response, the Iranian ambassador to the UN, Gholamali Khoshroo, condemned the Washington interference as a "preposterous example" of US bullying tactics and accused it of having "lost every shred of moral, political and legal authority and credibility in the eyes of the whole world." 1

Washington's interventionist approach indeed enabled Tehran to label the protests as foreign-led and to castigate the American and Israeli leaders as the enemies of the Iranian people. Rhetoric aside, the conservative opponents of the moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, had a hand in the protests and exploited the protesters' grievances. The Islamic regime soon quelled the unrest at the cost of dozens killed and hundreds arrested. The whole episode, whose importance was exaggerated by the US and its regional allies, demonstrated Washington's misjudgment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Islamic regime. This was not the first time that the regime had to deal with domestic disturbances, foreign intervention, and a poor understanding of its nature. The regime has proved to be more resilient and at the same time vulnerable. It has oscillated between its religious legitimacy and pragmatic policies.

The central concern of this book is to explore and analyze this oscillation over the last four decades and the reasons for it. In so doing, it focuses on the evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in its domestic and foreign policy settings in changing regional and international contexts. It also offers an analysis of the salient issues and developments that enabled the founder of the Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to implement his unique vision of a Shia theocratic order. While this order continues to be governed by his legacy, it has sufficiently reinvented itself to endure and survive numerous interlinking internal and external challenges.

The Context over Time

The Islamic Republic of Iran has experienced trials and tribulations ever since its inception, following the momentous Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. The revolution was remarkable in many ways. It was a mass uprising of unprecedented scale and social breadth in modern history, even as it predated social media. It began with the aim of reforming the rule of pro-West Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in order to transform Iran into a constitutional monarchy. However, it ultimately delivered a new Islamic type of government under the leadership of the Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, who emerged as the most high-profile political opponent of the Shah. At one level, the revolution inaugurated a dramatic departure from the past by replacing a secular monarchy with an Islamic government. At another level, however, it merely perpetuated a political culture of authoritarianism that had underpinned Iranian politics for most of the country's 2,500-year-long history. In short, one form of autocracy—the Shah's secular monarchy—was merely substituted with another—Khomeini's modern revolutionary Islamic theocracy. The transition altered Iran's domestic and foreign policies in dramatic ways. It resulted in the severance of ties with the United States, Iran's major sponsor under the Shah, which Khomeini demonized as a "hegemonic" and "evil" world power. The Iranian Revolution ushered in a new Islamic government that, from its inception, has challenged the prevailing norms of the regional and, indeed, the global order.

The Islamic system of governance that the revolution ultimately established was deeply informed by Khomeini's particular, politicized interpretation of Twelver Shia Islam, the dominant sect in Iran but the minority vis-à-vis the Sunni sect that predominates in most other states in the Muslim world. Khomeini promoted his interpretation of Islam as the most authentic and applicable under contemporary national and international conditions. He regarded it as the most conducive instrument for creating an Islamic government that could give full expression to the supreme will of God, and to the necessarily subordinate will of the people, in the contemporary world. Khomeini also believed that his interpretation of Islam alone could create a polity capable of serving humanity to the highest standard—which for him could only mean an Islamic standard. For him, there were only two possible ideological positions: Islamic and un-Islamic, with nothing in between or beyond. He pronounced that his Shia theological paradigm, which some of his followers subsequently
promoted as *Islām-e naaabi-e Mohammad* (the quintessential Islam of Prophet Mohammad), stood above all other interpretations of the faith, but he nonetheless called for pan-Islamic solidarity, including from Sunni coreligionists.

Khomeini desired to create an Islamic policy that would be durable in a changing modern world. To achieve this, he adopted a two-dimensional approach to Islamic government: *jiḥādī* ("combative") and *ijtihādī* ("reformist"). The former was to focus on the Islamization of politics and everyday life, and the latter to apply a novel interpretation of Islam based on independent human reasoning; to the degree necessary to forge a strong, modern Islamic Iran. He drew on an ideological interplay between the two dimensions in the context of a broader rhetorical framework that centered on the struggle between *mostaʿżafīn* (the “have nots,” or the “oppressed and downtrodden”) and *mostakbarīn* (the “haves,” or “arrogant oppressors”). Although Khomeini never endorsed Marxist thought, his dichotomization of the social strata rhymed with the Marxist division of social classes in capitalist countries: between the ruling bourgeoisie and oppressed proletariat. To legitimize the construction of his new Islamic Republic, he emphasized the empowerment of the *mostaʿżafīn* over the *mostakbarīn* by an *ijtihādī* interpretation that combined diverse and earthly themes from Islamic theology and jurisprudence. As Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic from 1979 until his death on June 3, 1989, Khomeini oversaw the establishment of an Islamic political paradigm that has guided the management of Iran under his successor Ayatollah Khamenei and the successive elected Islamic governments and that continues to shape Iranian politics to this day.

