Reconciling Islam and Modernity

The Role of Ayatollah Khomeini in Shaping Iranian Discourses on Islam and Democracy

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Abstract

This thesis attempts, through an analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini’s political thought, to show the way in which the widely accepted western caricature of the late Iranian leader as “backward” and “fundamentalist” masks the complexities of his political philosophy and of his legacy as a political and religious leader. Rather than representing an attempt to reclaim a fundamentalist ideal of Islamic community in opposition to the modern world, this thesis argues that Khomeini’s political project (as embodied by the state founded on his philosophy) is better understood as a progressive attempt to reconcile the perceived conflict between traditional Islamic values and forces of modernity. In this vein, it argues that the spirit of progressive inquiry that spawned Khomeini’s political philosophy, and in turn the Iranian state, is in fact the most important legacy of the Iranian revolution. This legacy of progressive inquiry has fuelled ongoing debates in Iran on Islam and democracy, which in turn have come to represent the cutting edge of democratic discourse in the Muslim World.

In making this argument this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter offers an examination of Khomeini’s political thought and identifies Khomeini’s chief political legacy as his introduction of Islam into the public sphere (and its resulting secularization). The second chapter addresses Khomeini’s mystical beliefs and identifies his primary legacy in this regard as his willingness to challenge traditional Shi’i authority in the cause of reconciling Islam and modernity. The final chapter offers an examination of the reformist visions of the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdulkarim Soroush, underscoring the way in which all three share a recognition of Khomeini’s political project as inherently modernist and progressive. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the future of Iranian political discourse and addresses the implications that developments in Iran may have not only for discussions of Islam and democracy in the Muslim World but also more broadly on global discussions on the nature of public religion.
Introduction

In January of 1980, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, sat down in his house in Qom for an interview with the Middle East Bureau Chief of Time Magazine, Bruce van Voorst. Although the interview began with reasonable queries regarding anti-American sentiment and the crimes of the Shah, van Voorst’s line of questioning quickly took on a bias that was at times patronizing and at others seemingly loaded with sarcasm. Despite the deteriorating quality of the questions, the Ayatollah attempted to answer each in a relatively thoughtful manner. Above all, his answers conveyed a great sense of Iranian frustration with the U.S. government, and other world powers, which, beyond ignoring the human rights abuses perpetrated by the deposed Shah’s regime, were at the time preventing the return of the Shah to Iran to be tried for his crimes. Regardless of his frustration with the U.S. government, Khomeini very deliberately noted that whatever enmity he, and other Iranians, felt towards America was not directed at the American people.

By the time the two men were halfway through the interview, it became clear that van Voorst was determined to paint a very specific picture of Khomeini, one he had in mind well before he arrived at the Ayatollah’s house. The picture was in fact a caricature; it was of a backward, close-minded, fundamentalist Mullah disconnected from the modern world and overflowing with implacable hatred for the United States. Van Voorst was not the only member of the western media determined to caricature Khomeini in this way. For citizens of the western world who had long since concluded that secular democracy was the only type of desirable government, the fiery Iranian cleric committed to the establishment of an Islamic state at all costs represented everything that stood in opposition to their conception of human progress.

1 The following question and response is one example that illustrates van Voorst’s fundamental misunderstanding of Khomeini’s position as well as his desire to cast Khomeini as reactionary and unreasonable. “Q: You have objected to the West’s efforts to impose its values on Iran. Why are you trying to impose Islamic values and Islamic justice on representatives of the West? A: We definitely do not want to impose Islamic values on the West. Islam will never be imposed—neither on the West, nor on the East, nor on any particular individual or region. Islam is opposed to coercion. Islam stands for freedom in all its dimensions. It is up to the people themselves to accept or reject.” Ayatullah Khomeini, “Man of the Year: An Interview with Khomeini (January 7, 1980),” by Bruce van Vorst, Time (January 7, 1980).

2 Ibid.
The aforementioned western caricature of Khomeini is not entirely devoid of truth. It is, however, a gross oversimplification of one of the twentieth century’s most capable and influential politicians and world leaders. In the ensuing chapters, I offer an exploration of Khomeini’s political and religious thought, as well as his highly contested legacy, in order to problematize the caricature that has clouded western perceptions of the late Iranian leader and the Islamic Republic of Iran for over thirty years. Most notably, I endeavor to dispel the misperception of Khomeini as fundamentalist and backward and in its place to craft a more nuanced understanding of his political and religious vision that exposes it for what it really is, a progressive modernist project aimed at reconciling conflicts that emerge between traditional Islam and the forces of modernity.

Towards this end, the first two chapters of this thesis offer an examination of what I see as the two most important aspects of Khomeini’s political and religious legacy. In Chapter 1, I analyze Khomeini’s political philosophy, namely the doctrine of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurist), and discuss the evolution of Khomeini’s political philosophy as it became the founding principle of governance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the crux of this doctrine is Khomeini’s assertion that the Islamic concept of velayat (guardianship)–traditionally dictating that clergy are obligated to serve as the guardians of orphans and those mentally incapable of caring for themselves–must be expansively understood to hold that clergy have the right and obligation to serve as guardians of society as a whole. This move, as will be highlighted by the work of Mohsen Kadivar discussed in Chapter 3, constitutes a radical departure from traditional strains of Shi’i jurisprudential thought. I assert that Khomeini’s greatest legacy, in this regard, is his introduction of Islam into the public sphere as the official ideology of the Iranian state. This resulted in the intended consequence of making Islam a powerful force that wielded undeniable influence over Iranian society. It also resulted, however, in the unintentional consequence of "secularizing" Islam–making it a publicly contestable discourse open to debate by all members of Iranian society.

In Chapter 2, I offer an examination of Khomeini’s mystical thought, highlighting specifically the frustration Khomeini expressed over the way in which his mystical beliefs were criticized by what he saw as
“backward” and “reactionary” clerics. I assert that Khomeini’s legacy in this regard is multi-layered. On one level it suggests that, towards the end of his life, Khomeini may have been disappointed in his own political accomplishments to the extent that they had not created a society tolerant of his views (or of “other views” more broadly). On another level, Khomeini’s mystical legacy underscores the fact that his political vision stemmed from beliefs outside of traditional streams of Islamic thought.

In Chapter 3, I discuss three alternative Iranian visions for Islamic government offered by the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdulkarim Soroush. I emphasize that while all three thinkers are critical of Khomeini’s political project to varying degrees, all three still draw on his legacy in some capacity to further their own vision. What Montazeri, Kadivar, and Soroush have in common in terms of how they conceive of Khomeini, I assert, is a shared recognition of Khomeini’s political project as inherently modernist and progressive. In this respect, regardless of the critiques they level at the Iranian state, all three thinkers reclaim at least Khomeini’s intentions, arguing that his desire to create an Islamic state able to grapple successfully with issues of modernity remains an admirable goal.

The discussion of modern discourses on Islam and democracy in Chapter 3 reaffirms the understanding of Khomeini’s multi-faceted legacy developed in Chapters 1 and 2. The robust debates that have emerged in Iran on Islam and democracy are a testament to the importance of Khomeini’s introduction of Islam into the public sphere. And, the fact that reformist thinkers invoke Khomeini’s political project as an impetus for their own visions is a testament to the way Khomeini has been understood by many Iranians as a progressive thinker whose philosophical endeavors, regardless of their practical outcomes, highlight the importance of reconciling Islam and modernity. In this way, I conclude that Khomeini’s life and work can holistically be understood to have both provided space needed for new debates on Islam and democracy to emerge, and inspiration to the thinkers who have filled that space. Given this understanding, I assert that it is long past due that westerners shed the false caricature they have previously accepted of Khomeini as a leader attempting to guide Iran back to an anti-modern Islamic
golden age. Beneath that caricature they will find cause to reconsider not only the assumptions they have made about Khomeini and Iran, but also larger assumptions that have shaped western understandings of the relationship between Islam and democracy.
CHAPTER I

Imagining a Role for Islam in the Public Sphere

The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
By the time that Reza Shah Pahlavi was deposed in 1941 and replaced by his son Crown Prince Muhammad Reza, Ayatollah Khomeini was a rising young star in the Iranian clerical establishment. Having completed his seminary education in 1936, the thirty-four-year-old Khomeini received the title of *Hojjat al-Islam*[^3] and was officially deemed capable of “deriving his own rulings,” conducting his own classes, and beginning to develop a following. From very early on, Khomeini was inclined towards political engagement and admired those clergy who had historically been brave enough to stand up to unjust rulers[^4]. As a young seminarian and cleric, however, he for the most part avoided expressing opinions on political topics. Beyond his first noteworthy political publication in 1942, *Kashf al-Asrar* (*The Discovery of Secrets*), Khomeini remained relatively removed from the public sphere until the Shah’s proposed “White Revolution” in 1963[^5]. His reasons for maintaining a quietist stance can be attributed to two primary factors: (1) his junior position in the clerical hierarchy made it difficult for Khomeini to adopt a politically activist stance out of step with those above him, both because it would marginalize him within the clerical establishment but also because he had great respect for those senior to him, particularly the sole *marja-e taqlid* at the time, Ayatollah Borujerdi[^6]; (2) Khomeini was still developing as a political thinker and, although confident that his voice and the voice of other clergy should be heard in the public sphere, was not yet sure exactly what he wanted to say.

Despite the fact that Khomeini’s political statements prior to 1963 were few and far between, a close analysis of Khomeini’s aforementioned first entry into the public sphere in 1942 as well as his more noteworthy statements from 1963-1970 reveal a number of important aspects of his political

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[^3]: *Hojjat al-Islam* roughly translates as “proof of Islam” and is a title given to those who have become licensed *mojtaheds* (someone deemed competent to conduct *ijtihad*, interpret divine law, by higher level clerics in the Shi’i establishment.) through completion of seminary education.

[^4]: Moin, 63.

[^5]: The “White Revolution” was Muhammad Reza Shah’s six-point reform bill intended to solve all of Iran’s social, political, and economic problems. Its passage in 1963 sparked a wave of clerical protest that eventually resulted in Khomeini’s arrest and later exile in 1964. Ibid., 83.

