Persian Truths and American Self-Deception
Hassan Rouhani, Muhammad-Javad Zarif, and Ali Khamenei in Their Own Words

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Table of Contents

Introduction: A Decent Respect for the Written Word [in Persian] ................................................................. 2

I: The Man and The Myth: The Many Faces of Hassan Rouhani ........................................................................... 4

II: An Iranian Moderate Exposed: Everyone Thought Iran’s Foreign Minister Was a Pragmatist. They Were Wrong ........................................................................................................................................ 19

III: Iran’s Supreme Censor: The Evolution of Ali Khamenei from Sensitive Lover of Western Literature to Enforcer of Islamic Revolutionary Orthodoxy ................................................................................. 25
**Introduction: A Decent Respect for the Written Word [in Persian]**

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“Known thine enemy” is an old but often unappreciated commandment. In the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon, let alone the always-rushed world of the White House, Capitol Hill, and the editorial offices of *The New York Times*, an attention to history and primary material isn’t usually required and is often impossible. Most officials aren’t comfortable reading foreign languages—let alone hard foreign languages—and U.S. government translations, which unavoidably offer selective coverage of the foreign press, rarely tackle material of any length. In theory, academics can help fill this gap; in practice, scholars seldom approach the material most useful to policymakers and are cautious about writing provocative analysis.

Like a journalist, an Iran scholar who isn’t an Iranian citizen can wait years before he has the opportunity and the invitation to travel to the Islamic Republic. A dual-national academic, if he has family in Iran he cares about, is in an even more precarious position.*The Washington Post’s* Jason Rezaian is an example of what can happen to a dual-national journalist who was careful in his reporting yet still ended up in prison. In the Internet age, Iranian intelligence and press officials can pay close attention to the American media. Even matter-of-fact biographical material, if it’s about an Iranian VIP, can get noticed. Unappreciated remarks can have lasting consequences.

Quick, and sometimes grossly inaccurate, sketches of Iranian leaders have become commonplace, both in the media and government. This happens more often when Iranian “reformists” take center stage since it becomes easier for Westerners and Iranians to talk to each other. So much of our current knowledge of the Islamic Republic, the accepted wisdom, flows from Westernized Iranians talking to attentive Western journalists and officials. These Westernized, English-speaking Iranians may have an atrocious track-record for prediction (please see the ever-so-short reform movement under president Mohammad Khatami) — they may have read little of the writings of the mullahs and lay radicals who made the Iranian revolution and still hold the centers of power within the clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards — but they are comprehensible to the Western ear. In Iran, as in the United States, hope springs eternal, especially among liberals. Hope plays well in a Washington that is tired of all the unpleasantness in the Middle East.

Even in the best of circumstances, senior U.S. officials have to make decisions in less than perfect circumstances. But President Barack Obama’s Iran policy has in this regard been noteworthy. Since before the Islamic revolution, lots of Persian material, much of it autobiographical in nature, has simply never entered into American foreign-policy discussions, at least not in a timely fashion. *The New York Times* once described Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as an “enigma” even though the ayatollah, an accomplished and polemical Islamic jurist, had been writing in clear, powerful Persian since the 1940s. The late Senator Edward Kennedy called Khomeini the “the George Washington” of his country, which either meant no one had properly briefed the senator or he had skipped American history in college.

In public and private, senior U.S. officials can make stunningly odd comments about the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, easily one of the most vitriolic, anti-Semitic, anti-American foreign leaders ever. The same is true for Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and his foreign minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif, who often get described in terms that bear little resemblance to how these men have written about themselves. As the Iranian revolution has aged, Iranian clerics and lay power players have been putting pen to paper more assiduously. Iran has a highly literate culture—despite the best efforts of some revolutionaries to dumb it down. And there’s considerable bad blood among the powerful, let alone among the fallen, and older men, as much as the young, love to recount their victories and aspirations. Persian source material has never been better.
The Obama administration’s “let’s-try-to-speak-well-of-our-Iranian-counterparts” approach is, of course, primarily driven by ideology, not a too-quick read of the primary material. Mr. Obama wants to make Iranian leaders in a certain image, whether or not that image has much to do at all with how these leaders have described themselves. As he remarked to The New Yorker’s David Remnick, the president wants to believe that a nuclear modus vivendi can be reached and in its wake a strategic modus vivendi, which would finally bury the enmity between Washington and Tehran, is possible.

Sensibly, the president fears war with the Islamic Republic. This fear of conflict over the nuclear question, however, has also warped the White House’s Iran analysis; in turn, presidential sentiments powerfully ripple through the foreign-policy and intelligence bureaucracies, discouraging untoward dissent. What happens inside the government also happens elsewhere in Washington. It’s a fair guess that the Ploughshares Fund, a major donor to left-wing “non-proliferation” causes, or the activists at the National Security Network, an energetic Washington outfit trying to rally the left behind a nuclear deal, don’t spend much time reading Persian primary material. Why should they?

In a happy spirit of dissent, produced by an abiding respect for Persian-language sources (and the Iranian leaders who deserve to have their ruminations taken seriously), my colleague Ali Alfoneh and I wrote the three following essays on Rouhani, Khamenei, and Zarif. They originally appeared in The New Republic and The Weekly Standard. We’d originally envisioned these three as a set. We intend to do one more, on Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the former major domo among political clerics. However, Rafsanjani’s critique can wait. The source material for him is continental in its depth and range, requiring more time than the current nuclear debate will allow.

Ali and I have our differences on American foreign policy and on the internal dynamics within the Islamic Republic, but we both ardently agree that any conversation on Iran must start in Persian. Our ruminations about the Persian-source problem in Washington always make me recall a letter written by the late Maxime Rodinson, one of France’s greatest scholars on the Muslim world. The letter was sent to Rodinson’s nemesis—the Anglo-American don of Islamic studies, Bernard Lewis. The two had butted heads for decades, often holding opposite views on the great political debates of the twentieth century. But the Frenchman, near the end of his life, knew he had a kindred spirit in Mr. Lewis, who’d been trained at the Sorbonne, as well as at the University of London. They both knew that historians can’t just make things up: they must respect their sources, and go wherever the primary material leads them. That journey led a Marxist and a classical liberal to differing interpretations and policy recommendations. But they both knew they had to try to be honest when they recounted what other men had written. That is a rule that ought to be as sacred in Washington’s foreign policy establishment as it is for the greatest of our historians. Such respect won’t keep us from making mistakes, but it will, at least, oblige us to err in daylight.
I: The Man and the Myth - The Many Faces of Hassan Rouhani

Urbi et Orbi, the city and the world, Tehran and the globe. In his turban and clerical robe, softly speaking of peace, Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani, resembles a spiritual guide more than a modern politician. Western statesmen, scholars, and journalists have been impressed by the differences between the cleric and his predecessor: Rouhani is everything Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was not—intelligent, eloquent, elegant, sophisticated. Perhaps as a result, the White House has premised success in the current nuclear negotiations with Tehran on the moderation, vindicated at the polls, of this mullah and his more Westernized foreign minister, Muhammad-Javad Zarif. Although senior administration officials in private are not crystal clear as to why the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who controls the atomic program, or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the military overseer of the nuclear quest, would now halt a massive, 30-year industrial effort, it is plain that they regard Rouhani’s election as the deus ex machina that may offer a way out.

Certainly, without an Iranian president who values economic progress more than the bomb, nuclear negotiations are unlikely to be more successful than American diplomacy was with a duplicitous, nuke-hungry North Korea, a country with which the Islamic Republic has had significant scientific and military exchanges. If Barack Obama is serious about his repeated threat to attack Iran’s nuclear sites if necessary to prevent the clerical regime from building nuclear weapons, then the choice between war and peace may well rest on whether the zealously political Rouhani is anti-bomb and can carry the day with Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards.

Rouhani isn’t an open book: He has a layered, somewhat closeted personality. An attentive observer can’t help noticing something disingenuous or theatrical about him: His real family name is Fereydoun, but he goes by Rouhani, which means “pious” or “a cleric” in Arabic. He wears clerical garb, but two decades before receiving a long-distance Ph.D. from a Scottish university, he wanted others to call him “Doctor” rather than his clerical title, hojjat al-Islam va al-Muslimin, a rank below ayatollah. Beyond appellations, in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections, Rouhani promised Iranians a “charter of rights.” Yet since 1979, throughout his entire political career, he has systematically violated what even hard-nosed Islamic jurists might consider sacred obligations that rulers owe their subjects.

Fereydoun or Rouhani? Theologian or doctor of laws? Restorer of traditional Persian civility and patron saint of the riyal, Iran’s currency, or systematic violator of the rights of man and false prophet? More-or-less trustworthy, pragmatic interlocutor with the West or deceptive enemy? Who really is the man at the helm of the self-declared “government of prudence and hope”? What is his story?

While Rouhani’s record as president is too short to offer answers, Persian sources unavailable in English provide important insights into his life and thought. This material needs to be treated with care. An autobiographical volume, Khaterate Hojjat al-Islam va al-Muslimin Doktor Hassan Rouhani (The Memoirs of Hojjat al-Islam va al-Muslimin Doctor Hassan Rouhani),

1 This essay was first published here: Ali Alfoneh & Reuel Marc Gerecht, “The Man and The Myth: The Many Faces of Hassan Rouhani,” The Weekly Standard, July 5, 2014. (http://w w w . w e e k l y s t a n d a r d . c o m / a r t i c l e s / m a n- and- myth_796083.html)

Hassan Rouhani, ـ۱۳۵۷ (تهران: مکاتز انسان - انتشارات اسلامی، ۲۰۰۸), Vol. 1.
Documents Center in 2009. A subdivision of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, the center often publishes works that mix fact with revisionism. The curious must use works by others to supplement and verify the auto-biography, as well as to cover Rouhani’s life since 1980. In addition, the journal Rouhani kept while he was Tehran’s chief nuclear negotiator between 2003 and 2005 was published in 2011 and gives a detailed account of his work in that position. His speeches, parliamentary addresses, and interviews with the Iranian and foreign press are also indispensable. (When we quote these works in what follows, the translations are our own.)

Childhood in Sorkheh, Theology in Qom

Rouhani was born on December 30, 1948, in Sorkheh, a dusty village of 3,000. It lies 100 miles east of Tehran in Semnan Province, a land of ruined caravanserai on the ancient Silk Road from China. Asadollah Fereydoun, his father, was an orphan with limited schooling, a devout believer, and an ambitious social climber. Asadollah’s military service coincided with the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941, and he witnessed the rapid collapse of Reza Shah Pahlavi’s modernized army. Asadollah deserted and returned to toiling on the land and small-time shopkeeping in Sorkheh.

Combining hard work with aspiration, he managed to make the right connections to marry above his social class: Sakineh Peyvandi, his 14-year-old bride, was from a wealthy family in the village. The young couple’s first two children died in infancy, making Hassan the oldest of five siblings.

Asadollah’s piety grew with his social ambition and wealth. In 1952 he undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, which earned him the title of Hajji. In 1956 Asadollah further boosted his prestige by taking his entire family to the holy sites in Najaf, Iraq, the burial place of the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, the Caliph Ali, the founding father of Shiite Islam. He did so at a time when most of Iran’s peasants, who then vastly outnumbered city-dwellers, would not even visit a neighboring village.

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7 Ibid., page 27.
8 Ibid., page 26.
9 Ibid., page 28.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., page 29.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., page 35.
14 Ibid., pages 37–38.
The piety of the Fereydouns was noticed: Villagers consulted Asadollah in religious affairs, wandering preachers found a place in his home, and by 1958 Grand Ayatollah Hossein Tabatabaie Boroujerdi appointed him his vakil, or representative, in Sorkheh. Asadollah was now authorized to collect khums, or annual taxes of one-fifth of all gain, from the faithful. This was no mean achievement. Boroujerdi was the supreme “source of emulation” for Shiites worldwide, and Asadollah would get to see the great man when traveling to Qom to hand over the cash to his office. This was an honor bestowed on few in any province.

Hassan was enveloped by his father’s faith. When he was only five years old, he started going with his father to group prayer. At about the same age, he started studying the Koran at the home school of his paternal grandmother. And he was enrolled at the village’s primary school even before attaining school age. His father also made the children herd sheep, weave carpets, and work on his land for a low wage, from which he subtracted the price of school pens and paper, which the children were obliged to buy at his small shop.

