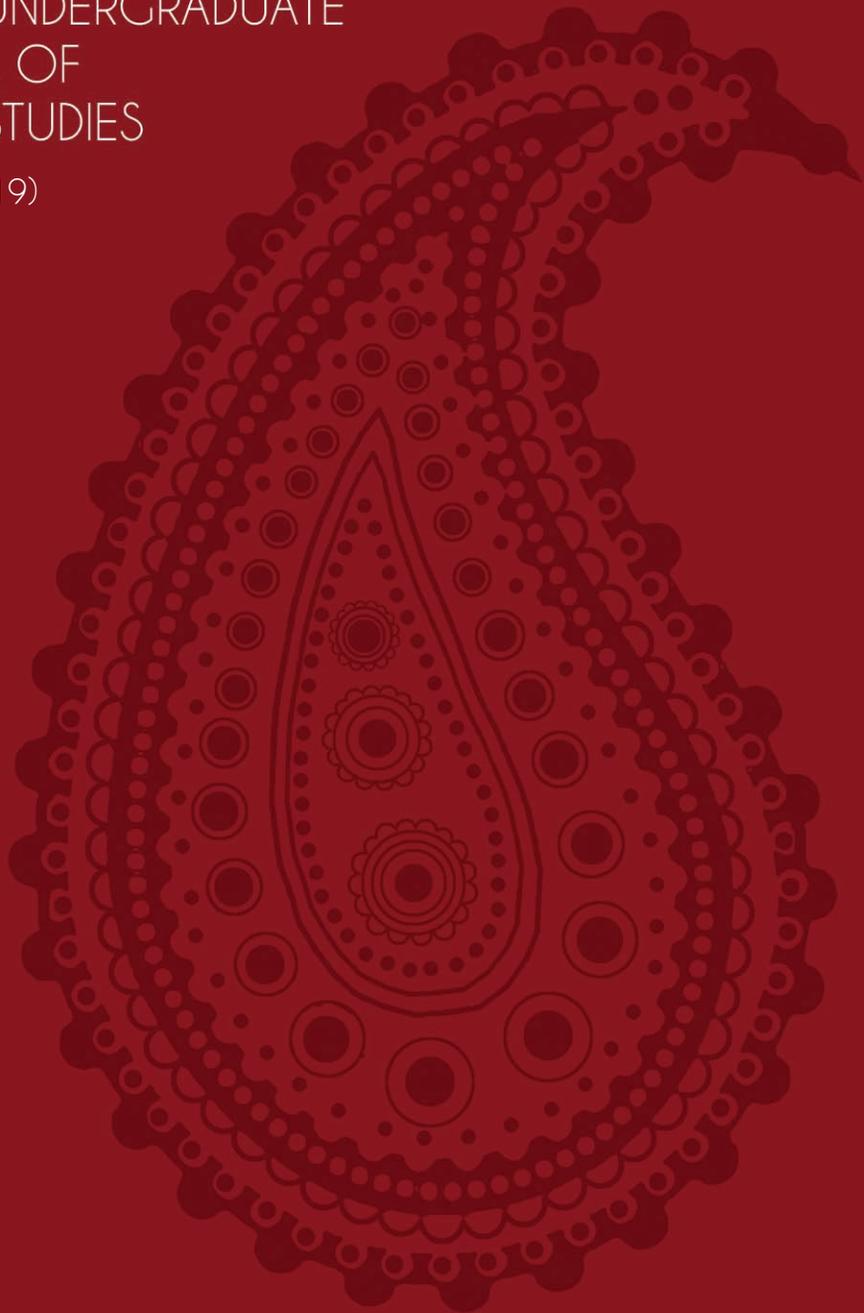


DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
IRANIAN STUDIES

Volume 4 (2019)



COLLEGE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA





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Editors-in-Chief:
Kayleigh Kuyon
Corey Standley

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Chris Progler
Emma Albrecht
Sarah Kayali
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Joni Keaton

Faculty Advisors:
Afshin Marashi
Manata Hashemi

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Email: amarashi@ou.edu.

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From the Faculty Advisors

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This fourth volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As with their work on volume three, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History

Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

Manata Hashemi

Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

From the Editors-in-Chief

We are proud to present to you the fourth volume of the University of Oklahoma's Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies, *DĀNESH*. Through the past three editions of the journal we have seen wonderful presentations on varying regional topics, spanning the breadths of history and social strata. In the tradition of the meaning of *DĀNESH*, or knowledge, we present these articles as an offering to expand the collective dialogue on the understanding of the Iranian and Persian state. We are pleased to have worked on this edition with a group of driven authors to present an edition comprising of submissions focusing on both historical issues and events as well as contemporary issues that Iranians are currently facing.

This work is a collective effort among our undergraduate authors and editors. We would like to extend a humble thanks to our Associate Editors, without whom we would not be able to produce such a successful and professional journal. It would also be remiss of us to not extend a heartfelt thank you to the Farzaneh Family, for without their continued support of the Iranian Studies program none of this would be possible. The University of Oklahoma's Libraries and Printing Services are the unsung heroes of this endeavor, as without their support we would not have the ability to make *DĀNESH* so accessible, both our print and digital versions. Thank you to the tireless, diligent work of our authors, who have crafted these amazing works that we are proudly sharing with you.

And finally, we are wholly indebted to the continued and unwavering support of Dr. Afshin Marashi, whose guidance and advice was invaluable in this journal's creation and continuance. This work, and so much of the growth of the Iranian Studies program as a whole, would not be possible without your faith in us, and our institution. Your academic guidance, advice, and friendship have been invaluable to us.

Corey Standley (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

Kayleigh Kuyon (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

The Alternating Allegiances of the *Ulama*: Clerical Participation in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11

Mathew Bray*

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In the summer of 1906, a group of theology students and other constitutionalists gathered in Tehran for what was expected to be a peaceful protest in favor of government reforms, a continuation of the nascent Constitutional Revolution. By the end of the first day's protests, a respected *sayyed* had been shot by police. In response, an even larger crowd of protesters gathered the next day, only for twenty-two of them to be killed in an attack by the Cossacks.¹ Following these gruesome events, almost all of the *ulama* turned immediately against the Qajar government. Even for those who had been uncertain about Constitutionalism, this direct and inhuman affront to the clerical estate was more than enough to make the current government an enemy.² Within days, many of the *ulama* and their followers had migrated to Qum, leaving the capital without religious leadership and clearly defining their stance on the revolution.³ In the years to follow members of the secular intelligentsia, merchants, and other reformers would continue to push for constitutional reforms with varying degrees of success; ultimately, though, support from the *ulama* began to waver as time went on.

The involvement of the *ulama* in the Constitutional Revolution can be viewed through a variety of lenses. Some scholars would argue their

* **Author's Bio:** Mathew Bray is majoring in Meteorology and Mathematics, and minoring in History. He will graduate in the Spring of 2020.

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, "The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 3 (August 1979): 405.

² *Ibid.*, 406.

³ *Ibid.*

participation, or lack thereof, derived primarily from economic aspirations. Rather, the *ulama* supported whichever side seemed more inclined to protect their land holdings and their financial support from *waqfs*. Others would view the issue in a theological context, attributing the actions of the *ulama* to the way scripture was interpreted in relation to legislative issues. Still others would point to the social position of the *ulama* as the natural representatives of the people, particularly the *bazaaris*, and connect the *ulama*'s leadership during the revolution to their traditional role as an opponent of the government in favor of the people. One theme common to all of these perspectives, though, is the complexity of the *ulama* as an institution. The *ulama* held a unique position in Iranian society as an autonomous, revered, organized, and non-governmental entity. This influence over society gave them the power to pursue their various goals, everything from maintaining *Shi'ite* religious purity to amassing economic wealth.

These observations and theories regarding the *ulama* explain their actions during the Constitutional Revolution. In the early stages of the Revolution, the *ulama* were compelled to support the Constitutionalist cause due to their roles as the leaders of the people and foil to the government, even though they had almost no political experience in a multi-party system. As time went on, however, the *ulama* split into two distinct groups based on their view of constitutionalism: those who believed representation was the best route to serve the *ulama*'s goals, and those who believed the new form of government was at odds with religious precepts. In the end, the *ulama* lost out during the revolution as much of their influence was transferred to the new government. Nevertheless, two important developments occurred within the clerical establishment. The *ulama* became far more politically savvy, which they would use to their advantage later on. Additionally, most clerics realized that in the grand scheme of politics, the *ulama* were more powerful united than divided and that it would be prudent for them to advocate for common religious causes.

Initial Revolutionary Involvement of the Unified *Ulama*

While the constitutionalist movement was in its early stages, it was widely supported by the *ulama* – though not necessarily because they believed in western government. In many ways, the *ulama* were swept into the revolution, compelled to join by both their historical role in society and the current state of Iran. At this point, the *ulama* were fully unaccustomed to participating in the public sphere of political discussion; their authority had never been questioned, but the rise of new political factions forced the *ulama* to compete for influence. Since the interregnum period of the eighteenth century, the *ulama* had served as community leaders and formed particularly close bonds with the *bazaari* class. For decades, animosity had festered between the *ulama* and the Qajar state,

centered on the lessening influence the *ulama* held within the government. As a result, the *ulama* had come to serve as a general opponent to the Qajars; whenever the people disagreed with the government, they looked to the *ulama* for support. A prime example, of course, is the Tobacco Protests of late nineteenth century. Considering their responsibility to the people, it was only natural for the *ulama* to participate in the Revolution.

Acts of direct violence against the *ulama* began around the same time as the first constitutionalist demonstrations and continued until the *ulama*'s migration to Qum in 1906. The first major incident was the application of the bastinado against Mirza Mohammad Reza, a mujtahid, in response to his preaching against government corruption.⁴ Within the next year several more violent offenses against the *ulama* were initiated by the Qajar government, mostly led by Ayn ud-Daula.⁵ Having become accustomed to a great deal of independence, and understandably angered by violence against their peers, the *ulama* became increasingly allied with the constitutionalist protesters.

Among the other constitutionalist protestors was the *bazaari* class, who were not well adapted to modernization and held close ties to the *ulama*. This *ulama-bazaari* alliance formed in the eighteenth century due both to *waqfs* given by the *bazaaris* to the *ulama* and similar social outlooks.⁶ The first action by the *bazaaris* against the government came after the tobacco concession of 1890, when Qajar leaders attempted to give a monopoly over the production and sale of tobacco to a European corporation.⁷ Not only did many believe that this would cause a 'peasantization' of the population, but the *bazaaris* were particularly concerned that increased foreign interference would interfere with their business.⁸ In response to this and other concessions, the *bazaaris* began to push for greater protections against foreign corporations and increased development of Iranian businesses to protect from outside monopolies.⁹ The Qajars did not honor these requests, most likely due to corruption or fear of European powers. They of course drew increasing ire from the *bazaaris*. Since the *ulama* held close

⁴ Said Amir Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist Opposition to Parliamentarianism: 1907-1909," *Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 1981): 176.

⁵ Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 176.

⁶ Ali Gheissari, "Iran's Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Constitutional Experience, Transregional Connections, and Conflicting Narratives of Modernity," in *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and Narratives of the Enlightenment*, ed. Ali Ansari (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

ties with the *bazaaris*, many would argue that “their [the ulama] major support for the economic interests of the *bazaaris*, as the main financial contributors to the religious establishment, should not be taken for granted” when considering the factors that brought the *ulama* into the revolution.¹⁰ Therefore, the Qajars’ apparent lack of care for the merchant’s interests turned the *bazaaris* against them, and the *bazaaris*, in turn, used their traditional relationships with the *ulama* to galvanize the clerics into leaders of the revolution.

The *ulama* were a natural choice to lead the revolution, not just because of their connection to the *bazaaris* but for their role as leaders of Iranian society. For centuries, they had served as community heads and sources of emulation, and within the previous decades had become a counterpoint to the corrupt government. The Qajars, however, tried to take power away from some religious institutions and often embraced Western powers and ideas over Iranian interests (as seen in the tobacco protests).¹¹ Additionally, the *ulama* depended on the Iranian people for support as all of their power derived from the respect and reverence lent to them by believers. Thus, if the people were at odds with the actions of the state, it was only logical for the *ulama* to side with the people to preserve their own power.¹² So strong was this bond, in fact, that scholars have even argued that “the occasion for the disturbances was less important than the outcome—a clash between ulama and state” on behalf of the disgruntled citizens.¹³ In fact, this connection between the *ulama* and their followers seems almost certain when one realizes that “there was no significant faction among the ulama whose position over the contesting issues differed from the warring classes,” implying that the *ulama* simply followed along with the desires of the majority.¹⁴ At this point in the revolution, the *ulama* were not basing their support on the ideals of constitutionalism but rather on protecting their own supporters against the government.

The *ulama*’s role as the representatives of the people went beyond direct opposition to the Qajar government, extending into social and religious spheres as well. As a result of this religious leadership, the *ulama* became inextricably attached to the Iranian people, especially through the course of the Constitutional Revolution. In a sense, the *ulama* played the role of the guardians of religion in society; the *Shi’ite* religion was seen as equivalent with the Iranian nation, and the *ulama* protected it from any impurities or attacks, even from the government

¹⁰ Hani Mansourian, “Iran: Religious Leaders and Opposition Movements,” *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1, (2007): 222.

¹¹ Gheissari, “Iran’s Dialectic,” 34.

¹² Algar, *Religion and State*, 241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 244, 252.

¹⁴ Mansoor Moaddel, “The Shi’i Ulama and the State in Iran,” *Theory and Society*, 15, no. 4, (July 1986): 523.

itself.¹⁵ This theme is particularly evident in the use of religious symbolism during the Revolution, particularly with respect to ideas like martyrdom.¹⁶ Although they had long been the religious leaders of Iran, the *ulama* had only begun to greatly exercise their power in the decades leading up to the Revolution.¹⁷ Much like their other roles as allies of the *bazaaris* and antagonist of the state, the *ulama* developed this power over time in events like the tobacco concession before exercising it to its full extent during the Constitutional Revolution.

The *ulama*'s participation in the early part of the Constitutional Revolution was almost inevitable. The Qajars attacked clerics violently and engaged in trade deals which significantly impacted *bazaaris* trade. At this point, the *ulama* felt they had developed a responsibility to protect the interests of the Iranian people and the purity of Islam. When Qajar leaders started to threaten these ideals, anger the people, and take steps that violated Islam, the *ulama* felt obligated to join in revolution against them. Thus, the *ulama*'s united leadership at the onset of the Constitutional Revolution can be viewed as an instinctive reaction to fulfill their traditional roles, maintain the relationships that granted them power and money, and protect their colleagues without much regard for the actual demands of the Revolution.

As different clerics began to consider the issues at hand in depth, they split into two major categories. The pro-constitutional group often was not as religiously conservative and focused more on maintaining worldly power than the more traditional monarchists.¹⁸ At the same time, many of the anti-constitutional *ulama* had ties to the Qajar government and stood to gain from brokering political deals.¹⁹ Even during the schism of the later part of the Revolution, though, the *ulama* shared the same major goals: protecting and expanding Islam, increasing the role of Islam in the government, and maintaining their own social and political power.²⁰ They did, however, disagree on which form of government best achieved these goals, shifting the role of the *ulama* in the Constitutional Revolution dramatically. During the period to follow, the *ulama* also began to discover how to operate in political discourse and attempt to exert their will over opposing factions.

¹⁵ Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist," 175.

¹⁶ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Democracy in Iran*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist," 175.

¹⁹ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 247.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The Pro-Constitutionalist *Ulama* of the Later Revolution

As the Constitutional Revolution continued to grow and become successful, the majority of *ulama* opted to stick with the movement and continue leading demonstrators. Although their support initially hinged on the instant fulfillment of leadership roles and protection of interests, clerics in the later stages of the Revolution issued endorsements for more concrete rationales, developed after more thorough consideration of constitutionalism. At the core these *ulama* were looking for the best way to reach the goals of preserving Islam, increasing Islamic oversight in government, and protecting their own power, and they eventually arrived at constitutionalism as the best way to do so. In contrast to the current Qajar state, these *ulama* believed that a representative form of government would be better able to protect Islamic values and that religious leaders could better control legal proceedings. That being said, most *ulama* supported the continuation of the monarchy in a limited capacity due to its historical importance. Moreover, constitutionalism was viewed as an excellent way to protect the rights of Iranian citizens and promote their interests adequately, which benefits the *ulama* by keeping their religious and pecuniary supporters pleased.

Since the *ulama* derived both their importance and financial support from the people of Iran, keeping the general population happy was of central interest. A more representative form of government would accomplish this goal by protecting the people's rights and giving them the representation that they demanded. Mirza Malkum Khan, a prominent constitutionalist, summarized this argument nicely, describing an unlawful government like the Qajars as one which "plunders its subjects at will [...] wastes the kingdom's treasures [...] and brazenly denies its obligations and pacts."²¹ This perspective on the Qajar government was not unique, with many *ulama* adapting these ideas into a religious context. Some even argued that Islam calls for a government which helps the people and promotes social justice during the occultation of the twelfth Imam.²² In short, the *ulama* advocated for constitutionalism as a way to protect the rights of Iranians and provide support for the poor. This message resonated with the demands of the constitutionalist demonstrators; the activists were able to claim the support of the *ulama*, while the *ulama* maintained the admiration of

²¹ Malkum Khan, "The Law," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.

²² Hamid Algar, "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran," in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 232.

the people.²³ This is similar to the role the *ulama* fulfilled at the beginning of the revolution but is based more in political theory than social forces.

Members of the *ulama* also examined constitutionalism in an even more esoteric light, arguing that absolutism destroyed individual rights, and, in a philosophical sense, representation is the better option. Certainly, these clerics did not argue for western-style democracy; on the contrary, they supported a continuation of the monarchy in some sense along with a *majles* that served to carry out Islam-based law.²⁴ Still, clerics incorporated the Enlightenment concepts of natural human rights and separation of powers into their arguments, using these as justification for the new form of government.²⁵ One member of the *ulama* described this realization as Iranians becoming “aware of the true requirements of their religion and its God-given freedoms,” drawing parallels to Islamic theology and modern political ideals.²⁶ These politically inclined *ulama* made it their mission to educate the people on the benefits of constitutional government, explaining its perks in numerous writings and speeches.²⁷ Clerics utilized this politics-based argument to supply a quasi-secular rationale to their position, which would appeal to all Iranians as well as other *ulama*. In their view not only would this new government provide tangible, real-world benefits to the people, but it would also serve as a pillar upon which Islamic law could be protected and spread.

In this same vein, many *ulama* believed that a constitutional government would be best suited to maintaining the purity of Islam. Keeping Islam safe from outside forces and changes was among the chief goals of all *ulama*, as Islamic purity was needed to maintain their legitimacy. The first argument of this sort used by pro-constitutionalist *ulama* was that the Qajars had become an anti-Islamic force which needed to be brought under control by an overseeing body.²⁸ Many clerics saw the Qajars as un-Islamic, due to the fact that the monarchy had gradually separated itself from the influence of the clerical establishment.²⁹

²³ Algar, *Religion and State*, 252.

²⁴ Asghar Fathi, “Ahmad Kasravi and Seyyed Jamal Waez on Constitutionalism in Iran,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): 708.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 709.

²⁶ Muhammad Husayn Na’ini, “Government in the Islamic Perspective,” *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.

²⁷ Sayyid Abd al-Azim Khalkhali, “A Treatise on the Meaning of Constitutional Government,” trans. Hamid Dabashi, in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 343.

²⁸ Abdul-Hadi Hairi, “Why Did the Ulama Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909?” *Die Welt des Islams* 17, no. 1 (1976): 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Further, a common sentiment among members of the *ulama*, *bazaaris*, and average citizens alike was that Qajars had become far too friendly with foreign powers who did not share Islamic values and wished to dominate the Iranian state.³⁰ This betrayal by the Qajars was evidenced by the numerous concessions it attempted to make and led many Iranians to doubt the government. The solution to this corrupted government, as presented by the *ulama*, was a representative system which would be able to guard against the infractions of the monarchy.³¹ Additionally, these religious leaders argued that the Western constitutionalist system was actually *more* compatible with Islam, as it mirrored the principles of rational thought and *ijtihad*.³² Thus, the *ulama* effectively portrayed the Qajars as anti-Islamic and presented constitutionalism as a valid, Islamic alternative. Therefore, representative government was seen, by this facet of the *ulama* at least, as the only way to truly protect Islam in Iran.

A large part of the argument above that constitutionalism is more Islamic than absolutism rests on the assertion that in a representative system, the *ulama* would have oversight power in government affairs. In the past, religious oversight derived from the informal bond between the *ulama* and state; however, as the Qajars did away with this connection, a representative government became an appealing alternative. This additional oversight would, at least in theory, come through a board of *mujtahids* who would analyze all legislation and either accept or reject it based on religious validity.³³ This committee was promised to the *ulama* early in the revolution, and it was enough to garner their continued support as it gave them the power to effectively control all actions taken by the government. From this, another important point can be deduced: the *ulama* fully expected the *majles* to operate within the confines of Islamic law.³⁴ In contrast to the Qajar government, which did whatever it wished, the *ulama* expected that a representative government would only enact laws that supported their interests. In the early years of the revolution this appeared to be especially true, and many *ulama* were pleased with the actions taken by the parliament.³⁵ As a result, these *ulama* advocated strongly for the new representative government, seeing it as the best way to give themselves a position of influence over the legislative process. This legal power, in turn, granted them the opportunity to maintain Islam's high place in society and secure their own status as leaders of the people.

³⁰ Algar, "The Oppositional Role," 235.

³¹ Na'ini, "Government in the Islamic Perspective."

³² Gheissari, "Iran's Dialectic," 37.

³³ Abrahamian, "The Causes," 411.

³⁴ Fathi, "Constitutionalism in Iran," 708.

³⁵ Khalkhali, "A Treatise on the Meaning," 341.

Certainly, then, the *ulama* also had a more personal stake in the government than just the expansion of Islamic law. If they were able to secure a high place in government, they could guarantee their own financial and social standing and ensure that the government would not interfere with their operations. For many centuries, the *ulama* had enjoyed a prominent post in Iranian society, serving as the role models of the people and receiving gifts through the *waqf*.³⁶ A government which gave the *ulama* power, like the early constitutionalist form, would allow them to preserve the secular status quo and ensure that their authority as community leaders went unchallenged. Moreover, the *ulama* had become used to a less involved state; in contrast to the mutualistic relationship between *ulama* and state that characterized the Safavid period, the two had become far more discrete in recent decades. Instead of legitimizing the government and receiving money in return, the *ulama* had become accustomed to support from the people and ignoring the government as much as possible.³⁷ So, in a sense, “the *ulama* were acting constantly ... for the preservation of their own power” and lent their support to constitutionalism under the assumption that it would benefit them in the long run.³⁸ Of course, this is not meant to imply that the *ulama* were secretly conniving to snag as much power as possible. On the contrary, they were working in their own best interest, which, at least in their minds, benefited Iran as a whole; if the *ulama* were able to keep themselves in a position of influence then they could ensure that Iran progressed in a religiously-just fashion in the future.

The pro-constitutionalist *ulama*, were, in general, only supporters of the movement insofar as it aligned with their own goals. Most still wished to retain some form of monarchy and were wary of overtly secular currents within the revolutionary coalition. The *ulama*’s support hinged on achieving several major goals, like expanding the presence of Islam in government, serving the people, and sustaining the status of the *ulama*, which this group of clerics believed were best reached through representative government. Nevertheless, some *ulama* noted flaws in the constitutional system and as time went on, these flaws pushed more and more *ulama* to turn against the newly established government. Most clerics still valued the preservation of their own role above all else, and it became clear that this would not happen under the new regime. The *ulama* were being outmaneuvered by liberal factions and losing their high posts in society; this growing rift between the goals of religious leaders and the constitutionalists led to a migration of clerics to the anti-constitutional camp.

³⁶ Jahenbegloo, *Democracy in Iran*, 38.

³⁷ Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, 249.

³⁸ Hairī, “Why Did the Ulama,” 152.

The Anti-Constitutionalist Clerics and Their Proliferation

Although the initial stages of the revolution included almost all *ulama* on the side of the new government, a select few were against the new system from the start and as time wore on membership in this camp only grew. The initial *ulama* against the constitution tended to be those with close ties to the Qajar government, who would personally benefit from a continuation of the traditional monarchy. Soon after, this group was joined by the religious traditionalists—those who, unlike the more liberal *ulama* discussed above, believed a western, representative-style government was anti-Islamic and thus not suitable for Iran. Compared to the larger group of *ulama* who supported the people against the government at first, this opposition group was relatively small. Nevertheless, in the later years of the revolution many *ulama* determined that the parliament was not properly serving their interests or giving the clerics enough power, and so turned against the movement as well. Although most *ulama* supported the constitutionalists at the beginning of the revolution, they gradually returned to their position of traditionalism as time went on. By the end of the Revolution, neither the constitutionalists nor the monarchy had truly won as the government remained in a sort of limbo. Either way, though, the *ulama* had not been able to preserve their influence as well as they had hoped, instead ceding powers to the government. Despite this, though, the *ulama* emerged from the ordeal more united and more politically prepared than ever before.

Although clerics served a vital role in the government during the Safavid and early Qajar periods, their connection to the government had begun to deteriorate through the nineteenth century. Most of the clerics who chose to stand with the government from the beginning stood to gain financially from their actions, as they were either high level employees of the bureaucracy or worked as mediators in government dealings.³⁹ Others were more personally connected to the Qajar family, either through familial relation or personal friendships.⁴⁰ No matter how these *ulama* truly felt about Qajar policy or the merits of constitutionalism, turning against the government would have been needlessly detrimental to their own lives. As a result, these *ulama* tended to either outwardly support the Qajar state and legitimize its actions or attempt to negotiate with the protestors on behalf of the government.⁴¹ Even though these Qajar supporters were less in number than those who advocated for the people, they gave the government a sliver of legitimacy and formed the core of the future anti-constitutionalist *ulama* coalition, which eventually toppled the Revolutionary movement.

³⁹ Arjomand, “The Ulama’s Traditionalist,” 177.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, 249.

Perhaps the most vigorous clerical criticism of constitutionalism was that it was not only against Islamic values, but specifically prohibited by Islamic laws. By far, the most adamant supporter of this school of thought was Sheikh Nouri, a cleric who, after supporting the revolution in its infancy, turned staunchly against the *majles* and became the leading *ulama* opposed to constitutionalism. Nouri argued that the secular-leaning policies of the new government were threatening to Islam and that the constitutionalists wished to remove Islamic influence from Iran, gaining him immediate support from conservative *ulama* and regular Muslims.⁴² Nouri argued that since constitutionalism was built on “equality and freedom,” which were “pernicious principles” aimed at destroying Divine Law, it must be inherently anti-Islam.⁴³ He further claimed that any form of representative government is not allowed as only Imams are granted the rights to convene and review laws under Islamic doctrine.⁴⁴ In short, Nouri held the view that “for the disposition of [Iran] Constitutionalism is a fatal disease, a terminal injury,” a stark contrast to those *ulama* who believed it was exactly what Iran needed to protect Islam and progress into the future.⁴⁵ Certainly, these theological arguments illustrate a growing conservative Islamic and anti-western undercurrent which would become especially important in the late stages of the Constitutional Revolution all the way up until the Revolution of 1979. Moreover, the goal of *ulama* like Nouri and his followers is clearly the preservation of Islam in its purest form; this goal is almost identical to the *ulama* who supported the Revolution. Thus, the *ulama* all attempted to act in the best interest of Islam but had vastly different opinions on how this ought to be done.

