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Nested Institutions, Political Opportunity, and the Decline of the Iranian Reform Movement Post 9/11

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Using the recent Iranian reform movement (1997-2003) as an example, this article demonstrates how social movement activism in the Middle East is often constrained by U.S. foreign policy and rhetoric. Directly after the 9/11 attacks, there was a remarkable confluence of shared interests between Iranian reformers and U.S. policy makers. Despite common goals and interests—and an explicit desire by many in the Iranian reform movement to normalize relations with the United States—Iranian reformers were forced to abandon the possibility of cooperating with U.S. policy makers in 2002. Moreover, hostile American policies and rhetoric during 2002 contributed to the decline of the Iranian reform movement and strengthened conservative factions in the Iranian government. The Iranian case demonstrates the degree to which social movement opportunities in the Middle East are "nested" within the context of international relations.

Keywords: Iran; U.S. foreign policy; nested institutions; political opportunity; social movements

International contexts have long affected social movement viability, but global integration has increased the degree to which local movements navigate within an international landscape (see Della Porta & Tarrow, 2004). This article demonstrates how international relations following 9/11 affected reform movement activists in Iran in 2002. In particular, despite compelling opportunities for U.S. policy makers to cooperate with Iranian reformers, cooperation became untenable due to Bush administration rhetoric. Moreover, the Bush administration's policies and rhetoric, beginning with the State of the Union speech in which Iran was labeled a member of the "Axis of Evil," precipitated a series of mobilizations and countermobilizations by different Iranian factions throughout 2002. By the end of the year, the Iranian reform movement had been weakened and largely dismantled by Iranian conservatives who control the Iranian courts and police.

David Meyer (2003) has asserted that social movement opportunities are often "nested within larger social and political institutions" (p. 23). He describes how the actions of international allies and like-minded "umbrella" organizations can constrain and enable actions undertaken by local groups. Meyer asserts that the degree of autonomy that a group exercises from other international institutions

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affects the degree to which decision making is "nested" (pp. 23-24). This study conceives of nested decision making more broadly. In particular, Iranian reformers and conservatives both found their opportunities nested within the context of U.S. foreign policy decisions, but neither had a formal relationship with the American government. Nonetheless, Iranian reformers found that their actions were more constrained by decisions made by the Bush administration because the reformers were advocates for normalizing relations with the West. In the study of international relations, the dynamic in which foreign policies affect domestic politics is often described as a "two-level game" (Putnam, 1988) or the "game within a game" (Tsebelis, 1990). Overall, it is common for domestic political considerations to prevent international cooperation, even when such cooperation could be mutually beneficial.

While political opportunity models are often used to describe domestic social conditions, they less often account for how movement opportunity is affected by international conditions. In general, *political opportunity* models include (a) the degree of political openness within a state, (b) the stability or instability of political alignments, (c) the development of allies, (d) shifting coalitions within the political elite, and (e) the capacity of the state to repress or facilitate dissent (Tarrow, 1998). Some have questioned the utility of the political opportunity approach. Three common criticisms have been the following: (a) As a structural approach, it neglects the agency of movement actors, (b) it inadequately describes movement culture, and (c) it has not been conceptualized uniformly in academic work (see Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). Others have noted that political opportunity approaches are implicitly designed to describe democratic societies (see Noonan, 1995), causing some to modify opportunity approaches to fit the conditions in nondemocratic societies (see Osa & Corduneanu-Huci, 2003).

Political Opportunity: Reasons for American Policy Makers to Pursue Relations With Iranian Reformers After 9/11

During the past two decades, it has become common for academics who study Iranian and American foreign policy to outline compelling reasons why these two governments should normalize diplomatic relations. These relations were suspended during the Iranian Revolution in 1979 when student supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini took Americans hostage. Subsequently, during the Iran–Iraq War, Americans provided support to the Iraqi armed forces. As a result of this recent history, those who study Iranian–American relations routinely confront the fact that the political cost domestically for groups that want to normalize relations makes a rapprochement difficult. Still, pragmatic concerns associated with the regional strength of the Iranian state do offer compelling reasons for normalizing diplomatic relations. Moreover, after democratic reformers were elected to the Iranian parliament in 1998, many felt

that conditions within Iran made the normalization of relations a greater possibility (see Katz, 1998; Sick, 2001).

