



*From the Discourse of Democracy to the Discourse of Normalization  
in the Islamic Republic of Iran*

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**Note to the English Version:**

**The following is an English translation of an article originally written in Persian (<http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?/politic/more/12464/>). The primary audience for the article is Iranian, but I hope that non-Iranian readers will find it interesting as well. I would like to thank my colleague who helped translate the article, but did not wish to be named.**

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iranian society has existed in an abnormal state. Consequently, the country's political, economic, social, and cultural structures, as well as its international relations, have been significantly harmed. To embark on a program of progress, Iran needs to adopt a policy of "normalization" which focuses on its national life and the country's international relations. Such a program can guide Iran toward a national reconciliation and an international symbiosis. The most important aspects of this normalization are the relations between state-religion and state-society (including the political opposition), capital and labour, the US and Iran, gender and generations, modernity and tradition, state and ethnic groups, and state and expatriates. Fortunately, the majority of Iranians have become aware of the need for such normalization, and aims to achieve national reconciliation and international cooperation. This majority believes that only a normalized situation can make it possible for Iranians to achieve freedom, justice, welfare, security, and national sovereignty. The currently popular slogan of the state propaganda machine, "national unity and Islamic solidarity," which appears regularly these days on Iranian television, can only become a reality when Iranians attain a multifaceted normalization in their society.

Unfortunately, opposed to the forces who seek normalization, namely the normalizers, are those with high levels of political and military power, as well as extensive religious and ideological influence, who create tension, namely the brinkmen. Using the excuse of returning to the ideals and demands of the Islamic revolution, they try to fossilize today's abnormal environment. These forces, which until recently had united under the banner of opposing the reform movement, are today actively creating tension with the US and have endangered Iran's national security. They use the slogan of "national unity and Islamic solidarity" to buttress their policy of causing tension. This article argues that the greater Iranian society is increasingly seeking to replace the discourse of democracy versus dictatorship with the new discourse of normalization versus brinkmanship. This new discourse is focused on normalizing Iran's international relations, especially vis-à-vis the



US. It is worthy of note that this new discourse belongs to a society which yearns for normalization in all the above-noted areas in which abnormality reigns. But given the dangers facing Iran because of its abnormal relationship with the US, its importance is rising with every passing day, particularly since normalization in this area can be relatively easily attained.

Our aim in discussing the transition from the discourse of democracy versus dictatorship to one focused on normalization versus friction in this article is to draw attention to three key issues. First, in the not-so-distant future, the Iranian people and the government of the Islamic Republic will be compelled to choose between war and destructive confrontation or peace and normalization with “foreign enemies,” especially the US and Israel. While choosing the path of normalization will benefit Iran and Islam, the path of war, which will likely be fought primarily in the air, is very likely to lead to the destruction of Iran. In such a case, radical Islam, which is the main source of friction within and outside the nation, will likely produce more radicalism in Iran’s security-military establishment. A good example of this phenomenon is Iraq, where the forces of religious moderation and democracy have been marginalized, and will likely stay in that position for a long time. Obviously, it is necessary to prevent such a scenario at all costs, and to utilize all means to increase the chances for peace and normalization.

Second, the leaders of the Islamic Republic must pay serious attention to the threats confronting Iran, and to respect the preference of the majority for normalization of their workaday lives, especially in the country’s relations with the US. Third, democratic activists, nationalists, and Islamists with different tastes, both within and outside Iran, have to exercise greater foresight than they did in their approach to the previously dominant discourse on democracy versus dictatorship. In so doing, such forces must base their prescriptions solely on the national interests of Iran. The current reality is that Iran is in a dangerous position and its fate can no longer be placed at the mercy of factional and ideological squabbles. In this article, we shall first outline the nature of this transition, and produce evidence which shows the dominance of the new normalization versus friction discourse. In the second section, we will examine the internal reasons; and in the third section we will consider the external reasons for the dominance of the new discourse. The final section focuses on available options and our responsibility. It is hoped that this article will set the stage for others to responsibly enter this debate.

