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**Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent:
Some Thoughts on the Nature of
Iran's Ambitions in the Middle East**

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ABSTRACT

In this “position paper”, the author presents his views on the “essential nature” of what ought to be considered a comeback of Iran as the dominating power in the Gulf region. This comeback appears to manifest itself most clearly in Tehran’s current “cold war” with the United States in the Iraq issue and the recent Lebanon crisis. Iran’s “rise” has been considered by some within the context of the supposed emergence of a “Shi’ite crescent”. Contrary to this view, however, Marcinkowski argues that Shi’ism abroad – in Iraq, Lebanon, the Arab Gulf states – has been largely instrumentalized by Iran in order to achieve a rather different agenda: the hegemony over the Middle East based on a purely “nationalist” Iranian agenda. According to the author, the key factor in Iran’s foreign policy vis-à-vis its Arab neighbours is domination out of distrust – a factor that reaches far back into the past, beyond the 1979 revolution. Seeing Iran’s “rise” as what it essential is – a petty regional nationalism of a country that, nevertheless, is aware of its imperial past – could help in rationalizing international relations. The discussion of this issue – currently still characterized by a tsunami of hasty and emotional conclusions and irrational evaluations on both sides of the fence – should rather be addressed with patience (but nevertheless perseverance and vigilance), as the succession of Iran’s ailing “supreme leader” Ayatollah Khamenei and the future course of the country are not clear at all.

This contribution constitutes the sequel to an earlier RSIS Working Paper where the author has addressed the issue of the future direction of Shi’ism in neighbouring Iraq.

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Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent: Some Thoughts on the Nature of Iran's Ambitions in the Middle East*

Introduction

A couple of years ago, King Abdullah II of Jordan, in obvious analogy to the geographical expression “Fertile Crescent”, alluded to the threat of a new, Shi'ite crescent, stretching from Iran to Iraq, the Arab littoral states in the Persian Gulf region and to Lebanon.¹ According to this view, Iran constitutes the heart of this crescent while local Arab Shi'ites, such as Lebanon's Hizbullah, are mere satellites in the orbit of Tehran, that is, its potential fifth columns.

However, as this paper is going to argue, a more differentiated approach is advisable.² A study into the Islamic part of Iran's history, at least from the Safavid period (1501–1722) onwards, will reveal that Shi'ite identity and Iranian nationalism are often inter-related. In spite of this, what is usually (and sloppily) termed “Iranian national feelings”³ by some appears—in the view of this writer—to have always been the more dominant factor in Iran's identity and foreign policy.

* Presented by the author at the “Sixth European Conference of Iranian Studies” in Vienna, Austria, 19–22 September 2007, organized by Societas Iranologica Europaea (SIE).

¹ See Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran. Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State” in *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004, p. A01. Also available online at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html, accessed on 21 November 2006. I have tried to elaborate further on this issue in my forthcoming book, *A New Middle East? Iraq, Iran, and the Fear of a “Shi'ite Crescent”*.

² Similar views have been expressed recently—and in greater detail—in two excellent articles by Professor Vali Nasr, who is with the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School; see his “When the Shi'ites Rise” in *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2006, available online at www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html; and his “Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq” in *Washington Quarterly* 27, No. 3, Summer 2004, pp. 7–24.

³ Within the domain of Iranian Studies in Europe, I would like to mention in this regard W. Hinz's *Iran's Aufstieg zum Nationalstaat im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1936). In his review of this book, published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 9, (1937–1939), pp. 239–42, Vladimir Minorsky, the “father of Safavid Studies”, referred—unfortunately only occasionally (*ibid.*, p. 241) and without any word of criticism—to the general “theories of ethnicity” that permeate Hinz's work, which was published during the time of

Moreover, it will be argued later—with reference to certain facets of the recent nationalism debate within Iran—that Iranian nationalism and Iran’s national interest will be the driving forces behind the country’s foreign policy in the time to come (although this may not be made official policy by Tehran in order not to repel the Shi’ites abroad). This nationalism—currently promoted by the Islamist regime in Tehran—is not racially motivated (as that of the ultra-nationalist Iranist opposition), since it includes ethnic non-Persian Persianate Shi’ites within Iran such as the Azeri Turks, who make up about a quarter of the population.⁴ Although worthy of careful monitoring, this direction of Iranian foreign policy is perhaps easier to address than a religiously driven apocalyptic millenarianism, as it facilitates diplomatic and pragmatic solutions to current issues. Paradoxically, the Islamic republic is thus be firmly rooted in traditional Iranian foreign policy.

Greater Iran—Then and Now

When discussing—in particular within the context of addressing contemporary Iranian foreign policy—the apparent dichotomy between Iranian nationalism on the

Germany’s Nazi terror regime. Edward Granville Browne has already referred with distaste to the core ethnocentric discussion around an alleged “Aryan” character with regard to things Iranian: see his *A Literary History of Persia. Volume II: From Firdawsi to Sa’di (1000–1290)* (Cambridge, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1928), pp. 143 & 489. More recently, Professor Bert Fagner has contributed an interesting study to the use of the term “Iran” within its respective historical and political contexts: see his “*Historische Wurzeln neuzeitlicher iranischer Identität: Zur Geschichte des politischen Begriffes ‘Iran’ im späten Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit*” in *Hokhmot banta betah. Studia Semitica necnon Iranica Rudolpho Macuch septuagenario ab amicis et discipulis dedicata*, edited by M. Macuch, C. Müller-Kessler, and B. G. Fagner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989), pp. 79–100. See also D. Krawulsky, “*Zur Wiederbelebung des Begriffes ‘Iran’ zur Ilhanzeit*” in eadem, *Das Reich der Ilhane. Eine topographische Studie*, Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1978, pp. 11–17.

⁴ According to the *World Factbook*, Iran’s ethnic breakdown in January 2007 was as follows: Persians, 51%; Azeri Turks, 24%; Gilakis and Mazandarani (Iranian dialects, rather than “ethnic groups”, as erroneously or for “other purposes”, assumed by the *World Factbook*), 8%; Kurds, 7%; Arab, 3%; Lurs, 2%; Balochis, 2%; Turkmens, 2%; others, 1%. According to the same source, the denominational composition was as follows: [Twelver] Shi’ite Muslims, 89%; Sunnite Muslims, 9%; Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Baha’is, 2%; see Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available online at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html, accessed on 30 January 2007.

one hand and a Shi'ite political assertiveness in the region on the other, it is also crucial to be aware of the circumstance that the concept of Greater Iran reaches back far into the pre-Islamic period when Iran ruled over areas that were one of the first world powers in human history. The historical Lands of Iran—or Greater Iran—have always been known in the Persian language as *Īrānshahr* or *Īrānzamīn*.⁵ Both terms refer to the Iranian plateau in addition to regions that had been historically under significant Iranian cultural influence, roughly corresponding to the territories ruled by the ancient Parthians and Sasanids—i.e. in addition to Iran proper, also the Caucasus, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Central Asia and large parts of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, and conforming to the Persian historical understanding of the full territorial extent of Iran. The capital of this entity was, at times, situated in what is now Iraq.



Figure 1

The concept of Greater Iran⁶

⁵ G. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 2. For a fuller treatment, see D. N. MacKenzie, “Ērān, Ērānshahr” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v8f5/v8f545.html, accessed on 29 January 2007. See also Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989), pp. 175, 179 & 183; and Josef Wiesehöfer. *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001, p. xi.

⁶ Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Greater-Iran.jpg, accessed on 29 January 2007.

