The Implications of the Iranian Reform Movement's Islamization

of Secularism for a Post-Authoritarian Middle East

by

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For over the soul
God can and will let no one rule but Himself.
Therefore, where temporal power presumes to proscribe laws for the soul,
it encroaches upon God's government and only
misleads and destroys souls.

~

خداوند نمی تواند و اجازه نخواهد داد که

هیچ کس به غیر از خودش بر روح انسان تسلط داشته باشد.

در نتیجه هر جایی که قدرت دنیوی سعی کند قوانین روحانی را مقرر کند، این مسئله یک

تجاوز به حکومت الهی می باشد که فقط موجب گمراهی

و ویرانی روح می شود.

~

Martin Luther
1523 AD

To my parents, Rick and Nancy,
and my grandfather, Edward Olivari.

Without your love and support,
none of this would have been possible.

and

To Dr. J.

Thank you for believing in me and for giving me a
second chance at the opportunity of a lifetime.

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Glossary of Essential Terms in Persian

Ayatollah:

Means 'the Sign of God' and is an honorary title within Shi'a Islam. It is usually assigned to legal scholars who are fully qualified *mujtahids* and who serve as a local *marja'-e taqlid*. The title became increasingly common in post-revolutionary Iran.

Hujatolislām:

Means 'Proof of Islam' and is a title given to middle ranking Shi'ite clerics who achieve the rank of *mujtahid* but are net yet considered Ayatollahs.

Ijtihād:

An Islamic legal term meaning 'independent reasoning.' There are three different positions on *ijtihad* in contemporary Shi'ite thought. The first is the relatively rare *akhbārī* tradition, which rejects *ijtihad*, suggesting that the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet are sufficient sources for Islamic law and social practice. The role for the clerical establishment ('*ulema*) in this tradition is minimal, acting simply as the readers of Islamic texts. The second position is the modern version of the *uṣūlī* tradition in Iran, called narrative-centered (*naql meḫvar*) *ijtihad.* This states that the Qur'an and Sunna require interpretation through human reason, though that human reason is to be held as 'secondary' to the infallible texts of Islam. This narrative-centered *ijtihad* requires a significant role for the '*ulema* as the qualified interpreters of Islam or *mujtahids*. It also enshrines the role of a *marja'-e taqlid,* or human source of emulation, that Shi'ites must emulate and trust for Islamic guidance (*taqlīd*). The third is a modern derivation of the *uṣūlī* tradition called reason-centered ('*aql meḫvar*) *ijtihad*. This states that the Qur'an, *Sunna*, and Islamic jurisprudence are not sufficient guides for the establishment of a system of governance, for example, and therefore require other sources of non-religious human knowledge to be focused on and reasoned with through a lens of Islamic virtue. Reason-centered *ijtihad* is also used to take the judgments of *mujtahids* as the focus on them through a further level of *ijtihad* to be exercised by individuals and groups of believers in a continuous fashion. See Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 148-9 and 'Edalatnezhad, Saeed. "Kudam Ijtihad?" (Which Ijtihad?) in *Andarbab-e Ijtihad: Darbar-ye Kar-amadiye Fiqh-e Islami Dar Donya-ye Imruz.*(*On Ijtihad: About the Efficacy of Islamic Jurisprudence in Today's World*) pg. 8. for greater details.

Majlis:

The Iranian *majlis* refers specifically to its parliamentary institutions.

Marja'-e Taqlid:

Means 'Source of Emulation' or 'Authority to be Followed.' It is a position held by the highest ranking members of the Shi'ite clerical communities. The title is bestowed upon four to eight high-ranking Ayatollahs on a local or national level and is only applied to one or two individuals on an international scale. Ayatollah Khomeini was the international *marja'-e taqlid* in the 1970s and 80s.

Mujtahid:

Means 'one who is capable of practicing *ijtihad.'* To qualify to be a *mujtahid*, one must be formally trained in Islamic law and have an extensive knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith. In Shi'a Islam, only clerics can be *mujtahids*, though reformers like 'Abdolkarim Soroush believe that the interpretations of *mujtahids* require an extra level of *ijtihad* among believers as well.

Rahbar:

Means 'Leader' in Persian. This is the term used specifically for the head of the Islamic Republic, sometimes referred to as the 'Supreme Leader.' This position is currently held by Ayatollah Khamene'i.

Taqlīd:

Means 'imitation' and is used to refer to a notion of Muslims conforming to the judgments of past doctrine, traditions, and interpretations. *Taqlid* frequently takes on a meaning of 'blind' imitation among some reformers, though in Shi'a Islam, it is considered to be more of a trust or a confidence in the judgments of *mujthaids* than a blind imitation.

'Ulemā:

Is used to refer to the clerical establishment in Shi'a Islam.

Velāyat-e Faqīh:

Means 'Guardianship of the Jurist' or 'Custodianship of the Jurist.' This was Ayatollah Khomeini's plan for religious governance whereby the Islamic Jurists, who he believed were the most qualified leaders, would oversee the community of believers in the absence of the infallible Shi'ite Imams.

*Many of these definitions have been paraphrased from The Oxford Dictionary of Islam *by John Esposito**

A Note on the Transliteration

The transliteration for the Persian words used throughout are my own. They are, however, based on a guide for transliterating Arabic and Persian words from the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. It should be noted that although the majority of the transliterated words are borrowed from Arabic, their spellings and pronunciations are provided as they appear in Persian. The diacritics are given both in the glossary and the first time the word is mentioned in the text.

Abstract

This thesis examines the Iranian Reform Movement's 'Islamization of secularism' between 1990 and 2004 as a case study on the changing relationship between secularism, Islam, and democracy in the contemporary Middle East. It focuses on the intellectual efforts of Iranian reflexive revivalists, 'Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Shabestari, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, Akbar Ganji, and Abbas Milani, by framing their theories historically, theoretically, and through their practical applications. The historical framework from 1953 – 2014 is divided into two overarching eras of thought: the post-colonial theoretical era from 1953 – 1989 and the post-authoritarian theoretical era from 1990 – 2014. By isolating these two distinct eras of political thought, a stark discursive shift is highlighted away from objectivist and totalizing visions of ideological secularism and Islam during the post-colonial theoretical era, and towards deobjectified interpretations of both theories that were infused with democratic ideals during the post-authoritarian era. During this time, Iranian intellectuals established a single democratic theory that combined both secular and Islamic thought whereby the politicization of Islam fundamentally relied on a secular and democratic system of governance to allow for the continuous evolution of religious knowledge and critical thought. The advocates of this theory, however, have been brutally repressed by the conservative clerical establishment for the last two decades and have been prevented from enacting significant democratic reform within the Islamic Republic.

Despite this repression, the hope for democratic change and the implementation of this new intellectual discourse is still very much alive both within Iranian civil society and abroad within many trans-national Shi'ite political organizations. As such, Iran's revolutionary reinterpretation of secular, Islamic, and democratic theories is both relevant and applicable as a reference for present Middle Eastern democratization efforts as they navigate their own unique balance between secularism, Islam, and democracy. This reference is best understood through four points. First, objectivist and absolutist ideologies of the post-colonial era are unsustainable bases for democratic politics. Second, Islam is best understood in terms of an ever-changing discursive tradition that lends a moral and spiritual component to everyday political, social, and economic interactions. Third, Secularism should be understood as the creation of a non-coercive overlapping political consensus and the ideological neutrality of the government that allows for political agency to rest in the hands of the governed. Finally, because there is no outline for a form of governance in the Qur'an or the *Sunna* of the Prophet, traditional modes of Islamic interpretation are not sufficient for the creation of a democratic state. As such, a unique form of reason-based *ijtihad* is necessary that focuses on both religious and non-religious human knowledge as a means of socially constructing and changing political paradigms over time.

Keywords: Islamization of Secularism, Iranian Reform Movement, Middle East Democratization

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Introduction: The Emergence of a Secular and Islamic Democratic Discourse in Iran

The Iranian people today live under an oppressive authoritarian regime that imposes a narrow interpretation of Islamic governance across the country. They have been fighting for democratic and religious reform for decades, however, but their battle is not with an ordinary authoritarian government. Iranian reformists are not simply colliding with repressive government institutions, but with the very epicenter of politicized Shi'ite clerical authority and the fundamental identity of Shi'a Islam itself. According to Nader Hashemi, an Iranian-American professor and author specializing in Islamic affairs, democracy, and Iranian politics, a reformist narrative of Shi'a Islam that is infused with both secular and democratic theories has won out in the hearts and minds of nearly 80 percent of Iran's voting population. This popular reformist discourse, which Hashemi has described as, "Islamic secularism,"[1] illustrates a stark disconnect between the repressive clerical regime and the Iranian people. This 'Islamic secularism' should not be understood in terms of an accommodation of Islam by secularism or democracy, however, as that would suggest that democratization and secularization are both normative projects based

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[1] Hashemi, Nader. "Is Rouhani the Iranian Gorbachev?"

on a specific, ostensibly Western, vision of modernity. Rather, this is a phenomenon whereby religious intellectuals and everyday Iranians alike have reconceptualized secular political theory based on their own unique social, historical, and religious experiences. Through this process, they have produced a revolutionary vision of what secular democratic governance could look like through a lens of Islamic virtue.

The notion that a democratic state could be both secular and Islamic would seem counterintuitive at first glance, but that is exactly what a new wave of Iranian intellectuals have been working towards since the early 1990s. For this Islamization of secularism to be properly understood, however, a great deal of theoretical reconceptualization is necessary to see beyond preconceived notions of these political theories in fundamental opposition to one another. The most intuitive way to understand such a radical redefinition of secular and Islamic theory is by framing it in three ways—historically, theoretically, and through its concrete applicability in recent history.

Historically speaking, political Islam and secularism in Iran have had a relationship of prolonged interlocution and theoretical overlap.[2] They have been defined and redefined based on a shared intellectual and historical heritage that has been shaped by the events leading up to the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution, the revolution itself, and its violent aftermath throughout the 1980s. This post-colonial theoretical period from 1953 – 1989 was dominated by Cold War era ideological trends of universality and vaguely defined, supposedly monolithic, notions of Islam and secularism. By contrast, beginning in 1989, evolving divisions within Iran's political elite and popular disillusionment with the ideological promises of the post-colonial era gave way to a reconceptualization of Islamic and secular theory in a deobjectified and democratic light,

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[2] Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety :The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. pg. 24-5.

signaling the beginning of a post-authoritarian theoretical era. It was in 1997, at the height of this post-authoritarian era, that the Iranian reform movement arose, undergirded by the epistemic revolution that was the 'Islamization of secularism.'

To further conceptualize the complexities of the Islamization of secularism it is useful to also introduce a theoretical framework, beginning with a categorization of the intellectuals themselves. The leaders of this epistemic revolution were a diverse group of Iranian professors, clerics, secular-modernists, and other political reformists both inside and outside the state, who have been collectively described as 'reflexive revivalists.'[3] They were 'reflexive' in that they critically looked inwards at Iran's social, intellectual, religious, and historical traditions, and longer blamed the outside world for their domestic imperfections or political problems. They were 'revivalists' in the sense that they did not try to fundamentally rework Islamic truth, but rather, sought to critique human knowledge of Islam, secularism, and democracy to revive their Islamic Revolution in a democratic fashion.[4]

Talal Asad, a Saudi Arabian anthropologist and political theorist, presents two concepts from his anthropological deconstruction of Islam and secularism that provide a valuable overarching theoretical framework. First, he suggests that Islam should be understood as a discursive tradition that, "is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present."[5] This means that contemporary Islamic political theory, for example, is derived from a past compilation of human interpretations of Islamic texts, traditions, and jurisprudence that

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[3] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. xix.

[4] Haj, Samira. *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity*. pg. 4.

[5] Asad, Talal. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. pg. 14.

necessarily change over time to confront new events in the present—a nearly identical

description of the process Iran's reflexive revivalists adhered to in their reinterpretations of

Islamic theory.

Second, Talal Asad suggests that a fundamental notion of 'the secular,' from which

various iterations of secularism can arise, *must not* be viewed as a simple separation of 'church

and state.' Rather, he suggests that a secular ethic emerges as a combination of ideas, practices,

and traditions over time that produce a Rawlsian notion of 'overlapping consensus.' This idea of

creating overlapping consensus is central to an understanding of secularism that is essentially

fluid and malleable depending on how such an 'overlapping consensus' is uniquely constructed

within various national contexts.[6] In this light, the Iranian intellectuals' Islamization of

secularism should be understood as the creation of an overlapping consensus through their

common desire to institutionalize the fluidity of human religious knowledge and establish a non-

coercive democratic state that allows political agency to rest in the hands of the governed, not a

static political or religious ideology. Through this theoretical framework, the Islamization of

secularism is best understood as the fundamental necessity for secular and democratic

institutions in order for an ever-changing Islamic discursive tradition to be politicized.

It is crucial, however, to also look at the practical application of this revolutionary theory

both in Iran and the contemporary Middle East to see how it effects the everyday lives of the

social agents themselves. Though Iran remains a repressive authoritarian regime, this reformist

vision of an Islamic secular democracy is still very much alive within Iranian civil society. The

best evidence of this was the 2009 Green Movement protests, which both demanded democratic

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[6] Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular.* pg. 2-5; 16.

accountability and reform, and meaningfully exposed the conservative regime's façade of democratic legitimacy for all of the world to see.

Perhaps the greatest pragmatic success of this new theoretical discourse can be found not in Iran itself, but within Shi'ite political organizations across the Middle East, such as *al-da'awa al-islamiyya* in Iraq and *al-Wifaq* in Bahrain. Since the 1990s a groundbreaking trend of secularization within the leadership of these religious political parties has been increasingly evident. They have abandoned their connections to the esoteric clerical establishment and replaced them with lay intellectuals and politicians that still advocate religious principles but do so on an individual level without a clerical dictation of Islamic subjectivity. The fundamental core of the Iranian's Islamization of secularism, however, was not intended to merely affect political parties, but was to create a lasting democratic institution. Even these lay political officials speaking in the name of Shi'a Islam have the capacity to become authoritarian and claim greater access to Islamic truth unless they are checked and balanced within a democratic system.

Though the Iranians' task today to establish democratic institutions in the central hub of politicized Shi'ite clerical authority is daunting and will likely take quite some time to achieve, their democratic theoretical discourse has profound implications for other Middle Eastern nations across the region who are presently in the process of democratic transition. As such, the explicit aim of this thesis is to answer the following question: What are the theoretical implications of the Iranian intellectuals' Islamization of secularism for democratization efforts across the Middle East as they navigate their own unique balance between Islam, secularism, and democracy?

The answer to this question is best understood in terms of four points of reference that Iran's Islamization of secularism suggests about the changing relationship between Islam, secularism, and democracy in the post-authoritarian Middle East.

First, the use of objectivist, universalist, or ideological discourses speaking in terms of absolutes are unsustainable bases for democratic politics. They are inherently unchangeable and place political agency in the hands of a static ideal rather than in the hands of the people, which frequently leads to authoritarian politics of repression. Second, Islam is best understood as an ever-changing discursive tradition that lends an ethical and spiritual component to everyday political, social, and economic interactions. Third, secularism is best understood as the creation of a non-coercive overlapping political consensus that is uniquely indigenized within an individual nation. In Iran, the reflexive revivalists established this consensus by defining a secular state as being ideologically neutral so that political agency could rest in the hands of the governed. Finally, because there is no outline for governance in the infallible sources of Islamic truth, traditional methods of independent human reasoning (*ijtihād*) that look only the Qur'an and *Sunna* of the Prophet are insufficient. As such, the use of a new type of *ijtihad* that focuses not on the Qur'an and *Sunna,* but on religious and non-religious human reason is necessary to socially construct, critique, and reconstruct political paradigms over time.

Chapter One – Historical Framework Part One: Post-Colonial Secular and Islamic Thought in Iran 1953 - 1989

Chapter one presents the first portion of a historical framework through which to understand the emergence of the Islamization of secularism in Iran. This post-colonial theoretical era from 1953 – 1989 was dominated in large part by Cold War ideologies speaking in terms of universality and absolutes. The first portion of this chapter discusses the theoretical clashes between ideological secularism and Islam in Iran that would eventually contribute to the eruption of Islamic Revolution in 1978-79. The latter half of this chapter deals with post-revolutionary Iran's institutionalization of Islamic ideology and a crucial divide that emerged between pro- and anti-clerical Islamist politicians regarding the structural identity of the Islamic Republic.

