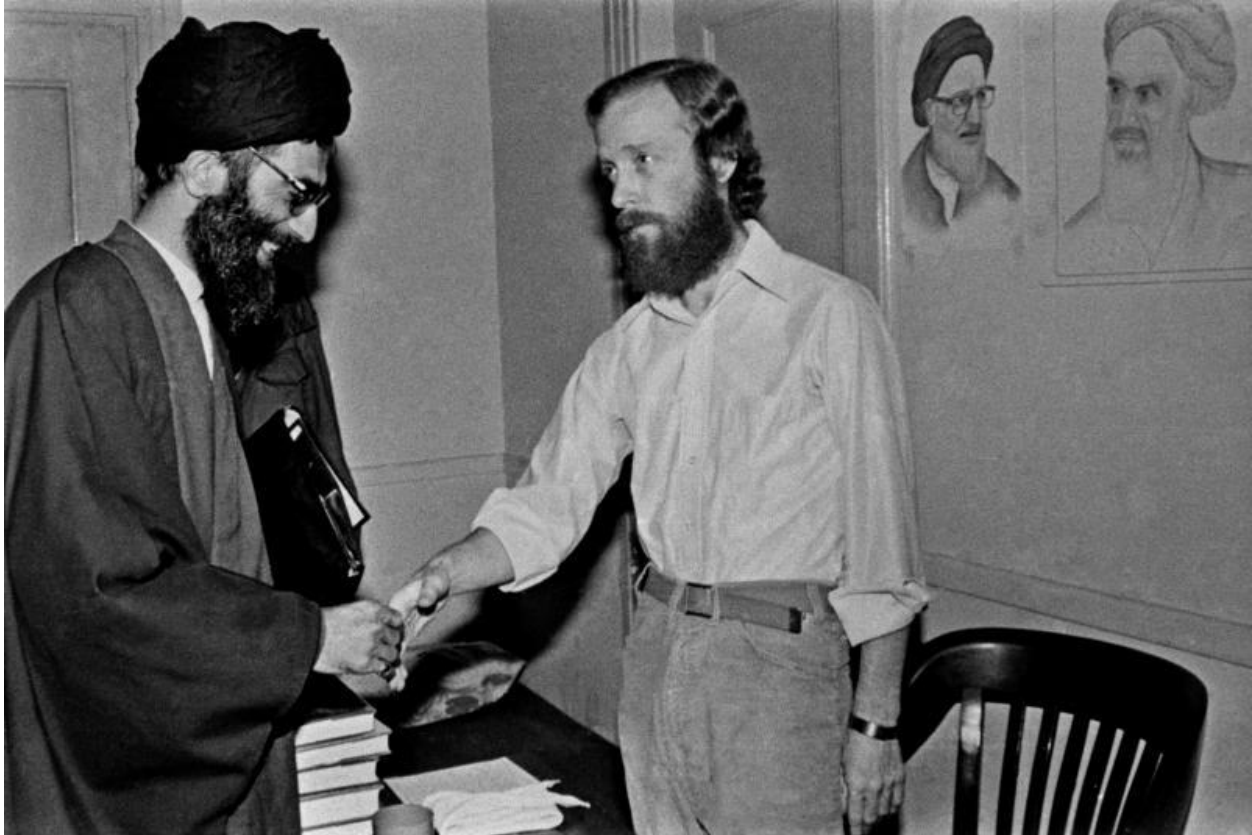


# Who Is Ali Khamenei?

*The Worldview of Iran's Supreme Leader*



*You can check out anytime you like: Khamenei visits an American hostage, 1980. (Abbas / Magnum Photos)*

*By Akbar Ganji*

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In June, Hassan Rouhani was elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rouhani ran as a reform candidate, and many have interpreted his victory as a harbinger of a possible liberalization or rationalization of Iranian domestic and foreign policy. But the dominant figure in Iranian politics is not the president but rather the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Iranian constitution endows the supreme leader with tremendous authority over all major state institutions, and Khamenei, who has held the post since 1989, has found many other ways to further increase his influence. Formally or not, the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government all operate under his absolute sovereignty; Khamenei is Iran's head of state, commander in chief, and top ideologue. His views are what will ultimately shape Iranian policy, and so it is worth exploring them in detail.

Khamenei was born in the northeastern Iranian city of Mashhad in 1939. His father was a religious scholar of modest means, and Khamenei, the second of eight children, followed his father's path to seminary. (Two of his brothers are also clerics.) He studied in Qom from 1958 to 1964, and while there, he joined the religious opposition movement of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1962. He played an important role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and went on to become Iran's president, from 1981 to 1989, and then Khomeini's successor as supreme leader.

Khamenei has always been in contact with the world of Iranian intellectuals, and the basic outlines of his thinking were laid down in his youth and young adulthood, during the 1950s and 1960s. Iran was then a monarchy and an ally of the United States; according to the Iranian opposition at the time, the shah was nothing but an American puppet. Unlike many other Islamists, Khamenei had contact with the most important secular opposition intellectuals and absorbed their prerevolutionary discourse. But he was also a seminary student, whose chief focus was learning sharia, Islamic law. He became acquainted with the theoreticians of the Muslim Brotherhood and was influenced by the works of Sayyid Qutb, some of which Khamenei himself translated into Persian.

As a young man, Khamenei saw a tension between the West and the Third World, and these views hardened during his dealings with the United States after the Iranian Revolution. He concluded that Washington was determined to overthrow the Islamic Republic and that all other issues raised by U.S. officials were nothing more than smoke screens. Even today, he believes that the U.S. government is bent on regime change in Iran, whether through internal collapse, democratic revolution, economic pressure, or military invasion.

