



Iran's Political System and Its Implications for US Policy

Dr. Peter Jones

Peter Jones is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa and is a fellow at several research institutions, including the Center for Trans-Atlantic Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University and at The Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention of the Jordan Institute for Diplomacy in Amman, Jordan.

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran poses a particularly vexing set of problems for U.S. policy-makers. Its seemingly impenetrable political process and highly ideological approach make it a very difficult interlocutor. But policy-makers need to understand and engage Iran. Left to fester on its own, Iran could pose an even worse set of headaches.

This paper provides an overview of the Iranian system, one of the most complex, unusual and factionalised in the world. It will explain Iran's constitutional arrangements and then explore how politics really works in Iran. The paper will then discuss what this means for U.S. policy-makers. It should be noted at the outset that this paper contains no magic formula for making everything alright. Such a magic bullet probably does not exist.

Governance in the Islamic Republic

The 1979 constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran had to translate into a workable political system the vision of its first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, for a state based on his interpretation of centuries old precepts of law, morality and justice. The constitution also had to translate the combination of religious legitimacy, political practicality and mass charisma which Khomeini enjoyed. One of Khomeini's last acts was to revise the constitution on July 28, 1989, shortly before his death.¹

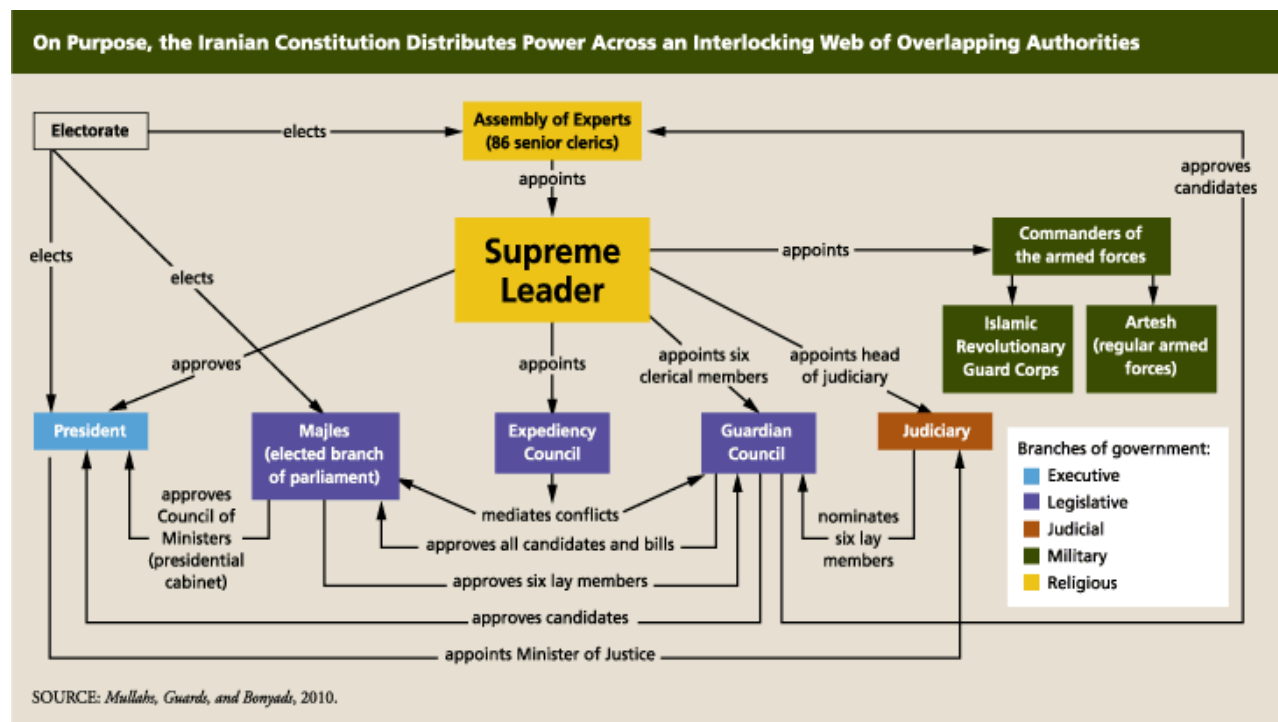
The constitution establishes a theocratic republic. On one side are the religious institutions and objectives which embody the Islamic Republic's theocratic mission. On the other are republican institutions and procedures, based on the French constitution of 1958. The whole thing is, in theory, given credibility by the regular participation of the people in elections – under the watchful eye of the theocrats. As Vanessa Martin notes, there are three currents in the politics of Iran;

...that of a moral community in which the powers of the state repose mainly in a leader of outstanding qualities...; that of a legal state defined by the laws that represent the divine will and bound to implement them both to secure legitimacy and to guide society; and that of the modern, strong state, highly organised, well defended and centralised in power and authority.²

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Partnership for a Secure America.