During the time of the Sasanids, Iran's last dynasty before the arrival of Islam in the 7th century CE, the major part of Mesopotamia was called in Persian Del-e Īrānshahr (lit. "Heart of Iran"), and its metropolis Ctesiphon (not far from present-day Baghdad) functioned for more than 800 years as the capital city of Iran. Although to the Iranicist scholar, the two terms *Īrānshahr* and *Īrānzamīn* are not necessarily interchangeable, they nevertheless signify a quasi-imperial concept. Apparently, the idea of a Greater Iran has not lost its appeal during more recent times. Iran's bygone Pahlavi dynasty, for instance, created what can only be considered a mythical cult surrounding the establishment of the Iranian monarchy some 2,500 years ago. The doyen of Iranian and Central Asian Studies in the United States and Aga Khan Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies at Harvard University, Professor Richard N. Frye, even stated that:

Iran means all lands and peoples where Iranian languages were and are spoken, and where in the past, multi-faceted Iranian cultures existed.⁷

Frye rearticulated this view elsewhere in the following way:

Many times I have emphasized that the present peoples of central Asia, whether Iranian or Turkic speaking, have one culture, one religion, one set of social values and traditions with only language separating them ... Arabs no longer understand the role of Iran and the Persian language in the formation of Islamic culture. Perhaps they wish to forget the past, but in so doing they remove the bases of their own spiritual, moral and cultural being ... without the heritage of the past

⁷ Richard Nelson Frye, *Greater Iran: A 20th-Century Odyssey*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005, p. x.

and a healthy respect for it ... there is little chance for stability and proper growth.⁸

It is important to understand that the knowledge of Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur in its history is still present in the mind of almost every Iranian, regardless of his or her social standing, political orientation or degree of adherence to the tenets and practices of Shi'ite Islam. It deeply affects the national pride of a country with a civilization reaching back thousands of years—the only country in the region that is not an artificial creation of post-World War I politics. This setting may help us comprehend better Iran's current insistence of being treated as an equal in its dealings with the United States, for instance. In their recent book, *Eternal Iran*, Patrick Clawson, Deputy Director for Research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Michael Rubin, Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote that:

[m]any Iranians consider their natural sphere of influence to extend beyond Iran's present borders. After all, Iran was once much larger. Portuguese forces seized islands and ports in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the 19th century, the Russian Empire wrested from Tehran's control what is today Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan, and part of Georgia. Iranian elementary-school texts teach about the Iranian roots not only of cities like Baku, but also cities further north like Derbent in southern Russia. The Shah lost much of his claim to western Afghanistan following the Anglo-Iranian war of 1856–1857. Only in 1970 did a U.N.-sponsored consultation end Iranian claims to

⁸ Richard Nelson Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, London: Butler & Tanner Ltd, 1989, p. 236.

suzerainty over the Persian Gulf island nation of Bahrain. In centuries past, Iranian rule once stretched westward into modern Iraq and beyond. When the Western world complains of Iranian interference beyond its borders, the Iranian government often convinces itself that it is merely exerting its influence in lands that were once its own. Simultaneously, Iran's losses at the hands of outside powers have contributed to a sense of grievance that continues to the present day.⁹

Iranian nationalism—although not always advocating irredentism—is not necessarily identical with Persian ethnicity, which is based mainly on the New Persian language, *fārsī*. It is rather more encompassing and includes aspects pertaining to Persian civilization—Islamic or pre-Islamic. Within this context, however, it is often forgotten that during most of the Islamic period, the Iranian lands were ruled by Persianized ethnic Turkic dynasties, a pattern that prevailed until about 80 years ago when the Pahlavis, who were ethnic Persians, came to power.

Saving the Centre of the Universe?

In the early modern period, Shi'ite Safavid Iran was antagonistic towards its Sunnite neighbours. Iran was 'converted' to Twelver Shi'ite Islam only from 1501, the year when the Shi'ite Safavid dynasty came to power.¹⁰ While there had been always

⁹ Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran. Continuity and Chaos*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 23.

¹⁰ I have tried to present a brief survey of this 'conversion' process, which ought to be seen in connection with certain developments in neighbouring Anatolia, in my *Mīrzā Rafī'ā's Dastūr al-Mulūk: A Manual of Later Safavid Administration. Annotated English Translation, Comments on the Offices and Services, and Facsimile of the Unique Persian Manuscript*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2002, pp. 14–19 (see for detailed bibliographical references therein also n. 54–64).

Shi'ite-dominated cities and regions in Iran, 1501 was a watershed, as Iran was until then one of the centres of Sunnite scholarship. The Safavids, who may have been of Turkic descent,¹¹ although this is still a matter of heated debate among scholars (and various nationalists of the region), who at times referred to themselves as Shahs of Iran, in conscious remembrance of the pre-Islamic *Īrānshahr*. Under Shah Ismā'īl I (r. 1501–1524), the founder of the Safavid dynasty, and again under one of his successors, Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1588–1629), known in Iran as “the Great”, Iraq experienced a comeback of the Iranians, as the Shi'ite shrine cities were temporarily wrested from the hands of the Sunnite Ottomans. In the words of one scholar, since the Safavid era, Shi'ism “had become an indispensable component of Iranian identity”.¹² Prominent Iranicist Professor Nikkie Keddie even argues that the Safavids establishment of Twelver Shi'ism is the dominant and official creed in Iran brought about “a common religious and cultural base”,¹³ a base that was “partly forced on Iranians to distinguish them from the Sunni Ottoman and Uzbek enemy states”.¹⁴

¹¹ See on this issue my “The Reputed Issue of the ‘Ethnic Origin’ of Iran’s Safavid Dynasty (907–1145/1501–1722): Reflections on Selected Prevailing Views” in *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 49, No. 2 (April–June 2001), pp. 5–19, and my *Mīrzā Rafī'ā's Dastūr al-Mulūk: A Manual of Later Safavid Administration*, pp. 12–19 (including the bibliographical references in the footnotes therein).

¹² Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*, Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996, p. 72.

¹³ Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796–1925*, Costa Mesa CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.



Figure 2

Map indicating the approximate extend of the Safavid Empire in 1512¹⁵

(Note the apparent similarities to Figure 1)

Perhaps the most significant consequence of that forceful conversion of Iran—previously one of the centres of orthodox Sunnite scholarship—to Shi’ism was a certain *Wagenburg* mentality as Iran now saw itself surrounded by potentially hostile Sunnite states, among them the Ottoman Empire, the various khanates in Central Asia and Mughal India. Moreover, by the 11th century, the Persian poet Ferdowsi had developed the concept of Iran and Turan (the latter symbolizing the potentially threatening Turkic, non-Iranian outside world¹⁶) in his *Shāhnāmah*—Iran’s national epic. Again, from the early 1800s onwards, it was Iran’s quasi-colonial experience with Czarist Russia and then Britain (the latter replaced by the United States after World War II) that enforced the perception of being different.

¹⁵ Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:LocationSafavid.png, accessed on 29 January 2007).

¹⁶ Somewhat hyperbolically, the 19th-century scholar J. W. Clackson (“The Iran and Turan” in *Anthropological Review* 6, No. 22, 1868, p. 286) stated: “The Turanian [i.e. ‘the Turk’, ‘non-Iranian’] is the impersonation of material power. He is the merely muscular man at his maximum of collective development. He is not inherently a savage, but he is radically a barbarian. He does not live from hand to mouth, like a beast, but neither has he in full measure the moral and intellectual endowments of the true man. He can labour and he can accumulate, but he cannot think and aspire like a Caucasian. Of the two grand elements of superior human life, he is more deficient in the sentiments than in the faculties. And of the latter, he is better provided with those which conduce to the acquisition of knowledge than the origination of ideas.”

