

**Political Islam, Political Institutions  
and Civil Society in Iran:  
A Literature Review**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper reviews the literature on political Islam, political institutions and civil society in Iran, as well as the evolution of Iran's relationship with Iraq since 2003. The review begins with an overview of the literature on Iran's post-revolution political system, and political Islam in Iran from 1979 to 2007. It proceeds to examine the literature on political parties and factionalism in Iran; women's political participation; the role of civil society in contemporary Iran; and the social agenda and policy influence of Iran's parastatal foundations (bonyads). The review also explores the literature on the evolution and character of key movements in Iranian politics, including reformism and conservatism. The final sections examine the Iran-Iraq relationship, and identify potential directions for future research.

This review focuses on the research available in English, much of which is produced by members of the Iranian diaspora. It would undoubtedly be enriched by a complementary examination of the substantial body of Farsi literature on these subjects. This review was carried out for IDRC's Middle East Good Governance (MEGG) Fund, as a contribution to the Fund's efforts to support the development of a solid collection of research on political Islam, political parties and civil society in the Middle East. This review aims to enhance the comparative aspect of the research supported by the MEGG Fund, but as a non-Arab, predominantly Shi'a country, Iran differs considerably from the majority of other countries in the region. While countries such as Egypt and Lebanon are ruled by secular regimes grappling with Islamist groups, the post-revolutionary Iranian state is constitutionally defined as an Islamist entity, founded on the doctrine of velayat-e faqih (rule of the Islamic jurist).

Contemporary Iran illustrates the potential benefits, challenges and tensions involved in the incorporation of political Islam into the core of the state. The literature confirms that an impressively diverse array of Iranians identify themselves as Islamists, including members of the beleaguered reform movement. Yet, many key players from the 1979 revolution have grown disillusioned with the ideology of the revolution. The experience of exercising political power has prompted many Iranian Islamists to question the velayat-e faqih, and rethink the relationship between Islam and democracy. Indeed, much of the literature suggests that in comparison to many of its neighbours, Iran has already made significant progress in incorporating democratic principles into the country's political fabric. The Iranian case therefore provides a critical counterpoint for those concerned with the rise and evolution of political Islam in the Middle East, and the question of how the involvement of Islamist groups in mainstream politics affects their agendas.

The literature emphasizes the complex nature of the Iranian political system; the diversity of the key actors and their views; and the importance of the tensions and rivalries that animate Iranian politics. While much of the literature on political Islam in Iran depicts a struggle between the forces of "tradition" and "modernity", a growing number of authors are challenging and adding nuance to this standard dichotomy. For example, many

scholars highlight decidedly modern currents in Islamist debates from Khomeini to the present day.

Contrary to simplistic media portrayals of the Iranian political landscape, the vast majority of the literature on contemporary Iranian politics underlines that neither reformism nor conservatism are monolithic movements. Rather, each faction has various sub-groups, with actors' allegiances shifting depending on the issue at hand. Although the strength of Iranian civil society is a matter of debate, observers are virtually unanimous in recognizing the importance of intellectual and theological debate in Iranian politics. As one author puts it, in "Iran, unlike most countries, epistemological debates have political implications."<sup>1</sup> While it is often assumed that Iranian women are on the margins of these debates, the literature examined in this review suggests that women's rights are a central "battleground" in the fight for legitimacy and control in the Islamic Republic. Women play diverse and active roles in this struggle, whether as MPs, grassroots organizers, scholars or soldiers.

The Iranian reform movement is perhaps the most thoroughly studied aspect of contemporary Iranian politics. The English literature on Iranian political movements focuses principally on the reformist camp, rather than on conservative movements and other trends. However, the evolving relationship *between* reformism and conservatism is explored by numerous authors. While there is heated discussion in the American media and literature on prompting regime change in Iran through military action or other forms of outside pressure, many if not most scholars seem to embrace the view that "[t]here is no question that working within the Islamic system is the best way to initiate reforms in Iran."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many members of the reform movement identify themselves as Islamist.

Most detailed studies of the reform movement were published during the Khatami presidency, when the reform movement was at its zenith. Many of these studies reflect an optimism about the strength of the reform movement that has not proven to be entirely warranted, given the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the virtual disintegration of the reform camp. Many analyses completed since 2005 suggest that while the reform movement suffers from deep internal divisions, a lack of clear vision, and a seeming inability to respond to voters' socio-economic concerns, it would be premature to conclude that reformism is entirely defunct.

### **Issues for future research**

There is clearly a wealth of literature on the experience of political Islam in Iran, but producing comprehensive recommendations on areas for future research would require a thorough examination of the Farsi literature, as well as in-depth discussions with researchers working in Iran. Given the profoundly restrictive political climate in Iran at the moment, this is no simple proposition. However, it is clear from the literature that understanding Iran's encounters with political Islam is essential to appreciating the

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<sup>1</sup> Kurzman, C. (2001) "Critics within: Islamic scholars' protests against the Islamic state in Iran", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 16 (1), p. 341, 357.

<sup>2</sup> Jahanbegloo, R. (2000) "The Role of the Intellectuals", *Journal of Democracy* 11 (4), p. 135.

broader trajectory of political Islam in the Middle East. Yet there is only a limited amount of recent literature that engages in rigorous comparative analysis of Islamism in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East. Despite the challenges associated with carrying out comparative studies on Iran, focused comparative research could yield insightful results of clear interest to both scholars and political actors.

Many prominent interpretations of contemporary political events in Iran are not based on rigorous analysis, and several scholars identify specific issues within the broad topic of political Islam and Iranian politics that merit future research. Key questions that have attracted relatively little scholarly attention include: “How and under what circumstances have domestic changes occurred during the past two decades under the rule of the Islamic state in Iran? To what extent have the revolutionary political culture and the legacy of Khomeini...continued or changed? When and how have domestic and international politics interacted in post-revolutionary Iran?”<sup>3</sup> Arguments about the social significance of popular or grassroots reform movements require further substantiation. Similarly, despite the unquestionable political importance of young Iranians, there is a lack of solid studies on this generation’s views and political activities. Scholars have also highlighted the need for more research on the operations and influence of the bonayds; the evolving views and strategies of Iranian Islamist feminists; and significance of the transformation of the public and private spheres in Iran, given the implementation of Islamist policies in Iran. While various analysts suggest that Iran functions as a quasi-hegemon in the region, analyses of Iran’s influence in Iraq are rife with assumptions that could be beneficially substantiated or refuted with more rigorous research. Each of these lines of inquiry pose serious practical challenges, but could make valuable contributions to policy as well as to the state of research on political Islam in Iran and internationally.

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<sup>3</sup> Vaez, H. (2004) “Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Continuity and Change”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31(2), p. 237.

## **Introduction**

One of the most popular images to describe the political situation in Iran is a crossroads.<sup>4</sup> Domestically, Iran stands at a crossroads between modernity and tradition, reform and conservatism, and democratization and political repression. Internationally, Iran finds itself at a crossroads in terms of its nuclear policy, and its relationship with its neighbour and historical nemesis, Iraq. Despite sharp limits on academic freedom in Iran, many researchers in Iran, the Middle East and further afield are working to understand the political and religious views and the socio-economic conditions that have brought Iran to so many critical junctures.

This paper reviews the literature on political Islam, political institutions and civil society in Iran, as well as the evolution of Iran's relationship with Iraq since 2003. The review begins with an overview of the literature on Iran's post-revolution political system, and political Islam in Iran from 1979 to 2007. It proceeds to examine the literature on political parties and factionalism in Iran; women's political participation; the role of civil society in contemporary Iran; and the social agenda and policy influence Iran's parastatal foundations. The review also explores the literature on the evolution and character of key Iranian political movements, including reformism and conservatism. The final sections examine the Iran-Iraq relationship, and identify potential directions for future research.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that this review focuses on the research available in English, much of which is produced by members of the Iranian diaspora. The review would undoubtedly be enriched by a complementary examination of the substantial body of Farsi literature on these subjects. This would bring to light more of the research produced by Iranians working in Iran.

This review was carried out for IDRC's Middle East Good Governance (MEGG) Fund, as a contribution to the Fund's efforts to support the development of a solid collection of research on political Islam, political parties and civil society in the Middle East. This review aims to enhance the comparative aspect of the research supported by the MEGG Fund, but it is important to note that the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran differs considerably from the majority of other countries in the region. Iran is one of the few countries in the world where Shi'a Muslims are in the majority. Unlike its Middle Eastern neighbours, Iran is predominantly ethnically Persian (51%) and Azeri (24%) rather than Arab.<sup>6</sup> While countries such as Egypt and Lebanon are ruled by secular regimes grappling with Islamist groups, the post-revolutionary Iranian state is constitutionally defined as an Islamist entity, founded on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurist). Contemporary Iran illustrates the potential benefits,

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Esposito, J., and Ramazani, R. (eds.) (2001) *Iran at the Crossroads* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>5</sup> A significant percentage of the English literature on Iranian politics and political Islam focuses on Iranian-American relations and Iran's nuclear program, and appears to be undertaken largely by researchers working in Europe and the United States. This literature review does not focus on Iran's nuclear policy or its relationship with the United States, but acknowledges the influence of these issues on the study and practice of Iranian politics.

<sup>6</sup> CIA (2007) "Iran", *CIA World Factbook 2007* (Washington, D.C.: CIA).

challenges and tensions involved in the incorporation of political Islam into the core of the state. The literature confirms that an impressively diverse array of Iranians identify themselves as Islamists, including members of the beleaguered reform movement. Yet, many key players from the 1979 revolution have grown disillusioned with the ideology of the revolution. At the same time, processes of technological modernization and westernization touch virtually every corner of the country. The Iranian case therefore provides an interesting counterpoint for those concerned with the rise and evolution of political Islam in the Middle East, and the question of how the involvement of Islamist groups in mainstream politics affects their agendas.

*A brief sketch of Iranian history, demographics and socio-economic conditions*

Before proceeding with the review, a brief sketch of Iran's history, demographics and socio-economic conditions is in order. Although Iran was never formally colonized, colonial powers exerted considerable influence in Iran in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while the country was ruled by the Qajar dynasty. The Persian Constitutional Revolution took place from 1905-1921, and in a 1921 coup Reza Shah Pahlavi seized power from the enfeebled Qajar rulers. The UK and USSR invaded Iran during World War II and forced the Shah to cede power to his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In 1951, nationalist politician Mohammed Mossadegh was elected Iran's first Prime Minister, and nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (BP), which controlled Iran's vast reserves. With the UK's prompting, the CIA orchestrated a coup against Mossadegh, and reinstated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah in 1953.

Under the Shah's leadership, Iran was the United States' foremost ally in the Middle East, and implemented a series of pro-western policies aimed at social and economic "modernization". Yet the Shah's regime practiced extreme political repression, imprisoning numerable critics including Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who went into exile following his release from prison in 1964. A movement for change gained momentum amongst an eclectic collection of actors, including secularists, Marxists and political Islamists. This movement drove the Shah from power in 1979, after which Khomeini returned to Iran and consolidated his standing as the figurehead of the revolution. Khomeini instituted his doctrine of velayat-e faqih, which was anchored in the new Constitution in 1979, following a national referendum. After establishing new structures of Islamic government, Khomeini suppressed the opposition raised by some former revolutionary supporters, and drove women, secularists and liberals from prominent public positions, particularly in the universities and judiciary.

The US decision to extend asylum to the Shah inflamed relations between Washington and Tehran, and US-Iranian relations deteriorated dramatically due to the November 1979-January 1981 US Embassy Hostage Crisis. The brutal Iran-Iraq war began in 1980 and raged until 1988. Grand Ayatollah Khomeini died in June 1989, and was replaced by Ali Khamenei, the former President and a relatively junior cleric. Under Supreme Leader Khamenei and Presidents Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Khatami (1997-2005) and Ahmadinejad (2005-present), Iran has emerged as a regional hegemon, but has been unable to recover entirely from the socio-economic impacts of the Iran-Iraq war.

Iran has a population of 68.6 million, made up of ethnic Persians (51%) and Azeris (24%), with notable minority populations of Gilakis and Mazandarani (8%) and Kurds (7%). 89% are Shi'a Muslims, while 9% are Sunnis. 2% of the population come from Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian or Bahai backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> The reform of Iranian family planning policies in the late 1980s led to the stabilization of the Iranian population growth rate at 1.1%, yet the denial of access to family planning options in the first decade after the revolution has resulted in a population that is one of the youngest in the world. 70% of the overall population and 50% of the Iranian electorate is under the age of 30.<sup>8</sup> Between 1976 and 1991, literacy rates rose from 47% to 71%, and now stand at 79% (male 86%, female 73%). However, unemployment rates are high, significant proportions of the population underemployed, and the country has one of the highest rates of "brain drain" in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Iran's political landscape is definitively shaped by its natural resources: Iran has the world's second largest gas and third largest oil reserves. Yet Iran's plentiful natural resources have not translated into improved standards of living for the majority of the population. In real terms, Iran's average per capita income has fallen by a third since the revolution, while the standard of living has declined by 20 percent, with 40% of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> The oil industry is characterized by widespread corruption, and the country is forced to import energy because it lacks sufficient domestic refining capacity. A widespread concern for young Iranians is the impossibility of earning the substantial amounts of money required to marry. Young Iranians have no cherished memories of the revolution, and often a much greater willingness than older generations to question the wisdom of a political system that has proven unable to meet their basic socio-economic needs.

