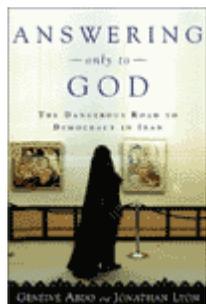


Answering Only to God: Faith and Freedom in Twenty-First Century Iran

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March 18, 2003



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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: On behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to welcome members and guests and C-SPAN TV to our Author in the Afternoon series. We are very pleased to have with us Jonathan Lyons and Geneive Abdo, who will be discussing their book, [Answering Only to God](#).

With the media's preoccupation with the impending war in Iraq, most Americans are probably unaware that in the same part of the world an anniversary was taking place last month. It was reported that few Iranians took to the streets to celebrate the twenty-fourth anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. But for Iran watchers this came as no surprise, for the revolutionary fervor that moved a nation to sacrifice so much for so long seems to have lost its momentum long ago.

When Ayatollah Khomeini created the modern world's only theocracy, he promised a heaven on earth in which the poor and oppressed would rule and be free. Instead, the country has been plagued by political paralysis, corruption, massive unemployment, social restrictions, and oppression. It now appears that this theocracy has lost two of its most powerful sources of control, moral authority and political legitimacy, and is ruling by coercion alone.

With a Constitution that stipulates both religious and democratic rule, it has become quite clear that after twenty-four post-revolutionary years, this government cannot be satisfactorily run both by the elected representatives of the people and the self-appointed, unelected representatives of God.

In *Answering Only to God*, our guests this afternoon, two veteran journalists, tell the story of this power struggle taking place between those claiming to speak in the name of Islamic purity and those who call themselves democrats. As they state in their book, they went to Iran on a mission. Little did they know, however, that it would be one that would set them on a collision course with the press, the authorities, the secret police, and the rest of the Iranian establishment.

During the three years in which they were based in Iran, they conducted hundreds of interviews with leading theologians, dissidents, hardliners, and reformers, going where few Westerners had ever been permitted to go before. These discussions form the basis of this engrossing reportage on present-day Iran, which prompt them to raise the perennial question of whether Iran is an Islamic state ruled by clerics, or a republic ruled by the people.

Many of you may remember Geneive from her previous visit to the Carnegie Council to discuss her book, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*. She may also be familiar to you as a commentator on Islamic affairs, on NPR, PBS, the BBC, "Jim Lehrer News Hour," CNN, and this afternoon "Oprah."

From 1998 until 2001, she served as correspondent in Iran for *The Guardian* of London and contributed articles to *The Economist* and *The International Herald Tribune*. Most recently she was a Neiman Fellow at Harvard University and a Guggenheim Fellow. She was also the recipient of a Ford Foundation grant for research on Iran. Currently she is a correspondent for *The Boston Globe* based in Washington focusing on Middle East issues.

Jonathan Lyons is the Washington Editor for Reuters News Agency. In 1998 he opened the agency's bureau in Tehran, fourteen years after it had been closed by Iranian authorities. Mr. Lyons has covered Turkey, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of the independent republics. He has been a Mid-Career Fellow at Columbia University's Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union.

In February, 2001, both Geneive and Jonathan were expelled from Iran under threat of prosecution and have been banned from returning since.

Please join me in welcoming our guests today, Geneive and Jonathan.

Remarks

JONATHON LYONS: Thank you very much.

Answering Only to God tells the story of the national struggle now underway in contemporary Iran. It is a struggle set in motion at the birth of the Islamic republic in 1979 between two fundamentally different understandings of the new state that arose from the ashes of the U.S.-backed monarchy.

Underlying the domestic turmoil, which is mostly visible and widely reported in the Western press as the confrontation between reformers and conservatives, lie several basic questions. These include: What is the true instrument of God's will in an Islamic republic? Does ultimate authority reside with senior theologians qualified to interpret the Holy Law, or is it the people as expressions of God's genius to exercise sovereignty in His name?

Answering Only to God takes these questions as a starting point and examines Iran at the dawn of the twenty-first century through the prism of this theological debate. But, as Joanne mentioned, *Answering Only to God* is also our story—that is, the story of the first American journalists, in this case husband and wife, to live and work in Iran since the aftermath of the revolution.

We arrived in June of 1998, at a time of great promise. Iran, which had witnessed the creation of the first theocracy of the modern age, now seemed ready to give birth to a new kind of state, one that made room for both Islamic tradition and personal and political freedom. President Muhammad Khatami was still in his first year of office and change was in the air.