*Khamenei has praised Leo Tolstoy and likes Honoré de Balzac, but he considers Victor Hugo supreme.*

Khamenei has always been critical of liberal democracy and thinks that capitalism and the West are in inevitable long-term decline. Moreover, he sees Washington as inherently Islamophobic. Nevertheless, he is not reflexively anti-Western or anti-American. He does not believe that the United States and the West are responsible for all of the Islamic world's problems, that they must be destroyed, or that the Koran and sharia are by themselves sufficient to address the needs of the modern world. He considers science and progress to be "Western civilization's truth," and he wants the Iranian people to learn this truth. He is not a crazy, irrational, or reckless zealot searching for opportunities for aggression. But his deep-rooted views and intransigence are bound to make any negotiations with the West difficult and protracted, and any serious improvement in the relationship between Iran and the United States will have to be part of a major comprehensive deal involving significant concessions on both sides.

## A PORTRAIT OF THE SUPREME LEADER AS A YOUNG MAN

To understand Khamenei's worldview, it helps to start by looking at the history of U.S. intervention in Iran. In 1953, the Eisenhower administration helped engineer a coup against the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosaddeq, and Washington was the chief supporter of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's authoritarian regime, until its overthrow in 1979. This helped shape the discourse of all of the regime's opponents; opposition to the shah went hand in hand with opposition to the United States, since the shah was considered Washington's gendarme.

Khamenei was 40 when the revolution occurred; before then, he had been a seminary student and cleric, but one engaged with the broader world as well as his narrow religious circles. As he said in a meeting with ulama (Muslim scholars) and young clergymen in May 2012, "I participated in intellectual circles before the revolution and had close relations with political groups. I got to know them all, and got into discussions and debates with many of them." He was a man of music, poetry, and novels as well as religious law. No other present-day *marja* (senior ayatollah) or prominent *faqih* (Islamic jurist) has such a cosmopolitan past.

Khamenei's widespread relationships with secular intellectuals in Iran radicalized his views about the United States, since these circles became increasingly anti-American after the 1953 coup and the U.S. backing of the shah and his subsequent repression of dissidents. As Khamenei's friend Mehdi Akhavan Sales, a poet, put it in one of his verses, "I will not forget: that we were a flame, and they doused us with water." Khamenei has spoken about the U.S. role in the 1953 coup several times, and the memory continues to resonate with him today. As he said just last year in a meeting with university students in Tehran,

"It is interesting to realize that America overthrew his government even though Mosaddeq had shown no animosity toward them. He had stood up to the British and trusted the Americans. He had hoped that the Americans would help him; he had friendly relations with them, he expressed an interest in them, perhaps he [even] expressed humility toward them. And [still] the Americans [overthrew] such a government. It was not as if the government in power in Tehran had been anti-American. No, it had been friendly toward them. But the interests of Arrogance [a term Khamenei often uses to symbolize the United States] required that the Americans ally with the British. They gathered money and brought it here and did their job. Then, when they brought their coup into fruition and had returned the shah, who had fled, they had the run of the country."

Khamenei had strong ties to Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, the two most influential intellectuals of the prerevolutionary period. They were important contributors to the theory of "Westoxication." But anti-imperialism seems to have been the strand of secular intellectual thought that shaped Khamenei the most.

In prerevolutionary Iranian opposition intellectual circles, Western culture and civilization were not only disparaged as a model but considered to be in crisis and decline. The Third World was its rising alternative; as the Iranian writer Daryush Ashuri, a contemporary of Khamenei, put it, "The Third World is composed of the poor and colonized nations, which are at the same time revolutionary." Iran was ostensibly independent, but colonialism was seen as taking a new form there, with native ruling political elites serving as agents of imperialism and working to secure its interests. The Western world, led by the United States, moreover, was thought to be laying the groundwork for its political and economic expansion by destroying indigenous cultures. Under such circumstances, it was easy to see Islam as not simply a religion but also a cultural and ideological weapon in the struggle against imperialism.

As a young man, Khamenei loved novels. He read such Iranian writers as Muhammad Ali Jamalzadah, Sadeq Chubak, and Sadeq Hedayat but came to feel that they paled before classic Western writers from France, Russia, and the United Kingdom. He has praised Leo Tolstoy and Mikhail Sholokhov and likes Honoré de Balzac and Michel Zévaco, but he considers Victor Hugo supreme. As he told some officials of Iran's state-run television network in 2004,

"In my opinion, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is the best novel that has been written in history. I have not read all the novels written throughout history, no doubt, but I have read many that relate to the events of various centuries. I have read some very old novels. For example, say, I've read *The Divine Comedy*. I have read *Amir Arsalan*. I have also read *A Thousand and One Nights*. . . . [But] *Les Misérables* is a miracle in the world of novel writing. . . . I have said over and over again, go read *Les Misérables* once. This *Les Misérables* is a book of sociology, a book of history, a book of criticism, a divine book, a book of love and feeling."

*Khamenei needs to know that Washington is not determined to overthrow the Islamic Republic, and the United States needs to know that the Iranian nuclear project is peaceful.*

Khamenei felt that novels gave him insight into the deeper realities of life in the West. "Read the novels of some authors with leftist tendencies, such as Howard Fast," he advised an audience of writers and artists in 1996. "Read the famous book *The Grapes of Wrath*, written by John Steinbeck, . . . and see what it says about the situation of the left and how the capitalists of the so-called center of democracy treated them." He is also a fan of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he recommended in March 2002 to high-level state managers for the light it sheds on U.S. history: "Isn't this the government that massacred the original native inhabitants of the land of America? That wiped out the American Indians? Wasn't it this system and its agents who seized millions of Africans from their houses and carried them off into slavery and kidnapped their young sons and daughters to become slaves and inflicted

on them for long years the most severe tragedies? Today, one of the most tragic works of art is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. . . . This book still lives after almost 200 years."