Encouraged by his father, Hassan started theological studies in Semnan in 1960. But in the fall of 1961, Asadollah enrolled him at the Alavi School at the Theological Seminary in Qom, the training ground for most of Iran’s influential clerics. Rouhani’s autobiography leaves the impression that the transfer from Semnan to Qom reflected the grand ambitions of a father for his son, but the move was also politically expedient. After the death of Boroujerdi in March 1961, most villagers in Sorkheh changed their allegiance to Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani. The Shiites of Iran, even after the Islamic Revolution established a clerical dictatorship, are free to choose their religious guides. Fereydoun, always sensitive to the popular mood, enrolled Hassan at the Golpayegani-led Alavi School. In return, the ayatollah made Fereydoun his vakil, authorized to collect religious taxes. Later Rouhani would display a similar instinct for discerning the popular mood and choosing patrons.

Most urban Iranians considered Qom a place of pilgrimage en route to or away from Tehran. The shrine of Fatima, the sister of the eighth imam of the Shiites, attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims annually. (The dominant form of Shiism in Iran, the Twelver rite, traces its legitimacy and charismatic spiritualism to Ali and 11 of his male descendants.) The unforgiving desert climate and the stern conservative atmosphere of Qom, however, discouraged pilgrims from staying, even for a night. For 13-year-old Hassan, with only Sorkheh behind him, the famous schools of Qom and their learned clerics from around the Shiite world must have been dazzling. Imagine a sandy, late medieval Oxford.

Hassan’s enrollment coincided with the arrival of Mohammad Beheshti, destined to be the first judiciary chief of the Islamic Republic, whom Golpayegani had entrusted with the task of modernizing the school. One cannot overstate the influence of the charismatic Beheshti on Rouhani. “Disciplined, grand, and stylish,” and “wearing shoes instead of slippers,” clad in “a very clean ironed robe,” confident and conversant in English, Beheshti must have been everything Hassan aspired to be. Even today, Rouhani’s speeches closely emulate Beheshti’s in structure, diction, and delivery.

Beheshti was a demanding modernizer whose innovations amounted to a pedagogical earthquake.

15 Ibid, page 58.
16 Ibid, page 45.
17 Ibid, page 36.
19 Ibid, page 36.
22 Ibid, page 85.
in Qom. All students at the Alavi School had to pass an entrance exam before being allowed to continue their studies. Marks were introduced, and so were annual exams. The students had to study subjects such as Persian literature, calligraphy, colloquial Arabic, mathematics, physics, and chemistry.

Many students opposed Beheshti’s reforms and left. Hassan stayed, and so did a group of his close friends and classmates, all of whom, at least in part thanks to their connection with Beheshti, rose to prominence after the revolution of 1979: Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri became the first head of the Ministry of Intelligence, while Gholam-Hossein Mohammadi Golpayegani, Mohammad-Hassan Akhtari, and Mousavi Kashani all now serve in the Office of the Supreme Leader, which is in practice a shadow government overseeing the elected one.

While Hassan was busy studying the classics of Islamic law, succession politics—the struggle for the mantle of the late Boroujerdi—roiled Qom. Among the Shiites, the most senior ayatollahs compete for the allegiance of the faithful worldwide. Traditionally, one ayatollah rises to be the “source of emulation” above all others. After Boroujerdi’s death, the grand ayatollahs dispatched their representatives to the remotest corners of the Muslim world to proselytize among the devout and increase their share of the khums money.

This struggle intensified as Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi launched his ambitious 1963 modernization scheme, the White Revolution. The shah’s reform program distributed the lands of the rural aristocracy and religious endowments among peasants. To fight illiteracy, it organized young men and women with a high school diploma into the Wisdom Corps, and more controversially it introduced the vote for women.

While the traditional clergy grumbled about the reforms, then little-known Ruhollah Khomeini eyed a historic opportunity to lead a revolution of his own: By attacking the land reform and women’s suffrage, Khomeini not only managed to establish himself as the leader of the opposition to the shah, he also used his newfound popularity to bypass the traditional clerical hierarchy, with its unwritten but rigid deference to seniority. Establishment mullahs realized Khomeini’s motives, and politically cautious ones like Beheshti did their utmost to keep seminarians out of politics. The Iranian Savonarola’s vitriol, however, resonated with younger theologians.

Rouhani writes that Khomeini awakened him politically when he was 15. There are, however, manifold reasons to doubt this. Rouhani’s account of the March 21, 1963, clashes between anti-riot forces and theology students in Qom is based on memoirs of other students present in the city at the time. Rouhani admits that his father, anticipating unrest, came to Qom and took him back to Sorkheh after Khomeini was arrested in June. There is no information concerning Hassan’s whereabouts as Khomeini’s exile to Turkey became public knowledge in the fall. Most likely, while he was studying under Beheshti, Rouhani kept clean of politics, and his autobiography recounts a fabricated early revolutionary history.

Later, when Beheshti left Qom to advise the Ministry of Education on religious curricula,

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28 *Ibid*.
Hassan may have engaged in small-time political activism. He left Alavi and enrolled at more politically active schools within the seminary. Around this time, he assumed the Arabic family name “Rouhani.” His claim that he secretly distributed Khomeini’s leaflets, and even the radical publication Entegam (Revenge), among fellow students, may be true. Nevertheless, Rouhani’s claim that he was aware of religious radicals’ taking shooting lessons in preparation for the January 22, 1965, assassination of Prime Minister Hassan-Ali Mansour seems highly doubtful. Equally unbelievable is Rouhani’s memory of attacking the shah in his first sermon, which he gave in Toyserkan, in northwestern Iran, at the age of 17. Rouhani writes that he was arrested by the local police but somehow managed to hide his identity from the police chief and return to Qom. The local police, backed up by SAVAK, the shah’s intelligence and internal-security service, would have done better than this.

**Marriage, University, and Military Service**

"The wedding ceremony, which ended my single life and marked the beginning of family life and new conditions, took place on September 6, 1969." A private man, Rouhani does not mention the name of his wife in the 696-page autobiography, let alone how he got to know her. The weekly Mehr has disclosed that Sahebeh Arabi, Rouhani’s cousin, was born in 1954, which means she was 15 at the time of her wedding.

Since the marriage coincides with Rouhani’s admission to the Faculty of Law at Tehran University, the two may well be connected: Rouhani’s father may have arranged the union as a condition for allowing his son to leave Qom for morally dangerous Tehran. Among religious families, marriage and *tیه*, or temporary marriage, where a man marries a woman for a specified time for a price, are not uncommon for young male students ready to go into the world.

Rouhani’s autobiography reveals that by January 1966 he was secretly preparing for the Tehran University entrance exam. Rouhani admits that his decision was controversial. After all, his fellow seminarians considered Qom the center of sunnah, or the proper practice of the prophet, and Tehran the source of innovation and heresy. Just as the seminary was the guardian of doctrine, the university was the institution most effectively questioning their faith. An inferiority complex among seminarians was usual since university students in the Pahlavi era had greater prestige. Many of Rouhani’s fellow seminarians probably considered his decision an act of defection or outright treason.

Why did Rouhani run the risk of isolating himself from his peers? He does not provide a clear
motive for his decision. In an obvious attempt to please his fellow seminarians, Rouhani makes the risible claim that the university actually had lower academic standards than the clerical schools. Apart from ambition and a desire for broader recognition, which he likely inherited from his father, the young man from Sorkheh had become better-traveled. He’d gone on missionary work to the Caspian Sea, seen verdant beach towns with Westernized bikini-clad “naked women” and been both repelled and fascinated. He likely now found Qom socially suffocating and the seminary hopelessly old-fashioned. As important, moving to Tehran allowed Rouhani to be closer to his mentor Beheshti and Morteza Mottahari, another modern cleric who taught at the Faculty of Theology at Tehran University and would play an important role after the revolution as one of the theoreticians of the Islamic state.

Needless to say, there is no mention of the nightclubs and cabarets of Tehran in Rouhani’s autobiography—he was, despite all the intimations of curiosity about and envy of the other side, a cleric from Sorkheh. The university didn’t prove uncomplicated for him. Too worldly for the seminary, Rouhani was too primitive for many of his classmates. They ridiculed his clerical garb. He found himself at odds with his Islam-skeptical professors: the criminologist Reza Mazlouman; Parviz Owsia, who taught family law; but also faculty dean Manouchehr Ganji, who was kind enough in a dispute between Mazlouman and Rouhani (the student shouted down his teacher in class) not to refer the passionate defender of the faith to the university’s disciplinary committee. For the offending lectures, Mazlouman would apparently pay with his life after the revolution.

And the insults Rouhani endured at university kept on coming. In 1971 he started his mandatory military service. Every time he entered the garrison in clerical garb, Rouhani says he was ridiculed by officers and enlistees alike. Pointing at the mullah’s beard, a colonel nicknamed him “Fidel Castro.” When the young cleric tried to organize group prayers, leftist conscripts would sing and dance in front of him and his small flock. Little did they know that the vengeful Fidel would become the army’s chief commissar within 10 years.

Preacher Turned Demagogue

From 1973 until the revolution, Rouhani toured Iran delivering anti-shah sermons. He’d given up the academy. His autobiography provides epic accounts of fiery sermons, invariably ending with SAVAK agents chasing Rouhani in vain. SAVAK documents reproduced in the autobiography reveal a somewhat more prosaic past. Rouhani’s name first appears in SAVAK archives in a document dated September 1975 reporting on the attendees of a sermon by Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi-Kani, later one of the most influential clerics of the Islamic Revolution. The second document mentioning Rouhani is from October 1977. This in itself strongly suggests that SAVAK was not intending to arrest an obscure preacher from Sorkheh. The documents also provide insights into how Rouhani’s peers viewed him. “Most theology students are of the belief,” SAVAK reported, “that [Rouhani’s] sermons are dull and uninteresting, but he manages to attract crowds because he uses the title ‘Dr.’ before his name.” (In Iran, as elsewhere in the Muslim Middle East at this time, having a Ph.D. was uncommon and prestigious.) It was Rouhani’s speech on the occasion of the death of Khomeini’s son that provided the unknown preacher a ticket to revolutionary fame. The 46-year-old Mostafa Khomeini’s death in Najaf, Iraq, in 1977 is still shrouded in mystery. While the Ayatollah Khomeini’s supporters accuse SAVAK of assassinating him, Parviz Sabeti, then

43 Ibid., page 272.
44 Ibid., page 354.
46 Ibid., page 369.
47 Ibid., page 369.
48 Ibid., page 375.
49 Ibid., pages 395-410.
50 Ibid., page 705.
51 Ibid., page 706.
SAVAK’s internal-security director, in his recently published memoir dismisses any such involvement.52 Khomeini’s reactions at the time, too, have contributed to the speculation. The ayatollah denied Iraqi police permission for an autopsy and issued a 40-word statement that did not call his son a martyr. Khomeini walked in Mostafa’s funeral procession for only five minutes and skipped the burial.

Khomeini, however, realized the usefulness of his son’s death for propaganda purposes and later called his passing “a blessing in disguise.”53 Predictably, the revolutionaries, with Rouhani in the lead, trumpeted the charge that the shah’s regime had murdered Mostafa. It was Mottahari, who like Beheshti had avoided confrontations with the monarchy, who asked Rouhani to speak at the memorial service in Tehran.54 This was the opportunity of a lifetime, and Rouhani delivered. Thundering from the pulpit, he claimed the ayatollah had sacrificed his son to God, alluding to Abraham and Isaac. Rouhani elevated the revolutionary leader to the status of imam,55 apparently the first time any of Khomeini’s followers did so publicly. The audience went into a frenzy, and tape recordings of Rouhani’s speech made him a minor celebrity among revolutionaries.

Rouhani was certainly aware of the significance of calling Khomeini an imam. An honorific title describing the person who leads prayers among Sunnis, imam among Persians refers to Ali and his charismatic descend-ants, who have acquired a semi-divine status within Shiism. Khomeini didn’t discourage believers from hoping he might be the “hidden imam,” the messiah who would come forth to reward the virtuous and punish the rest. By using imam, Rouhani not only fueled the growing personality cult around Khomeini, he also introduced the idea of the ayatollah’s being infallible and above written law. Many traditional clerics were disgusted. Such acts of sycophancy would play no small part in the degeneration of the revolutionary regime into a lawless tyranny.

