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## Introduction

When the political Shiite leaderships of Iran and Lebanese Hizballah emerged into the global light, the world could not be sure of what it was seeing. Were these new leaderships fundamentalist, conformist, or perhaps covertly realist? What knowledge was needed for better understanding of their worldview, strategic preferences, and conduct? There was no telling if Shiite leaders in Iran and Lebanon were stumbling blindly or walking proud.

Observers emphasize a rapid process of politicization, seemingly in direct contrast to the quietist, apolitical traditions of the new Shiite religious leadership. The assertion of overt political authority was an innovation bordering on the heretical for Shiite religious scholars. This embrace of conventions removed any notions of Shiite leadership as obsolete relics.

Article 2 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1980) declares the dominant role of religiosity in shaping the thoughts and actions of Shiite leadership.<sup>1</sup> The article states the following:

The Islamic Republic is a system based on belief in:

1. The One God (as stated in the phrase “There is no god except Allah”), His exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate, and the necessity of submission to His commands;
2. Divine revelation and its fundamental role in setting forth the laws;
3. The return to God in the Hereafter, and the constructive role of this belief in the course of man’s ascent towards God;
4. The justice of God in creation and legislation;
5. Continuous [religious] leadership (imamah) and perpetual guidance, and its fundamental role in ensuring the uninterrupted process of the revolution of Islam;

<sup>1</sup> For an astute analysis of Iran’s constitution, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran, Politics and State in the Islamic Republic* (IB Tauris, 1998).

6. The exalted dignity and value of man, and his freedom coupled with responsibility before God; in which equity, justice, political, economic, social, and cultural independence, and national solidarity are secured by recourse to:
  - a. continuous *ijtihad* [religious decision making] of the *fuqaha'* [Shiite legal scholars] possessing necessary qualifications, exercised on the basis off the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the *Ma'sumun* [the twelve infallible Shiite Imams], upon all of whom be peace;
  - b. sciences and arts and the most advanced results of human experience, together with the effort to advance them further;
  - c. negation of all forms of oppression, both the infliction of and the submission to it, and of dominance, both its imposition and its acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

It is in fact religiosity, the practice and reality of religion, which serves as the core of the Islamic Republic, particularly its notions of leadership, virtue, and success. All these are defined in religious terms, accessed through a firm belief in God's sovereignty and fulfilled within a worldly social order.

### Shiite Religiosity: A Comparative Perspective

The role of religiosity in political affairs is difficult to parse. For many scholars, the precepts of religious faith are incapable of supporting a full-fledged political system of beliefs and institutions. How is the very apparent religiosity of the Shiite leadership, particularly in the Islamic Republic of Iran, understood in the scholarly literature?

Hamid Dabashi, a leading scholar of modern Iran, begins his *Shi'ism – A Religion of Protest*<sup>3</sup> in the following manner: “Shi’ism is a festive gathering, a festival, a feast, a constellation of moral manners, a commitment, a conviction, a mobile memory – the centerpiece of it the iconic unsheathing of a dagger.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that “Shi’ism is the shimmering memory of an event, a dream, a single traumatic incident, condemned forever to try and remember itself: in vain ... Shi’ism is a blind faith, a reasoned reassurance, a moral mandate, an intellectual tapestry.”<sup>5</sup>

Dabashi understands Shi’ism as a predominantly cultural entity. Shi’ism shapes the intangible aspects of being – morality, intellect, faith, reason, memory. Shi’ism runs deep, says Dabashi, and its main trait seems to be an ability to encapsulate profound contradictions.

Given this view of Shi’ism, Dabashi’s thesis about the nature of political Shi’ism, and Shiite leadership, is not surprising: “My principal contention is that Shi’ism is predicated on a rather perplexing paradox – that it is morally triumphant when it is politically defiant, and that it morally fails when it

<sup>2</sup> Available online at [http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution\\_cho1.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_cho1.php)

<sup>3</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism – A Religion of Protest* (Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See Dabashi, *Shi'ism*, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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politically succeeds.”<sup>6</sup> Shi’ism “works” at the profound level of culture, says Dabashi. In fact, he claims even greater depth for Shi’ism as a motivating force. Dabashi links the Shi’i tendency toward social resistance to a Freudian guilty conscience caused by the martyrdom of the third Shi’i Imam, Hossein, at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD.<sup>7</sup>

Others cast Shiite religiosity within the framework of a struggle over naked power rather than over ideas. Ervand Abrahamian, in his *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*,<sup>8</sup> criticizes the commonly held opinion that Khomeini’s Islamic regime was a fundamentalist one. Abrahamian demonstrates the inapplicability of fundamentalism to the realities of the Muslim world and the Islamic Republic. He explains that Khomeini did not offer blind adherence to a single sacred text, did not reject Western modernity, and did not accept other conventions of fundamentalism as it is known in the Christian West.