## THE BUDDING ISLAMIST

Yet if Khamenei frequented prerevolutionary secular intellectual circles and was a student of Western culture more generally, he was first and foremost a seminarian, devoted to pursuing social change in accordance with the teachings of religion. And in this regard, it was Qutb, the Egyptian intellectual, activist, and chief theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood, who stole Khamenei's heart as a young man.

Qutb, who was executed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime in 1966, propagated the idea of an Islamic state. As he wrote in *The Battle Between Islam and Capitalism*,

"If you want Islam to be an agent of salvation, you must rule and must understand that this religion has not come for one to sit in houses of worship; it hasn't come to make a nest in hearts. Rather, it has come to govern and run life in a proper fashion; it has come to build a progressive and complete society. . . . If we want Islam to answer social, ethnic, and other problems and solve our problems and show a way to cure them, we must think about government and its formation and bring our decisions to implementation. . . . Islam without government and a Muslim nation without Islam are meaningless."

The pillars of Qutb's idea of Islamic government were justice, equality, and the redistribution of wealth. "True Islam," he wrote in *Social Justice in Islam*, "is a liberation movement that frees the hearts of individuals and then of human societies from fear of the bonds of the powerful."

Qutb's ideas would go on to become the template for the modern Salafi movement, eventually influencing radical Islamists such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. They were also very appealing for Iranian seminary students. Khamenei read them, was attracted to Qutb's personality and to some of his ideas, and went so far as to translate some of the master's works into Persian himself. As Khamenei wrote in the introduction to his 1967 translation of Qutb's *The Future of This Religion*, "This lofty and great author has tried in the course of the chapters of this book . . . to first introduce the essence of the faith as it is and then, after showing that it is a program for living . . . [confirm] with his eloquent words and his particular world outlook that ultimately world government shall be in the hands of our school and 'the future belongs to Islam.'"

Qutb revived the classic Muslim concepts of the House of Islam and the House of War but gave them a new meaning: "There is only one House of Islam, and that is precisely the one in which an Islamic state has been founded, and God's sharia rules, and the divine punishments are applied, and in which Muslims support each other. Aside from this, everything is the House of War, and the relationship of the Muslim with it is either war or peace based on a treaty with it."

Qutb also offered Khamenei a perspective on the United States as something of a licentious society, ideas Qutb had picked up during his sojourn there in the late 1940s. Qutb came to feel that Americans were prepared to accept Islam, but not in its true, nonsubservient incarnation:

"These days, the Americans have come to think about Islam once more. They need Islam to fight against communism in the Middle East and the Islamic countries of Asia and Africa. . . . Of course, the Islam that America and the Western imperialists and their allies in the Middle East want is not the same Islam that fights imperialism and struggles against absolutism; rather, it is that Islam that struggles against the Communists. Thus, they do not want the Islam that rules and definitely do not want an Islamic government, since when Islam rules, it sets up another *ummah* [Islamic community] and teaches the nations that it is obligatory to become strong, and that rejecting imperialism is a necessity, and that the Communists, too, are like the imperialist pests, and that both are enemies and aggressive."

## AFTER THE REVOLUTION

In the early days of the Iranian Revolution, after Washington announced that it was letting the ailing shah into the United States for medical treatment, a group of radical Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held its occupants hostage, creating a new crisis in U.S.-Iranian relations. Not all the members of the new ruling elite had known about the plan or agreed with it. According to former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, neither he nor Khamenei supported the move:

"Ayatollah Khamenei and I were in Mecca when we heard news of the seizure of the American embassy over the radio at night, when we were on the roof of our domicile preparing to sleep. We were shocked, since we had no expectation of such an event. It was not our politics. Even early into the revolution's victory, when political groups shouted very extreme anti-American slogans, the officials helped Americans who were in Iran return to their country uninjured, and many of them even carried their property with them. Once, when an armed group attacked the American embassy and occupied it, a representative came on behalf of the provisional government and settled the problem. Thus, it is clear that neither the revolutionary council nor the provisional government was inclined to take such measures."



But after Khomeini came out in support of the embassy takeover, the other rulers of the Islamic Republic followed his lead. As Khamenei put it in April 1999,

"I, along with Mr. Hashemi and another individual, met with Imam [Khomeini] after traveling from Tehran to Qom to ask, 'What are we finally going to do with these spies?' Should they remain, or should we not keep them, particularly since there was an amazing tumult in the provisional government over what we were to do with them? When we came into the imam's presence and our friends explained the situation and said what the [foreign] radio stations were saying, what America was saying, what government officials were saying, he thought and then answered in the form of a question: 'Are you afraid of America?' We said, 'No.' He said, 'Then keep them.'"

During his tenure as supreme leader, Khamenei has always defended the seizure. Revolutionary regimes often maintain their relationships with former colonial powers and suffer as a result, he argues. In the Iranian case, the embassy takeover helped make that impossible: "The matter of the den of spies [the revolutionaries' term for the U.S. embassy] cut the last possible thread connecting the revolution and America," he noted in a speech in 1993. The embassy takeover, he said, "was a great and valuable service performed for our revolution."

Khomeini appointed Khamenei as a member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, and before becoming president of the republic in 1981, he served as deputy defense minister, acting chair of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Khomeini's representative in the Supreme Defense Council. His work on security issues brought him face-to-face with Washington's cold realpolitik. In August 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a military attack on Iran, trying to take advantage of the new regime's disarray. Still stinging from the fall of the shah and the ongoing hostage crisis, the United States refused to criticize Iraq's actions, first protecting Iraq from censure at the United Nations and then actually supporting the Iraqi war effort against Iran. By the late 1980s, the U.S. military was increasingly engaging Iran directly, including attacking Iranian oil rigs in the Persian Gulf in 1987 and shooting down an Iranian passenger plane in 1988.