Khomeini held that the state's purpose is to prepare the Islamic world for the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi (also known as the Hidden Imam), who disappeared in 941 (Christian era).³ The Mahdi's reappearance, which will come in a time of great turmoil, will herald an era of justice for all who have kept faith. Central to Khomeini's concept was that a just, holy and wise leader must preserve the Ummah (the community of believers) in a state of holiness to hasten the return of the Mahdi, and protect the Ummah from non-believers who would exploit and corrupt it (a danger which Khomeini believed was represented by the U.S., Israel and modernity). Khomeini's idea of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent) holds that a religious leader must ensure that policies are consistent with the over-riding purpose of maintaining the Ummah in a fit condition to hasten the reappearance of the Mahdi.⁴

Thus, the elements of the Constitution are bound together through a series of institutions and bodies which are supposed to produce a government which, in theory, meets the needs of the modern world, and is fully grounded in religious doctrines.⁵ Depicted below,⁶ this intentionally complex network of overlapping institutions and bodies governs Iran.



As the following overview of each the bodies demonstrates, the religious branch, backed by the security forces, tends to have the upper hand. The major theocratic institutions/bodies in which at least a portion of the members are appointed by the Supreme Leader are the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council and the Judiciary. The republican institutions/bodies with elected officials are the President, the Majiles (the Parliament) and the Assembly of Experts. The Majiles also appoint half of the Guardian Council with the other half appointed by the Supreme Leader. As the Guardian Council vets all candidates for office, through his selection of half of the Council's members, the Supreme Leader has direct impact on who runs the "republican" portions of the government.

The Supreme Leader⁷ - Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei

Sitting atop Iran's system of governance is the Supreme Leader, whose authority derives from the *velayat-e faqih*. This office is established in Article 5 of the Constitution. The duties of the Supreme Leader include his involvement in virtually every facet of governance. He appoints key people in the judiciary and the military, resolves differences between the various organs of government, and many others. The Supreme Leader is served by a powerful institution; the Office of the Supreme Leader.⁸ Relatively little is known of this body. The Supreme Leader's son, Mojtaba, is reputed to play a significant role though he has no official capacity. The Supreme Leader also appoints an extensive network of representatives throughout the country and the government who serve as his eyes and ears through the system.

The President - Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

The President heads the executive.⁹ He is elected by a majority of universal suffrage every four years and can serve two consecutive terms. The Guardian Council approves candidates for President. The President administers the government, appoints Ministers (which must be approved by the Majles, or Parliament – an approval which is not automatic), implements laws passed by the Majles, signs international treaties, appoints Iranian Ambassadors, receives the credentials of foreign Ambassadors and chairs the Supreme National Security Council. Though the President is less powerful than the Supreme Leader, the two offices share overlapping responsibilities in many areas, such as foreign affairs, defence and the Judiciary.

The Majles (Parliament) - Ali Larijani (Speaker)

The Majles reviews budgets, proposes bills, ratifies treaties and reviews the performance of the President and Ministers.¹⁰ Candidates for the Majles require the approval of the Guardian Council. This gives the Supreme Leader significant influence over the selection of candidates as half of the Council is appointed by him and the other half through a process he influences. The leader of the Majles is the Speaker who is elected by the members of the Majles. The Speaker can use the power of review to frustrate a President. In cases of dispute between the Majles and the Guardian Council, the matter is referred to the Expediency Council.

The Guardian Council - Ahmad Jannati (Chairman)

The Guardian Council has 12 members.¹¹ Six are religious scholars appointed by the Supreme Leader for six year terms. The rest are appointed by the Majles at the recommendation of the head of the Judiciary, who is himself appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council vets candidates for all elected office, a power used to screen out reformist candidates.¹² The Guardian Council blocks legislation it deems un-Islamic or unconstitutional. It is worth noting that the ability to block legislation deemed un-Islamic rests with a majority of the members appointed by the Supreme Leader, and to block legislation deemed unconstitutional with a majority of those appointed by the Majles. A ruling of 75% of its members has the same force as the Constitution itself.

The Assembly of Experts - Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani (Chairman)

The Assembly is comprised of 86 clerics, elected by popular vote for eight year terms. The next election will take place in 2014. The candidates for the Assembly are vetted by the Guardian Council. The Assembly's primary duties are to appoint a Supreme Leader when an incumbent

dies in office, to monitor his progress in office, and, in exceptional cases, to remove him if he is no longer fit.¹³ The Assembly meets infrequently, and little is known of its deliberations.

The Expediency Council - Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (Chairman)

Created in 1988, this body exists to break deadlocks between the Majles and the Guardian Council and to advise the Supreme Leader.¹⁴ The Expediency Council is a flexible body consisting of some 35-40 members. Though its permanent members are appointed by the Supreme Leader, temporary members can be brought in depending on the issue.