Similarly, while some *ulama* believed that the representative system would give them the opportunity to review legislation, the anti-constitutionalist *ulama* concluded that the new government would generate less favorable policies. In the eyes of many conservative *ulama*, Islam forbade any intrusion of man-made law into issues that were already discussed in a religious context – and so the *ulama* wished to eliminate any laws that could be considered overreaching in this way.⁴⁶ From the beginning, members of the *ulama* who supported the Revolution expected that they, as the people’s esteemed leaders, would have the final say in any new policies so that they could veto anything deemed un-Islamic

⁴² Mansourian, “Iran: Religious Leaders,” 223.

⁴³ Shaykh Fadl Allah Nouri, “Book of Admonition to the Heedless and Guidance for the Ignorant,” trans. Hamid Dabashi, in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 356.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

or against their interests.⁴⁷ Indeed, as the constitutional form of government progressed and the *majles* came together, clerics demanded more and more oversight power.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it became quickly apparent that the *ulama* would be left out of the new constitutionalist system; they would, at best, be given nominal position while the *majles* would be free to pass reforms.⁴⁹ As a result, many clerics switched to the anti-constitutionalist camp. They believed that maintaining the status quo would at least serve their interests more than a liberal-leaning government. Indeed, the *ulama* were, as a whole, increasingly fearful of the western form of government, believing it would take away their local power in communities and destroy traditional institutions.⁵⁰ Without the promise of veto power, the *ulama* had no reason to advocate for such a government. Legislative review was one of the primary goals of both pro- and anti-constitutionalist *ulama*, and the growing realization that this would not become a reality led many clerics to turn against the revolutionaries, even if they initially believed in their cause.

More so than gaining legislative power, the *ulama* were interested in maintaining their religious and social rank. Once this was threatened by the constitutional government, though, the *ulama* overwhelmingly chose to defend their own interests over the demands of the revolutionaries. The main tipping point for the *ulama* was a push in the *majles* for financial and judiciary reforms, both of which would have threatened the *ulama*'s sources of income and influence.⁵¹ The *ulama* were ultimately supporters of their own goals; support for the constitution served as a potential surrogate of achieving their desired ends. Immediately after the new government began to attack their interests, such as traditional religious courts, the *ulama* either cut off their words of support or began to actively preach against representative government.⁵² From this, it is clear that promoting their own interests was at the core of the *ulama*'s involvement in the Constitutional Revolution. To be sure, other issues like protection of Islam and the well-being of the people were considered, but at the end of the day only self-preservation truly motivated the clerics' decisions. Further, it is evident that the pro- and anti-constitutionalist had more in common than it appears at first glance. As one scholar noted, "the pro- and anti-constitutionalist *ulama* had far more in common as members of the clerical estate than either group had with the secular constitutionalists or the absolutists,"

⁴⁷ Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist," 180.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁹ Algar, "The Oppositional Role," 255.

⁵⁰ Jahenbegloo, *Democracy in Iran*, 39.

⁵¹ Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist," 180.

⁵² Mansourian, "Iran: Religious Leaders," 224.

perfectly summarizing the character of the *ulama* during the revolution.⁵³ Although the *ulama* did temporarily debate each other, they remained, overall, united and continued to fight towards the same objective.

Clerics fought against the constitutionalist movement for reasons ranging from theology to politics to personal protection. Almost immediately, some members of the *ulama* were against the demonstrators either because they saw representative government as too Western or because they had a close connection to the Qajar state. As the revolution gained traction, however, it became increasingly clear to the *ulama* that they would not receive the benefits that their support had been contingent on. Moreover, they realized that the new government intended to undermine their position of authority and power within Iran. These factors eventually swayed almost all of the *ulama* to turn against the revolutionaries; the clerics' desire for influence outweighed their desire to remove Qajars and support their followers. Although the Revolution was eventually stalled by the Qajars, the *ulama* were still not able to maintain all of their power and became less important in society than they had been to start with. However, they had also developed political skills, which would allow them to influence politics and exert their will later on.

Conclusion

When the Constitutional Revolution broke out, the *ulama* had effectively no choice except to participate, due to their lofty post in society, which left them intertwined with almost every facet of Iran. Initially, most *ulama* naturally sided with the constitutionalist revolutionaries despite their lack of political expertise, as representing the interests of their supporters against the government had become an integral part of their function. Moreover, endorsing the will of the people secured the clerics' position of influence and prosperity, which primarily derived from popular support. As the initial wave of Revolution died down, however, the *ulama* split into two subgroups. The first of these continued to promote the constitution, believing it to be the best chance to protect Islam, ensure religious prominence in government, and serve the interests of the Iranian people. The second faction turned against the tide of Revolution, believing it to be anti-Islamic or too Western. Over time, more and more clerics joined this second group as it became clear that the new parliament would be detrimental to the religious establishment and its interests.

In the end, most *ulama* were united against the representative government, choosing to preserve their own place in society above all else. Certainly, the *ulama* shared the majority of their goals and were stronger together; although they split temporarily, they continued to pursue the same *ulama*-specific goals

⁵³ Arjomand, "The Ulama's Traditionalist," 184.

of promoting Islam and expanding their own power. Nevertheless, they were unable to stop the new government from curtailing their power significantly. The clerics did, though, learn how to operate in a contentious, public political sphere, a skill which would prove crucial in years to come.

Following the events of the Constitutional Revolution, the Pahlavi Dynasty established in the 1920's brought new pushes towards modernization and even further away from religious influence. Nevertheless, the *ulama* remained unanimous on their objectives through the reign of the Pahlavis and Mossadegh, and successfully attained their desires in the 1979 Islamic Revolution when Islam became the core of the government and the *ulama* obtained the leadership they had strived for. Although they were not fully successful in the Constitutional Revolution, the *ulama* gained the cohesiveness and political prowess necessary to enable their gradual rise to prominence throughout the twentieth century.

Clericalism, Constitutionalism, and Cautiousness: Iran's 1905 Revolution Through the Eyes of Sheikh Fazollah Nuri

Jake Waugh*

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The summer of 1909 was a summer of retribution. The first target was Mohammad Ali Shah, the Qajar king who had forcefully opposed constitutionalism and was responsible for the bombardment of the *Majlis* the year prior. After being replaced by his young son and forced to cede much of his property to the government, Mohammad Ali Shah was exiled to Russia in September. Another prominent target was Sheikh Fazollah Nuri, a senior cleric and the monarchy's chief ally among the *ulama*, whose shared opposition to constitutionalism earned him a swift execution in July of the same year.

¹ Recounting the sequence of events that ultimately led to Nuri's death is particularly useful for understanding the complexities of how the *ulama* navigated Iran's Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath. Although Nuri always kept a baseline of ideological consistency, he was someone who saw—and advocated—both sides of the issue. Therefore, he serves as a model case study.

Broadly, the emergence of factions among clerics had a lasting impact not only on the constitutional movement, but also on how we view the historical relationship between religion and politics in Iran. The particular story of Sheikh Fazollah Nuri, however, is representative of a more specific truth about Iranian Shiism during the Revolution: the political opportunity presented by constitutionalism and, conversely, cautiousness toward political change, both drove clerics to defy the very real desire for clerical unity. Although the effort to compromise and reach internal consensus was evident, the *ulama* ultimately succumbed to the contemporaneous emergence of political factions because

* **Author's Bio:** Jake Waugh majored in Political Science and minored in History and Philosophy. He graduated in the spring of 2018.

¹ Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 259.

individual clerics opted to prioritize the consequences of political change over the consequences of disunity. The evidence to support this conclusion will be presented in three parts: the beginning of divisions among clerics on the issue of constitutionalism, how they attempted to reconcile differences, and their failure to unify.

Clericalism Meets Politics

Nuri was born in the village of Nur, Mazandaran, but left for Iraq at a young age to receive a Shiite clerical education. Although first studying in Najaf, the most consequential period of his education took place in Samarra where Nuri studied under Haji Mirza Hasan Shirazi, the *mujtahid* who later issued the famous *fatwa* in opposition to the Tobacco Concession of 1890.² It is clear that the ideological influence of Shirazi on his pupils foreshadowed Nuri's opposition to the Constitutional Revolution, an act that put Nuri in a special group of particularly influential clerics in the history of modern Iranian politics.³

Before becoming a notable political figure, however, Nuri was principally a *mujtahid* in Tehran who worked to settle cases for local men of the merchant and upper-classes.⁴ In his early days in Tehran, his network of familial connections landed him a job in the Qajar royal court where he managed the registrar. In this capacity, he was given purview over contracts, including marriages, related to the business of the royal family. However, the scope of his job was much broader, and Nuri oversaw items such as tax collection and the wills of notable bazaaris as well.⁵ These roles, in addition to his status as a *mujtahid*, solidified his position as a proverbial gatekeeper of affairs between the people and the government. For instance, when the *Chaleh-ye Meydan* district of Tehran suffered a water shortage amidst drought conditions, it became incumbent upon Nuri to relay the urgency of the crisis to Tehran's governor, acting as an essential intermediary.⁶

² Abdul-Hadi Hairi, "Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri's Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism," in *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran*, ed. Llyod Ridgeon (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2005), 37.

³ Yann Richard, "Ayatollah Kashani: Precursor of the Islamic Republic?" in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 102.

⁴ Vanessa Martin, "NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online ed., 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nuri-fazl-allah>.

⁵ Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the Clerical Leadership of Khurasani* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 195.

⁶ Martin, "NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH."

As alluded to, Nuri's ultimate legacy centers largely on the issue of constitutionalism in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century, including how he reacted to the growing movement and how he navigated the internal divides within the *ulama*. These two latter challenges perhaps deserve separate treatment, as Nuri's actions can only be explained by illustrating the distinct tensions each concern presented. However, there were many instances in which clerical unity and opposition to constitutionalism were pitted against each other, and Nuri's response to those events were revealing of his allegiances. Although the desire among the clergy to act cohesively gave Nuri pause to briefly support the constitutional movement, his actions before and after this moment of toleration, as I will refer to it, demonstrate just how ardently opposed he was to the idea.

Even as internal divisions among the *ulama* over the issue of constitutionalism began to emerge, one thing that united all the clerics was the desire to safeguard themselves, regardless of the outcome. This meant assuring both the preservation of power and the safety of individual clerics—or so they thought. At the beginning of the Revolution, in the city of Kerman, a cleric who supported the constitutionalist movement was tortured by a Qajar ruler, which at the time was not very common. In response to the event, Nuri was notably quiet or, as some have suggested, perhaps silently pleased with the incident. This story, which was recounted by the historian Nazim al-Islam, proved that Nuri was not always opposed to placing his disapproval of constitutionalism above his respect for the status of clerics within Iran.⁷ Although this revelation about Nuri is not entirely indicative of his subsequent actions (i.e. his moment of toleration in the introduction of so-called “clerical constitutionalism”), it is rather consistent with his actions later down the road.

Nuri's political hand had been strengthened in 1903 with the ascension of Abd-al-Majid Mirza Ayn-al-Dawla to the role of grand vizier under Mozaffar al-Din Shah. Ayn-al-Dawla's predecessor, Amin-al-Soltan, preferred one of Nuri's contemporaries, Sayyed Abd Allah Bihbahani, who would soon become a leading supporter of the constitutionalist movement among the *ulama*. However, with the arrival of Ayn-al-Dawla, Bihbahani was passed over and a great deal of political influence was bestowed upon Nuri instead.⁸ The transition enflamed a tension that would later resurface in the constitutionalism debate with Nuri and Bihbahani on opposing sides. Bihbahani, along with other clerics (most notably, Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai), began to ramp up their opposition to the Qajars as a result of their decision to impose punishments, including torture, upon the

⁷ Mohammad Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 195-196*.

⁸ Martin, “NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH.”

bazaaris in 1905.⁹ In many ways, the *ulama* served as the protector of the merchant class. Consequently, many clerics felt greatly disgruntled by these events. It opened a window of opportunity for some, Bihbahani and Tabatabai chief among them, to voice their opposition more openly.¹⁰ After subsequent protests, when the demand for a “house of justice” was laid down, Nuri reluctantly agreed to the idea. Even though he was more supportive of the monarchy by virtue of his appointments and ideology, and even though he would have preferred not to follow the lead of Bihbahani and Tabatabai, Nuri understood how weak the government had become and decided to abandon his relationships in order to save his own reputation. Nuri agreed to the establishment of a parliament if and only if it were designed to be an Islamic institution, designed to safeguard religious institutions above all else.¹¹

A Brief Toleration of (Clerical) Constitutionalism

Even though debates over modernity were threatening to the power of the *ulama* in Iran, central to those debates were the obstacles in reconciling Islam with modernization which, as Monica Ringer has observed, worked in the *ulama*'s favor in the 19th century and into the 20th century. Islam still dominated the language of the debate, keeping full European-style modernity off the table in most areas of life, especially politics and the issue of constitutionalism. Accordingly, any reform would require the legitimacy of support from the *ulama*.¹² However, the clerical response to the issue of constitutionalism was, as mentioned, far from uniform. Occasionally, for sake of simplification, the *ulama* are thrown into a categorically anti-modernization camp, but, as Ringer also notes, that is not a very fair assessment. The relationship each cleric held with an aspect of modernity differed from individual to individual, often shaped by that cleric's association with the religious hierarchy and the state, among other things.¹³ It is also true that the idea of constitutionalism, and clerical support for it, was not as radical of a proposal in Iran as it had been in other instances around the world. This is because the vision of constitutionalism in Iran did not necessitate getting rid of the monarchy. The real issue was the handling of

⁹ Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 29.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Martin, “NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH.”

¹² Monica M. Ringer, “Negotiating Modernity: Ulama and the Discourse of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 47-48.

¹³ Ibid.

matters related to law and justice. More specifically, it was a concern over the absolute power to apply the law arbitrarily with few mediating forces (e.g. *fatwas*).¹⁴ This line of thinking is distinct from republicanism, for example, where a truly anti-monarchist argument is employed. Consequently, while constitutionalists were opposed to absolutism, most were not altogether opposed to the institution of monarchy.¹⁵

One way the *ulama* helped to ensure their continued authority in the new constitutional era (as understood in the above context) was through ushering in the adoption of the Supplementary Constitutional Laws of 1907. Inspired by examples in the Western tradition, particularly the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution, many constitutionalists thought it necessary to have a similar addition to the new Constitution of 1906. In some ways, these laws were reflective of the intent of a bill of rights as we have come to know it. For instance, they restricted the powers of the Shah—with two notable exceptions in the power over cabinet positions and the military, both of which were expanded—and codified national sovereignty.¹⁶ Yet, the influence of the *ulama* kept another hallmark of modernity from making its way into these laws: the separation of church and state. Altogether, these laws consisted of 107 different articles, beginning with Article 1 which declared a state religion, Islam, and outlined the Shah's duties to promote it.¹⁷ The next, Article 2, dictated that the *Majlis* would be prohibited from acting in a manner contrary to Islam. It also provided veto power to a group of five *mujtahids*, all of whom would be able to serve in the *Majlis* through appointment by the *ulama* and approval by democratically-elected members of the body.¹⁸ In exchange for including the language of Article 2, which served to safeguard the *ulama*, Bihbahani and Tabatabai endorsed Article 8, which provided “equal rights before the law.”¹⁹ Many of the other articles that appear to be liberal in nature contain language that qualify certain rights and liberties to a great degree. For instance, Article 20, which granted the freedom of expression (including written works), was amended to prohibit

¹⁴ Ali Gheissari, “Constitutional Rights and the Development of Civil Law in Iran,” in *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations, and Transnational Connections*, eds. H.E. Chehabi and Vanessa Martin (New York: I.B. Taurus & Co., 2010), 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸ F.R.C. Bagley, “New Light on the Iranian Constitutional Movement,” in *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural Change 1800-1925*, eds. Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 54.

¹⁹ Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 108-109.

materials “hurtful to the perspicuous religion.”²⁰ However, the language of the article also dictated that those who stood accused of heretical works would be punished by public authorities and not religious leadership according to certain interpretations of *sharia* law.²¹ Although the final set of Supplementary Constitutional Laws were a bit of a mixed bag, a set of compromises between the *ulama* and liberal reformers, it was nonetheless true that these laws, which were initially intended to serve as a more conventional bill of rights, had morphed into the codification of clerical power.

Nuri had been an integral part of the debate over particular articles contained within the Supplementary Constitutional Laws, especially the language of Article 2. Nuri was concerned by the concessions made in some of the other articles, particularly Article 8 and Article 20, but instead of abandoning the effort he worked to incorporate even more conservative language. His initial proposal for Article 2, for example, included the power of judicial review to be bestowed upon select *mujtahids*; however, it purposefully left out many specifics like how to determine which *mujtahids* would be endowed with such power.²² The ultimate language that was adopted, as described above, was a result of bargaining between Nuri and secular constitutionalists. Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, a radical constitutionalist from Tabriz, helped to negotiate the compromise by debating Nuri, arguing that enhancing *mujtahid* power was unnecessary in light of the proposed Article 27 which stated that all laws must comply with *sharia*.²³ Despite the fact that a compromise was ultimately struck (i.e. the five *mujtahids* appointed by the *ulama* and approved by the *Majlis*), Nuri grew tired of dealing with secular proposals. After all, he had already entered these debates/negotiations with an extreme skepticism toward constitutionalism.

Why Nuri continued to tepidly endorse constitutionalism, and even briefly promote so-called clerical constitutionalism, is a question that some scholars have approached carefully. It seems as though much of his logic appears to have been a result of both political and personal implications in the emergence of factions. While it was a universal desire within the *ulama* to present a united front amidst the political changes, the particular fear of being a sole dissenter appears to have kept Nuri from being more outspoken in his criticism early on. Nuri was not the only critic, but he was by far the most notable.²⁴ However, his restraint began to fade as the process continued. Nuri’s ally, Ayn-al-Dawla, had

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bagley, “New Light on the Iranian Constitutional Movement,” 55.

²² Martin, “NURI, FAŽL-ALLĀH.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mohammad Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 194-195.

left his post in July 1906 in the face of growing unpopularity. In the *Majlis*, Nuri was passed over for a spot on the council of *mujtahids* while his ideological rivals, Tabatabai and Bihbahani, were confirmed.²⁵ As Nuri's patience grew thin, he began to reevaluate his strategy, including his relationships with other clerics and the existing political order.

Reprioritizing: Placing Politics over Clerical Unity

Nuri's close relationship with Mohammad Ali Shah is speculated to have begun around the time just preceding the debates on the Supplementary Constitutional Laws. Although the extent of this relationship would not become apparent until later, some constitutionalists began to speculate its existence at that time because they felt as though they could detect the influence of conservative *ulama* on the Shah.²⁶ Mohammad Ali Shah was markedly more enthusiastic in his promotion of absolutism than his father and predecessor, Mozaffar al-Din Shah. Even though, at times, Mohammad Ali Shah would make pragmatic decisions, e.g. swearing loyalty to the constitution, it was often clear that his underlying intention was to destroy the constitution and the constitutionalist movement.²⁷ Although the *ulama* had a great deal to gain from controlling and executing the establishment of constitutionalism, the movement beyond the constitution itself was not easily contained.²⁸ For some like Nuri, the secular and Western elements were enough to make peace with a new realignment of interests, this time finding more in common with the Qajars.

Once fully realigned in opposition, Nuri wasted no time in denouncing the *Majlis*, calling it illegitimate, and beginning a wave of protests in favor of the restoration of full monarchy. In 1907, at the Shah Abdul Azim shrine in Rey, Nuri coordinated a *bast* where he not only slammed the overall constitutionalist movement for its attempts at subverting Islam, but also launched a series of more targeted attacks on ethnic minorities such as Jews and Zoroastrians for their part in trying to bring down traditional institutions. Simultaneously, Najaf was transmitting mixed signals. Some *mujtahids* signaled their support while others, most notably Muhammad Kazim Khurasani, furiously condemned Nuri. Khurasani even went as far as to call Nuri a non-Muslim.²⁹ The battle among the *ulama* in Tehran, which pitted Nuri against Tabatabai and Bihbahani, was not

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Martin, "NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH."

²⁷ Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 206.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

the only site of contention. In Najaf, the same debate played out, with Khurasani firmly in the pro-constitution camp. At times, Khurasani ceded some support to the more conservative faction in Najaf, led by Sayyed Mohammad Kazem Yazdi, while Nuri continued to grow support in Tehran. As Michael Axworthy has noted, a more empirical view of this trade off was observed at times of prayer where the number of followers behind Khurasani was dwarfed by thousands compared to Yazdi.³⁰ However, despite the ebbs and flows in support, Najaf still held considerable support for constitutionalism in the years leading up to and during the Revolution.³¹ The pro-constitutionalist sentiment that existed in Najaf did not appear overnight, as the rocky relationship between the *ulama* and the Qajars would suggest. Long before the early days of the Revolution, the monarchy had been embattled with Najaf clerics who criticized the government from afar. Telegrams sent between Najaf and Tehran document this quite clearly. For instance, as early as 1902 there were clerical demands for a “chamber of representatives,” which of course was an idea that would return four years later.³² Another well-known incident included name-calling, where Ayatollah Sharabiyani called Muzaffar al-Din Shah a “dog.”³³

During the Revolution, the aforementioned disagreement between Khurasani and Yazdi showed that Najaf, too, had succumbed to the emergence of political factionalism. Predictably, each side formed supporting alliances between Najaf and Tehran, e.g. Khurasani supported Tabatabai and Bihbahani, Yazdi supported Nuri, etc. These alliances remained more or less intact until the bombardment of the *Majlis* in June of 1908. In cutting all that was left of his semi-conciliatory (public, not private) attitude toward the parliament, the Shah enlisted the help of Russian forces, including the Cossack Brigade, to not only bombard the *Majlis*, but to also arrest or execute several constitutionalist leaders.³⁴ Among the leaders were Tabatabai and Bihbahani, both of whom were expelled.³⁵ This revival of monarchal power, which began the so-called “period of Lesser Autocracy,” led to conflict in Tehran and Tabriz.³⁶ Meanwhile, the involvement of a foreign state in the reclamation of absolute power forced some anti-constitutionalist clerics to revisit their allegiances. Although some clerics

³⁰ Ibid., 207.

³¹ Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 5.

³² Abdul-Hadi Hairi, “Why Did the ‘Ulamā Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909?” *Die Welt des Islams* 17, no. 1 (1976): 127-128.

³³ Ibid., 127.

³⁴ Gheissari and Nasr, *Democracy in Iran*, 32-33.

³⁵ Hairi, “Why Did the ‘Ulamā Participate,” 132.

³⁶ Gheissari and Nasr, *Democracy in Iran*, 32-33.

like Yazdi were sympathetic to Nuri and often agreed with his point of view, many of them disapproved of Mohammad Ali Shah's decision to turn to Russia. Other ayatollahs like Sayyid Ismail as-Sadr and Nuri's own mentor, Shirazi—both of whom had not necessarily supported the Shah but had appeased him—turned as well.³⁷ Nobody wanted to be associated with the propagation of non-Islamic forces in Iran, nor did they want to be associated with the prospect of a return to absolutism. Although the Summer of 1908 had this unifying effect among the *ulama*, their actions were still driven by the political implications of Russian involvement, not the desire to unify. After all, this new development did not change the considerable disagreement on the issue of constitutionalism, which very much remained a separate issue.

Conversely, the Russian bombardment of the *Majlis* forced Nuri to double down on his alliance with Mohammad Ali Shah.³⁸ For Nuri, the issue of foreign involvement and constitutionalism were not separate. As Vanessa Martin notes, Nuri was not enthused with the prospect of a return to absolutism per se, but he saw it as the only viable alternative to constitutionalism at the time, especially given the divide over support and condemnation of constitutionalism among the *ulama*. He supported Mohammad Ali Shah and his efforts to reclaim power from the *Majlis* because he saw the preservation of monarchy as paramount to maintaining religious influence on politics. Accordingly, his support was conditional. While he believed the monarchy should not be bound by the restraints of parliament, it would still have to conform to the rules and norms of *sharia*.³⁹

In writing after the coup, Nuri outlined the reasons why constitutionalism was inconsistent with Islam.⁴⁰ In it, he contends that constitutionalism wrongly attributes sovereignty to an entity other than God and that God must make all laws, which can only be interpreted by senior clergymen.⁴¹ This argument is quite forceful considering Nuri's evolution from skeptic of constitutionalism to tepid advocate to, finally, ardent opponent. That trajectory underscores the tension between undesired political outcomes (i.e. the erosion of religious influence) and the pressure from other clerics. More importantly, Nuri's final

³⁷ Hairi, "Why Did the 'Ulamā Participate," 137.

³⁸ Martin, "NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The writing referenced here is the *Kitab Tadhkirat al-Ghafil va-Irshadal-Jahil*, translated as *Book of Admonition to the Misinformed and Guidance for the Ignorant* (referenced in n. 41).

⁴¹ Nader Hashemi, "Religious Disputation and Democratic Constitutionalism: The Enduring Legacy of the Constitutional Revolution on the Struggle for Democracy in Iran," *Constellations* 17, no. 1 (2010): 53.

argument shows which of those forces ultimately won out. The decisiveness and disregard for opposing opinion within the *ulama* show clearly that, amidst the political turmoil, Nuri prioritized his own cautiousness.

In July of 1909, not long after articulating his forceful argument against constitutionalism and in defense of the coup, Nuri was placed on trial by the Directory. Until the Second *Majlis* could be established, the Directory, a group of a dozen leading constitutionalists, was tasked with carrying out Iran's affairs. Among other things, their agenda included expelling the Shah and putting influential anti-constitutionalists on trial.⁴² Nuri was implicated in the killing of constitutionalists earlier that year and was forced to defend his political involvement including, presumably, his relationship with the Shah. Nuri's defense echoed his political argument and he justified his actions by claiming that as a senior cleric, it was his duty to defend Islam from those who sought to undermine it. Nuri was sentenced to death, a decision doubly-endorsed by virtue of a *fatwa* handed down by Nuri's ideological opponents within the *ulama*.⁴³

Conclusion

The emergence of factions during the Constitutional Revolution unveiled certain truths about the relationship between Shiism and politics in Iran. As stated in the introduction, the story of Sheikh Fazollah Nuri is indicative of one truth in particular. Given the competing forces of politics and clerical unity, the *ulama* ultimately fell prey to political factionalism because individual clerics opted to prioritize the consequences of political change, whether viewed positively or negatively, over the consequences of disunity. In other words, the opportunity presented by constitutionalism or, in the case of Nuri, cautiousness toward political change, drove clerics to defy the pressure to act uniformly during the Revolution.

Although Nuri's story shows how political division ultimately overtook clerical unity, it should not be misinterpreted to suggest there was a lack of pressure to act in a unified manner. In fact, the reason why Nuri serves as excellent case study is because his actions—specifically, promoting constitutionalism before abandoning the idea—show just how much pressure the desire to act uniformly influenced individual clerics. Even though Nuri was skeptical of constitutionalism from the beginning, his brief toleration of would-be clerical constitutionalism was a direct result of internal pressure among the *ulama* to navigate the Revolution in a unified way that would allow Shiism to retain, and gain, influence over Iranian politics. In many ways, it was personal.

⁴² Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 258.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 258-59.

Nuri feared emerging as the major, lone dissenter to the plan devised by his contemporaries, who tried to keep him content by allowing him to negotiate concessions, e.g. the language of Supplementary Constitutional Laws.⁴⁴ Nuri's turn away from compromise should be appreciated with this added context. The pressure to compromise remained, but as evident by his later actions and writings, Nuri instead chose to reorganize his priorities, placing politics above unity.