### ***The Normalization Discourse and Evidence of its Emergence***

During the past ten years, the main dichotomy in the political discourse of Iran under the Islamic government has been between conservatives and reformists. Some have called this a dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship, or between pragmatism and ideology. It was against this backdrop that the discourse on civil society came into its



own. In my opinion, this political juncture and its related discourse is being transformed into a new dichotomy of those who favor normalization with the West, especially the US, and a healthy integration in the international system on the one hand, and those who favor friction and international division on the other. The rise in tensions with the US, which led to the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1737, is among the key signs of the fateful juncture at which Iran finds itself. The increasing gap between the normalizers and brinkmen coincides with rising internal and external tensions regarding Iran.

Specifically, those who favor normalization and unity wish to end the lingering revolutionary fervor within Iranian society. The normalizers yearn for the beginning of a new period in which Iran has become an acceptable member of the international community, and in which it can hope to find its rightful place. These forces, who once preferred democracy to normalization, and who in their views on relations with the West and the US only wanted détente and the reduction of friction, have reached the conclusion today that not détente but normalization must be the first goal in relations with the West. They feel that normalization has to coincide with democracy and precede it in practice. Opposed to this viewpoint are those who feel that friction, isolation, and the increasingly revolutionary fervor in domestic and foreign affairs is the preferred path. Through such a platform, the brinkmen feel that Iran must assume the role of the leader of those countries who work toward international disintegration, opposing the US, and supporting radical Islamists in the Middle East, especially the Shi'a. The reality is that the current dichotomy reflects the most significant contradiction that post-revolutionary Iran has seen within its ranks, but the leaders of the Islamic Republic have not allowed this dichotomy to become a full-fledged national discourse.

The emerging struggle between the reformists (including pragmatists) and the conservatives over normalization versus brinkmanship cannot be seen as a transient phenomenon. On the contrary, this struggle demonstrates the advent of a new discourse whose resolution can only be achieved through normalization with the US or, at the other extreme, war with it (or Israel). Over the past two decades, a struggle between decreasing and increasing tension with the international community, and the US in particular, has existed among various factions in the Islamic Republic. Today, however, this debate has undergone a qualitative shift: as we will describe below, UN Security Council Resolution 1737 against Iran and the preceding defeat of the Iranian reform movement have transformed the factional debates on foreign policy, to a national discourse with significant national consequences.

It is important to note that while the debate on various approaches to reforming the Islamic system or maintaining the status quo used to reside within the Islamic Republic, and thus was controlled by it, the new dichotomy between normalization and brinkmanship has an international character, and is thus also influenced by forces



residing outside Iran, first and foremost among them the “enemies” of the Islamic Republic. For example, even if the domestic advocates of normalization in Iran were to overcome their opponents within Iran, normalization can only take place if the US and Israel also share this wish with Iranians – and they will only back normalization if their interests are protected. Despite this fact, if the advocates of normalization within Iran act swiftly, they will have the opportunity to prevent war. At the same time, there is only one option for achieving normalization and that is an agreement on Iran’s nuclear program. The onus of reaching such an agreement, in the wake of the UN Security Council’s punitive resolutions against Iran, is upon Tehran.

Our main points of reference for the emergence of the new discourse on normalization versus brinkmanship are the pronouncements of current and former leaders of the Islamic Republic. These viewpoints are still not publicized in a transparent way. The inner division of opinion in Iran is carefully hidden under the guise of those who seek a peaceful and compromising resolution to the nuclear crisis versus their opponents, who insist in continuing with the current enrichment policy. The majority of Iranian leaders and the population are in favor of protecting Iran’s rights for enriching uranium for civilian, non-military uses. However, they do not wish to incur irredeemable expenses by exercising this right at the current juncture. Thus, the division between those opposed and those in favor of normalization is becoming starker. The passage of the UNSC 1737 has added to the fervor of these disputes between the normalizers and the brinkmen.