[^6]: See footnote 15.
vision that serve as a foundation for his future development. First and foremost, Khomeini’s political statements during this period reveal his distaste for clerical quietism. Particularly following the beginning of Muhammad Reza Shah’s push for reform in 1963, Khomeini came out strongly not only in his condemnation of the regime, but also in his condemnation of those clerics willing to sit idly by while the regime implemented its “anti-Islamic” reforms. Second, Khomeini’s statements hint at his developing vision for an ideal form of Islamic government, particularly what that government entails in terms of the role of the clergy. Lastly, Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government, at this early point in his development, was almost exclusively rooted in the 1906 Constitutional vision of a supervisory rather than executive role for the clergy. In this way, Khomeini’s political expression during this period reflects more commonly accepted critiques of the Shah’s rule. As the following analysis illustrates, while Khomeini began to stand out among the clergy for his activism during this period, he did not yet distinguish himself as a truly radical thinker.

Khomeini wrote and anonymously published his first significant political statement, *Kashf al-Asrar*, in 1942. Written at the behest of Ayatollah Borujerdi, as a response to the anti-clerical sentiments expressed by the recently defunct regime of Reza Shah, the central claim of *Kashf* is that religion and politics cannot and should not remain separate. In attempting to prove this claim, Khomeini employed a combination of appeals to Shi’i religious tradition, to reason, and to principles of government that had been accepted in the Iranian Constitution since 1906.

As the foundation for his critique, Khomeini sought to establish that no government can be just unless it is somehow based on a conception of divine justice and is thus “acceptable to reason.” He proclaimed, “The only government that reason accepts as legitimate and welcomes freely and

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7 In 1906, a revolution in Iran led to the establishment of constitutional government. While largely embracing French Enlightenment principles—most notably a strong belief in secularity—the 1906 Constitution also outlined the creation of a council of Islamic clerics who could oversee the legislative process to ensure it was in accordance with Islamic values. This Constitutional provision was referenced frequently by religious critics of the Iranian regime who were opposed to the Shah’s emphasis on secularity. Ibid., 119.

happily is the government of God, Whose every act is just and Whose right it is to rule over the whole world and all the particles of existence.” The blueprint for implementing the “government of God,” he maintained, is the Islamic shari’a. It contains a comprehensive set of laws that can be implemented to govern all aspects of society. Based on this understanding, Khomeini quite logically argued that if government is to be in line with divine law it must be run under the guidance of those most knowledgeable in divine law, the faqih. He was careful, however, to clarify that the role he envisioned for the faqih was supervisory rather than executive. He asserted, “We do not say that government must be in the hands of the faqih; rather we say that government must be run in accordance with God’s law, for the welfare of the country and the people demands this, and it is not feasible except with the supervision of the religious leaders.” Furthermore, Khomeini deliberately noted that his vision for clerical involvement in government was enshrined, and unimplemented in the Iranian Constitution. “This principle [of clerical consultation],” he asserts, “has been approved and ratified in the Constitution and in no way conflicts with the public order, the stability of the government, or the interests of the country.” By appealing to constitutional values, Khomeini situated himself in a discourse of more commonly accepted critiques of the Shah’s rule.

At the time that Kashf was published it is unclear whether Khomeini already had a more radical vision of Islamic government that he did not yet feel comfortable expressing. In 1943, however, it is quite likely that he, like the other clergy, felt relatively optimistic about the possibility that Muhammad Reza Shah would be more favorably inclined towards the clergy than his father. His calls

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9 Ibid.
10 Shari’a more broadly refers to the “divine path” laid out for Muslims that is derived from the Qur’an and the hadith (the traditions of the Prophet). Exactly what makes up shari’a is the subject of constant debate among Islamic scholars. How much emphasis is placed on the historical context in which certain Quran’ic precepts were revealed as well as whether or not legal principles derived from Islamic tradition can/should be considered eternally valid are two driving factors that make concrete definitions of shari’a challenging. Some of these issues will be addressed in greater depth in Chapter 3.
11 Fāqih is a title given to an expert in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). It can thus roughly be translated as “jurist.” The plural form of faqih is fuqaha, a term that will occur on occasion in this thesis.
13 Ibid., 170.
for implementation of the Constitution should thus be understood as based on a sincere belief that the Iranian government could be fixed—without drastic changes in structure—if only the Constitution could be implemented in full. Khomeini expressed as much in Kashf when he posited,

> If just one article of the Constitution were to be implemented, that specifying that all laws contrary to the shari'a are invalid, everyone in the country would join together in harmony, and the country would move forward with the speed of lightning. All the deplorable institutions mentioned above would be transformed into new and rational institutions, and through the joint efforts of all the people, the educated and the masses alike, the country would attain a state unparalleled in the world.\(^\text{14}\)

The belief in the transformative power of shari'a that Khomeini expressed in the passage above reappeared in many of his later arguments for Islamic government.

When Khomeini made his second major appearance on the political scene in 1963, it is quite possible that his perspective had changed. Twenty years of quietism\(^\text{15}\) had failed to see the creation of a consultative clerical council or the implementation of shari'a, and in the end had resulted in the Shah initiating secular reforms not unlike those of his father. Whether or not Khomeini had already embraced a more radical position at the time of his first vitriolic critique of the Shah in 1963, the events of the period undoubtedly pushed him towards the belief that much more was needed to reform the Iranian government than superficial changes.

While Khomeini’s statements during this period offer some subtle hints at his changing perspective, to the casual observer they continue to primarily remain focused on more commonly accepted critiques of the regime—the regime’s hostility towards Islam, its interference in popular elections for the Majles, and its refusal to implement the constitutional ordinances dictating clerical supervision of the government. Through these critiques, Khomeini’s primary intention appears to be to galvanize the clergy into taking political action. Towards this end, he began to depict the clerical

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\(^{14}\) Ibid., 171.

\(^{15}\) The clerical quietism that defined the forties and fifties resulted from the emergence of Ayatollah Seyed Hassan Borujerdi as the sole marja’e taqlid (see definition below) of the Shi’a. Borujerdi was an immensely competent administrator who strengthened the organizational structures of the Qom seminaries and religious community. He was very much opposed to the mixture of religion and politics, however, and strongly discouraged clergy from entering the political sphere. Marja-e taqlid roughly translates as “source of emulation.” It is the highest honorific title given to members of the Shi’i clergy and denotes that their decisions on Islamic law are respected by a large number of followers and lower ranking clerics.
disagreements with the regime in terms of a zero-sum conflict, asserting that the regime was
“fundamentally opposed to Islam” and that to refuse to oppose it is essentially was to accept the
inevitable destruction of the clerical establishment and the decay of Iranian society.16

This sentiment surfaced powerfully in a statement made by Khomeini in April of 1963
commemorating those killed following the SAVAK assault on the Feiziyeh Mosque.17 Khomeini wrote,
“As long as this usurpatory and rebellious government is in power, the Muslims can have no hope for
any good.”18 A year later, in a statement made following his release from prison in October of 1964
and in response to a new U.S.-Iranian military agreement, Khomeini stated his condemnation of
quietist clergy in even harsher terms.

Those gentlemen who say we must hold our tongues and not utter a sound—do they still say the same thing
on this occasion?... By God, whoever does not cry out in protest is a sinner! By God, whoever does not
express his outrage commits a major sin! Leaders of Islam, come to the aid of Islam! ‘Ulama of Najaf, come
to the aid of Islam! ‘Ulama of Qum, come to the aid of Islam! Islam is destroyed!19

Later on in the same statement, Khomeini pushed his critique of the regime one step further. Beyond
simply critiquing the failures of the Shah, he suggested that things would be much improved if
religious leaders ran the government by presenting a list of positive hypothetical statements prefaced by
“If the religious leaders have influence...”

If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit this nation to be the slaves of Britain one day, and
America the next... If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit such misuse to be made of the
public treasury. If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit the Majlis to come to a miserable
state like this; they will not permit the Majlis to be formed at bayonet-point, with the scandalous results that
we see.20

16 Khomeini, “The Afternoon of ‘Ashura,” 177. See also, Imam Khomeini, “In Commemoration of Martyrs at
Qum/April 3, 1963,” in Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980), translated and
17 On March 22nd, 1963, a service being led by Ayatollah Golpayegani—one of the highest-ranking Ayatollah’s in
Qom—to commemorate Ja’far al-Sadeq, the sixth Shi’i Imam, was infiltrated by the Shah’s secret police (SAVAK) who
disrupted the ceremony and ransacked the Feiziyeh Mosque. It was the first instance in which the Shah demonstrated
his willingness to use force to harass and silence the clerical opposition.
18 Khomeini, “In Commemoration of Martyrs at Qum,” 185.
19 Imam Khomeini, “The Granting of Capitulatory Rights to the U.S./October 27, 1964,” in Islam and Revolution:
Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980), translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (London: Mizan
20 Ibid.
Most noteworthy in this passage, is that while Khomeini’s conception of clerical “influence” hints at his later call for full clerical rule, in this instance the benefits he listed of clerical rule all speak to issues on which the religious and non-religious opposition in Iran agreed—foreign interference in Iranian affairs; corruption; lack of representation, etc.

Even in 1967, after he had already been exiled for three years, Khomeini continued to root his critique of the Shah’s regime in his understanding of the values of the Constitution, and to emphasize the importance of representative elections.21 Through the end of the decade, this approach remained largely unchanged as did Khomeini’s most readily apparent goal of galvanizing the clergy and breaking down the barriers between the religious and political spheres.

A Vision of Islamic Governance

In 1970, while in his sixth year of exile and his fifth year living in the Iraqi Shi’i holy city of Najaf, Khomeini delivered a series of twelve lectures that together became his defining treatise on Islamic government. In these lectures, he laid out his vision of velayat-e faqih—translated roughly as ‘guardianship of the jurist’—a doctrine that outlined clerical rule and would become a guiding influence in the formation of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the revolution. Within months, the Velayat-e Faqih lectures were published clandestinely and distributed throughout Iran. Their radical message of clerical rule, which clearly departed from the constitutionally-based critiques that Khomeini had espoused up until that point, received praise from many in the religious community but also received significant criticism from senior figures in the clerical establishment.