From Secular Nationalism to a Repressive Secularism of Religious Evisceration 1953 - 1977

In the early 1950s, Iran was a central theater for the Cold War and post-colonial political intervention. Though the British no longer physically occupied Iran in the aftermath of World War II, they maintained control over its oil industry for years, generating a deep resentment among an increasingly nationalist-minded Iranian public. In 1951, Mohammad Mossadegh, the leader of the secular-nationalist 'National Front Party,' headed up a passing of legislation in the Iranian Parliament (*majlis*) to nationalize the country's British-controlled oil industry. This caused his popularity to skyrocket among the Iranian people and he was elected as the new Prime Minister by a landslide parliamentary vote in 1951.[7]

The nationalization of Iran's oil industry and Mossadegh himself presented the Shah with a serious challenge. Not only did his domestic popularity threaten the legitimacy of the Shah's

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[7] Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution.* pg.132-69. and Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 348-65.

already questionable monarchy, but his nationalist ambitions also stripped the Shah's Western supporters of a major source of oil wealth. In 1953, with the United States' growing fear of Soviet influence in Iran, and at the behest of Western oil companies, the American CIA and the British MI6 launched a military coup to overthrow Mossadegh, putting an end to a period of pseudo-democratic politics in Iran.[8] This solidified in most Iranians' minds the idea that the West not only sought to exploit them for their natural resources, but also was willing to do so at the expense of Iran's democratic freedoms and independence – a notion that would resonate for decades to come in Iranian society and among its intelligentsia.[9]

With the Shah back in complete control over the state, he proceeded to eliminate the remaining secular-nationalist supporters of Mossadegh and completely dismantled the pro-Soviet, Marxist Tudeh Party. By destroying or co-opting Iran's two dominant political factions, the Shah created a vacuum that he would futilely attempt to fill with a 'top-down' project of modernization, secularization, and Westernization in the early 1960s. This 'modernization project,' known as the White Revolution (*inqilāb-e sifīd*), aimed to modernize the Iranian state by implementing what the Shah saw as the best path to a supposedly universal Western model of modernity. Using profits from oil wealth, he forcefully redistributed Iranian land from a semi-

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[8] There is some debate about this western-orchestrated coup. Though the CIA and MI6 did play a central role, some have tried to lessen it, suggesting instead that domestic factions – namely a group of clerics associated with Ayatollah Khomeini – were responsible for generating enough genuine public support to launch the coup. I believe more contemporary anti-clerical political motivations are behind pinning the clerics as the primary movers against Mossadegh. Though there was some clerical opposition to Mossadegh that participated in the coup, the fact that the initial coup that was launched by the CIA failed is central to understanding why the clerics would support the second successful coup shortly thereafter. Without the CIA's first failed attempt it would have been very unlikely that the clerics would have willingly launched one themselves. So, to diminish the role the CIA played, especially the money that was used to pay off hesitant opposition figures, would be to ignore well-documented facts. Though I do not agree with the views held in the book, it is an interesting counterargument to the long-established narrative of Western unilateral intervention that warrants a response. Bayandor, Darioush. *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited*.

[9] Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. pg.132-69. and Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*. pg. 348-65.

feudal landowning elite—many of whom made up the majority of the Iranian *majlis*—to a large number of Iranian peasant families, subsidized new businesses and industrialization, modernized Iran's road systems and transportation networks, and provided women with a semblance of emancipation. The United States also provided the Shah with advanced military equipment that he used to equip his Israeli-trained secret police force, the SAVAK (*Sāzmān-e Attelā'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*).[10]

The few remaining supporters of the secular-nationalist and the Marxist political parties were supportive of the Shah's social and economic reforms, though the success of his 'revolution' was marginal at best. For example, though many Iranian peasants were given new land, the Shah's industrialization and urban-focused development policies led to a mass migration from the countryside into the cities, negating the land redistribution policy's benefits for most Iranians. Many of these newly urbanized Iranians brought with them a strong base of religious values, widespread illiteracy, and a desire for industrial employment, making it difficult for the Shah's education reforms and limited industrial subsidies to fully account for an 'ultra-rapid' trend of urbanization.[11]

Though the Shah's modernization plans did produce marginal economic and social benefits, they failed to alleviate persistent economic stagnation for the vast majority of Iranians. Among the first to lash out against the Shah for his questionable modernization project was Ayatollah Khomeini. He vehemently criticized the Shah for his adherence to a Western model of modernity that left little to no room for public expressions of Islam and that produced a fundamental reliance on the West. In 1963, due both to a lack of political alternatives after the

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

Shah's purges of the secular-nationalists and Marxists, and by tactfully playing off of the religious values and economic discontent of the newly urbanized Iranian populations, Khomeini managed to incite a riot against the Shah's Westernized regime. The Shah, operating through the SAVAK, responded ruthlessly, killing hundreds of Iranians and forcing Ayatollah Khomeini into exile. His exile, however, did not negate the effects of the revolt, which created a rapidly expanding and diverse Islamic opposition movement that would become a symbol of resistance against the Shah's regime and its imperialist supporters. [12]

Following the 1963 revolt, the Shah asserted absolute rule for the next fifteen years, cracking down on any semblance of opposition. He especially focused his attention on the already marginalized Shi'ite clerical establishment (*'ulemā*), fearing another popular uprising inspired by Khomeini and his fellow clerics. It was at this time that the secularization aspect of his surge towards Western modernity took on an entirely different meaning. Up to that point in the post-colonial political era, the notion of secularism was well integrated into a popular secular-nationalist discourse. It was understood as a simple absence of religion from the state, though the Shah frequently used some pro-regime clerics to boost his own legitimacy when it suited his interests. After 1963, however, the Shah sought to use secularism as a means of eliminating the political threat of the growing Islamic opposition movement. Under this forced separation of religion from society and the immense SAVAK oversight of religious gatherings, many clerics began to suggest that secularism was un-Islamic, an inherently Western innovation, and had been imposed to facilitate the declining social significance of religion as a whole.[13]

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

Due to the Shah's forceful separation of religion from society, secularism fell in line with a broader post-colonial political narrative of casting off the imperialist West. Especially among the newly urbanized Muslim populations, secularism came to be understood as an inseparable part of Western imperialism and the Shah's repressive regime that it was enabling. Reza Shah's vision of secularism was indeed synthesized from what he saw as a universal Western path to modernity, despite the fact that secular theory in the West itself was never singular in origin or expression.[14] Despite its variable origins, the Shah sought to impose his own narrow vision of Western secularism from the top down, infusing it with his own anti-Islamic authoritarian bent. His hope to coercively replicate the successes of Western society from the top down generated little more than a summary Islamic rejection of secular thought, with the *'ulema* even deeming it pseudo-religious in nature (in an anti-religious, atheistic sense), and therefore always to be at odds with Islamic Truth.[15]

Instead of creating a secular society that allowed for peaceful conflict resolution, religious freedom, and a non-coercive state structure, the Shah blatantly eviscerated religion—and Islam in particular—from every corner of public space. For example, he forcefully removed hijabs from Muslim women who willfully donned them in public; forced Shi'ite clerics to take tests to qualify to wear a turban; threw all members of the *'ulema* out of the schooling systems, replacing them with 'secular,' pro-regime figures; and forced a commingling of the sexes in Iran's school systems.[16] This strengthened the Islamic resistance forces and provided justification for a reactive and summary rejection of secularism in much of Iranian society.

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[14] Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular.* pg.25.

[15] Andresen, Joshua. "Deconstruction, Secularism, and Islam." pg. 375-92.

[16] Keddie, Nikki.*Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution.* pg. 222.

Alongside the expanding Islamic opposition front, calls for nationalist and 'cultural' authenticity in the face of Western secular intervention strengthened, too. The forefather of this nativist intellectual movement was Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the son of a former anti-Shah cleric and a well-educated socialist activist. He manipulated an already popular third-worldist discourse, moving away from the idea of 'neither East nor West,' and specifically focusing on casting out the West, which he believed was a toxic roadblock to Iran's path to modernity. This nativist aversion to Western secularism, though nationalist in origin, was readily taken up within the Islamic discourse as well, because many Iranians saw Islam as an essential part of their national identity.[17]

Islam as a Revolutionary Ideology of Authenticity and Spiritual Liberation 1963 - 1978

Building upon his nativist opposition to the Shah's secularization project, Jalal Al-e Ahmad turned his attention to the Shi'ite '*ulema*, upholding them as the only force that had remained independent of the West under the Shah. His evolving intellectual efforts to remove Western influence from Iranian society was articulated in his well-known book, 'Westoxication' (*gharbzadigī*). In its original Persian, the term *gharbzadigi* carries a vitriolic connotation, meaning more than just Western toxicity, but also suggesting a state of being stricken, afflicted, or beaten down by the West. By suggesting that the Shah's toxic Western-oriented government was attempting to crush Iranian national identity, Al-e Ahmad lent a degree of nationalist legitimacy to the 'unafflicted' Islamic opposition movement.[18]

After Al-e Ahmad's death in 1969, 'Ali Shari'ati moved to the forefront of the Islamic intellectual resistance, drawing on the success of Al-e Ahmad's nationalist vision of the

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[17] Boroujerdi, Mehrzad. *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism.* pg. 68-9.

[18] *Ibid.*

authenticity of Islam. Shari'ati, a Muslim sociologist, professor, and writer has been described as

the most influential pre-revolutionary intellectual that, "did the most to prepare Iranian youth for

revolutionary upheaval."[19] Others have criticized his intellectual legitimacy, lack of academic

and Qur'anic references in his writing, and reactionary outlooks, describing him as a bombastic

pseudo-intellectual that "wrote and spoke more than he ever read."[20] Regardless of his

credentials, Shari'ati did indeed have a meaningful effect on pre-revolutionary Iranian society,

namely for his contribution in transforming the Islamic faith into a politicized ideology. Shari'ati

built this ideological vision of Islam largely on the intellectual efforts of Mohammed Iqbal,

whose vision of Islam he described as, "paying careful attention to this world and the material

needs of humanity, [but] also giv[ing] the human being a heart."[21] Indeed, Shari'ati similarly

presented Shi'a Islam as more than just a faith or a set of personal practices and guidelines, but

as an all-encompassing synthesis of everything from individual to social, political, and economic

Truth. Shi'a Islam, in his view, already included all of the useful aspects of Western theory and

society, though it perfectly corrected all of its imperfections and propensities for economic

excess by attending to the spiritual needs of humanity.[22]

Unlike Al-e Ahmad, who sympathized with the marginalized *'ulema*, Shari'ati sharply

criticized the clerical establishment for allowing Iranians to adhere to an 'opiate' iteration of

Islam that had left them vulnerable to exploitation and oppression from the imperialist West. He

also went so far as to accuse the *'ulema* of polytheism for their usurpation of the Islamic faith to

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[19] Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. pg. 200.

[20] Milani, Abbas. Notes from a brief interview on 1 Nov. 2013.

[21] Shari'ati, Ali. *Iqbal: Manifestation of the Islamic Spirit, Two Contemporary Muslim Views*. pg. 48. Translated by Laleh Bakhtiar from the original Persian.

[22] Rāhnamā, 'Alī. *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*. pg. 247-8.

appease the Shah, who he believed blasphemously forced the subservience of the Iranian people when they were to be submissive to God alone. In place of the '*ulema*'s Islam of inertia, Shari'ati advocated an iconoclastic vision of Islam as an ideology that would allow Iranians, and indeed all people, to reach the 'pinnacle of their human existence.' Through Islam, he believed that the world could overcome the 'myopic consumerism' of the West's ideologies by letting Islam guide them to something greater than their physical existence.[23]

Though Shari'ati was at the forefront of the Islamic intellectual movement that popularized this ideological understanding Islam, his prescriptions were rife with vague and idealistic prescriptions. For example, though he viciously attacked the clerical establishment for 'polytheism,' at the same time he may have implicitly suggested their necessity, saying that Muslims must:

> Make the effort of interpretation [*ijtihad*] and oblige *one group among them* to specialize in the theoretical knowledge of Islam, the deducing of Islamic laws, and the resolution of the problems of society and the events of the time. They should confide to this group social and ideological leadership [*taqlid*] as well as well as the responsibility for the people's destiny [emphasis added].[24]

In this argument, Shari'ati conforms to the tradition of clerical emulation (*taqlīd*) via an exclusive—ostensibly clerical—role for *ijtihad*, though he provides little insight into who these 'leaders of destiny' should be. This evolving intellectual tradition, in all of its vague ideological fervor, anti-Western nationalism, and undefined role for clerical authority, stoked the revolutionary spirits of the newly urbanized public. Iranians only needed what Shari'ati had

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[23] Shari'ati, Ali. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. pg. 111. For a description of Shari'ati's attack against the *'ulema*, see Rāhnamā, 'Alī. *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*. pg. 248-50. For the original text, see Shari'ati, Ali. *Religion vs Religion*.

[24] Shari'ati, Ali. *Tashayyo'-e 'alavi ('Alawi Shi'ism)*. pg. 273-4. 1973. Found in Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. pg. 208.

described as a 'leader of destiny' to help them bring down the Shah's regime and all the fallacious Western theories it was built upon.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the man who would become such a 'leader of destiny' for millions of Iranians in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, remained persistent in his opposition to the Shah's regime from exile in Iraq. In 1971, he began to devise a new style of Islamic governance that was neither a fully democratic republic nor a dictatorship. His vision for an Islamic state would be overseen by the Shi'ite *ulema*, who he believed were best qualified to lead a community of believers in Islamic law and hermeneutics, though the degree and breadth of power they were to hold was never clearly circumscribed. In his book entitled *Islamic Government (ḥukūmat-e islamī)*, he articulated an idea of clerical political leadership that he called 'Guardianship of the Jurists' (*velāyat-e faqīh*). *Velayat-e faqih* was based on the idea that because the twelfth Shi'ite Imam is in Occultation that the community of believers needed to place their trust in a pious group of jurists (*faqīh)* to guide them in social, political, and legal matters.[25]

Despite the warnings of numerous Ayatollahs and the support of nearly no one in the clerical establishment, Khomeini also sought to combine this juridical position of a *faqih* with the traditional Shi'ite role of *marja'-e taqlīd*. *Marja'-e taqlid*, meaning 'Source of Emulation,' is a well-established tradition whereby a high ranking member of the *ulema* is selected as a *marja'*, who serves as a leading authority in religious matters, to which the other members of the *ulema* and all believers look for guidance. By combining this *faqih* and *marja'* role into his theory of *velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini's vision for a system of Islamic governance led by a single figure had great potential for continued authoritarian governance in Iran. Although Khomeini

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[25] Milani, Mohsen M. "The Transformation of the Velayat-e Faqih Institution: From Khomeini to Khamenei."pg.176-77.

never publically articulated the idea of *velayat-e faqih* until after the 1978-79 revolution, his popularity among many Iranians grew significantly throughout the 1970s. This popularity, however, can be mostly attributed to his persistent voice of charismatic opposition against the Shah and not necessarily for his political theories or Islamic intellectualism. Despite his relative silence in the intellectual discourse at the time, his political theorization would eventually fit well into Shari'ati and Al-e Ahmad's intellectual discourse that had paved the way towards a popularly-supported Islamic transition to power. The role for the clerical establishment within that Islamic political system, however, would be deeply contested for years to come.[26]

Despite the mounting opposition of this Islamically-oriented social and intellectual movement, the Shah continued his top-down modernization program. A drastic increase in state oil revenue throughout the 1970s and rapid urbanization rates produced 'uneven and erratic' levels of economic growth, causing existing class disparities to become more pronounced. Many Iranians believed that they were witnessing the destruction of social justice at the hands of Western-oriented economic growth and all of its inherent excess. Indeed, many of these fears of excess were substantiated by the Shah's wasteful spending on the most advanced military equipment and lavish national monuments while many poor Iranians lacked sufficient governmental support structures to ease increasing levels of urban poverty. This served to bolster Khomeini's popularity among marginalized Marxist groups, too, as his rhetoric deftly took up hints of a class struggle at the behest of one of Shari'ati's former colleagues and Khomeini's greatest supporter—Ayatollah Mutahhari.[27]

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[26] *Ibid.* and Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg.85-91.

[27] Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After.* pg. 246-51; 257. Ayatollah Muthhari was arguably one of the most influential figures behind Khomeini's idea of *velyat-e faqih.* He has been described as the 'theoretician' of the Islamic Revolution, but was assassinated during the revolution itself by radical anti-clerical elements within Iran. His biography provides a useful discussion of his influence on Ayatollah Khomeini's *velyat-e faqih* and ideas for an

Just before the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in late 1977, the Islamic intellectual and social movement was as diverse as the Iranian nation that it represented. These various interest groups, however, were united in their mutual opposition to the Shah under a vaguely-defined banner of ideological Islam that drew from the intellectual efforts of Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati. Khomeini's political prowess, charismatic personality, and religious credentials allowed him to wrangle various divergent popular sentiments into this united front, though he intentionally left a well-defined role for Islamic governance and the clerical establishment out of his publicized rhetoric. Many left-leaning and non-religious Iranians could appreciate the moral dimension that Islam lent to their revolutionary aspirations, though many thoroughly underestimated the amount of political power that an Islamization of the opposition front would provide an already well organized clerical establishment.

Though its specifics remained undefined, three dominant features of this nebulous Islamic social and intellectual opposition movement were: (1) a nativist insistence on the authenticity of 'Iranian culture' and the necessity to excise the imperialist West from society and politics, (2) an ideological interpretation of Islam as a perfect political theory that encompassed every aspect of life from social interactions to economic and political decisions, and (3) a necessary role for 'true Muslims' to interpret Islamic Truth in order to spiritually remedy the ills of the post-colonial world—a role that would ostensibly be best played by the clerical establishment.