The sycophancy paid off. Rouhani became a rising star in the revolutionary firmament and soon found himself among the founding members of the influential Combatant Clergy Association,56 an Oxford Union for politicized mullahs. He joined his mentors Beheshti and Mottahari, along with Abdul-Karim Mousavi-Ardebeli, who later became a sanguinary judiciary chief, Ali-Akbar Nategh Nouri, a stalwart of the socially conservative revolutionary clergy in parliament, and other figures destined for power after the fall of the shah.

Pleasure and Propaganda in London and Paris

In April 1978, encouraged by Mottahari, Beheshti, and Mousavi-Ardebeli, all of whom offered to cover his expenses and probably did,57 Rouhani left Tehran for London.58 Rouhani claims he was wanted by SAVAK, but according to SAVAK documents released in his autobiography, Rouhani had shown up voluntarily for an interview with the Tehran branch of the security service in February, after which he’d been allowed to return home. The fact that Rouhani left Iran legally through Mehrabad Airport further contradicts his claim. If escaping the clutches of SAVAK was not the motive, why did Rouhani leave his homeland? According to his autobiography, Rouhani enrolled at Merton College, Oxford,59 to learn English but was also offered a position teaching Islamic law.

54 ibid, page 414.
55 ibid, pages 416-417.
56 ibid, pages 427-428.
57 ibid, pages 434-436.
58 ibid, page 439.
59 ibid, page 441.
and Eastern philosophy at Lancaster University. Rouhani does not explain how he was supposed to teach in Britain without English. He also writes he was admitted to Harvard but chose to study philosophy at the London School of Economics. All the while, Rouhani allegedly was also working feverishly with Beheshti’s network in Britain, making speeches at the Islamic Students Association in London and elsewhere, among other things assuring female revolutionary activists that the hijab would not be an issue after the revolution. And he made 10 visits to Neauphle-le-Château, the first in late September, just before Khomeini made the village outside Paris his headquarters. (In a colossal bad call, the shah had asked Saddam Hussein to boot the ayatollah from his exile in Najaf, thinking the mullah would cause less trouble farther away.) All these amount to Herculean achievements, considering that Rouhani arrived in London in April 1978 and returned to Tehran the following February.

In France, Rouhani renewed his bonds with two radical friends: Mohammad, the son of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, and Ali-Akbare Mohtashamipour, who would become the regime’s ambassador in Damascus in 1982, was a founding father of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and was probably instrumental in the bombing of both the U.S. embassy and the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983. Rouhani’s frequent visits to France, however, did not secure a place for him in Khomeini’s inner circle, and he was devastated to learn that Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, the future president, had denied him a seat on Khomeini’s famous flight back home. It was an insult Rouhani didn’t forget.

### Settling Scores in Tehran

Upon his return to Tehran, Rouhani found a country very different from the one he’d left. When the shah fled, the Pahlavi state rapidly collapsed. The ancien régime’s elites packed their luggage or shifted their allegiance to Khomeini. The military declared its neutrality early in the revolution. The police quickly surrendered. A power vacuum emerged, with forces and factions competing, sometimes violently, for supremacy.

Rouhani immediately contacted Beheshti, who was busy establishing the Islamic Republican party for the ruling clergy, and Mousavi-Ardebili, who was involved in organizing the militia later known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Beheshti and Mousavi-Ardebili were both searching desperately for reliable and capable people. Rouhani, however, eventually found another boss—Ali Khamenei.

The memory of the 1953 coup that had toppled Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq was still fresh in the minds of many. In spite of the army’s neutrality, the clerics perceived it as the single greatest threat to the new order. In his first of many broken promises, Khomeini had the shah’s top generals executed, though he’d granted them amnesty before his return home. He then made Khamenei the head commissar tasked with subjecting the sorry remains of the shah’s army to clerical control.

Rouhani’s motives for working with Khamenei rather than Beheshti or Mousavi-Ardebili aren’t

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60 I b i d , p a g e 4 4 2 .
61 I b i d , p a g e 4 5 5 .
62 I b i d , p a g e 4 4 3 .
63 I b i d .
64 I b i d , p a g e s 4 8 2 - 4 8 3 .
65 I b i d , p a g e 5 2 1 .
66 I b i d , p a g e 5 4 1 .
67 I b i d , p a g e 5 2 5 .
68 A l i - A k b a r M o h t a s h a m i , آز ایران به ایران , ( Q o m : K o w s a r a l - N a b i , 2 0 0 5 ) , V o l . I I , p a g e 2 8 5 .
69 H a s s a n R o u h a n i , خاطرات دکتر حسن روحانی ، اقلاب اسلامی (۱۳۵۷-۱۳۶۱) ( T e h r a n : M a r k a z - e A s n a d - e E n q e l a b - e E s l a m i , c a . 2 0 0 8 ) , V o l . I , p a g e 5 2 5 .
70 I b i d , p a g e 5 4 1 .
71 I b i d , p a g e 5 4 3 .
72 I b i d .
known. No one could have guessed then that Khamenei would succeed Khomeini as supreme leader. It’s clear that the basic training Rouhani had acquired in military service made him useful as a commissar in the army. It’s also possible that Beheshti wanted to plant his own man at the Joint Forces Staff. And Rouhani may have had a personal motive.

Rouhani’s autobiography stresses his intention to reorganize and enforce discipline in the new army. Other sources, however, depict him as vengeful and ruthless, a commissar less interested in revitalizing the army than in getting even with the officers who’d ridiculed him when he was in uniform. By July 1980, “Fidel Castro” had purged 12,000 servicemen. Rouhani even demanded abolishing the Army Special Operations unit and called for the public hanging of officers to terrorize the military, though Mostafa Chamran, defense minister in Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan’s moderate transitional government, prevented this. Chamran, who’d trained as a guerrilla leader in Egypt and Lebanon and commanded his own armed militia, wasn’t a kind soul, but even he found Rouhani too exuberant.

Bazargan and his supporters, however, proved to be the Kerenskys of the upheaval. His government resigned when Khomeini endorsed the seizure of the American embassy on November 4, 1979. At the time of the attack, Rouhani was on pilgrimage to Mecca, where he was trying to incite Muslims from around the world to join Khomeini’s cause. He was not involved in the hostage taking, though he later extolled the “great event.” “A superpower called the United States,” Rouhani proudly recalled, “was crushed. The idol of America was smashed.”

While he was still a military commissar, Rouhani ran for parliament in his native Semnan and won. He was soon elected to a parliamentary committee controlling the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Here, too, Rouhani’s primary task was to purge, and he did it zealously.

### Rouhani’s War

Khomeini infamously praised the September 22, 1980, Iraqi invasion of Iran as “a divine blessing.” A disaster for his country, the eight-year war indeed proved a blessing for the regime, which used the long emergency to consolidate its rule. The shah’s centralized state served as a blueprint for the mullahs, who with the war raging effectively rallied Iranians around the flag and the faith, damning dissidents as traitors and “enemies of God.”

The Iraqi invasion gave birth to a managerial class of revolutionaries capable of handling the day-to-day demands of an immense, savage conflict. The Islamic Republic’s first president and commander in chief, Bani-Sadr, increasingly found himself at odds with radical clerics. He was impeached in June 1981. When the parliament railed against him, Rouhani took a lead role, accusing the lay, Sorbonne-educated leftist of “incompetence” and “plotting” against the revolution. Facing the real possibility of execution, Bani-Sadr fled back to Paris.

After Beheshti was killed in a massive bombing of the Islamic Republican party’s headquarters by an unknown perpetrator on June 28, Rouhani started looking for a new protector. Demonstrating his father’s unerring sense for choosing powerful patrons, he found a new father figure in Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the genius speaker of the

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73 ibid, page 553.
75 ibid, page 202.
76 ibid.
77 ibid, page 1808.
78 ibid, page 5451.
79 ibid, page 3043.
parliament and future president, the major-domo of the revolutionary clergy who quickly emerged as the helmsman of the Iranian war effort.

Rafsanjani’s memoir testifies to the lasting bond of tutelage that formed between the two men. Rouhani not only adopted Rafsanjani’s politics, but also gladly fought his battles, some of which remain defining struggles within the Islamic Republic. With Rouhani as his point man in parliament, Rafsanjani tried to reinstate some of the military men that Rouhani had purged. This didn’t go down well with the Revolutionary Guard, who had no trust in the army built by the shah. The two men also fought a bitter parliamentary fight against Revolutionary Guard commanders over the “Statute of the Guards.”

They lost: When the statute became law in September 1982, the Corps obtained vast powers and independence from parliamentary and presidential oversight.

In an attempt to breach the Corps’s monopoly on intelligence, Rafsanjani and Rouhani managed with great difficulty to establish in 1984 a new intelligence ministry, with Reyshahri, Rouhani’s old friend from Qom, as its head. Most of the personnel, however, came from the Guard.

Rafsanjani made Rouhani his “eyes and ears” at the war front, and to judge by Rafsanjani’s journals, Rouhani’s reports on the Revolutionary Guard’s performance were usually scathing.

Rouhani even tried to intervene in battlefield deliberations, which further infuriated Revolutionary Guard commanders.

In addition to his struggles with the Guard Corps in the 1980s, Rouhani was enmeshed in the Iran-contra affair. He was one of the “moderates” that CIA memoranda to then-director William Casey said were on the other end of the weapons pipeline. According to Rafsanjani’s memoir, on November 3, 1985, Rouhani reported to his boss that he would soon be inspecting the newly delivered Hawk missiles, which the clerical regime had demanded in return for some half-dozen Americans held hostage in Lebanon (the number of hostages changed from time to time). In March 1986, according to Rafsanjani, Rouhani suggested that Iran should extort more Hawk missiles in return for the hostages. Rafsanjani authorized his deputy to help with “administering the political issues and the negotiations” with the visiting officials from the Reagan White House.

Reconstruction, Terror, and Nuclear Negotiations

“Haj-Mohsen, pack up your things and leave. You were useful during the war and aren’t of any use in peacetime,” whispered Rouhani, according to Mohsen Rafiqdoust, the minister of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, when Ahmad Khomeini briefed senior Guard commanders about his father’s decision to end the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Rafsanjani and Rouhani clearly saw the end of the war as an opportunity to rein in the unruly

80 Ibid, page 4045.
81 Ibid, page 4256.
82 Ibid, pages 4093 & 8618.
83 Ibid, page 532.
85 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, به سوی سرنوشت (کارنامه و خاطرات هاشمی رفسنجانی سال 1362) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashre Maaref-e Eqlab, 2009).
88 Saeed Allamian, برای تاریخ می گویم - " خاطرات محسن رفیق دست 1368.1375" (Tehran: Entesharat-e Soureh-ye Mehr, ca. 2013), page 396.
Guard. They wanted to merge the Corps with the regular army. Senior guardsmen struck back, thwarting the effort and developing an alternative history of how the conflict with Iraq was lost: The valiant Guard Corps was stabbed in the back by the corrupt clergy in Tehran, for whom peace was more important than victory and martyrdom. Within the Corps at least, this became a popular, passionately held, and durable myth.

With the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the succession of Khamenei, who’d been close to and dependent upon Rafsanjani for years, Rafsanjani and Rouhani tried to reach a modus vivendi with the Revolutionary Guard: Khatam al-Anbia (KAA), the Guard’s wartime corps of engineers, could become a big player in postwar reconstruction and be free to accumulate unaudited funds in its own financial institutions in return for the Guard’s abstention from politics. Senior commanders pocketed the offer but didn’t abstain from politics.

In an effort to centralize and better manage domestic and foreign national-security issues, Rafsanjani established a Supreme National Security Council in 1989 and, with Khamenei’s approval, appointed Rouhani as its first secretary. It became the arena for decisions in foreign policy, on the Islamic Republic’s growing economic ties with Europe, oil, Khomeini’s fatwa against the British author Salman Rushdie, the nuclear program, and terrorism. The council became the inner circle of Rafsanjani’s cabinet.

Discussions with the North Koreans about the delivery of “sensitive materials” from Pyongyang took place there in 1991 and 1992, with the involvement of the Atomic Energy Organization, the Iranian ministries of defense and intelligence, and the Revolutionary Guard. In a volume of memoirs published this spring, Rafsanjani writes that on March 11, 1992, these “sensitive materials” were “unloaded in Bandar Abbas and the second ship arrives in Chabahar tonight. The Americans are really fooled.”

