

The Miracle of the New Millennium

Abbas Milani¹

*Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look . . .
Such men are dangerous.
Julius Caesar*

He looks uncomfortable. The room is full of men, some of them clergy, in their distinct attire—long tunics, capes hung over their shoulders, turbans wrapped around their heads; a few have white turbans, others black, indicating descent from the prophet. In a country where archives and genealogical trees are rare and at best only a recent phenomena, where over the centuries marauding tribes and upstart despots have made a sport of erasing memories of the past, and finally, where signs of piety have usually served as profitable social capital, these claims of prophetic descent are hard to fathom. The room has more than its share of those claiming prophetic descent.

He has come to mend fences with some of the ayatollahs who opposed him in the presidential election in 2004. Even today, after many attempts at reconciliation, he continues to have a rocky relationship with these invariably conservative ayatollahs. It is a measure of the fissures within the ruling elite that, unbeknownst to him, someone is surreptitiously filming the meeting. Before long the film was posted on the Internet and became an international sensation. He is visiting Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, a teacher of ethics at the seminary, and an occasional Friday Prayer leader in the city of Qom—till 1979, only a thousand year old town of pilgrims and *madresas*, and since then the

¹ Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University where he also co-directs the Iran Democracy Project at Hoover Institution.

epicenter of resurgent Shiism in Iran. When Qom was a sleepy town, the title of Ayatollah was reserved for a handful of eminent clergy who, after years of study, received permission from another ayatollah to issue religious decrees—*fatwas*—and no less importantly, the right to collect a variety of religious tithes and taxes. As the power and prominence of Qom increased, the word ayatollah too became a title claimed by fiat or bestowed as a political favor by the government.

But Javadi Amoli was a bona fide ayatollah and first made a name for himself when he carried Ayatollah Khomeini's special message to Gorbachev, the new Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In a big Kremlin hall, full of mirrors and ersatz signs of imperial grandeur, the sight of a delegation of Muslim clergy, facing their communist counterparts, with Javadi-Amoli insisting on reading the entire message from Ayatollah Khomeini in Persian, was an absurdity befitting Samuel Becket.

Now, in a much less ostentatious sitting room, the same ayatollah who had delivered Khomeini's message is playing host to Ahmadinejad. Since becoming president, Ahmadinejad too has been writing letters to heads of state—in his case, long meandering letters to the President of the US, the Chancellor of Germany, and the Prime Minister of Italy, epistles ignored by their intended recipients, and full of clichéd criticisms of liberal democracy and of colonialism, full of pomposity and certitude and glaringly bereft of any self-reflection or doubt.

In spite of the air of clumsy haphazardness about him, every detail of Ahmadinejad's look was this time, like all of his other public appearances, crafted to send a message of pious populism, and populism is the last refuge of the political scoundrel. Populist leaders traffic in stereotypes and in claiming to have simple solutions to

complicate problems. They have an unerring instinct for the fears and anxieties, resentments and dreams of the amorphous mass, and as Nietzsche diagnosed, resentment, more than egalitarianism, is the motor of history. With guile and verbal pyrotechnics, populists channel the angst of the “atomized mass”—according to Hannah Arendt the malleable stuff of which totalitarian dreams are made-- into useable political capital. Ever since appearing on the political horizon, more like a meteor than a rising star, Ahmadinejad had shown a natural knack for this kind of populism—sometimes in his words and deeds, other times in his gestures and dress. And his election, as one of his chief lieutenants admitted after victory, was no “accident” or “serendipity” but the result of “two years of complicated, multi-faceted planning” by a coterie of Revolutionary Guard commanders, a handful of clergy, some leaders of the *Basiji*—the militia cum gangs that are the muscle of the regime—and friends and allies of Ahmadinejad from his days as the Mayor of Tehran. The unwieldy coalition was surely helped to victory by the “Spiritual Leader,” Ayatollah Khamenei, who is by law easily the most powerful man in the country. Out of his desire to eliminate Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the other presidential candidate, Khamenei helped secure Ahmadinejad’s victory. The “Spiritual Leader” had been, the whisper went, looking for a docile and malleable president. But he soon realized he got more than he bargained for. By the time Ahmadinejad was entering Ayatollah Amoli’s antechamber, Khamenei’s dissatisfaction with the new president was becoming more and more evident.