The Judiciary - Ayatollah Sadeq Ardeshir Larijani (Chief Justice. It is worth noting that he is the brother of the Majles Speaker.)

The Judiciary is an independent arm. It is charged with the enforcement of Islamic law and with the nomination of the six lay members of the Guardian Council.¹⁵ The head of the Judiciary is appointed by the Supreme Leader for a five year term. The head of the Judiciary works closely with the Minister of Justice, who is appointed by the President. This constitutes an important area of overlap between the offices of the Supreme Leader and the Presidency.

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) - Mahmoud Ahmedinejad (Chair), Saeed Jalili (Secretary)

Created by the revised Constitution of 1989, the SNSC is the key committee charged with the development of “the defence and national security policies within the framework of general policies determined by the Leader.” The SNSC coordinates “activities in the areas relating to politics, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic fields in regard to general defence and security policies.”¹⁶ The SNSC is chaired by the President and includes the Speaker of the Majles, the head of the Judiciary, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and the Interior, the Chiefs of the Revolutionary Guards and the Regular Military, and two personal representatives of the Supreme Leader. Additional members are brought in, depending on the issue at hand. Decisions of the SNSC are subject to confirmation by the Supreme Leader.

Informal Power in the Islamic Republic

While the formal structure is clear, if complex, the actual manner in which power is exercised is not. The constitutional system comprises not so much the process by which Iran is governed, as a playing field upon which factions and groupings compete for power and patronage according, until recently at least, to “accepted” rules. Foremost of these was the *velayat-e faqih*.¹⁷ The key point was that there was room at the table, and at the trough, for a spectrum of approaches, so long as all respected the basic tenet of the *velayat-e faqih*.

It is informal coalitions and groupings which are the real power centres in the Islamic Republic. There are at least three reasons why the formal structures of governance which are enshrined in the Constitution do not correspond with the actualities of power:¹⁸

- While formal titles appear to convey a certain status or role, actual power is vested more in the prestige and connections of the incumbent, than the title;¹⁹

- The uneasy relationship between the republican and the theocratic arms of government means that unelected bodies constantly oversee the decisions and membership of elected ones, with the consequent second-guessing and competition that this implies; and
- The incumbents of the multiple decision-making bodies which overlap across many functions spend more time fighting with each other for influence and prestige (which often means for the patronage of the Supreme Leader) than they do governing – indeed, this competition has come to be a substitute for governing in many cases.

Politics and governance in Iran are thus more properly thought of as a:

...decentralized power structure which takes the form of loose coalitions among like-minded individuals or groups and is characterised by personal patronage links. Upper-level posts are assigned exclusively to immediate relatives and friends of the individuals in power, who in turn place their relatives and friends in sensitive and influential positions. The Iranian government's successful functioning is often at the mercy of these informal networks.²⁰

The Factions

Key to the functioning of this system are the various factions which lie at its heart. Though ostensibly driven by political and philosophical objectives regarding the direction of the Revolution, the factions are deeply enmeshed in patronage. Broadly speaking, scholars have discerned four key factional groupings which are continually jockeying with each other (and, importantly, *within themselves*) for power, money and influence.²¹

- **The traditional conservatives** are the staunchest supporters of the vision espoused by Khomeini and the most resistant to reform. They are highly suspicious of rapprochement with the West. Though he is officially supposed to be above day-to-day politics, it is widely thought that the Supreme Leader is most comfortable with this faction.
- **The principlists** are a relatively new faction that arose as a response to the reformist government of the 90s, and the arrival of younger actors – including many veterans of the Iran-Iraq war – on the scene. President Ahmadinejad, Majles Speaker Larijani and others are members of this faction (which demonstrates the point that common “membership” of a faction does not necessarily mean political alliance, as these two evidently cannot stand each other). Principlists advocate a return to the doctrines and teachings of Khomeini, are deeply suspicious of social and political liberalization, profess to be suspicious of any opening of relations with the West, and espouse, publicly at least, a redistribution of wealth away from the elites which have grown fat since the Revolution.²² As such, the principlists have much in common with the traditional conservatives, but their economic agenda does tend to cross that of traditional conservatives since it is many of the latter who have amassed the very wealth which the principlists say they want to re-distribute.
- **The reformists** are a combination of reform-minded clerics and technocratic officials who favor less oppressive social policy, greater economic liberalization, a more active civil society and a less confrontational approach to foreign policy. Former President

Khatami is a leading figure in this movement, which has come under considerable pressure from the traditional conservatives.