Directly after the 9/11 attacks, shared interests among Iranian reformers and Americans increased, in particular as U.S. policy makers intervened in Afghanistan. As a result, reform-minded Iranian politicians initiated several pro-U.S. overtures. The president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, was among the first world leaders to condemn the 9/11 attacks (Khatami, 2001). Later, in an informal meeting, Iranian diplomats told U.S. officials that al-Qaeda operatives were likely responsible for the 9/11 attacks and that they would not object to a "surgical" strike against the organization (see Anderson, 2001b). Some U.S. officials interpreted these overtures as signs of Iranian goodwill and, through the U.S. State Department, began cultivating relationships with Iranians in informal meetings (Leverett & Mann, 2006). These meetings were abruptly halted in 2003, ostensibly because policy makers within the U.S. Department of Defense were arguing for a more hard-line approach to American–Iranian relations. What follows is a brief accounting of conditions that made the normalization of U.S.–Iranian relations appear increasingly tenable after 9/11, followed by a discussion of how the hostile rhetoric directed toward Iranians by U.S. officials throughout 2002 was used by conservative Iranian factions to undermine the reform movement within Iran.

The Iranian Reform Movement

In the years just prior to the 9/11 attacks, events in Iran led many to believe that U.S. and Iranian foreign relations might be normalized. In particular, a widely supported Iranian reform movement began forcing gradual increases in Iranian social and political freedom. There was extraordinary optimism when Mohammad Khatami, a reform-minded cleric, was elected to the Iranian presidency on May 23, 1997. Khatami's presidential campaign was based on two broad themes: (a) the need to establish a civil society, and (b) the need to establish a dialogue among civilizations. Following this election, many Iranian reform groups began referring to themselves as the "May 23rd" movement, a reference to the date that Khatami was elected (Poulson, 2006).

The Iranian presidency is weak compared with other Iranian political institutions. The president is popularly elected but does not control the military, police, or court system. Ali Khamenei, the leader of the revolution (*Rahbar*), is the preeminent cleric in the Iranian political system. He exercises considerable oversight (and veto power) concerning legislation passed by the Iranian parliament and also controls the military and police. Iranian reformers, led by Mohammad Khatami, made the argument that the popularly elected offices in Iran should exercise greater authority in Iranian politics (see Poulson, 2006).

Mohammad Khatami's conception of civil society (*jama-ye madani*) was framed using Muslim cultural norms but was largely the same program that civil society

advocates in the West have articulated. Indeed, Khatami is acquainted with Western philosophers and referred to them in much of his written work (Khatami, 1997, 1998a). Related to Khatami's program was his call for a dialogue among civilizations, which was an explicit rebuttal of a political discourse associated with Samuel Huntington's (1996) work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. There were some successes associated with the dialogue among civilizations, related to the normalization of relations with many Western European countries and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Iranian delegation to the United Nations also managed to designate 2001 as the UN year for dialogue among civilizations (Poulson, 2006).

Mohammad Khatami (1998b) also made public overtures to policy makers in the United States. For example, on January 7, 1998, he granted an interview with Christine Amanpour of Cable News Network (CNN). In this interview, he described his admiration of American civilization, stating, "We feel that what we seek is what the founders of the American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago. This is why we sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of the American civilization." Khatami (1998b) was also forthright in his criticisms of U.S. foreign policy, arguing that it was geared toward the domination of foreign nations and was in conflict with the American ideal of freedom. These overtures created some tentative "openings" between the U.S. and Iranian governments during the Clinton administration. Still, this thaw in relations was always constrained by domestic policy considerations in both Iran and the United States. Khatami always stressed the need for cultural exchanges as opposed to articulating the need to normalize state-to-state relations. Within the context of domestic U.S. politics in 1998, a weakened Clinton administration probably never seriously contemplated restoring diplomatic relations with Iran (see Ansari, 2006).