That day Ahmadinejad was wearing what had already become his uniform—an oversized jacket (or tunic), baggy pants, and a baggy shirt, all invariably light in color. He never wears a tie; since the Islamic revolution, ties have become an unmistakable sign

of modernity, and of opposition to the regime and its cultural politics. In every society, dress is an acute barometer of change and of cultural taste, often a locus of tension between the “moderns” and the “traditionalists.” In Iran, where the Islamic regime has tried to dictate every aspect of everyday life for men and women, sartorial subversion has become part of the grinding war of attrition, particularly by women, against the regime.

Even Ahmadinejad’s beard is part of his politically pious persona. Islam forbids the frivolous sensation of a razor blade on a man’s face, making stubble or a beard the unmistakable, indeed the requisite sign of piety in men. Islam also forbids any clothing, on men or women, that might betray bodily curvature; curves beget lust, and lust is the enemy of piety. Men and women, Islam believes, are like cotton and fire, and proximity can only fan the sinful flames of passion.

But pulsating beneath the pruderies of Islamic Iran and of the populism of figures like Ahmadinejad is another youthful world of cosmopolitanism, of girls and boys whose mannerisms and behavior in private are similar to the “hippest” communities of the West. Their dress and demeanor, no less than their sexual habits and values, are drawn less from pious Islam than from the norms of the international *avant-garde*.

In fact, the society the mullahs now rule is undergoing something of a sexual revolution. For men and women, bodies have become vessels of protest, sometimes through defiant and self-destructive promiscuity. In a recent study by a Columbia University anthropologist, more than half the married women interviewed in her fieldwork in the more affluent parts of Tehran admit to having extra-marital affairs. The number is particularly startling when we remember that in the Islamic Republic of Iran such affairs are considered capital crimes, punishable by death through. Oblivious to this

reality, Ahmadinejad and his clerical allies continue to preach a cult of prudish sexuality and consider this cosmopolitanism and sexual freedom a form of “cultural imperialism.”

Even his face and body gestures have become tools of his populist piety. Faces, scientists say, share some universal semiotics—expressions that defy borders, transcend cultural localism, and are understood by anyone, anywhere. Sighs of woe, grimaces of fear, and smiles of joy are amongst the six universal signs. But poverty too seems to beget a universal semiotics—wrinkles, deformities or scars that signal not so much age, as long years of suffering and deprivation. If the use of a vernacular is the conscious linguistic tool of populists, facial scars and features are gifts of nature to register amity and shared experience between the poor and their populist leaders. Ahmadinejad’s face is redolent of such registers of past poverty and signs of proletarian solidarity.

The floor of the room where the meeting is taking place is covered with a large Persian carpet. There are no tables or chairs—disdained symbols of modernity in traditional Persian households. Walls, too, are bereft of pictures or paintings. In Islam the depiction of human faces and bodies is hubris and usurping God’s monopoly rights of creation. But when Islamic forces conquered Iran some fourteen centuries ago—or as Islamic scholars never tire of insisting, when Iranians “embraced Islam” and welcomed the Muslim Arab army as “liberators”—those Arab forces discovered paintings and frescoes they immediately declared unsavory and unacceptable. Pictorial representation, as evident in the *bas reliefs* of Persepolis, the twenty five hundred year old capital of ancient Persia, had been an integral part of Persian aesthetic sensibility. That is why scholars and artists often talk of how the soul of Iran is riven between the values of a Zoroastrian and Manichean past and the new Islamic temperament drawn from the

deserts of Arabia. The paisley, the most global of Iranian designs, is said to be the metaphor of this stark dualism. It is the cedar tree, planted by *Zartosth* (Zarathustra), the prophet of the Zoroastrian religion in heaven, bent but not broken under the weight of Islam. It is a metaphor of Iranian defiance and submission, resilience and resistance. But in that unadorned room, there are men who have made a career of only cherishing the Islamic component of this dual identity.