⁴⁴ Martin, "NURI, FAẒL-ALLĀH."

Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

More information

Dr. Afshin Marashi
Director of the Farzaneh
Family Center for Iranian and
Persian Gulf Studies
amarashi@ou.edu

or

Dr. Manata Hashemi
Assistant Professor of
Iranian Studies
hashemi@ou.edu

Petition for the Minor

Katie Watkins
Adviser for IAS majors and
minors with last names A-H
kwatkins@ou.edu

or

Malin Collins
Adviser for IAS majors and
minors with last names I-Z
malin@ou.edu

www.ou.edu/ias



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture

Tur and Iraj: Azeri Turks and ‘Persian’ Iran

Daniel McAbee*

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Despite the prominence of the Middle East and Islamic world in Western news media, it is a region that suffers from severe misunderstanding. Out of the countries in those regions, Iran is perhaps the most poorly understood of all. This ignorance extends beyond popular misunderstanding to include policy and scholarly circles. This is evident in Western discussion of ethnicities in Iran, which often results in an inaccurate understanding of the matter. While some of this misunderstanding can be attributed to faults in the West—to Orientalism, to natural hatred and misunderstanding that develop between mutual enemies, and to the inaccurate universalization of Western cultural and social paradigms—Iran’s unique history certainly complicates Western perceptions and understandings.

Not only has Iran had indigenous aspects of self-identification and self-demarcation develop from neighboring people, but it has also interacted with modernity and imperialism differently than the majority of the non-Western world. These indigenous, pre-European processes focused around indigenous literature, its position within the Islamo-Persianate world, and its religious distinctiveness of being a majority Shi’a. Iran’s interaction with Western modernity, as well as Western imperialism, differed from most other places in the non-Western world in that it never formally lost its independence. While Iran certainly suffered repeated invasions and was forced to operate within certain guidelines presented by imperial powers, the Iranian plateau never suffered the imperial subjugation experienced by the Americas, Africa, and other parts of Asia. This means that Iran’s interaction with modernity, while certainly brutal and destructive, was done more on its own terms,

* **Author’s Bio:** Daniel McAbee is a double major in History and Middle Eastern Studies. He will graduate in the Summer of 2019.

causing the Iranian experience with modernity and its current state to be difficult to understand in a Western framework.

The Azeri Turks provide an excellent case study in this peculiarity. The description of the Azeris as a well-integrated, well-treated minority shows a misunderstanding of the history of Iran, the position of the minorities in Iran, and their relationship to the Iranian state.¹ The core of the difficulty arises from a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Persian ‘primary’ ethnicity and Iran.² As will be discussed in detail, tribes, and particularly tribes from Azerbaijan, frequently formed the kingmakers of modern Iranian history and were generally the strongest military force in Iran.³ Pre-Pahlavi Iran, while not free of nationalism and chauvinism, was highly decentralized with little ethnic prioritization or preference, due in part to the weakness of the state, as well as little ideological basis for ethnic prioritization.⁴ It was during the Pahlavi period that the state shifted towards an ideologically nationalist, Persian-centric focus. The relative late coming of modernity to Iran meant that the processes necessary to destroy the traditional order and replace it with modernity had not had sufficient time to take effect. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, the revolutionary overthrow of the modernizing and Westernizing Pahlavi regime and its replacement by an Islamic Republic additionally hindered cultural modernization, though did not totally reverse the processes and changes begun by the Pahlavi state.

Ethnicity in Iran

Western discussion on ethnicity in Iran frequently begins with a disclaimer stating that records regarding ethnicity and ethnic self-identification are scarce, which problematizes the accuracy of their statements.⁵ Western narratives on Iranian ethnicity then lay out the following picture: Persians, the dominant and primary ethnicity, constitute approximately 50% of the population, with minorities such as Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis, Turcomen, and Kurds constituting the remainder.⁶ The variation between one source and another can be quite noticeable, in part due to the lack of sources recording

¹ Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ Massoume Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clío, 2005), 65-66.

⁴ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 172-173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

ethnic self-identification but more importantly, the problematic nature of the metric itself. The “ethnic common sense,” to borrow a term from the scholar Rasmus Christian Elling, used in the West cannot be readily imported to other parts of the world, such as Iran.⁷ What Elling convincingly argues is that, while ethnicity is considered an innate and static characteristic of an individual or a people, it should be understood as “a processual, situational, relational and contextual dynamic of identification.”⁸

The question of identity, and more specifically, self-identification, is a complex topic in Iran due in large part to Iranian history. Ethnicity as an individual’s primary self-identification, and a feeling of connection to all of one’s fellow co-ethnics, is relatively recent in Iran and is not universal.⁹ Until the last century, tribes constituted a significant portion of Iran’s population and there existed a significant degree of linguistic diversity wherein various members spoke various dialects of Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, or other languages.¹⁰ Primary self-identification through one’s immediate community was not limited to tribes, who were largely eliminated during the Pahlavi period, and existed also among sedentary peoples.¹¹ Thus, many people from the region of Khorasan might primarily self-identify as Khorasani and see themselves as distinct from other Iranians based on their being from Khorasan.¹² This identification can extend even down to individual cities, such as Dezful, Shushtar, and Behbahan, where many of their inhabitants primarily self-identify as “Dezfuli,” “Behbahani,” and “Shushtari” respectively.¹³

Questions of identity have not always been centered on ethnicity even in Europe itself.¹⁴ Rather, identity centered around ethnicity was constructed and evolved out of a particular set of historical processes occurring in early modern Europe. Europe’s early experience with modernity was also incredibly destructive, similar to non-Western experience with modernity.¹⁵ In order for Western ethnic common sense to describe reality accurately, a certain degree of modernization must take place within a region. It was during

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David N. Yaghoubian, *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

the Pahlavi dynasty's destructive imposition of modernity that the Western approach to identity along racial and ethnic lines gained power and traction in Iran. While the Pahlavi state represented the high water of attempted Westernization of identity, this process had a history in Iran, albeit largely confined to Iranian intellectuals.¹⁶ The introduction of Western approaches to identity interacted with indigenous approaches to identity, which in tandem contributed to the creation and imposition of Persian nationalism.

Identity

Indigenous literature dealt with questions of identity, generally judging them vis-à-vis neighboring peoples and regions.¹⁷ While Iran as a concept did exist within Persianate literature, it was relative and connected to neighboring regions, not demarcated by borders.¹⁸ In this indigenous literary world, a region's topography and climate heavily influence the temperament of a people.¹⁹ An individual's birthplace or even lineage did not decide individual identity; instead, an individual's relationship to genetically unrelated people, organizations, or schools of thought could define their identity.²⁰ The relationship between various parts of the Persianate world illustrates this. Borrowing Mana Kia's use of contemporary terminology, Turan (the land of Turks), Hindustan (South Asia), and Iran constituted Persianate civilization, wherein educated elites communicated through shared culture expressions and literary language.²¹ This Persianate civilization represented the most refined civilization among all civilizations.²² Despite constituting one civilization, the regions were still distinct, as the continued use of different names suggests.

Competition between Iranian poets and Hindustani poets began to flare in the 18th century.²³ A new style of poetics, *bazgasht*, began to rise in certain Iranian circles, which began to challenge the hegemonic *tazeh gu'i* style.²⁴

¹⁶ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁷ Mana Kia, "Imagining Iran before Nationalism: Geocultural Meanings of Land in Azar's *Atashkadeh*," in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, edited by Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 90.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

²⁰ Ibid., 90-93.

²¹ Ibid., 90.

²² Ibid., 98.

²³ Ibid., 92.

²⁴ Ibid.

Hindustan was the center of 17th and 18th century poetics following particular actions of the Safavids, which caused many poets to flee to Mughal courts in Hindustan.²⁵ *Bazgashtis*, in seeking to empower their own circles, attempted to re-center the poetic world on Iran, where they were based, and link themselves to the old masters.²⁶ As previously mentioned, an individual's school of thought could serve as a primary self-identifier, so the introduction of a new poetic style introduced a new division in the identity of the Persianate world. This occurred concurrently with growing European encroachment into the Persianate world and political fragmentation, which furthered the distancing of Turan, Hindustan, and Iran from each other.²⁷

Pre-nationalist indigenous histories of Iran relied on two distinct narratives, here termed Qur'anic and Shahnamehic.²⁸ Qur'anically based history sought to place Iran and the Iranian plateau within the historical framework presented in the Qur'an, whereas Shahnameh inspired history placed Iran in its own historical framework, with significant pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian influence.²⁹ The Qur'anic history generally attempted to place Iran within a Qur'anic framework by finding connections between generally accepted historic Iranians and figures mentioned in the Qur'an.³⁰ These histories would tend to spend a great deal of time focusing on Iran shortly before or after the Arab-Muslim conquest, continuing into the time contemporary with the writer.³¹ Qur'anic histories would generally portray the Sassanian Empire as corrupt and decadent, in contrast with the pure and honest Arabs, carrying the banner of Islam.³² Shahnameh inspired histories focused on Zoroastrian accounts of history and the origins of Iran, the rebirth of which was due in part to the introduction from Indian Pارسis of new, supposedly authentic sources from pre-Islamic Iran.³³ These allowed the "projecting [of] an Iran-centered universal historical narrative that subordinated the Biblico-Qur'anic 'mythistory' to its own all-encompassing framework," which later Persian nationalists would use to "reconfigure the pre-Islamic past as a 'golden age' coming to a 'tragic end' with the Muslim

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 96.

²⁸ Kia, "Imagining Iran," 93-94.

²⁹ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Contested Memories of Pre-Islamic Iran," *The Medieval History Journal* 2, no. 2 (1999): 246.

³⁰ Ibid., 248.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 246.

³³ Ibid.

conquest.”³⁴ These dual histories, one Islamic, one Iranian, allowed for different ways of conceiving Iranian history. The *Shahnameh* inspired histories would take on a significant importance in later times.

Penetration by European scientific and racial discourse affected Iranian intellectual life, most particularly for those interacting with Westerners. The recently discovered philological connection between Indo-Iranian languages, such as Persian and European languages, was of particular importance because it took on racial significance.³⁵ Scientists began to believe that speakers of Indo-European languages belonged to one unified race: the Aryans.³⁶ Europeans began believing that Indo-Europeans were originally centered somewhere around Iran or India and therefore became very interested in pre-Islamic Iran, particularly the Achaemenid Empire.³⁷ Referred to in Greek sources as the Persian Empire, it became envisioned as a great empire of the Persian people whose direct descendants were the Persian speakers of Iran.³⁸

Iranian intellectuals, now aware of their “true identity,” began approaching Persianate literature from a new, racist-nationalist perspective.³⁹ They began reading the elite Persianate works as evidence of the Persian nation, stretching back to the Achaemenid Empire. Zoroastrianism became a distinctly Persian religion because of its Achaemenid associations.⁴⁰ The Persianization of the Zoroastrian religion allowed for a new reading of Persianate literature. The fall of true Persiandom, embodied in the ancient Iranian empires, could be traced in *Shahnameh* inspired histories to the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran.⁴¹ The different regions of the Persianate world became racial divisions. Perhaps building off *bazgasht* attempts at self-aggrandizement, the contributions of poets from Turan and Hindustan to Persianate culture were signs of dilution.⁴² The conflicts in the *Shahnameh* between Iran and Turan became additional evidence for the primordial nature

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 246; *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁵ Ali Reza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity: Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 65-66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁰ Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012), 22.

⁴¹ Tavakoli, *Contested Memories*, 249.

⁴² Kia, “Imagining Iran,” 92

of Persian-Turkish rivalry, further cementing the link between Turkic rule and foreign rule.⁴³ Perhaps if non-Persians were a sufficiently small portion of the population, they would have attempted to remove them from “Persian Iran.” It is perhaps due in part to the size of the non-Persian population that the nationalist attempts were primarily ones of “enlightenment” and “reclamation” instead of genocide; thus, they attempted to rewrite the histories of most non-Persian Iranians to misguided Persians.⁴⁴ Rewriting of Azeri history, for instance, provides an excellent example of this phenomenon. In the distant past, one of the languages spoken in Azerbaijan was an Iranian language, Azari.⁴⁵ Using the historical existence of this language, Persian nationalists began characterizing Azeris as misguided Persians who had been corrupted by Turkic influence.⁴⁶ They encouraged Azeris to abandon their “false” ways and rejoin Persiandom.⁴⁷ In response to this, Azeri nationalists began to construct their own histories and thus identities, often with similar ethno-linguistic primordialist techniques that contemporary Persian nationalists used to construct their histories. One such example was the belief among some that the Azeris actually represented a pre-Indo-European *Turkic* civilization that had always existed in Azerbaijan.⁴⁸ Azeri identity was not formed in sheer opposition to Persian nationalism, but rather as a result of certain historical processes and events which provide an interesting insight to the development of nationalist identity.

Azerbaijan

The Safavid period provides a useful and effective starting point to begin a narrative on Azerbaijan and the development of identity in the Iranian context. The Sufi Safavid Order was founded by an Ardabili named Safi al-Din among the Turkic speaking populations of the northern Middle East.⁴⁹ Over the next hundred years, the Safavid Order developed a fighting force of

⁴³ Asgharzadeh, *Challenge of Diversity*, 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁵ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 28.

⁴⁶ Asgharzadeh, *Challenge of Diversity*, 151.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 33.

⁴⁹ Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples*,

66.

tribesmen collectively referred to as the Qizilbash.⁵⁰ Under Ismail I, the Safavid Order gained Azerbaijan, then the rest of Iran, ultimately Shi'afying the majority of the population.⁵¹ After their fall, a variety of conquerors sought to re-establish the state created by the Safavids. None succeeded in establishing a dynasty until Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, himself a member of the Qajar Qizilbash tribe originally from Azerbaijan.⁵²

Due in part to the cultural importance of Azerbaijan, as well as the governing practices of the Qajars, which tended to place family members in governorships, the heir-to-be of the Qajars would govern in Tabriz and gain valuable administrative and military experience.⁵³ That the Qajar heir governed here suggests additional importance of the province which is pertinent to the current discussion. In major part, its importance lay in its prosperity which continued until the last decades of the 19th century. Azerbaijan was not only a major agricultural center in Iran, but it also provided a significant portion of the Qajar fighting force.⁵⁴ Azerbaijan, due to its position as a crossroads of trade, had a significant merchant class that traded extensively with neighboring Ottoman Anatolia and Russian Caucasia.⁵⁵ It was this merchant class which would prove most receptive to European ideologies.⁵⁶ The Qajars lost control of much of Iranian Caucasia to Russia, and it is in the Russian controlled Caucasus that Azeri nationalism began to develop into a more popular movement.⁵⁷

Caucasian Muslim interaction with Western political thought and modernity more broadly encouraged the development of a nationalist ideology and the creation of distinct identity. Cut off politically from Muslim states, the Muslims of the Caucasus were put in the position of Others, living

⁵⁰ Richard Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars on the Frontiers of Eastern Azerbaijan" in *The Boundaries of Modern Iran*, ed. Keith McLachlan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 22.

⁵¹ Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 2000), 11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³ Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars," 26.

⁵⁴ Richard Tapper, *Frontier Nomads of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

⁵⁵ Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars," 29.

⁵⁶ Tadeusz Swietochowski, "National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905 – 1920," in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change*, edited by Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 212.

⁵⁷ Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars," 28.

as subjects of a Western Christian power. This began a quest for identity among the Muslims of the Caucasus, including those speaking Azeri Turkish. The Russian Empire's approach towards the Caucasus, though conciliatory at first, ultimately attempted to remodel its possession on the Russian sociopolitical system.⁵⁸ In response to religiously-backed dissidents, they began to institutionalize and bureaucratize the Sunni and Shi'a *ulema* which only served to discredit those that collaborated.⁵⁹ Russian control of the region relied heavily on turning different religious and linguistic communities against each other, though Christian communities such as the Armenians did tend to receive support more often than Muslims.⁶⁰ Tensions between the various communities escalated until brutal, inter-communal violence broke out.⁶¹ This inter-communal conflict contributed to segregation and the development of distinctive identities among the large mosaic of different communities in the Russian Caucasus.⁶² Additionally, through the destruction of the formerly independent polities of the region and their consolidation into merely two provinces, intense local particularism began to fade away.⁶³ Thus, the Azeri Turkish language, which had served as a *lingua franca* for the peoples of these various polities, began to become a marker of identity.

Some Caucasians blamed the Russians for the violence as the belligerent communities had lived relatively peacefully together for centuries.⁶⁴ These forces represented the radicals in the Caucasus and centered in the city of Ganja.⁶⁵ The wealthier oil city of Baku, with a powerful Azeri bourgeoisie, tended to support a more autonomist approach towards the Russian Empire.⁶⁶ In addition to these were pan-Turkic and pan-Islamist sentiments.⁶⁷ These events and intellectual trends had an impact in Iranian Azerbaijan due to the great deal of interaction between these regions.⁶⁸ This flow was not one way as the events in Azerbaijan proved particularly interesting for all Azeris living in the Russian Caucasus, such that there were a number of Caucasian Azeris

⁵⁸ Firouzeh Mostashari, *On the Religious Frontier: Tsarist Russia and Islam in the Caucasus* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁰ Roudik, *Culture and Customs*, 28.

⁶¹ Swietochowski, "National Consciousness," 215.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁸ Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, 122

who fought in the Tabrizi *Mojahideen* during the Constitutional Revolution.⁶⁹ These lines of contact, as well as the movement of trade and tribes, allowed for a sense of community across the imperial borders.⁷⁰

The comparative political progressiveness foretold the Azerbaijani position in the coming century; particularly, the number of individuals originating in or having connection to Azerbaijan who were involved in reform movements and the Constitutional Revolution.⁷¹ This progressiveness stemmed from a confluence of factors, many of which relate to Azerbaijani proximity to outside powers. More generally, the proximity and Turkish connection to the reforming Ottoman Caliphate of the *Tanzimat* period provided an example of a reformist approach to politics.⁷² Conversely, due to the relative isolation of the Caucasus from St. Petersburg, the Caucasus and northwest Iran served as a haven for Russian radical Leftists, particularly in Baku which had significant interaction with Iranian Azerbaijan.⁷³ Outside influence alone could not explain a broad region-wide progressiveness, despite the openness of the Azeri bourgeoisie to Europeans. The material factors producing Azerbaijani progressiveness began particularly after the closure of the Russo-Iranian border. Most immediately, this disrupted the movement patterns of nomadic tribes, such as the Shahsevan.⁷⁴ Raiding became increasingly common as Iranian preference to maintain tribal groups as loyal buffers and troops against outside powers discouraged tribal settlement.⁷⁵ In the interest of maintaining instability in Iran, Russia contributed to and encouraged tribal raiding while also demanding Iran settle the tribes. Settling would only be partially worked towards with no real effect outside of worsening state-tribal relations.⁷⁶ This also encouraged Qajari reliance on Russian military aid against intransigent tribes and made Russian occupation and annexation of territory more possible.⁷⁷ Additional Russian economic penetration, especially in the form of Russians purchasing Iranian villages and tracts of land through Iranian intermediaries, encouraged a more

⁶⁹ Swietochowski, "National Consciousness," 217.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷¹ Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples*, 144.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷³ Swietochowski, "National Consciousness," 218.

⁷⁴ Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars," 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

exploitative and extractive relationship between landlord and peasantry, encouraging class conflict and calls for land reform.⁷⁸

During the Constitutionalist period in Iran, Azerbaijan was a center of activity among the Constitutionalists due to the factors discussed earlier. Tabriz established a local council for elected representatives to the *Majles* in Tehran.⁷⁹ By this point, Tabriz already had a history of social democracy and movement organization, which improved the efficiency of and confidence in the council. This confidence can be seen in its choice of name: initially *Majles-e Melli*, meaning “Council of the Nation.” It received strong condemnation from the *Majles* in Tehran, which accused it of secessionism.⁸⁰ The council in Tabriz flatly denied this, and began to call itself the *Anjoman-e Tabriz*, “Council in Tabriz,” or *Anjoman-e Iyalati-ye Azerbaijan*, “Council of the Province of Azerbaijan.”⁸¹ The *Anjoman* frequently called on the *Majles* in Tehran to take bolder steps and to question the sincerity and commitment of the new Shah, Mohammad Ali Mirza.⁸² Their fears were shown reasonable when, on account of regional councils causing chaos, Mohammad Ali Mirza brought the *Majles* in Tehran to an end and called on regional councils to follow suit.⁸³ Tabriz refused and created a self-defense force.⁸⁴ Rapidly, the city split between the Monarchists and the Constitutionalists, who were led by a Sheikhi named Sattare Khan, taking the name the *Mojahideen*.⁸⁵ Tabriz’s resilience won it the admiration of much of Iran, and it served as a beacon of hope in the fight against the Monarchists.⁸⁶ The Constitutionalists eventually won, capturing Tehran and deposing Mohammad Ali Mirza to replace him with his 12-year-old son.⁸⁷

The buildup to World War I proved a tumultuous time in Iran. The period of the Second *Majles* was the period of political parties.⁸⁸ Of particular note was the Social Democratic party *Ferqeh-e Demokrat-e Iran*. This party evolved out of a variety of Social Democratic movements, which included

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 29.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 31.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 70-71.

many groups of Tabrizi and Bakuian origin and Azeris.⁸⁹ This party had strong representation in the *Majles* and engaged in frequent street clashes and violent political action.⁹⁰ This destabilization weakened the national government and the political process in Iran.⁹¹ Perceived strategic need, as well as broad support for Germany, encouraged the Entente to take action against Iran.⁹² An incident involving a Russian soldier and a tribesman in Azerbaijan provided a pretext for the Russian invasion and occupation of Tabriz, which ultimately ended the *Anjoman-e Tabriz*.⁹³ The Ottomans then followed suit, invading Azerbaijan, turning it into a bloody battleground in the war.⁹⁴ All sides exploited inter-communal tensions, promising independent states to the various communities in Azerbaijan.⁹⁵ The Ottomans particularly attempted to reach out to the Iranian Azeris to little avail.⁹⁶ Ottoman mismanagement did little to endear the Azeris, and their pan-Turkist appeals fell flat in large part due to the centrality of Shi'ism in the identity of people in Tabriz and Azerbaijan.⁹⁷ The Ottomans broke up the Democrats in Tabriz and exiled its leadership from Iran.⁹⁸ This betrayal by Tehran, and supposed foreign support, would have great impact on the upcoming events in Azerbaijan.

Among the leading Social Democrats exiled from Tabriz during the First World War was Mohammad Khiyabani, an ardent reformist and preacher.⁹⁹ In the post-war return to normalcy, Khiyabani and others were elected to represent Tabriz in the *Majles*.¹⁰⁰ Unhappy with the election results, the Iranian state sent troops to rectify the election results.¹⁰¹ The populace of Tabriz took up arms and formed an autonomous council.¹⁰² Accusations of separatism began immediately, but Khiyabani, the leader of this movement,

⁸⁹ Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 36.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹² Keddie, *Roots and Results*, 73-74.; Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 40-41.

⁹³ Tapper, "Nomads and Commissars," 33.

⁹⁴ Tapper, *Frontier Nomads of Iran*, 271.

⁹⁵ Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁷ Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples*, 171.

⁹⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 59.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 46.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 49.

firmly denied these charges.¹⁰³ He called for radical reform for Iran nationally and for greater regional autonomy.¹⁰⁴ It was these calls in conjunction with his absolute refusal to accept foreign assistance that would eventually cause the destruction of his movement.¹⁰⁵ His support for regional autonomy put him at odds with the pro-centralization reformers, who believed that the only way to enact national reform would be through a strong centralized state.¹⁰⁶ He was also at odds with those reformers in favor of regional autonomy as they generally sought foreign assistance.¹⁰⁷ The centralizing reformers gained control of the state and ordered the Cossack Brigade to quell Khiyabani's movement.¹⁰⁸ They proved successful, killing him and then putting down the next two autonomist movements that rose up shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁹

Eventually Reza Khan, leader of the Cossack Brigade, deposed the Qajar dynasty and became the first Pahlavi Shah.¹¹⁰ His reign marks a restorative period in Azerbaijani history, not due to policies of accommodation, but due to his overwhelming military might. Gaining power through the support of the centralizing reformers, this peasant born Mazandarani assumed their ideological positions as well.¹¹¹ Worried about division of Iran by outside powers, these reformers believed that a centralized state could maintain Iran's territorial integrity.¹¹² They sought this through homogenization and modernization.¹¹³ These policies worked hand in hand as Reza Shah put down the various tribes and opposition movements that worked against state centralization.¹¹⁴ He then began a policy of forced Persianization through national education programs and banning of local, non-Persian languages.¹¹⁵ These Shah-appointed intellectuals sought to tear Turkic languages out of

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 18.

¹⁰⁷ Atabaki, *Azerbaijan*, 50-51.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Keddie, *Roots and Results*, 86.

¹¹¹ Ansari, *The Pahlavis and After*, 38.

¹¹² Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 47.

¹¹³ Abrahamian, *Modern Iran*, 84 – 85.

¹¹⁴ Keddie, *Roots and Results*, 91.

¹¹⁵ Asgharzadeh, *Challenge of Diversity*, 87.

Iran, root and stem.¹¹⁶ They also sought to de-Arabize the Persian language, creating an institute to “purify” the language, relying heavily on Persianate literature such as the *Shahnameh* to discern the “pure” from the “impure.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

The development of Azeri identity began in the 19th century and was firmly established by the 20th century. Prior to that, the Azeri language did not really serve as a source of identity, but more as a *lingua franca* for the various people in the region. For the majority of its history after the rise of the Safavids, Turkish and Persian had served as the two major languages of the Iranian plateau. To explain simply, Turkish dialects were the languages of the tribes whom were the primary fighting forces in Iran, while Persian was the language of administrators, culture, and the intelligentsia. The languages spoken “on the ground” varied and were not necessarily guided or influenced by the “high” languages. “Normal” people themselves were less interested in their linguistic-based “ethnic” identity, but with their religion, their tribe, their village and town, or their Sufi lodge.

The Muslim Turks of the Caucasus found themselves subject to the Russian Empire following the Russian annexation of the Iranian Caucasus, as well as the various small khanates of the region. In response to the destruction of traditional sociopolitical systems from the Russian Empire’s “civilizing mission,” its divide and rule practices, and its discrediting of established religious systems, Azeri speaking Turks, particularly the intellectuals, became interested in finding new ways to maintain and identify their community. One notable example is Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh’s encouragement of the creation of a popular literary version of the language as a means of maintaining their identity. The intellectuals of this time went further than the general populace, who still focused more on their religious identity than their ethno-linguistic identity.

The Russian Empire brought modernity through their attempts to standardize administrative practices, establish educational institutions, and restructure existing political orders. The discovery of oil in Baku assisted this by bringing significant capitalist development to the region, further disrupting traditional power structures. These events contributed to the development of a linguistically-based Azeri identity through the previously discussed effects of modernization on identity. Due to the porousness of the borders between the Russian Empire and Iran, these ideas easily spread into Iranian

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 153.

Azerbaijan. However, they were weaker than in the lands north of the Araxes River.

Development of a distinct Azeri identity in Iran began in the Constitutional Period. Centralizing reformers were interested in empowering the center in order to enact reforms across the country. Among some, there was interest in homogenization through Persianization, as well as Persianization due to racial ideology. Many movements expressed their interest in autonomy by demanding the respect of Azeri Turkish as a language with a place in Iran. It was not until the Pahlavi monarchy that Azeri identity as a separate ethnic group in Iran fully bloomed. Reza Shah's empowerment and centralization of the state far exceeded anything done in the constitutional period, more effectively imposing the ideology and policies of Persian nationalists. Not only did the state ban Azeri Turkish and teach Persian in the schools, but the Shah and Persian nationalist intellectuals attempted to characterize the Azeri as merely Persians who had been Turkified and encouraged them to return to their "original" language and culture. This resulted in intellectuals in this increasingly distinct group looking to discredit the Pahlavi narrative, inciting the construction of Azeri national histories and further developing a distinct Azeri identity.