In 1987, Khamenei took his only trip to date to the United States, in order to participate as Iran's president in a session of the UN General Assembly. In his speech, he addressed the relationship between Iran and the United States:



*Teacher and student: portraits of Iran's supreme leaders, Tehran, November 1997. (Damir Sagolj / Courtesy Reuters)*

"The history of our nation is in a black, bitter, and bloody chapter, mixed with varieties of hostility and spite from the American regime. [That regime] is culpable in 25 years of support of the Pahlavi dictatorship, with all the crimes it committed against our people. The looting of this nation's wealth with the shah's help, the intense confrontation with the revolution during the last months of the shah's regime, its encouragement in crushing the demonstrations of millions of people, its sabotage of the revolution through various

means in the first years of its victory, the American embassy in Tehran's provocative contacts with counterrevolutionary elements, the aid to coup plotters and terrorist and counterrevolutionary elements outside the country, the blockading of Iranian cash and property and refusal to transfer goods whose payment had long been received or assets that the shah had taken from the national wealth and deposited in his own name in American banks, the striving to enforce an economic embargo and the creation of a united Western front against our nation, the open and effective support of Iraq in its war against us, and, finally, an irrational, thuggish invasion of the Persian Gulf that seriously threatened the



region's security and tranquility -- all this is only part of our nation's indictment against the regime in the United States of America."

In a public speech the following year, he related an experience he'd had while staying in New York: "A high-ranking official of a European country came to meet me and said, 'You should finally solve your problem with America!' They thought that [with my] having come to New York and being in America, they might be able to warm their bread in this oven. I said, 'Impossible. The issue of the UN is another story. I have come to the UN to speak with the people of the world, and this has nothing to do with America. The issue of America is another story.'"

#### FROM KHOMEINI TO KHAMENEI

Since becoming supreme leader in 1989, Khamenei has sharpened his views of U.S. policy. His position now is clear and simple: Western governments, led by Washington, wish to overthrow the Islamic Republic and destroy the Islamic revolution, just as they did to the Soviet Union.

At a meeting with Iranian government officials in 2000, he put it this way: "An all-encompassing American plan has been arranged to collapse the Islamic Republican system, and all its aspects have been weighed. This plan is reconstructed from the collapse of the Soviet Union. . . . They have, in their own imaginings, revived the plan for the collapse of the Soviets in accordance with the conditions in Iran." Khamenei noted that there had been domestic factors responsible for the Soviet Union's collapse, including poverty, repression, corruption, and ethnic and nationalist tensions. But the Americans capitalized on these, he argued, to push the Soviet state to collapse -- partly by manipulating the media and staging a "cultural invasion," and partly by using political and economic pressure. However, such efforts would not work in Iran, he argued, because the Islamic Republic was not like the Soviet Union -- not least because, unlike communism, Islam was not a newly adopted ideology imposed by a ruling party after winning a civil war. Iran, moreover, had a long history of unified statehood. Its constituent elements had not been yoked together through imperialist expansion and wars of conquest over recent centuries, as was the case with the Russian empire that the Soviet system inherited. He also noted that the Islamic Republic was the product of a popular revolution and enjoyed considerable religious legitimacy.

Khamenei thinks several measures can ensure that the Islamic Republic does not meet the Soviet Union's fate. First, potential political insurgents -- the local Iranian versions of Boris Yeltsin -- must be identified and checked. Second, sensible reforms must be announced clearly, so they cannot be misunderstood or perverted. Reform measures must, as he has described, "be led by a powerful and restraining center so that they don't get out of

control." Third, the media must not be allowed to undermine the government. And fourth, interference by outside powers, such as the United States and Israel, must be kept at bay.

Khamenei also thinks that the United States, the West more generally, and Israel want to use elections to various Iranian offices (city councils, the legislature, the judiciary, the Assembly of Experts) to create, through their "internal allies," a situation of "dual sovereignty." The aim is, according to Khamenei, to create a split between the supreme leader and elected officials of the government. Just as the British, who once had absolute rulers, eventually turned the position of their monarch into a merely ceremonial office, so Iran's enemies, Khamenei believes, want to turn the absolute rule of the *faqih*, or "guardianship of the jurist," into a meaningless shell. Iran's chief reformist strategist, Saeed Hajjarian, used the concept of dual sovereignty as an analytic tool to describe the changing balance of power in Iran following the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the May 1997 presidential election. In response, Khamenei loyalists tried to assassinate Hajjarian in March 1999. He survived, but he has been paralyzed ever since. Khamenei mentioned the concept of dual sovereignty as a subversive idea in a public speech in 2004, as the Khatami administration limped through its final year in office: "You have heard the slogan 'dual sovereignty'! A number of irrational people have even repeated these words within the country. . . . Dual sovereignty is not desirable but damaging and a deadly poison! This is what [Iran's enemies] want."

After Iran's presidential election in June 2009, hundreds of thousands of people poured out into the streets of Tehran and held peaceful demonstrations against the manipulated outcome. As the demonstrations spread, Khamenei, in a Friday prayer speech, compared the protests to the "color revolutions," particularly the one in Georgia, which he claimed the Americans and the British had launched. Khamenei emphasized that during the previous weeks, the speeches of American and European statesmen had become harsher, and that after the Tehran protests, they set aside their "masks" and showed their "true features."