Why Khomeini chose this specific moment to deliver these sermons is difficult to determine. His decision can most likely be attributed to some combination of the following factors: (1) it was at this point that he had at last fully developed his political philosophy to the point that he felt ready to

expose it to and defend it in front of a larger audience; (2) Khomeini was beginning to feel marginalized as a voice in Iranian politics—his exile had largely been successful in convincing the Iranian clergy to reembrace their quietist position and the political sphere had been correspondingly calm—and he wanted to recapture the attention of at least the clerical community; and 3) Khomeini wanted to test the waters, so to speak, and see who among the religious community was willing to accept and advocate for his vision. In some ways, the vision Khomeini laid out in Velayat-e Faqih was not dissimilar from some of the ideas he had expressed previously (the inseparability of religion and politics, the problematic nature of clerical quietism, the need for government independent of foreign influence, etc.), in his lectures he simply addressed them in greater depth. The greatest leap made by Khomeini, however, is his move from envisioning the clergy in a supervisory role to envisioning them as the executive. This leap is based on Khomeini’s concept of guardianship in the Shi’i tradition and is the idea that I will discuss in greatest depth in this section.

In his translated volume, Hamid Algar divides Khomeini’s Velayat-e Faqih lectures into four parts: Introduction; The Necessity for Islamic Government; The Form of Islamic Government; and Program for the Establishment of An Islamic Government. The first two sections address many of the issues that Khomeini had already touched on in his pre-1970 writings. In essence they provide the contemporary political context and evidence from Muslim tradition that suggests why Islamic government is preferable to all other forms of government. In the first regard, Khomeini’s primary claim is that the Shah’s regime, through its denial of Islam, has become beholden to and perverted by foreign powers with treacherous designs for Iran. Khomeini asserted that the ruling class’s plan is to keep us backward, to keep us in our present miserable state so they can exploit our riches, our underground wealth, our lands, and our human resources. They want us to remain afflicted and wretched, and our poor to be trapped in their misery. Instead of surrendering to the injunctions of Islam, which provide a solution for the problem of poverty, they and their agents wish to go on living in huge palaces and enjoying lives of abominable luxury.²²

In this way, Khomeini envisioned Islamic government as a means of solving Iran’s social problems through ridding the country of corrupting foreign influences.

For evidence of the desirability of Islamic government in the Muslim tradition, Khomeini pointed in particular at the Prophet Muhammad who not only established a government but also, according to Shi‘i tradition, designated a “ruler to succeed him.”23 If Muhammad believed the best way to achieve the ends of Islam was through the establishment of an Islamic government, Khomeini asked, why then should we not also seek Islamic government now? As further evidence in support of this claim, Khomeini reiterated some of his more familiar claims regarding the shari‘a. He argued that the very existence of shari‘a as a comprehensive set of laws that embodies a “complete social system” in which “all the needs of man are met,” is “proof of the necessity for establishing government.”24 Lastly, Khomeini asserted that the need for Islamic government stems from the tendency of average men to stray from the path of righteousness. To keep men from corrupting vices there must be a guardian (or trustee) who ensures that they obey certain divine constraints.25 Paraphrasing the eighth Shi‘i Imam, Ali Reza, Khomeini proclaimed,

> Men are commanded to observe certain limits and not to transgress them in order to avoid the corruption that would result. This cannot be attained or established without there being appointed over them a [guardian] who will ensure that they remain within the limits of the licit and prevent them from casting themselves into the danger of transgression.26

On its own this passage reveals little about the nature of the guardian that Khomeini envisioned. It became clear in the later lectures, however, exactly what Khomeini had in mind.

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24 Ibid., 43. Khomeini also highlights that the system of taxes mandated by the shari‘a generates far more revenue than is needed just for the upkeep of the clergy and the relatives of the prophet. He naturally concludes that this surplus in funds must be intended for use in administering a government. Khomeini’s presentation of shari‘a as being comprehensive and uniformly agreed upon belies the contested nature of Islamic law and tradition that will be addressed in later chapters. 
25 Khomeini’s argument, in this regard, is closely linked to the way in which he mystically and philosophically conceives of man’s capacity to comprehend divine will. These ideas will be discussed more fully later on in the chapter. 
26 Ibid., 51.
The third segment of Khomeini’s lectures, The Form of Islamic Government, is the most controversial by far. In it he laid out in clear terms exactly how he envisioned Islamic government, for the first time making the leap from advocating a consultative role for the clergy to one in which the clergy serve as the executors of the government. The reason Khomeini made this leap stems from his fundamental conception of Islamic government as representing “the rule of divine law over men.” In other words, Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government is based on the sole sovereignty of God—“the legislative power and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God Almighty.” Khomeini understood shari’a as a comprehensive set of laws designed to create a society in line with divine will. Thus, the highest goal of Islamic government in his mind was to effectively implement shari’a.

Up until this point, Khomeini had not strayed too far from traditional Islamic conceptions of government. He then acknowledged, however, that Islamic tradition dictates simply that the qualification for ruling within an Islamic system is that a ruler be willing to follow the guidance of those most knowledgeable in Islamic law (the fuqaha), and then pushed these qualifications one step further. He argued that such a system, where the ruler is not himself knowledgeable of Islamic law, is doomed to at best be inefficient and more likely ineffective in implementing divine law. The alternative he proposed is that the middleman simply be eliminated and that the qualifications for rule be raised so that “in addition to general qualifications like intelligence and administrative ability” a ruler must also “surpass all others in knowledge [of the law and justice].” Because the clergy are naturally the most learned and knowledgeable of divine law, he argued, it is only logical that the right to rule belongs to them.

If the ruler adheres to Islam, he must necessarily submit to the faqih, asking him about the laws and ordinances of Islam in order to implement them. This being the case, the true rulers are the fuqaha

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27 Ibid., 55.
28 Ibid., 51.
29 Ibid., 60.
30 Ibid., 59. Khomeini later goes against these qualifications when he designates Ali Khamene’i, a lesser ranking cleric, as his successor.
themselves, and rulership ought officially to be theirs, to apply to them, not to those who are obliged to follow the guidance of the *fuqaha* on account of their own ignorance of law.\(^{31}\)

The fourth segment of Khomeini’s lectures on *velayate faqih*, *Program for Establishment of an Islamic Government*, is primarily aimed at his fellow clergy and, like his early speeches prior to 1970, is a call for the clerical establishment to renounce quietism and assume its rightful position of political leadership in the Muslim community. Drawing on primarily Shi’i traditions he both critiqued those clergy who claimed to be practicing *taqiyya*\(^ {32}\) as being more worried about their own well being than that of Islam\(^ {33}\) and also asserted that without clerical leadership any movement for Islamic government is doomed to fail. “The people must be instructed in these matters and helped to mature, intellectually and politically,” he claimed. “We must tell them what kind of government we want, what kinds of people would assume responsibility for affairs in the government we propose, and what policies and programs they would follow.”\(^ {34}\)

The government that Khomeini envisioned in his lectures in 1970, nine years before the success of the revolution, was strikingly similar to the Islamic Republic that emerged as the product of the revolution. Sharing in their acceptance of the doctrine of *velayate faqih*, both visions privilege divine sovereignty over popular sovereignty and rule out the possibility of elected representatives wielding significant power with no strings attached. Despite the similarities in these visions, Khomeini did not become the leader of the diverse revolutionary coalition because his vision of *velayate faqih* had unanimous support among all the members of the revolutionary coalition. In fact, part of the reason Khomeini was able to rise to such a position of prominence was because many groups within the coalition were unaware of the exact details of his governmental vision.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 60.

\(^{32}\) *Taqiyya* refers to a Shi’i doctrine that permits believers to conceal their faith when revealing it places them at risk of persecution.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 144.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 129.
This ignorance of other revolutionaries about Khomeini’s vision can be attributed to two primary factors. First, in 1970 Khomeini was not yet of the stature where his lectures would have been widely read by average Iranians. Despite the fame he had gained because of his opposition to the Shah prior to his exile, Khomeini had largely faded from the public eye during his exile. The community who would have had most ready access to and interest in Khomeini’s published lectures would have been the young seminarians in Qom who were either part of or were at least exposed to Khomeini’s network of supporters. This group, however, would have been generally less concerned about the more theocratic aspects of Khomeini’s vision. The second explanation is that immediately following the publication of 1970 lectures Khomeini pragmatically retreated from his more radical rhetoric in order to make his revolutionary vision more palatable to larger audiences. It is this process of reformulating his rhetoric that I explore in the next section.

Catering to a Wider Movement

Following his publication of *Velayat-e Faqih*, Khomeini again temporarily drifted into the background of the Iranian political consciousness. This was in part due to the fact that in the relative political calm of the early seventies Khomeini’s critiques of the regime held less appeal. It can perhaps also be understood as a side effect of some of the critical backlash Khomeini received following the publication of *Velayat-e Faqih*. After all, while Khomeini’s comprehensive political manifesto received rave reviews from many of his supporters, it was also the subject of major criticism by senior Shi’i clerics. The most noteworthy critic was Grand Ayatollah Abolqasem Kho’i, the most influential Shi’i cleric in Iraq. As Baqer Moin explains, Kho’i’s critique was two pronged:

First, Kho’i believed that the authority of the faqih – which in mainstream Shi’i theory was limited to the guardianship of widows and orphans – could not be extended by human beings to the political sphere. Secondly, Kho’i argued that in the absence of the Hidden Imam, the authority of jurisprudents was not the preserve of one or a few faqihs.  

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35 Moin, 158.
The critiques offered by Khoi were shared by other clerics at the time and, as will be shown in Chapter 3, remain among the most prominent contemporary critiques of Khomeini’s vision and the current Iranian Constitution.