- **The pragmatic conservatives** are willing to tolerate limited reform in the spheres of economic and foreign policy (tending towards pragmatic goals, such as a cautious warming of relations with the West in order to facilitate the development of Iran), but have been generally conservative in terms of liberalization of the political system in Iran and ambivalent regarding social reform. Former President Rafsanjani is a key figure in this faction, though he has “reinvented himself” when political needs demand it.

These factions are not monolithic but are coalitions of the like-minded, bound by ideological interests, economic ties and familial relationships. The manner in which individuals approach an issue is often a function of their faction, and coalitions within that faction, but this does not always hold true; the situation is fluid. Thus, on a given issue, one may find powerful individuals from quite different coalitions and factions coming together, while these same people will oppose each other on a different issue.²³ The factions are thus general signposts of how people will respond to an issue. The impact of constant infighting, combined with the structure of the Iranian system, is to reinforce a tendency towards stasis in decision-making. The overall system can reach broad agreements on matters of principle – such as the idea that Iran should have access to nuclear technology – but how these broad matters of consensus should be implemented, and how spoils should be divided, is the stuff of day-to-day infighting. Thus, fundamental revision of basic policy is hard to achieve as there are many formal and informal players who can block change.

Other Power Centers: The Bonyads and the Revolutionary Guards

If the four groups mentioned previously are the key factions in Iranian politics, at least two other bodies also play crucial roles; the *Bonyads* and the Revolutionary Guards. The power of the *Bonyads* and the Guards was greatly increased during the Presidency of Rafsanjani (1989-1997). After the Iran-Iraq war, Rafsanjani took advantage of high revenues from oil prices and pent up demand to institute an “era of reconstruction.” This was a period of extraordinary (even by Iranian standards) corruption in which the *Bonyads*, the Guards and other mercantile elites, including the Rafsanjani family and supporters, gorged themselves in an almost completely unregulated environment.²⁴

The *Bonyads* are state-sanctioned charitable organisations. Though ostensibly in existence to distribute wealth to the poor, the *Bonyads* are amongst Iran’s wealthiest entities.²⁵ They control a multitude of businesses (from airlines to Coca-Cola bottling plants), own tens of thousands of acres of land around the country and control much of Iran’s industrial sector. Some sources estimate that the *Bonyads* control up to 20% of Iran’s GDP.²⁶ Others place the figure at one-third.²⁷ It is estimated by Keddie that some 60% of the economy of Iran is directly under state control and another 10-20% under the control of 5 foundations directly tied to the Leader.²⁸

The *Bonyads* are tax-exempt. Their heads, many of whom are clergy, are appointed by the Supreme Leader. They are a key means of distributing vast amounts of patronage. As Suzanne Maloney observes, “...by virtue of intricate personal and institutional ties with the government, the *Bonyads* have become pivotal actors in the enduring rivalry among the ideologically oriented factions within the clerical establishment... More broadly, the evolution of the *Bonyads* as a

semi-autonomous centre of power redistributes the relationship among the various social groups (especially the traditional merchant class) whose support is key to the government's survival."²⁹ *Bonyads*, though different ones, of course, existed in the Shah's time and performed the same functions for his government, though not nearly to the same extent as today.³⁰

The Revolutionary Guards (also referred to as the Iranian or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)), are a parallel military establishment to the regular military. Its current leader is Mohammad Ali Jafari. Along with a paramilitary "militia" force, the *Basij*, which was placed under the IRGC's command in 2007, the Guards have a key role in defending the *velayat-e faqih* and report to the Supreme Leader. For many men shut out of the factional political process, the Guards are a path to power and wealth. The Guards have considerable holdings in construction and property, transportation, mining, agricultural industries, the energy sector and defence production.³¹ However, it would be dangerous to impute only monetary goals, or to see the Guards as monolithic. It is likely that there are a variety of groups and viewpoints within the Guards. Many of the senior leadership are undoubtedly corrupt, but there may also be people who serve for largely ideological reasons and many who combine motives. There is evidence that many junior ranks, possibly a majority, have supported reformist candidates.³²

It is thus difficult to tell what motivates "the Guards" as a whole. Ostensibly, they should be opposed to any rapprochement with the West, and many undoubtedly are. But it is at least theoretically possible that certain sectors of the leadership of the Guards whose primary interests are economic could see benefit in a relaxation of tensions – so long as this was done in such a way as to increase their hold over key economic sectors. But it is also possible that many others would be horrified at the idea of sacrificing the ideological precepts of the Revolution for profit. Many others could probably be swayed either way, depending on how the case was put.