Khomeini’s transformation of Iran along these lines challenged and even threatened the US geopolitical dominance that had prevailed in the oil-rich and strategically significant Middle East under the so-called *Pax Americana*. Prior to the revolution, Iran itself had acted as a critical pillar for this US policy under the Shah. The advent of the Islamic Republic not only alarmed the United States, which lost a critical ally in the region, but also caused deep ideological, political, and security concerns for many neighboring Arab states, which feared the Republic would embolden Shia and other minorities to rise up across the region. While Khomeini initially played down his Shia sectarian allegiance in favor of a pan-Islamist stance, his radical political Islamism was deeply rooted in Twelver thought and revolutionary rhetoric, with a call for the export of the Iranian Revolution in support of the oppressed peoples of the world. The revolution also jolted the Soviet Union to an awareness of political Islam.

Never before had a political leader as ideologically driven, defiant, and popular as Khomeini burst onto the world scene to lock horns with a superpower like the United States while loudly denouncing another, the USSR. Khomeini shunned the United States in particular, but he had no time for its “Godless” communist global rival either, condemning the December 1979 Soviet invasion and decade-long occupation of Afghanistan as “socialist imperialism.” Iran was no longer a compliant actor for an international superpower but rather a resistant and independently transformative force. Khomeini’s defiance injected a new catalyst for global political realignment that alarmed regional ruling elites and the United States. The rise of the Ayatollah was to shake the post–Second World War Pax Americana at its foundations in the Middle East—with a dramatic and lasting impact on regional geopolitical dynamics.

The US not only was suspicious of the forces that had toppled its Pahlavi ally but also saw Khomeini’s political Islamism and Islamic system of governance as repugnantly fundamentalist; a view that intensified during the “hostage crisis.” On November 4, 1979, a group of Khomeini’s militant student supporters invaded the American embassy in Tehran and took dozens of diplomats and employees hostage. Their demands were the extradition of the Shah from the US, where he had been admitted for medical treatment, to face trial in Iran for crimes against the people. After thirty-seven months, unable to rescue or negotiate the release of the hostages, Washington cut off all relations with Iran, imposed unprecedented sanctions on the country, and condemned the new order in Iran, which was becoming increasingly repressive as Khomeini moved to consolidate his power at the cost of thousands of lives.
Iran's erstwhile ally also decided on a policy of backing whoever opposed the new Islamic regime, including Israel, which was alarmed by Khomeini's call for the destruction of the "Zionist state" and which set out to undermine his Islamic order in whatever way available. Iraq, Egypt, and the Arab monarchies, all of which shared American and Israeli concerns, adopted the same approach to Iran. The Islamic Republic thus found itself immediately isolated. The US sought to shore up Pax Americana not only by strengthening its strategic partnership with Israel but also by increasing arms sales and military assistance to anti-Iran Arab states, especially in the Gulf. Iran's main regional Sunni rival today, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was selected as Washington's main regional counter to the newly militant Iran.

In its determination to marginalize Iran, the US even proved willing to aid its erstwhile foe, the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. With the Shah no longer an obstacle to his quest for regional supremacy and the country engulfed in postrevolutionary turmoil, the Iraqi leader saw his opportunity to invade. The Gulf Arab states, plus Egypt and Jordan, backed Iraq financially and logistically on a large scale. In Syria, the ruling Arab socialist Ba'th party under Hafez al-Assad supported Iran as much out of strategic interest as out of their schismatic dislike for their cousin Ba'athists in Iraq. Iraq's attack on Iran in mid-1980 ignited a bloody and costly war that lasted eight years and inflicted terrible devastation on both sides, resulting in massive loss of human life and widespread damage of infrastructure that has had a lasting impact on both countries' people.

During the war, however, the US ceased to look on Saddam Hussein as a repressive dictator hostile to the West and came to regard him as a useful pawn or even potential ally against Khomeini's Iran. The US assisted him in the war against the Islamic Republic primarily because it perceived its own interest in letting Iraq and Iran wear each other down in a cycle of mutual destruction, thus dramatically weakening two of the region's strongest states. Israel played its part in this plan by channeling some arms to Iran, although indirectly, in such a way as to make sure that the two antagonists were locked in indefinite hostilities and that no united Arab or Islamic front could be formed against the Jewish state—a policy that informs Israeli behavior to date. Unsurprisingly, the war ended in stalemate. The Islamic Republic had staved off its first existential threat, largely because of Khomeini's ability to mobilize the Iranian population against Iraqi forces by invoking a combination of Iranians' fierce sense of Shiism and nationalism in defense of the new Islamic Republic and the old motherland, Iran.