What the Azeri case illustrates is the importance of the destruction of traditional power structures and ways of living in the creation of identity along "modern" ethno-linguistic lines. These ideas of ethnic nationalism are rarely popular in origin. They instead represent ideas formulated by social elites as a means of unifying a community whose traditional life has increasingly been under assault and destroyed. Comparing the importance of Azeri identity in the Russian Caucasus to Iran tells this particularly well. While not the most "advanced" of European states, Russia was significantly more modern than Iran. Russian colonial policy destroyed the pre-existing political structures of the region and discredited the religious leadership of the Muslims in the Caucasian portion of its Empire. Being politically disconnected from the remainder of the *Ummah*, intellectuals in particular sought to create some means of maintaining their identity. Additionally, the Russian tendency to play off religious groups against each other, such as Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, further encouraged pursuit of a non-religious identity. What resulted, worsened through Soviet policies that exist outside the scope of this paper, was a fiercely nationalistic Azerbaijan.

The Azeris in Iran, though met with modernity, encountered it differently. Rather than imposed on them by a distinctly foreign power, it was imposed on them by one group originating in a community which they were a part of: Iran. Iran had seen two language groups exist in essentially coequal

complimentary positions for some time. Their identity as Iranians was not in question, but rather, they had to redefine it in relationship to a rising hegemonic group within Iran, the Persians. Their continued allegiance to Iran could possibly be explained by the resilience of traditional power structures. The power of traditional structures was significantly tested. For instance, the tribes that had been so important in Azerbaijan as political and military forces were absolutely decimated by the Pahlavi state. The Pahlavi state failed, however, to eliminate the *ulemaic* power structure which was of particular importance due to the significance of religious self-identification among these Shi'a Turks. Additionally, the continued self-identification with Shi'ism discouraged widespread support for pan-Turkism. It was the failure of modernity to erase traditional social structures, such as the *ulema* and Shi'a religious practices, that allowed for some partial continuation of traditional self-identification and the blurring of ethno-linguistic lines.

Queer Theology: Theological, Theocratic, and Secular Influences on Iran's Relationship with Transgender Bodies

Adam Oberlitner *

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On November 13, 2005, the Iranian daily newspaper *Kayhan* published a story about the public execution of two young men named Mokhtar and Ali. The charge that brought them to the gallows of Shahid Bahonar Square, alleges international advocacy organization Human Rights Watch (HRW), was *lavat*, a word loosely translated by many as “sodomy,” which refers to criminalized sexual acts between men.¹ As is often the case, the hangings provoked condemnations from such human rights organizations as HRW, but the agitation over these hangings, and several other such cases that year, effected no marked change in policy, neither immediately nor over the course of the following years.² There is a widespread Western perception of Iran as viciously anti-queer and without reservation in its anti-queerness—a reputation it continues to cultivate, one might argue, as Amnesty International’s 2017-2018 report on the country concludes with “some same-sex conduct [remains] punishable by death.”³ However, keeping this in mind so as not to trivialize the state-sanctioned violence faced by gay Iranian men and women, this all-encompassing conclusion is short-sighted.

* **Author’s Bio:** Adam Oberlitner is a double major in International and Area Studies and Arabic. He will graduate in the Spring of 2020.

¹ “Iran: Two More Executions for Homosexual Conduct,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 21, 2005, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/11/21/iran-two-more-executions-homosexual-conduct>.

² *Ibid.*

³ “Iran 2017/2018,” Amnesty International, accessed March 27th, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>.

The Iranian government has long permitted gender confirmation surgery (often referred to as “sex reassignment surgery,” or “SRS”) since the passage of a *fatwa* (an Islamic juridical ruling) in the 1980s, penned by none other than the father of the Islamic Republic himself. In addition, in 2012, the Iranian government moved to require health insurers to cover the full cost of confirmation surgery, previously covered in part through Iran’s welfare program.⁴ This latter point is specifically baffling to onlookers in the West, whose healthcare systems in countries, like the United States, may be less willing or able to guarantee such expansive coverage to accommodate the needs of their transgender citizens.

When compared, these two situations demonstrate a contradictory state of affairs. One cannot conflate transgender and gay persons or the distinct political issues they face, but since the marginalization of these groups stems from a common ideological source, it is worth asking why gay bodies are perceived as criminally deviant and why this is not the case for transgender bodies. Trans men and women in Iran still face harassment, discrimination, and violence; while the law sees transgender persons as separate from “criminally deviant” gay persons, popular opinion does not. This violence cannot be trivialized, but the legal systems surrounding transgender issues complicate the narrative that portrays Iran’s government as unabashedly anti-queer in all respects.

Because of its status as an Islamic theocracy, legal systems and political changes in the modern state of Iran cannot be decoupled from the development of its religious ideas. While religion plays a pivotal role in the politics of many countries, the theocratic nature of Iran requires law to have some basis in Islam, ordinarily in the conservative interpretation of Islam onto which many of the state’s major clerical figures hold. Iran’s reputation for anti-queerness, as mentioned above, is in part fueled by the active and critical role Islam plays in the formation of the country’s laws. However, as pointed out earlier, the Islamic Republic’s relationship with queerness is not adequately explained by a “progressive vs. conservative” or “secular vs. religious” lens. As such, this paper will explore Iran’s current legal and spiritual relationship with transgender bodies, including relevant developments in Shi’ite theology, theocratizing’s effects on recognition of transgender Iranians, and the way medical and political queer dialogue shapes the theology around it.

⁴ “Iran’s health insurers to pay for sex change operations,” BBC, May 29, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-18258276/iran-s-health-insurers-to-pay-for-sex-change-operations>.

The Usuli-Akhbari Dispute and the Usuli Legacy of *Ijtihad*

One of the major milestones in the development of modern Twelver Shi'ism is that of Usuli thought. The Usuli school of Twelver thinkers (taking its name from *usul al-fiqh*, or “principles of jurisprudence,” a methodology of theological analysis in Islam) initially flowered out of the earlier Mu'tazili school, which centered on an image of God as a font of justice as well as a desire to explore, in a rationalist scope, how evil can exist in a world with a just God.⁵ One example of Mu'tazili scholarship is Abd al-Jabbar ibn Ahmad's *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa*, in which he makes the claim that two of the four proofs one should use in discussions about God's nature are rational argumentation and *ijma'*, meaning the consensus of Islamic scholars.⁶ The Mu'tazilites dismissed the notion that one should simply abide by the Qur'an as-is and promoted discussion between scholars about the reality of God's will. It is worth noting that Mu'tazili thought did not recognize every individual person's religious interpretation as valid and worthy of consideration, but rather required scholars to participate in the process of interpretation among themselves. After these scholarly debates, everyday Muslims would abide by the new, rationalist interpretations of Islam.

The Usulis later expanded upon this concept in the 18th century with the proposed concept of a *mujtahid*, a person whose grasp of rationality and intimate understanding of Islam put them in the best position to interpret the will of the imam and the true meaning of holy texts. Usulis attached themselves to the interpretations of a single, living *mujtahid* who handed down their jurisprudential rulings on concerns both old and modern, allowing their adherents to tailor any major aspect of their lives to most closely fit the will of God. The fact that the *mujtahid* was conventionally required to be living prevented Usulis from adhering to the theology of a long-dead thinker. This in turn created a wealth of new perspectives endlessly flowing into Twelver Shi'ism, as new *mujtahids* reconsidered the rulings of their predecessors and applied themselves to interpreting Islam in new ways to

⁵ Nikki R. Keddie, “The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran,” *Studia Islamica* no. 29, (1969): 31-53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595086>; Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 47.

⁶ Richard C. Martin et al., *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 91.

tackle the pressing issues of their times.⁷ However, during the 18th century, another major school of Muslim thinkers known as the Akhbaris pursued a more tradition-oriented understanding of Islam. While the concept of *ijtihad*, or interpretation, was enshrined in the Usuli school, the Akhbaris focused on literal understandings of the *hadith* and Qur'an that came from allegedly infallible Muslim leaders of the past.⁸

The Usulis ultimately dominated the religious discourse of the time and have continued to be the dominant Twelver school of thought. The possible reasons for this outcome are many, but one highly compelling factor is the fact that this "Usuli-Akhbari dispute" occurred under the backdrop of the 18th century interregnum. This interregnal era between the reign of the Safavids and the Qajars was characterized by a vast decentralization of government in Iran; while there did exist a central government, it could not rely upon its own power to keep any major peace in Iran and thus the administration of land in the country often fell to regional tribes such as the Bakhtiaris. The Usuli focus on *ijtihad* and the dismissal of long-dead *mujtahids* allowed Usuli clerics to be infinitely flexible in an era that required it if they sought to maintain their power.

***Ijtihad*, Compliance, and Theocratizing Medicine**

In the mid-1960s, during the beginning of his Shah-demanded exile in Bursa, Turkey, Ruhollah Khomeini published a commentary on jurisprudence with the title *Tahrir al-wasilah*, and in its second volume he had written a section entitled *The Examination of Contemporary Questions*.⁹ Under this section, Khomeini had written on a matter commonly translated as "the changing of sex," of which he said that the *prima facie* view in his perspective is that there is no Quranic prohibition against gender confirmation surgery and that while there is no obligation for a person to undergo it, it is "possible" for a person to do so.¹⁰

The title of the section itself, *The Examination of Contemporary Questions*, demonstrates the Usuli ancestry present in Khomeini's approach

⁷ While the Usuli school of thought is usually perceived by many as more progressive than its contemporaries because of this relatively free flow of new ideas, this has been criticized by some scholars as reductionist, not all *mujtahids* interpreted Islam in unconventional or "progressive" ways.

⁸ Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power," 31-53.

⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Duke University Press, 2014), 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 174-175.

to theology—much of his work in this volume concerns the application of *ijtihad* to issues arising in the world at that time. The fact that Khomeini was willing to apply this process to the creation of an Islamic perspective on medically transitioning quickly became more relevant to the broader Islamic world after the Iranian Revolution, as he quickly became a leader among those opposing the West-backed regime of the Shah and his provisional government.

As the revolution brought low the Shah's rule and the Islamic Republic began, the practical consequences of theocracy became clear to those working within the new administration. The process of theocratizing required every aspect of society to be brought as close to God's will as possible, and this of course included medical practices. In the time of the Shah, scientific advancement paraded forward with no concern for Islamic rulings on medical issues such as abortion, birth control, or gender confirmation surgery. However, newly under the eyes of the jurists, biomedical scientists recognized that they now had to present their ideas in a more Islamic language in order to continue their practices. In 1994, Iran's Ministry of Health moved to put in place a national Congress of Compliance, which sought to reconcile the scientific community with the Islamic permissible practice of "legal medicine." During the second meeting of this congress, psychologist Mustafa Najafi brought to the attention of the compliance committee the issue of whether or not transgender men and women should live as their true gender for a period of time before transitioning, claiming that such a question arose on a daily basis for many in his field.¹¹ While few *mujtahids* had addressed the matter of trans persons as early as Khomeini had, this Congress of Compliance—a direct result of Iran's theocratization—forced jurists and the theocracy at large to meaningfully engage with the intricacies of transgender lives. This confrontation may not have happened at this scale if Iran had not undergone theocratization in the first place.

One of the other major influences on the status of medical transitions in legal medicine may have been the Iran-Iraq War following the revolution of 1979. As the Islamic Republic worked to display Iran's soldiers as heroic martyrs, it became evident that the celebration of soldiers' sacrifices posed a new quandary for the theocracy. As prosthetic technology had begun to greatly improve in response to the grievous injuries sustained by soldiers, the clerics of Iran had to come to a decision about the legal status of technology which could be seen as a modification of one's body. Ultimately, prosthetics were embraced, and this opened a door to other previously scrutinized

¹¹ Ibid, 169-70.

surgical practices such as plastic surgery.¹² This not only created a surgical field better equipped to care for trans Iranians, but it also pushed the boundaries of what surgical body modifications were deemed acceptable to the clerics of Iran.

A New Islamic Notion of Gender

This confrontation between the psychology of transgender identity and the theocratic practice of Islamizing medicine pushed Islamic scholars to consider the concept of sex and gender as separate from one another, and one prevailing model has been used by more trans-friendly scholars to explain gender identity in Islamic language. The concept of *jins* or “genus” in classical Shi’i jurisprudence refers to some essential part of a person’s nature and dictates their gendered obligations. However, some Shi’i scholars like *hujjat al-islam* Mehdi Kariminia argue that *jins* is not necessarily tied to one’s being “male or female.”¹³

Karimi describes biological sex as simply a sort of *jinsi* apparatus, a tool through which *jins* can be expressed. In this case, medically transitioning is not an act of altering one’s *jins*, which would be tantamount to changing the work of God. Instead, Kariminia describes a “ritual sex” tied to a person’s *jins* which indicates their gendered obligations—in this model, a trans woman’s *jins* dictates that she performs the gendered obligations of any other woman, such as observing the *hijab* and restricting herself to woman-only spaces. In this model, altering one’s *jinsi* apparatus could help them to better perform their *jins* role and, as a result, one might argue that promoting medical transition is more Islamic than simply not prohibiting it.

It is worth noting that Kariminia’s model of ritual sex resembles the folk theory of feminine essence often invoked in the West to provide a baseline model of a transgender person’s experience to cisgender people. That model being the concept of trans people as “a woman’s soul in a man’s body/a man’s soul in a woman’s body.” However, many Western critics have pointed out that the feminine essence theory is not a fully articulated or even an accurate description of what it is like to be transgender. Regardless, this unsophisticated model allows for the concept to be more easily digested by people without a baseline understanding of the matter so long as they believe in the concept of the soul. It could be argued that the model of ritual sex plays a similar role—while it is not an exhaustive or scientific representation of transgender persons, it allows people unfamiliar with the scientific or

¹² Ibid, 169.

¹³ Ibid, 177.

experiential aspects of gender identity to more easily grasp the concept and can help promote the normalization of medical transitioning. Just as the feminine essence theory is tailored to fit gender essentialist ideas about men and women as well as spiritual notions of a soul-and-body dichotomy, the model of ritual sex adopts the language of Islam to argue the idea to that same perspective.

The opinions of Iran's *mujtahids* are, however, widely varied. Therefore, a model like Kariminia's is not universally accepted by theologians, many of whom deny his view of the *jins* as an essence and the body as merely a *jinsi* apparatus. While many of his detractors proclaim that medical transition is still an act of altering God's work, this viewpoint is inconsistent with Ayatollah Khomeini's original view of it as permissible as well as Iran's recent move to completely subsidize the procedure.

While it may be easy to see the model of ritual sex as a tool for radical acceptance of transgender Iranians, this conclusion may be too hasty. While he does much to educate about and advocate for trans issues, Kariminia holds firmly to his position that transgender persons must eventually undergo gender confirmation surgery to permissibly sexually engage with the "opposite gender."¹⁴ If not, it would be inseparable to him from same-sex intercourse, which is explicitly forbidden in most understandings of Quranic law.¹⁵ Some other proponents of the model believe that while trans men and women should be permitted to medically transition, allowing them to live as their true gender before gender confirmation surgery would be too disruptive to "customs." As this model seems most consistent with the current legal status of trans bodies in Iran, however, it is a useful framework for understanding the way Twelver theology interacts with them in the framework of Iran's theocracy.

Reciprocity in Political Discourse and the "Trans Lobby"

As outlined above, while the process of theocratizing medicine allowed Islam to shape biomedical practices through the doctrine of "legal medicine," this theocratic process forced Islam to reckon in-depth with pre-existing conditions within the field of medicine, allowing for an environment that could foster the generation of a new Islamic concept of gender. This process of theocratization, at least in the *ijtihad*-focused tradition of Twelver thought, effectively created a reciprocal relationship in which theology shaped medicine and medicine in turn shaped theology. Just as theocratizing

¹⁴ Ibid, 184-85.

¹⁵ Ibid.

medicine had an impact on Twelver jurisprudence, the theocratization of Iranian politics also pushed Islam into confronting head-on the day-to-day issues of trans people in Iranian society.

Considering its anti-colonial bent, it is no surprise that immediately after the revolution, there was an air of intense animosity directed towards anything Western-seeming in nature in Iran. As the Iran-Iraq War began, many Iranians believed that the integrity of the Islamic Republic and thus its future was in danger. The intersection of these two attitudes played out poorly for the queer people of Iran—gay and lesbian Iranians were perceived as a moral threat to the Islamic Republic, and transgender Iranians were often perceived by their everyday countrymen as no different from crossdressing homosexuals. In addition, there had long been a tendency among many Iranian trans women to adopt Western names and Western styles of hyper-feminized attire, and so many in Iran saw these women simply as symptoms of Westoxification.¹⁶ The fact that men and women suddenly were wrangled into specific dress codes and gender-segregated spaces also made transgender men and women hyper-visible, making them easy targets for their angry countrymen and agents of the state.

Seeing the plight of other trans men and women in Iran, a woman by the name of Maryam Khatoon Molkara confronted several major jurists in the early 1980s and demanded some kind of resolution to the situation. After having sought out ayatollah after ayatollah for discussions, she finally traveled to the home of Ayatollah Khomeini, having a brief discussion with the man before he gave to her a letter describing his earlier ruling on confirmation surgery from the 1960s, essentially reissuing the decision as a *fatwa*. The reissuance of this *fatwa* is what initially provided the first official legal step forward for trans people in Iran, allowing Molkara to begin living as a woman and for other trans persons to seek out more expansive trans-specific healthcare.

This string of events demonstrates another form of theological reciprocity in Iran that could not have occurred without the state's theocratic structure. As ayatollahs became important political figures with officially recognized legislative powers in the Islamic Republic, they also became beholden to the same methods of activist pressure used to effect change in any other system of government.

¹⁶ Ibid, 164-65.

Western Psychiatry, Deviance, and the Realities of Transgender Lives in Iran

As Afsaneh Najmabadi points out in her book *Professing Selves*, one of America's most influential modern exports to the rest of the world is its science. In particular, the impact of American psychological and psychiatric texts on their respective fields in Iran played a key role in helping to create the legal distinction between transgender and homosexual bodies.¹⁷ While many everyday Iranians perceived homosexuality and transgender identity as minor variations on the same deviant behavior, texts such as the *DSM-III* and *DSM-IV* recognized them as separate from one another. Not only that, but the internationally widespread perception of trans identity as a disorder, specifically a "gender identity disorder," allowed many psychiatrists to view transgender persons as people who were ill and could potentially be treated and have their illness alleviated, primarily through the process of gender confirmation surgery. The fact that the *DSM* was one of the fundamental texts for the behavioral sciences in Iran is part of what allowed this distinction to enter into the discourse before the 1979 revolution, so when theocratization began, this was one of the many issues set before the jurists.

The dividing line between "disorder" and "deviation" in Persian psychomedical discourse is especially critical because of the loose translation of the word "deviation" to the Persian *inhiraf*, which Najmabadi notes not only captures the nature of the word's English equivalent, but is also culturally tied to moral notions of straying from the righteous path.¹⁸ The cultural baggage associated with this word creates a vast moral distinction between these two categories. The fact that homosexuality, considered to be one such example of *inhiraf*, and transgender identity are so closely linked in the broader consciousness of many Iranians pushes Iranian authorities to delineate between the two as strictly as possible. The practical effects of this have included the requirement of transgender men and women in Iran to constantly carry with them extensive documentation showing they are legally recognized as trans. Otherwise, they ordinarily face arrest and detainment, often resulting in humiliating treatment for days at a time.¹⁹ While aforementioned trans activist Maryam Molkara had been verified to live as a woman after her meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini, she was unable to undergo transitional surgery until 2002 after a flight to Thailand.²⁰ Because

¹⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁸ Ibid, 172.

¹⁹ Ibid, 167.

²⁰ Ibid, 166.

she had not been able to do so, authorities disallowed her to change her information on any of her official documentation and for seventeen years she faced employment discrimination and outright hostility from governmental officials and medical professionals.²¹ Even as she finally traveled to Thailand for surgery in 2002, she had been stopped by airport security before her flight and forced to change into masculine attire.²² Using Molkara as a case study, we can assess the way in which transgender men and women were actively policed in order to delineate “true trans bodies” from “same-sex players,” a term often used to derogatorily refer to gay persons in Iran.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic’s complicated relationship with transgender bodies is an excellent demonstration of the way in which theocratization has shaped the way in which Iranians interact with their government. It remains true that governmental decisions must ultimately coincide with the will of the state’s Supreme Leader. However, the importance of jurisprudence and interpretation in Twelver thought has helped to establish a religio-political framework through which trans activism—and thus activism in general—as well as academic discourse can shape not only governmental policy, but also the further development of Twelvers’ theology. The implications for this are clear. Many anti-colonial writers have argued that the forms of activism that work perfectly well in the West are not universally applicable, and political change in non-Western countries will most likely arise from non-Western activist methodologies. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Molkara confronting Islamic scholars about receiving a ruling on medical transition constitutes such a methodology. The theocratization of Iran created a system in which certain forms of activism could still exist and effect real change without having to necessarily start from the top of the state.

²¹ Ibid, 167.

²² Ibid, 166.

Lingering Effects: U.S. Media and the Case for Nationalism in the Iran Hostage Crisis

Lindsey T. Eisenmann*

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In his article on legitimacy and the Iran hostage crisis, R. K. Ramazani makes the claim that the hostility at play in foreign relations between Iran and the U.S. comes as a result of the Iran hostage crisis and the events that unfolded between 1979-1981. In 1978 Ayatollah Khomeini, an exiled Iranian Muslim leader, blamed President Carter for the “murderous regime” of Iran’s leader, Mohammad Reza Shah. He argued that, in spite of claiming to support freedom, America evidently supported repression.¹ Khomeini also spoke of the Shah as being a puppet of the U.S., which both demonized the U.S. and weakened the Shah at a time when his power was quickly dwindling in Iran.² Iranians lived through the oppressive regime of the Shah for years, and the revolution came as people grew tired of the Shah and were eager to see a change in the leadership of Iran. Soon enough, protests began erupting throughout Iran in opposition to the Shah, and the revolution was underway. Khomeini and his followers vied for “freedom from American domination,” which Khomeini believed would occur as a result of the revolution.³ On January 16, 1979, after months of protests and with no end in sight, the Shah fled Iran, and shortly after on February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to lead the Islamic Revolution and create an Islamic state in Iran.⁴

* **Author’s Bio:** Lindsey T. Eisenmann is an International and Area Studies major, and is minoring in International Security Studies. She will graduate in the spring of 2019.

¹ David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran hostage crisis and America’s first encounter with radical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 86.

² *Ibid.*, 86.

³ R. K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Hostage Crisis: Legitimacy Matters,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 274.

⁴ Farber, *Taken hostage*, 101 and 104.

On November 4, 1979, after a year of turmoil, militant students stormed the U.S. embassy, seizing 66 American citizens and holding 52 of them hostage for well over a year.⁵ Although it was initially planned to be a short three day ordeal, the hostage situation ended up lasting for 444 days.⁶ This event was a result of built up frustrations among Iranians in response to decades of U.S. interference. The tipping point came when the U.S. provided the Shah refuge, as well as cancer treatment, in New York.⁷ Iranians did not believe the stated seriousness of the Shah's ailment and demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran. Under no circumstance, however, would the U.S. government agree to their requests. As one ABC newscaster stated after the start of the hostage crisis, "there will be no bowing to the mob's demand for the return of the Shah."⁸ The hostage crisis began as a result of the U.S. sheltering and caring for the Shah, and it continued because of America's refusal to return the Shah to stand trial back in Iran. At a time when revolutionaries were emerging from the margins and attempting to take control of the chaotic mess in Iran, the hostage crisis served not only to weaken Iran's legitimacy in foreign affairs with the U.S., but to forge a deep hostility between the two nations which continues to this day. At this time, many Iranians were already discontented with decades of an overbearing U.S. presence in their governmental affairs and the hostage crisis resulted from this frustration. Throughout American media, the image of the hostage crisis was one of American innocence, alongside a terroristic portrayal of Iran. The deep-seated hostility of the U.S. toward Iran, and the innocence felt by most Americans throughout this incident, can largely be attributed to the role that U.S. media played in how it presented Iran and its citizens during the hostage crisis. By appealing to people's emotions as well as their sense of nationalism, American media worked to shape the minds of viewers to build up anger and hatred toward Iran and all that the revolution represented. The media played upon the viewers' emotions in a way that fostered nationalistic anger as well as hatred and distrust for the Iranian people and the Iranian nation as a whole, resulting in a tattered relationship between the two nations that continues to this day.

⁵ *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Iran hostage crisis."

⁶ Ramazani, "Iran's Hostage Crisis: Legitimacy Matters," 275.

⁷ "Why Carter Admitted the Shah," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/17/magazine/why-carter-admitted-the-shah.html>.

⁸ "America Held Hostage: The Iran Crisis," *ABC News*, November 1979.

It is nearly impossible to succeed in discussing the media's influence on public opinion during the Iran hostage crisis without mentioning bias. One cannot assume that either of the opposing sides was blameless or innocent in this situation. The U.S. had been meddling in Iranian affairs since the start of the cold war, and had protected the Shah that oppressed the Iranian people and ruled the nation as a dictator.⁹ It was not only the religious sect of society that greatly opposed the Shah. Many others opposed his “anti-democratic rule” and suffered as a result of his oppressive regime. In spite of this, the hostage crisis directly violated international law and was by no means a justifiable action.¹⁰ The hostage taking was a condemnable action, and, in spite of Iranian frustration with the U.S., it was not warranted. Melani McAlister claimed in her book *Epic Encounters* that the hostage crisis was “both politically and morally wrong.”¹¹ That being said, when looking at the hostage crisis through the lens of American media, it is a significant example of how the media can use a tragic situation as a tool to stir up nationalism and hatred for the “other.” It is a difficult situation to address as there is blame on both sides, but it remains an important example of how the media can take a contentious issue and use it to further their own agenda.

Iran in the Media Pre-1979

Before analyzing how the U.S. media affected American views of Iranians during the hostage crisis, pre-hostage crisis media coverage must first be examined. Knowledge of Iran before the revolution was scarce, and Iran's media presence in the U.S. was minimal. For the entire decade between 1972-1981, news coverage was so limited that the hostage crisis accounted for 75 percent of all televised news coverage of Iran in the U.S.¹² In the brief moments that Iran was discussed in the news prior to the hostage crisis, the focus was almost exclusively on oil, and the media labeled Iran a “strong ally” to the U.S.¹³ Iran went from having little to no media coverage in the U.S. to having an outpouring of coverage. The average American knew close to nothing of Iran prior to the hostage crisis, and the crisis quickly became the

⁹ Farber, *Taken hostage*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 143.

¹¹ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2001), 201.

¹² James F. Larson, “Television and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Iran Hostage Crisis,” *Journal of Communication* 36 (1986): 122.

¹³ *Ibid*, 116.; *Ibid*, 119.

entirety of the average American's knowledge of Iran. When the hostage crisis occurred, Iran's label of "strong ally" quickly changed; Iran became an enemy of the U.S. as well as the American people, which allowed the "innocent America" narrative to take off in U.S. media.