A certain consciousness of being different with regard to creed (Shi'ite instead of Sunnite) and ethnicity (Iranian rather than Arab or Turkic) appears to have contributed to what is often perceived as a mentality of being the centre or even pivot of the universe (Persian: *qebleh-ye 'ālam*)¹⁷, the latter having actually been one of the epithets of Iranian monarchs up to the late 19th century. In the view of Professor Ahmad Ashraf, Managing Editor of Columbia University's *Encyclopedia Iranica* (and a former colleague of the present writer there), Iranian conspiracy theories are mainly the result of a misinterpretation of the surrounding "hostile" world. Within the context of Iran, those theories:

... are a complex set of beliefs attributing the course of Persian history and politics to the machinations of hostile foreign powers and secret organizations. In contemporary social psychology such theories are defined as elaborate and internally consistent systems of "collective delusions," often tenaciously held and extremely difficult to refute. Many conspiracy theories are based on a simple dualism in which the world is viewed as divided between good and evil forces with the latter determining the course of history. Various failures and disasters, for example, defeats in war, revolutions and general backwardness can thus be blamed on powerful enemies. Conspiracy theories often serve an important social function, helping to assuage certain kinds of anxiety among group members but also often limiting or hindering their capacity to respond effectively to external and internal social and political challenges. Particularly since the beginning of the 20th

¹⁷ This feature has also been alluded to in titles of more recent publications, such as G. E. Fuller, *The "Center of the Universe": The Geopolitics of Iran*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991.

century, Persians from all walks of life and all ideological orientations have relied on conspiracy theories as a basic mode of understanding politics and history. The fact that the great powers have in fact intervened covertly in Persian affairs has led ordinary people, political leaders, even the rulers themselves to interpret their history in terms of elaborate and devious conspiracies. The acceptance of such theories has in itself influenced the course of modern Persian history, for it has engendered a sense of helplessness in dealing with the rumoured activities of foreign conspirators. Conspiracy theories in modern Persia can generally be divided into two categories: those focused on supposed plots by Western colonial powers and those focused on satanic forces believed to have been active against Persia from antiquity to the present.¹⁸

According to Ashraf, Iranian conspiracy theories focused mainly on colonial powers, “plots” from the part of the “cunning” British and the CIA, conspiracy between the country’s Shi’ite clerics and world powers, by the Freemasons, Baha’is and “Zionists”, as well as what he terms “satanic theories of conspiracy”, all depending on the particular *weltanschauung* and “mindset” of the beholder. As Ashraf also clarifies:

[t]he popularity of conspiracy theories among Persians arises from a combination of political, social, psychological and cultural factors:

¹⁸ Ahmad Ashraf, “Conspiracy Theories and the Persian Mind”, available online at www.iranian.com/May96/Opinion/Conspiracy.html, accessed on January 2007. A more detailed version appeared first as “Conspiracy Theories in Persia” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v6f2/v6f2a012.html, accessed on 30 January 2007 [with extensive bibliographical material].

frequent foreign interference during the period of semi-colonialism in the early 20th century and great-power politics in the 1940s–1980s; the legacy of deeply rooted pre-Islamic and Shi'ite cultural beliefs about satanic forces; and the effectiveness of such theories as a collective defence mechanism, particularly during periods of powerlessness, defeat and political turmoil. Certain deep-rooted aspects of the Persian cultural heritage, which seem to have no parallel in other Muslim societies, may also have contributed to the popularity of conspiracy theories. They include a dualistic world view, probably derived from pre-Islamic religious beliefs, in which good and evil powers were considered to be in conflict, with the latter directing the course of history. The mythological character of traditional Persian historiography, which may reflect a particular receptivity to the mythological mode of thought; a propensity to poetic exaggeration (*eghrāq-e shā'erāneh*) among the Persians at all social levels; and a long tradition of attributing miraculous deeds to the twelve Shi'ite Imams are other probable contributing factors. Although blaming others can help assuage anxiety about failures, ready acceptance of conspiracy theories has also proved to be highly dysfunctional; in modern Persia it has contributed to political malaise that has sometimes precluded rational responses to internal and external crises.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.

Within this setting then, the current political situation in neighbouring Iraq appears to be unique insofar as it seems to offer Iran (but also the Shi'ites in general, although—as shall be elaborated soon—the motives of both are in no way congruent) a way out of century-long isolation. This mind-setting of being different seems to reveal a certain paranoia or what can be termed “inherent Iranian worries”. Transferring those worries of a country of about 70 million people (a potential future nuclear power) to our own times would mean addressing the issue of Iran's security concerns.

I shall now try address the issue of how this dichotomy between Iranian nationalism(s) and Shi'ite assertiveness is represented in the contemporary Iranian political discourse.

Iran's Nationalisms—Shi'ite, Iranian and ... Shi'ite-Iranian

In order to put into proper perspective Iran's current assertiveness and, more importantly, to develop strategies to cope with it, it is essential to distinguish between the several facets of nationalism that are currently discussed in Iran, in particular, since the 1990s and the moderate era of ex-president Khatami (1997–2005). Khatami's presidency constituted a significant change of direction as it marked a departure from the economic and political isolation that Iran had experienced since the 1979 revolution. Outside the country, his term of office is usually associated with his concept of “Dialogue among Civilizations”, that is, between the Islamic world and the West.²⁰

²⁰ Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, “Empathy and Compassion: Believing in Dialogue Paves the Way for Hope”, a speech delivered at the U.N.-sponsored Conference of Dialogue Among Civilizations in New York City on 5 September 2000, translated by the U.S. Federal Broadcasting Information Service, available online at www.iranian.com/Opinion/2000/September/Khatami, accessed on 11 February 2007.

Khatami, in particular, has a record of contributions towards Muslim-Christian understanding. It was Khatami who—after Pope Benedict XVI’s controversial autumn 2006 lecture in Regensburg, Germany, and his remarks on Islam therein—said that the *full* text of the Pope’s Regensburg speech should be read before making any comments on its contents.²¹ Khatami himself displays a deep reading not only in Islam but in Western philosophy as well, and his ideas are often contrary to those of his more conservative peers in Iran. In March 1999, he made a sensational visit to the ailing Pope John Paul II in the Vatican, which to my knowledge is the first such meeting ever between a Pope and a high-ranking member of the Shi’ite religious establishment. The meeting between Khatami and John Paul was not one of those goodwill gestures with no follow-up. It resulted in a sequence of important conferences, a kind of Shi’ite Catholic project, attended by leading authorities from both denominations, as well in the joint publication of several books.²² In July 2003, a joint conference took place at the University of London’s Heythrop College and Ampleforth Abbey. It was inspired by previous meetings between Ampleforth’s Benedictine monks and the scholars of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute at Qom, Iran. The meeting, attended by 12 Catholic and 13 Shi’ite scholars, produced a proceedings volume.²³ Exactly two years later, another four-day-long conference took place at the same place. At the same time, Catholic scholars visited their Shi’ite counterparts in Iran.

²¹ Christoph Marcinkowski, “The Basis of Pope’s Reasoning” in *The Straits Times* [Singapore], 18 September 2006, p. 18.

²² See, for instance, J. A. Bill and J. A. Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi’i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002. The book appears to be the first attempt by Western Catholics to present a comparative approach towards basic features of Shi’ism and Catholicism, in terms of devotional practices as well as basic beliefs. However, it also addresses the issue of Shi’ism and politics. The second book contains the proceedings of the 2003 “Shi’ite-Catholic encounter”.

²³ A. O’Manony, W. Peterburs and M. A. Shomali (Eds.), *Catholics and Shi’a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (London: Melisende, 2004).

Inside Iran, however, Khatami's new philosophy has resulted in an unprecedented period of political liberalization that was reflected also in Iranian society at large, particularly in the publication sector and in the flourishing of non-government organizations. Within this context of liberalization, one can also observe a renaissance of Iran's nationalism debate, which is remarkable considering the official internationalist propaganda of the Islamic republic. In spite of the setback caused by the coming to power of President Ahmadinejad, the nationalism debate continues. Apparently, 28 years of theocracy have not affected the process of search for a national identity (Persian: *huvviyyat-e melli*) in a country of more than 70 million people of various ethnic backgrounds.