In the face of the criticism leveled at him by Kho’i and others, Khomeini did not fully retreat into silence. He did, however, appear to take a step back from the more radical vision for which he advocated in Velayate Faqih. In one of his earliest writings during this period, “The Incompatibility of Monarchy With Islam,” Khomeini returned to some of his previously aired and more popularly accepted critiques of clerical quietism and regime hostility towards Islam. With regard to the regime, he fiercely condemned the Shah’s lavish plans in 1971 to celebrate 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. He wrote, “Ought the people of Iran to celebrate the rule of a traitor to Islam and the interests of the Muslims who gives oil to Israel?” He continued to assert that the Kings of Iran provide a perfect example of why “Islam is fundamentally opposed to the whole notion of monarchy.”

Khomeini’s words for the clergy were no less critical. Given that at the time he was living in exile in Iraq, he directed his critique primarily at the Iraqi Shi’i clergy for being unwilling to stand up in support of their repressed Iranian peers. “Why is Najaf so sound asleep?” Khomeini lamented. “Why is it not trying to help the wretched and oppressed people of Iran? Is our only duty to sit here studying the principles and details of religious law?”

In addition to revisiting previously aired grievances, Khomeini also during this period began to place greater emphasis on critiquing aspects of the Shah’s regime on which all members of the Iranian

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36 The festivities were a precursor to ill-advised efforts by the Shah to elevate the Persian Imperial identity in Iranian culture over that of Islam. These efforts included the establishment of a one party system that required Iranians to become state party members as a demonstration of their loyalty to the monarchical regime, as well as the discontinuation of using the Islamic calendar in favor of a calendar based on the establishment of the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great. Ibid., 175.
38 Ibid., 203. The cross-national appeal reflected in this quote is something Khomeini echoes in other works during this period but which he begins to advocate for most vociferously only after the Iranian revolution. See also Imam Khomeini, “Message to the Muslim Students in North America/July 10, 1972” in Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980), translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (London: Mizan Press, 1981)
opposition could agree. Key among these points of agreement was the Shah’s human rights violations as well as the regime's problematic relationships with certain foreign powers that were perceived to be anti-Islamic, namely the U.S. and Israel.\textsuperscript{39} In the former regard, Khomeini repeatedly attacked the regime’s human rights record, placing the responsibility for the oppressive state directly on the shoulders of the Shah. In a statement he made in February of 1978, he proclaimed, “Do you think it is the police chief of Qom who [orders the police to attack religious students]? Don’t say it is the police who do these things; it is the Shah! The Shah personally gives the orders and tells them to kill.”\textsuperscript{40}

With regard to foreign involvement in Iran, Khomeini was immensely critical of foreign powers who had signed the Declaration of Human Rights and yet who continued to violate the Declaration in how they involved themselves around the world. He stated in 1978, “We have suffered, and continue to suffer, all these misfortunes at the hands of governments who have signed the Declaration of Human Rights and who loudly proclaim men’s right to freedom.”\textsuperscript{41} Khomeini’s claims in this regard possessed wide appeal as they drew on the frustrations felt by many Iranians with the Carter Administration’s aforementioned unwillingness to back up its human rights rhetoric with a condemnation of the Shah’s oppression of opposition voices.

The notion that Khomeini was attempting to appeal to a larger audience is in fact at the core of how his writings during this period should be understood. His appeals to human rights, his critiques of foreign interference with Iranian affairs, and, above all, the conspicuous absence of his advocacy for a government based on \textit{velayate faqih}, suggest that he was attempting to make his revolutionary platform more palatable to a wider swath of the population. His motivation for doing this was most likely his recognition that popular discontent, particularly in the mid to late seventies, was growing increasingly widespread in Iranian society and thus afforded him the opportunity to position himself as


\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 218.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 220.
the leader of a diverse Iranian revolutionary movement that extended well beyond his religious support base. In this regard, Khomeini was largely successful and his assumption of leadership of the movement was reflected in his calls for the movement’s unity. In one of his last major statements in this period, “In Commemoration of the Martyrs of Tehran,” Khomeini beseeched all members of the movement to remain unified if nothing else.

My dear ones! Avoid all disagreement, for disagreement is the work of the devil. Continue your sacred movement in unison for the sake of the ultimate goal, which is the overthrow of the corrupt Pahlavi regime and the liberation of the destiny and resources of our country from foreign control. Fear nothing in your pursuit of these Islamic goals.42

His emphasis on unity and his willingness to downplay the goal of Islamic governance, which he outlined so clearly in Velayat-e Faqih, is truly indicative of the fact that towards the end of this period, Khomeini’s greatest concern was the success of the revolution. With this in mind, he was willing to set aside or at least deemphasize aspects of his political philosophy in order to maintain the unity of the revolutionary movement. Khomeini’s tendency to preserve the revolution at all costs foreshadowed his later privileging of the survival of the Islamic state over strict adherence to traditional Islamic dictates. Both cases illustrate Khomeini’s appreciation for the fact that the challenges of political modernity, in some cases trump a rigid adherence to traditional Islam. This progressive aspect of Khomeini’s political project will be returned to later on.

On the Eve of Revolution

As the revolutionary crisis peaked in the final months of 1978, two competing interests were shaping Khomeini’s political statements. First, in order to secure his position of leadership in the aftermath of revolution, Khomeini needed to continue to cater to a diverse set of elements within the revolutionary movement without alienating any in particular. Second, while maintaining the unity of the movement, Khomeini also had to prime Iranian society to accept his vision for an Islamic state so

that when it was introduced in the aftermath of the revolution it would not be met with widespread shock and opposition among the populace.

One of the main points of tension between these two competing factors was that Khomeini’s vision for an Islamic state was lacking in some of the key democratic characteristics desired by many of the revolutionaries. To negotiate this tension and assuage the concerns of more fiercely democratic revolutionaries, Khomeini chose to couch his visions for Islamic governance in vague terminology that seemed at least implicitly to suggest a commitment to democratic values and popular sovereignty. The most notable example of this was Khomeini’s adoption of the term “Islamic republic” to describe his vision of ideal Islamic governance as opposed to his former terminology of velayat-e faqih. In a speech given in late November 1978 he beseeched revolutionaries, “Advance together, with a single voice and a single purpose, to the sacred aim of Islam—the abolition of the cruel Pahlavi dynasty, the destruction of the abominable monarchical regime, and the establishment of an Islamic republic based on the progressive dictates of Islam!”

When pressed on exactly what he meant by “republic,” Khomeini’s answers were vague and deliberately cryptic, allowing the listener to hear what they hoped or wanted to hear. For instance, in an interview conducted at Neuphle-le Chateau on December 29th, 1978, the interviewer, Hamid Algar, asked Khomeini to explain the nature of the “free elections” that would be held to establish an Islamic government in Iran. Khomeini responded, “All parties will be free to exist in Iran, except those that clearly oppose the interests of the people, and the elections will also be free. Of course we will make our recommendations to the people, which they may or may not follow. [emphasis added]” On one hand, this statement could be read to reassure democratic advocates that free popular elections would be an

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essential part of the new state. On the other hand, Khomeini’s qualification regarding parties that “clearly oppose the interests of the people” raised a set of problematic questions. Who would be deciding whether parties oppose the interests of the people? And, would those who are deciding be freely elected?

In other instances, Khomeini’s responses to questions about the nature of his vision for Islamic government cross the line from being vague to being potentially duplicitous. In one interview, he outlined all the institutions of government without a single mention of a role for the clergy or that the power of elected representatives will somehow be subject to unelected authorities. He commented,

In so far as the establishments are concerned, the people will elect their representatives to the parliament and these representatives will elect the government council (the ministers) and the president of the republic. The president of the republic will be accountable to the people (parliament). The new constitution will define the powers and jurisdiction of each of these people.  

The nature of the Islamic government that emerged only months later under Khomeini’s guidance showed the above statements to be incomplete at best and at worse patently false.

In negotiating the second interest influencing his decision-making process during this period—his need to prime Iranian society to accept and support Islamic government—Khomeini proactively began to depict the revolutionary movement as uniformly Islam-driven and clergy-led. In an interview in January of 1979, only weeks before he returned to Iran, Khomeini highlighted the fact that Islam was the only thing that could have unified the Iranian population in its pursuit of revolution and that could continue to unify it under a new government. “The Islamic values are what creates the people’s conscience. So, can the people be united in isolation from their conscience? If they miss the path they... will cause the society to be divided and disintegrated and, consequently,

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46 Some of those more sympathetic to Khomeini explain the inconsistencies between his pre-revolutionary statements and post-revolutionary actions as being caused by various strains that were placed on the regime immediately following the revolution (i.e. the war with Iraq, the subversive efforts of the Mojahedin-e Khalq). They argue that had these strains not been present, Khomeini would have implemented a more representative government such as the one he describes in the passage above. One prominent figure that makes exactly this argument is Ayatollah Montazeri whose ideas will be addressed in Chapter 3.
destroyed rapidly.”\textsuperscript{47} He further asserted that Iranians had struggled for the freedom to choose their own state for the sole purpose of choosing Islamic government. “All groups of people in small and big villages and in small and big cities are struggling in quest of one thing,” he writes, “namely freedom and independence. Considering that they are all Moslems, they are demanding an Islamic rule.”\textsuperscript{48}

With regard to the clergy, Khomeini repeatedly highlighted how, because the movement was Islamic, the clergy had played and should continue to play a key role in the leadership of society.\textsuperscript{49} He was also careful to note, however, that clerical leadership and influence in society did not necessarily mean clerical political rule. For the most part, he appeared to envision the clergy as removed from formal government in order to avoid the critiques of secularists. When he does reference a governmental role for the clergy, he suggests that it will be a supervisory role such as that outlined in the 1906 Constitution.\textsuperscript{50}

Khomeini’s motivations for crafting an understanding of the movement as monolithically Islamic both in terms of its goals and its leadership was two-fold: 1) it helped him to marginalize non-Islamic opposition voices and thus neutralize their capacity to pose a threat to the regime; 2) it gave Khomeini more evidence of the power of Islam as he began to adapt his vision for the global stage.