One of Abrahamian’s reasons for rejecting the notion of Khomeini as a fundamentalist seems relevant for our discussion:

[T]he term “fundamentalist” conjures up the image of inflexible orthodoxy, strict adherence to tradition, and rejection of intellectual novelty, especially from outside. In the political arena, however, Khomeini, despite his own denials, was highly flexible, remarkably innovative, and cavalier toward hallowed traditions. He is important precisely because he discarded many Shiite concepts and borrowed ideas, words, and slogans from the non-Muslim world. In doing so, he formulated a brand-new Shi’i interpretation of state and society. The final product has less in common with conventional fundamentalism than with Third World populism, especially in Latin America.

The term “populism” needs some added elaboration. By it I mean a movement of the propertied middle class that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric directed against imperialism, foreign capitalism, and the political establishment. In mobilizing the “common people,” populist movements use charismatic figures and symbols, imagery, and language that have potent value in the mass culture. Populist movements promise to drastically raise the standard of living and make the country fully independent of outside powers. Even more important, in attacking the status quo with radical rhetoric, they intentionally stop short of threatening the petty bourgeoisie and the whole principle of private property. Populist movements, thus, inevitably emphasize the importance, not of economic-social revolution, but of cultural, national, and political reconstruction.<sup>9</sup>

Abrahamian subverts both Dabashi’s explanation of political Shi’ism and the conventional understandings of religious rule. Khomeini’s regime was, according

<sup>6</sup> See Dabashi, *Shi’ism*, p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> See Dabashi, *Shi’ism*, pp. 9–13. Hossein, the third Imam (religious ruler) of the Shiite community following its secession from the majority of the Islamic world, was slaughtered on the plains of Karbala by a vastly superior Sunni force, which had ambushed him at the spot. Hossein’s death is reenacted each year as a passion play, on *Ashura*, the most solemn of Shiite holidays.

<sup>8</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> See Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 17.

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to Abrahamian, quite comfortable with foregoing much of its religious heritage and commitments. Moreover, while the powers that be in the Islamic Republic appear to be motivated by cultural and religious norms, in reality they are mobilized by a class struggle over the allocation of political means and social prestige. According to Abrahamian, Shiite religiosity in the Islamic Republic is a ploy on the part of the bourgeoisie, meant to mobilize the lower classes to preserve the class interests of the former. Religiosity is, then, a derivative element within the Iranian social sphere. It motivates genuine social processes, but mostly under use or manipulation by ulterior forces and motives.

Said Amir Arjomand, a prominent scholar of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath, represents an additional version of the materialist view. In his *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, Arjomand explains the revolution by doing two main things: “putting it in the context of the relationship between Shi’ism and political order in the history of Iran, and ... comparing it to other revolutions.”<sup>10</sup>

The role of religiosity in the unfolding of the revolution is, according to Arjomand, a historical one. Since 1501, Shi’ism has been the state religion in Iran. Shiite religious leaders have been part of a dual power structure, combining their spiritual authority with the stately, temporal authority of the king in power. As the Iranian state grew in strength and complexity, the religious establishment enjoyed a unique position.<sup>11</sup> Its leaders were fully integrated into the state elite while maintaining continuous, intimate contact with the Iranian masses through their networks of students and through their religious rulings.

The religious leaders could thus hardly shy away from offering stringent criticism of the state. The 1979 revolution was carried out by a broad coalition effort uniting socialists, wealthy merchants, landowners, and Western-educated liberals. Still, it was seen as Islamic because the unique position of the religious establishment allowed it to form a nexus for the various elements desiring change.

According to Arjomand, Shiite religious leaders skillfully took advantage of this state of affairs. They did all they could to expand their power at the expense of other forces. Arjomand explains their motivation:

What alerted the mind of Khomeini and a number of other Shiite jurists to the immense possibilities for the expansion of Shiite hierocratic power was: (1) the opportunity to lead a crusade against foreign, imperialist domination that had presented itself recurrently since the nineteenth century; and (2) a desperate struggle for the very survival of the Shiite religious institutions against the onslaught of the modernizing Pahlavi state, beginning in the 1960s and becoming more intense in the mid-1970s.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 15. Arjomand has also written the influential *After Khomeini: Iran Under his Successors* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> For a thorough historical review, see Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, pp. 11–75.