In a public speech in June 2011, Khamenei called the protests, which came to be known as the Green Movement, a continuation of the regime-change policy of United States and its allies and contrasted it with a true revolution, such as the one that led to the founding of the Islamic Republic: "A revolution that cannot defend itself in an age of sedition, against various political or military coup attempts and other such acts, is not alive. This revolution is alive, for it defends itself and indeed prevails and wins. This is certain, as you saw happen [following the protests] in 2009."

A frequent Khamenei theme is the constant presence of foreign threats to the Islamic Republic and the regime's ability to withstand them. The United States and the Western bloc, he argues, want to overthrow the system in Iran and have launched a variety of attempts to do so, including Iraq's military invasion in 1980, the manipulation of ethnic tensions, and economic sanctions. As he put it in another public speech in August 2010,

"They want to bring the revolution down. One of the important means they have employed has been these economic sanctions. They say that [the sanctions] are not targeting the Iranian people, but they are lying! The sanctions are meant to cripple the Iranian nation. They are designed to exhaust the Iranian people and make them say, "We are under the pressure of the sanctions because of the [policies of] the Islamic Republican state." They want to sever the ties between the people and the Islamic Republican system. This is the true aim of the sanctions. They are exerting economic pressure by means of sanctions."

He repeatedly claims that the stated rationales for U.S. policies are meant to mask more sinister motives. As he put it in yet another public speech in August 2011, "Although the excuse for the sanctions is the issue of nuclear energy, they are lying. . . . Perhaps you recall that the first sanctions against this country were enacted at a time when the nuclear issue absolutely did not exist. . . . Thus, the enemy's goal is to hurl the Islamic Republic to the ground."

Khamenei bases such arguments partly on what he sees as two failed attempts by Iran to compromise with the United States. The first was during Khatami's term as president, when the government suspended its uranium enrichment for two years as a trust-building measure. Khamenei believes the Western governments were not interested in trust building, only in making the pause in enrichment permanent. The two-year suspension resulted in no achievements for Iran -- not the lifting of sanctions, nor the release of frozen Iranian assets in the United States, nor any other reward. In a speech in January 2008, Khamenei noted,

"Today, to whomever comes to us and says, "Sir, suspend temporarily," we say, "We have already had a temporary suspension, for two years!" We had a two-year temporary suspension. How did it benefit us? . . . We, for our part, imagined that it was temporary and imagined that it was voluntary. Then, when we talked of resuming work, they started this media frenzy and tumult in political circles, saying, "Woe! Iran wants to end the suspension!" The suspension became a sacred issue that Iran had absolutely no right to approach. . . . Finally, they said, "This temporary suspension isn't enough; you must completely pack the whole atomic project in." This was a setback for us. [The Khatami government] accepted the retreat. But this retreat had a positive effect for us. We learned a lesson from that experience. World public opinion learned from the experience, too. . . . I said if this process of adding new demands is to go on, I will intervene. And I did. I said . . . we should go on the offensive [and resume enrichment]."

Khamenei then went on to remind his audience that despite Khatami's willingness to compromise, his kind words for Americans, his cooperation in toppling the Taliban and in the subsequent Bonn negotiations to install a pro-American government in Afghanistan, U.S. President George W. Bush had still included Iran in his "axis of evil."

The second experience he draws on is Libya's 2003 decision to give up its nuclear ambitions, which nevertheless did not prevent Muammar al-Qaddafi's violent removal through NATO military involvement. "In Libya," Khamenei said in his annual Iranian New Year speech in March 2011, "although Qaddafi had shown an anti-Western tendency during his first years in power, in later years, he performed a great service to the West. . . . This gentleman gathered up his nuclear program, . . . gave it to the Westerners, and said, 'Take it away!' . . . [Yet he was overthrown.]" Khamenei suspects that even if all of Iran's nuclear facilities were closed down, or opened up to inspections and monitoring, Western governments would simply pocket the concessions and raise other issues -- such as terrorism, human rights, or Israel -- as excuses for maintaining their pressure and pursuing regime change. To Khamenei, when it comes to nuclear weapons, the Iraqi and Libyan cases teach the same lesson. Saddam and Qaddafi opened their facilities up to inspections by the West, ended up having no nuclear weapons, and were eventually attacked, deposed, and killed. Major compromises by Iran on the nuclear front without significant concessions by the West, he believes, could end up leading to similar consequences for the Iranian regime.

## SANCTITIES

Another important issue for Khamenei is what he sees as actions that amount to insults to Islam. After the announcement of a possible burning of the Koran by a pastor in Florida in 2010, he asked in one of his public speeches, "What and who is behind the scenes of these evil deeds?" He went on to say that "a careful study of this evil occurrence, which came along with criminal deeds in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Pakistan, leaves no doubt that the planning and the operational command of these acts are in the hands of the system of hegemony and Zionist planning centers, which enjoy the greatest influence over the American government and its security and military agencies, as well as the British and some European governments." Similarly, after the release of the film *Innocence of Muslims* in 2012, he published a statement citing the American and Israeli governments as "prime suspects for this crime." He said that "if they had not supported the previous links in this rotten chain -- that is, Salman Rushdie, the Danish cartoonist, the American Koran-burning pastor -- and did not order dozens of anti-Islamic films from the cliques linked with Zionist capitalists, things would not have reached the point of this great and unforgivable crime."

At the same time, he tries hard to avoid casting this issue as a conflict between Islam and Christianity. "The goal of these infuriating measures [Koran burnings]," he argued in a public speech in September 2010, "is to bring the confrontation with Islam and Muslims into the mainstream of Christian societies and to give it a religious coloration and zeal." But "we must all realize," he said, that this "has nothing to do with churches or Christianity, and the puppet deeds of a few idiotic and mercenary clerics must not be laid at the feet of Christians and their clergy. We Muslims will never commit similar acts in regard to the sanctities of other religions. The struggle between Muslims and Christians on a general level is what the

enemies and plotters of these insane displays want, and the Koran instructs us to take the opposite position.”