In order to interpret Iran's rise appropriately, it would be crucial to distinguish between the three major nationalist concepts that has surfaced during the Khatami period: the Islamist (Shi'ite), the Iranist and the Islamist (Shi'ite)-Iranist approaches. The common thread of all of them is the perception of a certain dichotomy between the Islamic and national identities. Without going too much into detail, it should be noted that Iran's Islamization process following the conquest of the country in the 7th century CE by invading Arabs differed from that of, say, North Africa, which was more thoroughly Arabized, to the extent that Arabic became largely the national language of that region. With regard to Iran, however, things went a different way. Due to several closely interconnected political, social and religious factors that are not discussed here, the Iranians did not experience the same Arabization process and perceived—in spite of their acceptance of Islam—the coming of the Arabs and the subsequent destruction of the Sasanid state as a painful cut in their history and national identity, a cut that is also reflected in the current discourse on the proper place of Islam and nationhood. This discourse is in so far significant to the outside

political observer as it is often politicized by various factions struggling for Iran's leadership and future direction inside the country.

In Persian, the concept of nation is usually expressed by the term *mellat*, derived from the Arabic *millah*, which, incidentally, also appears several times in the Qur'an.²⁴ Without intending to go into details, it is vital to understand that the term national identity in the Iranian context is not congruent with the European discourse of the issue.²⁵ As Katouzian²⁶ has rightly pointed out, in 19th-century usage of the Persian language, the expression *mellat* (the people) was rather applied in opposition to another Persian term derived from the Arabic, *dawlat* (state), a concept that is different from the European nationalism debate, where the people and the state were perceived as more or less the same. In Persian, the distinction between both the domains (the state and the nation) is still maintained, although the expression *melli* is applied in daily language when referring to the adjective "national". It is thus rather a combination of both *mellat* and *dawlat* that is closer to the European concept of nationhood. In the course of Iran's history under Islam (but also in that of the Islamic world at large), the dichotomy between both these concepts has resulted in a certain tension and political instability that has pervaded until today. Perhaps this tension is best exemplified when comparing the official Iranist interpretation of Iranian historical experience and nationhood under the Pahlavi monarchy that was overthrown by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shi'ite clerics in 1979. This view saw in the "coming of the Muslim Arabs" a "great misfortune", an interruption of the natural

²⁴ Mainly with the meaning of "religion" and "sect"; see Qur'an 2:114, 124, 129; 3:89; 4:124; 6:162; 7:86, 87; 12:37,38; 14:16; 16:124; 18:19; 22:77; 38:6.

²⁵ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "The Frontier Phenomenon: Perceptions of the Land in Iranian Nationalism" in *Critique* 10 (Spring 1997), p. 22.

²⁶ Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 258–59.

course of Iranian history.²⁷ Contrary to this scenario, it is usually believed that this view of nationhood was reversed with the ‘victory’ of the Islamic revolution, which favoured an Islamist—and allegedly internationalist—interpretation. It is the perceived clash of both these concepts that dominated, at least since Khatami, large sectors of the political debate as well as academic and non-academic writing in Iran. Ahmadi,²⁸ for instance, directed the attention to the circumstance that the discourse of the dichotomy between Iranism (Persian: *īrāniyyat*) and Islamism (Persian: *eslāmiyyat*) actually preceded the coming to power of the clerics in 1979, whereas others questioned the linkage between both concepts altogether.²⁹ However, it should not be forgotten that it had been the Iraq-Iran War of 1980–1988 that enabled the regime in Tehran to use also the issue of defence of the homeland in its propaganda efforts,³⁰ which reminds one of Stalin’s concept of “The Great Patriotic War” when referring to the 1941–1945 war against Nazi German invaders.

A combination of both concepts—Iranist as well as Islamist—is perhaps best exemplified in a speech made by Khatami in 1997³¹, about six months after his election, where he referred to his concept of “dialogue among civilizations”, which ought to be preceded by a certain process of “self-finding”, that is to say, of a definition of Iranian nationhood, a process, however, that should not distinguish

²⁷ See, for instance, Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*, Edinburgh: Pearson Education Ltd, 2003, pp. 14–15, 59–62, 89, 192–95.

²⁸ Hamid Ahmadi, “*Huviyyat-e mellī-ye Īrān: vīzhīgīhā va avāmel-e puyāyī-yi ān*” [Iranian national identity: its particularities and the quest for its constituents] in Davud Mirmohammadi (Ed.), *Goftarhā-ye darbāreh-ye huviyyat-e mellī-yi Īrān* [Discussions on Iran’s national identity], Tehran: Iranian Civilisation Publications, 1383 AH solar/2004/05 CE, pp. 189–212.

²⁹ Afshin Matin-Asgari, “The Rise of Modern Subjectivity in Iran” in *Critique* 14, No. 3 (2005), p. 333; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “Contesting Nationalist Construction of Iranian Identity” in *Critique* 12, No. 1 (1998), pp. 45–46.

³⁰ This point was also emphasized by Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, p. 240; Shireen Hunter, *Iran after Khomeini*, New York and London: Praeger, 1992, pp. 92–95; and Suzanne Maloney, “Identity and Change in Iran’s Foreign Policy” in Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami (Eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 103.

³¹ Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, “*Farhang-e īrānī-ye eslāmī* [Iranian-Islamic culture]” in idem, *Eslām, rūhāniyyat va enqelāb-e eslāmī* [Islam, the clerics, and the Islamic revolution], Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1379 AH solar/2000/01 CE, p. 18.

between Iranism and Islamism. What is perhaps more interesting than Khatami's concept itself is the fact that he considered the nationalism debate to be an issue that needed to be addressed by the president of the country. In another speech in April 1998, addressing university scholars and Shi'ite clerics in the south-eastern provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan, which was dominated by ethnic Baluch Sunnites, Khatami went so far as to mention that although Iran had a glorious history before the arrival of Islam, it was Islam that had "ennobled" the nation (*mellat*), while at the same time rejecting a purely Islamist model that disregarded the country's cultural traditions and heritage.³² According to him, however, it was "the union of the Iranian soul and character with the religion of Islam that had caused the creation of this grandeur".³³ Khatami,³⁴ therefore argued that Islam as a culture (*farhang*) is the basis for the Iranian identity, as evidenced by the emergence of a galaxy of eminent Muslim Iranian philosophers, scientists, mystics and poets, for instance. Khatami's view aims to balance the Iranist and the Islamist lines of thought. It was during his term of office that both of the seemingly irreconcilable heritages were for the first time *officially* endorsed, as exemplified by the celebration of the Shi'ite Islamic *Āshūrā* mourning ceremonies and that of Iran's annual New Year festival (*nowrūz*), which goes back far into Iran's pre-Islamic past.

Contrary to Khatami's integrative approach, the Islamist line—personified by Iran's current Supreme Leader Khamene'i³⁵—prioritizes the Islamic heritage,

³² Idem, "*Huviyyat-e irānī-ye eslāmī* [Iranian-Islamic identity]" in idem, *Eslām, rūhāniyyat va enqelāb-e eslāmī* [Islam, the clerics and the Islamic revolution], Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1379 AH solar/2000/01 CE, pp. 60–66.

³³ Idem, "*Farhang-e irānī-ye eslāmī*", pp. 62–63.

³⁴ Seyyed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, "*Moqaddemeh* [Introduction]" in Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. *Eslām, rūhāniyyat va enqelāb-e eslāmī* [Islam, the clerics and the Islamic revolution], Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1379 AH solar/2000/01 CE, p. 7.