Directly after the 9/11 events, it appears that Mohammad Khatami saw opportunities to again reach out to American politicians. He quickly condemned the attacks against the United States (Anderson, 2001a) and often remarked that the event was particularly disappointing given his hopes for a year of dialogue among civilizations ("Khatami Warns Straw," 2001). Directly after 9/11, even staunch conservatives within Iran condemned the terrorist attacks against the United States. For example, Ayatollah Mohammad Kashani, during the Friday prayers at a Tehran mosque, asked, "How could one be indifferent to the fate of these defenseless men, women and children?" ("Friday Prayers," 2001). Some also implied that U.S. policies helped create the hostility that many in the world felt toward Americans (see Khamenei, 2001).

Congruent Iranian and American Policy Interests in Afghanistan

Many Iranians and Afghans have longstanding historical, cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties. In particular, many Iranians, Afghan Hazaras, and Tajiks

(20-30% of the Afghan population) share similar languages and religious beliefs. Currently, there are nearly 2 million Afghan refugees in Iran and many were persecuted by the Taliban. Moreover, in 1998, the Taliban executed several Iranian diplomats and security officials residing in Western Afghanistan. In response, the Iranian government massed close to 300,000 troops along the Afghan border in May 1998. In general, the Iranian press (conservative and liberal) consistently portrayed Taliban governance as both dangerous and archaic.

The Iranian relationship to al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan was also hostile. In fact, al-Qaeda leaders have consistently said that the Shi`is should not be considered Muslims. As a result, the most prominent Afghan leaders opposed to the Taliban and al-Qaeda often found refuge and support from Iranians. The Iranian government also supported various armed groups within Afghanistan who had managed to hold out against the Taliban offensive in 1998. Some of these groups (the Northern Alliance) became the primary beneficiaries of the NATO intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001.

As U.S. and NATO forces prepared to enter Afghanistan in October 2001, the reform and conservative factions within the Iranian government responded differently. Reformers in the Iranian parliament were talking openly about using their mutual interests with U.S. policy makers as a means of pursuing talks that would help normalize relations between the two countries (Waldman, 2001). In general, reform-minded factions asserted that the United States had the right to self-defense if it could be proven that al-Qaeda perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. Later, President Khatami criticized the rhetoric being used by President Bush, in particular the statement that "you are either with us, or with the terrorists" (Glanchant, 2001). Concurrently, conservative Iranian factions, in particular Leader Ali Khamenei (2001), began arguing that the United States was using 9/11 as a pretext for expanding American influence in the region.

When NATO forces invaded Afghanistan, the Iranian government condemned the intervention. Despite this condemnation, members of the Iranian government also acted cooperatively, even stating that they would provide support for American pilots downed in Afghanistan during the fighting (Anderson, 2001c). Iranian policies also helped in terms of stabilizing and establishing the new Afghan governance. Iranians played a constructive role in regional meetings among Afghanistan's neighbors that were designed to stabilize the country. The Iranian government also recognized and supported the U.S. administration's choice to head the new Afghan government, Hamid Karzai.

Iranian and American Interests in Iraq

The period when U.S. policy makers began employing hostile rhetoric toward Iranians coincided with the preparations being made to invade and occupy Iraq. The

hostile rhetoric was apparently designed to put Iranians on notice that they could be next with respect to the U.S. policy of regime change. The change in tenor adopted by the Bush administration, moving from expressing gratitude for Iranian contributions toward stabilizing Afghanistan to now characterizing Iran as evil, was remarkable. This change was apparently precipitated because some in the Bush administration believed that a more "muscular" policy toward Iran would be beneficial to U.S. interests. Indeed, one sound-bite offered by an administration source in late 2002 was that "anyone can go to Baghdad, real men go to Tehran" (Dunn, 2007, p. 19). Richard Perle, a prominent neoconservative thinker well-regarded by some policy makers, stated, "We could deliver to Iran a short message, a two word message 'you're next'" (p. 19).

It is important to note that there were a number of academic observers who regarded the rationales for the Bush invasion of Iraq as seriously flawed. The various rationales associated with why Iran should be "next" were generally considered even more nonsensical (see Amanat, 2002; Daley, 2002). Indeed, there was a variety of public discussions by many who regarded the rhetoric being directed toward Iran as counterproductive to the administration's own policy goals (see Dunn, 2007). Moreover, the Bush administration, in particular as it relates to the intelligence community within the Pentagon, often excluded Middle Eastern experts and created intelligence to justify the policy of preemptive military action and regime change (Miller & Barnes, 2007).