\textit{From Vision to Reality}

On January 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1979 the Shah conceded defeat to the Iranian revolutionary movement. Entrusting his monarchy to a regency council that quickly became no more than a shadow government, he left the country never to return. Shortly following the Shah’s departure and after 15

\textsuperscript{47} Khomeyni, “Interview With Khomeyni at Moment of Shah’s Downfall,” 14.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{49} In the same interview discussed above, Khomeini asserts, “because the struggle is Islamic and because the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people are Moslems, it is natural that their leadership will be in the hands of the clergymen.” Ibid., 8-9.

\textsuperscript{50} Khomeini discusses this in greater depth in his interview with Salman. “A council of ulema will be set up to supervise the laws and to make sure that they are not in conflict with the dictates of the orthodox religion. On the occasion, the constitution approved in 1906 contained an article stipulating the establishment of such a council (of 6 members). But the rule of the shahanshas obstructed its implementation to strike Islam and the Koran and to set up the rule of the false gods and of the infidel adherents of Mazdaism, Baha’is and other non-Moslems.” Ibid., 20.
years in exile, Khomeini returned triumphantly to Iran. He was greeted by millions who saw him as
the country’s savior and who believed that he would lead them to a better future. Largely in
affirmation of Khomeini’s leadership, on April 1st, 1979, 98.2% of Iranians voted by popular
referendum for the establishment of an “Islamic Republic.”

Following the April referendum, Khomeini could at last be confident that he was in the
driver’s seat of the movement to establish a new Iranian state. The realization of his vision of a
government based on velayate faqih, however, was not yet complete. Before that vision could become a
reality, Khomeini had to successfully respond to critiques and concerns about his government offered
by various segments of the population. His public statements during this period are dominated by this
endeavor. In some cases they are direct responses to comments publicly made by other revolutionary
figures.\textsuperscript{51} In others, he appeared to be responding to critiques that he gauged as being prominent
among dissident groups in Iranian society. In this vein, prior to the approval of the Constitution in
December of 1979, Khomeini’s statements focused primarily on convincing the populace that
government of the velayat-e faqih was indeed preferable to other forms of governance. Following the
enactment of the new constitution, while continuing to offer arguments to convince opposition voices
of the legitimacy of the regime, Khomeini’s goals in his political statements evolved once again as he
attempted to export the ideology and governmental vision he has created in Iran to the rest of the
global Muslim community.

The first major critique leveled at Khomeini during this period was that the Constitution
enshrined clerical rule in such a way that it rendered elected officials in the government potentially
irrelevant. In response to this critique, Khomeini remained adamant both before and after the
enactment of the Constitution that the role of the clergy in government was largely supervisory, much
like the clerical role that was outlined but never implemented in the 1906 Constitution. Following the
enactment of the Constitution, which very clearly drew all of the strings of power back to the clergy,

\textsuperscript{51} Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam and Dissent}, 59-62.
this case became harder to make. Khomeini, however, based the claim on two key points. First, he argued that the clergy was not interested in serving in the executive branch of the government, particularly in the office of the presidency, but rather sought to allow the majority of governing to be done by elected non-clerical officials.

The religious scholar will have a role in government. He does not want to be the ruler, but he does want to have a role. On this question of the presidency, there were proposals made to me... that the President ought to be a religious leader, and I realized that that was because no one else would be trusted in the role. But I said, "No, the religious scholar does not wish to be President himself; he wishes instead to have a role in the presidency, a supervisory role. He will exercise this role on behalf of the people. If the government begins to misbehave, the religious scholar will stand in its way."\(^5\)

The logic of this statement was of course proven false when Khomeini endorsed Khamene’i’s ascent to the Presidency in 1981.

Second, beyond asserting that clerics should avoid competing for elected positions, Khomeini also attempted to constantly present himself, as the Supreme Leader, as removed from the administration of the everyday government. In public announcements throughout his rule, he often spoke about the government as though it was not under his control. For instance, at one point he declared to the populace, “I do not know why the government has failed to proceed with its suspended plans for promoting the welfare for the people. It must immediately implement existing plans and adopt new ones in order to remedy the economic situation in our country.”\(^5\)

There is certainly some truth to the fact that Khomeini was not involved in every decision being made in Iran and thus at times may have been uninformed as to the motivations of elected officials with regard to certain government policies. As the above passage illustrates, however, Khomeini certainly played up the fact that the unique system of velayate faqih did not fit the familiar popular conception of authoritarian rule—where one ruler is micromanaging decisions made throughout the state—and preferred to present himself as a hands-off supervisor who only intervened in government in moments of severe crisis. This

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image belied the fact that all the strings of power in Iran could, in the end, be traced to the office of the Supreme Leader.

The second major critique of Khomeini’s proposed government was that the system of velayat-e faqih would lead to authoritarianism. Rather than focusing on the presence of clergy in government more generally, however, this second critique was more geared towards the fact that the system of velayat-e faqih provided no effective mechanisms of accountability by which the populace would be protected from tyrannical rule. This critique was voiced loudly by both religious and non-religious figures who, while perhaps not taking issue with Khomeini (at least at the outset of his rule), were worried about what could occur in the absence of Khomeini’s unique leadership. Khomeini’s response to these critics was three-pronged. First, he attempted to belittle the influence of secular voices by highlighting the essential Islamic identity of the revolutionary movement and thus ridiculing the idea that secular voices had any worthwhile contributions to make to the formation of the new state. One such critique which Khomeini levels at non-Muslims trying to claim a role in the movement stated,

You who imagine that something can be achieved in Iran by some means other than Islam, you who suppose that something other than Islam overthrew the Shah’s regime, you who believe non-Islamic elements played a role—study the matter carefully. Look at the tombstones of those who gave their lives in the movement of Khurdad 15. You will not find a single tombstone belonging to either (a non-Muslim or a member of the upper echelons of society.

Ghamari-Tabrizi identifies Naser Makarem Shirazi, “a long-time ally and disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini” as one of the key proponents of this critique. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, “[Shirazi] argued that the present revolutionary atmosphere influenced the advocates of velayat-e faqih. Their vision of the future political system in Iran was conditioned by the extraordinary charisma of Ayatollah Khomeini. ‘[Khomeini’s] leadership,’ he asserted, ‘is an exception in history. We should not author a constitution that institutionalizes an exception, we must write it for all times and all place.” Somewhat ironically, one of the chief rebuttals to this claim was offered by Montazeri who, as will be shown in Chapter 3, would later become a forceful advocate of Shirazi’s position. Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 59-60.

“Khurdad 15” refers to the protests that occurred on June 5, 1963 (Khurdad 15 in the Iranian calendar) in response to Khomeini’s arrest by the Shah.

Second, beyond attempting to marginalize opposition voices, Khomeini also co-opted some of their rhetoric thus undermining their ability to criticize the regime in clear language. He partly accomplished this through his use of the term Islamic Republic. He also, however, addressed the issue of whether or not the new Islamic state was democratic by claiming that calling an Islamic republic democratic is redundant because democratic values are already inherent in Islam.

To juxtapose ‘democratic’ and ‘Islamic’ is an insult to Islam. Because when you place the word ‘democratic’ in front of ‘Islamic,’ it means that Islam is lacking in the alleged virtues of democracy, although, Islam is, in fact, superior to all forms of democracy. To speak of a ‘democratic Islamic republic’ is like speaking of a ‘justice-oriented Islamic republic.’ That is an insult to Islam because it suggests that justice is something extrinsic to Islam, whereas it is the very substance of Islam.57

What exactly Khomeini meant by democratic values in this statement is, as in his use of “republic,” ambiguous. Based on an understanding of his work, it can be assumed that he is referring to the ideas of equality and social justice that are often referred to as “democratic.” He fails to address, however, how his conception of Islamic government can be reconciled with the ideals of representative government that are also generally associated with democracy.

Khomeini’s third response to this critique—specifically the claim that the velayate faqih could lead to tyranny—was to assert that the qualifications for becoming the supreme leader preclude that one who rises to the post could rule tyrannically. He offers a lengthy explanation for this position in an interview conducted in 1980. In his explanation he maintained that the constitutional provision for the velayate faqih is structured in such a way that it could not lead to tyranny or to a lesser extreme “harm anyone.” He asserted, “Particular attributes have been set down as necessary for the ‘holder of authority’ (vali amr) and the faqih, and they are attributes that prevent him from going astray.”58

Exactly how he is prevented from going astray, however, is unclear. Khomeini held that, “If he utters a single lie, or takes a single wrong step, [the vali] forfeits his claim to governance,”59 but he offered little explanation for who, or what government body, would identify when the wrong deed had been done

58 Ibid., 342.
59 Ibid.
and in turn remove the supreme leader from office. Despite the seeming lack of accountability mechanisms, Khomeini remained adamant that what is in the Constitutional ordinance is enough to keep the government from backsliding into tyranny. If the vali meets the qualifications for rule, he maintained, he must by nature be a just executor of divine law.

The last major critique leveled against the new Khomeini-inspired Iranian Constitution was that it created a state that was doomed to be deemed “backward” by the rest of the world. As mentioned previously, by the time of the Iranian revolution, secularity was considered by many in the Western world to be one of the pillars of good governance, and the new Iranian state was anything but secular. For that reason, beyond being fundamentally critical of the regime for the reasons outlined above, many critics also feared that by creating a state based on Islamic rule, Iran would be ostracized and marginalized in the global political and economic community.

Khomeini was certainly not an ardent admirer of the West. Much of his revolutionary and post-revolutionary rhetoric in fact utilized anti-Western, and particularly anti-American, themes to mobilize his supporters. Khomeini was very careful, however, to note that he was not fundamentally opposed to the West so much as he was opposed to the political meddling and cultural degradation that had come with Western influence in Iranian society. He clearly drew this distinction in his final testament in which he very deliberately rejected the characterization of himself, and of the ‘ulama, more broadly, as opposed to progress and civilization.