Before entering the room, Ahmadinejad, like everyone else, has taken off his shoes—sandals in the case of most mullahs—leaving them outside the door. Every room is ultimately a possible site for prayer, and shoes, sullied by the dirt of the streets, can render a space unsuitable for prayer. For Ahmadinejad, these rituals and this milieu are familiar. The room is in fact eerily reminiscent of the set for his highly successful presidential campaign film. It shows him walking into a simple room, bereft of any appointments, and then sitting cross-legged in front of a tablecloth spread on the floor. His wife, clad from head to foot in a black chador, or veil, appears only as a ghost of a human being. She and Ahmadinejad and their children sit around the tablecloth. They are eating lunch, and their table manners are similar to most Iranian working class or peasant families, often using hands instead of utensils.

The contrast with the regal and ostentatious campaign film for his opponent, Rafsanjani, could not have been more glaring. Rafsanjani sat around a big oval table with a number of young men and women, all clad in the fashionable attire of the affluent classes of the city. One of the girls, a scarf barely covering her hair, complained about the lack of entertainment for youth; the camera then focused on Rafsanjani, with tears welling up in his eyes. While Rafsanjani was clearly appealing to society's upper crust

and its youth, Ahmadinejad, in all he said and did during the campaign and as a president has been appealing to the society's poor, and their existential economic anxieties and social resentments. He campaigned on ending corruption, and on a more equitable share of the oil wealth. Israel or the question of Iran's nuclear program never figured in his campaign. His ability to understand and connect with the poor has been the result of both his political savvy and his life experience.

He was the child of a poor family in a small village. His father moved the family to Tehran in mid-fifties when Ahmadinejad was but a boy. Oil money was by then beginning to turn Tehran into an El Dorado. Like millions drawn to the city in those days, it did not take long for this economically disenfranchised and devoutly religious Ahmadinejad family to become foot soldiers of the coming Islamic revolution. In the months leading up to that cataclysmic shift, Anthony Parsons, the British Ambassador to Iran, seemed to have the Ahmadinejad family in mind when in a moment of clarity and candor, he told a despondent Shah, "the massive influx into the cities from the rural areas caused by the boom [of the sixties and seventies] created a rootless urban proletariat of dimensions hitherto unknown in Iran, particularly in Tehran. Many of these people had not benefited from the boom. Most of them could only find work in the construction industry . . . Furthermore, the crass materialism which the boom had created had made most people feel insecure . . . In this state of mind, it was natural for them to turn back to their traditional guides and leaders, the religious hierarchy." The revolution was, to no small measure, the result of an uneasy and unlikely alliance between the new angry "rootless poor" and the discontent middle classes. In the presidential election of 2004,

Ahmadinejad, with his “lean and hungry look,” became the favorite son of these still poor, and disgruntled, urban poor strata.

When he entered the room, Ahmadinejad had just come back from his first visit to the United Nations. Save for a brief trip to Austria many years ago, this was his first trip outside Iran. There is something dangerously provincial about him. While in some, this sort of provincialism creates a feeling of cautious and curious humility or inferiority, in him it has begot an arrogant swagger, and a disdain not just for the West but for all its Iranian advocates. Dogma interlaced with false certitude is a sure recipe for disaster, if not delusion. Compounding this arrogance is his belief that God has chosen him to perform His will. His supporters talk of his “genius,” of his “divine wisdom,” and of his role as “the miracle of the third millennium.” When he wrote his meandering letter to President Bush, his admirers spoke of it as a text divinely inspired, something to be studied in every high school in Iran.