The Bush administration rhetoric was also remarkably shortsighted when one considers the historical ties that many Iranians have to Iraqi Shi`i groups that are now preeminent in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Although the Iranian government condemned the U.S. intervention in Iraq and was concerned about being surrounded by U.S. troops in the region, most Iranian citizens were ecstatic when American forces deposed Hussein. Indeed, Iranians and Iraqis had fought one another in an extraordinarily violent war from 1980 to 1988 with nearly one million killed or wounded in the conflict. For example, thousands of Iranians who fought during a campaign to retake the Faw Peninsula in 1986 were killed or severely injured as a result of the Iraqi deployment of nerve gas. In fact, one of President Bush's rationales for invading Iraq (articulated in several speeches) was that Saddam Hussein "has already used weapons of mass destruction against Iraq's neighbors" (Bush, 2003).

Inevitably, U.S. policy makers were eventually compelled to support the same Iraqi exile groups that Iranians have long had close relations with. In particular, the Supreme Council for an Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its 10,000 to 20,000 militia (the Badr Brigades) were headquartered in Iran in 2002. Much of the leadership had resided in Iran for more than 20 years. Directly after the deposal of Saddam Hussein, the SCIRI quickly established preeminence in the major cities in Southern Iraq. Despite these deep and long-standing associations with prominent Iraqi exiles, just previous to the invasion of Iraq, many in the Bush administration were verbally assaulting the Iranian government. Informed observers found this rhetoric to be both

curious and counterproductive to regional, as well as American, interests. For example, Hamid Karzai, the newly elected president of Afghanistan, has consistently called on U.S. politicians to normalize relations with Iranians (see Fathi, 2002).

The Interpretation of the Opportunity by American Policy Makers in the Bush Administration

Political opportunities, as interpreted by political actors, can be assessed completely differently (see Kurzman, 1996). Moreover, opportunities that exist within the context of international cooperation (e.g., restoring relations with Iran) often have negative consequences within the context of domestic politics (e.g., it would weaken domestic support for a political party). On one hand, there were clearly social-structural conditions compelling cooperation between American policy makers and Iranian reformers. These conditions included (a) the election of a reform-minded president in Iran who wanted to normalize relations with the United States, (b) Iranian enmity toward the Taliban and support for the Northern Alliance, and (c) Iranian enmity toward Saddam Hussein and support for the SCIRI. There was also a remarkable consensus among long-time observers of Iranian–U.S. relations that favored pursuing a normalization of relations with Iran. As a result, scholars who use political opportunity models often state that opportunity has to be recognized by actors (see Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). It is clear that the Bush administration failed to recognize the opportunities described above, but a weakness of this model is that it is not useful for describing why the Bush administration ignored those best placed to describe conditions in the Middle East. Indeed, some in the administration willfully created perspectives concerning social dynamics in the Middle East that are at odds with the conditions that actually exist in the region.

The Bush administration, in 2002, had articulated two primary policy goals related to the Middle East. The first was to eliminate the possibility of threats associated with weapons of mass destruction. The second was to support the development of democracy in the Middle East. With respect to Iran, many pointed out that Iranian institutions were becoming more democratic and argued that negotiations were the best means to reconcile, and understand, the motivations behind the Iranian nuclear program (see Chubin & Litwak, 2003; Milani, 2005). One reason the Bush administration decided not to pursue relations with Iran (after some overtures had been made) is that some in the administration made a different assessment of the opportunities available to them and decided that cooperation with Iranian reformers was untenable. It is important to note that the list of social-structural conditions outlined above is not complete. For example, Iranian nuclear ambitions (a larger issue beginning in 2003) were part of the rationale behind the hard-line stance taken toward Iranians in 2002. Moreover, another clear concern is Iranian support for both Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas (see Dunn, 2007). Space does not permit

an accounting of these Iranian policies, but these conditions could also be interpreted as reasons to forge closer ties with reform-minded Iranians. For example, the Reagan administration had evaluated the Iranian relationship with Hezbollah in terms of an opportunity when it enlisted Iranian help in pressuring Hezbollah to release American hostages held in Lebanon (see Brumley, 1988).