<sup>12</sup> See Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 76.

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Arjomand's explanation highlights two motivating forces for religious leadership. First, he describes a nationalist, class-based struggle against foreign domination; second, a struggle for materialist survival against the state, a struggle over resources and institutional power. Religiosity itself does not play an independent role as a motivator and mobilizer. It is a tool, a means, a bonding agent. Religiosity, thus, is evaluated within a historical context. Its relevance on its own terms is, at best, of secondary importance.

We began our discussion of current literature by asking how this body of knowledge considers religiosity and its role in the thought and actions of Shiite leadership. Despite their differences, the views described earlier share a similarity in this regard. They all consider religiosity as a reflection of ulterior forces and motivations. For Dabashi, religiosity reflects powerful psychological processes, the logic of which is shared by all human beings. Guilt, desire, longing – these all find expression in religious practices. For Abrahamian, religiosity reflects the dynamics of social history, as well as a human tendency for grand, ideological visions. He conducts effective comparisons across temporal and geographical boundaries.

Within such comparisons, religious practices express broader patterns of social and individual behavior. For Arjomand, religiosity is a reflection of power struggles between economic classes. The religious scholars represent a concrete set of financial and political interests, and they protect those interests against competition. Religious practices and ideologies are a reflection of the material powers that drive and regulate social orders.

## **High Ground and Middle Ground**

Shiite heritage has always been grounded in texts.<sup>13</sup> Shiites have been, throughout their history, a persecuted minority. Shiite communities have hardly had the opportunity to entrust their collective memory to state institutions, despite the existence of several Shiite states throughout early Islamic history. The task of conducting a meaningful life has thus been entrusted to the scholars capable of studying and interpreting these texts. This scholarly religious leadership acknowledges the absolute extremities of values and interests, but consciously opts to forge its own path. We will refer to this in-between domain as the middle ground.

The leading scholars of the new brand of Shiite leadership – Dabashi, Abrahamian, and Arjomand – apply what may be called a high-ground approach to religion and religiosity. Both may be explained and justified by recourse to a higher, more basic organizing principle: psychological processes, economic forces, historical narratives. Often, religiosity is seen to be meaningful mainly

<sup>13</sup> In this respect, Shiite theology is very much akin to Jewish theology, which views the Torah as a “Tree of life to those who take hold of her” (Proverbs 3:18), online at <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+3&version=NIV>

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as a reflection of these higher principles. It is rarely perceived as an independently influential component within Shiite reality.

In contrast, the religious middle ground as we understand it plays a significant part in shaping that reality. This understanding does not contradict a psychological description or an economic description, but seeks to complement them by highlighting the dynamic, negotiated nature of Shiite religious experience and its influence on Shiite political reality. The middle ground is not relativistic, flaccid, or benign. The boundaries of the middle ground are solidly defined by unimpeachable truths.

One such truth is the faith in God as sole sovereign, rather than the state or the people. Life in the middle ground acknowledges these truths as horizons, but it rejects them as destinations. An object of aspiration, these horizons may motivate, but in reality they are unreachable. The middle ground resists the ultimate satisfactions of absolute truths just as it acknowledges and is inspired by such truths.<sup>14</sup> Resistance toward unassailable answers and absolute stability is a hallmark of middle ground life and politics. The extraordinary nature of life in the middle ground requires different forms of reading and understanding, which stray from the beaten path.

### The Religious Roots of the Middle Ground: Void, Interpretation, Friction

We present the Shiite middle ground through a three-dimensional grid. We refer to these dimensions as *Void*, *Interpretation*, and *Friction*. Shiite faith begins with a void. The Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, the infallible Shiite leader descended from the holy seed of the prophet Muhammad, awaits Judgment Day when he will return as the Shiite messiah.<sup>15</sup> His absence, alive but not present, leaves a gaping hole at the heart of Shiite consciousness. No single leader can replace him. Yet, the community cannot remain without an authoritative guide. The void, never whole, stands in direct contrast to the subjective, rational wholeness of the modern individual from which Western politics and philosophy emerge. The inviolable individual, always maintaining singular integrity and coherence, could hardly survive in the shadow of the void.

In the absence of the Imam, interpretation is the main practice of the Shiite community. With infallible authority suspended, no truth or order claim to be more than an interpretation. Authority is based on a constant processing

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between absolute questions and intellectual practice, see John Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> For the definitive treatment of the Islamic Messianism in general and Shiite messianism in particular, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism* (State University of New York Press, 1981). Sachedina is remarkable among scholars of Shi'ism for combining rigorous historical study, a keen theological sensitivity, and an understanding that this combination should continuously strive for relevance with regard to the current state of Shi'ism. His *The Just Ruler in Shiite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imami Jurisprudence* (Oxford University Press, 1988) is another work synthesizing these seemingly competitive directions.