### **The Iranian political system**

Iran's political system is notoriously complex. Understanding the purpose and character of the country's various political bodies requires an appreciation of both the theological underpinnings of the Islamic Republic, and the competing interests of these institutions and their leaders. William Buchta's 2000 text *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* is widely regarded as one of the clearest and most penetrating

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<sup>7</sup> Eliz Sanasarian's 2000 book *Religious Minorities in Iran* provides a well-researched discussion of the implications of Iran's Islamist ideology for members of the country's main non-Muslim religious minorities, the Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Zoroastrians, Jews, Bahais and converted Christians. Focusing primarily on the first decade of the Islamic Republic (1979-1989), Sanasarian engages two main questions: "(1) what has been the overall policy of the theocratic Islamic state toward its non-Muslim religious minorities? And (2), how have the minorities dealt with the state intrusion into their lives?" Sanasarian emphasizes the importance of learned cultural traditions in shaping the minorities' responses to changing political circumstances, and concludes by raising broader questions about the "perils of marginality" in the Islamic Republic. See Sanasarian, E. (2006) *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, D. (2006) "Iran's Quiet Revolution", *The Walrus*, September 2006, p. 58

<sup>9</sup> BBC (2007) "Huge cost of Iranian brain drain", *BBC News*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>10</sup> CIA 2007.

explanations of Iran's political structure.<sup>11</sup> The International Crisis Group has also released a number of reports that provide succinct overviews of the Iranian political system and the affiliations of the key players.<sup>12</sup> Although the "genesis, institutions, and political life [of the Islamic Republic] have been described in great detail,"<sup>13</sup> few analyses "do justice to the relationships—blood as well as political—between many prominent Iranians, still less to the personal animosities that excite them."<sup>14</sup> Nikki Keddie's updated text *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* provides a prescient analysis of the antecedents of the revolution, the political system it engendered, and recent challenges to this system.<sup>15</sup>

Major political institutions in Iran include the office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the office of the President and the Iranian Parliament (majlis). Each institution has a role in the conceptualization of Iran as an Islamic state, and the functions and limitations of these offices are set out in Iranian Constitution. The Constitution recognizes that Islam is a comprehensive way of life, which serves as the basis of government, and rightfully regulates both worship and society. It also enshrines both limited democratic principles and the doctrine of velayat-e faqih. The theological and democratic principles set out in the Constitution often clash with one another, leading to conflict between Iran's elected and unelected rulers.<sup>16</sup> Schirazi's oft-cited *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* provides an exhaustive discussion of the Constitution and its political significance. Prominent Iranian lawyer Mehrangiz Kar has also written on the Iranian Constitution, arguing that reform cannot be achieved in Iran without radical changes to the Constitution.<sup>17</sup> In "Islam, Law, and Political Control in Contemporary Iran", Tamadonfar further elaborates on the process of lawmaking in the Islamic Republic. He suggests that by "emphasizing 'communal interest' in legislation and establishing an extensive institutional mechanism of legal control, the clerics gradually marginalized the shari'a and sacrificed the Islamic notion of universality of law for legal territoriality."<sup>18</sup> Tamadonfar suggests that this trend is divorcing the clerics from their traditional religious role, and undercutting their legitimacy. Tamadonfar argues that the reformists' legal and political reform program

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<sup>11</sup> Buchta, W. (2000) *Who Rules Iran? the Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy).

<sup>12</sup> See for example International Crisis Group (2002) *Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution's Soul* (New York: International Crisis Group).

<sup>13</sup> Chehabi, H.E. (2001) "The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective", *Government and Opposition* 36, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Economist (2003) "The surreal world of Iranian politics", *Economist* 366 (8307).

<sup>15</sup> Keddie, N. R. (2006) *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution (updated edition)* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

<sup>16</sup> Conservative commentators such as Amir Mohebbiyan argue that there is no inherent conflict of principles in the Iranian system because the people in fact select the Supreme Leader, as they elect the members of the Assembly of Experts who identify the Supreme Leader. However, critics respond that this argument is flawed as all the members of the Assembly of Experts must be clerics, who are approved by the Council of Guardians.

<sup>17</sup> Kar, M. (2003) "Constitutional Constraints", *Journal of Democracy* 14 (1).

<sup>18</sup> Tamadonfar, M. (2001) "Islam, Law and Political Control in Contemporary Iran", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2).

would in fact benefit the clerical class by instituting a system more consistent with the shari'a.

Numerous authors have written at length on the position of the Supreme Leader, focusing largely on the role and charismatic authority of the first Supreme Leader, and the implications of his death in 1989.<sup>19</sup> For example, Daniel Brumberg argues that Khomeini's revolutionary vision was "anything but straightforward, coherent, or consistent."<sup>20</sup> Rather, "Khomeini's religiopolitical views swung from one perspective to another;...[and] during the last years of his life—and with nearly complete abandon after his death in June 1989—his followers exploited these competing notions of authority to advance various agendas of their own."<sup>21</sup> Brumberg's work also gives insight into Khomeini's conception of both political Islam and political strategy, writing. For example, Brumberg argues that "if [Khomeini]...radiated a spiritual logic that could not be reduced to a vulgar struggle for power or wealth, his quest to forge a new identity for his people was also animated by a rational approach to politics and religion. Khomeini articulated a utilitarian instrumentalism that viewed religion as a useful tool for attaining collective political and social ends."<sup>22</sup> Many scholars concerned with Khomeini's legacy underline the disparity between Khomeini's impeccable theological qualifications, and the much lower clerical status of his successor, Khamenei, who was only elevated to the rank of Ayatollah when he was made Supreme Leader. These observers stress that Khamenei's lack of theological qualifications brings the legitimacy of his leadership and the theocratic system into question.

Turning to Iran's elected institutions, Baktiari's *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran* provides a useful introduction to the politics of the majlis and the importance of factionalism in the Iranian political system.<sup>23</sup> Much of the literature on the reform movement contains detailed analyses of the political performance of former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani, as well as discussions of the limitations Iran's dual power system places on the president. The International Crisis Group's 2007 report *Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad's Tumultuous Presidency* provides a sharp, contemporary analysis of the current president's performance, and underlines the "continued ability of politics in Iran to swing the pendulum back, rein in policies deemed dangerous to regime survival and

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Halliday, F. (2000) "The contradictory legacies of Ayatollah Khomeini: The Iranian revolution at twenty", in Tapper, R. (ed.) *Ayatollah Khomeini and the modernization of Islamic thought* (London: Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies). See also Ehteshami, A. (1995) *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge); and Mozaffari, M. (1993) "Changes in the Iranian Political System after Khomeini's Death", *Political Science* 41.

<sup>20</sup> Brumberg, D. (2001) *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> Brumberg 2001, p. ix. See also Brumberg, D. (1997) "Khomeini's Legacy: Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice", in Appleby, S. (ed.) *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders in the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>22</sup> Brumberg 2001, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Baktiari, B. (1996) *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida).

trigger change—arduous, slow and modest though it might be.”<sup>24</sup> The ICG opines that more than anything else, the “president’s inability to deliver on his economic program...is contributing to his noticeable and steady decline in the public’s eyes.”<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that Ahmadinejad’s rule is tenuous, or that the international pressure can productively alter the course of Iranian politics.

In addition to political institutions such as the majlis and the presidency, military and paramilitary institutions are also animated by Islamist principles, and exert considerable influence on the Iranian political landscape. These institutions include the volunteer *basij* militia, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is discussed at length by Kenneth Katzman.<sup>26</sup>

Taking a broader perspective, Esposito and Ramazani’s edited collection *Iran at the Crossroads* offers a series of essays on pressing challenges including reform and resistance, evolving ideology, women’s rights and foreign policy, by prominent scholars such as Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Mohsen Milani and Fred Halliday.<sup>27</sup> Scholar H.E. Chehabi has also produced influential analyses of the Iranian political system, suggesting that “[g]iven the explicitly non-democratic bent of the original Islamic republicans, their claim that theirs was an ideological state, and this ideology’s derivation from immutable and eternally valid God-given laws, one would expect their regime to be frankly totalitarian.”<sup>28</sup> However, Chehabi argues that contemporary Iran’s political system does not fit the totalitarian model. Chehabi’s work also engages with the difficulties associated with carrying out comparative analyses using the Islamic Republic as a case study. Chehabi suggests that “[s]ince much of the top leadership of the Shi’ite religious establishment has stayed aloof from politics, Iran is not ruled by the clergy but by a politicized section of it”, a group he calls the “clerisy”.<sup>29</sup>

In “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, Kazem Alamdari examines how the clergy and other competing, parallel groups sustain a clientelistic power structure in the Islamic Republic. Alamdari argues that the clientelistic system “originated in three major sources—the Shi’a multiple hierarchy of power, the rentier state and numerous financially self-sufficient religious organizations formed after the 1979 revolution.”<sup>30</sup> Iran’s political structure “is not constructed like a canopy, in which removing the central pole causes its collapse; rather, it is built on many independent, rival, parallel columns of power that hold the system together.”<sup>31</sup> Alamdari asserts that elected government has

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<sup>24</sup> International Crisis Group (2007) *Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad’s Tumultuous Presidency* (New York: International Crisis Group), p. 25. See also International Crisis Group (2005) *Iran: What does Ahmadi-Nejad’s Victory Mean?* (New York: International Crisis Group).

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group 2007, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> See Katzman, K. (1993) *The Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview Press).

<sup>27</sup> Esposito and Ramazani 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Chehabi 2001, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Chehabi 2001, p. 52. See also Chebadi, H. E. (1991) “Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic is the Islamic Republic?”, *Daedalus* 120.

<sup>30</sup> Alamdari, K. (2005) “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government”, *Third World Quarterly* 26 (8), p. 1298.

<sup>31</sup> Alamdari 2005, p. 1299.

failed to end clientelism in Iran, and that it is unlikely to do so as long as non-elected leaders retain their powerful positions. The clientelistic system will end, Alamdari argues, only with the strengthening of a class system in Iran.

Similarly, Kamrava and Hassan-Yari argue that the Iranian political system involves two sets of power relations: official, constitutionally-sanctioned institutional relationships, and unofficial relations “existing between and within groups and clusters of powerful individuals and institutions.” Kamrava and Hassan-Yari suggest that the juxtaposition of formal institutions and unofficial factional alliances has resulted in a precarious balance of power, with two main results: “On the one hand, the emergence of multiple centres of power has enhanced the extent and reach of the state in relation to various social strata, thus bestowing it with considerable durability and staying power. On the other hand, the existence of multiple official and unofficial venues for competition has sharpened the tenor and substance of factional rivalries.”<sup>32</sup>

Although principally concerned with foreign policy, Ray Takeyh’s *Hidden Iran* picks up similar themes, elucidating for an American audience how Iran’s domestic political rivalries shape its behaviour internationally. Like Chehabi, Takeyh stresses Iran’s differences from a typical totalitarian state, emphasizing Iran’s competitive electoral traditions, its complex bureaucracy and the importance of key personalities in Iranian politics. Takeyh underlines how decentralized and flexible the Islamic Republic has become since 1979, and points out that “Iran has not undergone the typical experience of a revolutionary state—namely, relinquishing its radical patrimony for more mundane temptations. The perennial conflict between ideological determinations and practical considerations continues to plague the Islamic Republic.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Takeyh suggests that Iran’s foreign policy is best understood as a “matrix with three competing elements—Islamic ideology, national interests and factional politics.”<sup>34</sup>

Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr’s 2006 text *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* integrates analysis of Iranian history, Islam, political developments and civil society movements to elucidate how Iran has “responded to the challenge of balancing state-building with democracy-building.”<sup>35</sup> Their work provides insight into the role of democracy in the Iranian political system, focusing on its traction at the grassroots level. Gheissari and Nasr argue what while Iran has been an “improbable candidate for the flowering of democracy...in many regards there is more progress toward democracy in Iran than in any other country in the Middle East, perhaps with the exception of Turkey.”<sup>36</sup> This progress is reflected in regular elections, which actually influence policymaking and the distribution of power at national and local levels. While there are many barriers to democracy in Iran, the country is home to a “citizenry that understands

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<sup>32</sup> Kamrava, M. and H. Hassan-Yari (2004) “Suspended Equilibrium in Iran’s Political System”, *Muslim World* 94 (4), p. 495.

<sup>33</sup> Takeyh, R. (2006) *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Gheissari, A., and V. Nasr (2006) *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. vii.

<sup>36</sup> Gheissari and Nasr 2006, pp. v-vi.

the fundamental logic of democracy and the laws that govern its practice.”<sup>37</sup> Gheissari and Nasr argue the “[d]emocracy in Iran was neither a project of the state nor imported as an ideal form of politics from the West...but has rather emerged as a grassroots phenomenon, so that democratic thinking and political expectations are prevalent in society and now serve as the main impetus for continued struggle toward democratic change.”<sup>38</sup> The authors differentiate the Iranian case from the rest of the Middle East, because in Iran it is popular democratic attitudes rather than top-down reforms that account for the advance toward democracy. They explore why theocratic Iran has made greater progress than its secular neighbours, and discuss the legacy of Iran’s experiences for democratization in the Muslim world. Gheissari and Nasr suggest that the “seeming paradox” of the Iranian case lies in the complex nature of Iran’s deep-rooted struggle with democracy, and debates over the best route to development.<sup>39</sup>

### **Political Islam in Iran, 1979-2007**

Political Islam, or “Islam as political ideology” is by no means a monolithic school of thought.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the variants of political Islam found around the world are shaped by diverse socio-economic, political, cultural and intellectual factors. Generally speaking, political Islam may be described as the belief that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world”.<sup>41</sup> Political scientist Guilian Denooux defines political Islam as a “form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition”.<sup>42</sup>

Ayoob points out that much of the literature and even academic discourse on the Muslim world assumes that there is no separation in Islam between the political and religious spheres. Islamist rhetoric has contributed significantly to the popularity of this view, particularly in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the link between political life and Islam is enshrined in the Constitution and is essential to the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state. However, it is important to recognize that Shi’a thinking on the relationship between Islam and politics has historically been dominated by quietism, the view that the religious establishment should refrain from active engagement in politics. Quietism continues to be espoused by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf, the pre-

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<sup>37</sup> Gheissari and Nasr 2006, p. vi.

<sup>38</sup> Gheissari and Nasr 2006, p. vi.

<sup>39</sup> Gheissari and Nasr 2006, p. vii.