Bush Administration Rhetoric
and the Constraints on Iranian Reformers in 2002

The remainder of this study will describe how Iranians responded to the Bush administration's rhetoric following the State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, in which Iran was described as a member of the Axis of Evil. At this time, within Iran, the reform movement was closely associated with a position that the Iranian government should pursue a normalization of relations with the U.S. government. As stated previously, many reformers were surprised by the characterization of Iran as evil. Indeed, officials in the U.S. State Department were also surprised by the speech because they were in the process of making overtures to both Iranian and Korean officials and this rhetoric hurt their efforts (see Sipress, 2002).

The responses by Iranian groups to being called evil were not surprising. First, Iranian conservatives regarded the speech as a vindication concerning their reluctance to normalize relations with the United States. Ayatollah Khamenei, previous to the Axis of Evil speech, had stated that President Bush intended to use the 9/11 terrorist attacks as justification to pursue an "adventurous" foreign policy. In effect, President Bush's menacing rhetoric was regarded as a confirmation of this assertion (see Khamenei, 2002). Following the Axis of Evil speech, Leader Khamenei characterized President Bush as "thirsty for blood, he threatens the countries and nations of the world" (Valinejad, 2002). Iranian reformers appeared surprised by their inclusion as a member of the Axis of Evil. Most condemned the speech but tended to express hope that the U.S. administration would rethink its "immature" policy. The Iranian News Agency reported that "President Khatami evaluated Bush's speech as 'intervening, warmongering, insulting, a repetition of his past propagation, and worse than all, truly insulting towards the Iranian nation.' Khatami added that the 'great Iranian Nation' will never yield to arrogant demands of foreigners, although 'we are against warmongering, and favour peace. A type of peace that is based on prevalence of justice for the whole mankind'" (Haeri, 2001).

The most significant near-term effect that the Bush rhetoric had was that it turned the 23rd anniversary of the Iranian Revolution (celebrated on February 11, 2002) into an opportunity to protest against U.S. foreign policy. In general, the anniversary of the revolution had been attracting fewer participants over time. Indeed, the anniversary had become a piece of political stage management, similar to celebrations of the revolution crafted by the Soviet Communist Party during the decline of the

Soviet Union. Although many Iranians continue to regard the revolution as an important event, many also resented that revolutionary symbols, dates, and ideas had been coopted by the conservative religious factions who presented these celebrations as a demonstration of their political legitimacy. Indeed, as political dissent in Iran increased, the revolutionary celebrations became an increasingly desultory affair. Conservative factions mobilized their staunchest supporters, the armed forces and informal militias (*basijis*), but ordinary Iranians increasingly decided to remain at home.

In response to the Bush rhetoric, the anniversary of the revolution in 2002 attracted significantly larger crowds than in the past. In fact, Mohammad Khatami and other reformers called on Iranians to use the anniversary of the revolution to protest against U.S. foreign policy. As a result, there was a wider diversity of Iranians who celebrated the anniversary of the revolution compared with previous years. Crowd estimates in Tehran ranged from 300,000 to 400,000 to more than one million by a *New York Times* reporter (see MacFarquhar, 2002). During one rally, Mohammad Khatami stated that "immature leaders" in the West were calling Iranians "evil." But he hoped that these leaders would "wake up" and reverse policies that were not in the interest of Americans (MacFarquhar, 2002).

The Response by Iranian Conservatives: "Westoxification"

During the Iranian Revolution, many groups conceptualized Western ideas and culture as a pervasive disease that was infecting Iranians and compelling them to give up their indigenous culture. This idea did not originate with conservative religious thinkers, but the "Westoxification" terminology was widely adopted by religious leaders during the revolutionary period. Conservative factions within Iran continue to use this discourse in their speeches. Indeed, vigilance against Westoxification became the primary rhetorical device used to attack the reform movement. As a result, throughout spring 2002, there were increasing tensions between leaders of the Iranian reform movement and conservative factions. Inevitably, conservatives labeled the reform agenda as being Western inspired and linked the reformers' program to the Bush administration. For example, one conservative legislator in parliament delivered a speech on May 29, 2002, claiming that some reformers were in the employ of the CIA and that the reform press was a platform for U.S. propaganda (see Cadiot, 2002b).

