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

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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 whereas local Arab Shi'ites, such as Lebanon's Hizbullah, would function as mere satellites in the orbit of Tehran and thus being its "potential fifth columns".

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1. See Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran. Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2004, p. A01, also available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html., accessed on November 21, 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".*

However, as this paper is going to argue, a more differentiated approach would be advisable.[2] A glance at the Islamic part of Iran's history, at least from the Safavid period (1501-1722) onwards, for instance, might reveal that "Shi'ite identity" and "Iranian nationalism" were often inter-related. Inspite of this, what is usually somewhat sloppily termed "Iranian national feeling"[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.

Moreover, it shall be argued – with reference to certain facets of the recent nationalism debate within Iran – that rather Iranian nationalism and national interest would be the driving forces behind the country's foreign policy in the time to come (although this would

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2. Similar views have been expressed recently and in somewhat greater detail in two excellent articles by Professor Vali Nasr, who is with the US Naval Postgraduate School; see his "When the Shi'ites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2006), available online at http://www.foreignaffairs.org/2006070faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html and his "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq," *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, (1937-39), 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 Germany's Nazi terror regime. Already Edward Granville Browne has 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 and 489. More recently, Professor Bert Fragner has contributed an interesting study to the employment 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*, ed. M. Macuch, C. Müller-Kessler, and B. G. Fragner (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.

not be made official policy by Tehran in order not to repell the Shi'ites abroad). This nationalism – as currently promoted by the "islamist" regime in Tehran – would not be "racially motivated" (as that of the ultra-nationalist "Iranist" opposition), since it would include the ethnic non-Persian "Persianate" Shi'ites within Iran, such as the Azeri Turks, who make about a quarter of the population.[4] Although worth of careful monitoring, this direction of Iranian foreign policy is perhaps "easier" to address than a "religiously driven" apocalyptic millennarianism, as it would allow for diplomatic, pragmatic solutions to current issues. Paradoxically, the Islamic republic would 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 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 was ruling over those areas as one of the first "world powers" in human history. The "historical Lands of Iran" – "Greater Iran" – were always known in the Persian language as *Īrānshahr* or *Īrānzamīn*.[5] Both terms refer to the Iranian plateau in

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4. According to the *World Factbook*, Iran's ethnic split-up in January 2007 was as follows: Persians 51%; Azeri Turks 24%; Gilakis and Mazandaranis [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 setting 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 https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html (accessed on January 30, 2007).

5. G. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 2. For a fuller treatment see D. N. MacKenzie, "Ērān, Ērānšahr," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/article/v8f5/v8f545.html (accessed on January 29, 2007). See also Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran* (Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estermo Oriente, 1989), pp. 175, 179, 183, and Josef Wiesehőfer. *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. xi. See http://en.wikipidea.org/wiki/Image:Greater-Iran.jpg (accessed on January 29, 2007).

addition to those regions that had been historically under significant "Iranian cultural influence", roughly corresponding to the territories ruled over 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 extend" of Iran. The capital of this entity was, at times, situated in what is now Iraq.

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* or *Īrānzamīn* are not necessarily interchangable, they nevertheless signified 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 Havard Universiti, 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."[6]

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6. Richard Nelson Frye, *Greater Iran. A 20th-Century Odyssee* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005), p. x. For futher detail of geographical distribution of the Modern Iranian languages, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Modernirranianlangua-geesmap.jpg (accessed on January 30, 2007).

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 and a healthy respect for it [...] there is little chance for stability and proper growth."[7]

It is important to understand that knowledge of Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur in history is still present in the mind of almost every single Iranian regardless of their particular 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 several thousands of years – the only country in the region that is not an artificial creation of the post-WWI situation. This setting might help us to 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

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

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 UN sponsored consultation end Iranian claims to 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 convincesd 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."[8]

"Iranian nationalism" – although not always advocating "irredentism" – is not necessarily identical with "Persian ethnicity", which is mainly based on the New Persian language, *fārsī*. It is rather more encompassing and includes also aspects pertaining to "Persian civilization" – whether 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, we come across the antagonism of Shi'ite Safavid Iran to its Sunnite neighbours. Iran was "converted" to Twelver Shi'ite Islam only from 1501 onwards, the year when the

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8.   Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran. Continuity and Chaos* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 23.