³⁵ See, for instance, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene'i, *The Cultural Viewpoints of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran*, Tehran: Center for Cultural and International Studies, Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, 2000.

considering Islam “the most important pillar of Iran’s national culture”.³⁶ While Khamene’i, too, acknowledges the importance and grandeur of Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage and culture, it is, nevertheless, Islam that ought to be considered the basis of Iran’s national identity. According to him, the nation is synonymous with Islam, that is to say, with an inclusive system of values and ideas. Contrary to Khatami, however, Khamene’i rejects any kind of cultural borrowing from the West. This line of thought can be traced back directly to the famous Persian book *Gharbzadegi*, a title that is usually translated into English as “Westoxification”, by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1923–1969), an Iranian writer and stern critic of the socio-political and economic situation of Pahlavi Iran. The book, published in 1962, by Āl-e Ahmad—who was by no means an Islamic activist—proved very popular during the few years before the overthrow of the Shah as it exposed the ruler’s (and country’s) alleged poisoning of Iranian minds with Western thoughts and manners.³⁷ *Gharbzadegi*, termed by one scholar as “the modern Iranian articulation of nativism”,³⁸ became a key term and focal point of the Iranian opposition to the autocratic Shah regime, which was perceived by many at that time as a caretaker of the West.

The third nationalism to be discussed briefly is the Iranist variant. In my opinion, it is *this* version—neither the Islamist (Shi’ite) one (by Khamene’i) nor the Islamist-Iranist one (by Khatami)—poses a greater threat to political stability in the long run, at least to the Arabs living in the Gulf region, should the current theocracy be replaced one day by *any* other kind of political system in Iran. This is mainly because Khatami’s and even Khamene’i’s approaches are more or less inclusive in terms of people with a different ethnic but nevertheless Islamic background, whereas

³⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, translated from the Persian by R. Campbell, annotations and introduction by Hamid Algar, Berkeley CA: Mizan Press, 1984, p. 28.

³⁸ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, p. 53.

the Iranist line of thought is based on an alleged racial superiority and memories of a glorious past that nevertheless only under the Pahlavi regime was brought to the attention of ordinary Iranians by the activities of certain Western scholars on ancient Iran. One of such discourses is the constant reference to an Aryan homeland, perhaps the most bizarre construct by a people that constitutes a mixture of so many ethnic groups. More importantly, however, nationalists of this rather chauvinist and, at times, racist brand tend to diminish—or even reject altogether—the role of Islam in shaping Iranian history, society and culture. Iranist thought therefore poses a great danger to stability in the Gulf region as it estranges Iran further from its neighbours. Moreover, in terms of geography, the Iranist or ultra-nationalist approach proceeds from the idea of the historical Lands of Iran (Greater Iran) in Persian known as *Īrānshahr* or *Īrānzamīn* discussed earlier. It is thus a quasi-imperialist concept, as Iran has lost many of the once-constituent parts of the Sasanid, pre-Islamic empire, such as Central Asia, Afghanistan, and, of course, Iraq. The coming of the Islamic republic and the end of Pahlavi Iran in 1979 changed the situation insofar as Iranism ceased to be the *official* doctrine of Iranian politics. However, as Iranism is banned from the public discourse by the current regime (as it is considered non-Islamic), Iranism is enjoying a certain comeback among the opposition and the dissatisfied, mainly because it is forbidden, as are so many other things in Iran.

On a more serious note, however, the revival of Iranist (or chauvinist) thought in contemporary Iran also affects the way in which events in neighbouring Iraq are interpreted. One Iranist organization operating inside Iran, Anjoman-e Farhangī-ye Īrānzamīn (Cultural Society of Greater Iran, abbreviated to Afraz),³⁹ which is apparently not seriously hindered in its activities by the current Islamist government,

³⁹ The society maintains a website in Persian at www.afraz.ir, accessed on 4 October 2006.

congratulated the Iranian people to the election of Mr. Jalal Talebani to the office of President of the Iraqi Republic by referring to the circumstance that, as an ethnic Kurd (and thus a speaker of Kurdish, a member of the family of Iranian languages), Mr. Talebani would be in charge of the heart of *Īrānshahr* (Persian: *del-e Īrānshahr*). As discussed earlier, *Īrānzamīn* and *Īrānshahr* were originally mere political or geographical concepts dating back to the Sasanid period, without a particular ethnic or linguistic connotation.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, what is now Iraq would be the centre of such a construct. Publications by the above-mentioned organization, however, refer to their members as *Īrān-parastān*, literally “Iran-worshippers”⁴¹ and the language therein tries to avoid any vocabulary that may be perceived as non-Iranian, Arab origin. God (Arabic: *Allāh*), for instance, is constantly referred to as *Yazdān*,⁴² which, to a Persian speaker, has clear pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian connotations. From there, it is not far to *nezhād-parastī*, literally “worship of the race”, or racism plain and blank.

To the political analyst, the above three nationalisms discussed pose several problems in terms of regional stability. The Iranist approach, although bizarre and unreasonable, is perhaps the most threatening scenario, as chauvinism and prejudice towards “the other” exceed the boundaries of the group of hard-core Iranian monarchists. Any sudden regime change in Tehran may encourage a kind of nationalism that more or less falls into the Iranist category as any successor regime—democratically elected or not—would be in search of its national identity, an identity that would be sought most probably in the pre-Islamic imperial[ist] past. The Islamist

⁴⁰ See also Mustafā Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity*, New York: Paragon House, 1993, p. 87. This view has been questioned by other, mostly Iranian, scholars, such as A. Shapur Shahbazi, “The History of the Idea of Iran” in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (Eds.), *The Idea of Iran. Volume 1: Birth of the Persian Empire*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 100–11. See, however, Gherardo Gnoli, “Avestan Geography” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v3f1/v3f1a043.html, accessed on 29 January 2007.

⁴¹ See a website of *Afraz*, available online at www.afraz.ir, accessed on 5 October 2006.

⁴² Ibid.

(Shi'ite) variant, on the other hand, is also problematic as this puts the country further into conflict with surrounding Sunnite regimes, with Iraq posing a special case (and opportunity) for Iranian intervention. Khatami's mixed approach, however, did not manage to gain wider support. This is also the case with his concept of *mardomsālārī* or a "local version of democracy", as younger Iranians have largely lost patience with experiments of Islamic democracy and may opt for the original instead—Western European liberal parliamentary democracy.

The issue of an Iranian national identity is therefore an unsolved one, a circumstance that will contribute to instability in the region—independently from the ultimate answer to the burning question of which political order will actually emerge to succeed to the current regime in Tehran. Iran's current nuclear ambitions have to be seen in the context of this unsolved issue of national identity. It is the nuclear issue that is currently instrumentalized by the regime in Tehran, an agenda that even the various strata of the opposition in and outside the country basically agree. It can only be hoped that Iran's nationalist aspirations manifest themselves in a pluralistic and responsible manner—as a political force that is inclusive and integrative instead of exclusive. Such a development may help Iran (as well as the wider region) achieve the stability and democratic values that so many people wish for it to have. It is likewise hoped that it has become clear that there is no Shi'ite crescent looming over the region but rather the question of Iran's process of self-finding, or floridly, the future for the sword, sun and lion, the traditional emblems on the Iranian flag.