Ayatollah Khamenei (2002), on March 2, 2002, also accused the reformers of doing the bidding of the West in a speech that was broadcast on state radio. He then made an appeal for the reformers to recognize that Bush did not understand their movement:

> What kind of dialogue can be held with the side which does not even accept you at all, with the side which is against your existence as the Islamic Republic? America says explicitly that it is opposed to the religious system, it is in particular opposed to the

Islamic Republic because it is the source of the awakening of the world Muslims. America sees the Iranian reform movement as a move against the Islamic system. That is their understanding of the Iranian reform movement. America does not really recognize [understand] a group of our brothers and sisters who are known as reformists.

Mobilization and Countermobilization in 2002

In June 2002, a Tehran University professor, Dr. Hashem Aghajari, gave a speech that challenged the authority of the governing clerical establishment. Specifically, he questioned the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*Velayat-e faqih*) that acts to legitimate the power that conservative Ayatollahs exercise in the Islamic Republic. Shortly after this speech, Aghajari was arrested. A month after this speech (in July 2002), there was an increase of reform-minded student protests. Like Aghajari, prominent student activists began stating that the Guardianship of the Jurist was illegitimate. In November, the Iranian judiciary returned a verdict of death in Hashem Aghajari's trial (the sentence was later commuted) that sparked another round of student protests. Many demanded a referendum on the future of the Iranian Republic that would delineate, or possibly do away with, the authority of the Velayat-e faqih (Poulson, 2006).

After Hashem Aghajari's speech, conservative papers claimed that Aghajari was doing the bidding of Westerners opposed to the Iranian Republic (Shari'at-madari, 2002). Conservatives in Iran became particularly incensed when President Bush, in response to the student protest in July, issued a statement in support of the protesters. Bush commented that Iranians had elected reformers in presidential and parliamentary elections, "yet their voices are not being listened to by the unelected people who are the real rulers of Iran" (Kessler & Pincus, 2003, p. A28). This statement was ostensibly meant to support Iranian reformers, but it allowed conservatives to portray the reform program as an extension of the West. The conservative daily *Kayhan International* ("Hardline Daily Says," 2002) editorialized that

what actually prompted Mr Bush to make such insulting statements against our nation was the flashing green light by the servile US henchmen in this country, who never fail to add fuel to domestic controversies in the interest of their own malicious ends. Mr Bush's statement is universally construed as intervention in the internal affairs of an independent country and no less. (p. 2)

A week later, in direct response to President Bush's support for the student protestors, conservatives in the regime staged several massive rallies with as many as one million people participating in major cities. Inevitably, many speeches associated Bush's "meddling" with the program of the reform movement (see Cadiot, 2002a).

Although President Bush's intention was to support Iranian reformers, his open advocacy on behalf of the student demonstrators actually put reformers in the

government in a difficult position. During past demonstrations, reformers in the government attempted to side with demonstrators but also simultaneously called for "calm" and the observance of Iranian law. In effect, they tried to support the mobilizations while remaining a part of the Iranian legislative process. During this protest, many members of the reform movement increasingly called for Mohammad Khatami to step outside of the legislative process and openly confront the hard-line clerics who controlled the armed forces and judiciary. Some student activists began to abandon Khatami, characterizing his policies as failures and indicting him personally for his timidity (Poulson, 2006).

Conservative Iranian factions were aware of the fracturing of support for reformers. As a result, conservatives began to make disingenuous appeals to President Khatami to jettison the rabble within his coalition. For example, Habibollah Asgarowladi (2002), a leader of a conservative political party, published an open letter to Mohammad Khatami's brother, the head of the largest reform party in Iran. He states that the letter was undertaken out of "caring" for Khatami's reputation and that he did not want the reform party associated with those who stand against the Iranian revolution. Of course, the reform movement is tied to the policies and rhetoric of the Bush administration:

> In his statement Bush openly expresses support for certain Majlis [parliament] deputies and journalists and also for those who have been the cause of disorder and conflict at the university. . . . Perhaps the Participation Party has desisted from supporting the ruling system's positions and from alliance with the people [because] it has adopted a kind of like-mindedness and cooperation with the staunchest enemy of the Islamic system, namely America (p. 3).