<sup>40</sup> Ayoob, M. (2004) “Political Islam: Image and Reality”, *World Policy Journal* (Fall 2004), p. 1

<sup>41</sup> Ayoob 2004, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The influential International Crisis Group also provides a detailed discussion of Islamism in its 2005 report *Understanding Islamism*. The report points out that whereas the group’s earlier work defined Islamism as “Islam in its political mode”, this definition is inadequate, because it implies that Islam is apolitical. However, insofar as Islam is concerned with issues of governance, the religion is inherently political. Furthermore, this definition suggests that all forms of Islamism are equally political, which is not the case. The report employs a definition of Islamism as “Islamic activism”, understood as the “active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws or political that are held to be Islamic in character.” International Crisis Group (2005) *Understanding Islamism* (New York: International Crisis Group), p. 1.

eminent Shi'a religious authority. While the Iranian revolution was a major victory for advocates of an "activist" interpretation of Shi'a Islam, theological debates on the interface of politics and religion are far from over.

Beinin and Stork discuss the history of political Islam in Iran, observing that numerous mullahs struggled against the Qajar and Pahlavi monarchies to establish the primacy of their authority. Notably, however, the vast majority of clerics remained apolitical, and never tried to seize power before the 1979 revolution. While a significant proportion of the mullahs' struggle against the monarchy was shaped by local concerns, Beinin and Stork emphasize that the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* did not emerge in total isolation from other Islamist movements. Beinin and Stork argue that simple historical accounts of the evolution of political Islam often chart separate tracks for Sunnis and Shi'as. However, a closer analysis reveals connections between the Sunni and Shi'a strands of political Islam. For example, Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, an early Sunni leader of political Islamic thought, is credited with contributing to nationalist movements in Iran.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the dominant form of political Islam in Iran is inseparable from Twelver Shi'ism, the main variant of Shi'ism in Iran.<sup>44</sup>

While in exile in Iraq, Ayatollah Khomeini developed the major theoretical lines of the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, or "rule of the Islamic jurist". In "The Rule of the Religious Jurist in Iran", Abdulaziz Sachedina offers an accessible introduction to the *velayat-e faqih*, focusing on the political context in which the doctrine was articulated and has evolved. Sachedina also explores the political and legal consequences of this perspective.<sup>45</sup> A theory with little precedent in Shi'a political and theological thought, the doctrine posits that while waiting for the return of the hidden imam, legitimate Islamic governance is possible by having religious leaders serve "essentially as interim leaders".<sup>46</sup> In *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, Vanessa Martin discusses Khomeini's view that the clerical elite (*fuqaha*) have the right to identify a man within their own ranks to serve as the Supreme Leader or "ruling jurist" (*vali-ye faqih*).<sup>47</sup> While Khomeini's views on Islam and public life are often characterized as traditional or backward-looking, Martin stresses the deeply modern nature of Khomeini's thought and political strategy.

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<sup>43</sup> Beinin, J. and Stork, J. (eds.) (1997) *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>44</sup> Briefly, Shi'ites believe that the Prophet Mohammad's son-in-law Ali was the rightful leader of the Islamic community after the Prophet's death. Twelver Shi'ism, the largest branch of Shi'a Islam, follows the teachings of the twelve Shi'ite imams who are seen as the legitimate successors of the Prophet. Adherents believe that the twelfth imam, the Mahdi, did not die but has been in hiding since 873, and will eventually return to bring justice to the world. Twelver Shi'a has a hierarchical clerical system in which the senior clergy collectively represent the authority and accumulated spiritual wisdom of the hidden imam. The senior clergy (Ayatollahs) hold significant social and cultural power, as they administer justice and guide their followers on behalf of the hidden imam. Twelver Shi'a became the official religion of Iran in 1501. (International Crisis Group 2001, p. 1.)

<sup>45</sup> Sachedina, A. (2001) "The Rule of the Religious Jurist in Iran", in Esposito and Ramazani 2001.

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group 2002, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Martin, V. (2000) *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris).

The assumption of supreme political power by an Islamic jurist reflects Khomeini's belief that divine laws must be enforced as the basis of Islamic society. Accordingly, Khomeini argued that knowledge of Islamic laws and justice in implementing them are the two fundamental qualifications for political leadership. An elaboration of this view is available in Hamid Algar's well-regarded translation and annotation of Khomeini's "Islamic Government".<sup>48</sup> In his seminal 1985 text *The Mantel of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, Roy Mottahedeh provides a celebrated account of the revolutionary period and the emergence of Iran's dominant forms of political Islam, interlacing history and biography with political and religious analysis. Mottahedeh emphasises the "variety and complexity of Iranian culture", which results in remarkably diverse responses to the revolution and the process of political change, from the national to individual levels.<sup>49</sup>

In the aftermath of the revolution, Iranian politics was replete with references to "Islamic ideology", the origins and permeations of which are perceptively discussed in Hamid Dabashi's monograph *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*.<sup>50</sup> Although the doctrine of velayat-e faqih still garners avid support amongst Iran's conservative clerical establishment, popular backing for the view has waned, prompting Iranian-American scholar Mohsen Milani to argue that with the emergence of the Iranian reform movement, an "ideological war" broke out between "two opposing paradigms of Islamic governance".<sup>51</sup> The conservative paradigm is firmly rooted in Khomeini's teaching, and is based on "limited popular sovereignty", while the second, reformist, paradigm advocates popular sovereignty as the "essence of governance".<sup>52</sup> The second paradigm is no less an Islamist view than the first, but is grounded in the belief that democracy is compatible with and complementary to Islam, and that "no authority can deprive the people from enjoying the divine gift of freedom".<sup>53</sup> The second paradigm received widespread support amongst Iranian voters in the 1997 presidential elections, but the "ideological war" floundered under Khatami's leadership. Various observations suggest that Ahmadinejad's electoral victory on a platform of anti-corruption and "bread and butter" issues demonstrates that the majority of Iranian voters are much more concerned with day to day socio-economic conditions than debates about variants of political Islam.

This view is bolstered by the research carried out by Mansoor Moaddel and Taqhi Azadarmaki on the worldviews of Islamic publics, drawing on the results of the 2000-2001 World Values Surveys. Moaddel and Azadarmaki compare the religious convictions, religiosity, national identity and views on gender relations, family and the

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<sup>48</sup> Algar, H. (trans.) (1981) *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press).

<sup>49</sup> Mottahedeh, R. (2004) *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: One World Publications), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Dabashi, H. (1993) *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press).

<sup>51</sup> Milani, M. (2005) "Iran, the Status Quo Power", *Current History* 104, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

West held by Egyptians, Iranians and Jordanians.<sup>54</sup> The survey data indicates that 97% of Egyptians and 96% of Jordanians said that religion was very important in their lives, compared to 79% of Iranians. 70% of the Egyptian respondents felt that religious authorities responded adequately to the country's social problems, while the figure for Jordan was 60%. In theocratic Iran, only 47% felt that religious authorities responded adequately to social problems. While 64% of Egyptians and 85% of Jordanians felt that Western cultural invasion was one of the very important problems facing their countries, only 55% of Iranians held this view. The authors conclude by suggesting that the nature of the national regime is a key determinant affecting variations in the respondents' worldviews: "the experience of having lived for more than two decades under an Islamic fundamentalist regime has had a counter-productive effect, making Iranians *less* religious and less concerned about Western cultural invasion instead of more so."<sup>55</sup> They also note that the data indicates an intergenerational shift in Iran away from "fundamentalist beliefs."<sup>56</sup>

The Iranian studies literature explores many different examples of how the experience of power has prompted different types of Islamists, such as ultra-conservative clerics and anti-American students, to revise their approach to both politics and religion.<sup>57</sup> For example, Mir-Hosseini argues that "When they were in opposition, the clerics, as guardians of Islam, could deal with practical issues at an abstract and generalized level, leaving it to the conscience of the believer to interpret and carry out the appropriate practices."<sup>58</sup> However, "when shari'a becomes part of the apparatus of a modern nation state, its custodians may have to accommodate, even seek novel interpretations. This opens room for change on a scale that has no precedent in Islamic history."<sup>59</sup> Scholars such as Boroujeradi, Schirazi and Kian Thiebaut have suggested that many members of the Islamist elite have undergone a process of secularization, prompted by their confrontation with issues for which there is no clear answer in shari'a.<sup>60</sup> (Indeed, Sami Zubaida suggests that "ninety percent of legislation is on matters irrelevant to the Shari'a, such as administrative procedures, traffic regulations, economic policies and so on."<sup>61</sup>) In *Being Modern in Iran*, Adelkhah explores how the experience of power changed

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<sup>54</sup> For a more focused discussion of the impact of political Islam on Iranian women, see Bahramitash, R. (2004) "Myths and Realities of the Impact of Political Islam on Women: Female Employment in Indonesia and Iran", *Development in Practice* 14 (4).

<sup>55</sup> Moaddel, M. and Azadarmaki, T. (2002) "The Worldviews of Islamic Publics: The Cases of Egypt, Iran and Jordan", *Comparative Sociology* 1 (3-4).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Paidar, P. (2002) "Encounters between Feminism, Democracy and Reformism in Contemporary Iran" Molyneux, M. and Razavi, S. (eds.) in *Gender Justice, Development and Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 250.

<sup>58</sup> Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1999) *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 273.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Paidar 2002, p. 250. See also Boroujerdi, M. (1997) "Iranian Islam and the Faustian Bargain of Western Modernity", *Journal of Peace Research*, 34 (1); Kian-Thiebaut, A. (1998) *Secularisation of Iran: A Doomed Failure? The Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran* (Paris: Diffusion Peeters); and Schirazi, A. (1997) *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris).

<sup>61</sup> Zubaida, S. (2000) "Trajectories of Political Islam: Egypt, Iran and Turkey", *Political Quarterly* 71, p. 65.

Islamists' social role. She writes, "Defence of their special corporate identity no longer seems a crucial issue, since an increasing number of men of religion participate fully not only in the exercise of power but much more widely in the life of society as doctors, journalists, deputies, mayors, military personnel, even television producers."<sup>62</sup>

In "Trajectories of Political Islam: Egypt, Iran and Turkey", Sami Zubaida gives a theoretically rigorous discussion of the evolution of Islamist movements, focusing on the "routinization of charisma", and, in the Iranian case, the rationalization of the economy and government structures. Zubaida argues that in "Iran, the country of the popular revolution that became Islamic, there is now a move away from Islamic government. Islamic ideology and institutions, in becoming part of the state and politics, lost their sanctity and charisma."<sup>63</sup> However, Zubaida stresses that this does not necessarily mean that interest in Islam itself has waned, and emphasizes that the conservative forces are well-positioned to resist any threat to the security of Islamist institutions.

In *Islam and Democracy* (1996), Esposito and Voll engage in another comparative examination of six case studies that highlight diverse experiences of political Islam and Islamic movements around the world. Esposito and Voll argue that discussion of Iran and Sudan is "clearly necessary in a study of Islam and democracy", as "[these] two cases are often depicted as the prime examples of militant, revolutionary Islam."<sup>64</sup> The authors place the Iranian experience at one end of a spectrum that also includes "new style movements" in which Islamists are active participants in existing political systems (Malaysia and Pakistan), and cases in which Islamist movements are outlawed and at times violently suppressed (Egypt and Algeria). Esposito and Voll note the high levels of popular political participation in Iran, and underline that "although the actual practice of the Islamic Republic is open to strong criticism for human rights abuses, suppression, and authoritarian rule, its leaders continue to affirm in the definition of the republic itself the importance of popular participation and maintaining the republic as a government of the people."<sup>65</sup> This book serves as a helpful introduction to influential American scholarship on Iran, as it is interwoven with references to analyses of post-Khomeini Iran, published in establishmentarian American journals such as *Foreign Affairs*. For example, Esposito and Voll engage neoconservative scholar Fouad Ajami's view that "A transformed Iran has emerged after the appropriation of political power by theocrats and their flock... Judging by its record over a decade, it is a revolutionary state with cunning to match its ferocity, a state capable of organizing great campaigns and retreats and adjusting to things that can and cannot be."<sup>66</sup> Esposito and Voll also echo Hooglund's assessment of the transition of power from Khomeini to Khamenei: "The broad consensus that allowed the smooth transition of power in Iran was reached by the spring of 1989 after a remarkably open debate of nearly a year."<sup>67</sup> In the second republic, "Iranian politics will involve much ongoing intra-regime bargaining, national debate and forming and

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<sup>62</sup> Adelhah, F. (2000) *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 101.

<sup>63</sup> Zubaida 2000, p. 66.

<sup>64</sup> Esposito, J. and Voll, J. (1996) *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Esposito and Voll 1996, p. 76.

<sup>66</sup> Ajami, F. (1988) "Iran: The Impossible Revolution", *Foreign Affairs* 67 (2), p. 136. See also Hunter, S. (1989) "Post-Khomeini Iran", *Foreign Affairs* 68 (2).

<sup>67</sup> Hooglund, E. (1992) "Iranian Populism and Political Change in the Gulf", *Middle East Report* 174 (22).

reforming of a consensus acceptable to most of the important actors and their constituencies.”<sup>68</sup>

The essays in Ramin Jahanbegloo’s edited collection *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* provide a detailed intellectual exploration of the relationship between Islam, modernity and political life in Iran.<sup>69</sup> Zubaida also engages in a critical discussion of the interplay between Islam, political Islam and modernity in his chapter “Is Iran and Islamic State?” Zubaida argues that while the “project of the Islamic Republic is to Islamize state, society and culture...the basic processes of modernity in the socioeconomic and cultural fields, as well as in government, subvert and subordinate Islamization. The Islamic authorities are often forced to adapt their policies and discourses to practical considerations. ‘Secularization’ has not been reversed, but disguised behind imposed symbols and empty rhetoric.”<sup>70</sup> Continuing the debate, Hamid Dabashi mounts a detailed historical rebuttal to the standard dichotomy between “traditional” and “modern” Iran, suggesting that this binary distorts understanding of the history and politics of Iran, and perpetuates colonialist mentalities. As an alternative framework for understanding Iranian society, Dabashi forwards the concept of “anticolonial modernity”, which is grounded in Iranians’ struggles “against the colonial robbery of the moral and material foundations of [their] historical agency.”<sup>71</sup>

*Challenges to mainstream political Islamism in Iran: ‘Abdolkarim Soroush and “dynamic jurisprudence”*

Non-clerical religious intellectuals have played a significant role in prompting Iranians to rethink the religious and political precepts upon which the Islamic Republic is based. Undoubtedly the most influential of these religious intellectuals (*roshanfekrane dini*) is the iconic ‘Abdolkarim Soroush. A prominent ideologue in the early Islamic Republic, Soroush became disillusioned with post-revolutionary Iran and eventually transformed into one of its most compelling critics. While Soroush is regarded in the seminaries as an “intellectual lightweight”, as a non-cleric he has been particularly successful in capturing the attention of the Iranian public. The editors of a key annotated English collection of Soroush’s work contend that “‘Abdolkarim Soroush has emerged as the foremost Iranian and Islamic political philosopher and theologian. His sprawling intellectual project, aimed at reconciling reason and faith, spiritual authority and political liberty, ranges

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Jahanbegloo, R. (ed.) (2004) *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books). See also Vahdat, F. (2003) “Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction of Human Subjectivity”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (4).