He had been elected in 1997 in a landslide on promises to reduce the arbitrariness of the state, and he pledged to implement what he called the rule of law and to create a civil society within Iran's existing Islamic political system. He spoke eloquently of the need for greater social and political pluralism, and he promised to break Iran out of its international isolation chiefly through what he called "a dialogue of civilization."

On a more prosaic level, the Iranian and American soccer teams were about to meet in Paris in the World Cup, in what many saw as a harbinger of improved relations with the Great Satan. In the streets of Tehran, this recalled Nixon's "ping pong diplomacy," which opened the way to relations with the People's Republic of China.

For our part, Geneive and I found ourselves drawn to Iran after a number of years working in Egypt, Turkey, and many other Muslim countries. Geneive presented her earlier book, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*, in this very room in October 2000. That study documented for the first time the transformation of Egypt into an Islamic society, the result of a grassroots movement from the bottom up. By contrast, *Answering Only to God* portrays Iran's transformation from the top down, as imposed by the clerical regime.

President Khatami, like Islamic reformers throughout history, argues that the needs of modern Muslims could be met if reason and rationality were only introduced into the practice of the faith. His ideas energized much of the Muslim world at the time—Muslims yearning for greater freedom of expression, expanded religious and political tolerance, and increased participation of women and minorities. The promised land of the modern Islamic movement, the founding of a true Islamic republic, at last appeared within reach.

So Geneive and I packed up our house in Istanbul and flew to Tehran. However, we soon found ourselves chronicling the failure of the Khatami experiment, a decline in fortune that mirrored our own at the hands of the Iranian authorities. Welcomed with open arms in 1998 by the Khatami loyalists in charge of the Ministry of Culture, we were later forced to flee under threat of criminal prosecution by these very same reformists.

Tensions with the government had been building for some time, largely over the content of our reporting and the scope of our sources. Officials were nervous about our extensive contacts among the theologians in the holy city of Qom and they were increasingly displeased with articles that catalogued President Khatami's setbacks, in particular, one piece that demonstrated that the current supreme clerical leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, wielded more overt political power than Ayatollah Khomeini before him.

The secret police began to lean heavily on our researchers, translators, and drivers, the press authorities vowed to take away our visas, and at least one Iranian newspaper called Geneive a spy and demanded her expulsion; so on Christmas Day 2000 we burned our archive in a backyard bonfire, after having discretely carried copies of our interview notes, recordings, and other documents to the West in our hand luggage whenever we flew out of

the country for a holiday. Five weeks later, we slipped out of Tehran for good and have been banned from returning.

Finally, *Answering Only to God* is a cautionary tale, one that is sorely needed as America stands on the eve of a war that many in power tell us is designed not only to remove Saddam Hussein from power but to refashion the Middle East, the Muslim Middle East in particular, in our own image.

In its most benign form, this project would encourage the so-called democratization project—that is, the creation of American-style democracies among the authoritarian states that dominate the region. However, this approach makes no real allowance for the enormous cultural, religious, and social distinctions between the Muslim world and the West, nor does it take into account the extraordinary dynamism of the modern Islamic movement or the risk of a backlash.

In order to understand the contemporary Islamic world we must set aside notions that the region's religious revival is fueled simply by the failure of secular states, by poverty, or by envy of Western economic and military might or its lavish lifestyle. We must come to grips with the dynamics of the theological debate that lies at the heart of today's struggle, and, as *Answering Only to God* shows, this central conflict is not one of a clash of civilizations, nor of Islam versus the West; it is a clash of Islam versus Islam.

Despite its high drama and profound implications, this struggle has received relatively little attention in the West, and a number of factors contribute to this phenomenon. First, Western analysts, journalists, and policymakers are generally suspicious of viewing religion as a primary actor in contemporary societies. Second, it is extremely difficult to gain access to the clerical past, to the seminaries, to their reading circles and study groups that comprise the true battlefield of ideas. What's more, to view the Islamic world on its own terms and to listen to its own voices requires an uncomfortable reassessment of the West's long-held notions of faith, society, freedom, and human rights.

When America faced the horrors of September 11th, a consensus quickly emerged: that Islam had declared war on the West. Talking heads across the country posed the same rhetorical question: "Why do they hate us?" Scholars steeped in Orientalist theory were the heroes of the day, and for decades they had argued that the attributes of Western modernity, primarily its economic and military and technological power, had become too much of a threat to the Islamic world. Their warnings of a violent Islamic response, one intended to "even the score," were seemingly vindicated once the World Trade Center was reduced to dust and one side of the Pentagon was torn open by the flying bombs of Osama bin Laden.