President Khatami's Reform Legislation, August 2002

During this summer of protest and counterprotest, President Khatami was largely silent. For many, in particular as reformers were arrested and reform publications were shuttered, this was further indication of his timidity. After months in which activists pleaded publicly with Khatami to intervene more forcefully on behalf of reformers, he finally introduced wide-ranging reform legislation in the Iranian parliament that, if passed, would have greatly expanded the powers of the presidency. During the press conference where Khatami described the bills, both entirely related to reforming the Iranian political system, he still addressed the "warmongering" of the Bush administration. Indeed, Khatami appeared at pains to indicate that his reform package was in no way associated with the Bush administration (LaGuardia, 2002).

After these bills were introduced, the Guardian Council engaged in an effective tactic of delay. Members of the council often intimated that they were open to negotiation with reformers, but by spring 2003, it appears that the Guardian Council realized that the reformers had lost much of their popular support. Many Iranians were

discontent because Khatami had not made good on his pledge to strengthen the economy. Many members of Khatami's reform coalition found him to be too vacillating, too conciliatory, and too ineffective to force real change. Many opted out of the political process and explicitly stated that nonparticipation in elections was the most effective political statement they could make (see Dareini, 2003). It was not a surprise when both of Khatami's reform bills were vetoed in May and April 2003.

In 2004, the Guardian Council did not allow more than 60 of the reform parliamentarians to run for reelection, assuring that conservative factions would gain control of the parliament. The same year, in local and municipal elections where the Guardians could not eliminate candidates, conservatives narrowly won more seats. The voter turnout, despite calls for activism by some reformers, was woefully low. During the presidential elections of 2005, reformers were largely split on whether to boycott the elections or endorse the reform candidate. Many supporters of the reform movement decided to stay at home during the presidential election and this contributed to the election of a conservative, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to the Iranian presidency.

Discussion and Conclusion

The rhetoric of the Bush administration in 2002 altered the fortunes of the Iranian reform movement. At a time when the Iranian reform coalition was fragile, conservative Iranian factions further weakened the movement by associating the Bush administration's rhetoric with reformers who had once pursued reconciliation with Americans. Despite the fact that the Iranian reform movement was primarily pressing an agenda to reform indigenous Iranian institutions, it was the movement's relation with the West that dominated much of the political debate in 2002. As a result, the reform movement splintered at the end of 2002, with some activists arguing that reform within the Iranian political process was no longer tenable. Although reformers in the Iranian government are now largely gone, the conditions compelling the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States remain. In fact, an increasing number of U.S. policy makers continue to point out the logic of talking to Iranians even as tension between the two governments has increased (Baker & Hamilton, 2006).

Reasonable explanations as to how and why U.S. policy makers evaluated (or misevaluated) the opportunities to normalize relations with Iran are related to the following: (a) Movement actors and policy makers often assess opportunity differently depending on whether they are acting in a domestic or international context, (b) ideology compels people to reject opportunities to cooperate with certain groups, and (c) cultural differences can obscure opportunity.

Although theorists who use political opportunity approaches state that opportunities have to be perceived by movement actors, far less attention is paid as to why actors often choose to ignore opportunities. In 2002, U.S. policy makers ignored

opportunities to strengthen relations with Iranian reformers even though it was (arguably) in their interest to do so. Why did this happen? One possibility is that cultural misunderstandings made cooperation between these groups more difficult. Indeed, this is a common hurdle that international actors routinely confront (see Mizrachi, Drori, & Anspach, 2007). In effect, Middle East leaders often signal their willingness to cooperate with Western decision makers but have their intentions misinterpreted or completely ignored. This was often the experience of Iran's reform-minded president, Mohammad Khatami, as he moved to normalize relations with the United States.

Although U.S. foreign policy decisions affect the conditions that movements in the Middle East confront, it appears that influential neoconservative policy makers in the Bush administration knew very little about the actual social conditions that existed in Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan. As such, the decision to make Iran into a menacing political entity was done with little consideration as to how this would affect the fortunes of the Iranian reform movement. Moreover, it appears that those arguing for the adoption of the U.S. policy of preemption and regime change had, as a primary foundation of their ideological worldview, a belief that cooperation with Iranians was untenable. In effect, conservative ideologues (in the West and in Iran)—by virtue of their worldviews—will never evaluate the possibility of cooperating with "the other" as an opportunity.