*Si vis pacem, para bellum?*⁴³—Perspectives and Challenges

In the course of this contribution, I have argued that in order to interpret appropriately and address comprehensively the issue of the Iranian resurgence in the Gulf region, it is crucial to employ a more holistic approach. Similarly, the issue of Iran has to be addressed within the context of Iraq because of the intertwined histories of these two countries as well as their shared cultural and religious experiences. Theories about the Shi'ite crescent are not helpful in this regard. For instance, in terms of the supposedly threatening Shi'ite factor, and contrary to what is usually stated in the media, the 1980–1988 war with Iraq was not a Sunnite-Shi'ite showdown as Saddam Hussein's armies actually consisted mostly of Shi'ites. This may serve as an eye-opener to those who hold such lines of thought. Elsewhere⁴⁴ I have stated that the fear of a supposedly coherent Shi'ite movement, quasi remote-controlled from Tehran and aiming at taking control of the entire Middle East, is nothing more than a phantom, as such fear actually displays ignorance of the essential nature of the original Twelver Shi'ism as a quietist movement. While policymakers need to consider the emergent factor of Shi'ite assertiveness in Middle East politics, this phenomenon is not easy to grasp as it is burdened with layers of history, theological disputation and domestic ethnic politics on top of the usual interstate considerations. As I was also trying to show, the establishment of an Islamic republic—a theocracy ruled by Shi'ite clerics, as the case of post-1979 revolutionary Khomeinist Iran—has to be considered an aberration from the perspective of classical Twelver Shi'ite Islamic thought, tradition

⁴³ The famous dictum by 4th-century Roman military author Vegetius is usually paraphrased in this form: “If you seek peace, prepare for war.” The original, however, is: “*Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*” [Therefore, he who desires peace, let him prepare for war], *Epitoma rei militaris*, Book III, end of prologue).

⁴⁴ See my “Thinking Ahead: Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and its Seminaries (*hawzah 'ilmiyyah*)” in *RSIS Working Paper*, Singapore, forthcoming online in 2007 and in print.

and historical experience. Therefore, when dealing with the political realities of the Middle East, one should steer clear of rhetoric as it is all too often an empty shell.

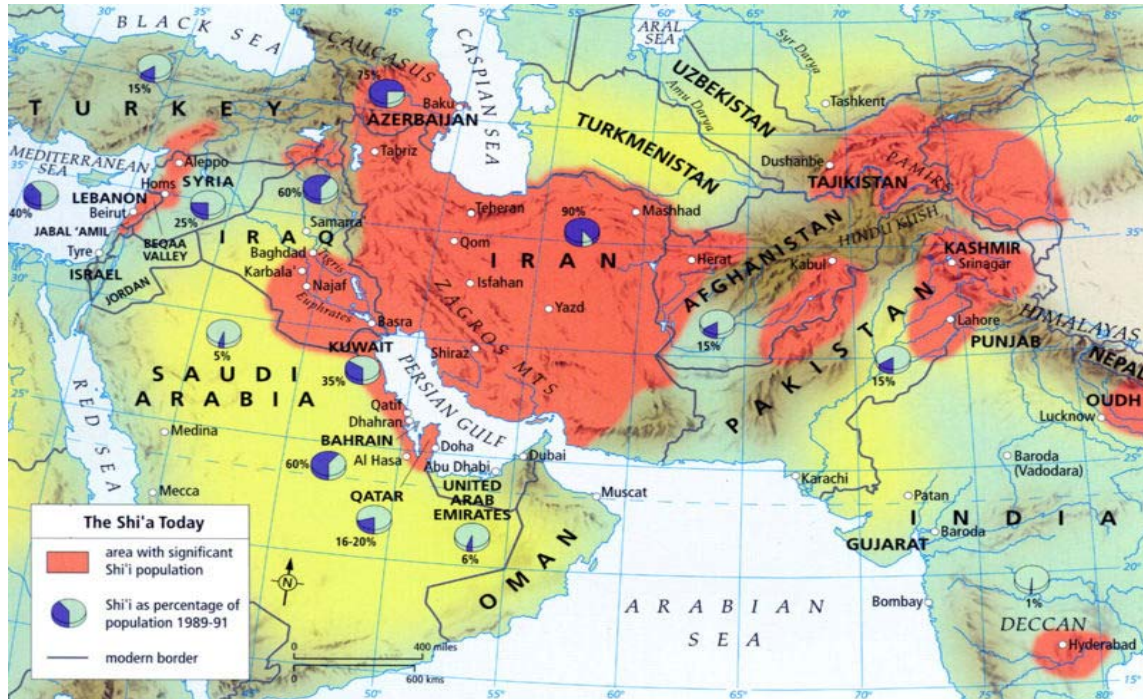


Figure 3

Iran and the geographical distribution of Twelver Shi'ites in the contemporary Middle East, Central Asia and on the Indian subcontinent⁴⁵

Perhaps to the surprise of the wider public, Iran's concerns are rather worldly in nature and have nothing to do with the supposed intention of spreading Shi'ism in the region. At the eve of an expected return of the eschatological Shi'ite saviour-Imam, the *Mahdi* (although this particular feature may appear from time to time in certain Friday sermons in order to mobilize a wider strata of the Iranian populace in times of crisis for the regime). Apparently in pursuit of a long-term political strategy of hegemony over the Persian Gulf region (and subsequently even over the rest of the

⁴⁵ Source: wikipedia art. "Shi'a Islam", available online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiite, accessed on 5 November 2006.

Middle East), based on the nationalisms discussed earlier in this paper, Tehran addresses supposedly Shi'ite issues in its dealings with international Shi'ite communities through the promotion of the Iranian model of a Shi'ite theocracy (in spite of the quietist and politically non-assertive character of Twelver Shi'ism in history). In the Sunnite world, Iran is perceived to be the champion of common Islamic issues such as the Palestine question where Tehran is actively supporting the Islamist Sunnite movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Rhetoric and propaganda aside, Iran does, however, have specific security concerns that should be taken into consideration since they may increase in significance as the regime in Tehran feels more unstable and endangered. Such a prudent approach vis-à-vis the Islamic republic—a potential nuclear power—has nothing to do with the Munich-style appeasement policy. Iran, a country with more than 70 million people and a national identity reaching back several thousand years, is not Iraq and the regime in Tehran should not be equated with that of the late Iraqi Baath Party. Such an evaluation is also not to be confused with regime approval, but rather it takes into account the fact that Iran's currently prevailing foreign and nuclear policy appears to be backed by larger segments of Iranian society than is usually thought. An offensive military approach against it is thus not advisable. In this writer's opinion, the keyword is "engagement" (especially of the economic kind) and not further "estrangement".

For instance, in terms of looking into the future, Iran can be co-opted to work more closely together with member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)⁴⁶—all of them being Arab nations—as well as with the European Union. As

⁴⁶ By 2010, the GCC countries are scheduled to induce a common currency—the "Khaleej", literally "the Gulf".

Bruno Dupré⁴⁷ rightly stated in a recent contribution to *Proliferation News* (published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), a Washington-based bipartisan think tank:

... for the European Union there is no viable alternative to a negotiated agreement supported by the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Authority) and U.N. Security Council. Wild cards will only create wild scenarios. The policy of the E.U. has been a double track strategy—privileging negotiations while preparing for incremental and reversible restrictive measures—and should remain so. ... The E.U. continues to believe that, beyond sanctions, a multilateral dialogue is essential. Such a suggestion is not actually new. The E.C.-Iran Trade Cooperation Agreement (TCA) as well as the E.U.-Iran Political Dialogue have been on and off since December 2002. The last pause in TCA negotiations was dated August 2005, after Iran resumed uranium conversion. Despite the nuclear standoff, the E.U. Commission is still providing assistance to Iran (counter-narcotics, disaster relief, Afghan refugees' repatriation, European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights) with more to come if Tehran is willing to suspend its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities. Interesting proposals are currently being discussed to offer fuel cycles assurances to countries that will renounce voluntary to enrichment and reprocessing activities. Iran can be part of

⁴⁷ Dr. Dupré, former Head of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Bureau at the French Ministry of Defence, has been dispatched by France to the European Union (E.U.) Commission in October 2006 to support the implementation of the E.U. Strategy against Weapons of Mass Destruction, in close coordination with the European Council (E.C.).