But the violent eddies of militant Islam that have now spread to our shores have little to do with our American way of life or our political or social freedoms. The true cause is the search for an Islamic Utopia, a process that began with the death of the Prophet Mohammad, and one that continues unabated today in the mosques of Egypt, Pakistan, and Algeria, in the mountain hamlets of Afghanistan, and in the seminaries of Shi'ite Iran.

It is this perennial pursuit that lies at the heart of bin Laden's attack on the United States. His primary grievance, articulated for decades to varying degrees by moderate Islamic militants and activists alike, concerns the shortcomings of Arab leaders, not the values or lifestyle of the West. When the West intervenes in the Muslims' pursuit of Islamic purity and religious salvation, either by supporting the repressive leaders deemed to be illegitimate in religious terms, or by interfering directly in the domestic politics of the Muslim world, only then does it too become the enemy.

Now I would like to give the floor to Geneive, who will speak about the Shia clerics and the students, two groups that in large measure hold the future of Iran in their hands.

GENEIVE ABDO: As Jonathan explained, the source of the current struggle in Iran lies in the theological debate. This debate emerged primarily when Ayatollah Khomeini resurrected an old concept in Shi'ite Islam and then gave it new meaning. That concept was the *Velayati Faqih*, or direct clerical rule.

Before the Islamic revolution, a collective of Shi'ite jurists made decisions, but Khomeini declared that ultimate religious authority should be in the hands of a Supreme Leader—in other words, absolute authority should be in the hands of one fallible man. This meant that the collective nature of religious authority in Shi'ite Islam would be lost, as would be the clerics' ability to interpret the Islamic text as they saw fit, even if their opinions contradicted those of the Supreme Leader.

Though many clerics at the time were opposed to this decision, they went along with Khomeini because he was such a respected theologian and charismatic political leader. His rare talents, which combined charisma and religious authority, put him in a very unique position of being almost immune to criticism, at least open criticism, within the clerical caste.

But when Khomeini died in 1989, the weakness of the system he had put in place became apparent. His successor, the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, had neither Khomeini's religious credentials as a learned and respected theologian, nor did he have his charisma which would enable him to wield the kind of power that Khomeini had.

This began the current friction among the clerics and sharply divided the clerical caste into three distinct categories: traditionalists, who believe clerics should remain outside politics; reformers or modernists, who believe the Supreme Leader should not have absolute powers over state matters, and who are now trying to carve out a formula for an Islamic democracy; and hard-line political clerics who now make up the regime.

The hard-line clerics derived much of their power by aligning themselves with Khamene'i and by working through an intricate network that links Iran's mosques, prayer halls, and religious foundations. During the time that we spent in Iran, I made several trips to Qom, the Shi'ite center of learning in Iran, to meet some of the clerics and to try to understand and absorb their ideas. It was very clear that carving out an Islamic republic would never be achieved until the clerics could reach a consensus on the scope and power they would have within the state.

The clerics are also grappling with how to apply Islamic laws in ways to meet the modern demands of a vast majority of the population, Iranians who feel that their lives are burdened and bogged down by religion.

One of the most interesting clerics I met was a man named Mohsen Kadivar, who is a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University this year. Mr. Kadivar comes from an enlightened middle-class family and he has devoted his adult life to trying to create a formula for an Islamic state which also allows for republican rule. It is in this way that he believes the Islamic republic failed in its mission since its creation in 1979.

One of his central critiques of the current system is that the clerics now must distinguish between those rules in Islam which are eternal and those which are relevant only to a specific time and place. In other words, in the divine state is it subject to change depending upon the will of the people?

Kadivar favors giving Iranians the right to determine which Islamic precepts should apply to their lives in the modern world, and it is this theory which poses a great threat to the conservatives now in power. The conservatives fear that relinquishing such power could eventually make them obsolete. If ordinary Iranians are given the license to define their relationship with God, what role then would that leave for the clerics running the state?

Kadivar's ideas about the power of the Supreme Leader also made him an enemy of the hard-liners running Iran. In his numerous books and articles, he set out to prove, for example, that there was no evidence, either derived in the Qu'ran or the collective sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, sanctioning the absolute power of the Supreme Leader. He pointed out that in Shi'ite theology, with its traditional disdain for political life, there was no discussion of the proper form of government an Islamic state should have in the absence of the infallible Imams. Mr. Kadivar maintains that believers are in charge of managing their own affairs and that ultimate authority must come from God, not from a fallible human being.

Mr. Kadivar's views are in direct conflict with one powerful conservative cleric, by the name of Ruhollah Hosseini, who holds enormous power within hard-line clerical circles. Mr. Hosseini was one of the few hard-liner clerics willing to speak with me.