Persian sources and U.S. intelligence point to this council as the venue where the ruling elite deliberated the expatriate assassination campaign, which claimed dozens of victims in Europe, and the attacks on Jews worldwide, most spectacularly in Buenos Aires in 1994, when a truck bomb exploded next to the city’s Jewish community center, leaving 85 dead and 300 wounded. Many in the West now want to believe that Rouhani and Rafsanjani were not involved in these decisions, that Iranian terrorism was the work of rogue or “hard-line” forces beyond their control, even though there is no evidence whatsoever that the two mullahs lost control of the intelligence ministry, which they’d worked so hard to create, or the intelligence ministers, who came from their circles.

The “not Rouhani’s fault” apologia would suggest a dysfunction in the clerical regime at a time when it was operating much more coherently precisely because of the efforts of Rafsanjani and Rouhani to rationalize and centralize foreign-policy and national-security decisions. Even when Rafsanjani started to lose influence in the last years of Mohammad Khatami’s presidency (1997-2005) and especially during Ahmadinejad’s tenure (2005-2013), the hierarchy and institutions that he had created continued to function. The Supreme National Security Council remained all-important; Khamenei just came to dominate it. And it’s important to remember that Khamenei appointed Rouhani to the council as his personal representative in 2005 after the latter had resigned because of serious disagreements with Ahmadinejad over nuclear diplomacy. Rouhani’s longstanding and by all accounts amicable relationship with the supreme leader held.

89 I b i d . p a g e 2 7 2 .
90 A l i - A k b a r H a s h e m i R a f s a n j a n i , سازندگی و شکوفایی (کارنامه و خاطرات) هاشمی رفسنجانی، 1377 (T e h r a n : D a f t a r - e N a s h r - e M a a r e f - e E n q e l a b , 2 0 1 4 ), p a g e 1 9 9 .
91 I b i d . p a g e 6 2 1 .
Terrorism hasn’t just been statecraft for the Islamic Republic; it’s been soulcraft—a means by which the regime could satisfyingly combat the omnipresent “conspiracies” arrayed against it. In some cases, it’s difficult to distinguish between personal revenge and raison d’État. In 1996 Reza Mazlouman, Rouhani’s Islamic-skeptical teacher, was shot to death in Paris. One of the present authors knew Mazlouman. It wasn’t entirely clear to French authorities why the former law professor had been murdered by the Iranian government; they had no doubt, however, that the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence was behind his assassination. He’d been involved in exile dissident activities, but his stature was second-tier, and the great wave of expatriate Iranian assassinations in Europe had ebbed. By 1996 the French, engaged in commercial outreach to Tehran, were trying hard to forget the 1991 assassination in a Paris suburb of Shahpour Bakhtiyar, the last prime minister appointed by the shah. In Germany in 1996, Tehran was still under judicial fire for the Mykonos murders of 1992, when Kurdish Iranian dissidents were gunned down in a Berlin restaurant. But German businessmen and the German government were aggressively seeking to expand trade with Tehran, while Hossein Mousavian, the Islamic Republic’s ambassador in Berlin who would later be on Rouhani’s nuclear negotiating team and still later a lecturer at Princeton University, was energetically trying to whitewash Tehran’s culpability for the murders. (In 1997, a German court found the Iranian government responsible.) The Islamic Republic’s economic concerns, however, have rarely outweighed matters of state and the faith.

Ali Younesi, who was President Khatami’s intelligence minister from 2000 to 2005 and was severely criticized by some in Iran’s elite for being too lenient, has recounted that Rafsanjani came to him twice to complain about how he was running his office. “The management style that you have established in the ministry of intelligence,” Rafsanjani warned, “makes it appear like an ineffectual municipal office that no one fears.”

A big reason Rouhani and Rafsanjani gelled as the most effective team in the history of the Islamic Republic is that they instinctively thought alike on most matters. For a revolutionary regime, fear is a crucial tool. And, as Hannah Arendt pointed out about totalitarianism, terror only begins in earnest after the opposition has been wiped out. (By 1996 in Iran, the Marxist, Islamo-Marxist, monarchist, and clerical opposition had been smashed.) The occasional assassination of dissidents keeps the elites in check. Rouhani’s autobiography, which details Mazlouman’s sins against Islam and insults to Rouhani, actually explains, almost glibly, why Mazlouman was assassinated. “Among the professors of the faculty, one of the professors who would in class attack the laws of Islam, was Reza Mazlouman,” Rouhani remarks, adding, “who several years ago was killed in Paris.”

What Rouhani is surely doing here, with the approval of the Ministry of Intelligence’s ghostwriters, is bragging. He finally won his classroom debate.

Terrorism abroad coincided with periodic campaigns against loosening morals at home, at a time when college-educated women were pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable under Islam. Some campaigns became uglier—notably the serial killing of intellectuals during Khatami’s presidency, which the investigative journalist Akbar Ganji concluded was the work of Rafsanjani and Ali Fallahian, Rafsanjani’s minister of intelligence, who had a close relationship with Rouhani. Rouhani isn't the worst revolutionary zealot about Persian mores, culture, and intellectual curiosity. But he has had an acute sense of political timing, and his regime has used the assassination of an Iranian diplomat in Paris as an opportunity to whip up Iranian nationalism and to demonize the West.

92 ناگفته های وزیر اطلاعات دولت خامی از ماجرای شهردار شدن محمود احمدی نژاد,” Jaras, May 1, 2013. (http://www.rahesabz.net/print/69470)
sense of the politicization of youthful exploration and dissent. In 1999 he castigated pro-democracy university students in Iran when their protests threatened a broader movement against the government. He backed Khamenei’s decision to “crush mercilessly and decisively” student unrest.

During Rafsanjani’s presidency, hostility towards the United States hardly diminished. As Rouhani put it on the eve of the first Gulf war, “the foreigners who have come to this region, and at their helm the United States, one of their goals is hegemony over this region. ... This is a disgrace for the region and the world of Islam if [Muslims] don’t resist this conspiracy and don’t counter it.” But unlike many ardent revolutionaries, Rafsanjani and Rouhani believed passionately in divide and conquer. To defeat American designs, every angle should be played. “Because of the fierce competition between Europe and the United States,” Rouhani explained in 1994, “we must expand our relations with Europe and counter America’s conspiracy.” On June 25, 1996, Iranian-backed members of the Saudi Shia Hezbollah detonated a truck bomb in the American military compound at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. U.S. intelligence quickly tracked the bombers’ flight from Arabia to Syria, then to Iran. Not long after the attack, in a talk with political researchers at the Expediency Council Strategic Studies Center, an outfit designed to support the ruling elite overseeing the Iranian parliament, Rouhani outlined why he thought the clerical regime was still safe from U.S. military action. Rouhani’s insights are astute and perhaps even more apposite today.94

“Any development that leads to delay in the realization of U.S. threats against us is desirable. The threats will not go away anytime soon, but delaying the threat is possible. ... Buying time should be our policy. ... I believe that any type of military aggression against Iran is outside of the consensus of public opinion in the United States. Here I mean consensus among the decisive majority of the American people and political consensus. The Americans cannot easily reach such a consensus. ... The willingness of important Western countries and their authorities is also needed, and the acceptance of our smaller neighbor states, meaning that the Americans also need to achieve the approval of our neighbors. Our neighbors’ acquiescence is important even for a mid-size military attack. ... Fundamentally, whenever the tension is high between us and the United States, before anyone else it is the smaller neighboring states that will be harmed. ... I believe we must work on relations with countries like France and Germany and make them into close and friendly countries. [But] finding friends is hard and keeping friends even harder.”

Rouhani remains proud and sensitive about his 2003-2005 nuclear tenure, for which he has been severely criticized within the ruling elite, even by the supreme leader. In his mind, he protected Iran’s nuclear progress at a time when George W. Bush was on a rampage. Any concessions he made or advocated were necessary, temporary, and in no way compromising to the atomic program. “You remember well the conditions two years ago, after the September [U.N.] resolution [in 2003],” Rouhani told his audience at a meeting of the

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94 اداره تدوین مذاکرات مجلس شورای اسلامی: مشروح مذاکرات مجلس شورای اسلامی دوره سوم (تهران: اداره تدوین یافته‌های انتخابات مجلس شورای اسلامی دوره سوم, 1996), صفحه 6371.

95 روحانی، عبدالرضا, روابطهای یک آهنگکردن, (تهران: انتشارات ماهنامه ایران, 2005), صفحه 489-494.

(www.moosaviv.com)
Expediency Council and the National Security Council staffs:

“Everything in the country was locked. Our economic relations with the Western world, our political relations, the issue of investment in our country and even productivity and domestic commerce, everything had come to a halt. Back then [the United States] was drunk with pride and victory. Had we shown passivity or radicalism, we would have given the knife into the hands of a drunk Abyssinian [George W. Bush]. We managed to put that phase behind us by prudence. … We managed to pass through that perilous curve. … Concerning technology, in the past two years we managed to create an opportunity so our great scientists and thinkers could complete our nuclear technology. In those fields where our technology was incomplete, we did not accept suspension. … Don’t forget, the [September 2003 U.N.] resolution was that Iran should suspend all enrichment-related activities, but we didn’t accept that for the production of parts and the assembly of centrifuges, both of which the resolution demanded that we suspend. We did not accept it and did not suspend it since we had few working centrifuges. But with the infusion of gas, we accepted suspension because we’d perfected our technology. That was artful. … We accepted suspension in fields where we no longer had technical problems. Simultaneously, we didn’t allow suspension to become a legal commitment. This is the secret behind the Tehran declaration. … This was very difficult for Europe, but because of our steadfastness, they were forced to give in.”

It was the lack of artfulness in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the urban peasant who’d risen from the front lines in the Iran-Iraq war to Tehran’s mayoralty to the presidency in 2005, that drove Rouhani and so many within the revolution’s managerial class nuts. Ahmadinejad was simple, blatant, and brave. He was the first Shiite populist, lower-class president of the republic, who increasingly voiced egalitarian views about God and man that left the clergy on the sidelines. In Rouhani’s and Rafsanjani’s eyes, Ahmadinejad was botching everything. In his book on the nuclear negotiations, *Ammiyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hastehi* (National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy), Rouhani dryly expresses his contempt for Ahmadinejad, who at least until he started to question the privileged political dispensation of the clergy had Khamenei’s backing. Rouhani’s first and last meeting with Ahmadinejad as Iran’s nuclear negotiator didn’t go well.

[Ahmadinejad] asked, “Why does [the IAEA] want to have an extraordinary session?” I answered that they wanted to investigate the reactivation of [the nuclear plant at] Isfahān. He said, “The agency has no right to do so; we have not done anything wrong. You go talk with El Baradei.” I then replied that it’s not so that the director general [of the IAEA] can make all the decisions. The Board of Governors of the agency consists of 35 ambassadors who make decisions based on the director general’s report. [Ahmadinejad then] asked, “How come the agency is so influenced by them?” I told him it is so because they cover most of the budget at the agency, and because they can influence most member states. He asked, “What is the annual budget of the agency?” I said I did not know, but probably a few hundred million dollars. He said, “Call El Baradei right away and tell him we will cover the entire budget of the agency.” I answered, … we don’t have the right and authorization to provide such assistance and the parliament should pass it. He answered, “I’m authorizing you—you let the rest be!” I then said that this is

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not my way of working. “If you insist, you speak with El Baradei yourself. … If you would like to issue such orders… well, it is better that you appoint a new [Supreme National Security Council] secretary really soon and give him these orders.” After that I called Mr. Ali Larijani and said, “It appears that you should get ready to take over the secretariat.”

**Rouhani’s Bomb?**

Rouhani’s journey from dusty Sorkheh to the Office of the President on Tehran’s Avenue Pasteur has been long. He has matured, and mentors like Beheshti, Mottahari, and Rafsanjani may even have made a pragmatist out of the once radical theologian; but pragmatism does not equal moderation.