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of the world, on adaptation and participation. A virtuous society is one that engaged more in interpretation than in attempting to live out static perfection. Interpretation is the core rationale of the Islamic Republic of Iran, just as it is the dominant dynamic allowing Lebanese Hizballah to remain unscathed despite the coalition of forces seeking the organization's weaknesses.

Friction is the practical axis of the Shiite middle ground. Different voices and interests coexist within this whole, without relinquishing their differences. The eternal and the mundane, the national and the communal confront each other and cooperate with each other within the friction of the middle ground. Often, friction challenges the procedural, bureaucratic rationale of Western societies. Such societies ground their integrity and morality in the smooth, neutral stability of the democratic process. Friction is negotiable, contextual, and dynamic.

The most publicized aspect of Iran's foreign policy, its nuclear prospects, can serve to illustrate these issues.<sup>16</sup> Pundits and politicians repeatedly state that a nuclear Iran is an unacceptable risk to the Middle East and beyond.<sup>17</sup> However, when seen in a middle ground context, Iran's nuclear policy is not determined by high-ground calculations. The focus does not seem to be on acquisition or detonation. Rather, Iranian policy seems to leverage the friction caused by nuclear negotiations into diverse global influence.

Iran uses the controversy around its nuclear prospects to further engage with different countries. It is the nuclear agenda, placing Iran at odds with the United States, that allowed it to develop close ties with Venezuela. Observed differently, it is the nuclear agenda that allows Iran to convey different messages to different international parties. Juggling the different Iranian statements addressed to the United States, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the EU, Brazil, and others makes Iran a hub of regional and global policy. It is here that one encounters the logic of the middle ground in immediate fashion. The potential to change the world, to touch absolute boundaries, is a constant temptation.

The politics of Shiite leadership reflect an understanding of the world simultaneously innovative, pragmatic, and traditional. The middle ground takes on the politics of the extreme, whether that extreme is universal or highly particular. The middle ground reframes the debates between state and non-state actors, religious and secular forces, local communities and global societies.

The resurgence of the middle ground opens up real possibilities for transcending or dissolving impasses plaguing global politics. Middle ground leaderships are on the rise in diverse countries throughout the world. They may

<sup>16</sup> For a diverse analysis of Iranian foreign policy over the past two decades, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri (eds.), *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad* (Ithaca Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> For a broad historical survey of Iran's nuclear history, see David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (IB Tauris, 2012).



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be found in Latin America, Asia, on the Indian subcontinent, and in Africa. They have the existing order in their sights. The example of Turkey is a telling one. For nearly two decades, the EU has refused to accept Turkey as a member. Turkish leadership traditionally adopted a position of acquiescence. Since the rise of Turkey's Justice and Development party (2002), headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, this position has changed dramatically. Turkey marches to its own drum. It seeks positive relations with Iran, a long-standing rival, turns to the United States for support, and significantly dampens relations with the EU.

Attempts to describe these changes in Turkish policy as "Radicalization" or "Islamicization" miss the far-reaching changes taking place in the country.<sup>18</sup> Erdoğan has embarked on a consistent reform of Turkish constitutional politics. He has successfully taken on the extra-democratic authorities enjoyed by the Turkish military and high courts. In the process, he has expanded the scope of public participation in Turkish electoral politics.

Erdoğan's policies cannot be merely addressed as fundamentalist on the one hand or cynical on the other. He has, like counterparts in India<sup>19</sup> and Brazil, rejected the notion that one must support or reject the current conventions of global politics. Erdoğan is a political reformist and a true believer, behaving like both an international statesman and a parochial village elder. We view Erdoğan, in similar fashion to Shiite leaderships in Iran and in Lebanon, as defining his leadership through friction rather than exclusion.

### Where We Are Going and How We Get There

*Understanding Shiite Leadership* strives to understand Shiite leadership through the interaction between its worldview, its surroundings, and its conduct. We seek to present the conceptual tools required for approaching and engaging with Shiite leadership on its own terms. The first four chapters deal with the components of the Shiite worldview and environment. The following four chapters examine Shiite leaderships in action, exploring a variety of contexts and courses of action. The concluding chapter combines both aspects into a unified narrative, considering history, theology, and practice through the eyes of an imagined Iranian Shiite individual.