It is similarly difficult to discern the relationship between the Guards and the Supreme Leader. Khamenei appoints the Commander of the Guards and they report directly to him. It is unlikely that they would deliberately disobey him, but quiet disregard for some of his views may be possible, as may be the possibility that the Supreme Leader increasingly takes what he perceives to be the Guards' interests into account in his own thinking. Whatever the exact nature of the relationship, it seems clear that the Guards are becoming a political power.³³ Some Western leaders and analysts have pondered whether Iran might be turning into a form of military dictatorship, with the IRGC pulling the strings of the state from behind the Supreme Leader.³⁴

Informal Power: The Roles of the Supreme Leader and the President

It is in this fractious and complex structure that the struggle between the Supreme Leader and the President must be understood. The role of the Supreme Leader in religious terms is to safeguard the Revolution and protect it for the day when the Mahdi returns. Beyond a few general precepts laid down by Khomeini (distrust of the U.S., Israel and modernity generally as contaminants of the Ummah), there was no blueprint for this; it was left to the ongoing political process to determine what this would be for each generation. Khomeini had the religious stature to fulfill this role. But Khamenei has had to be more cautious as he lacks Khomeini's charisma and legitimacy. Instead, through his considerable levers, he moulds the system. Khamenei has a religious reason for not wanting to tip his hand. He was not a Grand Ayatollah, the highest religious rank, upon his appointment and the rules of succession had to be revised to allow him to be eligible to succeed Khomeini. Many religious leaders have not accepted Khamenei's succession to the role of Supreme Leader.³⁵

Khamenei has exercised power by balancing the various factions, sometimes favoring one and then another, sometimes favoring one grouping or coalition *within* a particular faction, but rarely publicly choosing sides or allowing any one to dominate.³⁶ This has resulted, at times, in a rather schizophrenic set of policies and initiatives – sometimes fairly pragmatic and at others quite ideological.³⁷ Thus, despite Iran’s formal constitutional mechanisms, the reality is that power has been exercised through backroom deals, factional infighting and cooperation, and the bestowal (and removal) of patronage and positions upon allies.

Khamenei has had increasingly to rely on the Guards. He has allowed them to increase their power, perhaps to the point that he no longer completely controls them. This tendency was dramatically enhanced after the 2009 Presidential election.³⁸ In addition to the increased role of the Guards in assuring the survival of the system, the Supreme Leader’s actions were a break from his practice of remaining, overtly at least, above the political fray.³⁹

There are growing signs that relations between the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad are cooling rapidly. Much of the public speculation surrounds anger on the part of the traditional clergy, and the Supreme Leader, at the activities of Ahmadinejad’s close friend, relative by marriage and chief-of-staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashai.⁴⁰ Though forced to strip Mashai of the First Vice Presidency, at the Supreme Leader’s demand following comments suggesting that the Israeli people are not enemies of the Iranian people,⁴¹ Ahmadinejad has stood by his friend.⁴²

Beyond this, speculation is rife that the President is chafing at the boundaries imposed by the *velayat-e faqih*. Rumors have abounded that Ahmadinejad believes he has some sort of divine mission to hasten the return of the Mahdi. How seriously this belief may factor into his day-to-day governance is difficult to say but it does cause unease. If true, this could suggest that, having granted Ahmadinejad too long a rope, the Supreme Leader is now reasserting his authority. Whether he will be successful it is too soon to say. Perhaps most crucially, it is not known where the Revolutionary Guards stand on all this.

Implications for U.S. Policy

As will be evident from the foregoing, simple policy solutions for the Iran case are not likely to be found. Even at the best of times, Iran represents a highly complex country with a deeply felt history which mitigates against straightforward interactions with the outside world.⁴³ Today, with politics in serious flux, decision-making is likely to be even more confused. What then are some basic rules of reference for U.S. policy-makers going forward?

All politics is local, but only more so in the Islamic Republic. If the old adage that “all politics is local” is true of U.S. policy-making, the same is true of Iran with a vengeance. We should not be surprised or shocked by this. Just as American politicians have to craft foreign policy with an ever watchful eye on domestic politics and opinion, so too do Iranians – but their domestic politics is particularly poisonous. This has a number of implications for those dealing with Iran:

- *To whom should one talk and when?* The highly factionalised nature of the system makes it difficult to know whether any one interlocutor is speaking for the system as a whole, but you can guess that they probably aren’t. At the least, you can be sure that there are at least some factions in play whose primary goal is to act as a spoiler;
- *You are dealing with people who were raised in a political system where toughness is a supreme virtue.* In order to survive and reach the top, your interlocutor has had to be

tough and smart and you should never forget that. You should also never forget that whatever deal you may strike with your opposite number has to be taken back and fought for in the vicious world of Iranian politics. In that context, it is often true that an Iranian negotiator will not accept a “good” deal if it makes him look weak back home;⁴⁴

- *They want to survive too.* The Islamic Republic, like any system, wants to survive. Its factions and power centers will debate proposals against that over-riding criterion. In short, U.S. interlocutors whom the Iranians believe have goals of “regime change” will not be accepted; and
- *Apparently logical steps can have unintended consequences.* As an example, U.S. policy-makers may feel that the imposition of various kinds of economic sanctions may send strong signals and weaken the Iranian regime. But the highly factionalised nature of Iranian politics is such that sanctions may, in reality, actually *strengthen* some of the factions you want to hurt. For example, the Revolutionary Guards’ economic activities may be enhanced by some sanctions or hurt by others. In this context, steps taken recently to restrict Iran’s access to refined petroleum products will probably backfire – such steps will encourage the kind of conservation the regime wants; will allow it to raise the price of gasoline (and drop subsidies), which it has been desperate to do for some time; and give those who do control indigenous refining (the state) a windfall – all while allowing the government to blame foreigners for the hardship experienced by the ordinary people.