Media coverage was a prominent aspect of the Iran hostage crisis from the beginning, and within days of the hostages being taken ABC began a news program entitled "The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage." This nightly newscast eventually led to the start of the Monday-through-Thursday program "Nightline," which continues to this day to cover a wide range of topics.¹⁴ "Nightline" became significant during this time, as it rivaled late night talk shows and became a familiar voice for the American people during a time of crisis.¹⁵ As stated by James Larson, "Television network news usually follows or reinforces US government policy," and the hostage crisis provides clear evidence of this claim. "Nightline" played a significant role in the crisis, serving as a daily reminder of the crisis overseas in Iran. "Nightline" became a trusted source, and, because many Americans depended on it, "Nightline" succeeded in shaping the situation to fit their own political and social agenda. "Nightline," along with other U.S. media sources, ignored the Iranian grievances that resulted from the Shah's reign, and only presented the situation through the lens of a victimized America. The media left out important truths about the environment in Iran and presented the information in an arrogant and demeaning way in order to build up nationalism in the U.S. and potentially even a xenophobic outlook toward Iran.

The Early Days of the Crisis

American media did not hesitate to disperse images of the hostage taking that riled up and angered Americans from the start. The opening image for the first news coverage on November 8, 1979 presented hostage Barry Rosen blindfolded, handcuffed, and held by the hostage takers.¹⁶ Another image shown that night that would continue to be shown throughout the hostage crisis was a video of an angry Iranian mob burning the American flag outside of the embassy where the Americans remained in captivity.¹⁷ This video clip

¹⁴ David Yamada, "Thirty-five years ago: 'Nightline,' Ted Koppel, and the Iranian hostage crisis," *Musings of a Gen Joneser: A personal blog by David Yamada*, November 28, 2015., <https://generationjonesmusings.com/2015/11/28/thirty-five-years-ago-nightline-ted-koppel-and-the-iranian-hostage-crisis/>.

¹⁵ Yamada, "Thirty-five years ago."

¹⁶ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 202.

¹⁷ Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 147.

laid the foundation for American outrage toward Iranians. This depiction of the burning of the most significant symbol of the U.S. served to unify the American people. It created the belief that this situation was not an attack solely on the American government, but on the American people as a whole. Every image and video that followed served to fuel the fire. The book *Taken Hostage* includes street interviews conducted in the United States during the time of the hostage crisis. In these interviews, one man said “When I watch TV, the news, and I see what they do to that flag, it gets me in the heart.”¹⁸ This attack on the flag resonated as an attack on every individual American, and as news reporters showed these videos of the flag burning and average American citizens discussing how it affected them, it helped to propagate a sense of nationalism and defensiveness against Iranians. The appearance of those doing the burning also acted as an important part of this clip. In the clip, the viewer sees a swarm of Iranian men with long black beards as well as women clothed in the black chador.¹⁹ This was a perfect clip for the media to propagate, as it allowed the media to focus on the religious aspects of Iranian culture and to overemphasize the Islamic aspect of the hostage crisis.

The Islamic nature of the revolution was harshly criticized from the start of the crisis, and the U.S. media regularly condemned Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers. In a news article by the *New York Times* from November 14, 1979, Khomeini was analyzed by a group of “knowledgeable experts.” A quote from the article that frames the overarching intention of the author reads “the Ayatollah’s most prominent characteristic is an iron will that seems to defy any Western sense of moderation.”²⁰ Khomeini’s image quickly became the foremost symbol used by American media for the hostage crisis. In many news reports, an image of his anger-filled and fear-inspiring face hung in the background, or the camera would pan to posters of him in the streets of Tehran. In a nightly ABC report, one reporter stated “Holding Americans hostage is in character for the Ayatollah because he so strongly detests the U.S.”²¹ If the media could succeed in portraying Khomeini, an already questionable leader, as the face and leader of this movement, it would serve to greatly weaken his legitimacy and the theocracy he planned to establish.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Steven V. Roberts, “Experts Analyze Khomeini’s Attitudes; Reason for Iron Will; The Influence of Religion,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/14/archives/experts-analyze-khomeinis-attitudes-reason-for-iron-will-the.html>.

²¹ “America Held Hostage: The Iran Crisis,” *ABC News*, November 1979.

Near the end of that *New York Times* article, the author condemned Washington officials for not understanding Iranians' "depth of the rage felt toward the Shah."²² However, the article finishes in an accusing manner toward Iranians, as the author says that Washington officials also failed to understand that the Shah's cancer did not evoke "sympathy or human feelings in Iran[ians]."²³

The Shah was portrayed as a victim by the media multiple other times, including in the very first ABC newscast about the hostage crisis. The narrator dramatically begins the broadcast by telling the tale of "a king without a country" and "the fierce grip of Islamic fundamentalism."²⁴ This occurs in the introduction of the documentary, which is significant because it frames the situation in a biased way before the viewer is given the facts of what has happened. The phrase "a king without a country" seems to be an attempt to evoke sympathy for the Shah, as if he has been unjustly abandoned by his country. In a brief few seconds, this film managed to present the U.S. bias for the Shah, along with its bias against Islam and the revolution that aimed to rid Iran of the Shah that oppressed them.²⁵ This provides the framework for the comments made regarding the Iranians' lack of sympathy toward the Shah. Those statements vilified Iranians, suggesting that they were not justified in their dislike for the Shah and were inhumane for not feeling sympathy for a ruler that wreaked havoc on their nation. In the same ABC news report on the hostage crisis, the newscaster, Richard Anderson, stated that the hostage takers were expecting the U.S. to return the Shah "from his hospital bed in New York" in exchange for the hostages.²⁶ This seems to be a similar attempt to encourage compassion for the Shah and his illness, while failing to acknowledge the many reasons why the Iranian people chose to revolt against him in the first place. The image of a sick man being ripped from his hospital bed attempted to evoke sympathy in the American people, as well as to shame the Iranian people for not feeling concern for him. As well, the aforementioned article about Khomeini finishes with the conclusion "the Ayatollah and his followers are too blinded by their anger and self-righteousness to understand America's devotion to legal principles."²⁷ The writer of this piece over-generalized the Iranian people and vilified them in a

²² Roberts, "Experts Analyze Khomeini's Attitudes."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "America Held Hostage: The Iran Crisis."

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Roberts, "Experts Analyze Khomeini's Attitudes."

way that encouraged the reader to do the same. It boiled Iranian frustration down to nothing more than frustration at the chaos the Shah brought upon Iran. Just like the ABC newscast on the hostage crisis, this article neglected to consider the deep sources of their frustration that had been building up for years so that the writer could portray the Iranian people as self-righteous and blinded by anger.

Magazine and Newspaper Portrayals of the Crisis

The *Time* cover page from November 19, 1979 provides a visual example of the ways in which media served to convey a biased image of Iran. The image



of the blindfolded Americans adorned the cover in a way that evokes a sense of helplessness. During the CBS evening news on November 7, 1979, referring to Iranian demands for the return of the Shah in exchange for the release of the hostages, the reporter stated, "If the U.S. ever yields to this kind of blackmail, there will never be an end to it."²⁸ The rhetoric used by the media of Iran blackmailing the U.S. encouraged a sense of nationalism and a united fight against the Iranian "other." Though the hostages were portrayed as helpless, this threat of blackmail, and the reporters' call for the U.S. to resist their demands, made the

situation personal for the viewer. It was as if all Americans were victims of this situation. Another significant aspect of this cover is the way in which the magazine portrayed the hostage taker. The dark skin and turban, two images often stereotypically associated with Muslims, served to encourage

²⁸ CBS Evening News, November 7, 1979, <https://danratherjournalist.org/anchorman/breaking-news/iran-hostage-crisis/video-cbs-evening-news-november-7-1979>.

Americans in their prejudice and Islamophobia. The quote presented above by Ayatollah Khomeini in which he stated, “America is the great Satan,” is one that was used often by the media during this time. The use of that specific quote on this cover page, alongside a helpless portrayal of America, constructed the image of the U.S. as a victim of religious fanaticism and violence. In an ABC nightly report, one reporter stated “[Khomeini] considers Americans ‘Satan’s people.’”²⁹ The media took Khomeini’s quote out of context, focusing it directly at the individual and encouraging the average American, who was not directly involved with U.S.-Iranian relations, to become defensive in the crisis situation. Rhetoric like this operated to provoke nationalist sentiments and rally the American people against Iran. This is a prime example of how the media took a purely governmental issue and turned it into a social concern in which all of America felt directly attacked and personally affected.

The *Time* article from the issue presented above opens with the statement, “It was an ugly, shocking image of innocence and impotence, of tyranny and terror, of madness and mob rule.”³⁰ This idea of innocence and impotence is striking and was a prominent theme in U.S. media portrayals of America at the time. In the U.S., where Iranian history and foreign relations with Iran were not common knowledge among the average citizen at this time, the media had the easy job of convincing Americans that the U.S. was blameless in the hostage situation. The description of “tyranny and terror” goes even further, as it presents the Iranian revolutionaries as tyrannical. This statement is both ironic and biased, considering that the Iranian revolt was a result of the tyrannical regime of the Shah. The media neglects to address the horrors that the Iranian people faced for decades from the Pahlavi dynasty, a dynasty that was continuously backed by the U.S.

The Media’s Focus on Religion

Media during the time of the hostage crisis often framed the situation to be purely religious in nature, which encouraged Islamophobic views of Iran. While those who committed the hostage taking were part of Khomeini’s followers, the revolution was made up of vastly different groups and the hostage taking in Iran became a unifying force for the Iranian nation. From liberals to religious conservatives, when it came to the revolution, all were

²⁹ “America Held Hostage: The Iran Crisis.”

³⁰ “Blackmailing the U.S: The lives of some 60 Americans hung in the balance in Tehran,” *Time Magazine*, November 19, 1979, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,948771,00.html#paid-wall>.

united in the desire to rid Iran of the Shah and his oppressive regime.³¹ This truth is necessary for understanding Iran; the media presented all of Iran to be radically Islamic, which greatly influenced the American belief that Iran was a terrorist threat and a nation not to be trusted. President Bush stated in his 2002 State of the Union address that Iran was in the business of “aggressively pursuing weapons” and “exporting terror,” and proceeded to call Iran a part of “the axis of evil.”³² President Bush stated that the nations in this axis of evil “threaten the peace of the world.”³³ This wording is similar to the rhetoric used by the U.S. media during the time of the hostage crisis. By presenting Iran as a nation that threatened world peace, it was assumed that without Iran, the world would attain peace. This erased the negative impact that U.S. involvement had had on many parts of the world, including Iran. It was once again assumed that the U.S. was an innocent victim of this “evil” nation. President Bush’s speech was made at a vulnerable time for the American people, as it had been only a few months since the injustices of 9/11. To make a claim like this about Iran at such a crucial time, when the American people needed something to cling to, does a great deal of harm to the reputation of Iranian people. The hostage crisis laid the foundation for this view of Iran as a terrorist threat, and since then Iran has become the image of terrorism for many in the United States. President Bush’s comments only served to fuel the fire and intensify hatred and distrust for Iran.

Xenophobic Responses to the Media’s Influence

US media during the Iranian hostage crisis did more than influence the relationship between the two nations; it also worked to create an American outlook that was racist and xenophobic toward Iranians, Iranian Americans, and those who “looked” Iranian. During the time of the hostage crisis, many Iranian Americans as well as Iranian students studying in the U.S. began taking to the streets and protesting the U.S. government’s actions toward Iran.³⁴ Some U.S. district judges began outlawing protests on government property, and in spite of President Carter’s request that Americans not use “foreigners as scapegoats,” many Americans were already responding with

³¹ McAlister, *Epic encounters*, 204.

³² News Clips: U.S., “The ‘Axis of Evil’ Speech,” *George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum*, 2002.

³³ *Ibid.*”

³⁴ CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, November 16, 1979, <https://danratherjournalist.org/anchorman/breaking-news/iran-hostage-crisis/video-cbs-evening-news-november-16-1979>.

hate, and Iranians suffered as a result.³⁵ Media responses did not help the situation. During the CBS evening news on November 16, 1979, the reporter quoted a U.S. citizen saying he “wouldn’t blame Americans for throwing rocks or eggs or anything else at Iranian students protesting in the country,” and that he felt like “taking a punch at one myself.”³⁶ Although the reporter did not directly agree with these statements, he also did not condemn them. Including this interview in the broadcast and failing to denounce the statements encouraged Americans to say, think, and act in the same violent and hateful ways this man described. The reporter then went into detail about the challenges Iranian businesses were facing as a result of the hate and fear expressed towards them in the U.S. They showed an Iranian man’s auto shop that was vandalized and discussed how Iranian businesses have been boycotted as a result of the hostage crisis. Some businesses in the U.S. went so far as to place signs up that said things such as, “We reserve the right to refuse service to Iranian citizens.”³⁷ While some cities forced the owners to remove such signs, law enforcement in many cities simply chose to look the other way. The attempt by the media to reveal some of the outright racism experienced by Iranian Americans could have had a positive effect, as it humanized Iranians and gave a face to the issue. However, the way in which it was executed in this newscast seemed to only encourage more hate, as the wrongs already committed were neither condemned nor discouraged. Because the media had already presented the hostage crisis in a way that made it feel like a personal attack on Americans, many American citizens responded defensively and fought back in violent and hateful ways against those who were not to blame for the situation. Just as it was true that not all of America was innocent in this situation, it was also true that not every Iranian was guilty or supported the hostage taking. However, the media did not allow for a dialogue to be created, and instead sought to pit the “innocent” against the “guilty.”

Conclusion

Since the return of the hostages on the day of President Reagan's inauguration, politicians have clung to President Reagan's supposed superhuman strength in getting the hostages released immediately, and some have used that feat to fuel their own personal campaigns. Many politicians who have sided with the GOP have claimed that President Carter was weak, and credited the release

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

of the hostages to Iran's fear of President Reagan.³⁸ In the 2016 American election campaigns, both Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz (on separate occasions) took to the media to proclaim that they would exert the same power over Iran that President Reagan did 35 years prior. Both men shamed President Obama for being "weak" in regard to how he dealt with the seizure of U.S. sailors by Iran.³⁹ Rubio claimed that "When I become President... our adversaries around the world will know that America is no longer under the command of someone weak like Barack Obama." These men's statements were the result of the false belief that the hostages were released out of fear of President Reagan and ignored the negotiations of the Carter administration. It is a prime example of how the media and politicians continue to use the Iran hostage crisis to further their own agenda.

The Iran Hostage Crisis was an unjust and condemnable response to years of U.S. interference in Iran and built up frustrations of the Iranian people. Iran was practically unknown to the American people, who never viewed it as a threat, but the hostage crisis significantly changed American views and beliefs about Iran in ways that continue to this day. The U.S. media played an integral part in shaping how Americans view Iran. The media thrived off of the image of an "innocent America," and created an image of Iran as being under the control of religious fanatics who used terror to get their way. U.S. media at the time of the crisis used the faces of the hostages to encourage the growth of nationalism in America. Media newscasters and writers served as the leaders of this movement, sowing seeds of hatred and distrust toward Iran into the hearts of Americans as everyone watched the events of the hostage crisis unfold from their television screens and newspaper articles. The rhetoric used by the media succeeded in fostering hatred for the Iranian people in America, and Iranians in the U.S. suffered from increasing accounts of racism and bigotry during the time of the crisis and onward. America's overall lack of knowledge about the cultural and political state of Iran at the time of the crisis allowed the media to feed off American ignorance. The media presented the news in a biased way that ignored the facts of how Iran got to where it was and why the people chose to revolt against the Shah in the first place. The injustices that took place throughout the 444 days that Americans were held hostage by Iranian students should not be discussed without condemnation for the students' actions. However, it is clear that because of

³⁸ Amanda Taub, "The Republican myth of Ronald Reagan and the Iran hostages, debunked," *Vox*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/25/10826056/reagan-iran-hostage-negotiation>.

³⁹ Taub, "The Republican myth."

U.S. media involvement during this tragic situation, Iran suffered the consequences of being seen by America as a terrorist threat and a nation not to be trusted.

***Fatwas and Feminism:* How Iran's Religious Leadership Obstructs Feminist Reforms**

Anu S. Asokan*

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In 2009, a pro-government *Basiji* militia member shot Neda Agha Soltan in the chest. Neda was a philosophy student who participated in protests against a possibly corrupt election, and her death was the spark that started the Green Movement and increasing protests.¹ As the video of her murder became viral, the foreign media was expelled from Iran. Over 150 well-known reformists and journalists, as well as thousands of demonstrators, were arrested.² Throughout the protests, the repercussions, and the government's eventual crushing of the Green Movement, women were at the forefront of activism.

Iranian women have a long history of protest: they were critical to the 1979 Revolution and subsequent regime change. Iranian feminists joined together with other factions, like leftists, working class, and clerics, to overthrow the Pahlavi monarchy. These very different groups followed the leadership of the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini, who called for wealth redistribution, among other things.³ For a population that had endured a "repressive dictatorship, exploitative influence of the West, extremely uneven distribution of the wealth...and bureaucratic corruption in their workplaces," the opportunity for a new government was appealing.⁴ Iranian feminists had

* **Author's Bio:** Anu S. Asokan will graduate in the spring of 2019 with a major in History. She is also completing two minors in Biology and Chemistry.

¹ "'Neda' becomes rallying cry for Iranian protests," *CNN*, June 22, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/21/iran.woman.twitter>.

² Sanam Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 201.

³ Arzoo Osanloo, *Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 152.

⁴ Paria Gashtili, "Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran," *Philosophical Topics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 123.

a stake in the elimination of these unfair aspects of the Pahlavi government, but they also wanted to take action against the “shallowness of women’s emancipation” and human rights abuses that the monarchy had promoted.⁵

Although the pre-revolution Iranian feminists shared similar goals with other factions, especially the clerics, “the absence of a democratic, secular, and progressive leadership, as well as...the misleading promises of Khomeini” led them put their faith in the wrong person.⁶ Even though these different factions worked together against the monarchy, “due to the lack of cohesion and organization, [the liberals] were marginalized by the clerical caste that brought about the second revolution, the Islamic one, and secured a theocracy in Iran.”⁷ Khomeini recognized how essential female activists were in the 1979 Revolution, but nevertheless set the stage for the rapid institutionalization of gender inequality.

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, polygamy was outlawed, abortion allowed, and the minimum marriage age of women raised.⁸ After the 1979 Revolution, public spaces (such as beaches and schools) were gender segregated, female judges lost their positions, and polygamy was legalized. Women in particular were affected by this shift in rights; in most cases, they lost both custody of their children and their ability to divorce.⁹ The Iranian government’s current position on gender is “that men and women are fundamentally ‘different’ beings in nature...[which] has translated into a reality for women in which they occupy a subordinate status to men.”¹⁰ The state explicitly states that the life of a woman is worth only half of that of a man: the *quessas* law “stipulates that the amount of ‘blood-money’ payable to the family of a murdered woman should be half the amount that is payable to the family of a murdered man.”¹¹ The government continues valuing men over women even in recent years: “In 2007/08 the state imposed a quota system, offering 60 percent of university places to male students and 40 percent to female students, even if female

⁵ Ibid.; Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 172.

⁶ Gashtili, “Gender Politics”, 123.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rebecca Barlow and Akbarzadeh Shahram, “Prospects for Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2008): 23.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

students' grades are higher than male students' grades," once again institutionalizing the belief that women belong in the home.¹²

The data support the claim that post-revolutionary Iranian women suffer greatly due to this discrimination. For example, in 2003 "the ratio of estimated female to estimated male earned income was a mere 0.38."¹³ Although some conservative Iranians may argue that this income inequality is irrelevant because Iranian men provide for the family anyway, that is not always the case. The Association of Iranian Women in the UK, a non-governmental organization, found that "unemployment and poverty (clearly two interrelated issues) are the leading causes of why disturbing numbers of Iranian women turn to prostitution as a means of subsistence."¹⁴ Iranian women clearly have lost much in the past four decades, despite their bravery and contribution to the revolution.

The future of feminism in Iran is highly dependent on its history and current conditions. Patriarchal beliefs have been widespread in Iran for millennia, but it is the modern-day, Islamic government structure that codifies these inequalities and makes it all but impossible for even elected officials to implement feminist or other reformist policies. Analyzing the history of Iranian feminism reveals that working within the current constitutional framework is fruitless and produces no real reforms. Despite the obstacles Iranian feminists face, with the appropriate conditions and ideologies, gender equality can prevail.

Motivations for Female Oppression

The reasons for these recent changes are numerous, but many can be traced to a backlash to Westernization. Iranians have numerous examples of how detrimental certain events related to Westernization were to their sovereignty and quality of life. Many of these events occurred during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who were staunch and often extreme supporters of modernization. For example, the industrialization that was praised by capitalistic societies brought tangible problems. Scholar Erika Friedl demonstrated that "in [twentieth century] Iran, partial industrialization dislodged workers from agriculture faster than they could be absorbed into industry. Based on the traditional model of development, men

¹² Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, edited by Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

were the primary target of absorption into industry. Therefore, in spite of new job opportunities..., the overall daily life and economic position of the majority of women declined.”¹⁵ Therefore, in the eyes of many Iranians, Westernization could be linked with hypocrisy, interference, and false promises. Twentieth century “Iranian men and women... perceived modernization as simply imperialism in disguise,” because of their long history of unequal relationships between Iran and European or American powers. Unfortunately, this rejection of Western standards manifested itself uniquely in the constitutional and legal treatment of women.

The post-revolutionary state has focused on women for reasons that are particular to Iranian history and culture. The privilege and burden of being cultural repositories has often fallen upon women, and therefore women have a higher standard upholding the traditions of an entire culture. This is reflected in one scholar’s assessment that “a woman’s failure to conform to the traditional norms could be labelled as renunciation of indigenous values and loss of cultural identity.”¹⁶ Westernization also brought a social and economic division among Iranian women, primarily because of the increasing:

polarity between modern and traditional lifestyles. Among the urban middle class, two layers of women emerged....: *chadori* (veiled) women, representing the female fold of bazaar-oriented (merchants, traders, artisans, shopkeepers) ...and *beechador* (unveiled) women, representing modernized, educated females of the newly emerging *edaari*, that is, office oriented (professionals, technicians, government employees).¹⁷

Among the Iranian public, these divisions were strongly associated with Westernization. Traditional, veiled women were seen as old-fashioned and knowledgeable, whereas modern, unveiled women were “soon considered to be ‘Westoxicated’ (meaning to be under the influence of the toxic culture of the West), objectified, and identity-less (*beehoviyyat*).”¹⁸ Iranian women who worked in the office, dressed in Western styles, and did not wear a veil were

¹⁵ Nayerreh Tohidi, “Modernity, Islamization, and Women in Iran,” in *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. Valentine Moghadam (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

considered to be “complying with the forces of ‘Western imperialists.’”¹⁹ With these type of explicit associations between the evils of Westernization and Iranian women’s clothing and professions, it is not surprising that the revolutionary government tightened restrictions on women.

These revolutionary forces “mobilized the image of women as the symbolic bearers of virtue who represented the nation’s honor and hence needed to be saved from Western corruption.”²⁰ The new government’s dislike of the Pahlavi monarchy and modernization were focused on its effects on women, and therefore the reversal of some of the women’s freedoms were motivated by a desire to return to tradition and to eradicate Westernization. More recently, the state has been engaged in a “lengthy campaign against...Western cultural influences on gender relations. In schools, in the media, in political arenas, the government has identified women’s subservience as a linchpin of Iranian and Islamic identity.”²¹ By framing its current regulations in the context of the negative effects of Westernization, the state is able to justify gender inequality and its limitation on women’s rights.

What is important to recognize is that most of these restrictions are based on interests in maintaining *Iranian* culture, virtue, national identity, and tradition; the backlash against Westernization is rooted in the remembrance of Iranian history. These restrictions are not solely, or even primarily, because of Islamic values, they are because of preexisting social and patriarchal values shared by many cultures worldwide. Islam has been used to justify inequality, but so have other methods. For example, the science that men and women have biological differences has been twisted to justify female oppression. In 1979, Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari claimed that “the biological differences between men and women...[indicate that] woman’s most important duty is motherhood, so her ‘natural’ activities occupy her with family.”²² Ultimately, “the roots of patriarchal oppression go far deeper than the Islamisation of state and society since the 1979 revolution.”²³ In order to establish equality, it is

¹⁹ Ibid., 127.

²⁰ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 129.

²¹ Charles Kurzman, “A Feminist Generation in Iran,” *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 298.

²² Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 34-35.

²³ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 26.

vital to recognize that the 1979 Revolution is not solely responsible for promoting patriarchal oppression.

Unequal gender regulations have multiple origins and a very long history, mostly relating to Iranian society and its past, but the justifications for female oppression have changed to suit the needs of the oppressors. The most damning evidence for this contention comes from an analysis of government policies on the veil. In 1936, Reza Shah ordered the compulsory unveiling of Iranian women, in the guise of women's liberation. His actions did not free all women as intended; specifically, "girls who refused to unveil or whose guardians refused to allow them to do so were withdrawn from schools.... Working-class women for whom unveiling was the equivalent of public nudity were compelled to leave their jobs and spend the rest of their lives confined to domestic spaces."²⁴ Religious or conservative women were forced to choose between their lifelong practices and their engagement in the public sphere, and many chose the former. Even this choice stigmatized them "as traditional, backward and uncivilized."²⁵ Years later, yet another restriction on women's clothing was issued by the government—this time Khomeini's post-revolutionary government required that all women cover themselves in public with a veil. Surprisingly, the reasoning behind this law was not that different from the Pahlavi justification: it would free the women. Current Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei has stated that the modesty from veiling protects women "from abuse by men."²⁶ Supporters of mandatory veiling claim that women can participate in the public sphere more.

The striking similarity between the 1936 unveiling of women and the post-revolutionary veiling of women is that both decisions were made by men about women's bodies. This is strong and clear evidence that the patriarchy, rather than Islam itself, has a significant part in the oppression of women; women were *not* included in either of these decisions, even though these laws only apply to women. The veil itself is merely "an empty signifier, and has

²⁴ Rebecca Gould, "Hijab as Commodity Form: Veiling, Unveiling, and Misveiling in Contemporary Iran," *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 3 (2014): 234.

²⁵ Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Bypassing Islamism and Feminism: Women's Resistance and Rebellion in Post-revolutionary Iran," *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et De La Méditerranée* 128 (2012): 210.

²⁶ Khamenei (@khamenei_ir), "A woman can have active presence & deep influence on social arenas—as Iranian women are so influential. The features of today's Iranian woman include modesty, chastity, eminence, protecting herself from abuse by men, refraining from humiliating herself into appeasing men," Twitter post, March 8, 2018, 2:50 a.m., https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir.

been deployed equally for the ends of women's liberation as for their oppression. The crucial question is not whether or not a woman chooses to veil, but whether the choice to veil is forced on her by the state."²⁷ What must be emphasized is that patriarchal governments believe they can interfere with a woman's individual choice by claiming that their way is best for her. This is true of both the secular Pahlavi and theocratic Khomeini governments, and it is not unique to Islam. Thus, "Western discourses which state that women's liberation will come with liberation from Islam...[is] simplistic and damaging," because Islam is not the first, main, or only origin of or justification for gender inequality.²⁸

Implications of a Theocracy

However, Islam does play a major role in the legalization of these unfair social constructs. Specifically, Islam is written into the very structure of the Iranian government, in the form of the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council is not a mere advisory committee to the President; it is "the highest power in the country and the office of the president is the second highest."²⁹ This office of religious leadership was written into the Iranian Constitution. The Guardian Council comprises of twelve members, all of whom are directly or indirectly nominated by the Supreme Leader, whose role is also written into the Constitution. Both the Council of Guardians and the Supreme Leader have final say in almost all political decisions, and the Supreme Leader is granted the ability to appoint the heads of multiple departments, including the military. For an Iranian law to be passed, it must be approved by both the majority of the Parliament and the Guardian Council.³⁰

The implications of this government structure are highly relevant to women's rights. Even though women can exercise their constitutional right to vote and to run for government positions, these rights are greatly restricted by the Council. Since 1979, "a number of women have signed up as presidential candidates; however, all female candidates have been rejected by the Council of Guardians."³¹ This hindering of public participation is reflected in both the biggest elected office of the country as well as small

²⁷ Gould, "Hijab as Commodity," 235.