Those who argue that Rouhani has abandoned the nuclear ambitions that he has so proudly defended and advanced would be well advised to consider more closely the cleric’s words, deeds, associations, and pride. Most probably Rouhani wants the nuke as much as any officer in the Revolutionary Guard or Saeed Jalili, the one-legged, shrine-loving war veteran who so enjoyed ignoring and belittling European and American diplomats as Ahmadinejad’s nuclear negotiator. Rouhani just wants to be cleverer about how the regime becomes a nuclear state. The deal that he has likely cut with the supreme leader is a variation on what Rouhani believes he tried with the West after the clandestine nuclear program was revealed by an opposition group in 2002: temporary concessions on those things that no longer need further research, no concessions at all in areas requiring further work. To get the sanctions lifted—and Rouhani is convinced that once they start coming down, they are unlikely to go back up—the Islamic Republic should slow its nuclear program without diminishing its capacity to produce a bomb and the ballistic missiles to deliver it.

This time round, this approach may work with the West. It may not work at home. Although Khamenei has solidly backed Rouhani’s diplomatic offensive, referring to the need for “heroic flexibility” when confronting the enemy, his support is undoubtedly conditional. The supreme leader is surely aware that Rouhani’s nuclear memoir is, among other things, a criticism of his preferred confrontational approach during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. And Khamenei today doesn’t give the impression that he considers 2005-2013 wasted time. For cause: The nuclear program’s greatest technical and industrial advances have been made in the last eight years. True, sanctions have mounted; the supreme leader may believe they were unavoidable. And Rouhani has to worry that the Guard Corps’s longstanding distaste for him and small appetite for concessions may derail his diplomatic efforts to test Western resolve and unity. In addition, the Corps has grown enormously powerful under the sanctions regime because its resources are vast and privileged: As private Iranian businesses have withered and foreign firms have fled, the Guard Corps has moved in. Khamenei has approved or acquiesced to the Guard’s economic expansionism because it is, as it proved in smashing the massive pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009, indispensable to his rule.

Western observers of Iran often see the antagonism between Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guard Corps primarily as a test of wills over the nuclear program; it isn’t. It’s a struggle about the nature of the regime and the revolution. Rouhani’s politics aren’t reformist; they are revanchist. He wants his class—the first-generation, upper-tier revolutionary managers who made the republic under Rafsanjani—to again have the high ground. He wants educated civilians—primarily clerics—to determine the destiny of the Islamic Revolution, not coarse

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militiamen who, in his eyes, lost the great war against Saddam Hussein. Rouhani has conspicuously dumped guardsmen from his cabinet and provincial governments. He and his men have publicly attacked the Corps for trying to destroy private enterprise and exposed “private” firms that are really Revolutionary Guard front companies feeding on public finances. It’s unclear, however, whether Rouhani will have any better luck this time confronting the Guard than he did earlier. He may if the supreme leader believes that his praetorians have gone too far. But the odds aren’t in Rouhani’s favor. Khamenei knows—because his praetorians keep publicly reminding him—that the Corps is the guarantor of his rule and the revolution.

President Obama is in a peculiar situation: He has hooked his diplomacy onto a cleric who can claim to have been a founding father of Iran’s theocracy and its nuclear-weapons program. Rouhani has arduously and vengefully worked to see the revolution succeed. He treated with the devil (the Reagan administration) to get what the republic desperately needed during the Iran-Iraq war. He appears willing to do so again to ensure the regime’s continuing dominion. Whether or not Rouhani has any intention of trading away his nuclear legacy for a better economy, he’s clearly shown that he was an attentive student to his mentors. President Obama may not appreciate the fact that his Iranian “moderate” is the same “moderate” Oliver North dealt with. Rouhani surely does. Persian humor is built on irony and a mordant appreciation for an unpleasant Middle Eastern truth: Nice guys finish last—if they even finish at all.

II: An Iranian Moderate Exposed: Everyone Thought Iran’s Foreign Minister Was a Pragmatist. They Were Wrong

“To my esteemed enemy, Mohammad-Javad Zarif,” Iran’s former ambassador to the United Nations remains very proud of this dedication in his copy of Henry Kissinger’s Diplomacy. The book was a statesman’s gift, a polite and perhaps hopeful gesture from a former secretary of state to a man who certainly seemed, before the coming of the crude populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, destined to serve as Iran’s foreign minister. With the election of Hassan Rouhani, the American-educated Zarif, who was exiled to the Iranian Foreign Ministry’s university during most of Ahmadinejad’s eight-year presidency, made a comeback. As foreign minister he now leads the Iranian delegation to the Geneva nuclear talks. He is in personality the polar opposite of his nuclear predecessor, Saeed Jalili, who lost his leg, his sense of humor, and his patience for diplomacy in the Iran-Iraq War decades ago and became one of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s favorite minions.

Kissinger likely didn’t really want Zarif as an enemy: he has always had trouble with the Islamic Republic, a revolutionary land that stubbornly refuses to pass into Thermidor and the raison d’etat politics in which he feels at home. Zarif has a

small legion of American admirers in New York and Washington—journalists and think tank experts especially—whom he assiduously cultivated while at Turtle Bay. Perhaps even as much as Rouhani, he is the Iranian “pragmatist” in whom the White House now has put its atomic hopes. So is Zarif a good bet? Is he actually a realist in the Kissinginger tradition?

We may now answer these questions more precisely, since Zarif’s memoir Aqa-ye Safir: Goftegou ba Mohammad-Javad Zarif, Safir-e Pishin-e Iran dar Sageman-e Melal-e Mottabeh,100 or Mr. Ambassador: A Conversation with Mohammad-Javad Zarif, Iran’s Former Ambassador to the United Nations, has just been published in Tehran. The answer is not entirely edifying. To the extent that his book accurately reflects Zarif’s worldview and fundamental beliefs, the affable foreign minister turns out to be every bit as religiously ideological as the radicalized student activist he was in the late 1970s.

A certain circumspection is, of course, required: when Zarif commissioned this book, he was obviously interested in returning to the good graces of the Supreme Leader.

Ahmadinejad, a lower-class firebrand who exemplified many of Khamenei’s passions until he started to question the necessity of the clergy as intermediaries between man and God, loathed the revolutionary upper crust that revolved around Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the rapaciously corrupt clerical majordomo who was the right-hand man of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the obsidian-eyed mullah who established Iran’s theocracy. Zarif may have felt compelled in this book to alter his religious views and his possible political differences with Khamenei and others who wield the power within the regime. He is without his own power base; his network of friends is largely derive of those he has served.

Still, extended conversations—this memoir is a very long chat with the writer Muhammad-Mehdi Raji—inevitably reveal a lot of truth. And this makes Zarif’s book depressing to read—particularly for those who want to believe that Zarif’s savoir vivre and wit reflect the Islamic Republic’s transformation from a revolutionary state into a more run-of-the-mill, unthreatening if internally unpleasant Middle Eastern authoritarianism. Such hope is difficult to sustain after reading Zarif’s book. The memoir also serves as a bad omen for the Islamic Republic’s interim nuclear agreement in Geneva101—let alone the felicitous aspirations of those in Washington who want to end the cold war between the Islamic Republic and the West through a “grand bargain,” or just a lot of little ones.

Born in 1960 into an affluent, religiously devout, and politically conservative merchant family in Tehran,102 Mohammad-Javad, the fourth child of the Zarif family, was not groomed for revolution. Piety rather than politics dominated the Zarif residence behind Bagh-e Shah Square in central Tehran. Upon reaching school age, Mohammad-Javad enrolled at the Alavi School,103 a private institution that aimed to nurture a religious elite to counter the secular educational establishment that dominated Pahlavi Iran.


But the religiosity of the Zarifs did not translate into support for Khomeini and the revolutionary movement. In his book, Zarif reveals that his father “from the time of the revolution until his death” in 1984 was “very much against the revolutionaries and the Islamic Republic.” The memoir does not explain why the elder Zarif opposed the revolution, but reading between the lines one clearly sees the Zarifs as members of the Hojjatiyeh Charitable Society, a secretive anti-Bahá‘í and anti-communist group that was suppressed by Khomeini after 1979.

Founded by Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi in 1953, the same year Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh’s government was toppled by a clerically aided and American-backed military coup, the Hojjatiyeh urged devout Iranians to await the return of the Mahdi, the Shia Messiah, to start the revolution and establish just Islamic rule. Its eschatology was not of the sort that calls for immediate political action. For obvious reasons, the Shah’s Intelligence and National Security Organization did not mind postponing revolutions until after the Day of Reckoning. It wholeheartedly supported the Hojjatiyeh as a means of channeling religious fervor and political activism against Bahá‘ís and communists.

The allusions to the Zarifs’ Hojjatiyeh leaning are clear enough. The Alavi School was founded by a leading Hojjatiyeh member named Ali-Asghar Karbaschian. Zarif further admits that he attended the sermons of Mahmoud Halabi, the charismatic founder of Hojjatiyeh. He also discloses that it was through the intercession of a devout Hojjatiyeh-inclined friend of his father’s, who “later turned out to be a SAVAK agent,” that he managed to leave Iran for the United States without doing mandatory military service.

The Zarifs went to great lengths to protect the young Mohammad-Javad from the revolutionary political currents of the 1960s and 1970s. Neither newspapers nor television were to be found in the Zarif home, and the only radio receiver was locked up in a closet, to be used only by the elder Zarif to listen to morning prayers during the fasting month of Ramadan. The family gardener escorted the young Mohammad-Javad to the school bus, and he was not allowed to visit classmates at their homes.

Yet politics has a way of imposing itself upon Iranian families. In high school, socially isolated and friendless, Mohammad-Javad sought the company of books. He devoured “traditional and revolutionary books,” including those of the fashionably radical writer Ali Shariati, whose Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast or Fatimah is Fatimah, he secretly read and hid under the carpet in his room. This little pamphlet about one of the daughters of the Prophet Muhammad, and a wife of Ali, the first Imam of the Shia, was emblematic of Shariati’s reinterpretation of the Shia faith as a revolutionary creed, with Fatimah as Joan of Arc. Zarif also secretly read a few books by the leftist

108 Ibid., page 15.
109 Ibid., page 18.
110 Ibid., page 19.
111 Ibid., page 21.
author Samad Behrang, whose children’s stories were thinly camouflaged social criticism of the Pahlavi regime.

Zarif does not reveal what in these books ignited the revolutionary spark in him, or what other elements combined to make him militant. Instead he stresses his fear of being arrested, which allegedly was shared by his relatives, who urged him to travel abroad to avoid arrest. But reading Shariati and Behrang hardly justified fear of arrest or imprisonment in late 1970s Iran. Zarif’s explanation is implausible. The young Zarif’s urge to rebel and to live abroad might well have been more personal than political. A deep attachment to his ailing mother, and bitter arguments with a domineering father, whose funeral in 1984 he did not attend, point in that direction.

In January 1977, with help from the friend of his father, the SAVAK agent, seventeen-year-old Mohammad-Javad avoided the draft and left Iran for the United States. He first enrolled at the Drew Preparatory School in San Francisco, and later at San Francisco State University, to study computer science. Here again politics intervened. “Five to six months before the revolution,” he recalls, “I found these friends [Alavi School alumni turned revolutionary activists in the United States]. Maybe they found me.” Zarif’s ambiguity about who found whom probably shows that, rather than actively seeking the company of revolutionaries, he was recruited by the radicals. Outside the reach of his overprotective family and its always-surveilling family gardener, Zarif enthusiastically joined the “family” of Mostafa Chamran, who established the Muslim Students’ Association at Berkeley. Here Zarif associated with Mohammad Hashemi Rafsanjani, Javad Larijani, Hossein Sheikh al-

Eslam, Mohsen Nourbakhsh, and the notorious Saeed Emami, who would later become a deputy intelligence minister involved in, and probably scapegoated for, the infamous “chain murders” of Iranian dissidents in 1999. All of these men rose to prominence through the revolution.

Remarkably, Zarif does not provide any account of the hectic days leading up to the revolution, which reinforces the impression that he was watching events unfold rather than driving them. Even after the fall of the Shah, unlike the hoards of half-educated Iranian students who returned home to serve the cause, Zarif remained in the United States. He was appointed the representative of Berkeley’s Muslim Students’ Association to the Iranian Consulate in San Francisco in order to “prevent the consulate deviating from the path of the revolution.” This he did until the closure of the consulate, leaving San Francisco only in the summer of 1979, when he returned to Tehran to marry a girl his sister had found for him.