<sup>70</sup> Zubaida, S. (1997) “Is Iran an Islamic State”, in Beinlin and Stork 1997, p. 105.

<sup>71</sup> Dabashi, H. (2007) *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press). See also Boroujerdi 1997, and Mirsepassi, A. (2000) *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Mirsepassi mounts a forceful critique of the idea of a “clash of civilizations”, arguing against the construction of a binary between the “modern” West and the un-modern, irrational East. Mirsepassi helpfully identifies three main phases of Iranian modernity: First, an uncritical adoption of Western models of modernity in place of Iranian culture; second, a revised leftist conception of modernity critiquing colonialism and capitalism; and third, the development of Islamic discourses on modernity.

authoritatively over comparative religion, social science and theology.”<sup>72</sup> His influence is reflected throughout much of the literature on reform and political Islam in Iran. A pillar of Soroush’s views is the distinction he draws between “religion” and “religious knowledge”. While Soroush argues that the Koran and hadiths are part of divine and eternal “religion”, the interpretation of these texts is a matter of human religious knowledge, and is thus open to debate. Soroush sees democracy and human rights as core parts of contemporary non-religious knowledge, and argues that these principles must be integrated into Iranian society. Soroush’s revisionist approach to Islam has had particularly strong traction within the Iranian women’s movement, as it has enabled scholars and activists to express their demands within an Islamic framework.<sup>73</sup> Soroush’s views are critically examined in Afshin Matin-asgari’s “Abdolkarim Karim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran” and in Valla Vakili’s *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of ‘Abdolkarim Soroush*.<sup>74</sup>

Mir-Hosseini and Razavi discuss the implications of “dynamic jurisprudence” for establishmentarian conceptions of Islam and political Islam in Iran.<sup>75</sup> Clerical advocates of dynamic jurisprudence argue that the rules of shari’a are time and place sensitive. In identifying the requirements of Islam on a given issue, advocates of dynamic jurisprudence privilege the general principles of humanity and morality over “specific provisions found in various sources of Islamic jurisprudence—provisions which they generally contend were intended for, or are a product of, a different time, place and social context.”<sup>76</sup> While this approach is vociferously rejected by the conservative Iranian clerical establishment, it has stimulated considerable reflection and debate amongst scholars and civil society members.

## **Politics and governance in Iran**

### ***The role of political parties and factions***

Confusingly, the literature on politics in Iran contains extensive references to political parties, as well as the oft-repeated observation that political parties are banned, or do not exist. Stephen Fairbanks’ “Theocracy versus Democracy: Iran Considers Political Parties” provides insight into the history of political parties in Iran, and the ambiguous

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<sup>72</sup> Soroush, A. and Sadri, M. (2000) *Reason, Freedom and Democracy: The Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. ix. This collection contains major essays written by Soroush between 1983 and 1998, presented in chronological order to reflect the evolution of Soroush’s views along with changes in the new Islamic Republic. In his forward to the collection, Soroush writes that the “essays are partly a reaction to and partly an instigator of social developments” in Iran. Soroush worked closely with the editors and translators of this collection, making it an authoritative and reliable English account of his work.

<sup>73</sup> Razavi, S. (2006) “Islamic Politics, Human Rights and Women’s Claims for Equality in Iran”, *Third World Quarterly* 27 (7), p. 1228.

<sup>74</sup> Matin-asgari, A. (1997) “Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran”, *Iranian Studies* 30; Vakili, V. (1996) *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush: Occasional Paper Series, No. 2* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations).

<sup>75</sup> See Razavi 2006 and Mir-Hosseini 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Mokhtari, S. (2004) “The Search for Human Rights within an Islamic Framework in Iran”, *Muslim World* 94 (4), p. 474.

use of the term “party” in Iran today. Fairbanks argues that the establishment of political parties by civil groups is perceived as a direct threat to the clerics’ power, and is incongruous with the theory of velayat-e faqih.<sup>77</sup> However, he points out that Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates that the “formation of parties societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.” In the tumultuous aftermath of the revolution, almost 100 new political organizations emerged, but the rapid growth in political parties endangered the stability of the new republic. Consequently, Khomeini approved a harsh crackdown on the parties, and in 1981 a new law was passed defining political parties and the legitimate scope of their activities. The new law made the creation of political parties dependent on the acquisition of a permit from the Ministry of the Interior. However, the implementation of the commission to authorize political parties was persistently postponed, due to the Iran-Iraq war and the fact that the vast majority of parties had already been banned. On the grounds that it had served its purpose of saving Iranians from “falling into the trap of the parties”, the dominant Islamic Republic Party was voluntarily dissolved in 1986 by its leaders, then-president Khamenei and Rafsanjani.<sup>78</sup>

Fairbanks writes that despite the stagnation of the 1981 political parties law, the leading candidates for the 1997 presidential election were supported for the first time by “quasi-party, political organizations”. Although not official political parties, Fairbanks suggests that their involvement in the election was a significant step towards the creation of formal parties. These “quasi-parties” included the powerful, conservative Militant Clergy Association (Jame’eh-ye Rowhaniyat-e Mobarez, initially created in 1936 in opposition to Reza Shah); the leftist Militant Clerics Society (Majma ‘-e Rowhaniyun-e Mobarez), and the influential Kargozaran, a group of moderate technocrats founded by key officials from the Rafsanjani government. These and other groups resembled political parties in that several had their own newspapers and publicity systems, and effectively mobilized political support for their candidates.<sup>79</sup> These “parties” continue to exert influence in Iranian politics, although many are better described as factions.<sup>80</sup>

As Fairbanks argues, one of the principal problems with Iran’s factions has been their tendency to be subsumed by the parochial interests of particular groups or individuals. Many of the factions have struggled to develop cogent, issue-oriented policy platforms.

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<sup>77</sup> Fairbanks, S. (1998) “Theocracy Versus Democracy: Iran Considers Political Parties”, *Middle East Journal* 52 (1), p. 17. This article is also included as a chapter in the 2003 collection *Iran Encountering Globalization: Problems and Prospects*, edited by Ali Mohammadi. This collection provides an interdisciplinary perspective on a wide range of challenges facing Iran, including political development, democratization, the “Islamization” of Iranian women, and the interface between the global economy and the Islamic Republic.

<sup>78</sup> Fairbanks, S. (1998) ‘Theocracy Versus Democracy: Iran Considers Political Parties’, *Middle East Journal* 52 (1), p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Fairbanks 1998, p. 19-20.

<sup>80</sup> For more information on the history and evolution of factionalism in Iran, see Akhavi, S. (1987) “Elite factionalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *Middle East Journal* 41 (2), and Moslem, M. (2002) *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

These challenges are discussed in greater detail by Iranian scholar Hossein Seifzadeh in his article “The Landscape of Factional Politics and its Future in Iran.”<sup>81</sup> Seifzadeh opens his discussion with the observation that factional sparring has dominated the Iranian political landscape since 1979, and argues that due to the populist nature of Iranian politics, the factional leaders make ambitious promises that cannot be achieved. This inevitably results in popular discontent, and creates a political environment prone to the emergence of charismatic elites and cleavages among political factions.<sup>82</sup> Seifzadeh provides a schematic of factional politics in Iran, distinguishing between the reformists, pragmatists (associated with elite supporters of Rafsanjani) and fundamentalists.<sup>83</sup> All of these groups fall within the “pro-Islamic Republic” sphere. He goes on to highlight the debates between and amongst the members of these factions, analyzing their political discourse on domestic and international issues, and emphasizing the importance of culture in Iranian factional politics. Despite their strong hold on power, Seifzadeh argues that “politicized traditionalists represent a tiny minority in Iran.”<sup>84</sup> While the traditionalists, pragmatists and reformists embrace different approaches to the meaning of Islam and its implications for policy, Seifzadeh argues that each faction has been able to recruit supporters from both traditional and modern sectors of Iranian society, including from within the clergy. However, Seifzadeh notes that due to the diminishing popularity of the clerics, the reformists have revamped their political associations, reorganizing themselves by political considerations rather than clerical affiliations.<sup>85</sup>

Using a world system analysis, Saeidi offers an alternative perspective on the reasons for the emergence of political factions in Iran, and the implications of this system. Saeidi suggests that political factions are intensifying, and that “[p]ost-revolutionary politics has been the scene of clashes between left and right factions that ha[ve] caused political uncertainty, [reflected in] the dislocation of the post-revolutionary state in the world-system.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Saeidi argues that “clashes between the major political factions are the energy source that drives domestic and foreign policies in Iran,” and that “the emergence of political factionalism prevented the establishment of a unified and dominant political and economic approach inside the country non-hostile to the world-system.”<sup>87</sup>

Haleh Afshar complements this work by providing a brief discussion of the impact the absence of political parties has had on Iranian women politicians. Afshar suggests that

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<sup>81</sup> Seifzadeh, H. S. (2003) “The Landscape of Factional Politics and its Future in Iran”, *Middle East Journal* 57 (1). Seifzadeh suggests (p. 64) that “factional politics in Iran are now becoming more issue-oriented. Ideological conflicts are gradually becoming obsolete, and political factions are developing different issue-based strategies to gather support for themselves, though at times with religious dressings.” The election of Ahmadinejad and the deterioration of the reform movement suggest that contrary to Seifzadeh’s conclusion, ideological debates in Iran are poised to continue for some time to come.

<sup>82</sup> Seifzadeh 2003, p. 57-58.

<sup>83</sup> Seifzadeh suggests that the pragmatist Agents for Reconstruction Party was Iran’s first “modern elitist party”, but that the members of this group proved unable to offset the power of the conservative/“fundamentalist” seminarians and bazaar merchants.

<sup>84</sup> Seifzadeh 2003, p. 74.

<sup>85</sup> Seifzadeh 2003, p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> Saeidi, A. (2004) “The Accountability of Para-Governmental Organizations (Bonyads): The Case of Iranian Foundations”, *Iranian Studies* 37 (3), p. 525.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

the absence of formal parties has been a “mixed blessing”, enabling women to campaign as individuals unconstrained by party lines. However, the lack of a party system translates into heavy financial burdens for prospective candidates, which can be particularly difficult for women, who need to negotiate campaign financing with their husbands.<sup>88</sup>

In his short article “The Changing Landscape of Party Politics in Iran: A Case Study”, Abbas William Samii provides a more up-to-date overview of the party system in Iran, and a brief analysis of the emergence of the Jamiyat-I Isargaran-I Inqilab-I Islami party (Isargaran), and its role in President Ahmadinejad’s 2005 election victory. Samii contends that political parties “took off” in Iran after the 1997 election victory of President Khatami, an advocate of the role of political parties in civil society. In 2000, Khatami created a “House of Parties” to provide a legal framework for party activities, but Samii recognizes that many licensed political parties continue to have no real political role. Furthermore, the party system is complicated by the fact the individuals can belong to several parties, and that the parties do not actually field candidates in Iranian elections. Instead, the parties publish lists of the candidates they support, with the parties in a particular faction rarely supporting the same candidates.<sup>89</sup> Samii underlines two key features of the Iranian political system; the first is its dynamism and unpredictability. “Under these circumstances,” Samii argues, “using historical examples, possessing a thorough knowledge of [the] system’s institutions and legal framework, and knowing the specific personalities are essential” to understanding the system.<sup>90</sup> Second, parties such as Isargaran and politicians such as Ahmadinejad represent a younger generation influenced predominantly by the experience of the Iran-Iraq war, rather than the experience of the revolution. The growing power of younger Iranians, and their formative political experiences, must be borne in mind when analyzing the development of political parties in Iran.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Women in Iranian politics***

Western media coverage often fixates on the draconian elements of Iran’s women’s rights policies, obscuring the significant achievements Iranian women have made since the revolution. To be sure, Khomeini sharply curtailed many of the freedoms Iranian women enjoyed under the Pahlavi regime, through measures such as expelling women from the judiciary, forcing women to wear the hejab, limiting their free movement, and repealing the Family Protection Act. While women’s rights in Iran are far from secure, many of these early policies have been revised, and significant gains have been made in many areas. For instance, women’s literacy rates have improved remarkably since the revolution, and 63% of Iranian university students are now women.<sup>92</sup> Many of these gains are attributable to the efforts of Iranian women politicians and civil society leaders,

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<sup>88</sup> Afshar, H. (2002) “Competing Interests: Democracy, Islamification and Women Politicians in Iran”, in Ross, K. (ed.) *Women, Politics and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 112.

<sup>89</sup> Sammi, A. W. (2005) “The Changing Landscape of Party Politics in Iran: A Case Study”, *Journal of the European Society for Iranian Studies* 1 (1), p. 53-54.