Many people cautioned that I should not do this because Hosseini was feared across Iran because he was believed to be behind the murders of secular intellectuals in the 1990s. When I met him, however, he was very surprising, in that he was nothing like the cardboard figures and the stereotypes that Iranians often described when referring to the hard-liners who ran the regime. He was very clever and pointed out important subjects that are part of our discussion today.

He first explained that the kind of pluralistic system Iranians are striving for would not resemble a Western-style democracy for the simple reason that Western democracies do not have a role for religion within the state. Instead, he said, Iran was what he called a "guided republic," one that requires supervision by the clerics so that it does not deviate from an Islamic framework.

Hosseini also rejected the idea of permitting direct elections in Iran. Now a body of clerics screens all candidates who run in elections. Hosseini explained to me that the clerical establishment should decide who will be permitted to run in an election. When I pointed out to him that this was an undemocratic process, he then reiterated that Western-style democracy was not the goal of the Islamic republic.

So you can see from these two clerics, Mr. Kadivar and Mr. Hosseini, that the theological divide is vast, which makes the struggle in Iran very intense.

As the theological dispute has developed, another sector of Iranian society has also become involved in the movement toward change. University students, some of whom look to clerics such as Mohsen Kadivar and other progressives for guidance, have led this movement for change.

Students in Iran historically have been critical of the whole force of political change. They were very instrumental in the Islamic revolution in 1979 and their activism has been consistently a barometer of society's hopes and dreams.

University students worked hard to elect President Khatami in 1997, but since then many in the umbrella student movement – the *Daftar Tahkim Vahdat* – have parted ways with the President, convinced that he will never bring fundamental reform to Iran. They see him now for what he is—a cleric whose primary ambition is to preserve the existing Islamic system.

The turning point in Khatami's relationship with the student movement, and one of the great turning points in the reform movement, occurred in the town of Hamadan in the summer of 1999. It was about ten days after student demonstrations had broken out across the country – the largest demonstrations since the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. The students began their protest by demonstrating for six days against the closure of a reform newspaper.

In Hamadan, two weeks after the students had risked their lives in these demonstrations, they eagerly gathered in the town to hear what Khatami had to say. I remember standing in the crowd of young men and women, and they were so excited to see the President that they tried to dismantle rows of barricades to move closer to Khatami's podium. Many were taken away in ambulances after they passed out from the heat and the excitement.

But instead of instilling confidence in his foot soldiers fighting in the street for change, the President betrayed them. Khatami did indeed concede that an attack on the Tehran University dormitories, which had prompted the student demonstrations, was a crime, but he rewrote history that followed the next days after the demonstrations. He said, for example, that no shots were fired in these demonstrations, and Jonathan and I were actually on the streets of Tehran at the time and saw the Islamic militia and many vigilantes fire at the students and spray tear gas.

In the town of Tabriz, where the worst violence occurred, the militia created what they called a "tunnel of death" and forced the student demonstrators to pass through this gauntlet and beat them along the way. Yet, for Khatami it was apparently more important to deny that violence was inflicted upon the students than it was to defend the integrity of the system.

The hard-liners within the law enforcement agencies who had beaten the students were backed by the conservative establishment, and Khatami was not willing to confront the hard-liners within the regime. Khatami told the crowd in Hamadan, "My dear ones, today, in order to put down riots and in order put out the flames of violence for the nation, others use tanks, armored cars, and heavy weapons. Our forces did not use firearms to tackle the rioting. The disturbance was put down calmly and without resorting to firearms." We knew that that wasn't true, having been witnesses to these demonstrations. This incident sealed Khatami's fate and resulted in what is now a student movement led by radicals who believe that the reform movement has failed.

When discussing students in Iran, Westerners often ask, "What does the next generation really want?" The answer is complicated, but it is not what most people assume.

Many students are not in favor of creating a secular state in Iran. Instead, they want to establish a state structure which allows for freedom and civil liberties but also takes Islamic values into account. This is the reason they consider clerics such as Mohsen Kadivar among their heroes.

After the student protests in 1999, I went to search for some of these radical students, who then were still fairly invisible, and I met them in a rundown apartment in downtown Tehran. As they sat before me for several hours and discussed their visions of the future, I asked them directly, "Do you hope that Iran will develop a Western-style democracy?" They said, "No."

In fact, they pointed to the headline on the cover of *The Economist* at the time, which read "Iran's Second Revolution," referring to the protests that had just occurred. I had written the article inside, which did not make the claim that the student protests were a precursor to a second revolution, but that is how the world interpreted the demonstrations. As the students correctly pointed out to me, that was not their mission, even in the long term. Their mission was not to create a second revolution in Iran to topple the clerics.