Islamic government. It can be found in Davari, Mahmood T. *The Political Thought of Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State*.

The Islamic Revolution: Post-Colonial Islamic Intellectualism in Action 1977 - 1989

In late 1977, the Shah and his regime felt confident in their absolute control. He had

consolidated his power, imprisoning, exiling, or assassinating every source of opposition to his

power—including both Ali Shari'ati and Khomeini's son, Mustafa Khomeini. As a reflection of

his confidence, the Shah decided to publish an article in the Iranian newspaper, *Etela'at*, that

many assume was a response to the increasingly vitriolic commentary of Ayatollah Khomeini

after the death of his son. The article slandered Khomeini's reputation as the preeminent Shi'ite

marja' and sparked an uproar in the religious city of Qom. This initial wave of violently

suppressed protests expanded over the next few months and was met with mixed responses from

the Shah and the members of his regime. Initially, the Shah appeared unfazed by the popular

mobilizations, but divided members of his government responded in opposite and

counterproductive directions in lieu of an authoritative response from the Shah himself. Some

wanted to respond favorably to the protests, issuing further promises of reform and conciliations

while others encouraged the Shah to crack down on the protestors without remorse.[28]

The division in his government reflected the Shah's own vacillations throughout 1978,

which served strengthened the opposition movement against him. On the one hand he appeared

weak and desperately out of touch by attempting to reason with 'his people,' who in fact viewed

him as quite distanced from reality and in the back pocket of the Western imperialists. On the

other hand, he appeared frightened and insecure, frequently overreacting to minor protests with

excessive violence. Due to the traditional Shi'ite practice of publically mourning an individual's

death forty days after their passing (*chihilum*), the Shah's violent crackdowns exponentially

expanded the protests, which often erupted at these mourning ceremonies. As another result of

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[28] *Ibid.* pg. 248-56.

his excessive brutality, the Shah's regime was blamed for a deadly fire that killed 400 Iranians at 'Cinema Rex' in the city of Abadan. Though the fire was started by a radical religious group, believable rumors that the SAVAK had started the fire and locked the people inside circulated quickly.[29]

Protests continued to expand across the country and the Shah began making desperate conciliatory efforts, including implementing a civilian-led government under a hastily appointed prime minister, Shapur Baktiar. By the end of 1978, however, the Shah had completely lost control of his state and no amount of conciliation would return it to him. With the entire country gripped by protest and increasing divisions within the military, the Shah fled Iran in January 1979, and the entire Pahlavi state collapsed the following month. Shortly thereafter, a national referendum was held and the decision to turn Iran into an Islamic republic was passed by a landslide popular vote. The Shah had been ousted, the imperialist West had been utterly cast out with him, and both were replaced the anticipated perfection of Islamic ideology.[30]

Though the diverse groups that had converged under Khomeini's leadership had been united in their desire to overthrow the Shah, their visions for what the Islamic Republic should look like after the Shah's departure differed significantly. There were two primary groups within the Islamic movement that came to the fore in 1979. The first group, called the 'republican Islamists' or 'liberal Islamists,' foresaw their Islamic state as a democratic republic that should be guided by loosely-enforced moral principles, was neither aligned with the 'East nor West,' and provided little room for clerical political intervention. The second group, called the

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[29] *Ibid.* pg. 260-63. and Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 362-3.

[30] Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 367-8.

'*Maktabis,*'[31] or 'authoritarian Islamists' were largely dominated by the clergy, who instead sought to establish a republic that was overseen by the '*ulema* with a less fluid vision of Islamic moral principles.[32]

The divisions between these groups, who had been unified in their mutual opposition to the Shah, intensified in a struggle for the identity of the Islamic Republic. As the state apparatus under the temporary leadership of the republican, Mehdi Bazarghan, struggled to centralize authority, the pro-clerical camp gained significant coercive power through their control of the legal institutions, the Revolutionary Guard paramilitary force (*pasdārān*), and the security forces. These pro-clerical Islamists essentially created a 'state within a state,' controlling the mechanisms of force and coercion while the republicans only controlled parliamentary and bureaucratic positions. Most importantly, however, the pro-clerical Islamists maintained the support of a majority of Iranians, who had largely maintained rural outlooks, were semi-literate, and maintained deep sense of religiosity throughout the 1970s. Many of these recently urbanized individuals were politically reactive and supported only those individuals that could effectively communicate with them, who, at that time, was still Ayatollah Khomeini.[33]

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[31] The term *maktabi* is drawn from the Arabic and Persian word for book (*kitāb*), suggesting that these individuals had a 'by the book' doctrinal view of Islamic principles.

[32] The divergence in terminology used to describe these two groups is curious. I believe that for the first group, 'republican Islamists' is the most apt description as these individuals were, by and large, dedicated to establishing an Islamically infused democratic republic. The term 'liberal' in my mind suggests a more western-oriented philosophy, though in reality, they were more interested in curbing the power of the '*ulema* through a democratic state rather than adhering to some normative understanding of Western liberalism. This collection of 'republicans' was composed of many different Islamic Marxists, leftists, and other disparate pro-democratic groups. The second group's descriptions as '*maktabis*' and 'authoritarian Islamists' is also misleading. Though many of these individuals did hold a stricter interpretation of Islamic principles that they sought to institutionalized through coercion if need be, they were mostly interested in securing a position for the '*ulema* in the new state. I also want to shy away from describing these pro-clerical Islamists as *velayatis*, becuase Khomeini's idea of *velayat-e faqih* remained unarticulated at this early stage in the revolution. It is more important, therefore, to view this as a division over the role for the '*ulema* in the emerging republic, and less about their liberal or authoritarian bent. Regardless, the terms 'republican Islamist' and 'authoritarian Islamist can be found in Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After.* pg. 281. The terms 'liberal Islamist' and '*maktabi*' can be found in Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 369-70.

Khomeini sought to stem the growing anarchy, calling for a stop to ongoing protests and attempting to calm the masses through a 'controlled bloodletting' of the remaining members of the Pahlavi state. Nevertheless, the continued political polarization, fear of anarchy, and rampant assassination squads led to an increasingly authoritarian atmosphere both in the state and in the streets that was largely out of Khomeini's control. In November 1979, despite Khomeini's initial warnings against it, a group of zealous Iranian students attacked the United States embassy in Tehran, initiating the 444 day Iranian hostage crisis. This event proved remarkable for two reasons: First, it allowed Khomeini to unite many of the infighting political groups by focusing their attention on the 'Great Satan'—the United States—instead of each other. With public attention diverted, it also allowed him to more fully consolidate his authority, redrafting the constitution in order to institutionalize his role as the leader of the revolution through the idea of *velayat-e faqih*. He argued that in order for the authority of the *faqih* to be fully institutionalized, it had to rest in the hands of a single figure. The actual responsibilities of his position as *faqih* remained entirely vague and malleable, however.[34]

Second, the hostage crisis represented the utter casting out of the imperialist West from Iran, something that would draw great admiration from other post-colonially-fixated Middle Eastern nations. This victory for a 'third way' of Islam outside of the 'East and West' Cold War binaries inspired Muslims, Marxists, and third worldists alike, looking to Iran's great victory over the West as a testament to the power of nationalist and Islamic authenticity. Most importantly, however, the revolution in Iran empowered Islamic organizations, which could

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[33] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 370; Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After.* pg. 281; and Milani, Mohsen M. "The Transformation of the Velayat-e Faqih Institution: From Khomeini to Khamenei."pg.179.

[34] Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After.* pg. 268-82.

begin to see themselves as political leaders instead of just opposition figures.[35] Looking for a way to avoid a similar unrest within his newly-established secular Ba'athist regime, Saddam Hussein turned his attention to the Islamic Republic, too. Acting both from a fear of the Islamic Revolution spilling over into the Shi'ite majority in Iraq and seeing a momentous opportunity to strike a longtime regional rival while its state and society was in a period of upheaval and transition, Saddam launched an invasion against the Islamic Republic in September 1980.

The initial stages of the invasion were marked by minimal Iranian opposition to the Iraqi incursion. Instead of destabilizing the newly-established Iranian regime, however, Saddam's attack actually served to strengthen Khomeini's influence and power. The invasion crisis allowed a great deal of totalitarian government behavior to be overlooked for the sake of maintaining a cohesive defense of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini took this opportunity to consolidate the absolute power of the clerical government with him at the helm, launching a campaign of political and intellectual cleansing against his domestic opponents. Throughout 1981, Khomeini's regime executed several thousand leftist republican Islamists, purging Iran of an entire tradition of anti-clerical and pro-democratic students, intellectuals, and politicians.[36]

A strict interpretation of the revolutionary discourse of Islam as a perfect and liberating ideology had been effectively solidified under Khomeini's leadership and he now called upon all true Islamic revolutionaries to defend the Republic with the sanctity of Islam at their back. With the domestic 'threat' neutralized and the hostage crisis coming to an end, Iraq proved a useful focus for all of the revolutionary zeal still circulating in Iranian society. The revolutionary

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[35] Parvaz, D. "Iran 1979: A Revolution That Shook the World." Interview with Mehrzad Boroujerdi, a professor of political science at Syracuse University.

[36] Ansari, Ali. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After.* pg. 290-94 and Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 374.

guard, military, and the newly formed 'popular mobilization' militia (*basīj*), turned their full attention to the Iraqi invasion force, pushing Saddam back to the border and retaking the major city of Khorramshar in 1982. For many Iranians, this victory proved to be a decisive substantiation of the sanctity and righteousness of their war for Islamic preservation.[37]

In 1982, Khomeini and his government, motivated by what many believed to be an unstoppable force of righteousness, decided to go on the offensive in Iraq to claim the holy Shi'ite cities of Karbala and Najaf for the Revolution and liberate Iraq's majority Shi'ite population from Saddam's secular dictatorship. The Iranian government began to hold domestic rallies, changing their 'sacred defense' narrative into a mass-recruitment campaign of new 'martyrs,' whose sacrifice would be invaluable to the revolutionary cause. Though Khomeini's regime stoked the traditional Shi'ite guilt for not having sacrificed themselves with Imam Hussein in Iraq, created a cult of martyrdom that mobilized a generation of young Iranians by elevating them to a level of great societal importance, and directed all of the nation's revolutionary Islamic fervor at the Iraqis, both he and his Islamic ideology would fail to achieve victory or any meaningful gain during the war.[38]

During the ensuing eight year Iran-Iraq War, missiles were exchanged between the nations' major cities, leading to billions of dollars in infrastructural damage and excessive civilian casualties. Hundreds of thousands of young Iranian men were killed in mass wave attacks and human landmine clearing tactics, with casualties increasing drastically when Iraq began to deploy chemical weapons on the battlefield in 1986. The United States, still enraged by the hostage crisis, also fed a continuous supply of modern armaments to the Iraqi state while

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[37] *Ibid.*

[38] Peterson, Scott. *Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran – A Journey Behind the Headlines.* pg. 81-115.

enforcing sanctions against Iran, crippling their already strained economy and making it difficult for them to secure their own modern armaments. [39]

After nearly eight years of costly stalemate, Khomeini emerged after submitting to a UN-sanctioned ceasefire in 1988 with little more to show than an economy in a state of disrepair and an unmoved border with Iraq that was littered with the corpses of a generation of idealistic revolutionaries. Because Khomeini had so inseparably linked revolutionary Islamic ideology with the war effort, a national weariness with the war was also largely reflected in public opinions about the Islamic ideology on which the clerical government drew its legitimacy. By the end of 1988, revolutionary dynamism had subsided and Khomeini faced an overwhelming task of reasserting his interpretation of Islamic governance. When he passed away in 1989, however, an opportunity arose for the formerly marginalized pragmatists and leftists of the decimated republican Islamist camp to help redefine the Islamic identity of their Republic.

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[39] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 376.

Chapter Two – Historical Framework Part Two: Post-Authoritarian Secular and Islamic Thought in Iran 1989 – 2004

Chapter two presents the second portion of a historical framework through which to understand the Islamization of secularism in Iran. This post-authoritarian theoretical era began in 1989 after the Iran-Iraq War, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the winding down of the Cold War, which created a domestic and international context that was conducive to the creation of new theories. Indeed, during the early 1990s, there was a stark discursive shift away from ideological Islam and secularism that had dominated the post-colonial theoretical era and towards a narrative of democratic reform. The first portion of this chapter discusses the evolving rift in Iranian politics between the pro-clerical conservatives and pragmatists and the anti-clerical leftists. This pro- and anti-clerical divide would transform again by the beginning of 1997, with the pragmatist Islamists shifting their alliances to a redefined anti-clerical leftist group, thus creating the political foundation of the Iranian Reform Movement. The latter half of this section focuses on the intellectuals within that anti-clerical reform movement and their development of the democratic theory of Islamic secularism.

Khamene'i, Rafsanjani, and the Reconstruction of the Islamic Republic 1989 - 1997

Khomeini's death in 1989 created a power vacuum again in Iranian politics. He left no indication as to who would be his successor as the leader of the Islamic Republic (*rahbar*), though the constitution mandated that the *rahbar* be chosen from among the highest ranking *marja'iyyat* (plural for *marja'*). The conservative elite that controlled the Islamic government, however, did not find any of the *marja'iyyat* politically suitable to their interests to hold this position. Following Ayatollah Montazeri's ascendance to Khomeini's former position as the preeminent *marja'*, the conservative leadership deftly pointed out that he had resigned as

Khomeini's disciple and rightful successor after he publically criticized some of Khomeini's decisions towards the end of his life. With Iranian society in a state of mourning and disbelief after Khomeini's death, political infighting increasing over the empty role of *rahbar,* and no 'suitable' *marja'* to fill the position, an alliance between the conservative and pragmatist Islamist elite began to form.[40]

This alliance, led by Hujatolislam Ali Khamene'i and Iran's newly-elected president, Akbar Rafsanjani, issued a referendum to redraft the constitution—an undertaking that was widely supported in the disillusioning wake of the Iran-Iraq War. They implemented three major changes to the structure of the state, none of which meaningfully responded to the disappointment Iranians felt towards their Islamic state after the war, but rather, served the alliance's political interests. First, they removed the position of Prime Minister, effectively purging leftist political influence from the Iranian state. The role of prime minister was frequently held by this leftist camp, a group that comprised many of Iran's former republican Islamists, secular-nationalists, and socialists. During this period, the leftists had lost much of their sway with the Iranian people, too, as they had pursued a state-based economic strategy throughout the Iran-Iraq War that was largely unsuccessful. By removing this position of Prime Minister, Rafsanjani and Khamene'i greatly increased the power of Iranian presidency and purged the anti-clerical leftists from politics yet again.[41]

Second, their redraft of the constitution removed the requirement for the *rahbar* to be a *marja'-e taqlid*, allowing for lower-ranking clerics to serve as *rahbar* and providing the ruling

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[40] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 377-81.

[41] *Ibid.* and Matin-Asgari, Afshin. "The Iranian Left's Twentieth-Century Odyssey." in Cronin, Stephanie, and University of London. *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left*. pg. 49-50.

elite with a wider range of individuals to choose from at their discretion. With this ruling,

Hujatolislam Ali Khamene'i was selected by the conservative-dominated Guardian Council

(*shūrā-ye negahbān-e qānun-e assāssī*) as the next *rahbar* and was quickly promoted to the rank

of Ayatollah. [42] Khamene'i's religious credentials were nowhere near sufficient to have him

considered to be a *marja',* much less an Ayatollah, causing his religious leadership to be

questioned by both higher-ranking clerics and Iranians alike. As a further complication, because

Khamene'i was not a *marja'* all believers did not have to adhere to his guidance as *rahbar,* but

could look instead to higher-ranking clerics for guidance. This allowed room for discrepancies to

arise between the official state rulings and those of other Shi'ite clerics that outranked

Khamene'i. Khamene'i, therefore, required something more to legitimize his position as

rahbar.[43]

The final amendment to the constitution would provide Khamene'i with the level of

further control that his lacking religious credentials necessitated. He redefined the foundation of

the Islamic Republic from *velayat-e faqih* to *velayat-e mutlaq-e faqih*, meaning Absolute

Jurisistconsult. Though Khomeini had presented this idea in the early stages of his theorization

about *velayat-e faqih,* it was never implemented because he had initially intended to create a

relatively democratic 'guardianship,' not an authoritarian state. After Khomeni's death, however,

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[42] The position of *hujatolislam* within the clerical establishment is a level below that of Ayatollah and far below the highest rank an Ayatollah can achieve – *Marja'-e Taqlid.* Khamenei was quickly promoted to Ayatollah after assuming leadership of the Islamic Republic, but his religious credentials were severely lacking and required him to do a great amount of appeasement of clerics who outranked him. He also removed himself from Iran's fractional politics, trying to avoid any unnecessary criticism to his already questionable leadership. This conferred great power and authority to the Presidency under Rafsanjani, allowing him relative freedom of action. As a second note, the Guardian Council is a body of clerics that is responsible for choosing and dismissing, if necessary, the *rahbar.* It is composed of six high-ranking clerics that are elected by the parliament, though the degree to which they represent the Iranian people through this electoral system is limited, as their positions of power and the tradition of *taqlid* gives them power to dictate Islamic law and guidance as they see fit.