Shi'ite Safavid dynasty came to power.[9] Prior to that, there had been always Shi'ite-dominated cities and regions in Iran, but 1501 marked indeed a watershed, as Iran was until then one of the centres of Sunnite scholarship. The Safavids, who perhaps had been of Turkic descent,[10] although this is still a matter of heated debate among scholars (and various nationalists of the region), at times referred to themselves as "Shahs of Iran", in conscious remembrance of the pre-Islamic *Īrānshahr*. Under Shah Ismā'īl I (r. 1501-24, 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 there 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".[11] Prominent Iranicist Professor Nikkie Keddie even argues that the Safavids establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the dominant and official creed in Iran brought about "a common religious and cultural base",[12] a base that was "partly forced on Iranians to distinguish them from the Sunni Ottoman and Uzbek enemy states".[13]

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9. 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). To get clearer picture of the Safavid Empire in 1512, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:LocationSafavid.png (accessed on January 29, 2007).

10. 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," *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).

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

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

13. Ibid., p. 8.

The perhaps most significant result of the for the most part forceful "conversion" of Iran – previously one of the centres of "orthodox" Sunnite scholarship – to Shi'ism, was a certain *Wagenburg* mentality, as Iran saw itself now surrounded by potentially hostile Sunnite states, among them the Ottoman Empire, the various khanates in Central Asia, and Mughal India. Moreover, already in the 11th-century, the Persian poet Ferdowsi, in the *Shāhnāmah* – Iran's national epic – had developed the concept of "Iran" and "Turan" (the latter symbolizing the potentially "threatening" Turkic, non-Iranian outside world[14]). Again, from the early 1800s onwards, it was Iran's quasi-colonial experience with Czarist Russia and, later on, Britain (the latter replaced by the United States after World War II) which enforced the perception of "being different".

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" (Pers.: *qebleh-ye 'ālam*)[15] – 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 there of the present writer),

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14. Somewhat hyperbolically, 19th-century scholar J. W. Clackson ("The Iran and Turan," *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".

15. 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).

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 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 rumored 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.[16]

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: frequent foreign interference during the period of semicolonialism in the early 20th century and great-power politics in the 1940s-80s; the legacy of deeply rooted pre-Islamic and Shi'ite cultural beliefs about satanic forces; and the effectiveness of such theories as a collective defense 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

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

(*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.[17]

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 "inheritant Iranian worries".
Transferring those "worries" of a country of about 70 million people
(a potential future nuclear power) to our own times would mean to
address the issue of Iran's security concerns.

In the following then, I shall 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 be distinguish between several "facets" of
"nationalism" that are currently discussed in Iran, in particular since
the 1990s and the "moderate" era of ex-president Khatemi (1997-2005).
Khatemi's presidency constituted a significant change of direction, as it
marked a departure from economic and political isolation, which Iran
experienced since 1979 the revolution. Outside the country, his term

17. Ibid.

of office is usually associated with his concept of "'Dialogue among Civilisations" – in other words, between the Islamic world and "the West".[18]

Khatami, in particular, has a record of contributions towards Muslim-Christian understanding. It was Khatemi 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.[19] Khatami himself displays a deep reading not only in Islam but in Western philosophy as well, and his ideas are often in contrast 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 – to my knowledge, 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 just one of those myriads of "good-will 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.[20] In July 2003, a joint conference took place at University of London's Heythrop College and Ampleforth Abbey. It was inspired by previous meetings between Ampleforth's

18. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, "Empathy and Compassion: Believing in Dialogue Paves the Way for Hope," speech delivered at the UN-sponsored Conference of Dialogue Among Civilisations in New York City, on September 5, 2000, translated by the US Federal Broadcasting Information Service, available online at http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2000/September/Khatami, accessed on February 11, 2007.