If by ‘the manifestations of civilization and innovations’ they mean inventions and new products and advanced technology which contribute to the progress of man and his civilization, the idea has never been, nor will it ever be opposed by Islam or any other divine religion... But if ‘civilization and modernity’ is to be

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60 Remarkably, despite the seeming lack of mechanisms able to hold the valiye faqih accountable, Khomeini asserts in the very same interview that the constitution does not go far enough in granting power to the faqih. He states, “Now the Constitution makes some provision for the governance of the faqih. In my opinion, it is deficient in this regard. The religious scholars have more prerogatives in Islam than are specified in the Constitution, and the gentleman in the Assembly of Experts stopped short of the ideal in their desire not to antagonize the intellectuals!” Khomeini’s concern in this regard was likely assuaged by the 1989 amendments to the Constitution that explicitly made the velayate faqih’s authority absolute. Ibid.


62 ‘Ulama roughly translates as those learned in Islam. In other words, religious scholars.
interpreted... as liberty to engage in religiously prohibited acts, including prostitution and even homosexual relations and the like, then I can only say that the idea is invariably opposed by all divine religions and people.\textsuperscript{63}

Based on this understanding of the clergy as open to aspects of the West that could contribute to human flourishing, Khomeini asserted that Islamic government based on clerical rule should not be characterized as backward but instead should be given equal treatment as a viable political philosophy. Khomeini himself identified Islamic government as a “moderate system of government that is located in the middle of the political spectrum between Marxism/Communism on one end and Capitalism on the other.”\textsuperscript{64}

Overall, Khomeini’s responses to critiques of his political and religious philosophy were relatively effective. While certainly there were periods during his reign when he had to couple his intellectual responses with fierce coercive repression of opposition voices, generally his charisma and the respect he commanded as a religious and political thinker among both the clergy and the populace allowed him to counter intellectual, theological, and philosophical challenges to the Iranian state. Khomeini’s successor, Khamene’i, however, did not command the same respect nor possess comparable charisma to his predecessor. His ability to counter challenges to regime authority were thus less effective and allowed, during the late eighties and early nineties, for emerging critiques of velayat-e faqih to begin to take hold. The nature of these critiques will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{63} Ruhollah Khomeini, Imam’s Final Discourse: The text of the political and religious testament of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution and the Founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini (Tehran: Ministry of Guidance and Islamic Culture, 1990), 20.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 58.
CHAPTER II
The Unexpected Underpinnings of a Theocratic Vision

The Mystical Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
From One Leader to Another

In January of 1989, the year of his death, Khomeini wrote a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, praising the Soviet leader for his role in dismantling the “repressive Communist regime,” and suggesting, in the words of Alexander Knysh, that “the ideological and cultural vacuum created by the fall of Marxism should be filled with immortal philosophical teachings and moral values worked out by the medieval Muslim thinkers.” In his invitation to Gorbachev to embrace Islam, instead of directing his Soviet counterpart to the Qur’an, Khomeini recommended a series of mystical and philosophical thinkers that have historically been viewed with suspicion by more traditionalist members of the Shi’i clergy. The letter to Gorbachev thus exposed a mystical side of Khomeini that is often overlooked in his western caricature.

This chapter offers an exploration of the key aspects of Khomeini’s mystical beliefs that influenced the formation of his political vision. More importantly, however, it highlights the way in which Khomeini’s long and often criticized relationship with various currents of Islamic mystical philosophy raises questions about whether the state he created lived up to his complex set of beliefs. In the latter regard, I suggest in this chapter that the confusion surrounding the nature of Khomeini’s mystical beliefs is one of the primary reasons that Khomeini remains a contested figure in modern Iranian discourses on Islam and democracy.

The most comprehensive study of Khomeini’s involvement with Islamic mystical philosophy (or Islamic esotericism) is provided by Alexander Knysh in his article, “‘Irfan’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Philosophy.” According to Knysh, Khomeini’s exposure to Islamic mystical philosophy can be concretely traced back as early as 1921, when, at age 19, Khomeini followed his teacher and mentor Abd al-Karim Ha’iri (d.1937) to Qom. Upon his arrival at Qom, Khomeini

became acquainted with Mirza Muhammad Ali Shahabadi (d.1950), “a master of both religious and rational sciences,” who, along with the “somewhat controversial thinker” Mirza Ali Akbar Hakim (d.1925), became Khomeini’s primary mentors in his study of ‘irfan.66 ‘Irfan is a process of Islamic mysticism that literally translates as “knowledge” but can perhaps better be understood to mean gnosis, “the mystical knowledge of the inner world of Man seeking intimacy with God.”67 Exactly how Khomeini conceived of ‘irfan will be discussed later.

Unlike its better known (at least in the western world) counterpart Sufism, the study and practice of ‘irfan is not built around a system of brotherhoods. It does, however, strongly value the relationship and transmission of knowledge between master and pupil. Thus, through his study of ‘irfan, Khomeini became part of chain of transmitted knowledge that stretched back over eight hundred years. As Knysh explains, the mentorship of Shahabadi, Hakim, and other scholars, linked the future ayatollah to a long tradition of learning in Iranian Islam that combined mystical and metaphysical trends dating back to the teachings of such seminal figures in Shi’i intellectual history as Mir Damad (d.1630) and Mulla Sadra (d.1640), who had drawn their inspiration from eminent predecessors, such as Haydar Amuli (d.1385), Ibn Arabi (d.1240), and Yahya al-Suhrawardi, also known as al-Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (executed in 1191).

Under Shahabadi’s guidance, the first work on ‘irfan that Khomeini studied was Mulla Sadra’s Kitab al-asfar (Book of journeys). In this work, Sadra offers an account of how the “mystical wayfarer” attains knowledge of the divine while also emphasizing the obligation that the mystic has to impart the knowledge he has gained to the community of believers. Towards this end, he divides the mystic’s spiritual journey into four stages “corresponding to the wayfarer’s degree of spiritual attainment, on

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66 Knysh, 633.
67 Moin, 39. The Encyclopedia Iranica elaborates, “Like theosophical trends in other religions, ‘erfan emphasizes mystical experience, esoteric doctrine, and monist philosophy. Yet owing to its strong inner bonds with Islamic law and religious practice, it deemphasizes the occult and magical phenomena, which are often associated with theosophy. Because of its strong philosophical underpinnings of Islamic theosophy it appears less fortuitous to translate ‘erfan with esotericism or gnostis, terms which express a wide variety of esoteric and gnostic trends in Islam.” (Encyclopedia Iranica, http://www.iranica.com) Despite the latter portion of this definition, I continue to equate ‘irfan with gnostis for the sole reason that Khomeini himself draws that connection. In this regard, he uses ‘irfan and gnostis synonymously to describe “a spiritual journey in the right direction.” Khomeini, Light of the Path, 164.
the one hand, and, on the other, to his function as a divine messenger.”

In many ways, Knysh asserts, Sadra’s conception of the spiritual journey is reminiscent of Ibn Arabi’s “concept of the perfect man (al-insan al-kamil) in its particular emphasis on his functions as a religious leader of the community of believers.” Thus, it is fitting that the next works on ‘irfan which Khomeini studied as a young seminarian were Sharaf al-Din Mahmud al-Qaysari’s (d.1350) commentary on Ibn Arabi’s Fusus al-hikam (The Bezels of wisdom), as well as commentaries on Arabi’s work by his direct disciple Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (d.1273-74). The mystical writing done by Khomeini later in life reveals that he was heavily influenced by all of these works. In his own writings on ‘irfan, he essentially adopted Sadra’s four stage breakdown of an individual’s spiritual journey and also frequently referenced Qaysari and Qunawi’s commentaries on Arabi as support for his claims. In fact, as evidence of the influence these works had on Khomeini, Knysh recounts that in 1983, a book that had been written by Khomeini, and believed to be lost in earlier raids of his home by SAVAK, was rediscovered by a religious student. The book turned out to be a super commentary written by Khomeini on Qaysari’s commentary on Fusus al-hikam.

After more than six years of guidance, Shahabadi left Qom for Tehran leaving Khomeini essentially without a mentor. His teacher’s departure, however, did little to halt Khomeini’s continued study of ‘irfan. Not only did Khomeini continue to read mystical and philosophical texts on his own, but he also began to embrace the guidance of these texts in how he lived his own life. As Knysh explains, Khomeini appears during this period to have adopted a number of “ascetic practices

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68 Knysh, 634. Knysh explains in greater depth, “In the first stage, man travels from his self and the world to God; the second journey takes him from God to God, as he oscillates between considerations of divine attributes and divine essence; in the third stage, man sets out on the road from God back to the world and his self; finally he begins to wander from man to man, bestowing on his community a new dispensation of spiritual order.”

69 Ibid., 635.

70 Ibid., 631.
associated with the early stages of the Sufi path: renunciation of worldly delights and desires, self-imposed poverty, scrupulous discernment of the ‘lawful’ and ‘forbidden,’ and so forth.” Khomeini continued these practices for the rest of his life. At this time, Khomeini also attempted his first pieces of scholarship on ‘irfan. In 1928, he published Sharh “Du'a’ alsahar” (Commentary on “Du'a' alsahar [the morning prayer]”) in which he offered a summary of his “philosophical studies and spiritual labors in Qom.” One year later he published his first independent treatise on ‘irfan, Misbah alhidaya ila al-khilafa wa al-wilaya (Lamp [showing] the right way to vicegerency and sainthood). Following these two publications, Khomeini’s works on ‘irfan became few and far between. Beyond the aforementioned super commentary discovered in 1983, his discussion of the topic was limited to shorter lectures and pieces of writing, as well as bits of mystical poetry that he produced at various points in his life, many of which only surfaced following his death. Nevertheless, from the compilation of Khomeini’s work, certain themes can be drawn out that in turn can be seen as fundamental pieces in the foundation of Khomeini’s political philosophy.