Revolutionary societies are more romantic when observed from abroad, and after just three weeks in Iran the young couple moved to New York, preferring Manhattan to the mayhem at home. As undesirable as revolutionary Tehran might have been, however, Manhattan, and America, did not seem attractive to the newlyweds. Apart from a single visit to a professor’s home, where, out of fear of religious dietary restrictions, he did not touch anything but the salad, Zarif recalls that he never set foot in a residence of a non-Muslim American family in the course of more than twenty-four years in the United States. The couple seem to have shared a total disinterest in American society. Zarif admits that they “never learned the name of spices

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114 ibid, page 20.
115 ibid, page 16.
116 ibid, page 20.
117 ibid, page 18.
118 ibid, page 18.
119 ibid, page 23.
120 ibid, page 24.
121 ibid.
122 ibid, page 34.
123 ibid, page 28.
124 ibid, page 29.
125 ibid, page 48.
in English” since they did not, either then or later, socialize with Americans.

Zarif is keen to let the reader know that, with the pardonable exception of cigars, he never fell victim to the moral temptations of the United States. It is an odd admission from a devout revolutionary Iranian. Male Iranian revolutionaries often want you to know, at least privately, that they have sampled Western delights. Sin, after all, gives credence to repentance, and to zealotry. Publicly professing abstention is not de rigueur inside the Islamic Republic’s political system. Certainly Zarif expresses no revulsion from Western culture, and especially Western women, of the sort that the famous Sunni fundamentalist Sayyid Qutb did after a two-year sojourn in the United States. There is nothing in his book to match the embarrassed shock of young Khamenei, who—camouflaged in Western clothing—snuck into a cinema in Iran showing an American film and quickly fled in disgust. Zarif is not radically pious—but there is a moral prudishness and social insecurity about him that blends into a devout Shia concern for purity. Mohammad Khatami, the former Iranian president, wrote a book called *Bin-e Monaj*, or *Fear of the Wave*, which is, among other things, a serious reflection on his fascination with the West, especially its leading seducer, the United States. But Zarif, who has spent more time in the United States than any other revolutionary VIP, offers next to nothing about his second home.

At the time of the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, which Zarif still calls “the Den of Espionage,”126 he enrolled in the international relations program at Columbia University. Inspired by the Iraqi invasion of Iran, Zarif began studying the laws of war. By then, the skilled Shah-era diplomats at Iran’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations had been purged and were replaced by informers and spies of the new regime, who did not speak English and, according to Zarif, had no idea what the United Nations was.127 They used their diplomatic credentials largely as cover for revolutionary work inside the United Nations and the United States.128 Owing to his network in San Francisco, his presence in New York, and his command of English, Zarif was given a position at the mission in May 1982.129 This was an important leap in his career. In his book, Zarif seeks to win sympathy from the reader for his purge by Ahmadinejad,130 but the fact is that his own rise through the revolutionary ranks was built on purges.

Zarif openly admits that he and his fellow revolutionaries were ill-prepared for diplomatic service. “On many occasions,” he confesses, “I have thought that the toll of the mistakes by me and the likes of me in the field of foreign policy was in reality paid by seventy million Iranians.”131 The toll was great. For example, Ambassador Saeed Rajaei Khorasani, along with Zarif, boycotted the U.N. Security Council sessions that discussed the Iran-Iraq War.132 It was an unwise tactic, as Zarif today admits.133 He deprecates the Islamic Republic’s diplomacy of trial and error in the 1980s.134 He also doesn’t seem too fond of his odd speeches at the U.N. Special Committee on Decolonization, which surely were not much different from President Ahmadinejad’s vitriol before the General Assembly.

Apart from lacking the proper education for diplomatic service, Zarif also admits that he and other Iranian representatives at the Permanent Mission were kept in the dark by Tehran. “There were some who desired to continue the war until a specific point, and there were others who wanted to reach peace based on our conditions,” Zarif writes. Yet he admits that “in the United States, I was unaware of all this.”135 Zarif’s admission of ignorance may be just as valid today. He admits,

126 ibid, page 31.
127 ibid, page 68.
128 ibid, pages 58-59.
129 ibid, page 35.
130 ibid, page 63.
131 ibid, page 52.
132 ibid, page 36.
133 ibid, pages 37-43.
134 ibid, page 63.
135 ibid, page 79.
for example, that he has never inspected his country’s nuclear facilities. Previous negotiators of the Islamic Republic have disclosed (in private conversations with the authors of this article) that they were ignorant of the existence of the Fordow facility, which is burrowed into a mountain not far from the holy city of Qom. Even if Zarif negotiates in good faith in Geneva, how much does he really know about the strategy of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards, who oversee all of Iran’s nuclear sites?

Zarif’s account of the Islamic Republic’s post-Iran-Iraq War diplomacy, in particular in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, will give some comfort to those who have tried so assiduously to see a hopeful evolution in Tehran’s politics. But his discussion of the basic nature of the Islamic Republic and the West exposes Zarif’s ideological commitment and the regime’s revolutionary constancy.

“We have a fundamental problem with the West and especially with America,” Zarif declares. “This is because we are claimants of a mission, which has a global dimension. It has nothing to do with the level of our strength, and is related to the source of our raison d’être. How come Malaysia [an overwhelmingly Muslim country] doesn’t have similar problems? Because Malaysia is not trying to change the international order. It may seek independence and strength, but its definition of strength is the advancement of its national welfare.” While Zarif considers national welfare one of the goals of the Islamic Republic, he stresses that “we have also defined a global vocation, both in the Constitution and in the ultimate objectives of the Islamic revolution.” He adds: “I believe that we do not exist without our revolutionary goals.”

Zarif does not take the trouble to explain the global vocation of the Islamic Republic, but his reference to the Constitution is doubtlessly to Article 154: “[the Islamic Republic] supports the just struggle of the mustazafin [the oppressed] against the mustakbirun [the arrogant] in every corner of the globe.” This is the “export-of-the-revolution” clause, which the late Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, Khomeini’s “defrocked” onetime successor, who was perhaps the most Trotskyite of clerical revolutionaries, gingerly moved away from before he died under what was effectively house arrest. Very few others have even gone that far.

At times Zarif does not seem to recognize any conflict between ideology and national interests. “From a theoretical point of view, I believe utopian interests can be aligned with national interests,” he says, and cites Iraq and Lebanon as examples. “Interests, which others considered utopian, allowed us to become an influential state in Iraq and Lebanon.” But when the interviewer asks him about why the Islamic Republic does not support Chechen co-religionists against Christian Russians, Zarif refers to “certain considerations” and stresses the primacy of national interests. Zarif further points at the Islamic Republic’s relations with India and Pakistan; Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus; and Azerbaijan and Armenia, where the regime in Tehran sides with non-Muslims.

This might give the reassuring impression that for Zarif interests trump ideology, but a closer look at the foreign relations of the Islamic Republic explains the apparent inconsistency. Zarif does not really provide a review of his country’s diplomatic history, but such a review would be

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136 Ibid., pages 248-249.
137 Ibid., page 235.
138 Ibid., page 235.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., page 361.

141 The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 154, Chapter X. (http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch10.php)
142 Mohammad Mehdi Raji, آقای سفیر کلینگر با محمد جواد ظریف سفیر پیشین ایران در سامان ملل متحد (Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, ca. 2013), page 131.
143 Ibid., page 130.
144 Ibid.
instructive. The Islamic Republic has never demonstrated a great deal of interest in Muslim countries that are not on the front line of its struggle with the United States and Israel. Its fondness for revolutionary, or at least anti-American, non-Muslim states has always been much more pronounced than its efforts with Muslims who do not wish to be party to a “clash of civilizations.” Tehran has thrown a lot of money and “diplomatic” personnel at anti-American Latin American states but relatively little at Sunni Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. And after an initial euphoria in certain revolutionary quarters when the Soviet Union collapsed, Tehran quickly learned that it had relatively little traction among the Sunni Muslims of Central Asia. Jordanian missionaries with Saudi cash lived in miserable conditions to spread the word; Iranian “diplomats” wanted the benighted Central Asians to come to them. When Tehran learned that the peoples of the post-Soviet Muslim territories no longer viewed Iran as the center of the world and were not particularly exercised about American imperialism, Central Asia became an economic zone of interest but not much more. This brings us back to “pragmatism,” and to Zarif’s fondness for Kissinger’s dedication. Kissinger’s true home is post-Napoleonic Europe where, ever so briefly, the “balance of power” reigned supreme, and ideologies and religion no longer drove states to interfere in each other’s domestic affairs. Metternich, who is Kissinger’s iconic statesman, who squashed revolutionary movements wherever he could, is not a character Zarif could possibly admire. Although Zarif can certainly see the need to make tactical compromises in diplomacy, he makes it crystal clear that he sees national and religious concerns as indivisible. This point really shouldn’t be difficult for Americans and Europeans to appreciate since they have been the trailblazers in globalizing their mores into “universal human rights.” Iran’s first-generation revolutionaries, who drank deeply of Marxism, re-molding traditional Islamic tenets and heroes into religious dialectics about class struggle (often with a nasty anti-Semitic twist), have taken this moral universalism and made it their own.

They are undermined, of course, by the very success of the Western ideas that in part formed them. Individualism has sunk deeply into contemporary Iranian culture. It is impossible to read the Franco-Iranian scholar Farhad Khosrokhavar’s captivating book Avoir rintg ans au pays des Ayatollabs, or To Be Twenty in the Land of the Ayatollabs, which is a long look at the children of senior clerics in Qom, without realizing that the Islamic revolution is in deep trouble. The children, especially the daughters, are profoundly Westernized, especially about matters of identity, love, and marriage. Zarif does not bother much with cultural reflection, but he certainly leads the reader to believe that he is not too keen on internal Iranian reform, culturally or politically. Zarif’s fondness for bunar-e ta’amul, or the art of dealing, in foreign affairs should not be construed domestically as an affection for cooperation within Iran’s contentious and fractured society. It is worth noting that the Iranian police state hasn’t become more polite under President Rouhani. (Under Khatami, at least for a few years, the oppression lightened.) It might have even become worse.

Above all else, Rouhani and Zarif aim to preserve the Islamic revolution, not to transform it, as was the passion of the fallen left-wing Islamist revolutionaries who gathered round Khatami and briefly resurfaced in the pro-democracy Green Movement, which Khamenei crushed in 2009. (Neither Rouhani nor Zarif raised a word against the brutal crackdown.) Although Khamenei unquestionably would have preferred Saeed Jalili to be president, he has probably lucked out with Rouhani. Rouhani at home and Zarif abroad are infinitely more effective at bunar-e ta’amul. While Rouhani tries to re-weave the unity of the Iranian elite, badly frayed by the turmoil of 2009, and by Khamenei’s vindictive demolition of Rafsanjani’s political network, and by the anti-clerical populism of Ahmadinejad, Zarif is endeavoring to rebuild the Islamic Republic’s standing beyond its borders. Given his soft manner, his wit, his
reassuring English, and his ease with handshakes (difficult for many Iranian revolutionaries), and given the West’s profound fear of another war in the Middle East, Zarif’s biggest problem may be the Supreme Leader’s habit of speaking the unvarnished truth.

Whether Zarif succeeds or fails, it is certainly impressive that he has come so far inside Iran’s Islamic regime. He has spent nearly half his life in the United States, the “epicenter of evil.” Many within the Revolutionary Guards who survived the ghastly battles of the Iran-Iraq War are not fond of him. They consider him a draft-dodger. Yet he is trusted enough by Khamenei to have been made foreign minister during the most trying times since 1988. An American who had spent almost a quarter of a century in Russia would never be cleared to work in Washington’s national security establishment. And Iran’s ruling elite is vastly more suspicious and conspiratorial than are Americans. That Zarif has risen certainly shows he has talent, where many of his colleagues have none. It also shows what Kissinger perhaps realized: that he is our enemy.