While the advocates of normalization charge their opponents with brinkmanship and endanger the country’s interests with a rash nationalism, their opponents charge advocates of normalization with being pawns of America and Britain. For example, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called the UNSC Resolution 1737 “a useless piece of paper,” and has said that “we are not afraid of sanctions and war.” He has also accused his opponents of using the “empty resolution” for “causing division and for self-aggrandizement,” and for being followers of “America and Britain.” Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi has declared that the resolution is null and void, and has requested the government to continue its enrichment activities, calling it an “Islamic achievement.” Finally, Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, the deputy interior minister, announced that “the time for bowing to the Americans is over.” These types of statements can often be found in the pages of *Kayhan*, *Tar Namay-e Khedmat*, *Tar Namay-e Ansar-e Hezbollah*, and in other conservative newspapers and websites.

Among conservatives, Mr. Ahmadinejad has a special position. As chief executive, while he responds to perceived American threats by harsh words and by demonizing Israel, he has also taken concrete steps to open ways of reducing tensions. His agreement to officially hold discussions with the US about Iraq, his release of the British sailors, his letters to America’s people and president, his offer of a televised debate with President



George W. Bush, and his proposal for the reinstating direct flights between New York and Tehran are among such initiatives. While Ahmadinejad tip-toes between these two personae, a few opponents and even some of his supporters are saying that his belligerent stances are for domestic consumption. For example, the newspaper *Jomhuri Eslami*, a conservative publication, while warning against the dangers of Ahmadinejad's strident views on uranium enrichment, berates him in this fashion: "You might be making such a spectacle of the nuclear issue to cover some of the shortcomings of your government."

In sharp contrast to the brinkmen, the reformists, pragmatists, nationalists, and democrats advocate a peaceful resolution to the nuclear dispute. They want to get economic and security concessions from the US and Europe, they want to prevent an unwanted war, and they wish to lead the country toward normalization. For example, two former presidents, the reformist Mohammad Khatami and the pragmatist Akbar Rafsanjani used strident language to describe their views of the UNSC Resolution 1737 and have respectively called it "very dangerous" and "destabilizing"; Mr. Rafsanjani has also called it "ominous." Mr. Khatami, while condemning radicalism, has expressed his hope that Saddam's fate "be a lesson for smaller Saddams who continue his path."

In recent months, some of the key figures of the Executives of Construction and the reformists such as Hossein Mousavian, who was formerly Ambassador to Germany and close to Rafsanjani, and Mohsen Aminzadeh, the former deputy foreign minister under Khatami, have spoken candidly about the impact of the UNSCR 1737. Aminzadeh even recommends that the nuclear negotiations should be handled by the reformists who are now out of government. Mousavian (who has been charged with passing information to a foreign embassy), more indirectly, had a similar suggestion. A recent editorial in the conservative *Jomhuri-Eslami* newspaper has also advised Ahmadinejad to cease harping on the nuclear issue. The active diplomacy of Ali Larijani, secretary of the National Security Council, can also be seen as an expression of the existence of a less radical and more solution-oriented group high up in the conservative ranks.

### ***The Internal Reasons and Conditions of the Normalization Discourse***

The advent of the normalization discourse has its roots in domestic and foreign developments, some of which have existed from the beginning of the revolution. For example, antagonism toward the outside world, especially the US, was the main impetus behind the 1979 revolution, the hostage crisis, the war with Iraq, and the bloody domestic political battles that immediately followed the revolution. After the cutting of ties with the US, the ending of the war with Iraq, and the elimination of political "outsiders," the Islamic Republic entered a "constructive" phase whose flag-bearers were moderate pragmatists, affiliated with the Executives of Construction, which was led by President Rafsanjani. This group had expended almost all its energy on developing the national



economy, and succeeded in implementing a large number of projects. But because of its inability to normalize relations with the US, despite its efforts for reducing tension and toward economic (though not political) normalization, the pragmatists were unable to sustain economic growth. It was during Mr. Rafsanjani's presidency that the US imposed its most stringent economic sanctions on Iran, and closed the door on many opportunities available to the country.

While the rise of friction with the US was one of the main factors in the economic underachievement of the Executives of Construction, the latter's mismanagement and corruption also handicapped the creation of a healthy and balanced economy. In addition, the pragmatist's neglect of the democratic demands of the middle class, the social justice needs of the poor, and the security guarantees sought by the private investors, the sporadic nature of the privatization drive, and the inability to foster a generally pro-development environment were among other reasons for the defeat of the development plans of the Executives. At the same time, allowing security and intelligence forces to suppress and assassinate those with different views both inside and outside Iran worked to increase tension between the Executives and the outside world, and served to undermine their political legitimacy. It was in this environment that the reactionary opposition to the Executives became effective, and this paved the way for the rise of "reformists."