*Oversight: Iranian women casting ballots, Tehran, June 17, 2005. (Raheb Homavandi / Courtesy Reuters)*

## THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

Khamenei does not deny the astonishing progress of the West over the past century. As he said in a public speech in June 2004, “In America, you see the pinnacle of the rise of materialist civilization from the perspective of science, wealth, military power, and political and diplomatic efforts. America is a country that has legendary wealth and military power and extraordinary political mobility.” He accepts Western science and technology and laments the fact that despotic regimes in Iran and elsewhere in the developing world are responsible for these countries’ underdevelopment. Khamenei admires certain aspects of Western societies. Meeting with youth and cultural affairs workers in the Caspian city of Rasht in 2001, for example, he noted that “one good quality in European people is their willingness to take risks. This is the chief source of their successes. . . . Another of their good qualities is perseverance and keeping at hard work. . . . The greatest and most talented Western inventors and scholars are those who for long years live a hard life sitting in a garret and

discover something. When one reads their biographies, one sees what a hard life they lived. . . . These are the good parts of Western culture.”

“Western culture,” he noted in a discussion with Iranian youths in February 1999, on the occasion of the anniversary of the revolution, “is a combination of beautiful and ugly things.



No one can say that Western culture is completely ugly. No, like any other culture, it surely has beautiful manifestations. . . . A sensible nation and a group of sensible people will take the good and add it to their own culture, thus enriching it, and reject the bad." He believes that Islamic civilization is superior, however, because Western civilization is overly materialistic. "The West looks at only one dimension, one feature -- the material feature," he said during a recent meeting with youths devoted to the topic of socioeconomic development. He added that the Western outlook considers "progress first and foremost, composed of progress in wealth, science, military affairs, and technology. . . . But in Islamic logic, progress has other dimensions: progress in science, in justice, in public welfare, in economics, in international grandeur and status, in political independence, in prayer and approaching the exalted God -- in other words, it has a spiritual aspect, a divine aspect."

Khamenei is not a fan of liberal democracy. He argues that its supposed majoritarian legitimacy is undermined by the fact that actual governments in the West have received the votes of only a small fraction of the total possible electorate. He claims, moreover, that liberal democracies, such as the United States, have repeatedly violated their own principles by supporting despotic governments elsewhere, and have even worked to overthrow democratic regimes (such as with the 1953 coup in Iran). He sees liberal democratic governments as being interested in ruling the world at large, pushing globalization as a route toward Americanization, and attacking other countries at will (such as Afghanistan and Iraq).

The Islamic Republic has its own form of democracy, Khamenei believes, one that is rooted in religion. "The foundations of religious democracy are different from those of Western democracy," he argued in June 2005 in a speech on the anniversary of Khomeini's death. "Religious democracy, which is the basis we have voted for and which arises from the divine rights and duties of man, is not just a contract. All humans have the right to vote and the right to self-determination. This is what lends meaning to elections in the Islamic Republic. [What we have here] is much more advanced and meaningful and deeply rooted than what exists today in Western liberal democracy."

In practice, Khamenei believes that liberal democracy yields not freedom but domination, aggression, and imperialism, and this is what makes it unacceptable. "We believe in democracy," he said in a meeting with members of the Basij militia in northwestern Iran in October 2011. "We believe in freedom, too. But we do not accept liberal democracy. . . . We don't want to use that name for our pure, sound, righteous, and clean meaning. We say Islamic democracy, or the Islamic Republic." For all his criticisms of liberalism, however, he has not prevented the translation into Persian and the publication during his term of the works of liberal authors, such as Karl Popper, Milton Friedman, Ronald Dworkin, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, Robert Putnam, Amartya Sen, and many others.

Khamenei believes that Western governments and capitalism in general are suffering from incurable structural problems and face inevitable decline. In June 1992, in a message to pilgrims to Mecca, he said,

"The Western capitalist system is sunk to its neck in human problems. Despite the copious wealth that it has at its disposal, it is completely incapable of establishing social justice. The recent riots of blacks in America showed that the American system treats not only the nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America with injustice but also its own people, and answers protest with violence and repression just like in those other countries. It is true that the communist camp collapsed and vanished, but its rival, the capitalist camp, . . . particularly plagued by the arrogance that has affected it after the disappearance of its powerful rival, will vanish too, sooner or later."

He has argued that the financial crisis that began in 2008 is evidence in support of his pessimistic view of the West's prospects. He saw the Occupy Wall Street protests as the beginning of a major crisis in capitalism. "The people in these meetings and demonstrations of several thousand in New York," he noted at a large gathering of people in the city of Kermanshah in October 2011, "put up a poster on which it was written, 'We are the 99 percent.' In other words, 99 percent of the American people -- the majority of the American people -- are ruled by a dominant one percent. . . . Today, the capitalist system has reached a complete dead end. Perhaps it will take years for the consequences of this dead end to reach their final conclusion. But the crisis of the West has begun in earnest."

For Khamenei, world history is "turning a corner," and "a new age in the entire world" is beginning. The Marxist, liberal, and nationalist creeds have lost their attraction, and only Islam has kept its. The Arab Spring -- or, as he calls it, "the Islamic Awakening" -- is a prelude to a worldwide uprising against the United States and international Zionism. In his view, the fact that routine materialistic calculations make such an outcome unlikely is unimportant, because divine providence will bring it about. He sees the survival of the Islamic Republic in the face of more than three decades of international opposition as evidence of this heavenly support and counts on it continuing in the future. Khamenei believes that the historic turn he anticipates will lead to the victory of spiritual and divine values in the world. Contrary to Max Weber's diagnosis that modern science has disenchanting the world and the realm of power, Khamenei still relies on esoteric notions and divine beings in his approach to politics. He is re-enchanting the world.