<sup>90</sup> Sammi 2005, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Campbell 2006, p. 62.

and have been examined in-depth by a number of authors, particularly Iranian women scholars working abroad.<sup>93</sup> A popular theme in this literature is the observation that “the Islamic Republic has not opened the gates. Women are jumping over the fences.”<sup>94</sup>

Seminal English texts on women’s political roles in the Islamic Republic include Parvin Paidar’s *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*.<sup>95</sup> Paidar examines how Iranian women have influenced and been influenced by revolutionary and evolutionary processes in Iran, challenging the conventional notion of Muslim women as marginalized. In contrast, Paidar maintains that gender issues are at the centre of contemporary Iranian politics. Similarly, Hamideh Sedghi’s *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling and Reveiling* locates contention over women at the heart of the struggle between Islamists and secularists.<sup>96</sup> Using the hejab as an entry-point for discussion, Sedghi interweaves economic, political and cultural analyses to suggest that control over women’s labour, identifies and sexuality is central to the consolidation of state power in Iran. Mir-Hosseini echoes Paidar and Sedghi’s view that women’s rights are one of the main “battlegrounds” between modernists and traditionalists in Iran. However, Mir-Hosseini suggests that with the birth of the reformist movement, this struggle became part of a broader conflict between two different views of Islam. The first is an “absolutist and legalistic Islam, premised on the notion of ‘duty’, tolerating no dissent and making little concession to popular will and contemporary realities.”<sup>97</sup> The second is a pluralistic, tolerant conception of Islam that accords with human rights and democratic principles.

Along with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Paidar was particularly instrumental in advancing debates on the notion of Islamist feminism, and understandings of how Iranian women are constructed by different political discourses and institutions.<sup>98</sup> While Islamic feminism eludes a neat definition, Mir-Hosseini describes it as “a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, a gender discourse that is ‘feminist’ in its aspirations and demands, yet is ‘Islamic’ in its language and sources of legitimacy.”<sup>99</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi analyzes how Islamic feminist journals such as *Zanan* have engaged in interpreting the Islamic texts to

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<sup>93</sup> See for example Esfandiari, H. (1997) *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). Esfandiari’s text explores Iranian women’s responses to the Iranian revolution, and the strategies through which women have subverted the state’s agenda. For a general discussion of the role of women in Islamist movements, see Abdellatif, O. and Ottaway, M. (2007) “Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women’s Activism”, *Carnegie Papers* 2.

<sup>94</sup> Moghissi, H. (1994) *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women’s struggle in a male-defined revolutionary movement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press), p. 183.

<sup>95</sup> Paidar, P. (1997) *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>96</sup> Sedghi, H. (2007) *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). A number of authors have focused on the role of the hejab or chador in “Islamizing” public and private space in Iran. See for example Kar, M. (2003) “The Invasion of the Private Sphere in Iran”, *Social Research* 70 (3).

<sup>97</sup> Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2002) “The Conservative-Reformist Conflict Over Women’s Rights in Iran”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 16 (1), p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> See Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2002) “Religious Modernists and the ‘Woman Question’”, in Hooglund 2002.

<sup>99</sup> Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2004) “The Quest for Gender Justice: Emerging Feminist Voices in Islam”, *Islam* 21 (36), p. 3.

advance the cause of women's rights. Najmabadi notes that "the dominant method of reformist interpretation... has been to use more woman-friendly sources from an already existing set of authoritative exegetical texts. This confined the reinterpretive attempts to a highly misogynous canon, producing an endless array of contradictory positions for reformers."<sup>100</sup> In contrast, *Zanan* set out to provide fresh interpretation (often by women) of the texts directly relevant to women's lives. *Zanan's* revisionist approach placed women and their needs at the centre of the interpretive domain.<sup>101</sup> Najmabadi recognizes that *Zanan's* efforts to promote *ijtihad* "brought the fire of the more traditional Islamic advocates upon them," but applauds *Zanan's* efforts to advance the debate on women's rights in Iran, in particular by breaking down the dichotomy between secular and Islamic women in Iran.<sup>102</sup>

Haleh Afshar offers a particularly insightful discussion of the role of Iranian women politicians in advancing the status of women in the Islamic Republic.<sup>103</sup> Afshar points out that while Iranian women's support was instrumental to the success of the revolution, the post-revolutionary state has failed to meet their expectations in terms of improving the condition of women in Iran. While the Constitution places women first and foremost in the home, Afshar discusses how Iranian women have challenged this designation, seeking out the opportunity to shape the republic's political life by serving as elected political representatives, particularly in the majlis.<sup>104</sup> Afshar recognizes that only a small number of Iranian women have won seats in the majlis: four of the 270 members elected to the first post-revolutionary parliament were women, and the numbers remained in the single-digits until after the death of Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War. 14 women were elected to the fifth majlis (1996) (5.1% of MPs), and 11 to the sixth (2000) (3.7% of MPs).<sup>105</sup> Despite their diverse socio-economic backgrounds and political and religious views, Afshar argues that Iranian women politicians have generally been able to work together, and have made important strides in "gradually clawing back rights denied to them", by "assiduously formulat[ing] their demands in terms of Islamic teachings".<sup>106</sup> Indeed, Afshar suggests that "by situating their demands firmly in the context of the Islamic teaching, women parliamentarians have formed the only long-lasting, acceptable political opposition in a system that does not allow political parties and has driven

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<sup>100</sup> Najmabadi, A. (1998) "Feminism in an Islamic Republic", in Yazbeck, Y. H., and Esposito, J. (eds.) *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 65.

<sup>101</sup> Najmabadi 1998, p. 71.

<sup>102</sup> Najmabadi 1998, p. 65, 73. *Ijtihad* refers to "individual inquiry to establish the ruling of the Shari'ah upon a given point, by a *mujtahid*, a person qualified for the inquiry." See Hodgson, M. (1974) *The Venture of Islam, vol. 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 583.

<sup>103</sup> See Afshar 2002.

<sup>104</sup> Women have been elected to the majlis and municipal councils, particularly in Tehran and other large urban centres. There is some debate over whether women are legally permitted to stand for the position of president. Although various women have put their names forward as potential presidential candidates, the Guardian Council has rejected their candidacies without explanation. Drawing on the work of Azam Taleqani, Afshar suggests that that Iranian presidency is not legally closed to women, although this is a matter of some debate. (See Afshar 2002, p. 110.)

<sup>105</sup> 6% of candidates in the 1996 elections were women, and 7% of candidates in the 2000 election were women. (Afshar 2002, p. 112.)

<sup>106</sup> Afshar 2002, p. 110.

underground almost all other opponents”.<sup>107</sup> Afshar attributes this success to the women’s ability to use their family networks and knowledge of Islamic law to ensure that they were perceived as loyal defenders of Islam.<sup>108</sup>

Azadeh Kian takes a somewhat bleaker view of the success of the Iranian women’s movement in the decade after the revolution. She suggests that during this period, female Iranian political leaders failed to offer a reading of Islam and shari’a that was more responsive to women’s concerns. Kian argues that these efforts failed because they were principally based on “traditionalist interpretations” of the Islamic texts, and because the status of women was not a priority for the Iranian elite during the Iran-Iraq war. However, the end of the war saw the rise of a “new generation of gender-conscious Islamist women” who forged allegiances with secular women, presented a more modern reading of Islam, and made strong demands for improvements in the condition of women, ably using political levers to achieve their goals. Kian’s work draws on interviews with Islamist women who were leaders in this process.<sup>109</sup>

Adopting a more journalistic approach, Ziba Mir-Hosseini provides insight into the career and resignation of Fatemeh Maqiatjoo, a female reformist MP. Mir-Hosseini also discusses the more conservative orientation of the 12 female MPs elected to the seventh majlis, who have already distanced themselves from earlier female MPs’ efforts to prompt Iran to sign the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and facilitate single Iranian women’s opportunities to study abroad.<sup>110</sup>

Paidar’s 2002 chapter “Encounters between Feminism, Democracy and Reformism in Contemporary Iran” places the work of Iranian women MPs in a broader political and theoretical context. Paidar highlights the “opportunities that women have created and used to enact their rights within the existing authoritarian context...illustrat[ing]...the paradox of weak democratic institutions and active female citizenship.”<sup>111</sup> Paidar suggests that a “new window of opportunity...has been opened through the ongoing dialogue between and within the democratization and women’s rights movements. The new strands of political thought and discourse and the dialogue between them...present more emancipatory potential for women’s rights than democratic institutions have had in Iran since their inception.”<sup>112</sup> The force of Paidar’s argument is weakened when

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<sup>107</sup> Afshar 2002, p. 118.

<sup>108</sup> Afshar observes that women candidates are often the daughters and wives of successful Iranian politicians, as they benefit from their family’s connections and financial support. However, family connections are occasionally a hindrance: former MP Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, lost the 2000 election when she was “tarnished with the same brush” as her corruption-plagued father. (Afshar 2002, p. 112)

<sup>109</sup> Kian, A. (1997) “Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender-Conscious Drive to Change”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (1). For further discussion on the Islamist women’s movement, see Siavoshi, S. (2004) “‘Islamist’ Women Activists: Allies or Enemies?” in Jahanbegloo 2004.

<sup>110</sup> Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2004) “Fatemeh Haqiqatjoo and the Sixth Majles: A Woman in her Own Right”, *Middle East Report* 233. See also Razavi 2006 and Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2001) “The Rise and Fall of Fa’ezeh Hashemi: Women in Iranian Elections”, *Middle East Report* 218.

<sup>111</sup> Paidar 2002, p. 240.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

considered in the context of the resurgence of conservatism and restrictionism in Iran since Ahmadinejad's election in 2005. However, her detailed analysis provides valuable insight into the evolution of the women's movement in Iran, and its connections to reformism and democratization. For example, Paidar explains that given women's instrumental role in the revolution, their electoral participation was essential to post-revolutionary Iran's populist image. Interestingly, Paidar suggests that one of the most effective forms of protest by Islamist women in the eighties and nineties was the awareness women parliamentarians and publications created regarding the injustices perpetrated against women from the social groups that were the "grassroots supporters of the Islamic Republic", including war widows.<sup>113</sup>

### *The role of civil society*

Characterizations of Iranian civil society run the full gambit from robust and vibrant to "paper thin".<sup>114</sup> To be sure, many civil society organizations concerned with human rights and democracy have been labelled "agents of imperialism" and suffered extreme repression.<sup>115</sup> There is a considerable body of strong English scholarly literature on reformist civil society groups (see following section on political movements), and a more limited number of studies of the powerful Islamist foundations (bonyads), which elude easy categorization as governmental or independent organizations (see following section on the bonyads' agenda and policy influence). In addition to this, a few authors have provided insightful macro-level discussions of the role of civil society in Iranian politics, and the connections between civil society and political Islam.

For instance, through a survey of recent Farsi publications, Mehran Kamrava offers a valuable analysis of the civil society discourse in Iran. Kamrava identifies four key characteristics of how Iranian scholars view the concept of civil society. First, Kamrava argues that the concept of civil society has undergone a "substantial process of indigenization."<sup>116</sup> Second, Iranian theorists argue that the "rule of law" is critical to civil society, which implies that the state has a primary role to play by "'coexisting in harmony' and functioning as an integral part of civil society."<sup>117</sup> Third, Kamrava points out that "even Iran's secular theorists have not been able to fully evade the gravitational pull of Islam and its overwhelming role in Iranian culture and society. At the very least, they maintain that civil society is possible only after a 'proper' interpretation of Islam gains popular acceptance."<sup>118</sup> Fourth, Kamrava suggests that Iranian theorists are preoccupied with non-Iranians' perception of the Islamic Republic. This affects how Iranian elites portray "culture" to domestic and international audiences. Kamrava concludes that "whereas the articulations of Iranian scholars and politicians [on civil society] appear to be little more than a native version of a global academic trend", the

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<sup>113</sup> Paidar 2002, p. 244-5.

<sup>114</sup> Dr. Sohrab Razzaghi, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Iranian Civil Society Organizations Research and Training Centre, quoted in Campbell 2006, p. 63.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Kamrava, M. (2001) "The Civil Society Discourse in Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (2), p. 165.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

most significant consequence of the “discovery of ‘civil society’” in Iran is that it seems to have “ignited a subtle process of cultural re-orientation and re-articulation under the rubric of religion and an institutionalized Islamic Republican State.”<sup>119</sup> Kamrava’s work is particularly helpful in that it provides insight into the development of Farsi scholarship on Iranian civil society. Kamrava points out that Iranian scholars only began publishing work on civil society in the late 1990s, and that the number of books devoted to the topic is minimal.

Several scholars have offered perceptive analysis of different sectors of Iranian civil society. For example, Elaheh Rostami Povey offers an insightful discussion of two particularly important types of civil society organizations in Iran, trade unions and women’s NGOs. Povey argues that trade unions have had a significant role in changing the Iranian political system over the past ninety years, but underlines the male-dominated character of these organizations. Povey compares the trade unions with women’s NGOs, which typically focus on ameliorating the socio-economic conditions facing the poorest parts of Iranian society. While the women’s NGOs have not engaged in structural reform efforts, Povey argues that “they are challenging gender-specific access and influence over institutional power, matters that are crucial to the process of democratization.”<sup>120</sup> As trade unions and women’s NGOs adopt different approaches to strengthening community-based organizations, Povey suggests that “their collaboration would have a mutually transformational impact which would turn these organizations into more powerful forces in the process of democratization.”<sup>121</sup> Ladjevardi also offers a significant (if dated) discussion of the Iranian labour movement in *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*.<sup>122</sup> In “Postrevolutionary Iran and the New Social Movements”, Khosrokhavar discusses three principal social movements: the youth movement, the intellectual movement, and the women’s movement. Khosrokhavar argues that these contemporary movements had their genesis in the modernization of Iranian society, which partially prompted the 1979 revolution.<sup>123</sup> This view is challenged by scholars such as Moslem.<sup>124</sup>

Gerhardt offers an interesting examination of the connection between sport and the development of Iranian civil society. Gerhardt highlights the dominance of sport in the Iranian public sphere and the significance of Iran’s World Cup victory in France against the United States, suggesting that sport mobilized Iranian youth and challenged the dominance of the state. Gerhardt argues that sport prompted increased autonomy of Iranian civil society and explains Iranians began to forge a new national identity through sport. This identity has been appropriated by the state as well as by the reform movement.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Povey, E. R. (2004) “Trade Unions and Women's NGOs: Diverse Civil Society Organisations in Iran”, *Development in Practice* 14 (1-2), p. 254.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* See also Kian-Thiebaut, A. (2002) “Women and the Making of Civil Society in Post-Islamist Iran”, in Hooglund 2002.