The past matters to these people. Iranians are deeply conscious of their history (or, at least, of their popularly re-interpreted version of it, which is itself the stuff of constant re-interpretation and infighting), and see it as being directly relevant to their present reality, in a way Westerners generally do not. Again, there are implications for policy-makers:

- *They have threat perceptions too.* Iranian history teaches them that the “outside” world has brought new ideas and technologies to Iran, some of which have been highly beneficial, some not. For Iranians inclined to be suspicious of the outside world, which would include the Supreme Leader and the factions around him, history teaches them (not entirely wrongly) that outsiders have often come to Iran with the intent of dominating it, corrupting it and stealing its riches. This is particularly true in the case of the U.S., and Iranian leaders have never forgotten U.S. support for Saddam’s brutal war against Iran, and U.S. involvement in the overthrow of the 1953 democratically elected Iranian government;
- *Present-day objectives are often framed around historical concepts which appear to us vague and ill-formed, but they are powerful to the Iranians.* One often hears Iranians talk of such ideas as “justice” and “respect”, arguing that Western policy towards Iran has traditionally been lacking in both. But, when it comes to putting flesh on these ideas, the Iranians can be maddeningly vague as to what they mean in practice; and
- *Respect their history, but don’t be hamstrung by it and don’t let them dominate you with it.* When the Iranians bring things to a crashing halt with outbursts about “justice” and “respect” it is important to understand the details of what is meant by these terms – ask them, patiently and politely, to explain what they mean and **how these concepts relate to**

the specific matter at hand. Then, politely, but firmly, insist that they respond on this basis.

They may appear crazy to us, but they're not stupid. Iranian positions and behavior can appear strange, but this does not mean they lack a formidable intelligence, or that their positions are not logical within their own framework. For example, we may see no reason for Iran to pursue nuclear power, but they may believe that Iran's civilian nuclear program makes considerable sense economically. The key here is to accept that they will define their interests, and they may define them quite differently than we would, even if we disagree. Dismissing their conceptions of their interests as faked is neither respectful, nor productive. Instead, ask them, again politely but insistently, to explain and defend their logic.

What do you want? Even as you compel the Iranians to explain their logic and objectives, you must decide clearly about your own. And you must be able to explain it to the Iranians. The Iranians are extremely sensitive to this, and see tendencies towards deception and double-dealing on the part of the American system (rather a mirror image of our perception of them). Above all, as we are waiting for some sign of "bipartisan" acceptance of the idea of rapprochement across the major factions and power-centres of Iranian politics, so too are many Iranians waiting for the same thing from the U.S. system – they have heard sweet-sounding things from one President, only to see him replaced by another with a very different agenda.

Ultimately the U.S. needs to decide whether it can live with the Islamic Republic, and needs to communicate that in a bipartisan way. This may sound like a tall order in the current U.S. political context, but it is, after all, exactly what we expect of them – a bipartisan signal that they will accept norms of conduct consistent with our needs. This leads to the last point.

This will be a long and winding road. It is natural, and a particularly American trait, to search for a "solution" to a problem – to isolate the key elements of the issue and "solve" them one by one. This particular problem has no single solution. It is going to require a long-term commitment on both sides to a new basis of relations, and that is going to take time; setting artificial deadlines around specific issues, and then arguing that rapprochement is impossible when they are not met, will not move things forward. This problem will probably require action on multiple levels over time; not just officially. Steps must be taken to promote sustained multi-level interaction between Iranians and Americans. This is a source of U.S. strength – those who run Iran are frightened of the prospects for such interaction.

Conclusion

All of this may well strike policy-makers as insufficient. This is natural; policy-makers want to resolve the specific problems on their current agenda. But the Iran-U.S. relationship is not one which is amenable to this kind of policy-making. The mistrust on both sides is simply too great. In a way, this should not be a surprise; it took decades to create the mistrust that now characterises the relationship and this mistrust will not go away quickly by means of a few clever policies or deals.

Any real change in U.S.-Iran relations is going to take time. There are many who would say that this is not possible; something needs to be done now about the pressing problems of the day. But we appear to have the time – certainly, the nuclear issue, while still a serious question, seems to be receding as an immediate problem with recent revelations that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is not so imminent.

