

group and its Mahdi Army, which had opposed the occupation. Since Zarqawi had always justified his anti-Shiism in terms of the Shia complicity in fall of the Saddam regime, he was willing to call a truce with those Shias who would join the insurgency or stop working with the government. Although the olive branch to Saddam was important, the truce clearly did not extend to the large number of Shias who voted in the January 2005 elections and continued to support the UJA government and join its security forces. In fact, pronouncements by Zarqawi's supporters named SCIRI, al-Da'wa, and Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress as legitimate targets for attacks, along with Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord Party and the two Kurdish parties that were part of the government.²⁹ All this hair-splitting between Sunni extremists and Sunni ulama did not amount to a sectarian truce. In fact, it put the burden on Shias to prove that they were not "collaborators," which they could do only by joining the insurgency and succumbing to Sunni domination. Giving the attacks on Shias a nationalist cover thus served as the mantra for sectarian politics in Iraq.

Chapter 8

THE RISE OF IRAN

In May 2005 the Iranian foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, arrived at the checkpoint in the small town of Mehran on the Iran-Iraq border. He got into a car and unceremoniously drove one hundred miles west to Baghdad to meet with the newly elected prime minister of Iraq, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Kharrazi's trip came fresh on the heels of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's brief stop in Baghdad only forty-eight hours earlier, also to congratulate Mr. Jaafari. The timing of the trip was symbolic, and so was the fact that Kharrazi had driven across eastern Iraq in a car without concern for the violence that raged across the country. Throughout his stay in Iraq, Kharrazi never donned a bulletproof vest, and his demeanor and schedule somehow did not betray concern with security. Asked about future relations between Iran and Iraq while bantering in Persian with Iraq's Kurdish foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, Kharrazi told a gathering of journalists, "The party that will leave

Iraq is the United States, because it will eventually withdraw. But the party that will live with the Iraqis is Iran, because it is a neighbor to Iraq."¹ Kharrazi had not gone to Baghdad merely to embrace the new Shia-dominated government, led by a man who had spent years of exile in Tehran and had maintained his ties with Iran. He had gone to serve notice to the world that Iran had regional claims and to demand that its status and interests be recognized. Iran was on the rise, and where better to make that point than in Baghdad, where the future of the region hung in the balance?

The Shia ascendancy in Iraq is supported by and is in turn bolstering another important development in the Middle East: the emergence of Iran as a regional power. The Shia revival is inevitably intertwined with the rise of Iran. With almost 70 million people, 90 percent of whom are Shia, Iran is the largest Shia country. It has enjoyed close ties with the other pillars of Shia revival in the Middle East—powerful political forces in Lebanon and Iraq—as well as with the economically influential Shia communities in the Persian Gulf, many of whose members are Iranian in origin. The Shia revival may have begun in Iraq, but Iran benefits from it and will also play an important role in leading it and defining it.

The Islamic revolution is today a spent force in Iran, and the Islamic Republic is a tired dictatorship facing pressures to change. The victory of hard-line candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election cannot conceal the reality that grassroots concerns about democracy and economic reform are the key defining factors in Iranian politics as a whole today.² Iranian society often appears to be gripped by contradictions: a theocracy coexists with limited democratic practices; a secularized middle-class youth culture shares the public sphere with a sizable share of the populace that still puts its trust in Khomeini and his legacy. Daily newspapers run full-page discussions of debates between French philosophers

over the meaning of "postmodernist discourse," yet the country continues to languish under the Islamic Republic. The pull of modernity and reformism is strong, but so is that of tradition and conservatism. Despite the influence of the latter two forces, however, Iran more than any other society in the Muslim world is a place where fundamentals are under scrutiny and open to questioning and new thinking.

No other country in the Muslim world is so rife with intellectual fervor and cultural experimentation at all levels of society, and in no place in the Muslim world is modernity and its various cultural, political, and economic instruments examined as seriously and thoroughly as in Iran. The cultural dynamism of the country will also be a force that will define the Shia revival. The hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims who travel to Iraq along the highway from Mehran to Najaf are also a conduit for ideas, investments, and broader social and economic ties. They visit shrines and clerics but also fill the bazaars of shrine cities, and many buy property in anticipation of a boom in pilgrimage and business. The outcome of debates in Iran will bear on the character of the Shia revival and are being influenced by forces that the changes in Iraq have unleashed.