At the end of the "construction" period, while the government managed to deflect attention from its opposition to the US, the middle class made opposing dictatorship their main platform, and by tactfully using the disadvantaged classes' slogans, they spawned a major movement whose main achievement was the election of Mohammad Khatami on a platform of political development. Thus, the discourse of democracy versus dictatorship, which had been spawned by the revolution, re-emerged. This happened at a time when the Islamic Republic's isolation from the outside world, driven by "serial murders" at home and the killing of opposition figures abroad, had reached its apex after the Mykonos affair in Germany. The situation was made worse by the US sanctions against Iran. The lingering isolation of Iran became hidden under the shroud of the new president's call for dialogue among civilizations.

The reformist camp also failed in achieving its objectives. The main reason for its defeat was its insufficient grasp of the importance of normalization to its attempts at democratization. Its neglect of Iran's problems with the US and Israel were also among the main reasons for the reformists' failure in delivering their promises. The reformists did not even listen to public opinion, which, as has been shown by a few reformist pollsters, was overwhelmingly in favor of normalization with the US. This, among other developments, showed that the reformists' intellectually-based discourse was inattentive to public demands. Another mistake of the reformists was their attempt at weakening the



Executives, which was tantamount to indirectly boosting the conservatives. The disputes between the reformists and the Executives meant that the former, in their exclusive focus on political development, mostly ignored the need for economic development, despite numerous areas of commonality between the two camps. Thus, the reformists' attempt at discrediting the Executives further undermined both currents, and specifically deprived the reformists of the support of a capable group.

From a different position, the secular opponents of the system, who had been excluded by the reformists, further exacerbated the division between the reformists and the Executives. The secular opposition also focused solely on democratic change and paid no attention to the US-Iran conflict. This meant that instead of focusing on normalization versus brinkmanship, the social discourse remained focused on democracy versus dictatorship. As a result of its neglect for the need for normalization, along with a shaky leadership and a lack of solid plans, the reformist movement became excessively ideological and exclusionary, and thus did not pay enough attention to the economy and the rise of injustice, poverty, and unemployment. At the same time, excluding diverse ethnicities in Iran, women, and the youth from management positions further undermined the reformists' credibility. Perhaps the most significant problem facing the reformists, apart from the inattention to normalization with the international community, was their lack of belief in truly free elections. They only sought freedom for their own ilk, and thus the drive for democracy was not inclusive of diverse perspectives. The conflict between an Islamist ideology -- even in its reformist guise -- and modern liberal democracy meant that the reformists' democratization agenda was stillborn.

At the same time, the obliviousness of middle class reformists and government-backed intellectuals to social justice demands of the working classes and the economic demands of the wealthy strata meant that a rift was created between these three classes, which disabled a national unity movement that would include all of them. By exploiting this rift, conservatives managed to discredit the reformists' assets, including the press. Thus, the ideological focus of the reformists, which Rafsanjani had attempted to make pragmatic, became a tool in the hands of conservatives who wished to take Iran back to the ideological fervor of the revolution and war years. The distance between the working classes and the reformists caused them to be tactically co-opted by the conservatives, and this was another reason for the success of conservatives and the defeat of the reform movement.

The upshot of these developments boosted the political fortunes of the conservatives, who had begun a well-designed and aggressive campaign against the reformists. By exploiting the constitution's contradictions, especially the Leader's paramount position, and by abusing other levers of power such as the Guardian Council, the Baseej militia, the Revolutionary Guards, security forces, the Friday prayer leaders, and the mosques'



networks, among others, the conservatives managed to block the reformists' press freedom bill, their aim to increase the president's authority, and their plan to reduce the veto power of the Guardian Council. The Expediency Council under Rafsanjani could have come to the reformists' aid, but because of the rift that had developed between him and radical reformists, Rafsanjani effectively left the field vacant for the conservatives. Most importantly, the conservatives did not allow the reformists to think about normalization with the US or to embrace a more inclusive free elections agenda, which would go beyond "insiders." Unfortunately, the reformists themselves did not actually believe in either of these two key initiatives.