From that time forward, Iran's students have grown even more radical. During the protest which occurred last

November and December, they openly chanted against Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i, an act which could land many student leaders in jail.

The key question now is whether the student movement can create enough pressure within the system to force change. It depends greatly upon whether the students in the coming years can inspire other sectors of society to join them along this road toward reform. They cannot do it alone. And this is another misconception.

Yes, there is internal rebellion in Iran and there is discontent, but when President Bush and other Administration officials declare openly that they support the Iranian people, which is effectively code language for their support of an internal rebellion which would topple the regime, they do not understand that this movement is in a very early stage. The students are leading the way, but it will take a broad-based social movement to change the system, in the same way that it took Ayatollah Khomeini at least three decades to bring about the Islamic revolution in 1979.

JONATHON LYONS: The recent local elections in Iran mark the formal low point for the Khatami movement. In the capital, Tehran, which when we were living there was a hotbed of pro-reform activism, only 12 percent of eligible voters even bothered to cast ballots, and across Iran the candidates aligned with Khatami fared poorly while those supporting the conservative factions gained strength.

The seeds of this dismal result were sown as far back as July 1999, as Geneive has mentioned, particularly with the speech in Hamadan, when Khatami made it clear that he would throw in his lot with the establishment. And over time we watched as Khatami steadily abandoned the rest of his core supporters—that is, the religious intellectuals, including many prominent newspaper editors, publishers, and commentators; as well as reform-minded clerics, feminists, and lay activists.

In one particular poignant moment, two leading newspaper men, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Hamid Reza Jala'ipour, sent a letter to the President, whose agenda they had been pushing relentlessly in their newspapers, asking for his protection from the hard-line police and the courts. These were brave men, ready to risk prosecution for their pro-reform convictions, and Jala'ipour, a big, gregarious figure, even kept a bag with a razor and a toothbrush by his desk, waiting for the police to come and haul him off. And in fact, both men did time in jail. Yet, they could not disguise their hurt or anger that they had been abandoned by the symbolic head of the reform movement: "Either tell us that our press activities are illegal," they wrote, "or tell us clearly for which government bahti we are to get a minimum of political and professional security to continue our work."

They had taken Khatami at his word and pursued his reform to its logical conclusions. With the police knocking on their door, they asked, "Where is the President now?" Khatami never responded.

At least four factors contributed to the failure of the Khatami movement:

- First, the President was a loyal product of the system he sought to reform.
- Second, his commitment to and understanding of the broader reform project and its deep theological, social, and political implications was always in question.
- Third, the obstacles to profound structural change, in particular those posed by the Islamic Constitution, which all but guaranteed the hold of the hard-line clerics, were enormous.
- And finally, the President and his allies failed to build a firm foundation for their proposed Islamic civil society. They abandoned proposals for creating genuine political parties and grassroots organizations as too difficult and time-consuming, and instead they relied on a media campaign, in this case the creation of an independent press, to carry the day.

On a cold winter day in 1997, Muhammad Khatami presented himself to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. He was considering a run for the presidency, but he had told his backers he first was determined to give the leader who has the final say in all matters of state a final veto on his candidacy. Khatami told the Supreme Leader that his message of tolerance, pluralism, and openness could draw Iranians who had grown increasingly apathetic and cynical back into the political system. He would also reach out to women and ethnic minorities, broadening popular support for the Islamic system and, by extension, for the Leader himself.

The Leader, like everyone else in Iran, felt that Khatami had not a single chance of winning, and so he gave the candidate his blessing but made no comment on his election platform. The unintended result was the landslide victory of May 1997.

It is also important to recognize that the reforms that came to be associated with Muhammad Khatami represent

only one of several key strands that made up the coalition of clerics, workers, leftist militias, secular and religious intellectuals, Iranian nationalists, and university students, who carried out the Islamic revolution two decades before.

For years, any push towards greater democracy was subordinated to the demands of consolidating the revolution and purifying society of Western influence. It was also dedicated to the struggle with the Great Satan in the aftermath of the U.S. Embassy takeover.

Shortly thereafter, the bloody Iran-Iraq war, which dragged on for eight years, further retarded any steps towards reform. It was only with the end of the war and the death of Khomeini—a man whose son records was broken by his failure to bring down Saddam Hussein.