During the war, the resistance to Iraqi and Arab aggression and the stance against the United States and its allies provided Khomeini and his devotees with a powerful platform from which to wage jihad concurrently against two sets of enemies: external and internal. While fighting the Iraqi forces and fending off their regional and international supporters, Khomeini used the cover of war to engage in forceful processes of power centralization. The war was instrumental in promoting his leadership and the Islamic Republic as the resolute and fearless defender of true revolutionary Islam from internal and external threats. During the same period in which Khomeini's supporters and ordinary Iranians stemmed the tide of the Iraqi aggression, they also virtually wiped out or neutralized all those who either actually opposed or were suspected of opposing Khomeini's Islamic direction for Iran. Those complicit in the violence and arrests included a number of ranking clerics who had either actively or tacitly supported the revolution and Khomeini's leadership.

No regional or distant Muslim country embraced Khomeini's system of Islamic governance as it stood, despite his efforts at "export of revolution," which became the Islamic Republic's policy for a time. However, his political Islamism appealed to some minorities in the region, predominantly to marginalized Shia communities. The most successful case in this respect was in Lebanon, where Iranian Hezbollahis (followers of the Party of God) assisted the formation of the Lebanese Hezbollah (Party of God), which over time has grown to be a formidable Iranian protégé force in Lebanese political and military life.

Khomeini used a mixture of religious imagery, rhetorical power, political violence, and moral persuasion to implement a unique new
Islamic order based on a two-tiered system of divine and popular sovereignty. He developed an *ijtihadi* concept of the “sovereignty of God”—*velayat-e faqih* (the guardianship, or governance, of the Islamic jurist). Through this concept, he argued that Islam empowers a *faqih* (strictly a jurist, but in Khomeini’s reading also a deputy to the last hidden Shia imam and related to Prophet Mohammad) to have custodianship over the people, whose sovereignty was represented by an elected president and Majles (the National Assembly). Khomeini’s political theology legitimated and furnished what could be considered a form of religious polyarchy, as defined by Robert Dahl. It gave rise to a theocratic but politically pluralistic Islamic government, where the “sovereignty of God,” vested in the *faqih*, would nevertheless prevail over the will of the people on contentious governance issues.

Khomeini—the first *faqih*—was not oblivious to the need for his Islamic system to be robust and resilient. Indeed, he saw internal and external adaptability as necessary to safeguard the continuity of the Islamic government in the context of a changing modern world, and it was here that the *ijtihadi* dimension of his thinking and actions mattered most. Despite his emphasis on and reputation for ideological purity, he proved to be remarkably pragmatic when the survival of his regime was at stake. The system he established allowed the participation of diverse groups of his followers, so long as they operated within the Islamic framework that he had laid down. The Supreme Leader’s umbrella dictate underpinned the emergence, by the end of the 1980s, of three main theo-political factional clusters: *jihadi* (revolutionary conservatives and traditionalists, popularly referred to as “hard-liners,” characterized by a confrontational streak), *ijtihadi* (reformists, progressives, and internationalists), and *amalgaran* (pragmatists). Hereafter, the terms “traditional,” “conservative,” and “hard-line” will be used interchangeably to refer to the *jihadi* side of the spectrum, while “reformist” and “internationalist” will be used to refer to the *ijtihadi* side.

The same adaptability applied to Khomeini’s stance on the conduct of the Islamic Republic’s foreign relations. For example, to compensate for sanctions and hostilities with the United States, he was content to allow the cultivation of good relations with the Soviet Union, China, and India and, ultimately, to swallow his pride and accept a ceasefire with his mortal enemy, Saddam Hussein, despite his long-standing vow to fight to the end.

By the time of his death, Khomeini had left behind not only a politically pluralist theocratic order but also a seesawing *jihadi-ijtihadi* approach to its governance. This approach has been very diligently pursued by his successor Ayatollah Khamenei. Having risen, somewhat unexpectedly, to the heights of the Supreme Leadership, Khamenei has successfully used and consolidated his religious and constitutional powers as well as various vetting and power-enforcement bodies, particularly the state’s coercive instruments, in order to subordinate the executive and legislative branches of the Islamic government to his authority and to preserve his power to act as the final arbiter of all significant domestic and foreign policy issues. In this, he has performed both conservatively and pragmatically within Khomeini’s framework, depending on the nature of the issues and their implications for regime survival.

In many cases, Khamenei has insisted on ideological adherence, but there have also been occasions when he has accommodated pragmatic and reformist policies. He has done so especially when he and his conservative entourage have judged such flexibility as necessary. As such, they have allowed reform and renewal measures in both domestic and foreign policies, as long as those measures do not open the way for radical changes to the Islamic system that could undermine the basis of their power. Whenever confronted with complex or significant policy innovations, Khamenei has made sure to qualify his endorsement of them with precautionary statements to ensure their reversal if required.

Within this paradigm, Khamenei has thus far interacted with four elected presidents, all of whom have ultimately bowed to his authority over policy differences with him. The president who has had the most success in gaining Khamenei’s backing has been the moderate, Hassan Rouhani (2013–present). Rouhani was elected in a landslide with the combined support of the reformist and pragmatist factions in 2013 and again in 2017. He has campaigned