At the same time, the chief mistake of the secular opponents of the system was their opposition to normalization with the US and their boycott of the election, which worked in favor of the conservatives. These groups still believe that an opening to the US and taking part in elections will work against any reform of the system from within. Similar to the reformists, these groups forget that no country has ever managed to build a democracy in the absence of relations with the US and free and fair elections. The US will not allow an anti-American model of democracy to take root anywhere in the world, while dictators use this type of US pressure to suppress their democratic opponents. As I have explained elsewhere, while relations with the US are a necessary condition for democracy, it is not a sufficient condition. Free elections, diversifying the oil-based economy and religious moderation are among the prerequisite factors for Iran's democratization. One of the main results of neglect toward these realities was the ninth presidential elections, which led to the victory of the rigidly ideological conservatives and the intensification of antagonism with Israel, the US and the West. That election handed power to radical individuals from the security-military establishment, thanks to the extensive boycott by the democratic and nationalist forces.

After eight years of struggle between reformists and conservatives, the advocates of brinkmanship and dictatorship won, and thus the democracy discourse was dealt a fatal blow. The ninth presidential elections empowered forces which have nothing in common with the reformists or the Executives, except in preserving the system. Unlike their legal opponents, however, the current group in power is focused on unifying the Islamic movements against the West and Israel, promoting an artificial nationalism, and increasing Iran's hard power. These forces, inattentive to the small achievements of the reformists in the foreign policy area, and causing friction between Iran and the international community, have painted an ugly picture of Iran before the world, enabling the regime's foreign opponents to drag Iran's nuclear dossier before the UNSC, and to impose UNSCR resolutions on Iran. Calling the Holocaust a "myth" and organizing an international conference in Tehran to prove this, voicing the slogan of "wiping Israel off the map," paving the path for the hidden Imam's second coming to take over the world, cooperating with radical Islamists in the Middle East and anti-American governments,



and remaining rigid on the issue of uranium enrichment without considering the international environment are among these irrational approaches.

These developments have resulted in the rise of the normalization discourse in place of the prior discourse on democracy. The relative unity of reformists and the moderates against the conservatives, their successful cooperation in the 2007 Assembly of Experts and municipal elections, as well as their joint stance on the nuclear issue are among the key current trends. The improved position of Rafsanjani (though without an increase in his power) has led to an agreement between the reformists and the moderates to focus on normalization with the US and the Western world as opposed to building the imaginary democracy of ten years ago. They have also tried to create a more open environment for elections. The conservatives, in response, have intensified their efforts toward creating tension, and thus the main dichotomy is now centred on normalization versus brinkmanship. Therefore, for the first time after the revolution, the main social discourse in Iran reflects the main contradiction within the system, which revolves around normalization with the outside world, especially with the US.

### ***The External Reasons and Conditions of the Normalization Discourse***

The UNSC resolutions are the main causes of the current antagonism between forces for normalization and brinkmanship. These resolutions have acted as a wake-up call for the government, and have caused it to take previous threats more seriously as well. UNSCR 1737, in particular, has hit both reformists and conservatives like a sledge hammer and has forced them to move beyond slogans and to think seriously about declaring their stance vis-à-vis the West and Iran's place in the international community. UNSC resolutions are alarm bells which, if unheeded, can lead to the Iraqification of Iran in a different form. For example, the 1737 Resolution demands that all countries cease cooperating with Iran's nuclear program, and it has frozen the assets of companies and individuals who cooperate with Iran's nuclear and missile programs. The resolution has warned Iran that failure to suspend uranium enrichment will lead to new sanctions on Iran, based on Article 41 of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

UNSCR 1747 has put these threats into practice. It includes sanctions on Iran's arms exports, and it calls other countries to suspend their commercial ties with Iran. At the same time 28 individual and legal entities will face severe travel restrictions and a freezing of their assets. The resolution has specifically targeted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the 80 year-old Sepah Bank. The next resolution will certainly expand the reach of these sanctions. These resolutions are highly damaging blows to Iran. With these resolutions the UNSC has announced to the world that a strong Iran is a danger to international peace and must be weakened. This wrong-headed and anti-Iran idea of "a strong Iran is a dangerous Iran," was first fed to the US by imperial Britain, then to the



UN by the US, and now to the world by the UN. Imperial Britain wanted to keep Iran weak to protect the “jewel in its crown,” India. The fact that Iran has not initiated any hostility toward any state in its region in the last 250 years, even when it was at its strongest, is conveniently ignored.