With the death of Khomeini, the reformers suddenly began to find their voice. Among them was a young man named Ali Reza Alavi-Tabar, an intellectual, a radical activist, and an early recruit to the Revolutionary Guards which was created to defend the new revolutionary regime. Alavi-Tabar volunteered for the front at the outbreak of the war, and he stayed until the very bitter end, watching his comrades die or slowly filter back to civilian life. He stayed, he told us in a series of lengthy interviews in his office, long after he had begun to doubt the conduct of the war and prospects for victory. Recuperating from wounds he received in battle, Alavi-Tabar recalled that he cried uncontrollably as he heard Iranian state radio announce the armistice with Iraq.

But he and many of his comrades also began to realize that they had to change the system in whose name they had been prepared to die.

“For a whole generation of activists and thinkers, the last years of the war made them rethink things, helping them to accept reformist ideas. We did not criticize during the war, not because we were afraid, but because we thought those making the decisions back home were infallible. However, the lack of victory in the war raised questions in people’s minds.”

Alavi-Tabar and his fellow travelers at the time were still very much on the outside of power, but they began to come together in interlocking discussion groups and reading circles that linked the government think-tank, a few modest publishing houses, the state news agency IRNA, and several government agencies.

Among those on the periphery was the bookish cleric and former Minister of Culture Muhammad Khatami. Together, this band of intellectuals debated the notions that were to form the core of the future Khatami campaign—that is, the rule of law, civil society, and a dialogue of civilizations.

The tensions within the Khatami coalition began to show within days of its stunning electoral victory. Activists like Shamsolvaezin and Jala’ipour were impatient to push the reformist agenda. They argued for the immediate creation of a political party and grassroots organizations, but they were vetoed by powerful rivals inside the Khatami camp. Instead, the two men, joined by the U.S.-educated engineer, Mossan Zangarah [phonetic], poured their enormous energies into creating the first truly modern newspapers of the post-revolutionary era.

This it turned out was a fateful decision. For Khatami, himself a former newspaper publisher, and other intellectuals, the written word was a seductive device, and a free press, they argued, would mobilize public opinion, act as a check on the state, and energize a society beaten down by revolution, war, death, and suffering.

But the hard-line authorities soon recognized the danger of the newspaper revolution. The election of Khatami was bad enough, they reasoned, but the unbridled voice of a truly independent press was another matter altogether. Backed by the Supreme Leader, the Tehran Prosecutor closed the newspaper and jailed its founders.

So began a game of cat and mouse between the pro-reform press and the hard-liners in control of the courts. Religious imperative was invoked to silence dissent, and many editors and publishers were jailed on charges of violating Islamic values.

In April of 2000, these press wars closed dozens of newspapers. Prominent editors and publishers were jailed or prosecuted. Seven months later, Geneive and I sat in the audience as President Khatami confessed before a conference of lawyers and jurists that he had failed. His campaign promises to introduce the rule of law and to create a civil society had proven empty. “After three and a half years,” a grim-faced Khatami said, “I must be clear: The President does not have enough rights to carry out the heavy task on my shoulders.”

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you, Jonathan and Geneive. I would like to open the floor to questions.

Question & Answer

QUESTION: How will the sudden new threat of a couple hundred thousand American troops on the Iranian border affect the on-going internal debate?

GENEIVE ABDO: There is already evidence that it has strengthened the hard-liners, simply because their rhetoric for two decades has been against the United States. They have argued that the U.S. is an imperialist power which wants to invade the Middle East. This has been part of their strength against any sort of criticism. Their position is: if we seem unstable or vulnerable, the U.S. could come and occupy Iran again. There was a CIA-backed coup in Iran in 1953, so there is some recent history to back up this anxiety. We have already seen in the short term that the war in Iraq has strengthened the position of the hard-liners.

If the war is successful, if a democratic effort succeeds in Iraq, that might change the political dynamic within Iran, but we don't know at this stage.

QUESTION: There are a couple of bills before the Majlis, the Parliament, currently seeking to give the President more power or to curb the power of the religious authorities. What do you see as the prospects for that?

JONATHON LYONS: The short answer is not very good, at least in the near term. That's why in *Answering Only to God* we focus so much on the underlying religious struggle, because that struggle must be resolved before political manifestations, such as new bills spelling out a new sharing of power, can be put into place. Assuming that the tactics of the reformers haven't changed since we interviewed them extensively in the years that we were there, I would say that they are counting on a defeat.

GENEIVE ABDO: Even though the reformers comprise a majority in the Parliament, there is a Guardian Council, which is a body of clerics. They can veto legislation, and do so regularly, which makes the Parliament more or less irrelevant.

QUESTION: You used the phrase "the people as the expression of God's genius." Is that a traditional phrase? I'm wondering what habit exists in Shi'ite Islam, and also in the history of Iran, to make us in any way confident that they have a capability for democracy.