In many regards Iran presents the modern face of Islam. Persian is now the third most popular language on the Internet (after English and Mandarin Chinese), where one can surf more than 80,000 Iranian blogs.³ Iranians are actively engaged in discussions about Western thought. There have been more translations of Immanuel Kant into Persian in the past decade than into any other language (and these have gone into multiple printings); one of them is by the current conservative speaker of the Iranian parliament. In some areas of mathematics and physics, such as string theory, Iranian research centers rank among the best in the world; and Iranian cinema has in recent years become a powerful force, with

films such as Abbas Kiarostami's existential drama *A Taste of Cherry* attracting global notice.

This cultural dynamism has even left its mark on the Iranian religious establishment. Since the Khomeini revolution, Shia centers of learning in Iran, especially in the city of Qom, have prospered. There are large new libraries in Mashad and Qom, each housing millions of books and manuscripts, electronically catalogued with searchable databases and the latest technology for retrieving and maintaining them. A visitor to the Library of the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad or the Ayatollah Marashi Library in Qom cannot fail to be impressed by the size of the collections, the scale of the services provided, and the care that has been given to infrastructure and the use of technology. The achievement is as much in furthering Shia studies by making rare manuscripts and archaic texts available to eager clerics and seminarians as it is in promoting library science by creating the means to manage such vast collections. Ancient manuscripts commingle with computer terminals and high-tech restoration and preservation labs. The vast libraries are full of turbaned seminarians, some buried in theological texts, others absorbed in managing the collections on their computer terminals.

The Marashi Library was established by Shahabeddin Marashi Najafi, a contemporary of Khomeini's who was one of the five grand ayatollahs at the time of the Islamic revolution. He had lived all his life in Qom and loved books. Even as a seminarian in Najaf he would save his stipends and a portion of his income from preaching—at times accepting a book in place of payment for his services—to buy manuscripts. His collecting became more prolific as he grew in seniority. By the time of his death, in 1990, he had accumulated some 35,000 manuscripts in addition to a vast number of books, which are now housed in the library. Marashi asked to be buried with his books, and so at the entrance to the library there is

a small shrine to this clerical bibliophile, and visitors often say a prayer for his soul as they come and go.

The library houses unique treasures of Islamic and Shia theology, law, and history. When, almost a decade ago, the sultan of Brunei sought to prove that his family roots go back to the Prophet of Islam, he asked the Marashi Library to investigate. Researchers there combed through rare manuscripts to laboriously construct the sultan's genealogy and tell the story of a bloodline that stretched through Arab traders and itinerant Sufi missionaries and ulama over fourteen centuries from Arabia to Borneo.

The library sits amid a cluster of seminaries, some old and some founded since 1979. Both the old and the new now have impressive façades of white brick interlaced with blue tile and are topped by imposing domes. Qom now displays a grandeur befitting the leaders it produces and the country that they rule. The seminaries attest to the clerical control of Iran; they are associated with different clerics and traditions; and a few are specifically associated with Iraqi clerics who settled in Qom to escape persecution and who still live there. These wielded a great deal of influence in the 1980s, as they helped Tehran quickly build its ties with Lebanon's Shia, who have deep connections with Najaf. Together the city's many seminaries, whose architectural styles vary despite the relative uniformity of their façades, are somewhat reminiscent of Oxford and Cambridge in England, with their various colleges, libraries, chapels, and quadrangles. Some of Iran's most powerful men live in them, especially the one known as Haqqani. A kind of Ecole Nationale d'Administration for the Islamic Republic, it has produced a corps of alumni who now form the backbone of the clerical management class that runs Iran's key political and security institutions. During election campaigns, candidates troop to the city to pay homage to its religious leaders and receive their blessing.

None among the city's clerical oligarchs is more powerful and influential than Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, a hard-line conservative with a top post at the Haqqani and uncompromising views on Khomeini's theory of Islamic government. Mesbah-Yazdi is the strident face of Qom, its ingrained conservatism and deep attachment to the values of Khomeini's revolution and the power that it bestowed on the clergy. He is the most conservative among Iran's clerical elite and the favorite of Iran's Revolutionary Guards as well as the irregulars and vigilantes who do the bully-boy work of the Islamic Republic. During the heyday of reformism, from 1997 to 2005, he encouraged these forces to stop agitation for change by any means. During the 2005 presidential election cycle, he was the only cleric to issue a farwa supporting the one-time Revolutionary Guard Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After the election he cavalierly declared that Iran now had its first true Islamic government and there was no need for any more elections. After all, elections had at the outset of the revolution been a concession to secular forces. They were incompatible with theocracy, and as such, "Islamic republic" was a contradiction in terms that should be replaced with an unadulterated "Islamic government." While many Iranians yearned for a democratic future, Mesbah-Yazdi was looking to the Taliban for his.