Another reason that makes the normalization discourse significant is the erroneous thinking, among Iran’s enemies and its naïve friends alike, that in the current environment, with Saddam Hussein’s and Taliban’s departure and the rise of militant movements in Palestine and Lebanon, as well as Iran’s progress in nuclear research and missile technology, the country’s power is increasing. Based on this perception, Iran’s enemies recommend that the US attack Iran to destroy or degrade this increasing power, while Iran’s “friends” counsel the Bush administration to enter negotiations with this “rising power.” The Bush administration, meanwhile, has primarily listened to advocates of war. In reality, while Iran may be powerful compared to the smaller countries in the region (even though they enjoy the support of the world’s major powers), in comparison to the major powers in the region and to world powers, the country remains a third-rate power. Unfortunately, Iran has the veneer of power and this is attributable to its big mouth and to the changing roles of Iran and the Arab world in the past three decades.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Iran played an economic role in the region and worked toward global homogenization. At that time, it was the Arab world which was militaristic and worked toward international disintegration. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran and the Arab world changed places. Iran increasingly focused on international disintegration, militarism, and supporting revolutionary anti-western forces, while the Arab world focused on economic development and worked toward international homogenization. So advanced is this trend today that Israeli/Jewish investment in the Arab side of the Persian Gulf region is rapidly rising. In contrast, Iran adopted a militaristic posture and claimed to be the leader of the Muslim world, while espousing radical views and parading its military might. It seems that Iran has become like North Korea: beneath the veneer of might, the domestic and international position of the country have eroded. In reality, Iran is not in a good economic, technological, and military position, and that is precisely why the region surrounding it has experienced extreme dislocation and instability. This is because, as history has shown, whenever Iran has been strong, it has brought stability to the region that surrounds it.

The changing roles of Iran and the Arab world have caused two other developments in the region. First is the increasing closeness of the Arab world with the US, Israel, and Europe, and Iran’s confrontation with these new allies, especially with the US. As a result, the fault lines of political conflicts shifted from Arab-Israel antagonism to Iran-Israel antagonism. Secondly, increasing tension between Sunni and Shia sects has brought Iran and the Arab world into more overt antagonism. The US, especially after its invasion of



Iraq, having learned from the anti-Israel position of the Arab world in the 1970s, is seeking to sow discord between the Iranians and the Arabs. By fanning antagonism between the Sunni and Shia, the US wishes to stem anti-Americanism among Arab countries by deflecting it toward Iran. It is also worthy of note that the recent sanctions have targeted Iran, not Islam, in much the same way that the US invasion of Iraq destroyed that country, while actually strengthening Islam. The rising power of Islam and Sunni-Shia discord will ultimately weaken Iran and strengthen the Arabs.

In any potential future conflicts, the Sunni Hamas movement in Palestine, and the Shi'a in Lebanon and Iraq will not support Iran, because they are ultimately Arabs. The system of religious rule in Iran, which is the creation of Iranian Shi'a, does not enjoy a broad following in other countries, including among the Lebanese Hezbollah. They are not seeking a religious government. It is not without reason that Iran's main opponents in its region are Muslim states, while its main allies are non-Muslim states, a reality which the Islamic Republic is loathe to admit. The combination of these factors has created an antagonism between Iran and the world. Israel has succeeded in turning its own struggle with Iran to America's struggle. And the US, in turn, has intelligently turned this struggle to one between Iran and the world. The leaders of the Islamic Republic must rapidly extract Iran from the current dangerous situation. Otherwise, Iran, more than ever before, will become weak and suffer irreparable damage.