JONATHON LYONS: There is certainly nothing in their historical experience that would accord with our Western developed notion of democracy. Proponents of this Islamic democracy, particularly the clerical reformers such as Mr. Kadivar, or another cleric we haven't mentioned, the very important figure of Ayatollah Montazeri, will tell you that there are elements of democratic tradition within Shia Islam. Unlike Sunni Islam, which is the majority faith in the Muslim world, Shia Islam allows for a very high degree of independence for individual senior clerics.

To achieve this level of independence, you must not only be learned, write treatises and amass followers, but you also must have the acclamation of the people and your peers. And so Montazeri, and by extension his student Kadivar, would argue that that is a form of democracy because these people develop a true following, they're not foisted upon the people.

GENEIVE ABDO: The relationship that the clerics have with the state is at the heart of the distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam. In the Sunni tradition, in Egypt as an example, the sheikhs that were part of the official orthodoxy at Al-Azhar, which is the institution for Sunni learning, were for centuries basically a rubber stamp for the government. Even in recent wars between Arabs and Israelis, they were used by President Sadat as a rubber stamp on the system. That has changed, though, with the Islamic revival.

This differs in Shia Islam, where the clerics have been traditionally independent of the state.

QUESTION: There is a very large Irani Diaspora dispersed around the country. Are they in any way effecting or trying to effect change, working with the reformers?

Second, the Guardian Council controls the judiciary, the military, and the police. How is it ever possible to have a reform movement as long as those three branches of government are totally controlled by the clerics? Is there any possibility of the military or the police rebelling?

JONATHON LYONS: We haven't heard so much from the Diaspora in political terms until very recently, largely with the coming of the Bush Administration and the post-9/11 sudden interest in foreign policy, and Middle East policy in particular. There are elements of the Diaspora who feel that maybe now is the time to begin to mount a challenge to the clerical regime.

The Shah of Iran, or pretender to the Shah, has been on radio, television and in the newspapers trying to mobilize. We would argue very strongly that that does not have resonance back home. That may not prevent him from becoming a player in international politics or from having access to the White House, but he has no real

backing at home. Iranians are generally unhappy with the current state of affairs, but they are not looking for either a monarchist or a secularist solution.

GENEIVE ABDO: To answer your second question : As long as you have a Constitution which doesn't give power to elected officials but gives power to clerics, then you will not have democracy.

The problem, though, is that the Constitution was written on the basis of religion, because when Ayatollah Khomeini inherited or developed the Islamic republic, this was the first time in the whole history of Shia Islam that clerics had to sit down and create a framework on how to run an Islamic state.

And so this is the problem, two decades on, that they are still trying to resolve. They will have to go back and rewrite the Constitution if there is to be a pluralistic system.

QUESTION: Two elements should be factored in: 1) minorities, such as Kurds, such as the Afghans, such as the peoples who were at one time part of the Soviet Union; 2) the majority of the Iranian population is under thirty years of age, so they were born after the war with Iraq.

And also what puzzles me is you as a woman dealing with clerics. Do you feel that what they told you was authentic, was it whitewash, was it something that they wanted to say to get rid of you? How did you assess your dealings with them as a woman?

GENEIVE ABDO: In the beginning, it was very difficult for the clerics to answer serious questions from an American woman. One thing I did to help my case was wear a chador. This is not required, and most Western women, particularly journalists in Iran, wear just a head scarf and an overcoat. I did this in a very deliberate way, to send a message that I was making a concession to their Islamic culture, that I was willing to make this compromise if they were willing to take me seriously.

It took some time, but after awhile they did take me seriously, once I presented the questions. The reason that Jonathan and I were able to interview Ayatollah Montazeri, the successor to Khomeini, when he had never agreed to an interview with a Western journalist, was that we faxed him the questions, all about theology, so a month later he sent back an 8,000-word answer. He had never agreed to an interview before, because people asked him what he ate for breakfast and what life was like under house arrest. But when we asked him about the intricacies of Shia Islam, he felt that that was worth his time to answer.

So it did take some work, but over time we established some reputation as people who were trying to understand something deeper.

GENEIVE LYONS: I'll try to briefly address your question about demographics. The vast majority of Iranians are under thirty, have no real memory of any of these events—the revolution, Khomeini, possibly only some sort of nightmarish memory of the bombs over Tehran or other affairs associated with the war with Iraq. This is a very big factor in the way things play out over time, and certainly you hear among Western analysts that this is the factor.

We came away completely convinced, and remain convinced, that what the Iranians want today is a system that respects their culture and religion.