Now, faced with an ayatollah who had supported his rival in the election, Ahmadinejad begins to recount his American trip. Allah, he said, was with us on this trip. The ayatollah, nodding in approval, says, “the Lord works in mysterious ways, and that is what these Americans can’t figure out. This world has a master, and it is Allah.” Ahmadinejad concurs, adding, “On the last day, when I was speaking before the Assembly, one of our group told me that when I started to say ‘in the name of God the Almighty and Merciful,’ he saw a light around me, and I was placed inside this aura. I felt it myself; I felt the atmosphere suddenly change, and for those 27 or 28 minutes, the leaders of the world did not blink; when I say they didn’t bat an eyelid, I’m not exaggerating, because I was looking at them. And they were rapt. It seemed as if a hand

was holding them there, and had opened their eyes to receive the message from the Islamic Republic.”

By the time Ahmadinejad made his second trip to the UN, early in 2006, not only his fame and notoriety afforded him a rock star treatment by the Western media, but another key component of his vision of life and politics had become the subject of considerable inquiry and criticism.

As a president, one of his first acts was to have the cabinet sign a covenant with the *Mahdi*, the twelfth Imam in Iranian Shiism,² and its missing messiah. He then had two of his trusted ministers deliver the covenant down a well at *Chamkaran*.

For centuries, *Chamkaran* was but a dry well and a derelict mosque. There had been some *Hadith*—words or deeds attributed to the prophet and his progeny, and next to the Koran considered the most important source of Islamic jurisprudence—indicating that the missing messiah will one day emerge from the well at *Chamkaran*. When he came to power, he spent millions from the public coffers to build roads, and tourist facilities at *Chamkaran* and successfully turned it into a popular point of pilgrimage. The fervor of his messianic faith—what in the political parlance is called *Mahdaviyat*-- hinged on the idea of the return of the *Mahdi*, Shiism’s twelfth imam, believed to have gone into hiding one thousand years ago. The purpose of my administration, he has often said, is to help expedite the return of the messiah. In his second UN speech, he made a reference to this

² Iranian Shiites are often referred to as Esna Ashari, or twelvers; they believe that there have been twelve Imams, all male descendants of the first Imam, Ali, and that the twelfth, the Mahdi has gone into hiding. There are some Shiites who believe only in one Imam, and are called the Alavites, powerful in Syria; those who limit the number to about four are called the Zeydis, and they are an emergent Shiite group in Yemen; the Ismailis, spread around the world believe that the line of Imams died with the death of Ismail, destined to be the seventh Imam who died before he could claim his mantle.

aspect of his vision. Many of the top clergy in Iran have, in recent months, criticized this aspect of Ahmadinejad's politics.

It was a measure of Ahmadinejad's Machiavellian guile, the ironic charisma of his anti-heroic persona, the effectiveness of his populist anti-corruption campaign that in spite of serious constitutional obstacles to substantial presidential power, in his first months in power he amassed much power. In the current constitution, the office of the president holds little power, and moreover he came to power after contested elections clouded by allegations of foul play. Nevertheless he had, in the first months of his presidency more power and relevance than his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, who came to power with a strong electoral mandate. In fact Ahmadinejad has infused the office of the president with more power than it arguably ever had. But his meteoric rise was soon followed by a no less spectacular fall from grace. A number of factors, domestic and international contributed to this demise. It gradually began to dawn on Ayatollah Khamenei and other leaders of the Islamic Republic that Ahmadinejad was becoming a serious liability, and nothing was more emblematic of this problem than his anti-Semitism.