<sup>122</sup> Ladjevardi, H. (1985) *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

<sup>123</sup> Khosrokhavar, F. (2002) “Postrevolutionary Iran and the New Social Movements”, in Hooglund 2002.

<sup>124</sup> Moslem, M. (2002) “The State and Factional Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, in Hooglund 2002.

<sup>125</sup> Gerhardt, M. (2002) “Sport and Civil Society in Iran”, in Hooglund 2002.

In contrast to those scholars who focus on elite-led civil society movements, Bayat provides a detailed discussion of poor people's movements in Iran from 1977 to the early 1990s. Bayat observes that in large Iranian cities between 1976 and the early 1990s, a series of "popular activities" took place which received little media or scholarly attention, as they were "drowned out by the extraordinary big bang" of the revolution.<sup>126</sup> These activities had their genesis in large-scale rural-urban migration, and included the creation and consolidation of new communities of poor people in Iran's largest cities. Bayat suggests that the "mundane, ordinary and daily nature" of these activities belied their true political significance, and uses his examination of Iranian poor peoples' movements to demonstrate the variations in ordinary Iranians' experiences of social and political change, in contrast to the "totalizing" discourse of the revolution.<sup>127</sup>

### *Iranian Intellectuals*

The literature on Iranian civil society underlines that "ideas count for a lot in Iran." Philosophical debates are woven throughout the national political discourse, and figure prominently in popular newspapers and journals. The theocratic nature of the Iranian state means that religious scholars and intellectuals play prominent roles in Iranian public life. For example, intellectuals such as 'Abdolkarim Soroush have significantly influenced the shape of the contemporary reform movement (see earlier section on political Islam in Iran). The role of Iranian intellectuals in civil society has been examined by a number of authors such as Gheissari, Boroujerdi, Jahanbegloo and Sadri.<sup>128</sup> Jahanbegloo identifies a "Fourth Generation" of Iranian intellectuals (younger scholars in their thirties and forties), and argues that they have a "strategic role to play in building a strong civil society" and supporting the democratization process.<sup>129</sup> "Their role," Jahanbegloo states, "is not one of engaging in ideological politics, but of expressing critical views concerning the antidemocratic and authoritarian aspects of Iranian political and social traditions, as well as of encouraging the people to be wary of all forms of utopian thinking and dreams of totally rearranging Iranian society."<sup>130</sup> Sadri shares Jahanbegloo's assessment of the pivotal role intellectuals play in Iranian civil society, focusing in particular on the contributions members of the "religious intelligentsia" make to the reform movement. Sadri's work emphasizes intellectuals' key role as leaders in the dynamic Iranian press, and the roots of many prominent reformist intellectuals as radical Islamists in the revolutionary period.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Bayat, A. (1997) *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Bayat 1997, p. 3-4.

<sup>128</sup> See Gheissari, A. (1998) *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press), and Boroujerdi, M. (1996) *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

<sup>129</sup> Jahanbegloo, R. (2000) "The Role of the Intellectuals", *Journal of Democracy* 11 (4), p. 136.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Sadri, A. (2001) "The Varieties of Religious Reform: Public Intelligentsia in Iran", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15 (2), pp. 271, 274.

In “Critics from Within: Islamic Scholars’ Protests Against the Islamic State in Iran”, Charles Kurzman examines Iran’s dissident Islamic scholars. Kurzman offers a focused analysis of the practical and theoretical implications of the protests against the Islamic Republic raised by several prominent Islamic scholars, including Ali Montazeri, Mohsen Sa’idzadeh and Mohsen Kadivar. These dissident scholars do not belong to a unified group, and identify themselves as political Islamists in varying degrees. However, they share a commitment to preserving the long Shi’a tradition of scholarly debate and critique, which is often perceived as a threat by the ruling authorities. Indeed, Kurzman suggests that “seminary intellectuals are now among the greatest threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran”, given that in “Iran, unlike most countries, epistemological debates have political implications.”<sup>132</sup> Kurzman examines how “seminary-trained scholars have applied their critical methods to basic issues of state legitimacy, in particular the state’s right to insist on interpretive closure.”<sup>133</sup> The Iranian Constitution places limits on seminarians’ right to contest interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence by conferring upon the Supreme Leader the right of interpretive closure, or “the right to end debate on a subject.”<sup>134</sup> Kurzman details the cases of five prominent seminarians who challenged the regime’s positions on questions such as women’s rights and democracy, and the broader principal of interpretive closure.<sup>135</sup> The five cases share a common thread: each of the seminarians disagreed with the religious establishment on a substantive political issue, was pressured to defer to the regime’s interpretation, and embraced an even more dissident position by rejecting the Supreme Leader’s right of interpretive closure. Ironically, the “scholars’ positions were not originally subversive of the political order, but were intended to strengthen it by elaborating what they considered proper Islamic reforms. These reforms”, whether on women’s rights or political parties, “would save the Islamic Republic from becoming sterile, unpopular, and ineffective.”<sup>136</sup> Kurzman underlines that the regime’s policy of responding to its clerical critics with force has “backfired, as each escalating punishment has generated new critics within.”<sup>137</sup>

### *The internet and Iranian civil society*

Although discussion of the phenomenon does not yet appear to have percolated thoroughly into the academic literature, the western media has highlighted Iran’s profligate bloggers and “electronic” civil society.<sup>138</sup> These reports point out that some 7.5 million Iranians (11% of the population) use the internet on a regular to semi-regular basis, and that Farsi is the third most popular language for blogging in the world.

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<sup>132</sup> Kurzman, C. (2001) “Critics within: Islamic scholars’ protests against the Islamic state in Iran”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 16 (1), p. 341, 357.

<sup>133</sup> Kurzman 2001, p. 341.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> While seminarians certainly mounted opposition to Khomeini during his tenure as Supreme Leader, in the second Islamic republic, challenges to the Supreme Leader’s authority are all the most threatening, as Khamenei lacks Khomeini’s strong religious credentials.

<sup>136</sup> Kurzman 2001, p. 345.

<sup>137</sup> Kurzman 2001, p. 341.

<sup>138</sup> For some academic discussion of the issue, see Shafaei, S. (2003) “Globalization and Contradiction between the Nation and the State in Iran: The Internet Case”, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 12 (2).

Prominent bloggers include not only liberal, well-educated youth, but also clerics and politicians including President Ahmadinejad. Although conservative authorities have shut down more than one hundred newspapers since 2000, they have been slower to act in censoring the internet. At the same time, new websites appear with remarkably rapidity to replace banned sites, demonstrating Iranian civil society's ability to use electronic tools to communicate their concerns and advance their goals.<sup>139</sup>

### ***Iranian foundations (bonyads): Social agenda and policy influence***

In addition to the civil society organisations discussed above and in the following section on political movements, Iranian politics and social life are definitively shaped by a number of Islamic foundations (bonyads) and the bazaar. English-language literature on these institutions seems to be relatively rare, but insightful.

Ali Saeidi, a sociology professor at Tehran University, offers a valuable discussion of Iranian Islamic foundations (bonyads), focusing on the accountability of these parastatal organizations. Saeidi's paper examines the emergence and evolution of the bonyads, underlining their distorting impact on the Iranian political economy. Saeidi suggests that the bonyads "represent the dual power structure in Iran which reinforces the financial authority of religious leaders without accountability."<sup>140</sup> Saeidi argues that the bonyads' economic policies bolster the government's populist macroeconomic policies, often with adverse political and developmental effects. While Saeidi recognizes the bonyads' antecedents as independent, apolitical charitable foundations (awqaf), he maintains that the bonyads were a "unique product of the 1979 revolution".<sup>141</sup> After the revolution, property belonging to the Shah and his close associates was confiscated and transferred to the religious leaders in the form of newly created bonyads. This increased the revolutionary leaders' financial independence, and resulted in the bonyads controlling hundreds if not thousands of industrial enterprises.<sup>142</sup> Initially intended to ensure the implementation of religious principles that were not fully integrated into the functions of the Islamic state, such as the collection of alms taxes, the administration of awqaf and the provision of assistance to the poor, the bonyads gradually took on a much more expansive role in post-revolutionary Iran. Saeidi argues that the bonyads facilitated the social mobility of the revolutionary forces, supported the state's Islamist ideology, and contributed to the consolidation of the clerics' political power.

Saeidi underlines the bonyads' para-governmental character: while the bonyads receive enormous governmental subsidies and provide many services that typically fall within state's remit, they are exempt from taxes and normal financial reporting requirements,

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<sup>139</sup> Campbell 2006, p. 59. For a more general discussion of the media in the Islamic Republic, see Abdo, G. (2003) "Media and Information: The Case of Iran", *Social Research* 70 (3).

<sup>140</sup> Saeidi, A. (2004) "The Accountability of Para-Governmental Organizations (Bonyads): The Case of Iranian Foundations", *Iranian Studies* 37 (3), p. 479.

<sup>141</sup> Saeidi 2004, p. 480. See also Maloney, S. (2000) "Agents or obstacles? Parastatal foundations and challenges for Iranian development", in P. Alizadeh (ed.) *The economy of Iran: The dilemma of an Islamic state* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 149.

<sup>142</sup> Today, many of these bonyad-controlled enterprises function as monopolies, and are "overstaffed, debt-ridden, inefficiently managed, and therefore a drain on public budget."

and have resisted many of the state's key economic and political reform efforts.<sup>143</sup> "What is often not realized widely about these organizations", Saeidi argues, "is that they have been actively involved in [the] Iranian polity by propagating the dominant ideology in a wide range of social and cultural activities."<sup>144</sup> While it is difficult to assess the efficacy of the bonyads' assistance to the poor and vulnerable, Saeidi suggests that at least some foundations support those who are closely affiliated with the government, rather than providing assistance on an equitable basis. Saeidi illustrates his arguments with short case studies of a number of prominent foundations, and suggests that the "closed flow of information in [and about] these organizations... embodies a traditional moral order, that is to say, a religious moral system of non-reciprocal rights of religious leaders to control these resources."<sup>145</sup> In essence, the bonyad system "institutionalized the right of religious leaders not to disclose their activities to the people... democratization is impossible without improving the flow and transparency of these organizations' financial information."<sup>146</sup> Saeidi concludes on an optimistic note, suggesting that the discreet pressure being applied inside and outside of Iran may translate into greater accountability from the bonyads. The impact of the Ahmadinejad presidency on this process is, however, a matter of speculation.

Maloney's study complements Saeidi's work by focusing on the largest and most influential of Iran's revolutionary foundations, the Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan. Maloney argues that the bonyads have become "pivotal actors in the enduring rivalry among the ideologically oriented factions within the clerical establishment... the evolution of the bonyads as a semi-autonomous centre of power redistributes the relationship among the various social groups (especially the bazaaris, or traditional merchants) whose support is key to the government's survival. Consequently, the bonyads furnish a highly appropriate framework for the analysis of the post-revolutionary Iranian order, for they are neither wholly of the state, nor wholly distinct from it. Their narrative epitomizes the structural and ideological transformation of the Islamic state—from the incipient expansion of state apparatus and institutionalization of the ideological objectives of the revolution, to the drive for post-war reconstruction, economic competitiveness and organizational integration."<sup>147</sup> Maloney also emphasizes the importance of the bonyad's "strategic mission as agents of economic development and income redistribution", which accords the foundations a "mantle of social justice" which is integral to their political legitimacy in Iran's Islamic system.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Saeidi 2004, p. 485. Further elaborating on this point, Saeidi argues that "With no governmental discretion over their expenses, no shareholders, no public accounts, and no well-defined legal status, they have been operating autonomously from the government, and have acted like giant private monopolies rather than charity organizations caring only about the welfare of the poor. They have therefore been a major source of distortion and obfuscation in resource allocation, a major financial drag on the economy, and one of the main obstacles to rational economic reform."

<sup>144</sup> Saeidi 2004, p. 486.

<sup>145</sup> Saeidi 2004, p. 495.

<sup>146</sup> Saeidi 2004, pp. 495, 498.

<sup>147</sup> Maloney 2000, p. 148.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

In “Constitutionalism, Modernization and Islamization: The Political Economy of Social Policy in Iran”, Mahmood Messkoub offers a critical assessment of the evolution of Iranian social policy in the twentieth century, including a discussion of the role of several Islamic foundations in providing social services to poor Iranians. Messkoub argues that there has been a “remarkable degree of continuity in the development of social policy in Iran.”<sup>149</sup> Although the revolutionary authorities inherited reasonably well-developed social service delivery systems, development indicators in 1979 were extremely low. For example, the infant mortality rate was approximately 100 per 1000 live births. The “popular demands of the revolution with regard to equality and improved living standards were enshrined in the Constitution”, and marked advances have been achieved, although certain groups receive special treatment in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly members of the armed forces, the clergy and seminary students.<sup>150</sup> Messkoub writes that the “political influence of religion on social policy goes far beyond such special privileges and here lies an important departure from pre-revolution practices. Before the revolution access to state-run health and welfare institutions was not used as a means of mass social control... But since the revolution access to some social welfare programmes has become an important instrument of social control.”<sup>151</sup>

In *Bazaar and State in Iran*, Arang Keshavarzian discusses the politics of the bazaar, another critical Islamic entity in contemporary Iran. Keshavarzian’s monograph is one of the only in-depth English analyses of bazaari politics, and examines the economics and politics of the bazaar under the Pahlavis and in the post-revolutionary era. While the Pahlavis’ modernization campaign sought to undermine the bazaar, the revolutionary authorities were committed to preserving the bazaar as an ‘Islamic institution’. However, Keshavarzian’s analysis demonstrates that the outcomes of these policies were antithetical to their intentions: the bazaar thrived under the Shah despite his hostile approach. Indeed, the bazaar maintained so much autonomy that it played a significant part in the revolution. In contrast, the Islamic leaders’ policies inadvertently transformed the bazaar’s operations, and undermined its ability to mobilize politically.<sup>152</sup>

### ***Political movements: Reformism, conservatism and other trends***

Contrary to simplistic media portrayals of the Iranian political landscape, the vast majority of the literature on contemporary Iranian politics underlines that neither reformism nor conservatism are monolithic movements. The International Crisis Group’s 2002 study breaks down the Iranian political factions into conservatives and reformists, as well as intellectual and Islamic dissenters. Each bloc has its own sub-groups. For example, the reform camp includes technocrats, members of the modernist right and the Islamic left. The ICG report points out that Iranians’ political alignments often shift depending on the issue at hand.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Messkoub, M. (2006) “Constitutionalism, Modernization, and Islamization: The Political Economy of Social Policy in Iran” in Karshenas, M. and Moghadam, V. (eds.) *Social Policy in the Middle East: Economic, Political and Gender Dynamics* (Geneva: UNRISD), p. 216.