Khomeini’s ‘Irfan

‘Irfan, both traditionally and according to Khomeini, can be understood as a spiritual journey through which one gains knowledge of the Divine. As Vanessa Martin explains in her book, Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran, ‘irfan within Khomeini’s philosophy is the attainment of “true inner knowledge acquired by direct experience of the intelligible order which lies behind the visible world, and enlightened awareness of the transcendent.” As hinted at here by Martin, the “inner knowledge” that one must acquire is found by looking within oneself. Thus, through the practice of ‘irfan one must complete a process of self-reflection and meditation.

71 Ibid., 635.
73 Ibid., 34.
who is able to reach the point of ultimate self-reflection achieves ma’rifat or “knowledge of the essential reality of things.”

In simpler terms, the idea behind ‘irfan is that through a process of self-reflection a Muslim prepares him or herself to witness the Divine or gain a piece of divine knowledge. As Khomeini explains in his own philosophical works, there are three worlds: the “corporeal world” in which we live and interact and where we find the empirical knowledge that we can accumulate using science; the “in-between world” in which we find the heart and knowledge of morality; and the “hidden world” which holds all things spiritual and intellectual and in which we find knowledge of “the essence of God.” The purpose of self-reflection for Khomeini is gaining entry into this “hidden world.” It is by this means only that one achieves perfection through unity with the divine.

Self-reflection, within Khomeini’s mystical approach, entails a reordering of one’s soul. He argues that the human soul is where good and evil face off; where freedom, happiness, and salvation compete with damnation, slavery, and misery. It is the battleground of Godly and satanic forces. Khomeini largely describes the satanic forces present within the soul as the desires for individual pleasure and aggrandizement that are entangled in an individual’s ego and thus are an obstacle to one truly loving God. In this vein, he classifies the contents of the human soul as divided between “that ‘which is with you’ [your lower self] as well as that ‘which is with Allah’.” Based on this conception of the soul, he speaks of the ultimate end goal of self-purification as annihilating one’s lower self (ridding oneself of ego) in order to become god-like.

It is our selfishness and egoism that are responsible for our present condition. The following maxim expresses the same truth: ‘Your worst enemy is your lower self that is within you.’ It is this idol which man

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74 Ibid., 36.
76 Moin, 49.
77 Siavoshi, 32.
78 Khomeini, Light Within Me, 143.
worships most and to which he is attached most. Man cannot become godly unless he smashes this idol, because an idol and God cannot go together. An egoist can never be a devout person.79

In support of this understanding, Khomeini quotes the Qur’anic verse 16:96 which proclaims, “What is with you will come to an end, what is with Allah will remain.”80 He acknowledges, however, that the process of self-annihilation is not easily completed. The struggle against one’s lower self is of such a caliber that Khomeini identifies it as the “major jihad” to which all other jihads (such as physical holy war) are “subservient.”81

Whereas, for Khomeini, that which is Satanic in an individual’s soul is his or her personal interests, that which is Divine is an individual’s understanding and appreciation of the needs and wants of the community of believers—“the desires of every body.”82 In this way, Khomeini proposes that when you rid yourself of your own ego you become truly selfless. Those who accomplish this move forward “without caring for their lives or their personal interests.”83 By doing so they gain the capacity to see the divine connections that are between all things—connections that normally elude the human senses—and in turn can truly love the “Transcendent.”84

Khomeini, like his mystical predecessors Arabi and Sadra, refers to an individual who has achieved this type of enlightenment as the “perfect man.” As Martin explains, the “perfect man embodies the precepts of the divine law in his very soul” and is thus able to act in accordance with God’s law without need for the reinforcement of shari’a.85 Through his intimacy with the divine, the perfect man gains the status of God’s representative, or vicegerent, on earth. Within Khomeini’s understanding, he is effectively a “copy of God.”86 As Khomeini writes in his commentary on Du’ā’.

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79 Ibid., 139.
80 Ibid., 143.
81 Khomeini goes so far as to say that “Any other jihad performed by us will be worth the name only if we succeed in the major jihad.” Ibid., 141.
82 Ibid., 144.
83 Ibid.
84 Siavoshi, 33.
85 Martin, 36.
86 Moin explains further that to Khomeini and other Islamic mystics who share his perspective, the perfect man is “‘the centre and animating principle of the whole created universe, the spirit and the life of things’, and, more
“The Perfect Man, being the all-encompassing entity, the perfect mirror, which reflects all Divine names and Attributes, constitutes God’s most perfect Word.”\(^{87}\) He elaborates further on this idea in his glosses of Qaysari’s commentary on *Fusus al-Hikam,*

[The Perfect Man’s] relationship to the world… is that of the spirit to the body; he has attained the true existence, and, having abandoned the creatury one, his body has become identical with the universal Body, his soul—with the universal Soul, and his spirit—with the universal Spirit.\(^{88}\)

At this point, the only spiritual journey—or rather obligation—left to such an individual is to use the Godly attributes and knowledge that he has acquired to “guide and help others to reach God.”\(^{89}\) In constructing this understanding of the perfect man, Khomeini draws heavily on the work of Arabi and Sadra and, in particular, on the four-stage conception of an individual’s spiritual journey advanced by the latter.

While Khomeini argues that all human beings are equally capable of achieving enlightenment, he asserts that they are not all equally successful in that pursuit. He describes the process as an attempt to escape the “idol-temple” of ego that each individual has within them. It is not easy to smash this idol-temple, he argues, and to do so man often needs the help of the Prophets.\(^{90}\) This is, in fact, the reason that Prophets come to the world, he maintains, to aid man on his divine journey.

All the Prophets and the revealed Books have come only to smash this idol-temple and to take man out of it. The Prophets have come to set up a divine order in this fiendish world ruled by the Devil whom we all obey. Our base desires are the Devil’s manifestation. The greatest devil being our own appetitive soul, whatever we do becomes devilish... We can get out of this labyrinth only if we emigrate from our present state, act according to the teachings of the Prophets and other holy men and cease to be selfish and egoistic.\(^{91}\)

As is evident in this passage, Khomeini envisions the help provided by the Prophets as being on a grand scale. It is not aimed simply at supporting an individual but rather seeks to create a “divine
order” that enables all members of the community to strive towards the Divine. In this regard, he attributes a certain prophetic character to the perfect man—or more broadly to those who attain some level of spiritual enlightenment—who he believes is obligated to help set up a social order that realizes the ideals of divine guidance. Without such an order, he maintains, the community of believers will inevitably stray from the Divine path and “fall into the deep pit of hell.”

Khomeini’s emphasis on both the need for a divine order that can help guide the community of believers and on the role of those who attain enlightenment in bringing that order into being undergird his political philosophy of velayat-e faqih. Khomeini believed that, given the large portion of society who needed assistance on the road to enlightenment, the institution best positioned to offer that assistance was the government. The government, he argued, could help its citizens by imposing the moral guidelines that would keep them on the divine path. In justifying this proposal, he pointed to the traditions of the Prophets who “set up a government as a means of leading man to that position which is the real aim of the Prophets’ coming, [Allah’s justice].” Given the lengthy discussion of Khomeini’s vision of velayat-e faqih offered earlier, it is not necessary to rehash the key tenets of this doctrine. Referencing back to that earlier discussion, however, may be helpful for the reader in identifying the ways in which the doctrine can be linked to Khomeini’s esoteric beliefs.

While, as mentioned earlier, Khomeini’s statements about his esoteric beliefs from 1930 onward were few and far between, evidence of these beliefs does surface in his political statements. For instance, in his lectures on the velayat-e faqih, some of Khomeini’s passages reflect the aforementioned mystical practices and the process of spiritual endeavor that he had himself embraced. In the final section of Velayate Faqih, he explains to his followers that a successful movement to create Islamic government must begin with each individual’s internal struggle for spiritual improvement.

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92 Ibid., 143.
93 Siavoshi, 34.
94 Khomeini, Light Within Me, 174.
95 Knysh, 651.
We too have difficult tasks facing us. We must improve ourselves spiritually and improve our way of life. We must become more ascetic than before and completely shun the goods of this world. All of you must equip yourselves to protect the divine trust that has been vested in you... turn away from the desire for worldly gain, purify your souls, turn toward God almighty, cultivate piety.  

Despite Khomeini’s occasional references to mystical practices such as the one above, however, he largely chose throughout his career to downplay the mystical foundation of his beliefs.

*Khomeini’s Hidden Mysticism*

When Khomeini began his study of ‘irfan as a seminary student in 1921, it was by no means a subject that was unheard of in Qom or the larger Shi’i community. At the same time, however, ‘Irfan was not an “obligatory part of a talabeh’s studies.” The reason for ‘irfan’s exclusion from the standard curriculum was that it was frowned on by many of the senior clerics in the Shi’i religious community. These clerics viewed the esoteric discipline with suspicion because, as Moin explains, “despite [‘irfan’s] distinctly Shi’i character, many of the leading contributors to its development – intellectuals, poets and mystics – have not been Shi’a.” Given the unfavorable disposition that many of the clerical elite had towards ‘irfan, the young Khomeini, while fascinated by ‘irfan, was not overzealous in publicizing his interest in the discipline or the ways in which it influenced him. Moin writes,

Khomeini’s public posture from his early days as a mojtahed was always to conform to the general trend of the clergy and shun what they regarded as suspicious topics like philosophy and mysticism in favour of mainstream disciplines of law, jurisprudence, the sciences of the Qur’an and the sunna... He wrote in a simple and clear language both on these subjects and mysticism. But he kept his mystical writings under wraps. This was clearly sensitive territory in which it was all too easy to be accused of heresy or isolationism.