Moreover, the trend in regional affairs is running decidedly against Iran right now. The “Arab Spring” may inspire rhetorical support from the Iranians, but they know that the emergence of popularly supported Arab governments will not further their interests. Moreover, the loss of their only friend in the Arab world, the Syrian regime, would be a serious blow. Much as they may say they support the Arab spring, the Iranian regime knows all too well from their own experience after the 2009 Presidential elections, that these movements are fundamentally inimical to their way of governance.

None of what is being proposed here means taking a weak line with the Iranians. Too often, the debate around what to do with Iran seems to revolve around two extremes—either being tough all the time, or treating the Iranian regime as essentially peace-loving and tragically misunderstood. Neither of these perspectives respects the complexity of the situation. Even if steps are taken to foster contacts with Iran, there will still be tough measures that need to be taken and should be taken such as restricting access to nuclear technologies. The key for policy makers is to avoid either/or policy prescriptions. Rather, a more nuanced approach to the situation is required given the ever-shifting nature of the Iranian system, with a specific ear for what is being said for domestic Iranian political consumption versus what is meant for the West.

Again, understanding the local context and how it interacts with Iran’s international positions is not dissimilar to our own. This is why engagement is so important given the Iranian culture – one must interact with the key players to understand the real signals being sent, to whom, and how to best assist Iranian interlocutors who are interested in finding agreement with the West. Otherwise, we may find ourselves inadvertently leaving those interlocutors with little to no room to maneuver back in their own system.

¹ A Translation of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, available at: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00t_.html

² Martin, V. *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2000), p.p. 172-173.

³ There were actually two disappearances, or “Occultations.” The first, the “Minor Occultation,” took place between 879-941 and the Mahdi maintained contact with the world through selected deputies. The “Major Occultation” commenced in 941 and no contact has been received since, nor will it be until the Mahdi reappears.

⁴ See the series of lectures Khomeini gave in Najaf (Iraq) in 1970, which subsequently appeared in a book titled *Islamic Government*. For more on the development of Khomeini’s thinking see Algar, H., *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1981); Abrahamian, E., *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Martin, M. *op cit*; and Arjomand, S.A., *After Khomeini: Iran under his Successors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 1.

⁵ The following description of the institutions of the Islamic Republic draws on: Buchta, W., *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2000); Posch, W., *Iran’s Domestic Politics – The “Circles of Influence:” Ahmadinejad’s Enigmatic Networks*, IESUE/COPS/INF 0521 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, October, 2005); Sajadpour, K., *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader*, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008); BBC News Guide, *How Iran is Ruled*, accessed at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8051750.stm; Thaler, D.E., A. Nader, S. Chubin, J.D. Green, C Lynch, F. Wehrey, *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corp, 2010).

⁶ From Thaler, D.E. and A Nader, *Deep Seated Entanglements: The Web of Iranian Leadership Can Be Negotiated, Not Unraveled*, RAND Review, Summer 2010, at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/randreview/issues/spring2010/iran.html>

⁷ The title “Supreme Leader” (Rahbare Moazzam) is used popularly. The actual title in the Constitution is simply “Leader.”

⁸ The Office of the Supreme Leader maintains a web-site at: <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/>

⁹ The duties and powers of the President are framed in Articles 113–142 of the Constitution. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

¹⁰ The powers and responsibilities of Parliament are set forth in Articles 71-90. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

¹¹ The powers and responsibilities of the Guardian Council are set forth in Articles 91-99. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

¹² See Samii, A.W., “Iran’s Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 5, no. 4, Autumn, 2001.

¹³ The powers and responsibilities of the Assembly of Experts are set forth in Articles 107 and 111. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

¹⁴ The powers and responsibilities of the Expediency Council are set forth in Article 112. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

¹⁵ The powers and responsibilities of the Judiciary are set forth in Articles 156-158. Tschentscher, *op cit*.