<sup>150</sup> Messkoub 2006, p. 217.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Keshavarzian, A. (2006) *Bazaar and State in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>153</sup> International Crisis Group 2002.

The English literature on Iranian political movements appears to focus principally on the reformist camp, rather than on conservative movements and other trends.<sup>154</sup> However, the evolving relationship *between* reformism and conservatism is explored by numerous authors. For example, David Manashri notes that the contest between these groups is a profound debate that straddles issues of Islam and democracy, idealism versus pragmatism, the relationship between religion and state.<sup>155</sup> While the pursuit of political freedom is discussed at length in the literature, the struggle for social and economic development appears to be equally if not more important to the Iranian public. Yet, this aspect is often overlooked in much of the literature on the conflict between the reform and conservative movements. Since Ahmadinejad's election underlined the critical nature of these issues for Iranian voters, it is possible that forthcoming literature will respond more comprehensively to these issues.

### *The reform movement*

The Iranian reform movement is perhaps the most thoroughly studied aspect of contemporary Iranian politics, and issues of reform and modernization are cross-cutting themes throughout much of the literature. While there is some discussion in the American media and literature on prompting regime change in Iran through military action or other forms of outside interference, many if not most scholars of the reform movement seem to embrace Jahanbegloo's view that "[t]here is no question that working within the Islamic system is the best way to initiate reforms in Iran."<sup>156</sup> Indeed, many members of the reform movement identify themselves as Islamist.

Many of the most detailed studies of the reform movement were published during the Khatami presidency, when the reform movement was at its zenith.<sup>157</sup> Paidar suggests that that erosion of popular support for the hard-line state, and the rise of the reform movement was prompted by "economic stagnation, war, authoritarianism, corruption, and misappropriation of funds, as well as the state's attempts to regulate the private and public lives of its citizens. These factors gradually eroded the mass support for the Islamic Republic and amounted to a crisis of legitimacy for the hard-liners controlling the key apparatuses of the state."<sup>158</sup> Many of these studies reflect an optimism about the strength of the reform movement that has not proven to be entirely warranted, given the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Many analyses completed since 2005 suggest

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<sup>154</sup> For a specific analysis of the conservative movement, see Gheissari, A. and Nasr, V. (2005) "The Conservative Consolidation in Iran", *Survival* 47 (2).

<sup>155</sup> Manashri, D. (2001) *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London: Frank Cass).

<sup>156</sup> Jahanbegloo 2000, p. 135. See also Jahanbegloo, R. (2003) "Pressures from Below", *Journal of Democracy* 14(1) for a brief discussion of the reform movement in the later years of Khatami's presidency, focusing on the significance of demonstrations and popular mobilization.

<sup>157</sup> See for example Cronin, S. (ed.) (2004) *Reformers and revolutionaries in modern Iran: New perspectives on the Iranian left* (London: Routledge), and Boroujerdi, M. (2004) "The Reformist Movement in Iran", in Heradstveit, D. and Hveem, H. (eds.) *Oil in the Gulf: Obstacles to Democracy and Development* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

<sup>158</sup> Paidar 2002, p. 243.

that while the reform movement suffers from deep internal divisions, a lack of clear vision, and a seeming inability to respond to voters' socio-economic concerns, it would be premature to conclude that reformism is entirely defunct.

Key studies of the reform movement include Daniel Brumberg's *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, and Ali Ansari's *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*. Brumberg's work links Khomeini's legacy with the trajectory of political change in post-Khomeini Iran, suggesting that "Khomeini's own efforts to accommodate competing visions of political community set the stage for an ideological struggle over his legacy in the nineties." Further, Brumberg asserts that the "[A]yatollah's story convey[s] lessons that appl[y] not merely to the evolution of 'Islamic' politics in Iran, but also to the transformation of such politics in the wider Islamic world."<sup>159</sup> Brumberg develops the concept of "the politics of dissonant institutionalization", and suggest that this phenomenon opens up "possibilities for ideological change that conventional views of both Islamic politics and charismatic movements could not easily anticipate."<sup>160</sup>

In the second edition of *Iran, Islam and Democracy*, Ansari provides an updated analysis of the Iranian reform movement, examining how it endeavoured to reconcile political Islam with democratic principles, and asking how it failed with the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. Ansari's historical analysis captures the intellectual intensity of the reform movement, and provides a thorough discussion of the theoretical context of the reform movement; the discourse of reform; the influence of Iranian presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami; the impact of the hardliners' crackdown on reformists; the influence of the mercantile elite; and the roles of the different (often competing) actors in the reform movement, including students, the press, intellectuals, religious figures, and politicians. The central thesis of the first edition of Ansari's book revolved around a "social revolution driven by an intellectual renaissance," which necessitated a "delicate balance between popular demand and vested interest."<sup>161</sup>

In the second edition, Ansari suggests that the reformists' defeat was rooted in factors including the political leaders' indecisive and overly cautious approach, and the fact that reformists found themselves caught between increasingly polarized political forces which were not interested in compromising with the reformists. The reformists also had to contend with the oppressive tactics employed by their powerful opponents in the militias and conservative factions. Further, Ansari suggests that "sections of the conservative establishment had learned their lessons well. Whereas reformists had once possessed vision in abundance, they now offered only fear; where the conservatives had offered only austerity, Ahmadinejad now proffered a utopia."<sup>162</sup> Ansari decries the "hollowness of [the hardline administration's] domestic triumph", and suggests that while the "public may have grown tired of the unfulfilled promises of the reformist leadership...such

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<sup>159</sup> Brumberg 2001, p. x.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Ansari, A. (2006) *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change, second edition* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), p. xi.

<sup>162</sup> Ansari 2006, p. 281.

dissatisfaction did not necessarily translate into a rejection of ‘reform’ as an idea.”<sup>163</sup> Rather, Ahmadinejad’s victory was “a product of division and desperation”.<sup>164</sup> However, Ansari concludes with the argument that Iran’s nascent “culture of inclusivity has been replaced and even conservatives have found themselves overtaken by Iran’s ‘neo-conservatives’”.<sup>165</sup>

Shahra Razavi provides further insight into the calls for reform (eslahat) being voiced by “true believers” in Iran, including lay intellectuals, clerical leaders and various feminists with Islamic convictions. Razavi argues that these disparate currents of reformist thought represent a “genuinely local effort...to move Islamic politics out of the cul-de-sac of traditional Islam by endorsing modernist and universal values of human rights and democracy.”<sup>166</sup> Concerns regarding gender equity are prominent in some aspects of this thinking, particularly in terms of feminist Islamism and “dynamic jurisprudence”. Razavi recognizes that the reformist movement has been forced out of Iran’s centres of power, but suggests that this “challenges the reformist intellectuals and leaders to cultivate a broad social base, bringing into their fold the largely impoverished middle class, the women and the youth who constituted the ‘vote bank’ for President Khatami’s reformist platform, but whose voices remained muted in subsequent Iranian politics.”<sup>167</sup> This would necessitate an effective reformist response to widespread concerns regarding unemployment, corruption, inadequate public services, high inflation, urban deterioration and human rights violations. In Razavi’s opinion, this requires expanding the reformist agenda beyond its present liberal/neo-liberal parameters. However, Razavi cautions that it “would be dangerous...to accept the argument that the average woman or man on the street does not need the kind of liberal rights that the reform movement...have been demanding.”<sup>168</sup> Rather, she suggests that “disappointment with the reformists...does not stem from their championing of civil rights which are allegedly irrelevant for the popular social strata, but because they were largely incapable of substantiating those rights.”<sup>169</sup>

Writing in 2006, after the election of President Ahmadinejad, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam examines the “pluralistic momentum” in Iran, which “challenges the state-centric approach to Iranian politics.”<sup>170</sup> Adib-Moghaddam argues that the reform movement is a trajectory that “feeds into the political process in a bottom-up manner,” and helpfully explores the relationship between the reform movement and Iran’s “diverse” civil

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<sup>163</sup> Ansari 2006, pp. xiii, 268.

<sup>164</sup> Ansari 2006, p. 282.

<sup>165</sup> Ansari 2006, p. xiii. For further analysis of the decline of the reform movement, see Akbarzadeh, S. (2005) “Where is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 59 (1).

<sup>166</sup> Razavi 2006, p. 1224.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Razavi 2006, p. 1235.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* Razavi also helpfully highlights the contributions of reformist thinkers such as the cleric Mohsen Kadivar, who have integrated human rights concepts into their Islamic teachings. See Kadivar, M. (2003) “Human rights and religious intellectualism”, *Aftab* 27 & 28.

<sup>170</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2006) “The Pluralistic Momentum in Iran and the Future of the Reform Movement”, *Third World Quarterly* 27 (4), p. 665.

society.<sup>171</sup> He suggests that as long as pluralism remains a driving force in Iranian politics, the movement will continue to achieve political results.

### **The international dimension: Iran-Iraq relations since 2003**

The complexity of Iran's internal politics is rivalled only by the intricacies of its international relations. Particularly in the early years of Khomeini's rule, Iran's international relations were shaped by the regime's commitment to "exporting the revolution," a proposition that met with marked resistance from both secular and religious leaders in the Middle East and further afield. However, the notion of actively exporting the revolution has declined in popularity, although it is reportedly embraced by President Ahmadinejad.<sup>172</sup> The literature underlines that Iran has constantly evolving, multifaceted, perceptively calculated relationships with its seven neighbours and the broader region. David Menashri provides a helpful introduction to the dynamics animating Iran's relationships with its neighbours in *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*.<sup>173</sup> Suzanne Maloney's upcoming book on Iran's relationship with the broader Muslim world also promises to be a significant primer for understanding Iran's troubled involvement with Iraq.<sup>174</sup>

The English literature on the post-2003 Iran-Iraq relationship is limited, but growing. Some of the earlier research rested on mistaken assumptions about the strength and sustainability of the Iranian reform movement under Khatami, and the potential for rapid reconstruction and democratic development in Iraq. This illustrates the difficulty of anticipating political trajectories in Iran and Iraq, particularly from outside the region. At present most of the research on this issue seems to be carried out by western-based scholars and organizations. Research and policy analysis organizations such as the International Crisis Group and Chatham House have taken the lead in releasing detailed reports on the influence of Iran in Iraq, with an increasing number of peer-reviewed politics journals carrying articles on the issue.

#### *The Iran-Iraq relationship: History and geopolitics*

Iran-Iraq relations have historically been "characterized by a near permanent state of rivalry and policy-military conflict".<sup>175</sup> Ehteshami challenges the popular notion that Iran and Iraq are "somehow destined to be rivals" due to ancient historical claims or ideological differences between Shi'as and Sunnis, and instead explains the tensions

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> While former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami were pragmatists who promoted a foreign policy of détente combined with a "gentle easing of revolutionary fervour," Ahmadinejad has directly renounced this approach. (Lowe and Spencer 2006, p. 9).

<sup>173</sup> Menashri 2001, chapters 7 and 8. See also Nasr, V. (2006) *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton), and Hooglund, E. (2002) "Iran and the Persian Gulf", in Hooglund 2002.

<sup>174</sup> Maloney, S. (forthcoming) *Pivotal States in the Muslim World: Iran* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace).

<sup>175</sup> Alani, M. (2006) *Iran's Interventionist Policy in Iraq* (Dubai: Gulf Research Centre).

between these neighbours in terms of realpolitik—territory, influence and survival.<sup>176</sup> In contrast, Alani argues that the Iran-Iraq relationship is driven by a range of strategic factors in addition to religious and cultural interests, and suggests that historically the Iran-Iraq relationship was not merely a rivalry between two states, but a confrontation with significance for the wider Arab world: Iran, Iraq and Bahrain are the only countries in the world to have a Shi'a majority, but under the Sunni leadership of Saddam Hussien, Iraq counterbalanced Iran's power and served to contain the influence of Shi'ism. This was particularly important for Arab states with large Shi'a minorities, such as Saudi Arabia.

Much of the literature traces Iran's current interventionist policy towards Iraq back to Tehran's post-revolutionary decision to extend both overt and covert support to Iraqi Shi'a groups, with a view to ousting the Ba'athist regime. Although this policy was unsuccessful, political and ideological antagonism between Tehran and Baghdad, in combination with the Shatt al-Arab border dispute, led to the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Potter and Sick's (2004) edited collection *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War* insightfully explores the history of the Iran-Iraq War, and addresses the key contemporary implications of the conflict.<sup>177</sup>

Ehteshami examines the limited state-level cooperation that began soon after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, including the revival of diplomatic ties, economic relations, and discussions on key issues including prisoners of war, reparations, and their shared border. However, Ehteshami maintains that Iran and Iraq continued to perceive one another as their greatest security threat and argues that at "both the theoretical and practical levels, Iran had been preparing, if only subconsciously, for another encounter with Iraq."<sup>178</sup> The prospect of such an encounter plummeted after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Although Alani suggests that "in the Gulf region and the wider Middle East, the balance of power between Iraq and Iran is the key to the regional stability," he stresses that post-2003 there is no longer any question of a real balance of power between Tehran and Baghdad: Iraq no longer poses a serious military threat to Iran, and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. Indeed, a major 2006 Chatham House report by Rob Lowe and Claire Spencer entitled *Iran, its Neighbours and the Regional Crises* argues that by removing two rival regimes, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have considerably strengthened Iran's hand so that "Iran views Iraq as its own backyard and has now superseded the US as the most influential power there," and in the wider region.<sup>179</sup> Lowe and Spencer assert that Iran has in fact been the chief beneficiary of the war on terror, and maintain that the signs of Iran's increased power are most evident in Iraq.