these initiatives, provided full cooperation with the IAEA is restored and light is shed by Tehran on its past and current activities.⁴⁸

It appears that the current rift between Tehran and the West—the United States in particular—is also quasi-psychological in nature, as pointed out by Dupré, who tries to address this issue from the perspective of the European Union:

Restoring trust between Tehran and the international community and, in particular, between Tehran and the United States, is very much the objective of the EU3 (France, Britain and Germany). It is a long process because the ill-will between the two countries (Iran and the United States) goes beyond the nuclear issue. Both countries need to adjust their respective positions. This is difficult for Washington, which knows perfectly well that negotiation implies compromises that enable all parties to claim victories. ... Besides, it is hard to understand why the Bush Administration would agree to offer security guarantees to North Korea and refuse it to Iran. The same goes for Tehran. Iranian authorities know that there is no other alternative than Iran's integration in the international society and becoming a key constructive player in the region. Any other policy that will build on P5⁴⁹ division and uncontrolled escalation will hardly benefit the country. Unilateralism would then prevail, bringing worst-case scenarios ahead. Does Tehran really want to look like North

⁴⁸ Bruno Dupré, "Iran Nuclear Crisis: The Right Approach" in *ProliferationNews*, 1 February 2007, available online at www.carnegieendowment.org/npp/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19002, accessed on 5 February 2007.

⁴⁹ The five Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council are France, Britain, Russia, the United States and China.

Korea? We can only assume that those at the head of the Iranian Republic who want to avoid complete isolation will prevail.⁵⁰

In the view of this author, Iran's fears and security concerns referred to earlier can be summarized as follows: The primary concern is the survival of the regime, similar to the North Korean scenario. In the case of Pyongyang, the United States has for a long time been reluctant to enter into direct bilateral talks. Washington has now abandoned that line of thought and has offered what may well be considered as security guarantees to the North Koreans, a policy that may also be of interest when discussing a rapprochement with the Islamic republic.

Another long-term concern of Iran, a country that went through a traumatic eight-year-long defensive war against its western neighbour, is the revival of Iraq's military power in the medium-term future. The new Iraqi armed forces have received (and will continue to receive) modern U.S.-manufactured military equipment, which is a matter of grave concern for Tehran as it has been so far denied [direct] access to it.

Closely related to the Iraq issue is Tehran's view of the Kurdish question: independence for Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region is unacceptable as this may spark similar desires among Iran's ethnic Kurds as well. In this point, Iran finds itself in basic agreement with Turkey and Syria, countries that are also home to millions of ethnic Kurds and which do not show any interest in an independent Kurdish state.

Another worry for Tehran is the nature and future course of the revival of Iraqi Shi'ism, an issue that has been discussed by me in more detail elsewhere.⁵¹ Tehran simply wants to stay in control of the direction of the future, as it was Iran that

⁵⁰ Dupré, "Iran Nuclear Crisis: The Right Approach".

⁵¹ See my forthcoming "Thinking Ahead: Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and its Seminaries (*hawzah 'ilmiyyah*)".

hijacked the course of the Shi'ite movement in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution by instrumentalizing Shi'ites abroad in order to achieve Iranian political goals. Examples of incidences where Shi'ite communities outside Iran had merely been used by Tehran in order to achieve political goals are not uncommon, such as the cases of Iraq and Lebanon. When considering Shi'ite crescent theories, one should also see that there are also Shi'ites outside Iran who are willing to go their own way, such as the secular Republic of Azerbaijan, which has a Shi'ite majority, or the Shi'tes in India, who appear to be relatively well integrated into the secular framework of the world's largest democracy. Still, Iran and the Shi'ite Arabs, as well as other non-Iranian Shi'ites, seem to be aware that they may need each other to achieve short-term political goals. A revival of traditional Shi'ite higher education in neighbouring Iraq—outside the orbit of the regime in Tehran—will therefore not be in Iran's national interests, especially since it were the Iraqi Shi'ite seminaries in Najaf and elsewhere (known in Arabic as *hawzah*) that had been for many centuries the centre for scholarly and politically quietist Shi'ism. The adventure of Iran's current engagement in Iraq and the playing out of the various Shi'ite factions there (often against each other), however, will only last as long as these allies retain their usefulness to Tehran, as had been the case in the past with Shi'ite movements elsewhere.

The core issue, from the perspectives of both the United States and Iran, is the nuclear issue. Tehran's nuclear programme (whatever its nature) still seems to enjoy support by Iranians of any political persuasion and social strata, as it appears to be a means to maintaining national independence from the West. Iran's position in its confrontation with the United States and its allies over that issue has even been

termed, quite fittingly, “nuclear nationalism”.⁵² Iran’s security concerns and interests should thus be taken into consideration and not be dismissed as unfounded.

This author is convinced that, in spite of certain signals sent out by the Bush Administration indicating a supposed intention of rapprochement, the situation is actually heating up. In early 2007, the United States was trying to “turn cold” as many foreign policy hotspots as possible in order to regain the initiative in terms of the real issue—Iran (to wit the North Korean crisis, where Washington has been entering into a rather conciliatory mood). Moreover, the recent surge of U.S. troops in Iraq, aimed at containing, for some time at least, the increasing violence there, too, fits into such a picture. At the time of writing, in late January 2007, this author was expecting a critical situation in U.S.-Iranian relations to arise in the second half of the year, in particular because of the succession question in both countries (to wit, the upcoming U.S. presidential elections and the health of Iran’s ailing Supreme Leader Khamene’i).

So it is about time to address the resurgence of Iran—more convincingly than what had been done in the past—with the traditional instruments of diplomacy and economic incentives, and backed by credible military and economic might should things go wrong. As a catalyser, one may start with the idea that an increase of living standard in Iran will eventually lead to an increase of civil society based on a rudimentary middle class, as seen in the late Pahlavi period, and ultimately in a desire to arrive at a form of democracy that is based on local traditions and experiences rather than on implants from outside, as in the case of Iraq.

The recent and still ongoing nuclear issue does exemplify that Iran seems to show every sign of resurgence as the dominant regional power in the Gulf. Until the

⁵² See, for instance, Roya Johnson, “Iran’s ‘Nuclear Nationalism’” in *American Thinker*, 21 April 2006, available online at www.americanthinker.com/2006/04/irans_nuclear_nationalism.html, accessed on 12 February 2007.

Iranian revolution of 1979—under the bygone Pahlavi dynasty—Iran, which aside from Saudi Arabia is the largest and most populous country of the Gulf region, has been able to function as a kind of regional policing force, although it was acting in close alliance with the United States at that time. This period was interrupted by the 1980–1988 Iraq-Iran War, which isolated Iran and bound Tehran’s hands. Moreover, during the subsequent entrenchment of the United States in the Gulf in the 1990s, Iran decided to keep a rather low profile. However, the removal of the Western-backed Saddam Hussein regime and American involvement in fighting the insurgencies in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan have offered new opportunities for Tehran to stage a comeback as a regional power to be reckoned with again. The question to be answered is how a resurgent independently-acting Iran can be integrated into the regional security framework in order to dispel fears by its Arab neighbours—in particular those with sizeable Shi’ite populations that are thought of as fifth columns—of a hostile takeover.