[43] Milani, Mohsen M. "The Transformation of the Velayat-e Faqih Institution: From Khomeini to Khamenei." pg. 175.

velayat-e mutlaq-e faqih proved useful to ensure Khamene'i's authority over other clerics to compensate for his questionable religious credentials. This addition of 'absolute' (*muṭlaq*) to his guardianship meant that he had the final word in everything religious, judicial, social, and economic in the Islamic Republic. Though it did not confer a level of infallibility upon his decisions, something reserved for the Shi'ite Imams alone, it did suggest that Khamene'i's authority was not conditional or restricted (*muqayyid*), but all-encompassing. This meant that as the supreme leader, he could 'suspend' the rulings of other clerics if he deemed that a different course of action would better serve Islam as a whole.[44]

During this constitutional consolidation of conservative power, President Rafsanjani successfully led the reconstruction of Iran after the devastation of the Iran-Iraq War. He oversaw the gradual rebuilding of Iran's cities, building parks, recreation areas, concert halls, and other major civic centers that allowed for a high degree of public interaction and commingling of the sexes in safe and religiously-acceptable settings. There was also a major population boom following the revolution, and by the end of the 1990s, Iran's population would be twice what it was in 1979, creating a strain on Iran's already fragile economy. Though Rafsanjani was unable to fully revive the economy, due in large part to this population boom and the Western embargoes that remained in effect since 1979, he did successfully privatize some sectors of the state, providing new opportunities for business and industry.[45]

In the early 1990s during this reconstruction period, Mohammad Khatami, who would go on to win the presidency in 1997, was the minister of Islamic Guidance. As minister, he

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[44] Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 105-7.

[45] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 377-81.; Bayat, Asef. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post- Islamist Turn.* pg. 56-7.; and Mashayekhi, Mehrdad. "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran." pg. 287.

controlled the degree of 'cultural freedom' Iranians had in publications, art, theater, movies, and music. With the approval of Rafsanjani, Khatami eased restrictions on cultural modes of expression, allowing for a circulation of new ideas and expectations about democracy and civil society via the press and cinema. Due both their waning support within Iranian society and the regime's persistent political purges, the leftists were forced to regroup and rethink their political stance. This easing of restrictions provided them with an opportunity to reshape their political platform away from a focus on state-based economics, turning instead to democratic reform, freedom of expression, and civil rights to appeal to a new generation of Iranians, who were at the heart of this brief period of free expression. Despite Khatami's removal from his position of Minister of Islamic Guidance in 1992, this moment of cultural openness created a path to an innovative reform-based political platform for the leftists and an expectation of greater political accountability and freedoms within civil society.[46]

The population boom in Iran after the revolution did strain the country's economy, but it also led to a vast increase in the number of educated individuals in urban city centers. In 1979, the number of students in Iran's university system numbered about 175,000. This figure did not change very much throughout the eight year Iran-Iraq War, but in the early 1990s, Iran's university population shot up to over 1.25 million students. To account for this vast increase, reconstruction efforts also included a focus on expanding the number of state-run higher education institutions in Iran from 26 at the time of the revolution to 87 by 1997. Private sector 'Islamic University' systems also sprung up to complement the state's efforts, establishing more than 100 new religious universities throughout the 1990s. This drastic increase of both men and,

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[46]Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution.* pg. 266-7.

most notably, women, attending university added to an intensifying atmosphere of new expectations for democracy, civil rights, and pragmatism. [47]

This population of students flooding the university systems was largely made up of Iran's new youthful generation, who were too young to remember the revolution and numbered approximately half of the entire population by the mid-1990s. These young people were at odds with the invasive religious restrictions that the state had put on them in the name of an Islamic Revolution, in which they had played no role. Because they had grown up during the Iran-Iraq War, too, most of what they knew of the Islamic Republic was based on its failures on the battlefield and pervasive popular sentiments of despair and disenchantment with revolutionary Islamic ideology. As a result, many of Iran's youth turned to 'degenerate' behavior as a means of opposition to the Islamic government and the omnipotent moral police. Prostitution, drug addiction, and a wide-spread refusal to participate in religious practice were common place among this new generation as a means of escaping what they believed to be a hopeless political and social situation.[48]

In spite of such a drastic outpouring of rebellious and anti-religious behavior, there was not a loss of religious sentiment or interest in Islamic theology among many of them. Rather, Iranian youths shared a desire for a more inclusive vision of Islam that allowed them to be religious, hold diverse political views, and enjoy whatever movies, books, and music they wanted. They called this new vision of Islam the 'Religion of Life' (*dīn-e zindigī*), a more relaxed combination of faith, individual freedom, and fun that was inconsistent with the conservative government's plan to produce a dutiful generation of 'young true Muslims' that

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[47] Mashayekhi, Mehrdad. "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran." pg. 287-88.

[48] Bayat, Asef. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn.* pg. 59-65.

adhered to the revolutionary values of cultural authenticity, anti-imperialism, and Islamic justice.[49]

The revolutionary paradigm had shifted by the mid-1990s, and nearly 80 percent of Iran's youth were either completely opposed or indifferent to the Shi'ite clergy and the conservative Islamic state. A new wave of religious intellectuals, who had politically associated themselves with the reform movement, had an immense opportunity to reach out to these unrepresented young people. These lay and clerical intellectuals did precisely that, establishing a theological basis for this *din-e zindigi* that blended a more tolerant version of Islam with democratic and even secular political theories. Indeed, from 1992 to 1997, youthful attendance at academic lectures by this group of religious intellectuals far surpassed state-led religious gatherings.[50]

A unified 'Islamic Feminist' movement also emerged in the 1990s that complemented the democratic and human rights demands of Iran's growing civil society. This feminist movement focused on pragmatism and achieving attainable results, pushing political ideology and religious differences aside for the sake of women's rights. For example, instead of trying to overturn the requirement for all women to wear a veil, they sought to introduce new, more fashionable veil options. They also fought for equal opportunities in university systems and the workforce for women of all social classes. The emergence of this pragmatic discourse within the feminist movement, coupled with the vast increase in well-educated students of both genders attending universities, fostered a new class of politically active and cosmopolitan young men and women. With the 1997 presidential elections approaching, the candidate who could relate best to a narrative of pragmatism and the expectations of greater political openness and human rights

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[49] *Ibid.* pg. 61; 63.

[50] *Ibid.* pg. 86-7.

circulating around university campuses and intellectual circles, would have a good chance at claiming the presidency.[51]

Khatami's Election and the Rise of the Iranian Reform Movement 1997 - 2004

Mohammad Khatami, who retained much of his popularity for easing the restrictions on modes of cultural expression in the 1990s, emerged as the the presidential candidate representing the new Iranian left in 1997. His campaign reached out to women and young voters alike, focusing on democratic reform, civil rights, relaxing restrictions on the media, and allowing civil society to freely expand once again. It was at this time that the Iranian left under Khatami's political leadership became known as the reformists, uniting under his political promises for democratic reform and relaxation of government restrictions. The 1997 elections in Iran shocked both the conservative establishment and this new reformist party, with an unprecedented 80 percent voter turnout. Iran's youthful population made its voice heard, with over two thirds of the overall vote going to Mohammad Khatami.[52]

Khatami's unexpected election would prove to be a momentous opportunity to implement change before the conservative establishment and Ayatollah Khamene'i could fully control it. Among the first things Khatami did was reopen the press and media, allowing the reformist intellectuals and journalists to articulate their ideas for change in hopes of 'reigniting the fading revolution' for a new generation of Iranians. Despite the conservative establishment's best efforts to reign this in—frequently through the use of brutality, assassinations, and warnings of the toxic incursion of Western cultural imperialism—the spread of democratic plans for reform with Islam at their core spread rapidly through the university campuses, youth-based intellectual

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[51] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 381.

[52] *Ibid.* pg. 382.

circles, and reformist publications. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, the reformists won the majority of seats, too, placing this grassroots political movement for democratic and religious reform in control of two of the three branches of the Iranian government.[53]

The third branch of the Islamic Republic, however, remained fully in control of Khamene'i and the conservative establishment. Khamene'i acted as commander in chief of the armed forces and the *basij* militias, controlled the judiciary and the guardian council, and had essentially bought off the loyalty of the Revolutionary Guard (*pasdaran*) during the reconstruction period, giving them private ownership over large portions of Iran's oil and business sectors. With absolute control of the state mechanisms of coercion, Khamene'i could imprison, execute, and dismiss members of the reform movement at his discretion. Though the conservatives unequivocally lost every popular election, they still managed to receive ten to twenty percent of the vote, giving them control over a "potent, militant, and violent social base," that they could use to intimidate and mobilize against the reform movement in the streets if necessary.[54]

The Reflexive Revivalists and the Reconceptualization of Secularism

With his absolute power over the judicial system and military branches, Ayatollah Khamene'i could limit the political mobility of the reform movement within the state apparatus and could keep popular demands for freedom of self-expression at bay with constant oversight from his *basij* militias and the *pasdaran*. What he feared most, however, was the reform movement's intellectuals, many of whom were well versed in Islamic theology, had impeccable

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[53] *Ibid.* pg. 383. and Peterson, Scott. *Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran – A Journey Behind the Headlines*. pg. 116 - 25.

[54] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History.* pg. 384.

revolutionary credentials, and appealed to a new generation of Iranians and their demands for freedom and democracy. The most prominent among these intellectuals was 'Abdolkarim Soroush, who has been deemed by some to be the "Martin Luther of Shi'a Islam."[55] Soroush studied Islamic theology, philosophy, and history both in Iran and Europe and returned to Iran during the revolution to help the new government establish curriculums across the expanding university system. He also taught at Tehran University where he played a significant role in disseminating his new vision of Islamic, democratic, and even secular political theories to the burgeoning student populations. He was thrown out of the university in 1996 by Khamene'i's regime, however, and has since then spent much of his time abroad, continuing to press for reform in Iran.[56] Soroush, along with fellow professor and mid-ranking cleric Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari, inaugurated a trend of Islamic intellectual reform that provided the theological base for the reform movement's democratic aspirations and young Iranian's new expectations of Islam as *din-e zindigi*.

Supporting the religious reformers' theological work with Islam and democracy was another group of intellectuals called the secular-modernists. This group was made up of theorists such as Akbar Ganji, probably the most famous reformist journalist and modern secular intellectual, and Abbas Milani, an author on Persian modernism, professor, and pro-democracy activist. It was these individuals that were responsible for shifting the reform movement's understanding of secularism away from the West-centric aspirations of secular mimicry during the Shah era and the subsequent demonization of it as 'culturally inauthentic' during the revolution and throughout the post-colonial political era. They also presented the idea of

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[55] Wright, Robin. "Abdolkarim Soroush." pg.1 and Sadri, Mahmoud. "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar." pg.257.

[56] Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. pg. 155-6.

'modernity' as a continuous adaptation of existing traditions—including Islam—to confront

present circumstances.[57]

This combined group of new intellectuals was unique in their outlook. They were true

reformers in the sense that they did not advocate for an overthrow of the Iranian regime or the

Islamic Revolution from which it drew its legitimacy, but rather, they sought to revive the

revolution through new Islamic, democratic, and secular theories. Beyond simply being

reformers, however, these intellectuals are more aptly described as 'reflexive revivalists.' They

were reflexive in that they no longer blamed the West or the outside world for their domestic

conditions. Instead, they looked inwards, drawing on their own historical experiences throughout

the post-colonial era to establish a pragmatic and indigenous vision of Islamic and secular

democracy for a post-authoritarian Iran. They were revivalists in the sense that they did not seek

to fundamentally change Islamic truth, but focused instead on questioning Islamic exegesis and

drawing a line of distinction between fallible human knowledge and infallible Islamic Truth.[58]

Through their collective efforts, these reflexive revivalists undertook an 'Islamization of

secularism' to produce a multi-faceted secular and religious democratic theory that represented,

on an intellectual level, the political activity of Khatami's reform movement and its vast support

structure among Iran's female and youth populations.

Their conception of a secular state, however, must not be understood as Soroush says in

terms of, "a deliberate effort to exclude religion from worldly affairs,"[59] as it had been

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[57] Milani, Abbas. *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran*. pg. 16. and Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. pg. 61; 181; 183.

[58] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. xix.

[59] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. 54.

throughout the post-colonial era, but rather, "as a regime in whose polity no values and rules are

beyond human appraisal and verification and in which no protocol, status, position, or ordinance

is above public scrutiny."[60] Similarly, this secular state according to Akbar Ganji is,

"ideologically neutral…[and one in which] the state does not have the right to interfere with

religion, but religion, like any other institution in civil society, can be involved in ongoing

politics and publically express its own criticisms."[61]

There is very little divergence between the secular-modernist and religious reformers'

understandings of secular theory. Both groups focus resoundingly on some sort of governmental

neutrality with regards to ideology that ensures political agency is in the hands of the governed

and not a restrictive political or religious ideology. Secularism, in their view, was an inseparable

aspect of any democratic society, as it ensured the right of individuals to change their state's

structure over time.[62] Soroush believed that this change over time was necessary because human

political and social constructs—government itself, for example—are fundamentally fallible and

fluid. Religion, however, can enter into this secular system, he believed, by means of its people.

He said that in this secular and religious society, "it is not religion per se that arbitrates, but some

understanding of religion which is, in turn, changing, rational, and in harmony with the

consensual and accepted extra religious criteria."[63] This extra religious criteria, or 'overlapping

consensus,' that he mentions here is the non-coercive democratic system itself that is

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[60] *Ibid.* pg. 60.

[61] Ganji, Akbar. *Manifest-e Jomhuri-khahi.* (Republican Manifesto). pg. 16. Translated from original Persian by James Glassman.
"... از نظر ایدئولوژیک بی طرف است... دولت حق دخالت در دین را ندارد ولی دین مثل هر نهاد دیگر جامعه مدنی می تواند در سیاست جاری دخالت کند و انتقادات خود را علناً بیان کند."

[62] Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2008. pg. 206-7. Print.

[63] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. 132.

fundamentally representative of and responsive to the popular will. If religion is an aspect of that popular will, it can influence and operate within a secular state.

Along similar lines, mid-ranking cleric, Mohammad Shabestari suggested that, God has decreed to "let the world be the world" and that the faithful must know "to what extent they can expect religion to solve their secular problems," because, he continues, "it is not perfection for religion to function as a substitute for science, technology, and human deliberation." Democracy and secularism are human social constructs, he says, and:

> cannot be derived from the meaning of faith or the religious texts. However, since social realities demand such a form of government, people of faith must forge a relationship with this reality, reconcile themselves with its requirements, and follow a faithful life along its riverbed.[64]

Soroush added to this, suggesting that this 'social reality' that necessitates secularism was simply to prevent ideological coercion from eroding the foundations of democracy. "The only thing that is required of a secular democracy" he said, "is tolerance of different points of view and their advocates." This 'secular tolerance' would act as the underlying foundation of democracy and adhering to it would not require believers to renounce their own beliefs, but rather would be a "concern [of individual] believers" and their ability to accept different viewpoints from their own.[65]

To briefly summarize, secularism as a theoretical tradition has undergone drastic changes since the post-colonial era in Iran. During the post-colonial theoretical era, it was interpreted by most Iranians as a forceful separation of religion from the state. This was substantiated by the

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[64] Shabestari, Mohammad. *Iman va Azadi*, (Faith and Freedom). pg. 67; 134; 192. quoted in Sadri, Mahmoud. "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar." pg.261-2.

[65] Soroush, ʻAbdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam :Essential Writings of ʻAbdolkarim Soroush*. pg.138.

coercive secularization program between 1963 and 1977 under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi for the purpose of maintaining his own political power. Such a forceful marginalization of religion bred a monolithic nativist rejection of secularism as a purely Western and inherently un-Islamic theory that persisted in the popular discourse until the early 1990s. During the post-authoritarian political era, however, secularism was reinterpreted by reflexive revivalist intellectuals. They produced a multifaceted secular and religious democratic theory that advocated for a neutral state apparatus that would allow religion and extra-religious traditions to peacefully intermingle and engage in critical discussion with one another.

The idea of a secular democracy was pragmatically indigenized by these intellectuals to produce what secular-modernist Abbas Milani believed to be a revival of historical Persian encounters with the idea of democratic modernity. Historically, he said, "Persians were not only open to other cultures, but freely adopted all they found useful from them. Indeed, an eclectic cultural elasticity has been said to be one of the key defining characteristics of the Persian spirit and a clue to its historic longevity."[66] This cultural elasticity and pragmatism extended beyond the debate on secular theory, and was also evident in the reflexive revivalists' Islamic reformations.