19. Christoph Marcinkowski, "The Basis of Pope's Reasoning," *Straits Times* [Singapore], September 18, 2006, p. 18.

20. 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".

Benedictine monks and the scholars of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute at Qom, Iran. The meeting, attended by twelve Catholic and thirteen Shi'ite scholars, produced a proceedings volume.[21] Exactly two years later, another four-days-long conference took place at the same place. At the same time, Catholic scholars went to visit their Shi'ite counterparts in Iran.

Inside Iran, however, Khatemi's new "philosophy" resulted in an unprecedented period of political liberalization that was reflected also in Iranian society at large – in particular in the publication sector and in the flourishing of non-government organizations. Within this context of liberalization, one could also notice 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 Ahmadinezhad, the nationalism debate continues. Apparently, twenty-eight years of theocracy have not affected the process of search for "national identity" (Pers.: *huvviyyat-e melli*) in a country of more than seventy million people of various ethnic backgrounds.

In order to interpret Iran's "rise" appropriately, it would be crucial to distinguish between three major "nationalist concepts" that came to surface during the Khatemi period and that shall be outlined shortly: the "Islamist" (Shi'ite), "Iranist", and the "Islamist (Shi'ite)-Iranist" approaches. The common thread of all of them is the perception of a certain "dichotomy" between Islamic and national identity. Without going too much into detail, it has to be kept in mind that Iran's "Islamization process" following the conquest of the country in the 7th century CE by the invading Arabs differed from that of North Africa, for instance, which was "more thoroughly" Arabized, to the extend that Arabic became largely the "national language" of that region. With regard to Iran, however, things went another way. Due to several closely interconnected political, social, ad religious factors

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

that cannot be discussed here, 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 inside the country that are struggling for Iran's leadership and future direction.

In Persian, the concept of "nation" is usually expressed by the term *mellat*, derived, in turn, from the Arabic *millah*, which, by the way, appears also several times in the Qur'an.[22] Without intending to go into detail, it is vital to understand that "national identity" in the Iranian context is not congruent with the European discourse of the issue, for instance.[23] As Katouzian[24] has rightly pointed out, in 19th-century Persian-language usage, the expression *mellat*, "the people", was rather applied in opposition to another Persian term derived from Arabic – *dawlat*, "state" – a concept that is thus different from the European nationalism debate, where "the people" and "the State" where perceived as more or less the same. In Persian, the distinction between both 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 can be considered of coming somewhat 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 those concepts resulted in a certain tension

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22. Mainly with the meaning of "religion", "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.

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

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

and political instability that had been noticeable until today. Perhaps, this tension is best exemplified when comparing the official "Iranist" interpretation of Iranian historical experience and nationhood under the Pahlavi monarchy which was overthrown by Ayatollah 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 course" of Iranian history.[25] 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", allegedly "internationalist" interpretation. It is the perceived clash of both concepts that dominated, at least since Khatemi, large sectors of the political debate, as well as academic and non-academic writing in Iran. Ahmadi,[26] for instance, directed the attention to the circumstance that the discourse of the dichotomy between "Iranism" (Pers.: *īrāniyyat*) and "Islamism" (Pers.: *eslāmiyyat*) preceded actually the coming to power of the clerics in 1979, whereas others questioned the linkage between both concepts altogether.[27] However, it should not be forgotten, that it had been the Iraq-Iran War of 1980-88 that enabled the regime in Tehran to use also the issue of "defense of the homeland" in its propaganda efforts,[28]

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25. 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.

26. 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.

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

28. This point had also been emphasized by Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, p. 240, ShireenHunter, *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 (ed.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 103.

which reminds one of Stalin's concept of "The Great Patriotic War" when referring to the 1941-45 war against the Nazi German invaders.