Over the years, Mesbah-Yazdi has trained many students in Qom. None have become scholars of note, but many who studied with him at the Haqqani came to occupy sensitive administrative and security posts. For Mesbah-Yazdi, Qom's mission is no longer just to produce Shia men of learning but to produce the country's political and bureaucratic elite—the guardians of the revolution.

There are, however, larger forces at play in this religious seat of learning. The imperative of ruling a modern country has pushed Qom to step beyond its time-honored traditions to chart new paths

for Shia learning. After the events of September 11, 2001, the world became obsessed with reforming Islamic education. Madrasahs in the Sunni world, from Indonesia and Malaysia to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and on to Nigeria, were blamed for Muslims' excessive conservatism and, worse, growing extremism and violence. "Madrasah reform" became the mantra of the U.S. government and the primary goal of aid agencies; and Muslim governments from Indonesia to Nigeria, especially in Pakistan, pledged to reform the curricula of their religious institutions. Few have noticed that while the rest of the Muslim world has been grappling with introducing English and science to religious schools, seminaries in Qom have made great advances in incorporating many aspects of modern education into their curricula. Most now teach their students modern social sciences and Western thought. The Mofid University has gone further, by opening degree-granting programs in social sciences and the humanities to those with seminary educations. It has become customary for badly paid professors from Tehran's universities to make the long trek to Qom to teach in the city's various seminaries and educational institutions.

Qom today is home to about three hundred seminaries, easily the largest constellation of such institutions in Iran. There are some fifty thousand seminarians in the city, from seventy countries—and not all these students are Shia. Six thousand Shia seminarians come from Pakistan alone, even though relatively few Pakistani Shias look to the religious authority of any Iranian ayatollahs. There are even seminaries for women. The Jamiat al-Zahra and Jamiat Bint al-Huda train young Shia women from Iran, Pakistan, and the Arab world in theology, law, and history. Their alumni go back to their countries to teach in Shia schools for women. Qom is today training the next generation of Shia community and religious leaders from across the Middle East and South Asia.

These students spend years in Qom, learning Persian, Arabic, religious sciences, jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy. In effect they apprentice themselves to senior clerics, mastering rhetoric and legal disputation, logic, and oratory. In the process, students rise through the ranks to petty cleric and senior student before they receive permission to join the ranks of the ulama. Long stints of study in Qom allow them to forge cultural ties with Iran and also to learn much about the country. If in the 1980s seminary education went hand in hand with indoctrination in revolutionary thinking, today's crop of divinity students reads about reformist debates, election campaigns, and the problems facing religious leaders in governing a modern state and economy. Time spent in Iran no longer imparts only the spirit of Islamic revolution to seminary students, but is more likely to wind up exposing them to reformist and democratic thought.

Qom is today a wealthy city. It has all the trappings of a major center of learning. For much of the past two centuries Najaf was the premier seat of Shia religious learning, but the recent decades of dictatorship, persecution, war, and turmoil have been hard on Najaf. As Qom has prospered during the reign of the ayatollahs, Najaf has declined. Although most of the senior ulama today reside in Najaf, in terms of civic wealth and infrastructure as well as quality, number, and variety of seminaries and students, the city pales next to Qom. The strife that has marked the post-Saddam period has further damaged Najaf's attractiveness to students and scholars. It is therefore unsurprising that Ayatollah Sistani chose Qom as the headquarters for his Internet operation, sistani.org. The combination of religious and technical skills that he was looking for simply could not be found in Najaf, where he continues to maintain his own modest home on a narrow downtown street and do much of his writing on a manual typewriter.

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Almost a decade ago, in May 1997, an overwhelming majority of Iranians defied the advice of the country's clerical leaders to elect a reformist to the presidency. Muhammad Khatami's sweeping win seemed to some like Iran's "Prague Spring," a thawing of freedom under the warm sun of cultural revival, a victory for the people, and the beginning of the end of the repressive republic that Khomeini had built. The outside world came to see Iran through much the same lens through which it had viewed eastern Europe and Latin America a decade earlier—as the home of a restless populace that was finally about to throw off tyranny's yoke and embrace democracy's fresh opportunities. Iran's democratic inklings were seen as the beginning of a genuine secularism, for the first time bubbling from below rather than imposed from above.