The Reflexive Revivalists and the De-Ideologization of Islam

Soroush emerged at the fore of Islamic reforms as well, drawing on an enduring Islamic intellectual tradition that can be traced back through 'Ali Shari'ati. To begin his reform efforts, Soroush steeply criticized Shari'ati's efforts to ideologize Islam. He believed that "making religion ideological erodes its timeless and eternal message and nature, making it applicable only

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[66] Milani, Abbas. *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran.* pg. 15.

to specific circumstances and times."[67] By turning Islam into an ideology, the Iranian revolutionary government had created a temporally bound vision of what Islamic government should be at the time it was implemented. In the late 1970s, ideological Islam provided the revolution the momentum that it needed to overthrow the Shah and defend itself from the Iraqi invasion in the 1980s. By the 1990s, however, the same Islamic ideological paradigm was no longer prevalent and yet the repressive authoritarian structures of the state that still drew on that revolutionary paradigm for its legitimacy remained in place. Islamic ideology at that point, Soroush said, became, "highly susceptible to dictatorship," producing an esoteric class of official interpreters who, "slam shut the gates of thought and treat the ruling ideology as if it represented the perfection of reason."[68]

Like Shari'ati, however, Soroush saw Islam as adding an essential spiritual and moral component to social, political, and economic interactions. He argued that strictly 'liberal societies' deleteriously ignore the existence of God by focusing the entirety of their efforts on the satisfaction of human beings, leading to excessive consumerism, immorality, and social injustice. On the other hand, strictly religious governments—like the current regime in Iran—supposedly "attended exclusively to divine, not human, mandates … [and] assumed people's satisfaction was contingent upon and a natural by-product of God's satisfaction."[69] Both of these extremes, he suggested, were improper applications of Islam. Instead, he believed that there needed to be "a

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[67] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. *Farbehtar az Ideolozhi* (Sturdier than Ideology). *pg. 122.* found in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 159.

[68] *Ibid.* pg. 135.

[69] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. 122.

balance between the religious and non-religious to do right by both people and by God, acknowledging at once the integrity of human beings and of religion."[70]

In this balance, he recognized that there would not be a lasting consensus as to how divinely-focused and how worldly-focused social, economic, and political interaction would be. He therefore advocated for a mutual tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) to "allow a coexistence of religious and secular people, free from antagonisms that result from unequal rights and the imposition of one's beliefs on another."[71] In this view, Islam was not a static ideology or set of intolerant guidelines, but a moral ethic that could be applied to varying degrees within daily interactions for the sake of striking a balance between the oneness of God and His infallibility, and humanity's pluralistic and fallible nature.

For this tolerant balance between religious and worldly to be successful, Soroush and Shabestari continued by undertaking the task of further dividing Islamic truth between infallible and fallible sources. Their division, however, transcended the traditional separation of the infallible Qur'an and *Sunna* from fallible *ijtihad* and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), moving a step further by suggesting that there was an explicit division that needed to be drawn between accepted religious knowledge and the fundamentally fluid nature of all human knowledge. Accepted religious knowledge, Soroush said:

> meaning our knowledge of the Qur'an and the *Sunna*—is human knowledge, and, similar to other sciences, must be in constant flux, evolution, and contraction and expansion. This contraction and expansion is directly produced by contractions and expansions in other areas of human knowledge, and understanding of [religious knowledge] is not independent of our understanding of nature and science, and changes in relation to it. Therefore, just as philosophy and natural sciences are imperfect and continue to evolve, the

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[70] *Ibid.*

[71] *Ibid.* pg. 123.

sciences of jurisprudence and interpretation and ethics and disputation are also imperfect and also must continue to evolve.[72]

This means that the accepted religious knowledge generated by clerical *ijtihad,* for example, necessitates a further degree of *ijtihad* that would be continuous in nature and focused on reason itself, not the Qur'an and *Sunna*. This continuous *ijtihad* (*ijtihad-e mustamar*) required that the believer also look at extra-religious sources, too, in order to properly produce religious knowledge in relation to the present realities of the time period.

Similarly, Shabestari argued that this 'continuous *ijtihad*' would allow for 'dynamic' interpretations of the Qur'an and *Sunna*. He believed that, "we cannot continue imitating [*taqlid*] past *faqihs* [Islamic jurists], and, especially given the rapidly changing world around us, there is pressing need for new *ijtihad* on all fronts of Islamic knowledge." Shabestari and Soroush here effectively issued a threatening challenge to the Iranian clerical establishment in control of the Islamic Republic. The entire notion of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurists) that the current regime is based on fundamentally relies on Iranians trusting the guardianship of the clerical establishment for the interpretation of Islam and its relation to the world. Soroush and Shabestari, however, challenge that notion by obligating Muslims to undertake their own reason-centered *ijtihad* in a continuous and critical fashion of existing clerical *ijtihad*.

This tradition of challenging clerical *ijtihad* is not new, however, and can be traced back in modern times to the 1930s and Ali Akbar Hakimizadeh. Hakimizadeh was a former cleric, who issued a forty page written attack called *Thousand-Year-Old Mysteries* against the clerical establishment. Though he denies the claim, it is widely assumed that Hakimizadeh's criticism

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[72] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at: Nazariyyeh Takamol Ma'refat-e Dini* (The Expansion and Contraction of Theory of *Shari'a: Analyizing the Evolution of Religious Knowledge*). pg. 245. found in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revoltuion.* pg. 157-8.

prompted Ayatollah Khomeini to respond with his first book in order to reassert the authority of the *'ulema*.[73] Hakimizadeh lashed out at the clerics for being misleading, monovocal, and preserving their own power by immediately condemning any opponents as apostates and pushing for their execution. He challenged the clerics to place their theories in front of the masses so that their *ijtihad* could be popularly reasoned with instead of, "spout[ing] off arguments in an empty arena … and fill[ing] millions of books with unverified nonsense."[74] Hakimizadeh offered up a similar challenge to traditional Shi'ite power structures, suggesting instead that the population of believers had a significant role to play in *ijtihad*, saying, "Nowadays, nothing but reason and logic can stop people from questioning what you [the clergy] argue. It is better to possess such reason and logic, but one cannot withstand the flood of popular sentiment with silence, excommunication, heresy, or executions; the only choice is to respond or resign."[75]

Hakimizadeh's call for a reason-based popular *ijtihad* of existing clerical *ijtihad,* however, was subsumed by post-colonial and imperialist political clashes that empowered the *'ulema* as a barrier against foreign oppression and as guardians of the faith in the absence of the Imams. During the post-authoritarian political shift in 1990s, however, Soroush asserted himself as the latest reformer in opposition to the clerical establishment. He, like Shari'ati before him, believed that the clerical establishment was corrupt and unfit to lead a community of believers, though instead of condemning them of 'polytheism' as Shari'ati had, Soroush condemned them for their aversion to continuous rational thought and new scientific discovery.[76] "The clergy" he

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[73] Milani, Abbas. *The Shah*. pg.56-7.

[74] Hakimizadeh, Ali Akbar. *Asrar-e Hezar Saleh*. (Thousand-Year-Old Mysteries) pg.4. Translated by James Glassman from the original Persian. "در میدان خالی رجز خوانده باشد و یا ملیونها کتاب را از رجز خوانی پر کرده ..."

[75] *Ibid.* Translated by James Glassman from the original Persian اکنون جز دلیل و منطق چیزی نمی تواند جلو آنرا بگیرد اگر" داريد که چه بهتر و گرنه ديگر با سکوت و تکفير و يا فاسد العقيده خواندن و استکان آب کشيدن نمی توان جلو سيل احساسات مردم استاد اکنون يا جواب يا استعفا"

said, "is a syndicate group whose economic interests and livelihood depend on presenting and perpetuating specific, often petrified, interpretations of religion … Religious knowledge cannot progress and reach additional heights so long as it remains tied to the clergy's syndical interests." Instead, he suggested that the 'spirit of reasonable inquiry' was best served through democratic means by which the '*ijtihad* of the majority' would be juxtaposed with the *ijtihad* of the clergy, all of which would therefore be guided by the 'moral compass' of evolving Islamic reason. [77]

Along similar lines, Mohammad Shabestari and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, both clerics themselves, advocated for an obliteration of the clerical class altogether and a complete opening of the 'gates of *ijtihad*' for all believers. Eshkevari says that "Islam did not have a clerical class to begin with … [and] today, no one group, not even the clergy, can have a sole monopoly over the specialization of any one field."[78] Shabestari more deeply lashed out at the legitimacy of the clergy, specifically those at the heart of the Islamic Republic, saying that the Islamic Republic's narrow interpretation of Islam, or, "jurisprudential Islam[,] … has become plagued with crises and problems that it can no longer properly govern. It cannot sustain itself because of its … frequent resort to violence in order to force itself on society, and its philosophical dearth and poverty."[79]

The significance of Soroush, Shabestari, and Eshkevari's attack against the clerical establishment is profound. This argument for the necessity of a continuous, reason-based *ijtihad*

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[76]Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. *Raz-dani va Roshanfekri va Dindari* (Knowing Secrets and Intellectualism and Religiosity). pg. 109. quoted in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 160.

[77] Soroush. 'Abdolkarim. *Modara va Modiriyyat.* (*Moderation and Administration*). pg. 26; 47. found in in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 160.

[78] Quoted in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* pg. 150.

[79] Shabestari, Mohammad. *Naqdi bar Qara't-e Rasmi az Din.* (*A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion*). pg. 97. found in *Ibid.* pg. 169.

to be juxtaposed with existing clerical *ijtihad*, bears far greater weight than a simple opposition to repressive political power. It is also attempting to fundamentally restructure a long-standing Shi'ite tradition of *taqlid*—trusting the *ijtihad* of the clerics—by creating this additional layer of *ijtihad* based on reason itself (*'aql mehvar*). Such an implementation of reason-based *ijtihad*, however, effectively complements a transition to democratic politics, whereby each individual or community of individuals uses independent reasoning to interpret knowledge of faith, science, and politics in relation to one another in order to produce their own conclusions. These conclusions can then be judged within a democratic forum whereby the will of the population is used to decide the best application of reason within a changeable secular state structure that is fundamentally necessary to preserve the capacity for continuous *ijtihad* (*ijthihad-e mustamar*) to take place.

It is in this way that Iran's reflexive revivalist intellectuals have Islamized secularism. As discussed in the introduction, this notion is best understood via what Talal Asad describes as the Islamic discursive tradition, thorough which Islam acts as an ever-changing interpretive tradition of present circumstances in relation to past experience and future expectations. The Islamization of secularism, in this light, is the latest manifestation of Iranian Islamic interpretations that are responding to the present demands of Iran's youthful population in relation to past lessons gleaned from the post-colonial political era, and more specifically, the failures of the Islamic Revolution.

Chapter Three – Theoretical Framework: A Literary Review of the Theorists and their Interlocutors

Chapter three discusses four theoretical themes within the 'Islamization of secularism.' It includes commentaries from the theorists themselves, which are placed into a discussion with other intellectuals, analysts, and historians of Middle Eastern politics, who have been influenced by or have come to similar conclusions as Iran's reflexive revivalists. The four themes discussed here are: (1) the shift from post-colonial secularism to a diverse post-authoritarian understanding of it (2) the transition from post-colonial to post-authoritarian Islamic theory, focusing on the division of Islam into an ethical framework of reference and the inherent fallibility of all human knowledge of Islam (3) defining the roles of Islam and secularism in a religiously-based democracy, and (4) democratic tolerance and the importance of understanding political traditions in terms of an evolving discourse of experiential knowledge.

From Post-Colonial to Post-Authoritarian Secularism

The concept of secularism in Iran and the Middle East has come under immense criticism from both within and without. These criticisms, though, largely focused on the blind acceptance of a supposedly universal or objective vision of secularism that was embodied by secular dictatorships and disseminated by a hubristic Western liberal discourse of hegemony throughout the post-colonial political era. Indeed, it was precisely this form of imposed and blindly adopted secularism that Jalal Ale-Ahmad, 'Ali Shari'ati, and Ayatollah Khomeini sought to combat in the 1960s and 70s, and was still a prevailing understanding that the reflexive revivalists had to redirect in the post-authoritarian era as well.

As a point of entry into the evolving debate on secularism, 'Ali Shari'ati's encounter with the theory prior to the 1978-79 revolution is instructive. Shari'ati recognized that the strength of

a secular 'society without God' lay in its institutional structures,[80] but he harshly condemned the effects of a secular democratic society saying that, "individual freedom without a specified direction, [would] be debased and reduced to a veritable cesspool of corruption and filth; [which was] certain to result in the pollution of freedom."[81] Here, Shari'ati referred to the lack of attention secular society pays to the human spirit. Though he recognized the value of these 'modern frameworks' that secular society offered, because it ignored the spirituality of humanity, he believed that man would become 'savage' and 'materialistic.' Secularism, therefore, debased humanity's desire for freedom by alienating them from a fundamental necessity of their human condition—spirituality.[82] Shari'ati, however, failed to see the possibility for Islam to be cultivated and thrive within the individual, believing instead that secularism would cause Iranian Muslims to lose their faith unless Islam was institutionalized within the state itself.

Ali Mirsepassi, an Iranian-American professor, intellectual, and recent secular-modernist, directly confronts such monolithic and objective interpretations of secularism, advocating instead for a pragmatic adoption of secular institutional structures. He argues that, a 'metaphysically interpreted' version of secularism, if forcefully applied as had been done under the Shah's regime in Iran, ignores the very valuable institutional structures and conflict resolution mechanisms that secular society provides. By 'metaphysical' he means that by turning secularism into an anti-religious ideology, it can no longer act in service of humanity and instead works in the service of a repressive 'ideal.' This causes institutional structures—like the judiciary or police force, for example—to focus their efforts on removing religion from the

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[80] 'Ali Shari'ati. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies :An Islamic Critique*. pg. 100-01

[81] *Ibid.* pg. 112.

[82] *Ibid.* pg. 99-101.

public sphere in the name of some ideological secular ethic instead of allowing individuals to direct the path of the state. Furthermore, he argues that secularism has no claim to "universal or objective truth" in the first place and therefore must operate within the context it is applied to, not be blindly adopted from an externally synthesized model. Secularism, in this way, must be expressed differently in various times and places based on the context that it operates in and is, therefore, not static or objective, but is subject to interpretation.[83]

Talal Asad's query into the foundations of secularism and various 'formations of the secular' substantiates these viewpoints and also refutes secular objectivity, saying, "the secular is not singular in origin, or historical identity, it has shifted throughout the years and necessarily overlaps with religion—neither of which are fixed categories."[84] Like Mirsepassi, Asad suggests that secularism is fundamentally subjective in nature, and to unquestioningly imitate it based on a foreign entity's formation of secularism is to also perilously assume the same domestic conditions and social climate. Instead, 'the secular' is best implemented through gradual and organic reform.[85]

Again, using 'Ali Shar'iati's argument as a useful point of departure, the claim that 'unguided humanity' in a secular society would necessarily lead to 'cesspools of filth,' brings up the useful topic of public and private overlap in a secular society. Asad claims that a distinct separation between private and public cannot be drawn to suggest that a secular public is necessarily devoid of all religious influence in the first place. He says that, although the government structures themselves may not be based on religion, the people that act within them

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[83] Mirsepassi, 'Ali. *Democracy in Modern Iran.* pg. 20; 25; 46-7; 63.

[84] Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular :Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. pg.25.

[85] Chatterjee, Partha. "Fasting For Bin Laden: The Politics of Secularization in Contemporary India." *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. pg. 60.

have viewpoints shaped within both the private and public spheres. It is thus that individuals'

views, no matter the political system they live in, are shaped both inside and outside of the state

apparatus.[86] This means that, if a "cesspool of humanity" were to form within the contexts of a

secular state, it would be a combination of a failure of the public sphere and private spirituality to

direct the course of man. Furthermore, it suggests that a division between public and private

spheres of influence is faulty in the first place as it is impossible to restrict the natural

commingling of these domains of influence in any society unless done so through coercion.

'Abdulkarim Soroush, aptly sums up the transformation of a supposedly objective

secularism from a 'foreign ideology' that would facilitate the degradation of human spirituality

to a useful theory that could be applied within Islamic thought and practice. He says:

> we must not take as a starting point of departure the assumption that
> what has not originated among us is necessarily alien to us … [nor
> should we] seek to establish the hegemony of one culture at the
> expense of others … [rather,] each culture contains elements for
> which it must repent and aspects it should uphold.[87]

The important thing, he believes, is that secularism is neither "blindly emulated nor blindly

rejected" based on some false objectivity or understanding of "Islamic culture as terminus."[88]

Secularism, he argues, also does not inherently cause a "decline of religion in society," as

Shari'ati suggested it would. Instead, he says, "we see the opposite … [with] the sharp

dichotomies of the past, e.g. between secularism and religion, becoming blurred. They are relics

of the positivist era, and are no longer tenable."[89] In this way, he challenges Shari'ati's notion

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[86] Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular :Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* pg. 186-7.

[87] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim: *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush.* pg.169.

[88] *Ibid.* pg. 170.