## TALKING ABOUT TALKS

In August 1989, two months after being elected supreme leader, Khamenei announced to the United States,

"No one in the Islamic Republic has ever negotiated with you, nor will they. . . . As long as American policy is based on lies, deception, and duplicity and supports corrupt regimes, like that of Israel, and perpetuates oppression against the weak and poor nations, and as long as crimes and transgressions of the American rulers, such as the downing of the passenger plane and the impounding of Iran's property, remain in our nation's memory, there is no possibility of our holding negotiations with the American government or establishing diplomatic relations with it. We completely reject relations between them and us."

The following year, in a meeting with a group of students on the anniversary of the embassy takeover, he elaborated his thinking on this front:

"Those who think that we must negotiate with . . . America are either simple-minded or frightened. . . . What would negotiations mean? Would all problems be solved if only you go and sit with America and talk and negotiate? This is not the case. Negotiations with America mean trading with America. Trade means you get something and you give something. What will you give to America from the Islamic revolution for which you will get something? . . . Do you know what it wants? By God, America is not upset with the Iranian nation for anything more than its being Muslim, its standing firm with Muhammad's pure Islam. It wants you to stop being so firm. It wants you to not be proud. Are you ready for that?"

Seventeen years later, in December 2007, at a gathering of students in the central city of Yazd, he returned to the topic:

"One of our fundamental policies is cutting relations with America. Yet we have never said that we will cut these relations forever. No, there is no reason to cut relations forever with any state. . . . [But] relations with America are harmful to us. First, establishing relations will not reduce the danger posed by America. America attacked Iraq while the countries had diplomatic relations. . . . Second, having relations with the Americans is a way for them to increase their influence within certain strata . . . in Iran. . . . They need a base that they don't have now. This is what they want. They want their intelligence officers to be able to travel to Iran without restrictions. . . . Some people brag about the harm that results from the absence of [diplomatic] relations. No, gentlemen! Not having relations with America is good for us. The day when relations with America will be beneficial, I will be the first one to say that relations should be established."

In August 2010, in a meeting with high-level officials of the government under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Khamenei offered his interpretation of "two recent cases of negotiations with the United States, one of which was related to problems in Iraq." This was at a time when Ahmadinejad had stated that he was ready to negotiate with the United States. Khamenei described his understanding of the U.S. negotiating style:

"When the Americans don't have strong arguments, when they cannot present an argument that is acceptable and logical, they resort to bullying. And since bullying has no effect on the Islamic Republic, they unilaterally declare the end of negotiations! Fine, what kind of negotiation is that? This is our experience in both cases. So, when people like Mr. President [Ahmadinejad] say that we are ready to negotiate, I say yes, we are ready to negotiate, but not with the United States. The reason is that America does not enter the field honestly, like an ordinary negotiator; it enters into negotiations like a superpower. . . . Let them set aside threats, let them set aside sanctions, let them not insist that the negotiations must end in a specific conclusion. [Then there can be negotiations.]"

In February 2013, attending a security conference in Munich, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden said that in its efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States had imposed "the most robust sanctions in history" and that Iran's leaders were punishing their own people through economic deprivation and international isolation. Biden indicated that diplomacy still had a chance but that direct talks would be possible only "when the Iranian leadership, the supreme leader, is serious."

Khamenei responded quickly and directly. In a speech to the commanders of the Iranian air force, he said that since U.S. President Barack Obama's election in 2008, he had announced that the Iranian leadership would take an unprejudiced look at the new government's behavior and then make a decision. But what had been the results of Obama's first term? Washington had supported the "internal rebellion" (the Green Movement); it had imposed crippling sanctions that, he claimed, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said were intended to foment a popular uprising against the Islamic Republic; it had turned a blind eye to Israel's assassinations of Iran's nuclear scientists and perhaps even backed them; and it had supported the same terrorists in Syria that they had overthrown in Afghanistan in 2001. He then addressed Biden's call for talks:

"Whom did you want to cripple [with sanctions]? Did you want to paralyze the Iranian people? Is there any goodwill in this? . . . I am not a diplomat. I am a revolutionary and talk in a clear and forthright manner. . . .

Diplomats say something, and they mean something else. We talk in honest and clear terms. . . . Negotiations are meaningful when the other side shows its goodwill. When the other side does not show any goodwill, when you yourselves say pressure and negotiations, these two don't go together. You want to point a gun at the Iranian people and say, 'Negotiate, or I'll fire.' . . . You should know that the Iranian people will not be frightened as a result of such acts."

Khamenei claimed that the Islamic Republic was ready for direct negotiations with Washington but that there were several necessary preconditions. He wants the United States

to give up what he sees as its attempts to overthrow the Islamic Republic, enter into negotiations in a spirit of mutual respect and equality, and abandon its simultaneous efforts to pressure Iran, such as with military threats and economic sanctions. He argues that on these matters, contrary to what Biden said in Munich, the ball is in Washington's court, not Tehran's.