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<sup>176</sup> Ehteshami, A. (2003) "Iran-Iraq Relations After Saddam", *Washington Quarterly* 26 (4).

<sup>177</sup> Potter, L., and Sick, G. (eds.) (2004) *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>178</sup> Ehteshami 2003, pp. 121-122.

<sup>179</sup> Lowe, R. and Spencer, C. (2006) *Iran, its Neighbours and the Regional Crises* (London: Chatham House), p. 5.

### *Iranian foreign policy goals and activities in Iraq*

In its March 2005 report *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, the International Crisis Group points out that “Iran’s influence in Iraq has been one of the most talked about but least understood aspects of the post-war situation.”<sup>180</sup> Arrays of accusations have been made against Iran, from unorganized meddling in Iraqi politics to carefully planned, nefarious interference. In many cases, there is a lack of reliable evidence to support or refute these allegations.

However, much of the literature emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Iran-Iraq relationship within the context of Iran’s political system and broader foreign policy traditions. Multiple actors shape and implement Iranian foreign policy, and there is not always unity within the Iranian political and religious leadership on foreign policy, particularly in terms of Iraq. Most commentators agree that despite Ahmadinejad’s confrontational, apocalyptic statements on international politics, the Supreme Leader retains control over most foreign policy issues, and espouses a comparatively restrained approach. Indeed, various analysts argue that Ayatollah Khamenei is increasingly reasserting control over foreign policy in reaction to the extreme positions staked out by the president and his hardline advisers. Lowe and Spencer argue that given Iran’s political, culture, economic and military power, most states in the region want to uphold positive or at least stable relations with Iran. Nonetheless, when tensions in the region intensify, as a non-Arab, Shi’a state, Iran is often characterized by a collective sense of particularity and isolation that in some ways resembles Israel’s perception of being endangered and encircled by hostile neighbours. They suggest that although Ahmadinejad has added a volatile element to Iranian foreign policy, Iran’s regional policy is essentially conservative. Through the deft manipulation of its “soft power” resources, Iran generally strives to preserve the regional status quo. Lowe and Spencer assert that Iran’s current core foreign policy concerns include maintaining Iran’s regional hegemony, (especially economic and cultural); extending Iran’s sphere of influence; increasing regional stability; and ensuring that Iraq remains unified, but unable to raise a military threat against Iran.<sup>181</sup>

Alani engages in a specific analysis of Iran’s goals in Iraq, pointing out that in anticipation of the US invasion, in August 2002 the Supreme Leader established a Special Committee on Iraq comprised of representatives of the state’s political, diplomatic, religious, defence and intelligence institutions. The purpose of the committee was to monitor the conflict, articulate an Iranian strategy, and rally the state’s resources to advance Tehran’s interests in Iraq following the collapse of the Ba’athist regime. According to Alani (2006), the chief, inter-linked aims of the institutions on the committee were: (i) prevent a complete US success in Iraq that could threaten the immediate and long-term security and stability of Iran; (ii) ensure Iran’s sustained influence in post-Saddam Iraq, with a view to advancing Iran’s long-term interests in Iraq

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<sup>180</sup> International Crisis Group (2005) *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?* (New York: International Crisis Group), p. i.

<sup>181</sup> Lowe and Spencer 2006, pp. 5-11. For additional discussion of Iran’s foreign policy goals in Iraq, see Milani, M. (2005) ‘Iran, the Status Quo Power’, *Current History* 104.

and further afield; (iii) thwart the re-emergence of an Iraq that could challenge Iran's hegemony in the region.<sup>182</sup>

While some analysts have suggested that Tehran's goal is to establish an Islamic Republic in Iraq, most observers reject this interpretation of Iran's intentions, as do Iranian officials. Lowe and Spencer suggest that there is considerable flexibility in Tehran's approach, although the "clear preference...is for a sympathetic Iraqi government, devoid of US support and military presence, overseeing a loosely federal structure, heavily penetrated by Iranian economic and political interests".<sup>183</sup> The International Crisis Group (ICG) concurs with this analysis, but emphasizes the importance for Tehran of preserving the territorial unity of Iraq, supporting a Shi'ite dominated government, and keeping the US "pre-occupied and at bay". The ICG argues that this has translated into a complex, three-part strategy that consists of: (i) encouraging democratic elections (which will solidify Shi'a political strength); (ii) promoting protracted but "managed chaos" to absorb the Americans' focus and power in the region; and (iii) supporting a diverse array of often rival Iraqi actors to limit the risks borne by Iran in any potential outcome.<sup>184</sup> The Chatham House and ICG reports detail the various activities Iran has undertaken in support of this strategy, including strengthening links with diverse Iraqi political actors and parties; assisting militias and insurgents through the Iranian intelligence organizations and the Revolutionary Guards; distributing religious propaganda; and aiding innumerable Islamic social welfare organizations. Lowe and Spencer suggest that by creating a diverse range of patronage networks and levers for its influence, Iran can easily generate instability and exploit the anarchy in Iraq, making Iraq a "first line of defence" in case of American aggression against Iran.<sup>185</sup> The significance of Iran's support for Iraqi NGOs does not appear to have been studied in detail, but various analysts highlight the importance of Iran's ongoing support for political parties, particularly Shi'a groups. Indeed, the December 2005 electoral victory of an alliance of parties with strong Iranian connections underscores how well-placed Iran is in post-Saddam Iraqi politics.<sup>186</sup>

The Iranian policy towards Iraq has elicited a range of reactions. Various western officials admit the policy is disquieting for the west, but represents an effective, flexible approach to protecting and advancing Tehran's interests in a variety of different scenarios that may evolve in Iraq. Ehteshami, on the other hand, characterizes Tehran's approach as "short-sighted" and criticizes Tehran's "singular failure to deliver a consistent set of policy options towards Baghdad."<sup>187</sup> He acknowledges, however, that after 2001, Iran's

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<sup>182</sup> Alani 2006.

<sup>183</sup> Lowe and Spencer 2006, p. 11.

<sup>184</sup> International Crisis Group 2005, pp. i-ii.

<sup>185</sup> Lowe and Spencer 2006, pp. 11, 18-20.

<sup>186</sup> Some Iranian commentators suggest that the victory of the Shi'a alliance in the Iraqi elections bodes well for continued peace between the two states. As one conservative Iranian analyst remarked, "just as they say that 'democracies don't fight democracies', we believe that Shi'ites don't fight Shi'ites." (International Crisis Group 2005, p. 10.) The experience of the Iran-Iraq war does not support this analysis, as the vast majority of Iraqi troops were Shi'as with strong Iraqi nationalist convictions. Nonetheless, the transition to a Shi'a political leadership in Iraq may facilitate cooperation between Baghdad and Tehran.

<sup>187</sup> Ehteshami 2003, p. 119.

policy towards Iraq has become “increasingly nuanced” in light of the United States’ strategic decisions. While the strategic nature of Iran’s position is clear, some observers suggest the policy also reflects a degree of complacency and arrogance, rooted in Ahmadinejad’s belief in divine providence and the inevitable downfall and departure of the Americans from the Middle East. The International Crisis Group suggests that Iraqis continue to view Iran with suspicion and resentment, while Chatham House analysts maintain that Iraqis realize that “they are caught between the geopolitical wishes of two powers, both of which have to be satisfied”.<sup>188</sup>

### *The Iran-Iraq relationship and political Islam*

Iran’s approach to post-Saddam Iraq illustrates the centrality of political pragmatism in the development of Iranian foreign policy, but the Iran-Iraq relationship also has important implications in terms of political Islam. As Nakash points out in his article “The Shi’ites and the Future of Iraq”, the “collapse of Saddam’s regime has given Shi’ite debates on the meaning of a just government in the Iraqi context a greater urgency.”<sup>189</sup> Indeed, the issue of the relationship and struggles between Iranian proponents of the velayat-e faqih and Iraqi Shi’ites who support the concept of constitutional democracy is of growing significance for scholars and policymakers alike.

Nakash points out that historically, Shi’a Islam has been characterized by a tension between activism and quietism. While the majority of Iran’s clergy have adopted Khomeini’s activist doctrine of the velayat-e faqih, many of Iraq’s leading Shi’a clerics embrace quietism, the belief that religion and politics, and religious and political authorities, should be clearly separate.<sup>190</sup> During much of Saddam Hussein’s rule, links were severed between the shrine city of Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran), the two main centres of Shi’a learning. Saddam Hussein’s suppression of Shi’a learning effectively bolstered Qom’s position as the hub of Shi’a thought, and enabled Iranian clerics to assert the dominance of the activist interpretation of Shi’ism. Various Iraqi Shi’a scholars and political actors took refuge in Iran during the reign of the Ba’athist regime, and subscribed to Khomeini’s activist interpretations of Shi’ism. However, upon their return to Iraq, many of these individuals and groups, most notably the SCIRI, have distanced themselves from the idea of establishing an Islamic state in Iraq based on the Iranian model. Nakash argues that this parting of views is rooted as much in Iraqi nationalism as in theological conviction, although other commentators such as Lowe and Spencer maintain that Iraqi nationalism is defunct as a source of political motivation. Nakash suggests the vast majority of Iraqi Shi’ites have probably already decided against mimicking the Iranian system, but recognizes that exchanges between Najaf and Qom may spark fresh thinking on political Islam in Iran.

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<sup>188</sup> International Crisis Group 2005, p. i. See also Lowe and Spencer 2006, p. 20.

<sup>189</sup> Nakash, Y. (2003) “The Shi’ites and the Future of Iraq”, *Foreign Affairs* 82 (4).

<sup>190</sup> Lowe and Spencer point out that the elderly but eminently influential Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf advocates quietism; his death and the succession of an activist Iranian Ayatollah would radically alter the political terrain in central and southern Iran. (Lowe and Spencer 2006, p. 20.)

## Issues for future research

There is clearly a wealth of literature on the experience of political Islam in Iran. Producing sound recommendations on areas for future research would require a thorough examination of the Farsi literature, as well as in-depth discussions with experts on Iran, particularly with researchers working in Iran. Given the restrictive political climate in Iran at the moment, this is no simple proposition. However, it is clear from the literature that understanding Iran's encounters with political Islam is essential to appreciating the broader trajectory of political Islam in the Middle East. Yet there is only a limited amount of recent literature that engages in rigorous comparative analysis of Islamism in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East. As Chehabi points out, "The post-revolutionary Iranian regime is in many ways a puzzle to the political scientist...Iran is the only example of a post-traditional theocracy, which means that a comparativist has literally no previously developed tools for analyzing the country's political system."<sup>191</sup> However, Chehabi underlines the fruitfulness of comparative studies of Iranian politics, and it is likely that more focused comparative research could yield insightful results of clear interest to both scholars and political actors.

Several scholars identify specific issues within the broad topic of political Islam and Iranian politics that merit future research. For example, Vaez suggests that several questions have attracted relatively little scholarly attention, including "how and under what circumstances have domestic changes occurred during the past two decades under the rule of the Islamic state in Iran? To what extent have the revolutionary political culture and the legacy of Khomeini...continued or changed? When and how have domestic and international politics interacted in post-revolutionary Iran?"<sup>192</sup> In terms of research on civil society and parastatal organizations, Saeidi underlines the need for more work on the influence of the bonyads on Iranian political and economic life. However, he also emphasizes the difficulty of carrying out such research, as the bonyads are not obliged to disclose information about their financial and operational practices.<sup>193</sup> Milani stresses that despite the unquestionable political importance of young Iranians, no solid studies have been published on this generation's views and political activities.<sup>194</sup> Reflecting on the state of research on the Iranian women's movement, Paidar suggests that more studies are required to understand the diverse and evolving views of Islamist feminists.<sup>195</sup>

Iranian scholar Farideh Farhi points out that many prominent interpretations of contemporary political events in Iran are not based on rigorous analysis. For example, arguments about the significance of popular or grassroots reform movements do not always rest on detailed social science research. Farhi also points out that the rise of political Islam in Iran has entailed an unprecedented invasion of Iranian citizens' private

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<sup>191</sup> Chehabi 2001, p. 48.

<sup>192</sup> Vaez, H. (2004) "Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Continuity and Change", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31(2), p. 237.

<sup>193</sup> Saeidi 2002, pp. 487, 493.

<sup>194</sup> Milani 2005, p. 32.

<sup>195</sup> Paidar 2002, pp. 266, 269.

lives. Farhi suggests that the impacts of this “invasion” merit much more research, focusing in particular on the ways in which the transformation of the public and the private has distorted the political process in Iran.<sup>196</sup> The struggle over women’s place in the Islamic Republic is particularly salient in connection to debate on the transformation of the public and private spheres, and merits further examination.

Looking towards research on Iran’s international role, the International Crisis Group points out that analyses of Iran’s influence in Iraq are rife with assumptions that could helpfully be substantiated or refuted with more rigorous research.<sup>197</sup> Additional research on the development of debates between Iranian and Iraqi Shi’ites on the nature of just government would also benefit both scholars and policymakers concerned with this volatile region.

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<sup>196</sup> Farhi, F. (2001) “On the Reconfiguration of the Public Sphere and the Changing Political Landscape of Postrevolutionary Iran”, in Esposito and Ramazani 2001, pp. 57-59. For a more general discussion of the public-private debate in Islam by a prominent Iranian thinker, see Kadivar, M. (2003) “An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam”, *Social Research* 70 (3).

<sup>197</sup> International Crisis Group 2005, p. i.

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