²⁸ Rostami-Povey, "Introduction," 2.

²⁹ Jamileh Kadivar, "Women and Executive Power," in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 122.

³⁰ Gashtili, "Gender Politics," 132.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

community branches. Despite feminist efforts to increase women's participation in local councils, their involvement has increased only a mere 1.5% between 1994 and 2004.³² These examples show that what is written into law—namely, that women have the right to become political candidates—is often starkly different from practice, and the legal, constitutional power of the Guardian Council is responsible for this difference. It is difficult to predict whether the Iranian people would vote for a female President, simply because no woman has ever gotten to that stage. Perhaps the Guardian Council would allow more female candidates if their own members happened to be feminists, but the fact that women's rights are left dependent on the beliefs of twelve members is what is troubling. Even if the majority of Iranian society does support patriarchal views, the portion of the population that wishes for female empowerment would have more opportunities to enact their beliefs through their constitutional rights if candidates were not vetted by the Council.

In addition to this legalized limitation on women's rights, there is much indirect power wielded by the religious institutions. In 2001, the liberal President Khatami and the Parliament wanted women on Khatami's cabinet, but this plan was rejected by the religious elite. Khatami "was confronted with a great deal of opposition by a number of grand ayatollahs."³³ Because his position and the policies he wanted to promote would rely so heavily on his relationship with the religious elite, he was not willing to "take a risk which would have made the conservative clerics angry and could have prompted them to issue fatwas...[or instruct] the citizens not to pay taxes."³⁴ The clerics have such great influence that they are as powerful as the elected President or elected members of Parliament who are there to represent the people. Therefore, even with liberal candidates and majority votes from the Parliament, the disproportionate influence of the religious elite on the government was able to maintain the status quo. The rights of half the population are left in jeopardy because the structure of the government grants an unelected office such great power. The sheer power awarded to the unelected religious leadership has effects on every aspect of Iranian politics, not just women's rights. Reform, both feminist and otherwise, should rely on public opinion, but here it relies on both the vote and the beliefs of the

³² Elaheh Koolae, "Women in the Parliament," in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 140.

³³ Kadivar, "Executive Power," 126.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Guardian Council. Even though the Iranian Constitution awards the right to vote to both men and women, Iran cannot become a true democracy as long as the religious office has this type of superior control.

Opposition from Iranian Feminists

With the structure of government as such, what is needed for change? Under what conditions would women's rights improve? Some Iranian feminists argue that the laws are in place to help women, so therefore women must use the legal system to its full extent. The female judge and former politician Nahid Hajinouri believes that rights are re-established when women repeatedly try to get them enforced with legal methods.³⁵ For example, one law student was fined for wearing mascara and lipstick, but she told the judge that the penalties for modern makeup are not specifically listed in the Qur'an or in the civil code. Because she was informed, the judge greatly reduced her fine.³⁶ In addition, Iranian women who feel powerless in their marriages can also use the courts "to renegotiate the terms of marriage or persuade their husbands to comply with the terms of the marriage."³⁷ For example, one woman who went to court asked the judge to file a divorce for her, but instead the judge obtained a signed statement from her husband promising to get better living quarters for their family. Although the woman ended up staying with her husband, she did have more power ultimately because he was forced to comply with his court-appointed duties. Legal anthropologist and former lawyer Arzoo Osanloo claims that "women's increased petitions to the court, their increased use of the legal process and greater reliance on a discourse of rights pose challenges to statist patriarchy and compel the courts to implement women's state-sanctioned rights. Thus, women's discourses of rights in Tehran's family courts could be seen as part of the resistance."³⁸ These women resist the state—by complying.

However, these petitions do not actually increase women's rights; all of the legal hassle simply results in courts finally executing the rights these women were already supposed to have. The law student should not have been given a fine at all; the fact that she was, which was entirely determined by a subjective judge who had no legal basis for doing so, is incredibly troubling. Perhaps Iranian feminists are "still happy about the small achievements of these brave and defiant women, simply because [they] do not see them just as

³⁵ Osanloo, *Politics of Women's Rights*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

women, but as women in a Muslim society, and that, unfortunately, makes [them] lower [their] expectations.”³⁹ Using the legal system to reclaim their rights is an improvement over the status quo, but it is not active, thorough resistance. The women who use this legal method are not calling for change to the laws or change to the government structure that enables this type of bias and subjectivity, and therefore the underlying problems themselves are not resolved. This method may bring benefits to their lives and they should be applauded for their persistence, but it is not enough to bring change by itself.

A second, more widespread branch of resistance is Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists from both Iran and other parts of the Middle East believe that Islam itself is not the fundamental problem—rather those in power (specifically, men) interpret Islam wrongly, often to satisfy their own patriarchal principals. They believe that “gender discrimination has a social origin. In other words, there is no ground for such discrimination in the holy book of Muslims or in the teachings of the prophet.”⁴⁰ This viewpoint is partly a backlash to Western thought, especially because many Western and secular feminists point to Islam as the underlying cause of women’s oppression in the Middle East. Iranian feminists are “aware and critical of dogmatic faith in Western secular liberalism which has a history of violence, wars, colonial exploitation....”⁴¹ Feminist pioneers in Iran, like Shahla Sherkat, the founder of women’s magazine *Zanan*, believe that “gender equality is Islamic;” therefore, Iran can continue its Islam-based government structure and still bring change to women’s lives.⁴²

Islamic feminists in Iran have several contentions in favor of their perspective. First, they point to the Qur’an and legendary Islamic women like Fatimeh and Zaynab, who were “non-domesticated, non-passive, socially engaged, and politically militant.”⁴³ In fact, Zaynab “fought alongside men in the battlefields...[and] ensured the continuity of Shi’ism,” which is even more significant considering Iran’s Shiite background.⁴⁴ They point to the importance of over a dozen women directly mentioned in the Qur’an as well as strong and brave religious women from more recent Iranian history to prove that Islam has a long tradition of female power, and this power has been

³⁹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 134.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” 7.

⁴² Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 125.

⁴³ Tohidi, “Modernity, Islamization,” 121.

⁴⁴ Rostami-Povey, “Historical Context,” 25.

minimized and usurped by misogynists.⁴⁵ In addition, the pride that Islamic feminists hold in these legendary Iranian-Muslim women emphasizes that secular and Western states do not have a monopoly on female empowerment. This “counterargument” to Western secularism validates the legitimacy of Iran’s theocracy.

Second, they point to the specific patriarchs who began deemphasizing these brave and strong historical women. Ayatollah Mutahhari “believed that Islam gave priority to societies, communities, and families over individuals....In 1979, Mutahhari’s writings served largely as the basis for gendered social divisions,” because he argued that women could best serve their communities by adhering to domestic life and motherhood.⁴⁶ By tracing the coercion of women into the domestic sphere back to Mutahhari’s fairly recent interpretations, “religious-oriented Iranian feminists....[can emphasize] that women’s problems are a result of misguided male interpretations of Islam’s holy texts, as opposed to the principles of Islam itself.”⁴⁷ Finally, Islamic feminists in Iran point out that “Talibanism and Saudi-style conservatism have never existed in Iran....The high number of votes cast in favour of reformist candidates in elections since the 1990s shows that the majority of the people believe in *Fiqh Poya* (dynamic jurisprudence) and the idea that Islam is compatible with democracy and modernism.”⁴⁸ Because Islamic conservatism is moderated by a democracy, and because there is such a high level of participation from the Iranian public, Islamic feminists contend that the Iranian people embrace their government’s unification of state and religion.

Islamic feminism is appealing because of the strength of its arguments and because it calls for internal change and reform rather than instability and revolution. This “religious-oriented feminism has proven to be a flourishing force since it does not challenge the Iranian regime, but confines itself to targeting aspects of state policy that are deemed to be deviating from Islam.”⁴⁹ However, as secular feminists have contended, this method of resistance and philosophy can be problematic and unsuccessful.

⁴⁵ Zahra Nejadbahram, “Women and Employment,” in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 74.

⁴⁶ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 35.

⁴⁷ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 25.

⁴⁸ Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” 3.

⁴⁹ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 26.

Secular Feminism and Criticisms of Other Feminist Methods

Secular feminists call for a government where religion does not have a formal role to play. Furthermore, they specifically “view the merging of Islam and politics as a central part of the problem that Iranian women face,” which is where secular feminism strongly diverges from Islamic feminism.⁵⁰ Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi is a devoted Muslim, but she is still a secular feminist because she has come to accept that “when religion is given a formal role to play in the political arena, religious texts make powerful and sometimes easy tools with which to ostensibly justify gender inequality.”⁵¹ Secular feminists are not arguing that Islam altogether is incompatible with feminism or democracy. Rather, they wish that Islam, or any religion, would not have a legal part in the government.

Secular feminists contend that Islamic feminism is not effective, and they have numerous examples that support this contention. In the late 1990s, when the Iranian Parliament was more liberal than it had been previously, it voted to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Iranian feminists had been fighting for the ratification of this major international agreement for several years, and the fact that the Parliament had passed CEDAW was seen as a feminist victory.⁵² However, this success was short-lived. The Guardian Council vetoed CEDAW, claiming that women and men are inherently unequal and therefore CEDAW would be against Islamic principles.⁵³ In a less extreme example, a law “that raised the minimum legal age for girls to marry from nine to thirteen was only approved by the Guardian Council” with the stipulation that a clause would be added.⁵⁴ The Guardian Council requested a clause that would allow girls who were younger than thirteen to marry if they had permission of a guardian. This effectively took away the point of raising the minimum age at all, because guardians could continue marrying off underage girls. Thus, despite the representatives’ best efforts to minimize pre-teenage marriage, the Guardian Council’s power was so great that this law could be rendered useless. Islamic feminists maintain that women’s rights can be improved within the framework of the current

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵³ Kambiz Fattahi, “Women’s bill ‘unites’ Iran and US,” *BBC News*, July 31, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6922749.stm.

⁵⁴ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 28.

government; the CEDAW and marriage age law failures are just a few of many strong examples against this belief.

A reform-oriented parliament under President Khatami hoped that the *ulama* would:

...incrementally yield their orthodox reading of Islam to the more enlightened version of the faith proffered by Khatami and his backers...[However,] the conservative-dominated Guardian Council repeatedly exercised its veto power to block legislation that would cause any consequential change to the status quo. At root...was the Iranian-Islamic principle of *velayate faqih*: governance of the most learned Islamic scholar... It effectively relegates other branches of the government, including the parliament, to function as optional extras to a predetermined political agenda.⁵⁵

Therefore, the parliament's intention was almost irrelevant because it opposed the beliefs of the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council's overwhelming constitutional power successfully and repeatedly suffocated reformist ideas.

In fact, one female Parliamentarian expressed her extreme disillusionment with the government structure in a dramatic move: Fatemah Haqiqatjoo "resigned in protest against the Guardian Council's disqualification of candidates from the legislative elections."⁵⁶ Her resignation was fully justified: in the "2004 legislative elections, the Guardian Council disqualified one third of the 8,200 individuals who filed papers to run as candidates... [leaving] a list of conservative candidates with no strong ties to the reform movement."⁵⁷ There is no higher authority on the powerlessness of Islamic feminists in the Parliament than a former member herself resigning. For Haqiqatjoo to resign, with the public explanation "that reform from within the state system was no longer possible," is shocking.⁵⁸ Not only is Islamic feminism unsuccessful, it actually hurts secular feminist efforts. For one, depending on the *ulama* to reinterpret Islam to support gender equality will leave "women's rights contingent upon interpretations,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

and as a result, [make] women vulnerable.”⁵⁹ Rights that were carefully argued and won after years of activism could easily be reversed if new and more conservative scholars joined the Guardian Council. In addition, “the fact that any moves for reform and improvement of women’s conditions in Iran need to be formulated in the language of Islam... makes these moves hostage to a set of ideas and principles that are grounded in the experience of seventh century Arabia.”⁶⁰ For example, the Qur’an specifically states that only men and women exist, but modern Western feminism includes gender fluidity.⁶¹ If Islam does not acknowledge the possibility of gender fluidity, how would Muslim scholars be able to address this concept without simply using their own, perhaps outdated, views? Lastly, “scholars are also worried that Islamic feminists delegitimize the activities of secular feminists by providing a less threatening ‘feminist’ option that actually does not result in significant social change at all.”⁶² What may be hailed as major Islamic feminist victories could be, as shown earlier, mostly insignificant. However, the Guardian Council and a conservative Parliament may be more willing to concede to some secular feminist demands if they did not have the option of less challenging and more flexible Islamic feminist policies.

Future of Women’s Rights in Iran

Where is Iran headed, in terms of gender equality and women’s rights? It is hard to tell. On one hand, the Iranian public has become increasingly vocal about their demands for a less restrictive society. On the other hand, the Iranian state has continued to repress protests with harsh condemnation from its religious leadership and outright violence.

The 2009 Presidential Elections inspired monumental feminist activism and activism in general, closely paralleling the overwhelming activism exactly thirty years prior. The candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi promised to focus on women’s issues and, quite unusually, his wife campaigned heavily alongside him.⁶³ Another candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, suggested appointing a woman to his cabinet, and his “spokeswoman Jamileh Kadivar even openly questioned the mandatory hijab.”⁶⁴ The allure of these reform candidates was so strong that a previously apathetic public showed up in droves to the polls;

⁵⁹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 129.

⁶⁰ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 32.

⁶¹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶³ Vakil, *Women and Politics*, 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

turnout was an astonishing 85%.⁶⁵ When the incumbent and fairly unpopular candidate, President Ahmadinejad, was declared the victor with an incredible 62% of the vote, the other candidates immediately called for a recount and claimed that the elections were rigged. When the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader reconfirmed that Ahmadinejad had won with the majority of votes, even in the hometowns of the other candidates, urban areas erupted in protest.⁶⁶ When the protester Neda Agha Soltan was shot and her murder became highly publicized, hundreds of women became activists willing to protest the injustices of her death, the elections, and the state itself. The government swiftly took action against disagreeing voices: “thousands of demonstrators and activists were arrested, and an estimated 107 people were killed. Nine months later... the state, through its tactics, had neutralized the opposition,” despite proclaiming the merits of merging Islam with democracy.⁶⁷

This suppression means that oppositional sentiments are festering and growing stronger, not that the government has succeeded in persuading all activists that the status quo is satisfactory. Even after the Green Movement, there have been smaller movements protesting the government’s restrictions. In 2017 and 2018, dozens of women removed their headscarfs in public in form of protest, and many of these women were harassed by the police or arrested.⁶⁸ Although Supreme Leader Khamenei reiterated his belief that women should be modestly dressed, the more moderate President Rouhani released a report stating that 49.8% of Iranian men and women believe that the government should not regulate veiling.⁶⁹ This indicates that both the Iranian public and the elected government are becoming less conservative, or at least less permissive of the religious leadership’s interference.

The possibilities for change are increasing, especially because the Iranian public has more young people and Iran is globalizing. In fact, “65% of Iran’s

⁶⁵ Robert Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Protests Flare in Iran as Opposition Disputes Votes,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Vakil, *Women and Politics*, 201.

⁶⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, “Tired of Their Veils, Some Iranian Women Stage Protests,” *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/world/middleeast/head-scarf-protests-iran-women.html>.

⁶⁹ Thomas Erdbrink, “Compulsory Veils? Half of Iranians Say ‘No’ to Pillar of Revolution,” *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/middleeast/iran-hijab-veils.html>.

population is below the age of thirty...Because they are products of this government, their demands for reform cannot credibly be labeled as *gharbzadeh* [Westoxicated].”⁷⁰ Gender equality is just one of the many issues that the legal apparatus of the state affects. The history of feminist activism is evidence that working within the framework of the state has failed repeatedly; in order to accommodate feminism and other reforms, the government structure must evolve to minimize the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader’s overwhelming constitutional power. This is the only way that people can have greater control over what they vote for. Whether these recent protests are successful, as they were in the 1979 Revolution, or suppressed, as they were in the Green Movement, could determine the fate of women’s rights in Iran.

⁷⁰ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 17.

Reworking Westoxification: Jalal Al-e Ahmad's Original Conception of Westoxification and its Post-Revolutionary Reinvention

Aubrey Crynes*

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On October 19th, 2016, the Islamic Republic of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, posted an image on Instagram that depicts Uncle Sam standing in front of what appears to be a club-like entrance blocked off by red rope with "globalization" scrawled across a sign overhead.¹ The caricature looks harmless enough, until the viewer notices the signs by the door banning the atomic symbol as well as a stylized version of "Allah," which fit right into Khamenei's (or whichever intern writes his Instagram posts) scathing caption: "Becoming global means giving in to the culture that has been imposed on the economy, politics and security of the world by a few big powers. This is the same as dependence without any difference!"² The idea that globalization equates to dependence on larger Western nations is not Khamenei's own. Dependency theorists around the globe have echoed this same warning countless times. In the Persian language, this specific kind of Western- led dependence is often called 'Gharbzadegi', which can be translated as *weststruck* or *westoxified*.

In 1962, Jalal Al-e Ahmad published *Gharbzadegi*. This book and general term are central to understanding ideological debates in Iran today. Al-e Ahmad wrote this book at a pivotal time in Iranian history, and it would prove to be influential in the years ahead. A concept so important that it is found in the Instagram posts of Iran's current Grand Ayatollah is worth exploring in depth. Jalal Al-e Ahmad's rhetoric has continued to thrive in the Islamic Republic, but there is a striking difference between the original content of his work and the way his rhetoric is employed by the Iranian

* **Author's Bio:** Aubrey Crynes is an International Security Studies major, and is minoring in Iranian Studies and Sociology. She will graduate in the spring of 2019.

¹ Khamenei quote, "#Globalization," *Instagram*, October 19, 2016, accessed April 9, 2018.

² *Ibid.*

government. This paper will center around Jalal Al-e Ahmad's original work in *Gharbzadegi* and delve into his thoughts on Iran's economics and culture before finally examining how those ideas have been implemented long after *Gharbzadegi*'s publication.

Before delving into the contents of *Gharbzadegi*, some background on the author is appropriate. Jalal Al-e Ahmad was a writer, teacher, and scholar, born into a clerical family in Tehran.³ In his early life, he was active in the Tudeh Party, Iran's largest communist party in that period, but left after becoming disillusioned with the party's Soviet loyalism.⁴ Al-e Ahmad briefly rejoined the political scene with the advent of Mohammad Mossadegh's election to Prime Minister and the beginning of the oil nationalization project, until the CIA-led coup of 1953, which overthrew Mossadegh and his National Front government.⁵ Western influence in Iran at this time was only continuing to grow, aided by Reza Shah Pahlavi's close relationship with the United States and other Western powers.⁶ Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* seems to be born from his observation of the world around him. He was by no means the first person to have these critiques; at this time, "western influence in Iran was already widely resented," and the book gained prominence despite heavy state censorship.⁷ However, while resentment may have been common, Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* "conveyed to a wider audience the critique of the Pahlavi regime that had previously been articulated by only a small group of intellectuals and political dissidents" as opposed to general displeasure.⁸

The Economics of *Gharbzadegi*

Written in the 1960s, *Gharbzadegi* was put to paper at the same time that the 'New Left' was emerging. The Cuban Revolution had just rocked Latin America and the rest of the world; across the globe, a wave of popular leftist

³ Brad Hanson, "The 'Westoxication' of Iran Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 1(1983): 7.

⁴ Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Bizhan Jazani and the Problems of Historiography of the Iranian Left," *Iranian Studies* 38, no.1 (2005): 174.

⁵ Hanson, "The 'Westoxication' of Iran," 7.

⁶ Evaleila Pesaran, "Towards an Anti-Western Stance: The Economic Discourse of Iran's 1979 Revolution," *Iranian Studies* 41, no.5 (2008): 696.

⁷ Ahmad Alizadeh and John Green, *Gharbzadegi* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1983), viii.

⁸ Pesaran, "Towards an Anti-Western Stance," 697.

action was brewing.⁹ Combined with Al-e Ahmad's leftist background, this means that much of his economic analysis in *Gharbzadegi* has a decidedly leftist bent. However, the book is by no means explicitly or exclusively Marxist and it was not intended to serve as a leftist critic of the Iranian economy. Al-e Ahmad does not delve heavily into specific economics and rarely deals with raw numbers.¹⁰ What he does do is focus on two very economic, very materialist ways that Iran has been westoxified and delve deeply into what that means for Iran and its position in the world. Al-e Ahmad comments specifically on oil and, in what more Marxist jargon would be considered the 'modes of production,' the machines.

In a Westerner's mind, oil is often one of the first things associated with Iran. Al-e Ahmad would be quick to note that this is because, to the Western world, Iran is not a land with a deep history, rich culture, and many peoples; rather, it is simply the site of resources to be exploited. Iran's oil in Al-e Ahmad's time had never been its own. Sold off in Qajar concession agreements and consolidated back into Western hands after 1953 (after Iran briefly attempted to take back what was its own), Al-e Ahmad considered oil to be where the West had "hatched ... in [to] [Iranian] politics and [Iranian] society."¹¹ This hatching, more than just the start of British and American interest in Iran, was the place from whence those nations began to leverage their control. In fact, Al-e Ahmad attributes the "rise of Reza Shah almost solely to Britain and oil."¹² Western interest in Iran does not end with oil, and Al-e Ahmad argues what many with a Marxist background would argue: because Britain and America are capitalist nations, they are always looking to expand their markets and move exploitation farther away from their own countries in order to keep the peace at home. This has led to the continued expansion of Western economic markets within Iran as well as "developing an internal Iranian market for the Iranian oil which [the West] control[ed]."¹³

These markets, unlike markets and patterns of trade that would have perhaps developed organically, tied Iran to countries that it had no immediate geographic interest in trading with. Even the Russians, a great

⁹ Rich Yeselson, "What New Left History Gave Us," Democracy Journal, December 8, 2014, <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/35/what-new-left-history-gave-us/>.

¹⁰ Hanson, "The 'Westoxication' of Iran," 8.

¹¹ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 62.

¹² Hanson, "The 'Westoxication' of Iran," 10.

¹³ Ibid.

power that Al-e Ahmad felt in the past had tried to force its own will upon Iran, were now an alienated neighbor. Iran's borders had become "longer, thicker and more impenetrable...[Iran was] perpetually cut off [and] frontiers everywhere in the world [were] drawn solely along the lines ...of various corporations."¹⁴ The streamlining of the Iranian economy to operate in a back and forth between themselves and Britain, as well as the United States, only exacerbated the inability of Iran and the surrounding region to develop in a way that would be more indigenous and untainted by westoxification. Even though Iran had achieved a brief period of control over its oil under Mossadegh, the Shah "had to give the consortium of oil companies concessions that were covered in an unrecognizable package" after the coup.¹⁵ For oil itself to be profitable, it cannot be a standalone resource, nor can it simply be scooped up with a person's bare hands. Instead, it needs to be extracted, refined, and used to run machines. And this, to Al-e Ahmad, was an even greater curse of westoxification than mere Western interest in Iranian oil.

Machines themselves do not inherently bring westoxification. To put it in Marxist terms, they are simply the modes of production; namely, the tools used to get the job done, retrieve a resource, or produce a product, among a whole host of other functions. The catch with machines, and other modes of production, is who owns them, and who knows how to use them. Therefore, westoxification is not the machine, but rather "a characteristic of an era in which [Iran] has not yet obtained machines and does not understand the mysteries of their structure and construction."¹⁶ This is Al-e Ahmad's main concern: Iran lacks the indigenous technology that the nation is "compelled to use because of the market and the economic constraints put on [them]."¹⁷ Al-e Ahmad wants Iran to become like Japan, a nation that, in his eyes, was able to avoid westoxification, beat back Russian imperial power, and develop machines that were indigenous to Japan itself and therefore under their own monopolized domain.¹⁸ Machines were not the end in Al-e Ahmad's eyes, but the means by which Iran could begin to wrestle itself away from the economic vice grip that westoxification had placed it under.

Iran's economy at this time was in flux. As it was undergoing a period of rapid urbanization, Iran was straddling two ways of life: a traditional,

¹⁴ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 85.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 20.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

indigenous pastoral economy and a new, booming urban economy which was largely driven by “big foreign economic interests like a trust.”¹⁹ Al-e Ahmad takes issue to this transition in two main ways, the first being the more obvious fact that this drive to urbanize was not coming from Iran itself, but rather from foreign capital pouring into its urban areas. Investors were building factories, and where there were factories there were jobs. Often requiring little formal training and providing more stable constant pay than agricultural labor, low-level factory jobs attracted many Iranians from rural areas. The issue for Al-e Ahmad was not the movement to the city, but rather that the people building, owning, and running the factories were not Iranian, and that Iranians, except for a very select few, did not have the means to open their own factories, nor did they have the technological know-how. His second issue was that the technology that was flourishing in urban areas was not being brought to rural areas. The rural areas did not need factories, but farming equipment would have been welcome. The machines were not reaching these areas because there was no foreign investment interest in rural Iran, and the rural Iranians “[could] not obtain these tools.”²⁰

Another issue, outside of raw investment capital, was the knowledge of how to operate and replicate these machines; or even the technological knowledge to create Iran’s own unique machines. This, in Al-e Ahmad’s eyes, was a failure stemming directly from Iran’s universities. Often located in urban areas, awash with exposure to the West and its machines, all the universities were doing was “merely producing good repairmen for Western industrial products.”²¹ The lack of Iranian innovation meant that Iran was left to the technological whims of Western powers. Any project that the nation wanted to take on, any innovation that was to be, had to come from outside its borders. As long as the world’s economies continued to be driven by technological progress, Iran’s economy would continue its subordinate position - and the longer the technological know-how stayed out of Iranian hands, the harder it would be for Iran to take control of itself again.

Al-e Ahmad’s background in Marxist thought makes it no surprise that he identifies economics as the root that allowed westoxification to take hold in Iran. Oil, the resource on which the world relies, was incredibly valuable. Iran had plenty of oil, but no control over it. As Western nations sunk their teeth into Iran’s oil reserves, the West’s markets and economic interests spread outwards, enveloping the rest of the Iranian economy. By owning the

¹⁹ Ibid., 129.

²⁰ Ibid., 131.

²¹ Ibid., 150.

capital and possessing the knowledge to operate the modes of production, the West kept Iran infected. Al-e Ahmad did not think these machines were the solutions to all of Iran's problems, but rather the tools that could aide Iran in separating from the West. Al-e Ahmad wanted Iran to "adopt the machines, but [Iran] must not remain slaves to them."²²

Culture and Gharbzadegi

Westoxification was not merely an economic disease but a "cultural malaise," and Al-e Ahmad makes it very clear there is a sociological aspect to it as well.²³ With Iran's economic markets saturated with westoxification, it soon bled into its culture. Cultural change is always more pronounced than other kinds of change because it is the most visible. The machinations of oil companies go on behind closed doors, but culture is in the way people dress, in what they eat, or in the art they create. This makes cultural change more jarring, and more threatening. Al-e Ahmad finds this cultural westoxification in three arenas: architecture, dress, and education.