[89] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. "Enlightenment and Philosophy in Islam." pg. 2.

that a secular society itself would necessarily prevent humans from attending to their spiritual

needs. Instead, he argues that believers, "must stand in the *agora* of cultural exchange, fit, able,

and willing to assume the task of defending the truth for [them]selves."[90]

From Post-Colonial to Post-Authoritarian Islamic Theory: Referential Divisibility and the Fallibility of Human Knowledge

Expanding upon the reflexive revivalists' reforms within the Islamic discursive tradition,

reformers both in Iran and Middle East have continued to work against the notion of Islam as a

perfect and complete political ideology. Instead, they have turned to something resembling a

divisible set of faith-based ethics, or an evolving framework for inquiry that is based on

incomplete human knowledge and therefore in need of continuous revision and supplementation.

As both a point of comparison and departure, it is useful to look again at post-colonial visions of

Islam as an ideological political theory from Ayatollah Khomeini and 'Ali Shari'ati. Khomeini

described the political application of Islam as the, "light of divine justice [that] shall shine

uniformly on all and the divine mercy of the Qur'an… [that] shall embrace all like life-giving

rain."[91] Indeed it was this unspecific and idealistic vision of Islam that was popularized in the

1970s as the perfect light against the darkness of Western incursion.

Similarly, Shari'ati saw Islam as the perfection of ideology:

> the efficacious combination of the three currents [inherent to
> humanity] of mysticism, socialism (equality), and existentialism
> (freedom) without the problems of one being able to overtake the
> goodness of another. As a combination of the three, Islam can
> overcome the subsumation of humanity by religious slavery, the
> materialism associated with equity, and the godless misdirection and
> materialism associated with an unguided free man.[92]

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[90] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg.170.

[91] Khomeini, Ali Ruhollah. cited in, Peterson, Scott. *Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran--a Journey behind the Headlines*. pg.34.

This definition of Islam in Shari'ati's eyes was first and foremost the idea that it was the perfect completion of ideology for all time. He argued that it already had the West's ideas built into it, but corrected their ills like materialism, for example, by attending to the human spirit and providing an absent moral dimension to political, economic, and social interaction. The second important concept to be taken from this is his idea that 'unguided man' would necessarily fall into misdirection and godlessness. Though simplistic, this idea that humanity needed a guide adhered to the Shi'ite tradition of *taqlid,* Ayatollah Khomeini's notion of *velyat-e faiqh,* and with the idea that religion in the hands of individuals in the private sphere would not be sufficient to prevent their falling into godless alienation.

In stark contrast to a vision of Islam as a perfect and static ideology is an interpretation of it instead as a divisible set of politically-applicable ethics. Tariq Ramadan, a widely criticized but influential author and cultural critic, advocates the notion of transcending post-colonial conceptions of Islamic objectivism through the use of an 'Islamic reference' within emerging secular and democratic societies. He envisions this 'reference' not as a static ideological foundation, but as "a corpus of principles that can orient and inspire political action" and as an 'applicable ethic' that can transcend the 'economic subservience' associated with Western conceptions of liberal democracy and secular society by focusing on social justice and individual spirituality.[93]

Samira Haj, a professor of Middle East studies and author specializing in Islam and modernity also offers some unique analysis that complements the idea that Islam is not an inert or indivisible ideology. Haj presents the argument of Talal Asad that Islam is a discursive

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[92] Shari'ati, Ali. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. pg. 119-20.

[93] Ramadan, Tariq. *The Arab Awakening :Islam and the New Middle East*. pg. 98-116.

tradition that is interpreted and reinterpreted based on historical experience and textual sources

extending through the past, present, and into the future. Via this interpretation of Islam as an

evolving discursive tradition, she makes the argument that it is best understood as a 'framework

of inquiry' through which Islamic reformers and everyday people can interpret their present

based on a set of historical debates and textual truths.[94] By suggesting that Islamic traditions are

essentially socially and historically-situated references, Haj would agree with Ramadan that

Islam is not a monolithic ideology that is perfectly static, but rather, serves as a framework of

experiential religious knowledge for current and future interpreters.

Soroush and his fellow intellectuals usefully sum up their own vision of this historically-

situated 'framework of inquiry.' Soroush suggests that because the infallible religious texts of

Islam do not contain an outline for a specific form of government, Islam as a politicized ideology

is nothing more than fallible human knowledge, not the epitome of ideological perfection that

Shari'ati and Khomeini believed it to be.[95] Echoing this point, Mohammad Shabestari argues that

human religious knowledge—which Islam as an ideology is derived from—is a fallible source of

human intuition that is incomplete and that must be supplemented with ideas like secularism and

democracy, for example. "The meaning of perfection of religion is not that it contains everything

under the sun," he says, "so that if we were unable to find a specific item in it we should go off

calling it imperfect. It is not perfection for religion to falsely function as a substitute for science,

technology, and human deliberation."[96] In this view, Islam can serve as a framework of

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[94] Haj, Samira. *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity*. pg.4.

[95] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri. *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. 192-4.

[96] Sadri, Mahmoud. "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar." pg. 261.

reference, for example, but is not going to provide a framework for all aspects of the human political, economic, and social experience as Shari'ati believed it would.

Continuing to Define a Secular and Religious Democracy

The reflexive revivalists have recently elaborated upon their conception of a combination of secularism and Islam within a democratic system. They suggest that secularism acts as the institutionalization of the fluidity of the public will through an ideologically neutral government apparatus. If that public will has Islam as a major marker of its identity, religion can then work its way into the public sphere as a representation of the governed. Other intellectuals and analysts that have expanded upon this combination of Islam and secularism within a democratic framework have produced a diverse body of opinions on the subject. As a foundational reference to understand how one could establish a secular and Islamic democracy, however, the work of Talal Asad again proves most useful. In the post-authoritarian era, Asad views secular theory as a combination of sensibilities and moralities, as "more than just the separation of religious and secular institutions in government, but [a presupposition of] new concepts of religion, ethics, and politics that define a new political ethic."[97] In this light, secular theory is not an unwavering force of religious evisceration into which all other theories and practices must assimilate, but rather, is an amalgamation of converging ideologies, theories, and beliefs that produce a "least common denominator" or an "overlapping consensus" based on common values like equality, human rights, or female modesty, for example. Secularism, in this way, serves to balance variable religious beliefs and interpretations of reality within the ever-changing expectations of society.[98]

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[97] Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular :Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* pg.16.

[98] *Ibid.* pg. 2.

In stark opposition to the notion that religion could indeed operate within a democratic political system, however, 'Ali Mirsepassi sees a religious and secular democracy as "contradictory and questionable at best." He argues that:

> to have a complete democratic system, one has to desacralize all spheres of politics [because] all religion, in one way or another, rests on a concept of the sacred. If any element of government, leaders, ideologies, institutions, laws and the like is invested with the aura of the sacred, it cannot claim to have come from the will of the people. In a democracy, legitimacy and representation are not permanent or fixed. People and positions can be changed or recalled. Nothing can occupy a privileged position beyond the reach of popular vote.[99]

Mirsepassi is missing the mark entirely here. Instead of understanding Islam in terms of an ever-changing discursive tradition, that is "not permanent or fixed," he deleteriously assumes that Islam cannot be representative of a collective will of individuals nor be reinterpreted and adjusted over time. Both assumptions are unequivocally false according to the reflexive revivalists.

Soroush, for example, strongly disagrees with Mirsepassi's desacralization prescription, saying first that in a religious democracy, "it is not religious per se that arbitrates, but some understanding of religion which is, in turn, changing, rational, and in harmony with consensual and accepted extra-religious criteria."[100] Religion, by this definition, is not opposed to democracy—which is an extra-religious social construction by nature—and therefore is applicable to Mirsepassi's idea that legitimacy and representation is always changing. Soroush continues saying:

> It is valid to argue that in a secular society a religious democratic government is impossible because religious governments are not answerable to the people. In such a society, the best form of

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[99] Mirsepassi, 'Ali: *Democracy in Modern Iran :Islam, Culture, and Political Change.* pg. 101.

[100] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim: *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush.* pg. 131.

government would be a secular democratic regime. However, it is not valid to argue that nowhere and under no conditions may one perceive the desirability of a religious democracy, even in a religious society. The truth of the matter is that a religious government can be an appropriate reflection of a religious society. Indeed, in such a society a purely secular government would be undemocratic. [101]

In this light, he suggests that the extent to which a society is democratic depends directly on its responsiveness to the will of the people and respect for their right to individual expression. If religion is representative of the will of a population, ensuring a universal application of 'desacralization' would itself be inimical to today's interpretations of secular and democratic theory.

Indeed, Nader Hashemi, who specializes in Islamic, democratic, and secular politics in Iran, agrees with Soroush that a desacralization or a complete 'privatization of religion' is not necessary for the establishment of a secular democracy. In fact, he believes that it works against a democratic representation of a society like Iran in which religion is a major marker of individual identity. He argues instead that both secularism and an interpretation of Islam that is operable within a democratic society would need to be socially constructed though a process of bottom-up reform and theoretical indigenization. They are, "earned, not assumed," he asserts. Though he suggests that a secular democracy can indeed also be a religious one, he qualifies his argument with two "lines that cannot be crossed" within a secular democracy. These "minimums" for secularism come from a notion called the 'twin tolerations.'[102]

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[101] *Ibid.* pg. 126.

[102] Hashemi, Nader. *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*. pg.172-4., which presents the notion of the 'Twin Tolerations,' found in Stepan, Alfred, *Arguing Comparative Politics*. pg. 213-53.

The 'first toleration' is the idea that a democratic constitution cannot give religious

organizations a 'veto power' over popularly elected policies. [103] This means, for example, that

the Iranian clerical establishment could not deem a popularly approved removal of the veil in

public as un-Islamic and counteract popular sentiment with a veto. Instead, they would be forced

to articulate their opposition to it through democratic institution structures—the parliament or

free press, for example. Instead of using religion coercively, they would have to use it reasonably

by engaging the populations through *ijtihad* to prove their religious credentials democratically.

The 'second toleration' Hashemi presents says that a secular democracy must not bar a

religious organization from politics simply for its religious nature. [104] This means that in order

for a religious organization to be removed from politics, it would have to be attempting to

undermine or subvert the democratic system through violence or coercion. For the sake of

relevance and continued public support, though, it would ostensibly be more beneficial for

religious organizations to operate within the confines of the system.

Like Hashemi, Eshkevari also suggests a non-coercive religious democracy that at its

core is secular—though not in the sense Mirsepassi describes it as a desacralizaiton of the public

space. By secular, Eshkevari means that that a religious democracy is one that is not based on the

coercive application of religion, because religion cannot be, according to the Qur'an, imposed on

the hearts of individuals, but must be desired by willing believers. Instead he says that a religious

and secular democracy is:

> one that is based on the non-religious rights of the people and the
> non-political responsibility of religious individuals towards
> management and critique of power. Its first responsibility is to
> provide for the material needs of the people in order to rid them of
> such material needs, so they can attend to matters that are more

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[103] *Ibid.* pg. 175.

[104] *Ibid.* pg. 175-6.

> delicate and spiritual. The people can thus freely choose their beliefs
> and also transform society into a stage for open and free choice of
> religion.[105]

Here, Eshkevari makes the argument that a secular society is based on the inherent human rights of all religious and non-religious individuals. In order for religion to be properly 'attended to' in a secular and religious democracy, he argues that a secular state must provide for the people's worldly needs so that they can further incorporate spiritual matters into their daily lives. Indeed, this provision of worldly needs to the individual is one of the most striking counter arguments against the Islamic Republic, which many believe has utterly failed to produce a viable system of banking, international trade, and social support structures.

Popular Hermeneutics: The Importance of Social Actors in Interpreting Tradition

Expanding from the concept of a potential fusion between Islam and secularism in a democratic society, Soroush moves beyond the existing literature in his discussion of toleration. Indeed, Mirsepassi, Hashemi, and Asad all speak of toleration as a fundamental principle that inherently accompanies secular society, though the question remains as to whether or not toleration can be successfully reconciled within societies where there are a multiplicity of individual conceptions for promoting and ensuring the sanctity of 'the Good.'[106] Soroush goes beyond simply assuming a tolerant ethic within secular society, however. In an attempt to reconcile the concept of toleration within religious communities, he suggests that the idea of tolerance does not necessarily imply that, in accepting the self-expression of another, a tolerant individual is abandoning or sacrificing their own religious beliefs. Therefore, he believes, the

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[105] Eshkevari, Hasan. *Hakumat-e Demokratik-e Islami* (Democratic Islamic Government) pg.296., found in Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. pg.135.

[106] Asad, Talal: *Formations of the Secular :Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* pg. 182-3. and MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue.* pg. 220-24.

problem of intolerance depends on the choices of the individual believer, not the Islamic faith itself.[107]

At a pragmatic and societal level, Asef Bayat and Nader Hashemi make similar claims that the quest to internalize new visions of Islam and secularism within the Middle East falls on the people themselves and particularly on their social interpretations of secular and religious theory. Bayat argues that little attention has been paid during the post-colonial era to what political theories actually meant in the day-to-day lives of people. Instead, he says that such theories must be defined by human history and humans themselves through social movements in particular, which have a decisive role in developing popular "shapings of truth." Most importantly, like Soroush, he says that, "it is the social agents that determine the inclusive or authoritarian thrust of religions, not the religions themselves."[108]

This is a crucial point that exemplifies the shift away from notions of top-down, ideologically-based theories of the post-colonial era. By suggesting that individuals are the ones that determine how theories are expressed at a given point in history, Bayat dispels any preconceived notions of theories having some kind of intrinsic value outside of what a society allows them to have. Bayat, like Soroush, also elevates the role of human agency in the creation political traditions and the governmental structures through which they are corporeally embodied. In this light, the objectivist visions of ideological totality from post-colonial era failed

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[107] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim: *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. pg. 138. This notion of tolerance within the Islamic faith is advanced *ad nauseum* in many other books targeting a Western audience. It is in large part a reaction to the post-colonial era traditions of Orientalism, but especially the September 11 attacks that elicited a widespread Western demonization of Islam as intolerant and violent. This is a brief but not exhaustive list of sources that I found, which discuss this Islamically-rooted tolerance: (1) Abou El Fadl, Khaled, Joshua Cohen, and Ian Lague. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. (2) Diouf, Mamadou. *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal*. (3) Jackson, Sherman A. *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghāzalī's Fayṣal Al-Tafriqa Bayna Al-Islam Wa Al -Zandaqa*. (4) Shah-Kazemi, Reza. *The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam*. and (5) Kurzman, Charles. *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*.

[108] Bayat, Asef: *Making Islam Democratic :Social Movements and the Post- Islamist Turn*. pg.5.

to successfully root themselves within the Middle East because they were not derived from the

people themselves but were coercively imposed from the top-down, not through a bottom-up

organic synthesis.

Chapter Four – Pragmatic Applications of Iran's Islamization of Secularism within the Post-Authoritarian Middle East 2005 - 2014

Chapter four discusses the pragmatic applicability of the Islamization of secularism both in Iran and across the Middle East. The first portion of this chapter discusses the lasting implications of the secular and Islamic democratic discourse in Iran after the reform movement was suppressed in the early 2000s. The latter two sections of this chapter deal with the application of the Islamization of secularism on an international scale, first by discussing the secularization of the leadership of Shi'ite political networks across the Middle East and second by offering four fundamental lessons that the Islamization of secularism can offer to other Middle Eastern nations currently in the process of democratic transition.

The Islamization of Secularism after the Dismantling of the Reform Movement 2005 – 2014

Although the Iranian reform movement had generated a viable intellectual framework for Islamic, secular, and democratic governance, by 2004, it had been eclipsed by a wave of social and political repression under the conservative clerical establishment. In his last term as president from 2000 - 2004, Khatami and the Iranian reform movement were effectively immobilized by the subversive political efforts of Khamene'i and his control of the judiciary system. Iran's reformist intellectuals, political figures, and social activists were regularly summoned by the court systems for even the most minimal critiques of the regime. The parliament and presidency were severely restricted as well, preventing them from successfully facilitating institutional change. By 2005, the reform movement's role in elected positions had been so restricted that the Iranian people could no longer pragmatically vote for them and expect any change.[109]

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[109] Behrooz, Maziar. "Iran After Revolution" in Daryaee, Touraj. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*. pg. 384-85. and Ansari, Ali, M. *Iran, Islam, and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*. pg. 220-24.