There was secularism in Iran among the suppressed intellectuals and the middle class, which had had enough of religion and wanted Islam banished from public life. As one student activist told National Public Radio, "We are fed up with being forcibly taken to heaven." There was also a more pragmatic and less exasperated secularism that expressed esteem for and even belief in religion but sought to separate it from politics, giving each its own separate domain, somewhat on the model of the no-establishment clause found in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The demand for secularism of both sorts showed the extent to which the population had tired of Khomeini's republic, of clerical rule, and of living by Islamic law.

It is, however, a mistake to confuse hostility to the Islamic Republic and its clerical rulers with a turning away from Shia piety at the popular level. In fact, unhappiness with the Khomeini-crafted regime has led many Iranians to go back to Shiism as they knew it before Khomeini. This yearning for an older and less politicized faith also helps to explain why the modest, deeply learned, and plain-living Sistani has so quickly become popular in Iran.

What happens on Tuesday nights near Qom offers another window into the spiritual longings of modern Iranians. Not far from the seminaries, on the city's outskirts, stands a small mosque called Jamkaran. Local belief has it that the Twelfth Imam once appeared and offered prayers at this mosque. Its symbolism is somewhat like that of the shrine of Fatima in Portugal, where many Catholics believe the Virgin Mary appeared six times to three children in 1917. The Jamkaran mosque was long a sacred place, but not a well-known one until recently. Sometime during the past decade—the decade of reformist hopes and disappointment—its reputation spread. People, especially young people, now go to the mosque from near and far. On Tuesday evenings, thousands throng there to pray, and many serve in its vast kitchen devoted to feeding the poor. The popularity of the mosque was not lost on the newly elected Ahmadinejad, who was quick to commit government funds to its restoration as he outlined his populist agenda.

At the rear of the mosque is the "Well of Requests." It marks, it is said, the precise spot where the Twelfth Imam once became miraculously unhidden for a brief shining moment of loving communion with his Creator. The well is covered by two small metal grids. Covering the grids are small strings knotted around the metal bars. Much like a votive candle burning before an Orthodox icon or Catholic statue, or a prayer written in Hebrew on a scrap of paper and placed between the ancient stones of Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, each bit of string represents a human soul's humble plea for God's divine mercy. Every morning Jamkaran's custodians cut away the strings. By afternoon the bars are covered with more. The mosque's entrance features giant photographs of Khomeini and his successor, an ironic feature of the décor, given how strongly the Islamic Republic's founder disliked the kind of piety that Jamkaran embodies.

Going to Jamkaran on a Tuesday night makes it hard to see Iran as anything but deeply Shia, closely attached to the stories and beliefs that have sustained the faith over the centuries and account for its spirituality. So close to the Islamic Republic's seat of power in Qom and even under the watchful eyes of Khomeini's and Khamenei's portraits, and despite Ahmadinejad's appeal to its popularity, Jamkaran has become as powerful a symbol of Iran's rejection of Khomeini's brand of Shiism as the reformist voters who challenged the Islamic Republic at the polls.

Events in Iraq have only increased this tendency. The opening of the shrine cities has been an emotional event for Iranians, and many regard Ayatollah Sistani as the religious leader they had unconsciously been yearning for. Sistani has brought back respect for the ulama in Iran, washing away the cynicism that had developed toward Iran's clerical rulers, whose reputation for corruption has become legendary. Since Saddam's fall, many Iranians have begun giving their religious taxes and donations to Sistani's representative in Qom, where Sistani enjoys great popularity and influence among the city's merchants and in its teeming bazaars, or directly to his office in Najaf. Many who go to Najaf return home as Sistani's followers. Some three decades ago, in 1975, after the Shah and Saddam signed a peace treaty, Iranian pilgrims flocked to Najaf and Karbala. Many returned as devotees of Ayatollah Khomeini, who then lived in exile in Najaf. They funneled money to him and brought back his messages in the form of pamphlets and audiocassettes. Sistani and his quietist message now command the allegiance of the new wave of pilgrims who go to Iraq.