Iran has a proud history of magnificent and unique architecture. It is indigenous to Iran, is not mass produced, and carries a distinct style. Western architecture of the time, however, was anything but. The buildings shooting up in Iran's urban areas were made to be cheaply and quickly produced and were created in the style of apartment blocks in big Western cities. Not only are changes such as these merely aesthetic, but new housing styles can also change the way people live. While many Western visitors to Iran praised these new buildings as a sign of modernization, bringing Iran along into the 20th century with the 'wrest' (read West) of the world, "to many Iranians these new facades stood for nothing but blind imitation of Western styles - mere stupid mimicry."²⁴ Al-e Ahmad made his feelings clear on the matter, finding Iran's new cities to be cancerous and ugly.²⁵

Not only were the facades of buildings changing, but the very layouts of the cities were changing as well. Public spaces were shrinking, with parks disappearing and Western-style cinemas appearing in their place. Neighborhoods were spreading further apart, making room for themselves where they could in between the cities' larger development projects. The

²² Ibid., 96.

²³ Said Amir Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (2002): 720.

²⁴ Pamela Karimi, "Westoxification," *Perspecta* 43, (2010), 192.

²⁵ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 132.

strain of urbanization meant that neighborhoods popped up without larger city planning and lacked “water, power, telephones, social services, meeting places [and] libraries.”²⁶ Even as Iran’s cities boomed with Western capital and Western machinery, many of its new residents went without basic human services, let alone community spaces. The structures of communities were not just being westoxified in the public sphere, but in the private sphere as well.

More goes into housing than merely the beams that hold up the roof; housing requires people and dictates how those people live within the structure. These new buildings, built in the Western style, were meant to house Western-style nuclear families. Iranian family homes, which were traditionally multi-generational, encouraged a very different kind of family structure.²⁷ Changing the very basis of family structure radically upends culture. Multi-generational homes encourage more communal child raising, a greater respect for older generations, and the creation of larger social ties. Nuclear families, by contrast, often shift the burden of child care to a single person and are often alienating in comparison to communal living. Changing the way children are raised shifts cultural values dramatically, and while the Western model is often praised as the more ‘liberating’ model for women, nuclear family homes traditionally shift the burden of child rearing disproportionately upon the mother.

Buildings were not the only things undergoing a sudden transformation: sartorial reform that began under Reza Shah was picking up pace. In Western eyes, changing women’s dress in non-Western nations to more Western styles is often seen as a sign of progress, but a new pair of jeans does not guarantee equal rights or legal protections. Al-e Ahmad attacks this idea of progress, saying that Iran has “been satisfied to forcibly remove [women’s] veils...beyond that nothing. That’s enough for them.”²⁸ He goes on to note all the things sartorial reform has not achieved for women, including women’s continued inability to serve as a witness in court, lack of divorce rights, lack of voting rights, and inability to be a government representative, which remained unchanged even after the banning of the veil. Women’s liberation movements did not come to Iran with the advent of westoxification, and even those that existed in that period (ones that amounted to more than adopting Western clothing, anyway) were not rooted in Western powers, but rather the movements that opposed them. The Tudeh

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Karimi, “WESTOXIFICATION,” 194.

²⁸ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 80.

party, which Al-e Ahmad had been a part of, had an active women's wing, and Mossadegh's National Front pushed to extended voting rights to women, although it was defeated by the more conservative members of the Ulama in the Majles.²⁹ These movements were not grounded in an attempted to imitate Western women, but rather out of indigenous pushes for equality.

Women's 'liberation' movements rooted in merely mimicking the West often had unintended effects. The forced unveiling under Reza Shah was an attempt to reform Iranian culture from the top down in favor of the style of the West. While the forced unveiling did not remain mandatory into his son's reign, the damage of that initial push and of widespread upper-class adoption of Western clothing styles had already been done. Women for whom veiling was a deeply held personal religious belief were faced with the choice of either leaving their homes or upholding their principles, and many chose the latter.³⁰ On the other hand, if the head of a younger woman's family was against public unveiling, then she too would be kept inside, although this time not of her own accord.³¹ The top down, foreign approach to sartorial reform masquerading as liberation was both empty of real progress and representative of yet another way for the nation to become even more consumed by westoxification.

As if the restructuring of the public sphere and family structure were not enough, as the Iranian state further embraced westoxification it enveloped the school system as well. Just as Iranian elites began the practice of sending their children off to receive the best education that Europe and the United States had to offer, those children returned to Iran to rebuild the nation's own school system in the Western image. This involved more than just building styles or school hierarchies; adopting an education system from another area is to adopt a different way of understanding the world. For instance, Western conceptions of history are linear, and history is often seen as having some distant end point. However, there are other ways of viewing history - whether they be cyclical or one of a host of other pedagogical methods. This linear view of history aides the Western narrative of a march towards progress, and aids in spreading westoxification by pushing a narrative of forward enlightenment that moves along the Western path. The new school system in Iran adopted Western methods that in Al-e Ahmad's eyes had "no

²⁹ Hamed Shahidian, "The Iranian Left and the 'Woman Question' in the Revolution of 1978-79," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no.2 (1994): 223.

³⁰ Karimi, "Westoxification," 193.

³¹ Ibid.

evidence of tradition...no sign of any culture of the past...no continuity between East and West.”³² Al-e Ahmad’s own historiography in *Gharbzadegi* is not on the most firm of footings, but he does explicitly state that he would rather leave that to the historians.³³ The difference between Al-e Ahmad and an entire educational system is of course that Al-e Ahmad’s book was not intended to be the basis of schooling for generations of Iranians, but merely a socio-cultural critique.

The cultural entrenchment of westoxification was more viscerally felt than its economic counterpart because it could be seen in a much more intimate way. From the buildings lining the streets to what people wore walking down them, westoxification had permeated Iranian public life. It even got behind closed doors, affecting everything from children’s education to the way families lived and worked in their homes. The extent of this permeation was what made westoxification seem so suffocating and all-encompassing. If oil was the place from which westoxification hatched, it had grown far beyond its base indeed.

The Aftershocks of *Gharbzadegi*

Al-e Ahmad’s ideas did not sit stagnant in his book after he published it, nor did they remain confined to the salons of Tehran’s intelligentsia. Instead his ideological influence permeated through many different types of people, and their ways of building off of his work did not always reflect his original intent. Al-e Ahmad, as earlier mentioned, had no specific economic policy, just general principles. This allowed for a lot of rhetoric used both in *Gharbzadegi* and by other Iranian leftists to be placed into economic discourse, even if the policies are not reflective of Al-e Ahmad’s leftist thought. Another two of his more amorphous points are that of the role of religion in combating westoxification, and later, during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, what constitutes a westoxified person.

After the 1979 revolution, a new government and constitution for Iran were created and with them new economic policy. The participation and influence of the Iranian left during the revolution was undeniable, and while they did not hold power in Khomeini’s government their leftist economic thought did hold some sway. Many clerics supported a liberal, market-based economy with government influence extending to a liberal welfare state at

³² Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 148.

³³ Abbas Amanat, “The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Nostalgia, Illusion, or Historical Awareness?,” *Iranian Studies* 22, no. 4 (1989): 5.

most.³⁴ However, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist clerics made well known their opinions. Relying on a blend of Marxist economics and Islamic theology, these clerics (such as Mahmoud Taleghani, a leftist cleric who was a leader during the revolution in his own right and was trusted by Ayatollah Khomeini) advocated for economic policies that included public land ownership and the state as the leading economic force, with private projects working downstream of leading public directives.³⁵ The nature of theology makes it difficult to create a decisive policy, and as the Iranian government's legitimacy is ultimately rooted in its religious justification, economic policy in the Islamic Republic has taken on an odd combination of rhetoric and policy.

Political rhetoric not matching with policy is not extraordinary, but the way leftist rhetoric is sustained in Iran in order to push largely neoliberal economic policy is unique. The economics of Jalal Al-e Ahmad favor Iranian-led economic initiatives and indigenous production as well as economic equality. Economic planning platforms lean heavily on this kind of rhetoric. The texts of these economic plans often call for emphasis on concepts like "social justice" and reduced poverty and social insecurity, and the text of the Iranian constitution even mandates government control over crude economic resources.³⁶ The policy in place and the policy proposals being made, however, only match in name. Policy implementation (such as the creation of private banking), austerity measures due to fluctuation in oil prices, and the burden of foreign debts, all stand in stark contrast to the language so readily employed by the Iranian government.³⁷ Oil, the very place where westoxification began to seep into Iran according to Al-e Ahmad, has now become a resource where the Iranian government is actively trying to court not only foreign investment, but the physical presence of foreign companies in Iran's oil fields as well. As much as the government wishes to tout Al-e Ahmad's anti-imperialist rhetoric and enshrine policy in leftist, indigenous language, their policies are far from Al-e Ahmad's thought.

Al-e Ahmad's relationship with religion was complex and evolved not only throughout his life, but also throughout his work. In *Gharbzadegi*, Al-

³⁴ Mehrdad Valibeigi, "Islamic Economics and Economic Policy Formation in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Journal of Economic Issues* 27, no. 3 (1993): 795.

³⁵ Valibeigi, "Islamic Economics," 797.

³⁶ Jahangir Amuzegar, "Khatami and the Iranian Economy at Mid-Term," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4 (1999): 538.

³⁷ Amuzegar "Khatami and the Iranian Economy at Mid-Term," 544.

e Ahmad sees religion as a vehicle for stagnation and not the place from which resistance to westoxification should grow. The Ulama in *Gharbzadegi* are characterized as antiquated and, in attempting to “seek refuge in times long past and old out dated ceremonies, [the Ulama] is satisfied to be the gatekeeper at the graveyard.”³⁸ The solutions for westoxification had not grown out of the religious establishment and even though the Ulama are embedded in tradition, they are not the proper agents for the indigenous innovation that Al-e Ahmad prescribes to combat the disease. However, after writing *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad’s later works are not as condemning of religion as they once were. Al-e Ahmad undertakes the Hajj and tells of his pilgrimage in his memoir *Khasi dar Miqāt*. In the book, he wrestles with the examples of westoxification he finds on his journey, but also seems to come away from it almost wholly embracing the faith. Al-e Ahmad ultimately died before recording his official position on religion in the role of combatting westoxification, but in his later life seems “to have accepted Islam as an indigenous, non-Western part of Iranian identity.”³⁹

After Al-e Ahmad’s death, religion became firmly rooted as a legitimate position of resistance to westoxification. Ali Shari’ati, another prominent Iranian anti-imperialist intellectual, sees religion as something that is native to Iran, and because to be Iranian was “necessarily religious,” religion was the point from which Western encroachment could be rebuked.⁴⁰ Al-e Ahmad never knew, but beyond providing his fellow intellectuals with a framework for their own ideas, his work would go on to “provide Khomeini with an unwavering revolutionary discourse, steeped in strong existential, postcolonial, and Marxist philosophy.”⁴¹

The discursive tools Al-e Ahmad popularized were not only employed in the Iranian Revolution to ward off Western powers, a goal he would have been wholeheartedly in favor of, but also as tools that were turned against Iranians in ways that were not compatible with his political history and writing. While Al-e Ahmad did condemn wholesale adoption of Western dress, as well as state-sponsored, forced removal of the veil, he had no specific comments on the value of the veil itself, spending more time speaking about women’s ability to witness in court or to have the right to

³⁸ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 84.

³⁹ Hanson, “The ‘Westoxication’ of Iran,” 12.

⁴⁰ Pesaran, “Towards an Anti-Western Stance,” 699.

⁴¹ Roxanne Varzi, “Iran’s French Revolution: Religion, Philosophy, and Crowds,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 637 (2011): 59.

divorce on their own terms.⁴² However, during the Revolution, the concept of being westoxified was turned against Iranian women; not for spouting the ideals of Western nations or encouraging the adoption of Western culture, but rather for simply resisting the mandatory hijab. These women were attacked and had their voices silenced in the name of combating westoxification, even though they had been participating in the same revolution that had rid the country of the West's political and economic domination.⁴³ To this day, denouncing political opposition or reform as "Westernized" is a powerful rhetorical cudgel in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Gharbzadegi was an intellectual catalyst that provided the framework for a variety of intellectual and social movements to build upon. The aftershocks of this work are still felt to this day, both within Iran and in context of larger discourse on the developing world. However, since Al-e Ahmad's death, the ideas presented in *Gharbzadegi* have at times been twisted from their original intent, while others who use *Gharbzadegi* as a framework for their own ideas purposefully obscure parts of the work that are incompatible with whatever agenda they are pushing in order to lay claim to the novel's larger narrative.

Conclusion

The world will never know Jalal Al-e Ahmad's thoughts on Instagram. If one were to guess, he would probably oppose the Western app, the modern microcosm of a machine, in favor of perhaps a different photo sharing app of Iranian creation. But regardless of what one thinks on the matter, it does not change the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei uses that platform regularly to disseminate ideas to the world, contributing in turn to the continued dissemination of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's thought. Iran in the 21st century may have thrown out the westoxifying agents of Western imperialism, but not without consequence. The Islamic Republic of Iran is now subject to sanctions and international isolation spearheaded by the nations that used to wish to envelop every part of Iranian life. Today in 2018, scholars talk of neocolonialism, and the same Western powers that so ensnared Iran in westoxification in Al-e Ahmad's time still control most of the power and wealth across the globe. Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* provided specific analysis on the way the West interacted with and controlled Iran, and his

⁴² Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 80.

⁴³ Val Moghadam, "Revolution, the State, Islam, and Women: Gender Politics in Iran and Afghanistan," *Social Text* 22 (1989): 44.

rhetoric still holds great power today. Growing out of Iran's oil fields, the sickness took hold of Iran's economy and controlled the tools it needed to produce while denying the country the technical skill and financial capital needed to create tools of its own. Westoxification then seeped into Iran's culture, allowing it to co-opt Iran's social structures in order to remake it in the West's own image and control that market as well. While Al-e Ahmad's words still hold power, they are often used to obscure policy that contradicts many of the values he espoused.

Gharbzadegi's ideas have withstood the test of time and have become a vital framework for the way Iranians to this day understand the dynamics of the world in which they live. Al-e Ahmad's work rings with a sentiment that holds true for many of the world's peoples, asserting that "why, after all, shouldn't the Eastern nations be aware of their own wealth? And why? Just because machines are Western, and we have to adopt them, have we supplanted all our Eastern criteria for life with Western ones?"⁴⁴ These questions have yet to be resolved, but *Gharbzadegi* at least provides a lasting framework from which to begin to understand them.

⁴⁴ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 170.

Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

More information

Dr. Afshin Marashi
Director of the Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies
amarashi@ou.edu

or

Dr. Manata Hashemi
Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies
hashemi@ou.edu

Petition for the Minor

Katie Watkins
Adviser for IAS majors and minors with last names A-H
kwatkins@ou.edu

or

Malin Collins
Adviser for IAS majors and minors with last names I-Z
malin@ou.edu

www.ou.edu/ias



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema: Unveiling the Reality of Iranian Women under the Islamic Republic

Jocelyn Viviani*

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In post-revolutionary Iran, cinema became a medium for social critique of the prevailing issues in modern Iranian society. The problems of women under the Islamic Republic became a major focal point in these post-revolutionary Iranian films. After the revolution of 1979, Shi'a Islam reshaped the political and social landscape of Iran. At this critical juncture, the Islamic Republic under the religious authority and guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini was able to consolidate its power through the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, meaning the “the guardianship of the jurist.”¹ By implementing the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in its system of government, the regime was able to enforce a political ideology based on its interpretation of Shi'a Islam. As a consequence, the regime's ideology reshaped the fabric of Iranian society, particularly when it came to the position of women. This political ideology subjected women to the traditional roles of wives and mothers, and further Islamized the image of women through enforced veiling and cultural norms. As the Republic's ideology began to shape every aspect of Iranian society, the problems of women became more apparent. The topic of women's issues is significant in that women play an integral role in the social and political trajectory of Iran under the Islamic Republic. Without discussing and contesting the issues of women, political and social change for women in Iran becomes harder to obtain.

* **Author's Bio:** Jocelyn Viviani majored in International Security Studies, and minored in Middle Eastern Studies and European Studies. She graduated in the spring of 2018.

¹ Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 71.

Cinema provides a medium to discuss the problems that profoundly impact women under the Islamic Republic. Even though the Islamic Republic has used cinema as a way to propagate its ideology, Iranian filmmakers have found creative ways to contest the state's censorship, particularly the government's role in the "guidance, support, and supervision of the film industry."² Post-revolutionary cinema in Iran has challenged the traditional roles of women as wives and maternal figures and the religious representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its emphasis on central female characters, depiction of modesty, and critique of morality. Specifically, Iranian cinema has challenged the traditional roles of women being wives and mothers by presenting women as central characters. Iranian filmmakers have challenged the Republic's modesty laws and cultural norms, such as the compulsory veil and averted gaze, by using metaphors and other creative ways. Furthermore, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has critiqued the regime's strict interpretation of morality, especially when it comes to women, by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality.

Women as Central Characters in Film

Before analyzing Iranian films where women play a central role, it is necessary to examine each film within a historical framework to conceptualize and understand the significance behind cinema challenging the regime's portrayal of women as simply wives or mothers. Before the Revolution, the westernization policies of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah at the time, shaped Iran's film industry. The Shah used cinema as a political tool to propagate his regime's vision to modernize Iran within a western and secular framework. Due to the regime's political objectives, cinema reflected the changes of women entering the public sphere and playing a more visible role in society. During the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of *film farsi* showed women having active roles on screen, but these melodramas exploited the image of women by portraying them as either "chaste or unchaste dolls."³ However, after the Revolution, women in cinema shifted from being depicted as "objects of desire and agents of

² Sussan Siavoshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 515.

³ Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 215-226.

corruption” to being represented through the regime’s religious perspective of women.⁴

The Islamic Republic made changes to the film industry that consequently impacted the representation of women in cinema. Like the Pahlavi Dynasty, the Islamic Republic has used cinema as a tool for state propaganda. However, the Republic also employed cinema to promote the political objective of Islamizing Iran. By implementing the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in governance, the Islamic Republic has been able to reconstruct Iran and its film industry in an Islamic framework based on its understanding of Shi’a Islam and Islamic Jurisprudence. Between 1980 and 1989, as stated by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “there was an almost total absence of love from the screen, and although women were present [sic] behind the camera, working even as directors, their roles on screen were restricted to devoted wives, mothers, and sisters.”⁵ In other words, women no longer played a central role in films. Instead, their roles were neutralized and confined to the home.⁶ This period of cinema depicted women in the traditional roles of wives and mothers. It also emphasized the importance of the domestic sphere to the growth and development of Iran under the Islamic Republic. From the perspective of the Iranian state, “the family is the cornerstone of society...consensuses and ideological belief in the principle that the formation of family is fundamental for the future development of the individual is one of the main aims of the Islamic government.”⁷ During the early years of the Islamic Republic, cinema’s emphasis on the domestic sphere stripped women of their agency and limited them to specific societal roles.

Even though the Islamic Republic has used cinema to promote an Islamic political objective for Iran, post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers have challenged the Republic’s depiction of women by presenting women as central characters in films. This paper will analyze three films in which women occupy a central role: *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten. Bashu, the Little Stranger* was one of the first Iranian films to challenge

⁴ Manata Hashemi, “Negotiating the Forbidden,” Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 8, 2018.

⁵ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 696.

⁶ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979,” 222.

⁷ Guity Nashat, “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980): 177.

the representation of women under the Islamic Republic by showing a strong female lead character.⁸ The character Na'i is the central character in the film. Despite being a wife and a mother of two, Na'i challenges cultural tradition and has agency in her life. For instance, she defies cultural norms and traditions by keeping the orphan Bashu despite her husband's objections. Even though she faces the ridicule of her village and disapproval of her husband for taking in an Arab orphan, she takes on the role of Bashu's mother. She integrates Bashu into her family, and they both uniquely depend on each other. She takes on the role of his mother, and Bashu takes care of her in the absence of her husband. Furthermore, it is important to note the historical context of the film. Under the circumstances of the Iran-Iraq War, the structure of roles within the family changed. Na'i takes the leadership role of the family due to her husband fighting in the war. The character's agency in taking in an orphan who is ethnically Arab and assuming the leadership position of the family challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women as simply wives and maternal figures. The film shows that women can be wives and mothers and still take on leadership roles and have agency within their lives. Essentially, the film asserts that these things are not mutually exclusive.

While *Bashu, the Little Stranger* facilitated the shift in roles of women under the Islamic Republic, the movies of the reform period further challenged the Islamic Republic's depiction of women. They presented women to be visible and vocal actors in Iranian society. To provide context, after the 1997 presidential election of Mohammad Khatami, the discourse of reform reshaped the face of Iranian politics. During this period of reform, women began to occupy critical roles in films. The films *The May Lady* and *Ten* were social critiques of the reform movement's failure to achieve political and social change for women. These social critique films show two mothers struggling to reconcile motherhood and their own individuality.

The May Lady focuses on the female character Forough Kia. She is divorced and has a teenage son. Despite being a divorced woman and a mother, Forough challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women being wives and mothers by showing her agency as a mother and being vocally critical of traditional gender structures.⁹ She comes from an upper-middle-class background and holds a high social standing due to her

⁸ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 207.

⁹ Manata Hashemi, "Negotiating the Forbidden," Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 8, 2018.

occupation as a documentary filmmaker. She is well-educated and ambitious. Forough has the freedom of mobility, unlike women from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. She is not completely restricted to her domestic role as a mother. However, her role as a mother shapes her decisions in life. Even though she is a divorced woman and a mother, she wants to be an individual and be happy. Throughout the film, she struggles to reconcile her obligations as a mother and her individual desire to begin another relationship despite her son's disapproval. *The May Lady* shows that during this period of reform women may have become more visible in Iranian society, but they still experienced gender inequality under the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ The main character Forough Kia challenges the regime's portrayal of women by showing that women can have lives outside the domestic sphere.

Ten challenges the traditional roles of women in the Islamic Republic by presenting strong female characters. The film explores ten interactions between the central female character, an unnamed female driver, and her passengers. Despite one of her passengers being her younger son, the other passengers are all female characters. As mentioned previously, the films produced during the reform era were critical of the social and political order under President Mohammad Khatami. Even though the discourse of reform emphasized civil society and democracy, the conditions of women under the Islamic Republic did not significantly improve. The film touches on themes of struggling to resolve one's individuality and motherhood. It also explores themes of gender inequality and the repression of women's rights under the Islamic Republic.¹¹ For instance, the unnamed female driver challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women by being vocal about her individuality as mother and her right to be remarried despite her son's disapproval. During her interactions with the women in her car, the female driver learns how each one of them struggles with traditionalism and modernity. The issues of women include motherhood, religiosity, prostitution, and being a wife. Each of these characters in *Ten* operates within a patriarchal paradigm. By presenting women as central characters in the film, *Ten* demonstrates how social constructs shape our roles in society.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manata Hashemi, "Women and their Representation," Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 6, 2018.

¹² Ibid.

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema's Depiction of Modesty

Post-revolutionary cinema in Iran challenges the religious representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its depiction of modesty. After consolidating power, the Islamic Republic used enforced veiling and cultural norms to not only Islamize the image of women but also to restrict women to traditional roles in Iranian society. One of the significant acts of the Islamic Republic was that it “abrogated the Family Protection Law before any other law and reestablished sharia law.”¹³ By framing Iran’s political structures with the Islamic concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the Islamic Republic was able to reshape the fabric of society to fit its interpretation of Shi’a Islam. This was especially true when it came to women wearing the *hijab* and adhering to codes of modesty. According to Hamid Naficy, “the constitution of the self as dual (both private and public) necessitates the existence of a boundary or veil—however amorphous—separating interior from exterior. Veiling and the codes of modesty that attend it, therefore, are operative within the self and are pervasive within the culture.”¹⁴ Put differently, the Islamic Republic believed the veil and codes of modesty create a barrier between the private and public sphere. As a consequence, the Islamic Republic made the veil compulsory for all women and enforced these cultural norms, such as averting one’s gaze, to preserve and strengthen the regime’s Islamic image.

Even though the Islamic Republic has employed political structures to enforce veiling and codes of modesty, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has used metaphors and creative ways to challenge the depiction of modesty. This paper will use the post-revolutionary films *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten* to analyze the depiction of the *hijab* and the significance of depicting the direct gaze of a female. In the film *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, the leading female character, Na’i, challenges the Republic’s religious representation of women through the depiction of her *hijab* and direct gaze. At the beginning of the film, the viewer sees Na’i staring directly into the camera. She almost exposes her hair to the audience. This controversial scene arguably breaks the barrier between the private and public sphere. It shows that, despite Na’i being a wife and mother and wearing the *hijab*, she is attractive. Her direct gaze forces the viewer to look at her and witness the unveiling of her sexuality as a woman. Her eyes, in

¹³ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 292.

¹⁴ Hamid Naficy, “The Averted Gaze in Iranian Post Revolutionary Cinema,” *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (1991): 30.

essence, become a metaphor for unveiling. As stated by Hamid Naficy, “women’s sexuality is thought to be so excessive and powerful if it is contained or if it is allowed unhampered visual gaze through the gaze (unveiled), it is supposed to lead inevitably to the wholesale moral corruption of men and of society as a whole.”¹⁵ This film touches on how the patriarchal attitudes of the regime shape the codes of modesty. By directly gazing into the camera and panning the camera away before Na’i exposes her hair, the film challenges the patriarchal authority of the Islamic Republic. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* challenges the legitimacy and patriarchal structure of the Republic by using Na’i’s direct gaze as a metaphor for unveiling.

The May Lady challenges the regime’s portrayal of women through the central character Forough. Throughout the film, Forough reaches for her scarf and the camera pans down. In one scene, as her son’s teenage friends are leaving Forough’s home, they see Forough without her veil. The men look back at her as they leave. Even though the audience cannot see Forough, they are aware that she is without her scarf. The depiction of modesty in this scene is significant in that it shows the unrealistic expectations of women under the Islamic Republic, especially in the private and domestic sphere. From an Islamic standpoint, a woman would not have to cover in the comfort of her home and in front of her family. By showing a woman adhering to Islamic dress code in the privacy of her home, *The May Lady* challenges the extreme lengths the Islamic Republic goes to preserve this Islamic image of women and Iranian society as a whole.

Ten challenges the Republic’s religious representation of women through two characters: the main female driver and one of her religious female passengers. The unnamed female driver wears a loose scarf. Throughout the film, she is vocal about women having the right to make their own decisions and be individuals without the permission of a man. The looseness of her scarf could arguably symbolize her resistance to the Islamic Republic’s enforcement of patriarchal structures. That being said, it is necessary to understand that the compulsory veil is one of the most visible symbols of the state’s authority over women. By loosening her scarf, she can show resistance and contest the gender inequality perpetuated by the state. One of the most significant scenes in the film shows a religious young woman removing her veil completely and revealing that she has shaved her head. Once she removes her veil, it conveys the artificiality of the *hijab*. While we have discussed the Islamic Republic’s artificial construction of a

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

private and public sphere through its politicization of the *hijab*, *Ten's* depiction of modesty highlights the artificiality of the veil and the veil being used by women as a form of resistance under the Islamic Republic.