III: Iran’s Supreme Censor: The Evolution of Ali Khamenei from Sensitive Lover of Western Literature to Enforcer of Islamic Revolutionary Orthodoxy

The Blind Man’s friend: Don’t suffer because of the past. You censored books for the sake of God… What is it you are taking?
The Blind Man: Valium. I’m taking it to forget everything, even God.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s 2003 movie script "Faramoushi (Dementia)" never passed the censors at Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

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% D 9 % B 5 % D 9 % 8 A % D 8 %
% B 1 % D 8 % A 7 % D 9 % 85 % D 9
% 88 % D 9 % 86 -
the clerical regime’s gateway for all films, books, magazines, and newspapers. Makhmalbaf’s sarcasm and scaring allusions often got him into trouble before he went into exile in 2005. His mordancy in Faramoushi, aimed at the rampant, crude, and at times comical censorship within the Islamic Republic, must have caused the censors particular unease: The intellectual journey of the central character, the blind censor, bears a definite resemblance to the evolution of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei’s strange life is worthy of a Makhmalbaf movie: The young Ali was a lover of books; Ayatollah Khamenei bans books he dislikes. Budding with modern curiosity, the young man much preferred the company of intellectuals and poets to that of holy-law loving mullahs. He tried his hand at poetry and prose, and under the shah endured the humiliation of interrogation and imprisonment for love of the written word. As supreme leader, Khamenei imprisons and assassinates poets and artists to safeguard the republic of God against cultural pollution from the West.

What made the young cleric, an intellectual capable of considerable compassion toward atheists, turn into a torturer of dissident writers, poets, scholars, and students? It’s not an unimportant question. It was to Khamenei that Barack Obama started writing letters in 2009 in the hope of ending the rancor of U.S.–Iranian relations. The supreme leader and his praetorians, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, control Iran’s controversial nuclear program.

In Makhmalbaf’s script, the blind censor as a young man is a film aficionado, in love with Gelsomina, played by Giulietta Masina, in Fellini’s La Strada. He’s an admirer of Sergei Parajanov’s The Color of Pomegranates. Above all, he is enthralled by Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather. When Saddam Hussein invades Iran, he fights for his country and loses his sight, a victim of Iraqi chemical agents. Returning from the front, the blind cinephile joins the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to continue the fight on a different front: safeguarding the purity of the revolution against the “cultural onslaught” of the West. 148

## Childhood Misery and Books

Khamenei was born in 1939 into a lower-middle-class clerical family in Mashhad in Khorasan Province in northeastern Iran. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Khorasan’s aristocrats and poets revived the Persian language and culture, which had been submerged by the seventh-century Arab invasion and the rapid conversion of Iranians to Islam. By the time of Khamenei’s childhood, however, the province had become a cultural backwater. Most of Khorasan’s men of letters flocked to the more cosmopolitan and liberal Tehran. To judge by Khamenei’s autobiographical statements compiled in Hedayatollah Behboodi’s recently published Sharbe Esm (The Elucidation of the Name), 149 the land where the sun arrives from was wretched, backward, and religiously superstitious. In 1943, 4-


year-old Ali and his older brother Mohammad enrolled at the neighborhood religious elementary school. It was hardly an Arcadian paradise: The teacher, a lowbrow cleric, often beat the students and tasked Ali to rub paper money against the Koran in the belief it would bring the teacher fabulous wealth. Ali was a *seyed*, an alleged descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and thus capable of miraculously “blessing” the money of the miserly mullah.\(^{150}\)

In 1946 Ali enrolled at a secular school, but his agonies did not cease. Clothed in his father’s old rags and slippers, he was ridiculed by more prosperous classmates. Ali’s undiagnosed nearsightedness, too, made him appear dull-witted and prevented him from doing well at school.\(^{151}\)

Passing by a secondhand store one day, Ali accidentally tried a pair of glasses, and suddenly “the world became clear.” His father, however, would not pay for them, or for “shoes with laces.”\(^{152}\) Ali’s father thought his son so attired would appear the dandy. A year passed before Ali’s loving mother squirreled away enough money from her food budget to buy her son spectacles.\(^{153}\)

At home Ali and Mohammad continued religious studies under the watchful eye of their introverted and neurotic father, who regularly slapped Ali for incorrect recitations of the Koran and other religious literature.\(^{154}\) The young man found solace in his mother’s recitations of Persian poetry. Her love of poetry ignited his own.\(^{155}\)

Poetry led Ali to discover other literature, first through serialized newspaper novellas and Persian translations of popular European novels at a small neighborhood bookstall. For a modest fee, he would rent the popular works of fiction and escape from the harshness of his home.\(^{156}\)

Too timid to rebel against his father’s authority and continue his studies at a secular high school,\(^{157}\) Ali enrolled at the Mashhad Theological Seminary in 1952.\(^{158}\) Quickly, however, he discovered the library of the Astan-e Qods-e Razavi charitable foundation, Iran’s equivalent of the Vatican library. In this beautiful refuge from the daily humiliations of school and home, he encountered masterpieces of European literature. “I would go there to read,” Khamenei later recalled. “The voice of the moezzin calling to prayer was broadcast through the loudspeakers, but I was so absorbed in reading that I would hardly notice!”\(^{159}\)

Which works made the later self-appointed *vali-ye amr-e moslemin*, or guardian commander of the Muslims, forget about the call to prayer? Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, the story of Jean Valjean, who finds himself on the wrong side of the law but the right side of virtue. Khamenei later praised the book as “a miracle in the realm of the novel... a work of sociology, a work of history, a critical book, a divine book, and the book of affection, sympathy, and love.”\(^{160}\) He also read Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, which, in Khamenei’s words, “depicts the initial defeats [of Russia], but in a way that makes them a source of pride and glory of the defeated nation.”\(^{161}\) The morally strong characters

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\(^{150}\) *Ibid*, page 42.


\(^{156}\) *Ibid*, page 68.

\(^{157}\) *Ibid*, page 53.


\(^{159}\) *Ibid*, page 69.

\(^{159}\) *Ibid*, page 70.

\(^{160}\) *Tayyebeh Estelae-Resani-ye Howzeh (Iran)*, May 23.
in Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe* and *L’âme enchantée* (*The Soul Enchanted*) appealed to the young Ali, who also read Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Mikhail Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*, the works of Michel Zevaco, and “anything” by Alexandre Dumas, *père et fils*. Still later, Khamenei discovered Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog*, an “artful” parody of the Soviet regime, which he later praised, but still later dismissed as unrevolutionary and thus “lacking universal appeal.”

## A Religious Intellectual

Before long, Khamenei, doubtless defying his strict father, began attending the literary gatherings at Mahmoud Farrokh’s aristocratic and “eye-pleasing” mansion, which attracted traditionalists, and the Negarandeh circle, an informal association of younger literary hopefuls. Chez Farrokh, Khamenei got to know the poets Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Mehrad Avesta, Mohammad-Reza Shafiee-Kadkani, and other literary luminaries from Mashhad. He even tried his hand at poetry under the pen name Zia al-Din, or Light of the Faith, but never dared to publish or recite his own poems. “I knew poetry, knew the difference between good and bad poetry. … Looking at my own poems,” Khamenei later remarked, “I had the view of a critic and was not satisfied. Therefore, I would not recite a poem. Had the poem been on par with the poetry of the day, I certainly would have recited it.”

In the Iran of the 1960s, as wherever political debate is suppressed, there was little distance between literature and politics, and literary circles inevitably led to political activism. Gholamreza Qodsinejad, founder of the Negarandeh society, who spent four years in prison after the 1953 coup that restored the shah to power, became a lifelong friend of Khamenei’s. Khamenei also got to know Ali Shariati, a French-educated intellectual who became one of the ideologues of the 1979 revolution, and still later Jalal Al-e Ahmad. By mixing Shiism with Marxism, Shariati, who died in 1977, managed to unite the secular and religious opposition to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s regime. Al-e Ahmad, a Westernized teacher with a deep knowledge of Persian literature, coined the term *gharbzadegi* (Occidentosis) in his book of the same name in 1962, which traced Iran’s backwardness to emulation of the West. Unlike most revolutionary clerics, Khamenei was first exposed to politics at literary salons, not in religious schools and mosques.

Having rubbed shoulders with the literati and the chic revolutionary set, Khamenei readily embraced Ruhollah Khomeini’s 1963 rebellion against the shah. The shah’s modernization scheme, the White Revolution, launched in 1963, distributed the lands of the rural aristocracy and religious endowments among peasants, organized a civilian corps to fight illiteracy, and introduced female suffrage. While the traditional and religious

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(https://www.hawzah.net/fa/Article/View/644442)


163 “ Guests at a gathering of poets are invited to recite their own poems, but if they are unable, they recite one of the works of Hafez or Shabestari,” *Dastere Hez va Nashre Asrar-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei (Iran), November 25, 1991*.


166 Ibid., page 72.

167 Ibid., page 73.


169 Ibid., page 191.
segments of Iranian society were enrag ed by the reforms, the shah’s dictatorial rule alienated the secular elites who might otherwise have supported the modernization scheme. Khomeini managed to transform both rage and alienation into a political movement with his own interpretation of Islam as its unifying ideology and political program. For the vanguard of his revolution, he mobilized theology students.

Khamenei claims to have joined Khomeini’s rebellion “from the first hours of the struggle” and says he was already acquainted with Khomeini’s polemical Kashf al-Asrar (The Unveiling of Secrets), first published in 1942. Given Khamenei’s love of Western literature and lack of interest in clerical polemics, however, this can be doubted. He probably read the book later, after joining Khomeini’s revolt. The work, nonetheless, seems to have made a lasting impact on the young cleric, who later described it as “the blueprint for an Islamic government.”

Perhaps inspired by Shariati, Al-e Ahmad, and Khomeini, Khamenei spent 1965 translating Egyptian radical theoretician Sayyid Qutb’s Al-Mustaqbal li-badhal’-Din (The Future Belongs to this Religion), from the Arabic original into Persian. Executed in 1967, Qutb was the most influential Arab Sunni Islamist since the Egyptian Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. His voluminous Koranic commentary has remained required reading among fundamentalists. His emphasis on jihad and on takfir—declaring Muslims who fail their faith infidels, not just poor Muslims—was instrumental in the intellectual march to al-Qaeda and mass-casualty terrorism. Qutb’s book shared a fundamental assumption of Khomeini’s: that Islam is fully capable of delivering answers to contemporary social and political needs. Equally appealing to Khamenei, Qutb shared Al-e Ahmad’s distaste for Middle Easterners’ emulating the West and Shariati’s passionate revolutionary rhetoric.

Khamenei’s foreword to his translation of Qutb reveals his understanding of political Islam in the 1960s. According to Khamenei, Western imperialism was perfectly happy with Islam as a set of daily rituals, which kept Muslims ignorant of the “revolutionary and mobilizing factors” of the faith. Westerners and Westernized Iranians wanted to neutralize “jihad and self-sacrifice for the preservation and propagation of the faith” and the “necessity of using force and violence against its enemies.” Khamenei also highlighted that Islam, in spite of its originality, in its traditional garb could no longer appeal to young people, and clearly saw Qutb’s theoretical innovations and literary style as a means of countering the appeal of Marxism and scientific socialism among Muslims.

While Shariati and Khomeini revealed to Khamenei the political potency of Islamism, Al-e Ahmad and Qutb radically changed the young man’s perception of the West. The West was no longer the civilization that had given him Dante, Dumas, and Hugo; Russia was no longer the mother of Tolstoy, Sholokhov, and Bulgakov. The West and Russia had become “world-devouring” imperial powers. Their materialism and communism were killing the faith and spirituality of Muslims.

At the time Khamenei was translating Qutb’s book, its author was in Gamal Abdel Nasser’s
prison, and by the time the Persian translation was released, Qutb was dead. In April 1967, Khamenei’s translation was banned in Iran. SAVAK, the shah’s secret police, arrested the young cleric. During his three-month imprisonment and ensuing legal proceedings, Khamenei consistently claimed that Qutb’s book and his own foreword were directed against communism and Nasser’s Arab socialism, and not against the Pahlavi regime. The arduousness of imprisonment appears to have had its intended literary effect. Khamenei took cover. In 1970 he translated Shaykh Radi Aal-e Yasin’s 1953 treatise Sulb al-Hassan (The Peace Treaty of Hassan). In Khamenei’s translation, the title of the book also featured a subtitle: The Most Glorious Heroic Flexibility in History.