A combination of both concepts – "Iranist" as well as "Islamist" – is perhaps best exemplified in speech made by Khatemi back in 1997[29] – only six and a half 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 between "Iranism" and "Islamism". What is perhaps more interesting than Khatemi's concept itself is the circumstance that he does consider the nationalism debate an issue that needs 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 province of Sistan and Baluchistan which is dominated by ethnic Baluch Sunnites, Khatemi even stated 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 which disregards a country's cultural traditions and heritage.[30] 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".[31] Khatemi,[32] thus, argued that Islam as a culture (*farhang*) is the basis of Iranian identity, as evidenced by the emergence of a galaxy of eminent Muslim Iranian philosophers, scientists, mystics and poets,

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29. 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.

30. Idem, "Huviyyat-e īrānī-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.

31. Idem, "Farhang-e īrānī-ye eslāmī," pp. 62-63.

32. Seyyed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, "Moqaddemeh [Introduction]," in Seyyed Mohammad Khatemi. *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.

for instance. Khatemi's view aims at a balance between the "Iranist" and the "Islamist" lines of thought. It was during his term of office that both of those seemingly irreconcilable "heritages" where for the first time *officially* endorsed, as exemplified by celebration of the Shi'ite Islamic *'Âshūrā'* mourning ceremonies and that of Iran's annual New Year festival (*nowrūz*), which goes back far into Iran's pre-Islamic past.

Contrary to Khatemi's rather "integrative" approach, the "Islamist" line – personified by Iran's current "Supreme Leader" Khamene'i[33] – prioritizes the Islamic heritage, considering Islam "the most important pillar of Iran's national culture".[34] While Khamene'i, too, acknowledged the importance and grandeur of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage and culture, it is, nevertheless, Islam is 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 Khatemi, 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 *Gharbzadegī* – a title which is usually translated into English as "Westoxification" – by Jalāl Âl-e Ahmad (1923-69), an Iranian writer and stern critic of the socio-political and economic situation in Pahlavi Iran. This book, published in 1962, by Âl-e Ahmad – by no means an "Islamic activist" – proved very popular during the final years before the overthrow of the Shah, as it "exposed" the ruler's (and country's) alleged "poisoning" of Iranian minds with Westernized thought and manners.[35] *Gharbzadegī*, termed by one scholar "the modern Iranian articulation of nativism",[36] became

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33. 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).

34. Ibid, p. 7.

35. 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.

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

thus a key term and focal point of the Iranian opposition against the autocratic Shah regime which was perceived by many at that time as caretaker of "the West".

The third "nationalism" that shall be referred here in brief is the "Iranist" variant. To my mind, in the long run *this* version – *not* the "Islamist" (Shi'ite) one (Khamene'i) and *not* the "Islamist-Iranist" brand (Khatemi) – is actually more threatening to political stability – or 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 Khatemi'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 the "Iranist" line of "thought" is based on alleged racial superiority and memories of a glorious past which nevertheless only under the Pahlavi regime had been brought to the attention of "ordinary" Iranians by the activities of certain Western scholars on Ancient Iran (an issue that, for a variety of reasons, shall not be addressed here). One of those discourses is the constant (and to the non-Iranian, often repelling and disgusting) reference to an "Aryan homeland" – perhaps the most bizarre construct by a people that constitutes a mixture of so many ethnic groups like perhaps not many others on this planet. 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 (One should be aware of the circumstance, that such a line of thought would erase a historical experience that last in Iran for the last 1,400 years). "Iranist" thought poses thus a great danger for stability in the Gulf region as it would estrange Iran further from its neighbours. Moreover, in terms of geography the "Iranist" or ultra-nationalist approach proceeds from the earlier discussed idea of the "historical Lands of Iran" – "Greater Iran", in Persian known as *Īrānshahr* or *Īrānzamīn*. 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 – Iraq. The coming of the Islamic republic and the end of Pahlavi Iran in 1979 did change the situation in so far as "Iranism" ceased to be the *official* "doctrine" of Iranian politics. However, as "Iranism" is banned from the public

discourse as "non-Islamic" by the current regime, it is enjoying a certain come back among the opposition and the dissatisfied – mainly because it is forbidden, as currently so many things in Iran. Lastly, however, in practice (and on a perhaps less academic note), anyone who has lived in Iran for some time might not be able to tell the difference between the fine points of the "Iranist", "Islamist-Iranist", and "Islamist" approaches towards "the foreigner" – he or she will be "the Other" anyway…