The Critique of Morality

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has challenged the regime's strict interpretation of morality, especially when it comes to women, by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality. To provide context, Iran underwent a turbulent period after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Due to this period of increased factionalism in Iranian politics and political uncertainty about Iran's future without the guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini, "the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance gradually began to relax the strict policies that had determined artistic production for nearly a decade."¹⁶ With the relaxed censorship rules and Mohammed Khatami as head of the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), Iranian cinema gradually began to tackle taboo subjects. Post-revolutionary Iranian films like *Time for Love* and *The May Lady* have challenged the traditional roles and representation of women under the Islamic Republic by critiquing the regime's singular interpretation of morality.

Time for Love was one the first Iranian films to touch on the taboo subject of women committing adultery. This film explores the multiple ideas of morality by focusing on three versions of the main female character Guzel's extramarital affairs. In each version, the lover and husband change roles. Blake Atwood states, "In the first section, a married woman, Guzel, has an affair, which her husband ultimately discovers. Outraged and angry, he kills her lover, and the episode ends with the judge sentencing him to death."¹⁷ In the second section, the husband becomes the lover, and the lover becomes the husband. The lover then kills the husband. In both of these versions, Guzel kills herself. In the final section of the film, the husband eventually allows Guzel and her lover to get married. At the end of the film, at the wedding, the judge states that he had to suspend his judgment before knowing the full context behind the husband's actions. The judge states, "Judging is good for a person who only thinks of the consequences of a crime, not of the reasons for doing it. In every trial, when I heard the guilty

¹⁶ Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

person's reasons, I thought to myself, if I were in his situation..."¹⁸ Even though the judge doesn't finish his sentence, the message of suspending one's judgment before knowing the story behind one's actions is evident. By presenting multiple scenarios of morality, *Time for Love* challenges the regime's singular interpretation of morality. Through the character of the judge, the film emphasizes that one must suspend judgment before knowing the context behind a person's actions. Instead of conforming to the regime's conservative understanding of morality, the film fails to condemn a woman's infidelity. *Time for Love* instead relies on Persian mystical traditions to convey a pluralistic understanding of morality. For example, Sufi thought encourages one to appeal to emotional logic and the logic of love, specifically divine love.¹⁹ Instead of casting moral judgment so quickly, the film is asking the audience and the regime to view Islam in a more empathic way.

One of the key scenes that tests the regime's concept of morality is the symbolism of sexual love through the use of scarves. During the first section of the film, Guzel and her lover are seen sitting in a horse-drawn carriage. As the scene progresses, the audience hears the galloping of the horse and see Guzel and her lover raising two scarves in the air. As stated by Atwood, "The two scarves dance in the wind, and the long take emphasizes the intimate entanglement of the fabrics as they move through the breeze."²⁰ The harmony between the galloping of the hooves and the scarves is meant to symbolize sexual love. Since the Republic's censorship forbids sexual love and physical intimacy from being openly expressed on screen, *Time of Love* challenges the moral authority of the regime by cleverly using scarves to express "carnal love."²¹

Additionally, *The May Lady* critiques the regime's strict interpretation of morality by addressing the taboo of motherhood. According to Hamid Reza Sadr, "this film act as a magnifying glass on the 'moral,' traditional social that views with distaste a middle-class widow and mother embarking on a new relationship."²² Even though the Islamic Republic emphasizes the importance of family in Islam, the film demystifies the notion of the perfect family and the perfect mother. Forough's son Maani is openly critical of her desire to date Doctor Rahbar and believes that his mother is attempting to

¹⁸ Hosseini, "Negotiating the Forbidden," 696.

¹⁹ Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 44.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 260.

replace his father. The main character Forough “is conflicted and confused regarding the cultural propriety of her love as a mother, and her love as a woman for a man who is not her son’s father.”²³ Forough’s character is battling the taboo of wanting to fulfill her desires and still being a good mother to her son.

The Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad further confronts the Republic’s conservative interpretation of morality by interweaving the voices of Forough and Doctor Rahbar “to convey the impression of intimacy and closeness.”²⁴ Due to the Islamic Republic’s censorship laws, Iranian filmmakers are unable to show intimacy between males and females openly. Bani-Etemad instead creatively expresses the love and physical intimacy between Forough and Doctor Rahbar through their voices. The audience never sees the male lover. Instead, the audience only hears the echoed voice of Doctor Rahbar reading love letters to Forough and speaking to her on the phone. If the characters had directly addressed each other, they would not have been able to express any form of intimacy due to the Republic’s authority over the film industry. By interweaving the voices of the two characters, the film shows that Muslim women under the Islamic Republic can experience intimacy and love outside the institution of marriage. *The May Lady* challenges the Republic’s narrow understanding of morality by exploring the taboo subject of love and motherhood with a pluralistic understanding.

Conclusion

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema explores and challenges the traditional roles and representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its focus on central female characters, its portrayal of modesty, and its criticism of the Republic’s strict interpretation of morality. This paper first provided a historical context for understanding the shift in women from being neutral characters to central characters in films. By presenting women as central characters, the post-revolutionary Iranian films *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten* show that there is a middle ground in which women can be both wives and mothers and still have agency and individuality. Secondly, these films challenge the Republic’s religious representation of women by using metaphors and creative ways to test the state’s enforcement of veiling and cultural norms. Finally, *Time for Love* and *The May Lady*

²³ Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 124.

²⁴ Ibid.

confront the regime's conservative interpretation of morality regarding women by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality. They display that morality is relative rather than absolute.

By exploring the social problems of women, Iranian cinema expresses the implications of Iranian women living under the Islamic Republic. In the modern day, women are navigating the political and social spheres of Iranian society. They are doing so by contesting the enforcement of the *hijab* and the Republic's prescribed gender roles. Additionally, Iranian women are challenging the regime through protests and demonstrations. Through the medium of cinema, domestic and international audiences can see the conditions of women living under the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic's strict gender roles, reductive representation of women, enforcement of the *hijab* and codes of modesty, and single definition of morality create further problems for women. These factors suggest that women cannot engage and actively participate in society without the consent and approval of the state. By focusing on these specific issues, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema forces the Iranian government to recognize and examine the hardships Iranian women face. It also applies these issues of Iranian women to broader, universal issues of gender inequality and the dominance of patriarchy in political and social structures. Through the medium of cinema, political and social change for women in Iran becomes a fundamental part of the discourse between Iranian society and the Islamic Republic.

Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

More information

Dr. Afshin Marashi
Director of the Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies
amarashi@ou.edu

or

Dr. Manala Hashemi
Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies
hashemi@ou.edu

Petition for the Minor

Katie Watkins
Adviser for IAS majors and minors with last names A-H
kwatkins@ou.edu

or

Malin Collins
Adviser for IAS majors and minors with last names I-Z
malin@ou.edu

www.ou.edu/ias



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture

Beneath the Surface: How Censorship in Iranian Music Cultivates Identity

Kristen Pierri*

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When listening to music, Iranian's do not tap their feet or dance; they do not smile or wave or give any indication that they are enjoying the music they are listening to because they are not allowed to. Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, compared music to drugs that ruin the realm of seriousness that comes with Islamic culture.¹ He neglected music's cultural significance outside of the realm of religion, and banned the citizens of Iran from listening to music that provided them excitement. Controlling such personal reactions and behaviors required strict enforcement by the Cultural Revolution Headquarters established in 1981.² On top of that, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was established to control cultural production, making it very difficult to get music produced that did not fit the criteria established by the Islamic Republic.

Over the years, the Islamic Republic eased up on the restrictions imposed on music, but only with some genres of music like pop. This has created some ambiguity on what music is allowed, and what music is not, and it has generated discussion on why some music gets passed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and why other music does not. In recent years with growing technological advancements, Iranians' have a new platform to share their music: the Internet. With this new platform, Iranian underground rock music was born. Rock musicians have an especially difficult time getting their music published because they often create discussion through the lyrics of their songs.³ Some of this

* **Author's Bio:** Kristen Pierri will graduate in the spring of 2019 with a major in Musical Arts and a minor in Psychology.

¹ Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 6-7.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Laudan Nooshin, "Underground, Overground: Rock music and Youth Discourses in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 464.

discussion conflicts with the censorship imposed on Iranian cultural, as it calls for more cultural freedom. Other aspects of the discussion highlight Western views of Iranians, focusing on topics like terrorism. In order to get published by the Ministry of Culture, Iranian rock musicians, and Iranian musicians in general, must make a choice: either keep lyrics that create discussion and maintain a small audience underground and online, or adapt their music to the criteria of the Ministry and gain a larger audience in Iran.⁴ This is a difficult decision for many Iranians and most decide to leave Iran to produce their music freely in Los Angeles, California.

The Islamic Republic approves music that relays the state ideologies they want to embody. For example, they give opportunities for women to take part in cultural discussion, but deny them the real opportunity of true freedom with their music. Female performers are neglected in that they have a strict dress code that sometimes impedes their performance with other people, they do not have venues to rehearse, and, mostly importantly, the female solo voice is banned.⁵ The state sponsors all female festivals, but uses these festivals to further impose state ideology. In recent years, females have taken advantage of these festivals to generate discussion themselves, and create a unique identity.⁶

Music was not the only form of expression that was suppressed after the Iranian Revolution. Multiple aspects of public freedom were suppressed in the form of newspaper closures, censorship of political ideas that conflicted with the Islamic Republic, denial of equal juridical rights to women, and the impeachment of the first-ever elected president of the Islamic Republic.⁷ These suppressions were a response to Reza Shah's reform policies before the Revolution, as he implemented several reform policies, often against the will of the Iranian citizens, to modernize the state. When the Islamic Republic was founded, Khomeini aimed to create a unique Iranian identity that went against the Shah's prior modernization reforms. This is why the Islamic Republic suppressed multiple aspects of public freedom and aimed to create a homogenous Iranian culture.

However, all the restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic have failed to create a homogenous cultural identity, especially regarding music, in Iran. Iranians enjoy different music that is not always approved by the Ministry of Culture, and this music brings together likeminded people that create their own unique identity

⁴ *Ibid.*, 494.

⁵ Wendy S. Debano, "Enveloping music in gender, nation, and Islam: Women's Music Festivals in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 457-58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁷ Roxanne D. Marcotte, "Religion and Freedom: Typology of an Iranian Discussion," *Critique*, no. 16 (2000): 49.

based on the sonic atmosphere of the music they all enjoy. The emergence of the Internet has allowed this heterogeneity to flourish in the world of Iranian music, and it facilitates discussion that cannot occur in other spaces.

Music Censorship in Recent Iranian History

The music censorship of post-revolutionary Iran stems from the Pahlavi dynasty's use of music to westernize the nation and distract its audience from the political unrest felt throughout Iran. A particular genre of music known as *musiqi-ye pap* was considered quite popular in pre-revolution Iran.⁸ This genre of music reflected the Pahlavi government's efforts to develop and westernize the country. Even before the Revolution, music was controlled with a specific agenda in mind, which is why *musiqi-ye pap* consumed Iran's sonic space. In a way, music was censored then to only reflect the ideologies of the state and not what the general public wanted to hear. Because of this, musicians developed creative strategies to get their dissenting messages across through their music using *musiqi-ye pap*. Iranians created ambiguous songs that implied dissent.⁹ In this sense, *musiqi-ye pap* played a role in aurally disseminating oppositional political perspectives, conveying the widespread political dissatisfaction plaguing the nation.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, music was one of the first casualties because the Islamic Republic understood the power of music.¹⁰ Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, declared music as a moral corruption for the youth.¹¹ Women's voices were deemed un-Islamic, leading to the banning of the solo female voice.¹² Music for idle entertainment and fun was discouraged, and the outward display of excitement and play from music was banned.¹³ The goal of the Islamic Republic was to undo the Westernization that occurred under the Pahlavi dynasty and create an Islamic identity within Iranian culture that disengaged from the other global spheres of influence. For nearly two decades following the Iranian Revolution, popular music was banned for its immoral associations to the deposed monarchical regime. All of these restrictions were enforced by the Cultural Revolution Headquarters, and musicians were not allowed to publicly publish their

⁸ Farzaneh Hemmasi, "Intimating Dissent: Popular Song, Poetry, and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Iran," *Ethnomusicology* 57, no. 1 (2013): 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ Full quote from Ayatollah Khomeini on music states, "One of the things that intoxicate the brains of our youth is music... it takes the human being out of the realm of seriousness and draws him toward uselessness and futility..." Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

music unless they received a performance permit from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. To gain one of these permits, musicians must go through a long, arduous, and critical process with rather vague criteria. According to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, music should not have an association with pleasure and debauchery, not inspire atheism, not criticize the Islamic order and religious authorities, the content of the music and words should have solidity, the music and lyrics should reinforce the spirit of national unity, and it should guide the youth and the whole society to a bright future and an atmosphere of hope.¹⁴

Not only were these regulations strictly enforced, but the government shut down all music institutions and education programs.¹⁵ This, ironically, led to an increase in music making within family circles by all generations and sexes of all social classes. Since Khomeini imposed such strict regulations on music, he emphasized the power of music and the importance of controlling it. When President Mohammad Khatami was elected in 1997, a lot of things changed within the realm of Iranian culture. Under his rule, the ban on pop music was lifted and the Islamic Republic was more permissible with its selection of music.¹⁶ There was a higher tolerance for social, demographic, and economic change in Iran, and the youth of Iran began to hope that they might live in a more tolerant and open society. However, there was an obvious difference of opinion between President Khatami and Ayatollah Khomeini, stemming from the divide within the government itself between reformists and conservatives. In the Islamic Republic there are deep fissures and internal power struggles that contribute to a discrepancy in what is allowed and what is not. This culture of ambiguity was also present during Khomeini's rule, but it became more pronounced with the cultural developments that occurred under Khatami.

With the emergence of the newly legalized pop music, grassroots movements in music emerged that reached their audience through underground networks. These grassroots movements highlighted two important trends rising in Iran's social and political life: pluralism and diversity.¹⁷ Grassroots music did so by cultivating a more diverse, inclusive social domain that highlighted group ethos and eclecticism. Among these grassroots groups was the genre of Iranian rock music. This

¹⁴ Patrician Hall, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 663.

¹⁵ Nasim Niknasf, "The Story of a Man Without Lips: Representational Politics in Iranian Music Education," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 210-211 (2017): 121.

¹⁶ Laudan Nooshin, *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016), 246-47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

underground rock scene exemplifies music that distinctly emphasizes dissenting points of view with the Islamic Republic, and it critically analyzes Iran's role in the global world. Through this rock scene, a youth culture has formed that is not only aware of Iran's global presence and stigma, but actively engages in discussion that criticizes the censorship imposed and regulated by the Islamic Republic.¹⁸ The youth are wary and uncertain about centrally organized events, even in regard to government sponsored music festivals. They are concerned over losing control of their expression, and they have a reluctance to be associated with officialdom. This increasingly conscious youth culture in Iran, in conjunction with globalized technologies, has made it more difficult for the Islamic Republic to enforce music standards.

In 2005 Iran saw yet another change in leadership under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He was more conservative than President Khatami, and he wanted to clamp down on manifestations of Western culture that had grown in Iran.¹⁹ However, this task proved difficult and he was ultimately unsuccessful in his endeavor because the government could not completely regulate the underground music scenes or the internet, where Iranians listen to most of their music. There was a certain point during Khatami's presidency where Iran could not return to the austerity of the 1980s, as the country had developed too much and became too cosmopolitan for anti-Western agendas like those of Ahmadinejad.

In more recent years, President Hassan Rouhani has eased up significantly on the restrictions imposed on music, and has even encouraged musician growth in Iran. The national orchestra has resumed its work, and more people are earning degrees in music. Classical music, as well as popular music, is permitted more under Rouhani's authority. The songs and videos of underground rock musicians are even presented in an official context. With Rouhani's recent reelection, citizens are hopeful to see progressive action taken in Iranian culture, specifically regarding the ban on female solo singers.

Youth Culture in Iran's Underground Music Scene

In the early 2000s, Iranians between the ages 15 and 29 represented the majority of the Iranian population. Most of this generation did not experience the context of the Iranian Revolution and they do not remember pre-revolutionary Iran. Youth in Iran

¹⁸ Nooshin, "Underground, Overground," 487-89. Page 489 gives an example of an Iranian song that addresses the concerns of Iranian Youth. The title of the song is "My Sweet Little Terrorist Song," addressing western perceptions of Iranians during the critical time after the Iran-Iraq war.

¹⁹ Nooshin, *Music and the Play of Power*, 263.

also have a wider lens because of the Internet.²⁰ They can access and understand more information than what was readily available in pre-revolutionary Iran, and they can see Iran in the context of a global network. This increased access has shown them the stereotypes the West has of Iran and its people, and it has also exposed them to Western cultural standards and practices. Iranian youth enjoy, and often prefer, these Western practices, so they employ those same practices in their music.

Western views of Iran particularly shape Iranian youth culture and underground music. Two important events in particular affected the lives and world views of the youth generation in Iran: the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a few months into President Khatami's second term, and the ensuing proclamation by George W. Bush that said, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."²¹ Over the following years, the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, and anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian sentiments were prevalent in Western politics and media. Due to the large use of the Internet in Iran, Iranian youth were not oblivious to this fact. This discourse put Iran in a vulnerable position, and Iranian youths were forced to define their position in this new world order. During this time, Iranians were less focused on cultural productions attacking the state, and more focused on patriotism and highlighting their own distinct identities, identities that went against Western stereotypes of Iran.

This generation of Iranian youths are referred to as the "Third Generation," in reference to the Iranian Revolution. As they came of age in an atmosphere of confusion and dissent, they developed attitudes of defiance as well as openness.²² They were defiant against the West's attacks on their culture, but they were also open and enthusiastic about Iranian inclusion in the global network. Throughout this generation, music became a vehicle for youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identities.

Not only was Iran more aware of its global presence and stigma, but it was also susceptible to the commodification and commercialization of globally marketed music stars. These typically included Western music stars and Western music practices. Musicians coming of age during President Khatami's time had greater openness and access to global cultural currents. They used this new realm to create an alternative space for themselves and the creation, production, and exchange of their musical ingenuity. Pink Floyd is an example of a popular Western band in Iran, as it highlighted the surrealism of human existence and rebelled against authority, constrictions, and homogeneity— notions that deeply resonated with the youth in Iran.²³ After Iran confronted Western stigmatization through their cultural

²⁰ Nooshin, "Underground, Overground," 472.

²¹ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 212.

²² *Ibid.*, 212-13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 218.

production, a change in leadership emerged and cultural production was once again constrained. Under President Ahmadinejad, censorship in music again became more prevalent, and the rhetoric of “cultural invasion” was re-established in hopes of eradicating Western cultural practices.²⁴ This was very difficult to do as Iranian youth and musicians were globally conscious and were connected to these practices through the Internet. Therefore, despite the increased censorship, underground music blossomed. Websites were created for bands, Iranians were connected through social media, and it did not seem to matter if the music was published through the Ministry of Culture or not as the bands had already established an audience through the Internet. Ahmadinejad, concerned with guarding freedom and cultural invasion, set out to arrest the most popular underground musicians, broadcasting their arrests and warning other musicians against following in their footsteps. These actions changed the rhetoric in Iranian underground music, shifting it from defying Western stigma to defying internal suppression of expressive freedom.

Underground musicians can only operate below the radar, so it is very hard for them to rehearse and circulate their music. They also lack access to feedback from their audience, which is difficult when the music is designed to generate discussion. Most underground musicians define rock as an alternative space for youth experience, and the youth of Iran hold a sense of ownership over this creative space.²⁵ Music mediates notions of place, belonging, and nationhood in a nation that seems to reject the cultural freedom Iranians desire. This underground network that attracts likeminded, urban, progressive people serves as a distinct place and identity that directly contrasts the “overground” Islamic Republic and all the music passed by the Ministry of Culture. For this reason, many musicians capitalize on their underground status, enhancing their “outsider capital,” but it is still difficult to balance this and the demands and risks of remaining underground.²⁶

The media plays a large role in influencing youth culture in Iran. Young Iranians have gained a better understanding of their global position and Western practices, and they also have more access to internal news. Most young Iranians attending college show an interest in political news but, more importantly, they show a higher interest in scientific, artistic, and cultural news. They watch television to receive most of their information, but more and more Iranians are noting the Internet as their favored source of information. They are developing more trust in the Internet than in Persian speaking TV channels, which has led to a diminishing

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 211-12.

²⁵ Nooshin, “Underground, Overground,” 475-76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 494.

interest in political news. This may also explain the higher interest in scientific, artistic, and cultural news.²⁷

This Third Generation holds no inhibitions toward the Iranian Revolution or the country's cultural officials, so they are more comfortable expressing their criticisms. They prefer straightforward language that facilitates criticism, which can be found in the underground music scene. This generation is a political force that advocates for cultural freedom and expression.²⁸ Because of this, the Islamic Republic has criminalized the underground music scene, its musicians, and its audience members. The music of the Third Generation contains words of protest, so the Islamic Republic is doing everything in its power to suppress this movement.

Gender Issues in Iran's Music

With the founding of the Islamic Republic and the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, the solo female voice was banned in music. This absence of the female voice in the public realm, as well as the higher social and political risks for women in the music field, has contributed to the low number of female musicians in the underground music scene. Female musicians often make an appearance in bands as background singers or musicians. The female voice is almost always accompanied by other singers, and very few bands have attempted to feature the solo female voice.

The reason for the ban on the female voice stems back before the Revolution, and includes different Qur'anic interpretations. According to some interpretations of the Qur'an, a woman's voice is considered part of her intimate sphere. Therefore, it was not the woman singing that was seen as a problem, but rather men listening to the singing of woman.²⁹ Islamic jurisprudence in general is very suspicious of music and singing, so many Qur'anic verses have been interpreted as signifying a prohibition on music. This is why Ayatollah Khomeini does not allow the celebration of music and sees music as strictly a religious tool that should reflect the serenity and seriousness of the Islam religion.³⁰ Female singers have not received as much recognition for their work as male singers in pre-20th century Iran. This problem was slightly relieved under the new modernization policies enforced

²⁷ Mehdi Semati, *Media Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 60-65.

²⁸ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 223-24.

²⁹ Houchang Chehabi, "Voices Unveiled: Women Singers in Iran," in *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, eds. Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Press, 2000), 152.

³⁰ Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 6-7.

by Reza Shah, but were later overturned by Ayatollah Khomeini, who placed the ban on the female voice using the aforementioned Qur'anic interpretations.³¹

Females in Iranian society are constantly under the eyes of the state. The state controls social behavior and cultural expression, therefore controlling all media outlets that convey perceptions about how things should look in an ideal society. The people in power are Iranian men. They dominate the media scene, and they dominate the posters on the streets. These male symbols are often referred to as the "male gaze."³² Throughout post-revolutionary Iran, women have not had the same opportunities as men, and carving an identity for themselves has proven difficult under all of these circumstances. However, women have the unique opportunity to convene with other women in a moderately private space during all-female music festivals.³³

To compensate for the ban on the solo female voice, the Islamic Republic has sponsored women-only music festivals featuring all-female musicians with an all-female audience. An example of an all-female music festival sponsored by the government is the Jasmine Festival held at *Talar Vahdat* (Unity Hall). This performance hall is visually punctuated by nationalistic and Islamic images, and the Festival itself is scheduled in conjunction with national holidays celebrating Fatima. Fatima, in post-revolutionary Iran, represents the ideal Iranian woman according to government standards. She represents both the obedient daughter and the obedient wife, as well as a sacrificing, benevolent mother.³⁴ These two aspects of the music festival, the performance hall and the national holiday, emphasize women's role in an Islamic Iranian society. While it is true the government sponsors the Jasmine Festival, it also supports traditional gender roles through the Jasmine Festival. Women in Iranian society are conservative in behavior and represent the physical embodiment of state ideology.³⁵ Some women even present this behavior at the Jasmine Festival by not dancing and by emphasizing the spiritual, intellectual, and national aspects of music, either inadvertently or intentionally.

Despite nationalistic symbols still presiding over these festivals, women have started an ideological discussion at the Jasmine Festival. While these festivals appear to externally support state gender roles, the internal discussion that occurs negotiates identity with respect to gender, nation, and Islam. Music serves as a conduit to express and formulate these ideals, and it shows how different

³¹ Chehabi, "Voices Unveiled," 154-58.

³² Debaro, "Enveloping music," 442-43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 441.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 446-47.

³⁵ Ann Lucas, "Understanding Iran Through Music: A new Approach," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2006): 89.

interpretations can coexist in a pluralistic society. The exclusivity of these festivals to only females, and the price of the tickets, creates a sort of “high culture.”³⁶ This amplifies the discussion generated.

Ironically, the state holds these festivals to honor women and their family roles, yet men are not allowed to attend to also celebrate these family roles. At the conclusion of the Jasmine Festival, men are seen waiting outside for their wives in their cars. The festivals are set at a time that accommodates the familial role of a wife, ending before dinner time, yet husbands and sons cannot engage in the celebration of all the hard work their wife or mother pours into the family. On top of this, men continue to dominate all aspects of life in Iran, including the music scene.

It is difficult for females to improve their skill as musicians. Not only do they have to deal with the ban on the solo female voice, but they have to deal with the stigma of impropriety and immorality associated with their performance. They also have a strict dress code that makes it difficult to coordinate with fellow musicians and they lack space to rehearse their music. Therefore, even in underground music, women must rely on men to provide them an opportunity to express themselves through music.³⁷ With the increasing access to music education under the more liberal leaders in Iran, people are allowed to pursue and use music as a form of cultural protest. However, musicians are still socially and economically marginalized, and it does not help that the restrictions on publication are still strict. This increase in music education also means an increase in music education for women, which helps lend them a voice to generate discussion at the Jasmine Festival.³⁸ It also allows them to learn musical instruments to participate in mixed-sex bands.

Conclusion

The internal political battles between reformists and conservatives in the Islamic Republic has contributed to ambiguity regarding cultural restrictions.³⁹ A general pattern of conservative-liberal-conservative-liberal has been observed in recent history, which has taken a toll on the music industry due to everchanging policies. However, under heavy censorship, Iranians have cultivated a private space for themselves to experiment with their identity through music. This private space, the underground music scene, generates discussion about Iran’s place in the global network as well as the internal suppression of cultural expression in Iran. The youth

³⁶ Debano, “Enveloping music,” 453.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 461.

³⁸ Hall, *The Oxford Handbook*, 665.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 668.

of Iran particularly enjoy this scene because they are not tied to the Iranian Revolution, and are more comfortable criticizing and analyzing authority. They enjoy open, straightforward discussion through the lyrics that the underground music scene provides.

With increasing globalization, and with the Internet at their fingertips, Iranian musicians have bypassed the critical process of earning a performance permit, and have created likeminded audiences. However, Iranians are limited to releasing music underground and through the Internet, as opposed to going through the Ministry of Culture to perform their music “overground.”⁴⁰ Performing underground also poses serious risks if caught by the Islamic Republic, and this is particularly dangerous for popular underground musicians. Therefore, musicians must make the choice to sacrifice part of their musical discussion (the lyrics that openly generate discussion) to perform overground, or to remain underground with the limited audience and risks.

In the Iran of 2018, Iranians are hopeful for progressive action in the field of music production. Above all, they hope for the eradication of the ban on the female solo voice, a restriction that has impeded female musicians since the 1980s. Despite all the changes that have occurred since the Iranian Revolution, Iran has cultivated an underground music scene to discuss and explore their identity as an Iranian nation. While the goal of the imposed censorship was to expunge other cultures and create a homogenous Iranian culture, the censorship laws instead had the opposite effect on music. Through music, Iranians will continue to carve distinct identities that emphasize pluralism, diversity, and inclusiveness, regardless of what the future holds.

⁴⁰ Nooshin, “Underground, Overground,” 494.