Aal-e Yasin’s book defended Hassan ibn Ali (625-670), the second imam of the Shia, who in the face of adversity made peace with his enemy, Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan, and relinquished his claim to the caliphate. Muawiyah, with his Syrian army behind him, claimed the caliphate after the death of Hassan’s father Ali in 661. This peace has since caused controversy among the Shia, between those who considered it wisely expedient and those who believed Hassan should have chosen war and possible martyrdom rather than the unjust victory of Muawiyah, the first ruler of the Umayyad dynasty. In his short introduction, Khamenei argued: “[The third imam] Hussein’s drinking from the chalice of martyrdom under specific circumstances, and Imam Hassan’s preserving life through peace under other circumstances, were two schemes and two means to immortalize the [Shiite] school of thought.” He found both approaches to be “wise solutions... from which there was no escape.”

Revealingly, Khamenei’s introduction has been removed from post-revolution editions of this translation, which clearly shows the cleric’s unease with his original theme. It is difficult not to interpret Khamenei’s first foreword as the words of a defeated man. Burned by prison, unable to foresee Khomeini’s triumph nine years later, Khamenei advanced an Imam Hassan-style accord with the shah rather than torturous struggle and martyrdom. Curiously, Khamenei used the phrase “heroic flexibility” when he publicly endorsed President Hassan Rouhani’s nuclear negotiations with the United States in 2013. This time, Khamenei stressed, however, that “heroic flexibility” is a tactical stratagem employed by wrestlers who meet formidable opponents. “One must never forget the nature of the enemy,” he added. Khamenei’s foreword to his translation of another Qutb manifesto published in Iran in the mid-1970s, reflects a similar resignation. Khamenei admits he’d abandoned the Persian translation of Qutb’s essay, and that it would never have been completed without the help of Hadi, his younger

brother. Khamenei continues the theme of insidious Western conquest. It remains unquestionably the most salient narrative in the supreme leader’s speeches today. “This is the story of our life, the sad story,” Khamenei writes, “… of a people who, by changing and forgetting themselves, totally surrendered their dear and centuries-old heritage to the civilization of the West. Instead of their own rich, original, and deeply rooted civilization and culture, they tried to console themselves with the sorry remains of creations of others. Even strangers pitied them, let alone friends.”

On top of his earlier grievances against the Occident, Khamenei also accuses Westerners of “seeking consolation at the feet of idols in Hindu temples, Jainism, yoga, or any other mystical way, if not through ridiculous manners of the hippies or through marijuana, LSD, heroin, and the like.”

Five decades later, Khamenei uses similar accusations against anyone who seeks political or moral inspiration from the West.

In 1974 Khamenei’s writings and his association with leading clerical figures again led to his arrest and imprisonment. Houshang Asadi, a leftist political activist and Khamenei’s cellmate for three months, in his Letter to My Torturer, recalls the cleric who would “recite the Koran quietly… pray… and weep, sobbing loudly… losing himself completely in God” while “looking at the sky from behind cell bars in search of a compassionate and merciful God.”

Asadi also remembers his cellmate’s “unique mastery of contemporary literature, especially poetry.” To Asadi’s dismay, Khamenei was not fond of modernist poets like Forough Farrokhzad and Ahmad Shamlou, or Sadeq Hedayat the novelist. But they shared a love for Akhavan-Sales, who wrote free verse, and the more traditional, but socially conscious, Houshang Ebtehaj. To pass the time, the two men would recount novels and poetry to each other. Asadi would even sing Communist hymns, to the cleric’s obvious enchantment. But every time the conversation turned to Asadi’s atheism, Khamenei would say, “You are a Muslim. I can see God in your heart. Even when you talk about atheism, your breath smells of God.”

Asadi also recalls “the glow” in Khamenei’s eyes as the cleric, with his own hands, fed a Communist cellmate who had just returned from a session of severe torture. This occurred at a time when most clerics considered Communists religiously impure and performed ablutions if they accidentally touched a Communist in prison. Khamenei, however, was about to change.

**A Deadly Ideologue**

Makhlubalaff’s blind cinephile changed as he began working as a censor. He censored movies according to his own whims, based on his feelings towards the cinematographer, or depending on what movies he considered expedient for the “immature” general public. Sitting in the movie theater of the ministry, the blind censor listens to Vigen, the old Armenian movie operator, describe the clips shown to him. Then the censor adds his own commentary:

A whore deserves to be stoned [to death], but showing such scenes is not expedient. … [A] thief deserves to be dismembered as a means of frightening the public from committing theft, but screening this movie is not expedient. … [Yasujiro] Ozu’s Tokyo Story is fine, but the director had a habit of drinking from dusk to dawn with his pals. He demanded “Nothing” be written on his gravestone. Showing the works of nihilist directors is not expedient. … Fahrenheit 451? They say it is about the death of literature in the hands of cinema and television, but in Iran, intellectuals who see it will think it is against censorship. Not expedient. … One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest? No, no,… these young people just wait for a window to be smashed to take arson to the streets…! Parajonov? Had he

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not been a sodomite, I would allow his *The Color of Pomegranates*.

With the Islamic revolution, a failed poet became a powerful critic. Khamenei enthusiastically fanned the flames of Iran’s cultural revolution. The writer Faraj Sarkouhi explains well the significance of culture for most within the clerical class. “The clergy is a cultural class and aware of its importance. For years they had complained about the assault of Western culture against the world of Islam, and now they wanted to get even with Western culture, and with anything that did not fit their interpretation of Islam. Freedom of speech, thought, and religion, human rights, humanism... individualism and anything the Constitutional Revolution [of 1905-1911] had imported into Iran... they considered the work of Satan.”

Culture was so important that even in February 1982, in the midst of one of the darkest periods of the war with Iraq, Khamenei, by this time president of the republic, chose to address cultural commentators at the newspaper *Jomhouri-ye Eslami*. Khamenei disclosed that a poet had sent him a letter thanking him for his interest in poetry, but complaining about feeling isolated after the revolution. Khamenei answered, “I had a look at his poetry, and saw that his [real] message was ‘this autumn too will pass...’ I wrote back, ‘You don’t see the spring [the Islamic Republic] has come. How can you complain you are separated from the people...?! The spring is here, but a donkey is grazing in the midst of the flowers. One must chase the donkey, and not dismiss the reality of the spring!”

Not even the great masters of the past were spared Khamenei’s criticism. He attacked as “unrevolutionary” the poetry of Nizami and Sadi, twelfth- and thirteenth-century poets, respectively, who surely were among the great, classical poets his mother once lovingly recited to him. Complaining about prerevolution poets became a recurring theme in Khamenei’s speeches. He slammed art from before the Islamic revolution as “in the service of masters of power and the government.” He demanded that the arts serve “the people,” which in Khamenei’s terminology means “the regime,” and attacked “artists who have parted ways from the loving, grateful people.”

A speech to the Iranian Students’ Poetry and Literature Congress in December 1986 is typical of the new, post-revolution Khamenei, who, like the revolution’s founding father, wanted to birth a new man, the perfect man, which traditional Shiites had once thought was possible only for the chosen few in some eschatological future:

I have a complaint... many of those who could have used their superior art in the service of the revolution and the people have not done so. ... Some of them never claimed to be popular. One would say: “I am the poet of requiems for my own wounded heart,” and would write poems only for himself and had nothing to do with the ideals and goals of the revolution. ... [And then] there were some who claimed [to be popular and revolutionary] but did not join the people. They failed to do so because of several reasons: their dogmatic thoughts

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were nullified by the victory of the revolution. … Liberal minded Westerners, who talked of humanism and the like, aestheticians who worshipped beauty and love, and indulged in saying absurdities. … But the leftists too, those who considered the people the toiling class… as their ideal. … When the revolution came, it became clear they were all absurd. … They did not join the [Islamic] revolution, did not accept the idea of the revolution and they have naturally nothing to say. … There were also those who on the one hand desired to be popular poets and now have the honor of being revolutionaries—but at the same time continue their revelry and debauchery, drinking incessantly and the like. … There are those who want to be the sole star of the revolution… [but with] their evil character, wickedness, and dependence on various counterrevolutionary camps, have no motive to be in the service of the revolution, and have even worked against it. 188

The once unassuming, awkward young cleric now believed the only goal of the arts was to immortalize the revolution’s achievements. “A call, vocation, revolution, civilization, or culture—be it truthful or false—which is not expressed by art will not survive.” 189 Poetry is capable of making posterity understand “what happened in this society in the days of the revolution, and during the imposed war [the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988],” he wrote in 1987. 190 “Revolutionary poetry must be the vanguard of the caravan of the revolution. … [T]hrough the arts and literature, the revolution can be exported in an easier and more honest way.” 191 “Make a sword out of your art,” he demanded, “in order to cut away filth and impurities.” 192 Answering proponents of artistic freedom, Khamenei shot back: “There are those who say: ‘You are shackling the artists, you are restricting them. The artist should be free, and art can’t be restricted to ideological frameworks!’ This is a total lie. … Art has always been the best means of explaining ideology.” 193

Khamenei’s criticisms were warnings. “The remains of the art from the era of Taghout [the rebellion against God, a reference to the era of the shahs], the spirit of which was surrender to the cultural onslaught of the foreigners, cannot have any role in the structure of the revolutionary art of today. Those authors will no longer be allowed to publish.” 194

Shahrokh Meskoob, the Iranian literary critic, once remarked that fathers kill their sons in Persian mythology, not the other way round as with the Greeks. This is what happens in Makhmalbaf’s script. The blind censor employs his own son to read aloud book manuscripts submitted to the Ministry of Culture. In the end, however, the son

After the murder of Sirjani, the newspaper Kayhan, Khamenei’s official mouthpiece, went after intellectuals. In a series of articles, later made into a TV series, the newspaper pinpointed public intellectuals—most of whom had refused to turn on Sirjani—as “mercenaries,” “lackeys,” and “poison pens” of the West. Then in October 1995, the regime killed the writer and literary translator Ahmad Mir-Alaei, who’d not only refused to retract his support of Sirjani but had met with the British author V.S. Naipaul, who was visiting Iran for Beyond Belief, his sequel to Among the Believers. In 1996 the regime attempted to kill a group of authors, Faraj Sarkouhi among them, who had publicly refused to take back their support of Sirjani. They were on a bus headed to a literary conference in Armenia. The driver attempted to kill them by steering the vehicle over a cliff as he jumped to safety. Fortunately, passengers thwarted the plot. Again the fingerprints pointed directly to the intelligence ministry and Khamenei.

It’s a near certainty that the supreme leader authorized all of the assassinations of intellectuals and oppositionists, at home and abroad, since 1989. Although Hassan Rouhani has a long track record of uninterest in or hostility to intellectuals and students who push the envelope of “cultural” expression, the regime’s current severe crackdown on journalists and intellectuals ultimately can be traced, too, to the supreme leader.

There are—there always are—artists who side with the regime. Poets who show up at

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195 "پناه آخیر مرحوم سیرجینی به آقا خامنه‌ای" Sirjani Website (Iran), accessed September 1, 2014. (http://w.w.w.sirjani.com/letters/toKhamenei3.htm)

196 Ibid.


199 Ibid.

200 Ali Hamedani, "پرگذاره هویت صدا و سیما" Youtube.com, uploaded August 15, 2014. (https://w.w.w.youtube.com/watch?v=x0oqK89EbjQ)


202 Faraj Sarkouhi, پناس و داس (Spanga: Nashre Baran, 2002), pages 129-134.
Khamenei’s court with panegyrics for the “wise leader”; authors whom the supreme leader praises for their dishonest books about the Iran-Iraq war and the clerics’ (disastrous) waging of it; and moviemakers who soften the image of the country. It’s a tricky business. Sirjani and Makhmalbaf, once favored by the regime, fell from grace. Khamenei may still admire *Les Misérables*, but he probably now sympathizes with Police Inspector Javert, who imprisons human beings in this world in return for freedom from torment in the next. Khamenei may still like *War and Peace*, but most likely as a literary device to explain away Saddam Hussein’s triumph over the Islamic Republic in 1988. Bulgakov he now dismisses, which isn’t surprising. Rather than sympathizing with the dog, the supreme leader surely now identifies himself with the totalitarian surgeon who is striving to create “the new man.” Khamenei, who once would have enthusiastically agreed with Makhmalbaf’s tearful plea in his film *Gabbeh (Life is Color!)*, has become his country’s Grand Inquisitor. It requires no great insight to see that such a man isn’t ready for President Obama’s good intentions.