On a more serious note, however, the revival of "Iranist" – chauvinist – thought in contemporary Iran affects also 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*)),[37] which is apparently not seriously hindered in its activities by the current "Islamist" government, "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*" (Pers.: *del-e Īrānshahr*). As discussed earlier, *Īrānzamīn* and *Īrānshahr* were *originally* a mere political or geographical concept dating back to the Sasanid period, without a particular ethinic or linguistic connotation.[38] Nevertheless, what is now Iraq would be centre of such a construct. Publications by the above-mentioned organization, however, refer to their members as

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37. The society maintains a website in Persian at http://www.afraz.ir, accessed on October 4, 2006.

38. See also Mustafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), p. 87. This view has been question by other, mostly Iranian, scholars, such as A. Shapur Shahbazi, "The History of the Idea of Iran,"' in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, and Sarah Stewart (ed.), *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 *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v3f1/v3f1a043.html (accessed on January 29, 2007).

Īrān-parastān, literally "Iran-worshippers"[39] and the language therein tries to avoid any vocabulary that could be perceived as of "non-Iranian", Arab origin. "God" (Arab.: *Allāh*), for instance, is constantly referred to as *Yazdān*,[40] which, to the 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 briefly discussed "nationalisms" pose several problems in terms of regional stability. The "Iranist" approach – although bizarre and repelling to reason – is perhaps the most threatening scenario, as chauvinism and prejudice towards "the Other" exceeds the boundaries of the group of hard-core Iranian monarchists. Any sudden regime change in Tehran would encourage a kind of nationalism that more or less would fall into the "Iranist" category as any successor regime – democratically elected or not – would be in search of its "national identity", an identity which would be sought most probably in the pre-Islamic imperial(ist) past. The "Islamist" (means, Shi'ite) variant, on the other hand, is also problematic as this would put the country further into conflict with the surrounding Sunnite regimes, with Iraq posing a special case (and opportunity) for Iranian intervention. Khatemi's "mixed approach", in turn, did not manage to gain wider support. Similar had been the case with his concept of *mardomsālārī* or a "local version of democracy", as younger Iranians have largely lost patience with any experiments of "Islamic democracy" and might opt for the "original" instead – Western European liberal parliamentary democracy.

The issue of "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 which political order will actually emerge in succession to the current

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39. See a website of *Afraz*, available online http://www.afraz.ir, accessed on October 5, 2006.

40. Ibid.

regime in Tehran. Iran's current nuclear ambitions of whatever kind have to be seen within the context of the above referred to unsolved issue of national identity. It is the nuclear issue which is currently instrumentalized by the regime in Tehran, an agenda to which even the various strata of the opposition in and outside the country would 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 is not a "Shi'ite crescent" that is looming over the region but rather the question of Iran's process of "self-finding" process – or similarly floridly, the future for "sword, sun, and lion", the traditional emblems on the Iranian flag…

Si vis pacem, para bellum? [41] – Perspectives and Challenges

In the course of this contribution, I have also tried to argue that in order to interpret appropriately and address comprehensively the issue of Iranian "resurgence" in the Gulf region it would be crucial to pursue a somewhat more *holistic* approach. Similarly, the "issue" of Iran has to be addressed within the context of Iraq, due to the entwined histories of those two countries as well as shared cultural and religious experiences. "Shi'ite crescent" theories are not helpful in this regard. For instance, in terms of the supposedly threatening (since allegedly "decisive") "Shi'ite factor", and contrary to what is usually stated in the media, the 1980-88 war with Iraq was not a "Sunnite-Shi'ite showdown", as Saddam Husayn's armies, for instance, consisted mostly of Shi'ites. This might serve as an eye-opener with regard to the