In addition to the regime's domestic efforts to subvert the reform movement, international developments in the early 2000s overshadowed Iran's quest for reform as well. After the September 11 terrorist attacks and the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, an 'obsession' with the United States and its military presence in the region had overtaken the public discourse in Iran. Domestic fears that Iran would be the next victim of a U.S. military intervention grew significantly when the nation had been numbered among George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil.' The conservative regime used this opportunity to shift the public's attention away from its continuous obstruction of constitutional reform and towards the 'Great American Satan' once again. With the Iranian public fearing a United States military intervention and a blaring Islamophobic discourse circulating across Western and international media airwaves, the reform movement's democratic efforts were utterly subsumed by a global discourse focused on Islamic extremism. As the 2005 presidential elections approached, the Iranian reform movement and their democratic ambitions had been crushed domestically by Khamene'i and overshadowed internationally by a violent surge of American imperialism that had a very different vision of democratization.[110]

By the time the 2005 presidential elections had come around, the conservative establishment had successfully eroded any confidence Iranians had in the reform movement's ability to produce practical change. The electorate was effectively trapped between an immobilized reform movement and the repressive conservative establishment with few presidential candidates falling outside of that binary. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former professor and provincial governor, had been a vocal critic of the failures of the reform movement throughout the early 2000s. Though he was officially running as a conservative candidate, he did

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[110] Ansari, Ali, M. *Iran, Islam, and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change.* pg. 229-33.

not appear to be completely in the back pocket of the Khamene'i's clerical establishment. Instead, he appealed to some Iranians as a viable option for change outside of the reformist-conservative gridlock. His eventual victory in the 2005 presidential elections, however, was not greeted with the outpouring of support that Khatami had in 1997. In fact, many Iranians had become so disillusioned with the political system as a whole that they didn't even show up to vote.[111]

Ahmadinejad's first term in the presidency was largely characterized by a failure to produce tenable economic strategies to deal with increasing unemployment as well as a resurgence of government restrictions on young people and women. Domestically, freedoms in the press were cut back significantly, professors and students at universities that had remained sympathetic to reform movement ideology were forced out, and the reformist majority in the *majlis* had all but evaporated. Internationally, Ahmadinejad had reversed what meager gains Khatami had made in easing Iran's international isolation by giving the nation a friendlier voice in the global arena. In part a ploy to take advantage of Iran's increasing regional influence as a result of the toppled Afghani and Iraqi governments, Ahmadinejad also sought to increase his domestic and international popularity by stoking national and regional sentiments against Israel and the West. He denied the Holocaust, condemned the United States' military interventions, and suggested that if it were up to the populations of the Middle East, Israel would be voted out of existence. In 2006, when Iran refused to allow UN inspections of its nuclear facilities, the West assumed the worst due in part to Ahmadinejad's vitriolic international grandstanding and ramped up the sanctions that the U.S. had in place for years.[112]

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[111] *Ibid.*

[112] *Ibid.* pg. 386-7. and Gerges, Fawaz. A. *Obama and the Middle East.* pg. 178-9.

In addition to further corrupting Iran's international image and launching rampant domestic crackdowns, another defining characteristic of Ahmadinejad's first term in office was the increasing economic hardship from Western sanctions that were imposed after the 2006 expulsion of UN nuclear inspectors. By the end of Ahmadinejad's first term in 2009, Iran's unemployment rate was on the rise again despite marginal improvement since 2005, international and domestic business opportunities were stifled by sanctions, and Iran's essential oil exports had fallen from 2.5 million barrels per day to approximately 1 million barrels per day.[113] Iranians were promised change and had instead been confronted with the possibility of a U.S. invasion, harsher economic sanctions, and a new surge of government violations of their individual freedoms.

In 2009, with all political avenues for change looking increasingly bleak, the reformists had another opportunity to retake Iran's presidency. Mir Hussein Mousavi, the pragmatist prime minister who served during the Iran-Iraq War, emerged as the reformist frontrunner for the presidency. Despite the reformists' failure to deliver meaningful political change in the early 2000s, the discourse of reform and the Iranian intellectuals' plans for Islamic democracy still resonated with nearly two thirds of the population. The reformists no longer promised any fundamental or revolutionary change, however, but instead focused the Mousavi campaign on steering Iran away from the destructive domestic and international policies that Ahmadinejad had pursued. Indeed, the reformists' campaign had managed to succeed in mobilizing Iran's electorate with a nearly 85 percent turnout at the elections.[114]

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[113]Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Yearly Economic Reports 2005 – 2010.*

[114] Hashemi, Nader. and Danny Postel. *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle For Iran's Future.* pg. xi-xii. and Sahimi, Muhammad. "A Raging Fire Under a Heap of Ash: The Green Movement at One Year." pg. 295.

After voting had concluded, the conservative regime suspiciously shut down the reformist campaign's election monitoring system, which allowed them to keep track of vote tallies in real time and report fraud if they saw it. Shortly thereafter, Mousavi's campaign website also went out of service. After only a day of counting votes, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was hastily pronounced the victor despite the fact that there was a legally mandated three day waiting period before the announcement could be made.[115] The reformists were in utter disbelief that Ahmadinejad could have won and began to find many discrepancies with this outcome. For example:

> Mousavi received fewer votes in his hometown of Tabriz than Ahmadinejad; Karoubi's [the second of three reformist candidates] total vote was less than the number of people active in his campaign, and Rezaee's [the third reformist candidate] votes shrank by a hundred thousand in the final stages of the announcement.

In addition to this, after all of the votes were tallied, Ahmadinejad had apparently received more total votes in this election with nearly 85 percent voter turnout than he did in the 2005 election with only 60 percent voter turnout. Many Iranians believed this to be inconceivable in light of his extremely unpopular domestic and foreign policies and well-established political knowledge that high voter turnout rarely favors the incumbent. [116]

After scrutinizing the election process in search of more discrepancies, all evidence suggested that there had been no falsely added votes and that the election had indeed been conducted properly. The fraud, the reformists discovered, was not in how the election was conducted as they had expected, but in the official announcement of the results. When the vote count was received by the Ministry of the Interior, it was hastily readjusted and Mahmoud

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[115] Kurzman, Charles. "Cultural Ju-jitsu" *Ibid.* pg. 7

[116] Alizadeh, Ali. "Why are the Iranians Dreaming Again?" *Ibid.* pg. 3-4.

Ahmadinejad, shocked by the results himself, was fraudulently handed a second term as Iran's president.[117] Shortly after the election results were officially announced in June 2009, dismayed voters poured out onto the streets, donning green arm and headbands that they had used during the campaign to show support for Mousavi. They carried signs that read, 'where is my vote?' (rā'ī man kujast?), and over the following weeks, nearly one million Iranians had mobilized, demanding accountability for what they believed was a blatantly rigged election. These were by far the largest protests Iran had seen since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 and the conservative regime was well aware of its potential consequences.

These mass mobilization came to be known as the Iranian Green Movement (junbish-e sabz-e irān) and was a diverse combination of Iranians from various economic and social backgrounds, united in their demands for democratic accountability. These largely peaceful demonstrations, however, were met with excessive government brutality. The revolutionary guard, basij militias, and state police forces attacked the Iranian people on the streets in an attempt to halt the protests. They indiscriminately beat and imprisoned people and occasionally resorted to shooting protestors from rooftops with high-powered sniper rifles to disperse the crowds. Government violence did not stop the protests, however. Social media and camera phones played a major role in disseminating images of government brutality, sparking more popular outrage and causing the movement to grow. By the end of 2009, the Green Movement had reached more than three million strong and their initial focus on the sham election had shifted to calls for the downfall of the Khamene'i regime and a transition to democracy.[118]

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[117] Farhadpour, Morad, and Omid Mehrgan. "The People Reloaded." *Ibid.* pg. 130.

[118] Hashemi, Nader. and Danny Postel. *Ibid.* pg. xvi-xvii.

By the spring of 2010, however, the security forces' excessive presence in the streets, complete shutdowns of reformist media and communication sources, and a systematic campaign to incarcerate prominent political figures within the Green Movement's upper echelons had proved successful. Mir Hussein Mousavi was placed under house arrest in February and was effectively cut off from any form of communication with his supporters or the outside world. Ahmadinejad, Khamene'i, and the Revolutionary Guard had solidified their control of the Islamic Republic and initiated a period of unprecedented dictatorial repression not seen since the Shah era. The Green Movement had effectively died out in the streets, but its lasting significance cannot be understated. The protests in 2009 exposed the cracks within the conservative establishment, officially dispelled the illusory notion that the Islamic Republic was a legitimate 'religious democracy' for all the world to see, and forced the Revolutionary Guard to emerge from the shadows as a major power player in Iran.[119]

Though the Green Movement was initially an outburst of anger for the violation of Iran's thirty year tradition of fairly administered elections, at a much deeper level, it was the corporeal manifestation of the democratic hope that the reform movement's intellectual discourse of Islamic secular democracy had generated among Iran's populations. More precisely, it meaningfully demonstrated that the reformist intellectual narrative was still very much alive in the Iranian public discourse despite the outward appearance of the repressive conservative regime and the reform movement's failure to change the state's institutional structures. Over the next four years of Ahmadinejad's second term in office, however, that residual hope would be severely put to the test.

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[119] Sahimi, Muhammad. "A Raging Fire Under a Heap of Ash." *Ibid.* pg. 295-7.

Between 2010 and 2013, Iran's domestic situation became extraordinarily bleak. Absolute dictatorial repression gripped the country as the conservative establishment cracked down on any semblance of opposition. As the Arab uprisings erupted across the Middle East beginning in 2011, Khamene'i and his conservative regime further entrenched their absolute authority, executing, imprisoning, and torturing any remaining individuals still explicitly sympathetic to Green Movement. The Islamic Republic's belligerent mouthpiece, President Ahmadinejad, had also become increasingly unmanageable for Khamene'i, both internationally and domestically. By the end of his presidency, a deep rift between the conservative clerical authorities and Ahmadinejad had opened up, causing Khamene'i to restrict the Iranian presidency's power to little more than an international spokesman. Western sanctions had also ramped up significantly against the Islamic Republic for its persistent nuclear program, and by the beginning of 2013, the value of Iran's currency had fallen by nearly 80 percent, oil exports were at an all-time low, and unemployment had shot up to 14 percent.[120]

As Iran's 2013 presidential elections approached, Khamene'i knew that his regime would be faced with dire consequences and another mass uprising if he falsified the election results again. Domestic calls for a general boycott of the election circulated with rumors that Iran's Guardian Council—which is responsible for approving presidential candidates—would not allow any non-conservative candidates to run. That notion, however, was partially proven wrong as reform-oriented candidates that ran as self-described 'moderates' were allowed through the selection process. One among them was Hassan Rouhani, a former nuclear negotiator, member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, and mid-ranking cleric. Rouhani's campaign focused on changing the direction of Iran's international isolation by re-engaging the West and easing nuclear

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[120] Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran. 2010 – 2013. and Berliner, Uri. "Crippled By Sanctions, Iran's Economy Key In Nuclear Deal."

tensions. He also promised to decrease domestic restrictions on the freedom of speech and the press, vowing to cut back security force oversight in universities and civil society. Though the power of the presidency had been severely restricted during Ahmadinejad's last term in office and such lofty campaign goals depended largely on the willingness of Khamene'i's regime to allow them to happen, Rouhani's campaign proved successful, winning him just over 50 percent of the overall vote, with his closest opponent receiving only 17 percent.[121]

It had been widely assumed, given the extreme political repression and consolidation of power after the Green Movement protests, that Khamene'i would dictate the outcome of the election. The fact that he not only failed to unite all the conservatives behind a single candidate and that the overwhelming majority of Iranians united behind Rouhani's calls for 'moderation' spoke volumes about the lasting effects of the Iranian Green Movement and its undergirding discourse of Islamic and secular democratic reform. Though Rouhani's power to meaningfully direct policy in the Islamic Republic is severely limited today, his recent efforts to ease Western sanctions, soften Iran's harsh international image, and curb Iran's nuclear program stand as testaments to Khamene'i's lack of absolute authority. There are deepening cracks within the conservative ranks, many clerics are speaking out in opposition to the regime and its violence in the name of Islam, and an unequivocal victory of a subterranean discourse of secular and Islamic reform has swept the hearts and minds of nearly 80 percent of the Iranian public. [122] Achieving lasting democratic change within the central hub of politicized Shi'ite clerical authority, however, will be a matter of time and patience.

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[121] Bakhash, Shaul. "Rouhani's Surprising Election." pg. 1-2.

[122] Hashemi, Nader. "Is Rouhani the Iranian Gorbachev?"

Situating Iran's Intellectuals within an International Shi'ite Political Discourse

In an interview in 2010, 'Abolkarim Soroush appropriately described the concept of Islamic secularism that was becoming increasingly popular throughout the 1990s within the ranks of transnational Shi'ite political organizations. "A line has been drawn," he said:

> between religion and power. This delineation means that, in keeping with their religious duties, religious people can take part in power and politics … [however,] they cannot claim exclusive rights in the name of religion or claim that religion has only one single interpretation, which is the official [clerical] one. These are all things that nowadays fall under the banner of political secularism.[123]

Soroush's vision of secular politics, whereby religious individuals in power and political roles could still be fully devout Muslims without asserting a claim to Islamic esotericism or imposing religious truth on others, rang true with the earlier efforts of his fellow Iranian intellectuals. Though this discourse of Islamic secularism has failed thus far to produce significant institutional changes within the Iranian state itself, perhaps some of most profound effects can be seen within the recently secularized leadership of Shi'ite political organizations throughout the Middle East. Just as Iran's intellectuals were heavily influenced by the outcomes of the Iranian Revolution, so too did its consequences weigh heavily on the many Shi'ite political organizations abroad. It is useful, therefore, to begin by looking at a regional disappointment with the Iranian Revolution to understand how a discourse of Islamic secularism could meaningfully replace it.

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini had declared the Islamic Revolution to be a 'victory for all of Muslims.' The Iranian Revolution's success in casting out the imperialist West was indeed representative of a supposed universal victory for an Islamic ideology that fell well outside of the Cold War's universalistic binaries. Its ideological triumphalism had generated a great deal of expectations and hope for Islamic organizations abroad, who were similarly experiencing the

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[123] Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. "It's Best Just to Speak of an Unqualified Republic"

effects of imperialist duress. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, a separation of many

Shi'ite organizations from clerical power centers in Iran and Iraq had become increasingly

evident. Lay and clerical leaders of these organizations in Iraq, the Levant, and the Gulf felt as

though the Islamic Republic had established a monopoly on Shi'ite religious power and had

relegated them and their interests to the periphery. Their discontent grew as they perceived that

Khomeini and the new Iranian epicenter of clerical political power were myopically focused on

forcefully exporting the revolution to Iraq and eliminating factional opposition within Iran's

domestic political structures. Just as the revolution's initial triumph had reverberated across the

region in 1979, so did many of its unfulfilled expectations.[124]

The failure of the Islamic Revolution throughout the 1980s and 90s to pragmatically

deliver on its ideological promises resulted in a widespread trend of, "domestification of Shi'ite

political concerns."[125] This shift inwards exacerbated an existing rift between lay officials and

the clergy within these peripheral Shi'ite political groups as well. These lay political figures,

known as *iffindīs* in the Gulf and Iraq, traced their intellectual heritage back to 'Ali Shari'ati and

his biting disavowal of the clerical establishment. The extent to which the new Iranian

intellectuals' notion of Islamic secularism had influenced international Shi'ite political networks

became clear not only due to a pronounced shift away from clerical power centers in Iran, but

also through a blatant transition to *iffindi* leadership in the 1990s. This idea of Islamic secularism

had gained significant traction within these international Shi'ite political networks as a pragmatic

solution to existing frustrations with Iranian clerical hegemony. Instead of relying on Iran's

clerical power centers, which had offered many of these Shi'ite groups little more than a

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[124] Louer, Lawrence. *Transnational Shia Politics*: *Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. pg. 177-83.

[125] Louer, Lawrence. *Shi'ism and Politics in the Middle East.* pg. 84.

supposed perfection of Islamic ideology, they turned to the *iffindis* and embraced the pragmatism of Islamic secularism to address their local issues.[126]

In Iraq, for example, the Shi'ite political party *al-da'wa al-islamiyya* (the Islamic Calling), which was founded by the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, severed ties with the clerical establishment in the 1980s. After Saddam's execution of Baqir al-Sadr and other members of *al-da'wa* in 1980 for their support of the Iranian revolution, a power struggle between the group's clerical and lay leadership ensued. *Al-da'wa*'s new leadership turned away from Iran and Baqir al-Sadr's vision for the group to establish a universal Shi'ite guardianship over the entire world of believers (*velāyat-olumma*), focusing instead on alleviating persistent domestic persecution and government purges during the Iran-Iraq War. The clerics within the party's ranks that had previously occupied leadership roles gradually withdrew from politics throughout the 1990s, and today, lay officials have completely replaced them.[127]

In Bahrain, political influence within Shi'ite religious groups has similarly shifted from clerics to lay officials. For example, the *al-Wifaq* Shi'ite political party decided that it would participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections despite an existing boycott that had been in place as a result of the Bahraini monarchy's decision to suspend the nation's constitution. 'Ali Salman, the party's lay figurehead, had managed to muster enough political support outside of religious circles to proceed with the decision to take part in the elections. Only after gaining that domestic support did he go through a prolonged process of reaching out to Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani—one of the highest ranking *marja'iyyat* (plural for *marja'*)—to receive his official religious approval.

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[126] *Ibid.* pg. 24-5.