In the few years of the revolution, a series of apparently benign lectures and discussions were held in Tehran. At the center of these discussions was a stridently conservative cleric by the name of Mesbah-Yazdi, and an infamous professor of philosophy by the name of Fardid. Fardid had been a student of German philosophy and a disciple of Heidegger. Like Heidegger Fardid was strongly suspected of harboring an anti-Semite disposition. Like Heidegger, he too both tried to hide the odious nature of his racism in a veneer of complicated political ideas and concepts. Fardid was also a

voracious purveyor and consumer of conspiracy theories. In his paranoid view of the world, Freemason and Jews have for a century conspired to dominate the world. And when Ayatollah Khomeini won power, Fardid, till then a sycophantic a royalist, and an eager theorist of the Shah's "dialectical philosophy" of revolution, and of one-party rule suddenly became not just a devout Moslem, and a passionate advocate of the rule of mullahs as the necessary and anointed prelude to the return of Hidden Messiah. Together with Mesbah-Yazdi—Ahmadinejad's religious mentor-- Fardid helped successfully forge key elements of an Islamic pseudo-fascist ideology, founded on a strident brew of anti-Semitism, Heideggerian philosophy and Ayatollah Khomenei's theory of divinely legitimized rule of the clergy.

And in those days, a little man with a mind darkened by dogma and constrained by the dangerous self-referentially of fundamentalism, a man whose heart was poisoned by the malignant tumor of anti-Semitism was schooled in the ideology forged by Fardid and Mesbah-Yazdi. His name was Ahmadinejad and his reckless threats against Israel, and his criminally negligent denial of the Holocaust are no temporary lapse of words or reason, but rooted in a peculiar critique of modernity and of Judaism, forged by the likes of Fardid. Other aspects of his paradigm of politics, both domestic and international, also contributed to his gradual loss of power.

Since its inception, and for much of the last quarter of century, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been faced with a number of cardinal problems: statism and a planned economy vs. the private sector and market economy; private property vs. public ownership; technocracy vs. piety as a measure of meritocracy; women as chattel vs. woman as equal partners; export of revolution vs. consolidation of power at home;

nuclear power and a full fuel cycle vs. accommodating the international community; fundamentalism (as the belief in the self-sufficient, non-errant, atemporal canonical truth of Shiism) vs. eclectic acceptance of new ideas and changing interpretation of the canon, and finally East vs.

In answering each of these questions, Ahmadinejad has relied on a paradigm that defies the experiences of the Islamic Republic itself, and often tries to revive ideas and practices whose irrationality, or impracticality had been shown long ago. The paradigm has three key components in the realm of international relations. The first key element is the idea of exporting the Islamic revolution and creating a “Shiite revolutionary arc” in the Moslem world. There is much that is shared between the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution in Soviet Union and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. As in the Soviet Union, and the argument of those like Trotsky that the revolution in Russia can only survive and win if it is exported to the rest of the world, and particularly to what he considered the moribund world of capitalism, in Ahmadinejad’s vision, the Islamic revolution in Iran too can survive only if it helps lead the other Muslims in the fight against the weak and declining West. Iran, he argues, must be the ideological leader, military supplier and financial supporter of this international brotherhood (a “Shiite Comintern!”.)

A second corollary of this paradigm is the proposition that on the nuclear issue, only by forcefully continuing enrichment activities, and ignoring Western offers of carrot or threats of stick can the Islamic regime maintain its dignity and achieve its goals. The past Iranian President, Mr. Khatami, and his chief negotiator on the nuclear issue, Mr. Rouhani, according to Ahmadinejad, committed nothing but treason in agreeing to suspend the nuclear program. They showed weakness, he alleges, and got nothing in

return. If Iran continues to pursue its nuclear program, Ahmadinejad and his supporters often declared, the West would or could “do nothing.” A few days after Iran announced that it had enriched uranium successfully, Ahmadinejad and his allies declared, in jingoist jubilation, that “as we said, the West can do nothing,” adding that we must aggressively push forward with all aspects of the nuclear program.