Still, it is apparent that opportunities need to be conceived of as a multilevel game when discussing the various choices that the Bush administration and Iranians made concerning American–Iranian relations. For example, viewed in one manner, demonizing Iranians at a time when many were participating in an ongoing democratic reform movement was incongruent with the stated policy goal of encouraging democratic reform in the Middle East (see Danner, 2002). But viewed in another manner, President Bush took the opportunity to demonize Iranians because it helped him create political support for legislation that increased his political power domestically. Conversely, conservative Iranians who were experiencing a steady decline in their political legitimacy found it useful to characterize President Bush as meddlesome, irrational, and dangerous as a means of restoring their political credibility. In effect, although Iranians would likely benefit from normalizing relations with Americans, conservatives worked against this policy because it would have strengthened the legitimacy of the Iranian reform movement. In fact, some believe that conservatives in both countries formed an unwitting alliance in which both used the menace of "the other" to adopt increasingly authoritarian domestic policy and stifle dissent (see Ansari, 2006).

Conditions similar to these often put democratic reform movements in the Middle East, and throughout the world, in a "double-bind" as it relates to their relationship with Western groups. Reform groups that make contact with civil society groups in the West often simultaneously maintain a critical stance toward U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, some are critical of U.S. policy because it actually supports authoritarian

governments in the region (e.g., Egypt). Moreover, in many cases when there is explicit Western support for democratic movements in the global south, this support tends to link these movements to Western interests and makes them less legitimate within the countries where they operate. This is particularly true for democratic reform groups in the Middle East following the U.S. intervention in Iraq. Another problem is that American politicians consistently fail to pursue opportunities to fashion relationships with groups in the Middle East if they believe it negates their political power domestically.

This article described how American foreign policy acted to constrain the Iranian reform movement. In this respect, regarding movement opportunity as nested within a larger international context is a useful analytical tool. Iranian reformers and conservatives did respond to changing international conditions after 9/11 in a manner that they hoped would increase their political strength domestically. But a clear weakness of the opportunity approach is that it offers little to explain why U.S. politicians routinely misevaluate social conditions in the Middle East. Indeed, the metaphors associated with social science and political opportunity often give rational motivations to those who make irrational decisions. It is certain that it is possible to describe the policy decisions made by the Bush administration in 2002 as being driven by a "game within the game" dynamic related to an array of domestic and international policy considerations. And, perhaps the actions of decision makers within the Bush administration could be characterized as logical within the context of their worldviews. But the hallmark of the Bush administration's policy toward Iran in 2002 is that it was driven by an ideology that willfully ignored social reality, and this undermined a very real democratic reform movement in Iran.

Looking to the Future

Since this article was drafted in the spring of 2007 there have been significant shifts in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. In particular, Barack Obama emphasized a willingness to pursue diplomacy with Iranians as a candidate for the U.S. presidency and shortly after his election issued a Nowruz (Iranian New Year) message that expressed a desire for better relations between the Iranians and Americans (see Obama, 2009). Later, Obama addressed the peoples of the Middle East in a much anticipated speech at Cairo University on June 5, 2009.

These overtures by President Obama were later debated by the Iranian presidential candidates during the June, 2009 campaign. In fact, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that he was, under certain conditions, now open to pursuing a dialogue with representatives from the United States. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad's rhetorical style–particularly his characterizations of the United States–were criticized as counter-productive and incendiary by his presidential opponents. Ultimately, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the June 12, 2009 election, but there are

indications that political graft significantly inflated his vote tally. At this writing, the outcome of the election has not been resolved and there are ongoing street demonstrations in Tehran in which hundreds of thousands reform movement activists are participating.

To date, President Obama–unlike the Bush administration in the summer of 2002–has not openly sided with the reform movement. This reaction is clearly designed to deny conservative factions in Iran the opportunity to associate Iranian reformers with the United States government. Obama stated that: "It's not productive, given the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, to be seen as meddling" (Lovin, 2006).

Obviously, the success or failure of the reform movement in Iran will be associated with a number of factors. And while it is important not to overstate the degrees to which American policy and rhetoric affects movement activism elsewhere in the world, it does seem apparent that the Obama administration has changed much of the context in which movements in Iran now operate. In this regard, the recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy–both rhetorical and practical–offer further opportunity to investigate the degree to which social movements in the Middle East are "nested" within larger international contexts.

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