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41. "If you seek peace, prepare for war", the famous dictum by 4th-century Roman military author Vegetius. It is usually paraphrased in this form (originally, however, *Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*, "Therefore, he who desires peace, let him prepare for war", *Epitoma rei militaris*, Book III, end of prologue).

validity of such lines of thought. Elsewhere[42] 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 referring to a phantom, and gives thus evidence to the total ignorance of the *essential* nature of original Twelver Shi'ism as a rather quietist movement. While policymakers need to take on board 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 also was 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, and historical experience. Thus, 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.

Perhaps to the surprise of the "wider public", Iran's "concerns" are rather "worldly" in nature and have nothing to do with a 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 might appear from time to time in certain Friday sermons in order to mobilize somewhat wider strata of the Iranian populace in times of "crisis" for the regime).[43] Apparently in pursue of a rather long-term political strategy of hegemony over the Persian Gulf region (and subsequently perhaps even over the rest of the Middle East) – based on the "nationalisms" discussed earlier in this paper – Tehran addresses supposedly Shi'ite issues in its dealing with international Shi'ite communities – through the promotion of the

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

43. For futher view on the connection between Iran and the geographical distribution of Twelvel Shi'ites in the contemporary Middle East, Central Asia and on the Indian sub-continent, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiite, accessed on November 5, 2006.

"Iranian model" of a "Shi'ite theocracy" (in spite of the quietist and politically rather non-assertive character of Twelver Shi'ism in history). In the Sunnite world, Iran appears as 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, has specific "security concerns", concerns that should be taken into consideration as they might even increase in significance the more instable and endangered the regime in Tehran feels. Such a *prudent* approach *vis-à-vis* the Islamic Republic – a potential nuclear power – has nothing to do with 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 equaled with that of the bygone Iraqi Baath. Moreover, such an evaluation is not at all to be confused with "regime approval", but rather takes into account the circumstance 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 totally out of question. To the mind of this writer then, the keyword would be "engagement" (especially of an economic kind), rather than further "estrangement".

For instance, in terms of looking into the future, Iran could be co-opted to work together somewhat more closely with the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)[44] – all of them being Arab nations – as well as with the European Union. As Bruno Dupré[45] rightly stated in a recent contribution to *ProliferationNews*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington-

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

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

based bipartisan think tank,

> "[...] for the European Union there is no viable alternative to a negotiated agreement supported by the IAEA [the International Atomic Energy Authority] and UN Security Council. Wild cards will only create wild scenarios. The policy of the EU has been a double track strategy – privileging negotiations while preparing for incremental and reversible restrictive measures - and should remain so. [...T]he EU continues to believe that, beyond sanctions, a multilateral dialogue is essential. Such a suggestion is not actually new. The EC-Iran Trade Cooperation Agreement (TCA) as well as the EU-Iran Political Dialogue have been off and on since December 2002. The last pause in TCA negotiations dated August 2005 after Iran resumed uranium conversion. Despite the nuclear standoff, the EU 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 these initiatives, provided full cooperation with the IAEA is restored and light is shed by Tehran on its past and current activities." [46]

It appears that the current rift between Tehran and "the West" – the United States in particular – is also of a quasi "psychological" nature, as also pointedly stated by Dupré, who tries to address this issue from

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

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 [i.e., France, Britain and Germany]. It is a long process because the damage 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 P5[47] 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 Korea? We can only assume that those at the head of the Iranian Republic who want to avoid complete isolation will prevail."[48]

In the view of this author then, Iran's "fears" and "security concerns", referred to earlier, could be summarized as follows: Number one concern is certainly the survival of the regime, similar to the North Korean scenario. In the case of Pyongyang, the United States had been for a long time reluctant to enter into direct *bilateral* talks. Washington

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47. The five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, i.e., France, Britain, Russia, the United States, and China.

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

has now abandoned that line of thought and has offered what could well be considered as "security guarantees" to the North Koreans, a policy that could also be of interest when discussing a *rapprochement* with the Islamic Republic.