The third component of his foreign policy paradigm was intimately interlinked with the second, and is called, in the jargon of Iranian policy establishment the “Asia Look.” According to this notion, Iran’s future no longer rests with the declining West, but with the ascendant East—particularly China, and India. Multi billion dollar oil and gas agreements with both China and India, and negotiations for the construction of a new pipe line connecting Iran to India through Pakistan, and eventually China will allow Iran to have a rapidly growing market for the country’s oil and gas. Moreover, both countries have nuclear technologies they could share with Iran, and both countries are, based on their past behavior, highly unlikely to “meddle” in Iranian domestic affairs by talking of such troublesome issues like human rights and the democratic rights of the Iranian people. Ahmadinejad was further convinced, and convinced others in the leadership that Russia, with its new more muscular foreign policy and its desire to embarrass the US, and China, with its insatiable appetite for energy, would never allow the passage of a UN resolution against Iran.

Nearly every aspect of this international paradigm has now failed, and with it has caused the demise of its proponent. The passage of two UN resolutions against the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program, and the fact that not only Russia and China did not veto the resolution but joined them, the decision by the Russians to delay the completion

of the Bushehre nuclear reactor, and finally the rising tide of Sunni states, uniting against the rise of the Shiite Iran in the region have all helped underscore the defeat of the Ahmadinejad paradigm.

The gradual grind of these defeats and the embarrassment resulting from his insistence on denying the Holocaust began to chip away at Ahmadinejad's power. The first sign of his decline was an increasingly more vocal chorus of critics who say he not delivered on his campaign pledges to fight corruption or improve the lot of the working classes and the poor. In the last elections for local councils as well as for the powerful eighty-man Council of Experts (entrusted with the task of choosing the next spiritual leader) Ahmadinejad and his allies suffered humiliating defeats.

The counter-attack by his foes and critics began with Hashemi Rafsanjani's decision to publish a hitherto classified letter by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the letter, written in 1988, Ayatollah Khomeini describes the reasons why, after eight years of continuing the war with Iraq, he was left with no choice but to sign a ceasefire agreement with Iraq. The letter explained this exigency by the fact that the Revolutionary Guards had demanded amongst other things nuclear bombs to win the war. The implied message of the letter's publication was clear: Iran had been gradually put in a corner and had no choice to sign a peace agreement with Iraq, and Ahmadinejad's intransigence in the nuclear issue today is likely to lead Iran into a similarly costly and humiliating situation. Ahmadinejad in rebuttal, simply declared that the publication of the letter was an act of treason that only made the enemy happy.

If publication of the letter was the first sign of criticism of Ahmadinejad's policies his dismissive attitude toward the passage of the UN Security Council resolutions against

Iran provided his critics with new ammunition. Ahmadinejad has continued to insist the resolutions are no more than a piece of paper, and should not be taken seriously . But other members of the leadership—from Khamenei to Rafsanjani—insisted that the resolution is in fact very serious and must be treated with utmost urgency and care. The resolution, Rafsanjani declared in a Friday Sermon, will be more damaging than an invasion of Iran. Even after such words of caution, Ahmadinejad continued with his defiant rhetoric. The hostile crowds Ahmadinejad faced recently at college campuses and the mounting parliamentary criticism of his actions show that even Ahmadinejad’s populism can no longer protect him. In the last year, Ahmadinejad has tried to help insure himself against this rising opposition by consolidating his relations with the Revolutionary Guards. Multi-billion dollar no-bid contracts have been given to Revolutionary Guards and their leaders and their companies. But even that has not silenced some in the ranks of the Guards who are also worried about the future of the regime. The website *Baztab*, close to some of the Revolutionary Guards has become increasingly and openly critical of Ahmadinejad. Though the arrest of the fifteen British soldiers deflected, for about two weeks, serious discussion of the consequences of the UN resolutions, and though Ahmadinejad, to the public derision of his critics, tried to reassert himself by declaring that “he had decided to pardon” the sailors, his fall from political grace continues.