The first two chapters focus on the leadership's quality of interpretation. Its evolution, both historical and theological, is also the story of Shiite leadership itself. The initial void in Shiite public life, the one left by the Twelfth Imam

<sup>18</sup> For a nuanced, interdisciplinary anthology on religion in Turkish public life, see Ahmad T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan (eds.), *Democracy, Islam and Secularism in Turkey* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> For a history of Indian democracy, see Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Harper Perennial, 2008). For a history of Brazil and its transformation under Luis Ignacio Da Silva (Lula), see Richard Bourne, *Lula of Brazil: The Story so Far* (University of California Press, 2009).



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who resides with God as a Messiah-in-waiting, was filled by the interpretative leadership of the religious scholars. They were the ones qualified to mediate divine revelation into practical rules for human life. They were also those who provided human lives with a semblance of holiness, a link to a transcendent truth.

Still, interpretation was hardly ever politically construed in a formal sense. Khomeini's 1979 revolution rejuvenated traditional Shiite practices and principles, marginalized under the authority of Iranian Shahs over the past 500 years, shining a new light on them and casting them as inherently political. This political form of interpretation rejects absolutist ideologies, opting for ongoing friction within society.

Interpretation provides a key principle of the middle ground, its reality and its leadership. It allows for both an acknowledgment of the void and a commitment to creating a meaningful life from this void. It provides cohesion while leaving room for difference and adaptation, tension, and, most of all, the absence of a clear-cut resolution.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the cultural and geopolitical environments in which Shiite leadership operates. Middle ground reality is diverse. It includes several spaces – communal, institutional (state), and the frontier – without any single space achieving prolonged dominance over others. Boundaries between these spaces are porous and flexible. This is so because middle ground reality is not a part of the perfect, single-spaced reality of divine creation. Middle ground reality is a human construct.

For nearly forty years (1941–1979), Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, attempted to create a state based on a single space. He sought to follow the notion of single civic space of Western states, one which provides a sense of community alongside institutional coherence and national identity. Khomeini's Islamic Republic, however, reveled in its multiplicity of spaces – community, state institutions, and frontier.

What are the unique features of each space? What role does each fulfill with regard to the other spaces of Shiite society? To what extent does the presence of Shiite leadership within these spaces affect its policy and practice? We highlight these issues in order to demonstrate how the power and effectiveness of Shiite leadership are related to its simultaneous presence in different spaces.

The following three chapters examine friction management by Shiite leaderships in Iran and Lebanon. Interpretation and space serve as two lenses, or a pair of spectacles, with which to observe the reality of friction. Friction drives the various modes of behavior exhibited by Shiite leadership. These chapters elaborate the ways in which Shiite leadership in Iran and Lebanon regulates friction.

The three dimensions of Shiite middle ground reality – void, interpretation, and friction – sustain each other. All three dimensions shape each other simultaneously. The initial void rejects absolute truths. The resulting necessity of interpretation denies a single space or person the possibility of dominating the

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middle ground. Friction provides both the basic principle of motion and the elaborate structure for Shiite leadership.

The notion of middle ground challenges the discourse of victory and defeat embraced by current global politics. The Arab Spring of 2011 provides another type of challenge. In both cases, revolutionary narratives defy the convention of a linear plot. While incumbent regimes are unseated by these middle ground forces, the process of nation building following such upheavals is as unpredictable as it is imminent.

Conservative and pragmatic, embracing and solitary, the politics of the middle ground as practiced by Shiite leadership are a worldview as well as a way of life, not just means to a high-ground end. How does Shiite leadership measure up to prevalent leadership types in other parts of the world? What can one learn from it about truths we hold to be self-evident? This course of inquiry will be taken up in the concluding chapter.

That chapter consists of an imagined encounter with Hossein B., an archetypical Iranian protagonist in the story we tell. His life reflects diverse issues: the advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the relationship between religion and politics, and the extent to which the practice of interpretation, as well as awareness of multiple spaces, have shaped individual and collective consciousness. Hossein B. will be a Tocquevillean figure, serving as a guide through various experiences of Shiite life. Looking at Shiite leadership through this lens will allow us to end our voyage on a note of promise.

As mentioned earlier, *Understanding Shiite Leadership* provides the conceptual contours of Shiite leaderships in Iran and Lebanon. We focus on their middle ground dynamics and logics, most emphatically on the role of friction as their organizing principle. These leaderships are constantly in motion; evaluating, adapting, aligning and realigning. Those engaging with Shiite leaderships – decision makers, scholars, and observers – should come to expect the recasting of insurmountable differences as platforms for dialogue, and of hardline rigidity as pragmatic realism.