- ¹⁶ The powers and responsibilities of the SNSC are set forth in Article 176. Tschentscher, *op cit*.
- ¹⁷ Raket, E.P., *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran: A Study on the Iranian Political Elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. xxiv.
- ¹⁸ Thaler, *et al*, *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads....*, *op cit*, pp. 21-23. These points are also made in Buchta, *op cit*.
- ¹⁹ Thus, the relatively dormant Assembly of Experts became a key player in the system when Rafsanjani was its head.
- ²⁰ Buchta, *op cit*, pp. 6-7.
- ²¹ This description is a development of pp. 68-72 of Thaler, *et al*, *op cit*, which is a development of Kamrava, M., "Iranian National Security Debates: Factionalism and Lost Opportunities," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 14, no. 2, Summer 2007. Other scholars have also identified these 4 factions, though they describe them differently and give them other names. See Buchta, *op cit*, chapter 3, "Ideological Factions among Iran's Elite."
- ²² Ehteshami, A., and Zweiri, M., *Iran and the Rise of the Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2007).
- ²³ For more on how this tendency impacts on Iranian negotiating behaviour and foreign policy see Jones, P., "How to Negotiate with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, web-edition, April, 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4801
- ²⁴ See Ansari, A.M., *Iran Under Ahmadinejad: The politics of confrontation*, (London; International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi paper no. 393, December, 2007), pp. 13-16; and Panah, M.H., "State and Society in the Islamic Republic: The Impact of the Post-Revolutionary War," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, vol. 6, no. 1, April, 2000.
- ²⁵ See Maloney, S., "Agents or Obstacles? Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development," in *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, ed. Parvin Alizadeh (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 145-76.
- ²⁶ Molavi, A., *The Soul of Iran; A Nation's Struggle for Freedom*, (New York: Norton and Co., 2006 edition), p. 176
- ²⁷ See the testimony of Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service before the Congressional Joint Economic Committee hearing *Energy and the Iranian Economy*, July 25, 2006. (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2007), p. 17.
- ²⁸ Keddie, N., *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of the Revolution*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 273.
- ²⁹ Maloney, *op cit*, p. 148.
- ³⁰ The post-Revolutionary period represents not so much a break from the policies of the Shah's time as an intensification of trends already underway regarding state ownership of the economy and institutionalised corruption as the means of rewarding loyalty. One difference is the post-Revolutionary insistence on self-sufficiency, which has both an ideological aspect (rejection of the Shah's perceived dependence on foreigners) and necessity (Iran has been under sanctions since the Revolution).
- ³¹ See: Bednarz, Dieter and Erich Follath. "Revolutionary Guards Keep Stranglehold on Iran," *Der Spiegel*, August 26, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-677995,00.html>; "Iran's Revolutionary Guards – Showing who's boss," *The Economist*, August 29 – September 4, 2009; Wehrey, F., J.D. Green, B. Nichiporuk, A. Nader, L. Hansell, R. Nafisi, and S.R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, (Santa Monica; RAND Corp, 2009), and Khalaji, M., "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Inc.," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Watch*, No. 1273, Aug., 2007.
- ³² Ansari, A., "The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled," *The National Interest*, Dec. 21, 2009, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=22602>
- ³³ See Sajadpour, *op cit*, p. 8. This is a departure from the role of the higher ranks of the military during the Shah's era – which was kept far from political life. When the time came to defend the Shah's regime, the military leadership sat out the crisis. Perhaps the Islamic Revolutionaries learned from this when they brought the IRGC into political and economic decision-making. For more on the Shah's military and the Revolution see Huyser, R.E., *Mission to Tehran*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986).
- ³⁴ See, for example, the comments of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the effect that the IRGC has effectively supplanted the government of Iran; "Clinton warns Iran becoming a 'military dictatorship,'" BBC News, 15 February, 2010, accessed at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8515623.stm>
- ³⁵ Moreover, there are many clerics who have never accepted the idea that religious leaders should play any role in politics. For more on these debates see "Iran's debate over theocracy," *The Economist*, June 27-July 3, 2009, p. 55.
- ³⁶ See "Iran: Who runs it? The puzzling relationship between the supreme leader and the president," *The Economist*, July 26 – August 1, 2008, pp. 58-59.
- ³⁷ In foreign policy terms, for example, see Menashri, D., "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, March 2007, and Ramazani, R.K., "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4, Fall 2004.
- ³⁸ Vatanka, A., "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Fight the Opposition Tide," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Spring, 2010
- ³⁹ See "A supreme leader at bay," *The Economist*, January 9-15, 2010, pp. 26 – 27.
- ⁴⁰ See "The president's awkward friend: A power struggle in Iran," *The Economist*, September 11-17, 2010, pp. 57-58.
- ⁴¹ Bozorgmehr, N., "Ahmadi-Nejad backs aide over Israel," *Financial Times*, 18 Sept., 2009, accessed at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f2f0ffb2-85b9-11dd-a1ac-0000779fd18c.html?nclink_check=1.
- ⁴² See "The president's awkward friend," *op cit* and Sheikholeslami, A., "Iran Forces' Chief of Staff Criticizes Ahmadinejad Aide Over Islam Remarks," *Bloomberg news*, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-08-10/iran-forces-chief-of-staff-criticizes-ahmadinejad-aide-over-islam-remarks.html>.
- ⁴³ See Limbert, J., *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History*, (Washington: USIP, 2009), and Jones, P., "How to Negotiate with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, web-edition, April, 2009.
- ⁴⁴ This may be part of the reason the deal over the Tehran Research Reactor was killed when it got home.