What has contributed to Ahmadinejad’s demise has been the near break-down of the Iranian economy. In spite of record earnings from oil, there has a massive flight of capital from Iran, a shrinking private sector, a crisis in the banking sector, an increase on oil dependency and an increase in subsidies paid by the regime. The serious

unemployment situation has not improved, and as the direct result of Ahmadinejad's monumental ignorance of the economy, the Iranian regime is now faced with what economists used to call the incurable problem of stagflation—high inflation rates and rapidly rising prices and a depression-like “recession” or slow-down. So worried are elements within the regime that there is now talk of impeachment, of changing the time of the presidential election and making it concurrent with parliamentary elections thus limiting Ahmadinejad's term of presidency to only two (instead of four) years. A letter signed by more than one hundred fifty members of the parliament boldly questions the ability of the once-Teflon president to steer the ship of state. Under these circumstances, only an attack on Iran can help Ahmadinejad and radical allies save his presidency. For much of the last quarter of century, they have followed, all too well, Shakespeare's advice to, “busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels.” (*Henry IV*, part two, 4:5)

An attack on Iran will not only help the Ahmadinejad cabal consolidate their waning power, but it will also lead to a surge of nationalist support for the isolated regime in Iran. Even in much of the Muslim world, an American attack would elevate Ahmadinejad's status as a hero and martyr among aggrieved Muslims—both Shia *and* Sunni. Such an attack would only help him and his allies' realize their ambition to establish Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. Their support for terrorist organizations would increase. Terrorism, polarization, and sectarian violence would intensify in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Afghanistan, and could begin to engulf Bahrain and even the Shia region of Saudi Arabia, (where most of the country's oil is) and in Oman, where there are new signs of life in the Zeidi Shiite insurgents.

A sustained American bombing campaign might well disrupt Iran's nuclear weapons programs. But the newly consolidated hard-line regime in Tehran would be even more emboldened to openly acquire nuclear weapons, and such a regime would be able to count on a new degree of popular support for the program. A preemptive attack, which would lack international legitimacy, would also prompt Iran to withdraw entirely from the nuclear non-proliferation regime, as some of Ahmadinejad's allies have already threatened, while inducing the crucial international fence-sitters—Russia and China—to back Iran without hesitation.

There is an alternative. Rather than throwing the reactionaries in Tehran a political lifeline in the form of war, the United States should pursue a more subtle approach: In Iraq, instead of giving US soldiers the task of containing, or arresting Iranian agents in the country, demand of the Iraqi government to perform its duties of protecting the country from foreign interference. Moreover, the US should offer to negotiate unconditionally with Iran on all the outstanding issues. Comprehensive negotiations could offer the regime powerful inducements—such as a lifting of the economic embargo and a significant influx of foreign investment and thus jobs. Central to such negotiations must, however, be the issue of the human rights of the Iranian people. An offer of serious, frank discussions with the regime on all of these issues will, regardless of whether the regime accepts or rejects the offer, be a win-win situation for the United States, for the Iranian democrats and for the existing UN coalition against the regime's adventurism. If the regime accepts the offer, anti-Americanism, as one of the regime's most important ideological foundations will have dissipated, weakening the regime's position among the radical Islamists. Such a negotiation will also clearly

undermine the power of the Ahmadinejad and his cabal. If they reject such an offer, again the inner tensions within the regime on the one hand and between the regime and the people of Iran, who overwhelmingly want normalized relations with the US, will increase. The regime's rejection of such talks will also lead to more unity in the UN coalition on more serious sanctions against the regime.

If it is true that an intransigent radical minority of Muslims, taking their cues from the likes of Ben Laden are bent on confronting the West and the secular democracy that comes with modernity, it is also true that only a large, active coalition of Muslim moderates, both Shiite and Sunni, can defeat radical Islam and its *Jihadist* terrorist arm. The battle for the soul of Islam is less between reviving Shiite and a frightened Sunnis, but between the hitherto silent majority of Muslims, keen on a spiritual reading of Islam and *Jihadists* who want to turn Islam into an ideology for terror. That silent majority, in Iran as well as the rest of the Muslim world, is the natural ally of the West, and a foe of Ahmadinejad's form of dogma and adventurism. Prudent American policy must strengthen the position of this majority and of the Iranian democrats, and not weaken it. A new war or the rhetoric of confrontation only helps Ahmadinejad.

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