The hundreds of thousands of Iranians who now visit the shrine cities of Iraq, much like the twelve million who visit the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad every year, show that the Islamic Republic may have lost steam but Shiism is still thriving in Iran. The piety of

the everyday folk who trek to Jamkaran and Karbala binds them to their coreligionists in the Arab world and South Asia, and that will sustain the Shia revival and do much to determine its political force and valence.

Just five years ago, Iran was flanked by hostile Sunni regimes—the Taliban-Pakistan-Saudi axis to the east and Iraq to the west. Iranians have welcomed the collapse of the Sunni wall around them since 2001 and see the Shia revival as the means for preventing its return. In fact, the post-9/11 U.S.-led destruction of the Taliban and Saddam regimes has freed Iran to expand its regional influence at a time when the country's vibrant cultural and economic scene demands greater expression. In many regards, the years since 2001 have been for Iran a "Prussian moment," comparable to the era of growing influence for Berlin that Otto von Bismarck managed to engineer across the German-speaking world in the mid-nineteenth century. The Shia revival will further bolster expansion of Iran's regional influence and its claim to "great power" status. This in turn is tied to Iran's nuclear ambition, which aims both to protect and to perpetuate the country's regional role.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto once dubbed Pakistan's atomic bomb the "Islamic bomb," as the counterbalance to the "Hindu bomb" of India. In the 1990s, Pakistan's nuclear capacity gradually took the shape of a "Sunni bomb," as it sat in the middle of the Saudi-Pakistani-Taliban axis on Iran's east. It was an open secret then that Saudi Arabia, Iran's perennial nemesis, was a major financial backer of the Pakistani nuclear program, no doubt with the kingdom's security interests and regional ambitions in mind.⁴ It was in worrying about that axis—and the threat from Ba'hist Iraq—that Iran first became interested in a nuclear arsenal. An Iranian nuclear capability would have helped Iran to contain the Sunni pressure and even reverse the balance of power to its own advantage. The prospect of

a nuclear Iran will now ensure that the post-2001 strategic gains will not be reversed. An Iranian bomb will also be a Shia bomb, confirming Shia power in the region and protecting Iran's larger footprint.

Iran's position also depends on the network of Kalashnikov-toting militias that form the backbone of Shia power represented by the web of clerics and centers of religious learning. From Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army in Iraq, the Baseej volunteer force in Iran, and the Army of Muhammad (Sipah-i Muhammad) in Pakistan, Shia militias project Shia power and enforce the will of the clerics. All these militias have been organized, trained, and funded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards—itsself a Shia militia before it grew into a full-fledged military force. They are links in a chain that represents the muscle of the Shia.

In Iraq, Iran's primary objective is to ensure that Ba'athism and Arab nationalism—Sunni rule in an altered guise—do not return to power. The more violent the Sunni insurgency becomes and the more Shias it kills, the more determined Iran grows. The moderate grand ayatollah Yousef Saneie, who lives in Qom, reacted to the growing ferocity of suicide bombing during the summer of 2005 by saying that the suicide bombers are "wolves without pity" and "sooner rather than later, Iran will have to put them down."⁵ The higher up one goes in Iran's government, the stronger this feeling becomes. Iraqi clerics who escaped Saddam's rule are a notable force in Qom. Their seminaries have trained Iranian and Iraqi seminarians, and some of their most notable scholars have become leaders of the Islamic Republic. The powerful head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shahrudi, is an Iraqi—a student of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's—and speaks Persian only with difficulty.

At the height of the Iran-Iraq war, the Revolutionary Guards found enthusiastic volunteers among the children of those Iranians whom Saddam had expelled from Iraq in the 1970s as part of his

Arabization campaign. Eager to fight Saddam and Ba'athism, these young people joined the war effort, and many rose through the ranks. Today some of these "returnees from Iraq" (*moavedin-e Iraq*), as they are called in Iran, such as the one-time deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards and senior adviser to the supreme leader General Muhammad Baqer Zolqadr, are among the most powerful men in Iran. These leaders view Arab nationalism as anti-Iranian and see an Iraq defined by Shia identity as friendlier to Iran. They are committed to restoring Iran's cultural and religious presence in Shia Iraq and to erasing the impact of Ba'athism. They hope that things can go back to the way they were when large communities of Iranian clerics and merchants lived in Najaf and Karbala and Shia identity tied Arab and Iranian Shias together in ways that secular nationalism could not touch. For these leaders, whatever ideological differences they may have with Ayatollah Sistani pale before the symbolism of an Iranian cleric dominating the religious scene in Shia Iraq.

