Almost all US administrations have taken it for granted that there is a dichotomy and power struggle in Iran between the “hardliners” and “moderates”. The dichotomy has provided a strong analytic framework for understanding Iran’s domestic and foreign policies. However, there is an increasing awareness in the US media about the implausibility of applying the term “moderate” to the Iranian officials. After a review of the history of the “hardliner-moderate” dichotomy and the recent dissatisfaction with term “moderate” as it is applied to the mullahs’ regime, I shall indicate that the scope of current literature in its critique of the dichotomy is limited to showing that certain Iranian officials—who are deemed by the US administration to be moderate—are not, in fact, moderate. The critiques, however, fail to question the very assumption of the dichotomy and power struggle within the regime. By questioning the assumption of the dichotomy, I present an alternative view of Iran affairs that is based on the harmony of the seemingly conflicting factions. I shall indicate that all the signs of a power struggle between the “moderates” and “hardliners” have been part of a game directed at the goal of serving the interests of the regime. I shall review certain policy issues in light of my “harmony” account.

“Hardliner-moderate” dichotomy: A brief history

The earliest indications for the assumption by the US policymakers of a power struggle and “hardliner-moderate” dichotomy within the Iranian regime goes back to early 1980s. At the time, the US and European officials tried to find and reach out to “moderates” inside Iran for helping to release the hostages taken by Iran’s Lebanese and Palestinian proxies. Rafsanjani, then speaker of majlis, was deemed to be the highest ranking “moderate”. The idea was that having direct contact with a “faction” within the Iranian regime has two main benefits. At the domestic level, the United States and Europeans could help “moderates” get the upper hand over the “hardliners” and in the long run improve the regime’s behavior. That was the rationale behind providing American arms to Iran during the “Iran-Contra” scandal. Since Iran badly needed the arms and achieving them would be considered a success, the argument goes, the “moderates” would be credited for the accomplishment and become stronger in Iran’s power structure. At the foreign policy level, the “moderates” could improve Iran’s regional behavior and, for example, use their influence over Iran’s proxies and help release the hostages. However, the actual outcome of the engagement with the “moderates” was not as expected by the assumption of a dichotomy and power struggle.

When the Iranians received incentives for their role in helping to release the hostages, they had stronger desire for supporting the terrorist groups and hostage-taking because it clearly proved to be a very profitable business. More hostages taken by Iran’s proxies meant more incentives by the US and Europeans for Iran’s help in releasing them. That was exactly what happened as the result of the engagement policy of the United States and European countries. along with a scandal at the international level for the United States, and fulfillment of the goal of achieving the necessary American arms by the Iranian regime and enabling the regime to prolong the war with Iraq.
A prominent example of how “hardliner-moderate” dichotomy was taken very seriously and shaped the policy of the United States towards Iran is the case of the presidency of Khatami in Iran in 1997. It was assumed that his rival, Nateq Nuri, was the supreme leader’s and the hardliners’ favorite candidate. It was also assumed that Khatami’s presidency was the result of a serious power struggle between the “reformists” and “hardliners” who had almost all power positions in Iran’s legislature and judiciary. That was the reason behind the support for the policy of engagement with Iran during “moderate” Khatami an important part of which was enlisting the MEK and the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the main Iranian resistance groups. At the same time, the mullahs in Tehran were clandestinely developing their nuclear program. After the National Council of Resistance made revelations about Iran’s secret nuclear sites in 2002, the “moderate” Khatami was no longer a good fit for the regime. A “moderate” president who claimed to be open to dialogue with the world could not justify and defend the mullahs’ exposed nuclear program. To be able to continue their strategically important program, the mullahs needed to change gears from the “moderate” to the “hardliner” mode. It means that, Ahmadinejad was not Khatami’s rival: he was his closest friend who wanted to accomplish for the regime what Khatami, thanks to the revelations of the Iranian resistance group, was no longer able to do.

As another example, an important assumption underpinning recent nuclear talks and the deal was that “moderates” are controlling the government and, despite the opposition of the powerful “hardliners”, want to achieve a nuclear agreement with the world powers. Therefore, there was a perceived overlap between the interests of the world community and the “moderates” in crafting a nuclear deal. The concessions made by the United States, including the retreat from the condition of anywhere, anytime inspections, were deemed necessary in order for enabling the “moderate” Iranian negotiators to sell the deal to the “hardliners” at home. An important reason Obama administration has been optimistic about the deal and its impact on Middle East is the assumption that achieving the deal with world powers strengthens the “moderates” inside Iran.

Policy Implications

What is generally assumed to be a serious power struggle between the hardliners” and “moderates” is in fact a very well-played deceptive game by the Iranian regime and only serves the interests of the mullahs. The US needs to reconsider the assumption of a power struggle inside the regime. The succession of the “moderates” and “hardliners”, instead of being the result of a serious power struggle, is a matter of harmony between the “factions” in order to best serve the interests of the regime under changing circumstances. The real dichotomy and power struggle—which the “hardliner-moderate” game intends to conceal—is the fight between the majority of Iranian people and their organized resistance movement, on one hand, and the mullahs, on the other hand. The United States, instead of being fooled by the mullahs’ “hardliner-moderate” game and taking side in that fictional battle, should make a choice between the two really opposing sides in Iran: the people of Iran and their organized resistance movement fighting for regime change and democracy, and the mullahs.