Khamenei rejects the notion that the differences between Iran and the United States center on the nuclear program. "If we wanted to make nuclear weapons," he said in a public meeting with a delegation of ulama and martyrs' families from the Iranian region of Azerbaijan this past February,

"how could you prevent it? If Iran was determined to have nuclear weapons, America could not prevent it in any way. We do not want to make nuclear weapons. Not because America is upset over this, but because it's our own belief. We believe that nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and must not be produced and that those that already exist in the world must be eliminated. This is our belief. It has nothing to do with you. If we did not have this belief and decided to make nuclear weapons, no power could prevent us, just as they were not able to prevent it in other places -- not in India, not in Pakistan, not in North Korea."

The key to successful negotiations, he claims, is for Washington to change its attitude and sense of entitlement. "The Americans must confirm their good intentions and show that they are not interested in bullying. If they demonstrate this, then they will see that the Iranian nation will respond in kind. Let them not make trouble, let them not intervene, let them not bully, let them recognize the Iranian nation's rights. Then they will receive a commensurate response from Iran."

Every year, Khamenei gives his most important speech in Mashhad on the first day of spring, the beginning of the Iranian New Year. This year's address was striking, however, for what seemed to be a slight softening of his position on talks. For the first time, even while expressing his lack of optimism about direct negotiations with the United States, he explicitly said, "But I don't oppose them." And while noting that Washington seems to have no inclination to complete the nuclear negotiations and resolve the issue, he nevertheless said that the solution to the conflict "is very near and very simple." Iran's only demand, he said, was recognition of its right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, and it would be "very simple" to eliminate foreigners' concerns. "They can implement the nuclear agency's legal regulations; from the start, we, for our part, have had no opposition to implementing these supervisions and regulations."

What is noteworthy about the road traveled by the supreme leader during these tumultuous past three decades is the change in the manner of his discourse. He has shifted away from



absolute ideological notions of "the West," "world arrogance," and the United States as a totally homogenous other and moved toward accepting a more nuanced conception of the West as a complex social reality -- one with not only an inherent drive to ruthless market competition, capitalist exploitation and foreign policy expansion but also dynamic artistic products, literature, science and technology, risk taking and institutional innovations, and religious and spiritual diversity. The discourse depicting the United States as an absolute enemy with which it would be absurd and naive even to think about negotiating has given way to a discourse about the United States as a potential interlocutor with which it might be possible to discuss acceptable terms of negotiations over such issues as the nuclear program and security in Iraq. It appears that for Khamenei, the United States has gone from being the monstrous absolute other to a powerful regional presence with a domestic political system plagued by the painful consequences of two recent failed military adventures in the Middle East.

## WHAT COMES NEXT?

Given Khamenei's control over Iranian policy and his deeply rooted suspicion of U.S. intentions toward the Islamic Republic, improving the relationship between Iran and the United States will be difficult, especially if long-standing U.S. policies, such as constantly escalating sanctions, remain in place. Yet improved relations are not impossible, because the most important interests of both Tehran and Washington can indeed be accommodated simultaneously.

What Khamenei needs to know is that Washington is not determined to cripple or overthrow the Islamic Republic, and what the United States needs to know is that the Iranian nuclear project is peaceful, that Iran will not block free access to energy resources and regional sea-lanes, and that Israel can enjoy peace and security within its internationally recognized borders (which, some still hope, will be determined in a final settlement with the Palestinians). Iran can reassure Western governments that its nuclear project is peaceful by making it transparent and by ratifying and implementing the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocols on proliferation safeguards in exchange for its guaranteed right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. The West, in turn, can reassure Iran that it is not bent on regime change by taking tangible practical measures in exchange for Iranian adherence to security and peace in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East -- and it will have to do so in order to make significant progress on the nuclear front.

Washington would be well advised to lift the economic sanctions, since whatever their aims, sanctions inflict damage on populations at large, not only or even primarily on the government officials who are their ostensible targets. This is as true in Iran as it is elsewhere, and it means that outside powers, and the United States in particular, are currently

responsible for widespread unemployment, soaring inflation, and a massive increase in poverty. Under these circumstances, more and more middle-class families will join the ranks of the poor, and more children of the poor will fall victim to malnutrition, disease, and violence. Problems of daily survival will become the public's main concern, issues of democracy and human rights will be marginalized, and Iran's social fabric will be destroyed from within -- just as happened in Iraq during the 1990s. That is not something the United States should want to see for any number of reasons.

Khamenei, for his part, must accept that in the long run, the only way to make the Islamic Republic truly powerful and sustainable is to legitimize his regime through the people's free votes. The Soviet Union had the largest army in the world and amassed thousands of nuclear weapons, but it eventually collapsed. Even if Western governments forswear any intentions of regime change, Iran's domestic problems will never be solved without democracy, freedom, and human rights.

If the Obama administration is serious about pursuing a solution to the problems between Tehran and Washington, it would be well advised to develop a road map that specifies the unresolved issues in the Iranian nuclear file in a clear manner and sets out a timeline for investigating, resolving, and closing the cases one by one. Step-by-step progress on the nuclear front should be linked to step-by-step progress on lifting the sanctions. The administration would also be well advised to take a comprehensive approach to the region and embed discussions of the Iranian nuclear program in a broader framework of regional security, bringing Washington's allies on board and minimizing those allies' desire to play the spoiler. This would mean building a consensus around a set of rules for regional politics, guaranteeing borders and abjuring regime change as a policy, achieving real results in ending the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, working toward the eventual removal of weapons of mass destruction from the region, and supporting human rights across the Middle East.

This is obviously a very tall order, but there is no other way to avoid the continuation, or even escalation, of the existing conflicts in the region. Confrontational policies on all sides over the last decade have yielded little except stalemate and misery. The election of Rouhani as president showed the desire of the Iranian people to put a decisive end to the Ahmadinejad era, and it has created an opportunity for both Iran and the international community to move forward toward more constructive relations. That opportunity should be seized rather than ignored.