Do they want this Islamic system? The majority would say decisively "no." But they want a system that works within their culture and respects their values. They may like "Titanic," which was a big hit on the black market when we were living there, they may like Michael Jordan, but they don't want to import wholesale American values; they want to pick and choose, as do many societies.

QUESTION: The Iranian intelligence service has been extremely aggressive both internationally and domestically. Have you seen any dissipation of that aggression?

JONATHON LYONS: We didn't study that very much. As you can imagine, it is an extremely complex matter, certainly safer to study from outside Iran.

We had some exposure to the sharp end of the stick, if you will, from the intelligence service. We were the targets of limited and rather soft harassment. They would come into our office and move some of the furniture around so that we would know that they had been there, and our translators were interrogated, and we assumed that people that we dealt with were followed.

It comes down to the division of power. As the previous question elucidated, Khatami is probably arguably the least powerful elected executive in the world. The office of president in Iran does not have any of the functions that we would list as a natural prerogative of an elected president—cannot declare war and peace, does not

command the armed forces, can't control the police, doesn't have final say on foreign policy.

We are left with the Ministry of Culture, which is one of the reasons that newspapers became such a prominent vehicle for the attempted reform, because in a way it was the only playground they could play in.

The very feared head of intelligence, a cleric named Dori Najaffa Badi [phonetic], was brought down by a government scandal, allegedly for participating in, or at least abetting, the murder of secularist intellectuals, and he was brought down by the free press. Probably the greatest success of the Khatami free press was actually holding an extremely powerful official to account.

QUESTION: How does the clerical establishment in Iran interact with the foreign businesses there, and has this interaction resulted in any relaxation of restrictions?

JONATHON LYONS: I'm sure that everyone is aware that Islam is a business-friendly religion, a mercantile religion. Mohammad's first wife was a merchant.

Rafsanjani in particular, the former President, is renowned for allegedly amassing an enormous amount of wealth, both personally and through his family, in connection with concessions for private foreign businesses—car factories, soda bottling plants, pistachios, etc. So yes, the ties are quite extensive, because right after the revolution they nationalized a huge chunk of the property that was controlled by the Shah and his inner circle, hotels controlled by big Western chains.

It's quite amusing that when you ask Tehranis, "How do you get to the Laleh Hotel?" they don't know, but if you say, "That's the Intercontinental twenty years ago," they all know where it is. If you need to know a hotel, you don't use the current name, you use the old name.

There was a big American business presence there. They inherited a great deal of wealth and business connections. The traditional merchant class in Iran, were very big supporters of Khomeini when he was in exile and very strong supporters of the revolution, and would arguably have much to lose if the system opened up further. That is an obstacle to the reform project, because many of the resources are focused in very concentrated hands, held by people who benefit from the status quo.

QUESTION: Are you saying that the clerics are actually fairly laissez-faire in terms of business?

JONATHON LYONS: We always insist on not seeing the clerics as monolithic. Khatami comes from a clerical association that can only be described as leftist. Some of his closest allies would probably support a return to Soviet central planning in the economy.

One of the fascinating things about Iran is that there is no simple spectrum of left, right, center, social values, economic policies, religious values. They all intermingle in very complex ways and it's very difficult to differentiate one from another until you discuss these things for many hours.

QUESTION: What is your forecast of the governance structure of Iran ten years from today?

GENEIVE ABDO: Never make predictions. Certainly it will be far more pluralistic than it is today. It is also a matter of demographics, because now 50 percent of the population is under thirty-five, so the people that are in their twenties now will be the leaders ten or twenty years from now, which will certainly change the political dynamic.

What will happen to the clerics is an open question. The clerics will not disappear, but whether their role will move from running the state to an advisory function within the state is probably what they will sort out in the next ten to twenty years. If young people have their way, the future leaders of Iran, the clerics will probably have more of an advisory role to the state rather than a primary role.

It also depends on what happens in the Islamic world in general. If, as we have seen, Islamic movements gain more power, this will indirectly give the clerics more power in their insistence on running the states. There are many forces at play not only in Iran but in the region.

JONATHON LYONS: The gentleman whom we have mentioned several times, Ayatollah Montazeri, has a very long and complex history. He wrote an 8,000-word treatise as a response to our questions. It has been translated into English and is available at our website, www.answeronlytogod.com. You will also find stories about how we were expelled from Iran and some other stories that you might find interesting.

GENEIVE ABDO: He answers in a very thorough way some of the questions about the whole issues about the future of Iran, what we can expect from the clerics.

JONATHON LYONS: That is a roadmap that people should use and take seriously. It may not be *the* direction, but it's certainly one direction under consideration.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you, Jonathan, Geneive.

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