Another long-term concern of Iran, a country which went through a traumatic eight-year long defensive war against its western neighbour, is the revival of Iraq's military power in the mid-range future. The new Iraqi armed forces received (and will continue to do so) modern US-manufactured military equipment, which is a matter of grave concern for Tehran, as it has been denied so far (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 would be unacceptable, as this might spark similar desires among Iran's ethnic Kurds as well. In this point, Iran finds itself in basic agreement with Turkey and Syria, countries which are also home to millions of ethnic Kurds and which thus do not show any interest in an independent Kurdish state.

Another one of Tehran's worries is the nature and future course of the revival of Iraqi Shi'ism, an issue that had been discussed by me in more detail elsewhere.[49] Tehran simply wants to stay in control of direction, as it had been Iran which 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 majority-Shi'ite secular Republic of Azerbaijan, or the Shi'tes in India who appear to be

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

relatively well intergrated 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 might 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 – would thus be against Iran's national interests, all the more that it had been the Iraqi Shi'ite seminaries in Najaf and elsewhere (known in Arabic as *hawzah*) which 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, would only last as long as those allies retain their "usefulness" to Tehran – as often the case in the past with Shi'ite movements elsewhere.

The core issue, however, from the perspective of both the United States and Iran, is the "nuclear issue". On the other hand, Tehran's nuclear program (whatever be 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".[50] 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 Stated was trying to "turn cold" as many other foreign policy hotspots as possible in order to regain 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 US troops in Iraq, aiming at containing, for some time at

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50. See, for instance, Roya Johnson, "Iran's 'Nuclear Nationalism'," *American Thinker*, April 21, 2006, available online at http://americanthinker.com/2006/04/irans_nuclear_nationalism.html, accessed on February 12, 2007.

least, the increasing violence there, too, fits into that picture. At the time of writing, in late January 2007, this author was expecting for the second half of that year a critical situation in US-Iranian relations, in particular because of the "succession question" in both countries (to wit, the upcoming US presidential elections and the health situation of Iran's ailing "Supreme Leader" Khamene'i).

Thus, it is about time to address the "resurgence" of Iran – more convincingly than done in the past – with the traditional instruments of diplomacy and economic incentives – backed by *credible* military and economic might should things go wrong. As a catalyzer may serve the idea that an increase of living standard in Iran would 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 Iranian revolution of 1979, under the bygone Pahlavi dynasty, Iran – aside from Saudi Arabia the largest and most populous country of the Gulf region – has been able to function as a kind of "regional policing force" – although by that time acting in close alliance with the United States. This period was interrupted by the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran War which 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 regime as well as the American involvement in fighting the insurgencies in neighbouring Iraq and Afghnistan have offered new opportunities for Tehran for staging a comeback as a regional power to be reckoned with again. The question to be answered is how a resurgent independently-acting Iran could be integrated into the regional security framework in order to dispel the fears a "hostile takeover" of its Arab neighbours – in particular those with sizable Shi'ite populations that are thought of as "fifth columns".

Within this potentially rather explosive setting, it would be a fatal mistake from the part of Tehran to underestimate the willingness (and military capability) of Washington to resort to a "preemptive strike" against Iran's nuclear facilities. If this scenario holds true, it would be the United States *directly* – not its proxy Israel – that would strike first, mainly in order to reestablish largely lost military "prestige" in the Middle East. The deteriorating security situation in Iraq and in particular the (for the Republicans) negative outcome of the 2006 US-congressional elections seem to have boosted Iranian self-confidence, which might 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 rather to *increase* the number of US troops in Iraq could indeed help to achieve that goal. The difficulties faced by US troops in Iraq in their fight against insurgents are usually seen as encouraging Iran to bolder action in that country. Therefore, Iran's current triumphalism in Iraq might not last long as Shi'ites there (and elsewhere, for that matter) might one day prefer to pursue their *own* particular interests rather than being satellites of Tehran. Within this wider setting, a "surge" of US troops in Iraq – if done so with the *sole* objective of establishing firm control over the "federal" capital Baghdad – might actually be the right thing to do, although I am aware of the fact this is a rather unpopular *minority* view among observers.