### ***Available Options and Our Responsibility***

Post-revolutionary Iran has developed and continues to exist under abnormal circumstances. This article has tried to show that to end this unacceptable situation, Iranian society has exchanged the debate on democracy versus dictatorship with normalization versus brinkmanship. This article has focused on Iran-US relations because of this topic's vast importance to the broader normalization discourse in Iran. While the US and Iran have managed to maintain a neither-peace-nor-war scenario, the current regional environment, especially the condition of Iraq, Iran's nuclear dispute with the international community, among other factors, have created a situation where a final decision must be made to resolve Iran-US differences. Otherwise, the danger of destructive confrontation will become real. While war with the US will set Iran back for decades, peace can help Iran in all spheres, and by extension the Middle East.

Specifically, if Iran fails at creating normal, if not friendly, relations with the US (and Israel), three outcomes are possible. First would be the Iraqification of Iran, which cannot be ruled out. If this were to happen, it would take the form of heavy air bombardments rather than a land invasion. At the minimum, the US might wish to reduce Iran's power. In a second scenario, Iran will turn into another Cuba or North Korea, embarking upon a long-term isolation. This is less likely given Iran's energy resources and its strategic



significance to the US. Finally, it is possible that Iran will experience a revolution which, in the absence of a unifying leadership, could sink Iran into internal chaos as well as ethnic and political strife. This option is possible, though not in the foreseeable future as the Iranian people are not in a mood for another revolution anytime soon. The outcome of any of these possible developments will not be positive for Iran.

On the other hand, if Iran succeeds in creating normal relations with the US (and Israel), again three scenarios beckon. In the first scenario, Iran, like Egypt, will become a client state of the US and function more or less like it did before the revolution. Yet this scenario will not last for the same reason that the Shah's dictatorship did not, and for the same reason that the continued dictatorship of the current system is unsustainable, even in the presence of relations with the US. Another scenario, however unlikely, is a velvet revolution in Iran. In countries where velvet revolutions have succeeded, the reigning systems had no credibility and the church played an important role in galvanizing opposition. Yet these two factors exist in opposite form in Iran. Islam, for example, is the ideology of the theocratic system. Finally, in the best scenario, Iran can become like South Korea, in which political reform can take place without destroying social and economic structures.

While each of the latter three scenarios are preferable to the former three, the ideal of replicating South Korea's experience will be the dominant hope for the current period in Iranian history. The increasing power of the military in Iran has major similarities to the dominant position of the South Korean military in 1980, which was the year in which their system began its political reform. The difference that exists, to be sure, is that the Korean military was more disciplined. For this scenario to become a reality there is a need for normalizing relations with the US and creating discipline in the government sector. To embark on South Korea's path, which is a model for semi-democratic sustainable development, it is necessary to institutionalize free elections gradually, which demands building new institutions. The most significant changes are modifying the constitution, recognizing political forces beyond the current system, and creating a parliamentary system in which coalition governments become a possibility. Transforming the Iranian economy and diversifying it away from oil dependency, the creation of new industries, which will be mostly knowledge-based, and investing in employment-creating micro enterprises in all national arenas can all serve to reduce poverty and expand social justice.

In the final analysis, what will determine whether Iran can embark on South Korea's path is the extent to which the Iranian Islamists who are now in power can generate innovative reform in political Islam. The political elite of the Islamic Republic have thus far not been able to create a healthy balance between political Islam and a national discourse in Iran. For example, Rafsanjani courageously diluted the Islamic components of the



Republic as he focused on expediency; Khatami linked republicanism to the people's will and Islamism to the religious leadership and aimed to create peace between the two; Ahmadinejad has emphasized both right-wing Islamist tendencies, and an extreme nationalism. All three men have failed to bring Iran and Islam into a more comfortable or stable relation.

Specifically, as I have noted in numerous previous publications, the Islamic Republic began its life with an "Islam-Islam" slogan, and later for various reasons revived Iran and entered the "Islam-Iran" phase in which Islam continued to hold sway over Iran in the state ideology. Moving into the construction phase under Rafsanjani, the "Iran-Islam" phase began, during which time the national interest was for the first time viewed as taking precedence over Islam. This trend continued in the Khatami years and the weight of Iran became even greater vis-à-vis Islam. With the defeat of the reform movement, however, this trend stopped and did not lead to an expected "Iran-Iran" phase. Entering this phase, which if not channelled properly has the potential to lead to fascism, continues to face formidable obstacles in the Islamic Republic. With the ascendance of radical Islamists in the executive branch of government, a special mixture of "Iran-Islam," akin to a radical Shi'a-Iranian nationalism, has been promoted.