[127] *Ibid.* pg. 126. and Louer, Lawrence. *Transnational Shia Politics Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. pg. 84-7.

Weeks after the decision had already been made within the party ranks, Ayatollah Sistani issued his consent for their participation in the elections. This delayed response and the fact that Sistani's approval was only sought out after the decision had already been made speaks volumes about the significantly diminished role of clerical officials in political decision making.[128]

Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani's approval of *al-Wifaq*'s participation in the Bahraini elections is also representative of another increasing trend of indirect rather than direct clerical intervention into politics. Sistani like many other high-ranking clerics within the Shi'ite establishment have either never been active in politics or have withdrawn to fulfilling indirect roles outside of Iran's governing circles. Ayatollah Sadiq Husseini Shirazi, for example, a high-ranking Ayatollah from Karbala, Iraq, decided to remove himself from politics completely, surrendering political decision making to his 'local representatives,' saying that they were 'better informed' than he was in relation to actual political situations and that his area of expertise remained only in the study of Islam.[129] These apolitical and indirectly involved clerics have been deemed 'quietists,' though their opposition to clerical governance—specifically that of Ayatollah Khamene'i—has become more vocal over recent years as a result of what they perceive to be an exploitation of Islam to maintain political control.

Even more pronounced than clerics removing themselves from positions of political authority, however, is a movement of clerics who have been educated within the *howzehs* (theological seminaries) turning away from the profession altogether. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a former cleric by the name of Mohammed al-Mahfouz said, "Islam can do without the *'ulema* and may be regarded as a personal matter, between God and the individual believer, as

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[128] Louer, Lawrence. *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East.* pg. 131-2.

[129] *Ibid.* pg. 133.

Sunnis believe."[130] Though this idea of removing the necessity of the clerics in Shi'a Islam is not new, it has regained significant traction after intellectuals like Soroush, Shabestari, and Eshkevari had reignited an anti-clerical theoretical discourse in the 1990s that Shari'ati had proposed prior to the Islamic Revolution.

Evidence of this shift away from clerical authority within international Shi'ite political organizations is perhaps the greatest success story thus far of the Iranian intellectuals' Islamization of secularism. Rather than clerical figures leading political organizations and using 'official' religious authority to dictate the path the group should take, lay religious individuals have resoundingly taken up leadership roles in their stead. Religion in this regard is still very much a part of these groups' political orientations, though the secularized leadership and their opinions regarding Islam remain fundamentally that—opinions. Iran's intellectual Islamization of secularism, however, has a far broader applicability than simply inspiring Islamic secularization at the political party level. At the theory's core, the reflexive revivalists sought to create a secular and Islamic democracy, an idea that has profound implications for a Middle East in the midst of democratic upheaval.

Defining a Post-Authoritarian Discourse: Four Lessons for Emerging Middle Eastern Democracies from the Iranian Islamization of Secularism

The democratic aspect of Iran's Islamization of secularism is perhaps the discourse's most important defining characteristic. Without democracy and its capacity to institutionalize the fluidity of popular sentiments and interpretations of religion, even the Islamic secularism that is sweeping the ranks of Shi'ite political parties across the region has the capacity to become repressive and authoritarian. In order to better understand the fundamental democratic message

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[130] *Ibid.* pg. 128.

of the reflexive revivalists' Islamization of secularism, it is useful to first look at how another

scholar has described their revolutionary efforts to establish a new Islamic political discourse.

Asef Bayat, an Iranian-American author and cultural critic, who specializes in social

movements and their relationship to political and Islamic theory, has usefully summarized the

intellectual efforts of Iran's reflexive revivalists. He characterizes them according to the

following four principles:

> (1) They embrace modernity by not only following in a long tradition of accepting science and reason's compatibility with Islam, but also creating new ideas and new discursive vocabularies to accompany them (2) they are post-nationalist in nature in that they stopped blaming the outside world for their problems, but instead sought a different notion of freedom than their revolutionary predecessors – they sought freedom as liberty not freedom as liberation from the outside world (3) they are post-revolutionary in that they abandoned the notions that the clerical regime maintained of martyrdom, bravery, and militancy, and instead advocated for tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and democratic reform. (4) They are post-ideological in that they stood against the idea that religion should or could be ideologized, which meant that it necessarily was the antithesis of free critical thinking, needed to 'create enemies' and inherently fostered authoritarian-style domination, which encouraged apostasy and 'Secularism' [understood in an anti-religious ideological sense].[131]

Based on this relatively comprehensive description, Bayat suggests that Iran's intellectuals have

inaugurated a discourse that is 'post-nationalist,' 'post-revolutionary,' 'post-ideological,' and

finally, he builds up to the all-inclusive description, 'post-Islamist.'[132]

It is critical to understand what Bayat specifically means by saying that these individuals

have created a post-Islamist discourse, because it is not sufficient to simply describe this new

intellectual era in terms of what it is not. Indeed, it is not 'Islamist' meaning that it does not

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[131] Bayat, Asef. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post- Islamist Turn*. pg.86-7.

[132] *Ibid.* pg. 10-11.

adhere to some ideological or static vision of Islamic theory. It is, however, according to Bayat, "both a condition and a project, which must be embodied within a master (or multidimensional) movement." The first phase of this movement he says was a popular experimentation with and ultimate exhaustion of Islamic ideology due to its failures to produce pragmatic results in the economic and political world. At this point, he says that the movement was forced to reinvent itself, but "[did] so at the cost of a qualitative shift away from its fundamental ideological principles."[133]

The second phase of this 'post-Islamist' movement Bayat says was a, "conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism." Through this description, he suggests that the reflexive revivalists' intellectual efforts are best understood as a transcendence of Islamism. He subsequently qualifies this notion of 'transcendence,' however, saying that it, "[was] neither anti-Islamic, nor un-Islamic, nor secular, [but] turned the underlying principles of Islamism on its head … by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, … and the future instead of the past."[134]

Alternatively, it is crucial to view any recent evolution in the interpretation of Islam in terms of a discursive tradition. In this light, the reflexive revivalists were not necessarily opposing ideological Islam or what Bayat thinks were its 'fundamental principles' that opposed 'rights, plurality, and the future.' Rather, they reformed fundamental aspects of past Islamic theory to produce a superior representation of what Islamic truth meant to them in the present in reference to a past body of textual and experiential knowledge. It is important to remember as well that the Islamic ideology that the Iranian regime draws its legitimacy from today was at one

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[133] Bayat, Asef. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn.* pg. 10-11.

[134] *Ibid.* pg. 11.

point in time what the majority of Iranians believed to be the greatest expression of Islamic Truth. As such, the problem with Iranian 'Islamism' was not specifically that it was 'opposed to rights, plurality, or the future'—all of which Iranians had assumed ideological Islam would attend to in 1979—but rather that it had been warped during the Iran-Iraq War into an unmalleable authoritarian government. Therefore, to classify the Islamization of secularism as, "post-Islamist" is both misleading and inaccurate. Rather, it was its revolutionary reconceptualization of secular democracy that best defined it, and more specifically, how politicized Islam as an evolving discursive tradition fundamentally requires a democratic secular neutrality to ensure the continuous production of Islamic reason and knowledge.

Unlike during the post-colonial political era, Iran's reflexive revivalists were no longer operating within a discourse of absolutes or oppositionalism. They were not fixated on casting out the West, casting out Islamic ideology, and certainly not on defining their democratic theory in terms of what it was not, as Bayat has with his myriad of 'post-' distinctions. Instead, they pragmatically embraced their history and built their interpretations of the present on top of a body of experiential social, political, and religious knowledge. Today, the final step for the Islamization of secularism is to see its immense potential realized within an actual democratic system. For the time being, the Iranian people will have to wait for more opportune circumstances to transition to democracy. Many Arab nations across the Middle East, however, are presently in the process of democratic transition and Iran's intellectual Islamization of secularism can offer crucial inspiration for these nations as they will invariably need to confront today's evolving relationship between Islam, secularism, and democracy.

It is imperative to emphasize that the Iranian reflexive revivalists' ideas must not be blindly emulated by other Middle Eastern democratization efforts. Rather, it is best to understand

the international applicability of the Islamization of secularism in terms of a divisible set of the following four principles. First, universalism, theoretical objectivity, and ideological discourses speaking in absolutes are unsustainable bases for democratic politics. They do not allow for democracy to properly function because they are inherently averse to change and may be utilized to force varying conceptions of reality on individuals that may not see it in the same way.

Second, Islam is best understood as lending a non-coercive spiritual and moral dimension to political, economic, and social interactions of individuals if it is to be applied within imperfect human political constructions. While Islam as a religion itself is infallible and perfect, political derivations of it and human religious knowledge as a whole is fallible and must be subject to change. Third, Secularism is best understood as a fundamental governmental neutrality with regards to ideology that allows for agency to rest in the hands of the governed. It is also the fundamental necessity of a democratic society as it fosters a degree of political tolerance among both religious and non-religious individuals. This political tolerance can then prevent the erosion of democracy through ideological coercion and allows democratic elections to determine which interpretation of religious or non-religious policy is the most applicable in that present moment.

Finally, the role for independent human reasoning (*ijtihad*) to interpret both Islamic texts and religious knowledge and translate them into political systems is central to the combination of Islam and secular democracy. Because there is no reference to a specific style of governance in the infallible sources of Islamic truth (the Qur'an and *Sunna*), an additional level of *ijtihad* that focuses on both non-religious and religious knowledge is necessary to establish the most preferred interpretation of political theory as it changes over time. This results of this *ijthiad*, however, must remain fluid and their interpretations continuous in accordance with the Islamic discursive tradition if they are to be applied within a democratic framework.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion: Obstacles to a Democratic Iran and Limits of this Research

By framing the Iranian reform movement's Islamization of secularism historically, theoretically, and through its pragmatic applications since its inception in the 1990s, a concept of what secular and Islamic governance could look like in a post-authoritarian Middle East has been articulated. A new conceptualization of secular theory is best understood in terms of two central ideas. First, as Talal Asad suggests, generally speaking, 'the secular' is essentially the creation of a unique set of overlapping consensuses within a domestic context. That overlapping consensus can range anywhere from a consensual privatization of religion and a descralization of the public sphere to a fully religious government. The identity of secularism fundamentally relies, therefore, on the way that it is indigenized within society and what they decide their 'overlapping consensus' should be. Second, secularism, as it has been indigenized in Iran, is a fundamental ideological neutrality of the state that allows for political agency to rest in the hands of the governed. In this way, the secular and democratic government system is malleable and can be shaped based on the public will as it invariably changes over time.

With this notion of secularism in mind, politicized Islam is best integrated within a secular framework when it adheres to three recent reconceptualizations of Islamic truth. First, according to Talal Asad, Islam should be broadly understood in terms of a discursive tradition. This discursive tradition is essentially an evolving 'framework of inquiry' through which Muslims interpret their present circumstances based on a compilation of experiential religious knowledge and textual references extended through time. This suggests that interpretive knowledge of Islam is in constant flux and is necessarily affected by both religious and non-religious influences at different points in history. Second, according to 'Abodlkarim Soroush, Islam as a political force is a fundamentally human and, therefore, fallible construction. As such,

there can be no esoteric claims by clerics or individuals to a single conception of Islamic political truth. In this light, two levels of *ijtihad* are necessary today in order to effectively check and balance interpretations of Islamic truth. The first is a traditional narrative-based *ijtihad* that focuses on interpreting the Qur'an and the *Sunna* of the Prophet. The second is an innovative reason-based *ijtihad* that focuses on the results of narrative-based *ijtihad* as well as non-religious sources of human knowledge in order to effectively establish popular consensus among various interpretations of Islam and their relation to the world. Finally, according to Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, Islam is fundamentally a spiritual matter of the individual believer and cannot be forced on the heart of the unwilling. This notion of coincides with the Qur'anic mandate that says, "there is to be no compulsion in the acceptance of religion. The right course has been made clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in idolatry and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it…"[135] This suggests that the acceptance of religion is truly an individual matter and that Islamic truth can speak for itself and therefore does not require coercion to be rightfully heard.

With these reconceptualizations from the Islamization of secularism in mind, the politicization of Islam fundamentally relies on a non-coercive secular framework in order to institutionalize the perpetual change inherent to the Islamic discursive tradition. Through this discursive tradition, Muslims continuously interpret the world with both reason and narrative-based *ijtihad* through a framework of experiential religious knowledge extended through time. They can then apply their conclusions within a democratic framework, by placing their findings in front of the masses to be judged as Ali Akbar Hakimizadeh had urged more than 80 years ago.

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[135] *al-Qur'an al-Karim.* Translated by Sahih International. (Sura 2, Verse 256).

Through this unique democratic theory, the Iranian reflexive revivalists issued a threatening challenge to the authoritarian clerical government within Iran. Though they have been marginalized for the last two decades, their theory is very much alive both within Iran itself as well as abroad. The prospects for democratic transition in Iran today are actually quite good despite the government's continuous violation of individual freedoms. For example, many of Iran's young men and women have been through university systems both within Iran and abroad, providing Iranian civil society with a body of well-informed and cosmopolitan social agents with high expectations of government; young Iranians have overwhelmingly turned away from clerical authority and discounted a revolutionary narrative of international isolation, martyrdom, and dutiful piety; the clerical conservative regime is almost completely isolated internationally with few allies capable of assisting them should a mass uprising occur; many high-ranking clerics have turned away from the Iranian regime and have sharply criticized Ayatollah Khamene'i for using Islam as a means of political repression; and most importantly, nearly 80 percent of the population supports the democratic reform narrative that was undergirded by the intellectual efforts of Iran's reflexive revivalists.[136]

Despite all of these trends suggesting that a realization of the Islamization of secularism in Iran is possible, there are four major obstacles that have hindered democratic transition. First, the Iranian regime is not simply an authoritarian government, but is a religious government that still maintains the unwavering support of about 20 percent of the population. According to a former member of the Iranian Green Movement, "these people still really believe that the *rahbar* is the representative of God on earth. They would die for him if he told them God wanted them to."[137] Second, in addition to this zealous portion of the population—many of whom are already

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[136] Hashemi, Nader. "Is Rouhanin the Iranian Gorbachev?" and Milani, Abbas. "Prospects for Democracy in Iran"

members of the armed forces, *basij* militias, or the police force—the *Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guard), has a vested interest in keeping the conservative government in power, violently if necessary. During the reconstruction era in the early 1990s, Khamene'i and Rafsanjani gave the *Pasdaran* control of approximately 40 percent of the entire Iranian economy. Should the current political balance be upset, their economic interests would likely be threatened by a new government system. As such, there is a good reason to believe that, as demonstrated during the Green Movement protests of 2009, the armed forces would willingly fire upon the population if there was a democratic uprising.[138]

Third, with the knowledge that the armed forces would likely fire upon the Iranian people if their economic and political interests were threatened, the specter of the Syrian civil war looms over the head of many Iranians. With well over one hundred thousand people dead and the civil war showing no signs of slowing down, the Iranian people, in many ways, fear a similar bloody fate. In addition to that, the violent anarchy and mass political executions that ensued after the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution are still very much alive in many Iranians' memory. Finally, the international sanctions that are in place have overwhelmingly hurt the Iranian people more than the conservative establishment. With their currency devalued by nearly 80 percent since 2006, economic hardship has afflicted lower and middle-class Iranians alike. As such, many do not have the luxury to step away from their occupations for long periods of time, making a prolonged popular insurrection less of a reality for many Iranians who need to focus instead on managing everyday expenses.[139]

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[137] Anonymous. Interview conducted February 16, 2014. When I told this individual that my work may be publically published on the university's website, they asked that I kept their identity confidential.

[138] Hashemi, Nader. "Is Rouhanin the Iranian Gorbachev?" and Milani, Abbas. "Prospects for Democracy in Iran"

[139] *Ibid.*

Democratic transition in Iran will likely come via a prolonged reform effort rather than a popular uprising. For the time being, however, the revolutionary intellectual efforts of the reflexive revivalists, need not be confined to Iran. Their discourse of democratic reform and a combination of non-coercive secular and Islamic theory can indeed have profound implications as a viable reference for other nations across the Middle East in their own democratic transitions. The reflexive revivalists must not be blindly mimicked nor disregarded, but religious intellectuals within nascent Middle Eastern democracies must indigenize their own conceptions of secular and Islamic theory, using Iran's Islamization of secularism as a useful framework of reference not a model for reproduction.

Democratic transition will remain an immense task for intellectuals across the Middle East and one that will certainly warrant future research as the Islamization of secularism continues to evolve as it is adapted within various national contexts. The greatest limitations of this particular research study, however, were twofold. First, the vast majority of the intellectual publications of these thinkers remain untranslated from Persian and are notoriously difficult to obtain. Few libraries have access to any of these Persian volumes, meaning that I unfortunately had to rely mostly on secondary sources to gather the majority of the quotes from the theorists used in this case study. Second, there is very little that has been written on this topic, with most intellectual histories of contemporary Iran ending with the initial works of Soroush, without juxtaposing his ideas with those of the many other theorists who have elaborated on his intellectual efforts.

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