Perhaps, however, it is about time to see also Tehran's opportunities in Iraq somewhat more realistically in the light of some of Iran's own domestic problems. There is, for instance, the question of "succession" to the ailing "Leader of the Revolution" (Pers.: *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

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hardline president, Mahmud Ahmadinezhad. However, as already the case with regard to Khamene'i himself, both, Rafsanjani as well as Mesbah-Yazdi, are usually not considered "grand ayatollahs" or *marja's*[51] and thus would lack credibility when claiming to be highest-ranking religious leaders within the Shi'ite hierarchy.

It is likely that "pragmatic hardliner" Rafsanjani would be the most obvious choice – however, not as "Supreme Leader" (this post might be filled with a politically rather insignificant figure of the religious establishment), but rather as successor to President Ahmadinezhad, as that the latter, too, might be compelled to leave the political scene once Khamene'i is no more. In the December 2006 elections to the "Assembly of Experts", the gremium of ayatollahs which, in turn, elects the "Supreme Leader", reformist-backed Mahdi Karroubi and fundamentalist associates of Mesbah Yazdi failed to live up to their expectations. Rafsanjani, the main force behind the armistice agreement that ended the 1980-88 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 the 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", and also 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 Irnian government, he "has more or less run the Islamic Republic for the past 24 years".[52] Rafsanjani (age 72) would be an interesting choice as he wields more power and influence to build bridges to the West

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51. 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 or *marja's*)

52. Paul Klebnikov, "Millionaire Mullahs", *Forbes Magazine*, July 21, 2003, available online at http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2003/0721/056.html (accessed on January 24, 2007).

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.[53]

However, the solution of the apparent leadership crisis in Iran – either in the case of Khamene'i's death or his being declared "incapable" of performing his duties and his replacement by someone else – would not 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 program. "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 US 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."[54]

So far, there seems to be no agreement on whether and when Iran will be able to produce a nuclear weapon or whether Tehran does actually have the intention to do so. In spite of rather nonsensical and irresponsible concerns that such a weapon would be put to "test" by Iran "immediately" in an (ultimately suicidal) attack on Israel, one could nevertheless expect that the possession of a "sufficient" nuclear arsenal

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53. "Rafsanjani urges U.S. to begin thaw in ties", in *ChinaDaily*, May 19, 2005), available online at http://.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-05/19/content_444110. htm (accessed on January 24, 2007).

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

would certainly deter the United States from any further attempts to destabilize Iran, thus making Iran "safe" from US intervention and perpetuating the existence of the regime, a scenario which seems to be Washington's (and Israel's) *real* concern.

It is the view of this writer that Iran would not strike first, unless it is attacked, especially by Israel. Needless to say, that an attack by Israel on Iran would have consequences for the entire region that would be irreversible. As the prospects for the "success" of a US military intervention appear to be rather gloomy, such an event can nevertheless not be entirely ruled out. To the mind of this writer, the current difficulties for both sides (Iran and the United States) to "jump over their own shadow" and to enter into a dialogue are rather "psychological" in nature and characterized by their different experiences of the 1979 revolution and its aftermath. As Rafsanjani has also made clear, Iran would be basically ready to respond (!) to any serious efforts from the part of Washington to improve ties – after a certain face-saving wait-and-see period.[55] 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 would have his way, Washington would 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, would imply the impossible: that both sides would deal with each other as equals – with Tehran as 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 had been 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

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

"[i]t would be a grave and unnecessary mistake to accept uranium enrichment on Iranian soil before has recolved outstanding IAEA questions and built confidence that its nuclear activities are entirely for peaceful purposed. Making such a deal now would not resolve the outstanding compliance problem nor the insecurities that Iran's 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 realized this option, the 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."[56]

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

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