The decline of reform during the "Iran-Islam" period has added to the appeal of "Iran-Iran" for reformists and the youth. This has happened to the extent that many of them are today opposed to the meddling of religion in the state, and even those who do not directly advocate a separation of religion from politics are proposing a new leadership council or the elimination of the post of religious guardianship of the government. At the same time, while Iran becomes increasingly dominant in the "Iran-Islam" mix, there is increasing danger that requires saving Iran as a country and Iranians as a people. It is precisely for this reason that the yearning for normalization with the world is more salient than ever before. It is a fact that if there is a war, Iran will become destroyed rather than Islam. Iran, as a country, can be irreparably damaged, while Islam, as religion, with adherents across the world, cannot be destroyed with military force. For example, as noted above, the US-led war on Iraq destroyed that country but actually bolstered Islam. Even the clergy, when they think about a possible war between Iran and the US, think about Iran, not about Islam. That is why the normalization discourse is based on a national, "Iran-Iran" identity, and not an Islamic or even "Iran-Islam" formulation. Therefore, those forces who cause tension and are opposed to normalization and those who impose conditions for normalization, are anti-nationalist and work toward weakening Iran.

It is important to note that on the question of relations with the US, Iranians are divided into various groups. One group advocates direct US meddling in the internal affairs of Iran, and supports getting US help in deposing the Islamic regime, even if it comes with a US war against Iran. These are US lackeys or political opportunists who have an



instrumental view of the US. This same group is likely to become a tool of foreigners. The other group are those who oppose any type of positive or negative US intervention in Iran. This group, who can be seen as the US' enemies, are not attentive to the realities of today's world, and can endanger Iran's national interests with this enmity and brinkmanship. In between the lackeys and enemies of the US, there is a group who have a realistic view of current circumstances and Iran's interests. This group hopes to protect Iran's national interests while being attentive to the interest of the US and other countries. This group can be best described as the advocates of normalization. At the present time, this group is in search of a peaceful resolution of the crisis between these two countries.

The experience of the past 27 years has shown that normalization will not be possible unless all Iranians, both religious and secular, including reformists, nationalists, democrats, seekers of justice, and those focused on the country's independence, sympathise and cooperate with each other. In the current environment there are only two options: advocating war or advocating peace. The imposition of any kind of condition on normalization is tantamount to advocating war. Unfortunately, the reformists and the pragmatists are half-hearted in their call for normalization, while sowing friction still lingers in their approach. If they do not become 100 percent convinced that normalization is the right way forward, they will face defeat again. Fortunately, not all conservatives are seeking to increase tensions and are seriously attentive to Iran's interests. The drive for normalization is based on domestic and international demands, which are, especially in the latter's case, beyond the control of the government in Iran. This reality enhances the probability of normalization, and if Iranian leaders focus on normalization as the core of their platform, they can be effective in domestic and foreign spheres alike.

What will determine the fate of the normalization discourse is the cooperation between forces outside the Iranian state with those on the inside who favor normalization. The unification of these forces and all those whose hearts beat for Iran around the slogan, "first normalization, then enrichment" can be an effective new start in the direction of national and international reconciliation, which are the two key demands of the Iranian people today. The slogan of "national unity, Islamic solidarity" can only be attained if the Iranian people can reach their demands for normalization. The prerequisite for this development is the rapid normalization of relations with the US and Israel. If the advocates of brinkmanship (who include US lackeys and enemies) beat the defenders of normalization, Iran's fate will come to resemble Iraq or North Korea, or it will be beset by a new revolutionary turmoil. In such a scenario Iran will suffer irreparable damage and will not be able to implement internal and external normalization for decades to come. To prevent this undesirable outcome, the only possible way is the victory of the normalizers over the brinkmen.

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American Iranian Council

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مشوق تغییر از طریق گفتگو و درک بهتر

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