Within this potentially explosive setting, it will be a fatal mistake on the part of Tehran to underestimate the willingness (and military capability) of Washington to resort to a pre-emptive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. If this scenario holds true, it will be the United States—not its proxy Israel—that will strike first, mainly in order to re-establish its largely lost military prestige in the Middle East. The deteriorating security situation in Iraq and [for the Republicans] the negative outcome of the 2006 U.S.-Congressional elections seem to have boosted Iranian self-confidence, which may lead to the tragic miscalculation in terms of America’s willingness to resist Iranian ambitions in the region. In order to avoid being interpreted by Tehran as wavering and weak, and suffering from a loss of face, the United States now tries to deal with Iran from a position of strength while officially

advocating a climate of dialogue. The recent decision by the Bush Administration not to follow the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group and instead *increase* the number of U.S. troops in Iraq may indeed help to achieve that goal. The difficulties faced by U.S. troops in Iraq in their fight against insurgents are usually seen as encouraging Iran to employ bolder methods. Therefore, Iran's current triumphalism in Iraq may not last long as the Shi'ites there (and elsewhere, for that matter) may one day prefer to pursue their own particular interests rather than being satellites of Tehran. Within this wider setting, a surge of U.S. troops in Iraq—if done so with the sole objective of establishing firm control over the federal capital Baghdad—may actually be the right thing to do, although I am aware of the fact this is an unpopular minority view among observers.

Perhaps it is time to treat Tehran's opportunities in Iraq more realistically in the light of some of Iran's own domestic problems. The first is the question of succession to the ailing Leader of the Revolution (Persian: *rahbar-e enqelāb*), Ayatollah Khamene'i, who is said to be suffering from liver cancer. Among the main contestants for the succession are pragmatist ex-president Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Gholam-'Ali Mesbah-Yazdi, the ultra-conservative mullah who is considered the mentor and spiritual father of Iran's current hardline president, Mahmud Ahmadinezhad. However, as with Khamene'i himself, both Rafsanjani and Mesbah-Yazdi are usually not considered grand ayatollahs or *marja's*⁵³, and so lack credibility when trying to claim to be highest-ranking religious leaders within the Shi'ite hierarchy.

It is likely that pragmatic hardliner Rafsanjani is the more obvious choice, though not as Supreme Leader but rather as successor to President Ahmadinezhad as

⁵³ On the peculiar role of *marja's* in Shi'ism, see my "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects", pp. 37–38, on the significance of *marja's*.

the latter may be compelled to leave the political scene once Khamene'i is no around anymore. It is also possible that the post may be filled by a politically insignificant figure from the religious establishment. In the December 2006 elections to the Assembly of Experts, the congregation of ayatollahs that elects the Supreme Leader, reformist-backed Mehdi Karrubi and fundamentalist associates of Mesbah-Yazdi failed to live up to their expectations. Rafsanjani, the main force behind the armistice agreement that ended the 1980–1988 war with Iraq, was twice president of the republic (from 1989 to 1997) and candidate in the 2005 Iranian presidential elections. He won the most number of votes in Tehran province. He is currently serving as Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, an unelected constitutional body created in February 1988, the main purpose of which is to resolve differences or conflicts between Parliament (the *Majlis*) and the Council of Guardians, as well as to serve as a consultative council to the Supreme Leader. *Forbes Magazine* at one time listed Rafsanjani in its list of richest people in the world and has written that as the real power behind the Iranian government, he “has more or less run the Islamic Republic for the past 24 years”.⁵⁴ Rafsanjani (age 72) will be an interesting choice as he wields more power and influence to build bridges to the West than reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami, for instance. During his 2005 election campaign, Rafsanjani said relations with the United States would be a major issue of his presidency.⁵⁵

However, the solution to the apparent leadership crisis in Iran—either in the case of Khamene'i's death or his being declared incapable of performing his duties

⁵⁴ Paul Klebnikov, “Millionaire Mullahs” in *Forbes Magazine*, 21 July 2003, available online at www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2003/0721/056.html, accessed on 24 January 2007.

⁵⁵ “Rafsanjani urges U.S. to begin thaw in ties” in *China Daily*, 19 May 2005, available online at www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-05/19/content_444110.htm, accessed on 24 January 2007.

and his replacement by someone else—is not expected to affect Iran’s current firm stand on the nuclear issue, as even Rafsanjani has made clear and as

[p]layers’ cards look good for both Iran and the rest of the world, making the risks of escalation today real. ... Rafsanjani stated on December 31, 2006 that there would be consequences if Tehran was treated unfairly over its nuclear programme. “Westerners are creating problems for themselves and the region ... the consequences of this fire will burn many others,” he told worshippers. Recent events (midterm elections creating a majority of Democrats in the U.S. Congress and the defeat of Ahmadinejad’s supporters during recent local Iranian elections) as well as future elections in key countries (United States, United Kingdom, France) may complicate further the possible scenarios.⁵⁶

So far, there seems to be no agreement on whether Iran will be able to produce a nuclear weapon or whether Tehran does actually have the intention to do so. In spite of some nonsensical and irresponsible concerns that such a weapon will be put to test by Iran immediately in an [ultimately suicidal] attack on Israel, one can expect that the possession of a sufficient nuclear arsenal will certainly deter the United States from any further attempts to destabilize Iran, thus making Iran safe from U.S. intervention and perpetuating the existence of the regime, a scenario that seems to be Washington’s (and Israel’s) real concern.

It is the view of this writer that Iran will not strike first, unless it is attacked, especially by Israel. Needless to say, an attack by Israel on Iran will have

⁵⁶ Dupré, “Iran Nuclear Crisis: The Right Approach”.

consequences for the entire region that will be irreversible. As prospects for the success of a U.S. military intervention appear to be gloomy, such an event cannot be entirely ruled out. In this writer's opinion, the current difficulties for both sides (Iran and the United States) to "jump over their own shadow" and enter into a dialogue are psychological in nature and characterized by their different experiences of the 1979 revolution and its aftermath. As Rafsanjani has made clear, Iran is basically ready to respond to any serious efforts from Washington to improve ties, after a certain face-saving wait-and-see period.⁵⁷ One should not forget that Rafsanjani knows what he is talking about as he was the guiding spirit on the Iranian side behind the Iran-Contra arms deals in the 1980s. If Rafsanjani has his way, Washington will halt its attempts at destabilizing Iran, whereupon Tehran—as a reward—would play a constructive role in Iraq and the wider Middle East region. This unlikely scenario, however, implies the impossible: that both sides will deal with each other as equals, with Tehran being the hegemon of the Middle East, recognized as such by the United States, the world's only remaining superpower.

In the light of the nature of the nationalism discourse that was outlined in the earlier course of this contribution, I would like to concur with George Perkovitch, the vice-president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who in concluding a paper on possible options in solving the Iran crisis stated that:

[i]t would be a grave and unnecessary mistake to accept uranium enrichment on Iranian soil before Iran has resolved outstanding IAEA questions and built confidence that its nuclear activities are entirely for peaceful purposes. Making such a deal now would neither resolve the outstanding compliance problem nor the insecurities that Iran's

⁵⁷ "Rafsanjani urges U.S. to begin thaw in ties".

activities cause. The international community certainly should not provide Iran any benefits for such a "false" compromise. The best option is a negotiated agreement whereby Iran relies on international supplies and foregoes enrichment until the IAEA dossier is closed and confidence in Iran's peaceful intentions is restored. To realize this option, the U.S. must be much more involved in diplomacy with Iran. Washington must clarify through every means and channel possible that it will not act to topple the Iranian regime and will not attack Iran if it does not attack other countries directly or indirectly or through proxies. The Bush Administration has in practice moved to this position, but has not yet convinced much of the world, including Tehran, that this is the case.⁵⁸

Lastly however, whether Perkovitch's view concerning Washington's true intentions towards Iran are actually in concurrence with the facts, remains to be seen.

⁵⁸ George Perkovitch, "Five Scenarios for the Iranian Crisis" in *Proliferation Papers* [Paris and Brussels: Ifri], No. 16 (Winter 2006), p. 29; also available online at www.ifri.org/files/Securite_defense/Prolif_Paper_Perkovitch_Iran_Scenarios.pdf [emphasis mine].

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