Many among those who were expelled by Saddam decades ago—including the senior denizen of Qom and a teacher of the Haqqani seminary, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Tashkiri—have returned to Iraq to rebuild an Iranian presence, laying claim to property they lost—which was often given to Sunni families.⁶ On their heels have come Iraqi Shia exiles who escaped Saddam's repression in the 1980s and 1990s. These "Iranian exiles" (*al-jaliyya al-Iraniya*) have eagerly joined Iraqi political life. They can be found in municipal and provincial assemblies, mosques and seminaries, and in government offices in virtually every Shia town from Basra to Baghdad. It is often through them that Iran channels its spending on clinics, schools, and social work. The returnees, Iranian or Iraqi, represent Iran's influence in Iraq and strengthen ties between the two countries.

Many more in Iran's leadership, including President Ahmadinejad

and a large number of senior Revolutionary Guards officers, are veterans of the Iran-Iraq war; some fought in its most ferocious battles, such as the fight over the Faw Peninsula, when Saddam used chemical weapons. They see Iraq's pacification under a Shia leadership as a strategic objective: what they were not able to win in the Iran-Iraq war, they can now get courtesy of coalition forces and the Shia government in Baghdad. When the Kurds celebrated the inauguration of their National Assembly in Erbil on June 4, 2005, the Iranian envoy captured this sentiment by saying, "This is a great day. Throughout Iraq, the people we supported are in power."⁷ He was referring to Iraq's Kurdish president, Jalal Talebani, but also to the Shia leaders who had taken over power in Baghdad. The Iranian public too looks to a Shia Iraq as a source of security, often commenting that "Shia countries do not go to war with one another."

The Iranian presidential election of 2005 also brought to power a leadership that is more keenly aware of the Shia-Sunni divide. President Ahmadinejad, a number of ministers, and some Revolutionary Guards commanders, as well as Mesbah-Yazdi and his potent network of Haqqani alumni, all have ties to the wing of the Islamic Revolution that was most staunchly committed to core Shia values and felt itself more anti-Sunni, and in particular anti-Wahhabi, than the norm. Since Ahmadinejad's election, the tenor of propaganda against Iran's Sunni minority, seen as potential Saudi clients and allies for Iraq's Sunni extremists, has grown more strident. Elements of the Iranian regime are even producing anti-Sunni polemics in Arabic for dissemination beyond Iran.⁸

Unlike Khomeini, with his agenda of subtly steering Shiism closer to Sunnism, these conservative leaders wanted the revolution to empower Shiism and entrench its identity. Their rise to the helm in Iran will make Shia revival and contending with Sunni resistance to it more central to Iran's politics and its regional ambitions. The

2005 presidential election mobilized and gave voice to those Iranians who feel most drawn to the Shia revival and resent the Sunni backlash against it most keenly. The throngs who voted for Ahmadinejad come from humble religious backgrounds. Regardless of what they feel about politics, they are deeply attached to the core values and piety of Shiism, which is in turn tightly bound with the shrine cities of Iraq, and they are offended by the tenor and ferocity of sectarian violence.

The conservative leaders who have risen to the top in Iran share these feelings, and their language of power echoes the mood on the street. Still, Iran's leaders also understand that Iran can achieve great-power status only if it can reduce Sunni resistance to Shia revival. For this reason they have taken a page from Khomeini's strategy of focusing attention on the United States and Israel to divert attention from the sectarian divide.

Chapter 9

THE BATTLE FOR THE
MIDDLE EAST

Salt is an ancient Jordanian town, a short twenty minutes' drive north of Amman. Salt was a trading center, once the most important settlement between the Jordan River and the desert lands to the east. In the Ottoman period, it was the capital of the Balqa region, which covered roughly the same territory as modern Jordan. It is a picturesque little town, with narrow streets and charming houses that have tall arched windows in the style of the late Ottoman period. During its heyday, Salt was a cosmopolitan, tolerant place where Muslims and Christians lived together in peace.

This town of many churches showed a different face in March 2005. During that month there was a much-publicized wake for a native son of Salt, Raed Mansour al-Banna, who had died on February 28 hundreds of miles to the south, in the Iraqi city of Hilla, some sixty miles south of Baghdad. Raed was the suicide