Despite his wariness of being ostracized within the clerical elite, Khomeini’s interest in Islamic esoteric philosophy and mysticism “did not wane” over the course of his life. Prior to his exile in 1964, he taught private classes in mystical philosophy to a “close circle of friends and students, among whom were the future ayatollahs and Muslim leaders Morteza Motahhari and Hossein Ali

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97 Moin, 42.
98 Ibid., 40.
99 Ibid., 46.
100 Knysh, 650.
Montazeri." He also was not entirely willing to sweep his esoteric interests under the rug whenever they attracted the displeasure of more senior clerics. Ayatollah Borujerdi, for instance, remained critical of Khomeini's engagement with mystical philosophy throughout his period as sole marja. Notwithstanding Borujerdi's objections, Khomeini refused to “suspend his classes.” Ironically, he ended up doing so shortly following Borujerdi’s death, but this was likely due to his increased political activity rather than a concession to the critiques of senior clerics.102

Following the revolution, Khomeini at last appeared poised to bring his mystical interests to light. Apparently feeling more secure with his position in the clerical establishment, he delivered a series of televised sermons on mysticism. The sermons, however, elicited outrage among certain members of the clergy who “protested that he was restating old views that they had condemned as heretical.”103 Perhaps wary of provoking a crisis in the clerical establishment, when Khomeini fell ill in the midst of the lectures he elected not to continue with them. From then onward, he avoided publicly speaking of mysticism, until the letter he wrote to Gorbachev in 1989.

Khomeini’s letter to Gorbachev is by no means in itself a mystical manifesto that illuminates Khomeini’s perspective as a mystic. It is most significant rather for the criticism it elicited and Khomeini’s response to that criticism. As mentioned previously, in the letter to Gorbachev, Khomeini recommended that the Soviet leader familiarize himself with the work of a number of major mystical thinkers including, Ibn Arabi, Avicenna, Sohravardi, and Mulla Sadra.104 Khomeini’s reading recommendations did not sit well with some more traditional members of the Shi’i clergy. One group, which called itself “The Protectors of Jerusalem,” published an open letter to Khomeini condemning his reading suggestions as heretical. The letter proclaimed,

Your Holiness... you have not referred Mr. Gorbachev to the truth of the holy Qur’an, but have asked him to read [the works of] the condemned heretic Avicenna, the Sunni pantheist and arch-mystic Ibn al-Arabi, the

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101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Moin, 274.
104 Khomeini, A Call to Divine Unity, 11, 13-15.
works of Sohravardi who was executed by the Muslims for his ideological deviations, and the writing of Mollah Sadra, who was exiled to the village of Kahak near Qom because of his intellectual deviations... We fail to understand why you refer the gentleman to deviant philosophers and mystics for the study of Islam. Are there not sufficient reasons in the Qur’an to prove the existence of God and to explain the principles and precepts of religion? Does it mean that leaders of Islam are unable to explain the truth of the Qur’an without resorting to philosophy and mysticism?

Although the group that published the letter was operating on the fringe of the clerical establishment, it still managed to incite a ferocious response from Khomeini. After years of concealing his mystical beliefs, Khomeini unleashed years of frustration and anger in a public letter in which he decried those in the clerical establishment whose close-mindedness had been at the root of the stagnation of pre-revolutionary Iran.

This old father of yours has suffered more from stupid reactionary mullahs than anyone else. When theology meant no interference in politics, stupidity became a virtue. If a clergyman was able, and aware of what was going on [in the world around him], they searched for a plot behind it. You were considered more pious if you walked in a clumsy way. Learning foreign languages was blasphemy, philosophy and mysticism were considered to be sin and infidelity. In the Feiziyeh my young son Mostafa drank water from a jar. Since I was teaching philosophy, my son was considered to be religiously impure, so they washed the jar to purify it afterwards. Had this trend continued, I have no doubt the clergy and seminaries would have trodden the same path as the Christian Church did in the Middle Ages.

The above passage poses a direct challenge to the western caricature of Khomeini as a reactionary, fundamentalist mullah. It instead shows Khomeini to be a victim of reactionary tendencies in the Shi’i clergy whose own interests in progressive strains of Muslim thought were stifled by his more close minded contemporaries.

Khomeini’s feeling of being trapped by the traditionalist clergy is further echoed in some of the mystical poetry he produced later in life. Much of this poetry was produced as a form of correspondence between Khomeini and his daughter-in-law Fatemeh as he mentored her in her own study of mystical philosophy. Very little of this poetry has been translated into English. One theme that does emerge in what little has been translated, however, is Khomeini’s tendency to draw a comparison between himself and Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, a Sufi mystic who was executed in 922 by the political and clerical elite for declaring, while in the midst of mystical union, “I am the

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105 Moin, 275.
106 Ibid., 270.
In one poem that Khomeini’s son Ahmad presented to the people of Iran after his father’s death as a memorial tribute, Khomeini writes, “Freed from my self, I beat the drum/ [with the refrain] ‘I am the Truth’/ Like Mansur I thus bought myself the gallows.” In a second poem, he expresses a similar refrain. “Even while I have shunned love of myself/ Now truth is none but me/ I will see the gallows also/ As did Mansur see.” Khomeini’s self-comparison to Hallaj suggests that he also viewed himself as a victim of a close-minded clerical establishment that had been unwilling to accept his ideas as divine truth.

Taken in tandem, Khomeini’s response to the critiques of his letter of Gorbachev, as well his self-representation in his mystical poetry, present him, at the time of his death, as locked in an upstream struggle against streams of Shi’i thought that were resistant to modernity. According to this understanding, it is Khomeini who had been pushing the clergy all along towards a more pragmatic embrace of modernization and towards an appreciation of diverse ideas and schools of thought. In this endeavor he had been opposed rather than enabled by the reactionary and fundamentalist clergy who were determined to retain the traditional practices and beliefs that had led to their classification as backward.

Whether or not this is a valid characterization of Khomeini’s position within the clergy is contested. Many claim that in fact Khomeini’s later references to mysticism are poorly conceived pieces of propaganda designed to salvage what was otherwise a legacy of brutal repression of those who opposed his conception of Islam. While there is certainly some validity to such an argument, it

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108 Ibid., 452.
109 Moin, 273.
110 In Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition, Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi highlight this perspective, presenting a counter poem alongside Khomeini’s poetry that rejects Khomeini’s appropriation of Hallaj’s legacy and compares him rather to the caliphs Ma’mun and Harun al-Rashid, who were responsible for killing the seventh and eight Shi’i Imams. The counter poet’s work exhibits disgust for the idea that Khomeini could be a truth speaking dissident while at the same time executing huge numbers of his political opponents. Fischer and Abedi, 451.
seems to ignore the long and influential engagement Khomeini had with Islamic mystical philosophy that has been outlined in this chapter.

Furthermore, it runs contrary to statements made by Khomeini both before and after the revolution in which he exhibits a vision for Islam that is unexpectedly open and inclusive. As Knysh notes, in his early mystical writings, Khomeini downplays the differences between Sunni and Shi’i, which “appear to him as matters of minor significance.” And, in his later writings, Khomeini expresses a similar desire to craft a unifying and inclusive vision of Islam rather than one based on a strict understanding of orthodoxy. In this regard, he calls for a reconciliation between philosophers, gnostics, and jurists. He asserts that “in all these groups there are people who are pious” and that in the end the differences between their viewpoints are insignificant.

These seemingly inclusive spiritual proclamations by Khomeini are in obvious tension with the state that he helped create and the state’s ideology, which for all intensive purposes has come to embody its own type of Iranian Shi’i orthodoxy. In negotiating this tension, some less sympathetic to Khomeini adopt the perspective that actions speak louder than words and thus hold that Khomeini’s primary legacy is the absolutist Islamic Iranian state that was his brain child. Others, however, are willing to consider that perhaps Khomeini was genuinely frustrated towards the end of his life with the fact that the state he had created had failed to open up discussions of Islam to a diverse range of viewpoints. Whatever may be the case, the ambiguities present in Khomeini’s thoughts and actions has led to his continued importance as a contested figure in contemporary Iranian debates about Islam and government. The way in which his legacy is invoked by three leading reformist thinkers is discussed in the ensuing chapter.

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111 Knysh, 644.
112 Khomeini, Light Within Me, 175.
CHAPTER III
The Standard Bearers of a Progressive Islamic Project
*Iranian Discourses on Islam and Democracy*
A Fertile Environment for Discourse

In the preceding chapters I highlighted some of the complexities in the political and mystical thought of Ayatollah Khomeini that are often lost in the western caricature of the late Iranian leader. The assumptions made about Khomeini, however—that he is fundamentalist, anti-American, anti-modern, etc.—are not self-contained in the sense that they only skew western perceptions of Khomeini. They rather extend beyond Khomeini to the revolutionary movement that he headed, to the state that he founded, and to the society that seemingly continues to venerate him as a political and spiritual leader. In other words, western scholars commonly assume that the state that emerged from Khomeini’s perceived “fundamentalist” philosophy created such a hostile environment for modern discourses on human rights and democracy that Iranian society has remained inevitably stagnant in its development with regard to either area. Given these assumptions, western scholars choose to focus on what they identify as the “radical,” “fundamentalist,” and “reactionary” aspects of Iranian political discourse as its defining characteristics.\textsuperscript{113}

In this vein, post revolutionary Iran has come to be perceived in the western consciousness as an ongoing “interruption” of global progress toward the realization of “modern values”.\textsuperscript{114} It is a prototype for all that modern society should not be; a repository for all values perceived to be in opposition to western conceptions of civilization and progress—religious fundamentalism, political totalitarianism, intellectual stagnation, etc. This, western scholars believe, is the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini.


\textsuperscript{114} In Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran, Ghamari-Tabrizi highlights the way in which the western perception of the Iranian revolution and Islamist movements more broadly is rooted in a recognition of such movements as fundamentalist and diametrically opposed to modern conceptions of “progress.” He writes, “For [Bernard Lewis and other scholars], the Iranian revolution and its ensuing Islamist social movements amounted to a reactionary retreat from a rapid modernization that threatened the unchanging ‘essence’ of Islam. They located the ideological basis of contemporary Islamist movements in the despotic and anti-modern core of the Islamic dogma. They warned about the perils of Islamic fundamentalism, locally as well as globally, and its devastating interruption of the general progressive project of modernity.” Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 13.
In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that this western conception of Iran is fundamentally flawed. Rather than being trapped in a period of stagnation, I posit instead that post-revolutionary Iran has proven to be a fertile environment for the growth of robust and innovative discourses on Islam and democracy. In this regard, Iranian society does not represent a holdout against modernity but rather has embodied the cutting edge in discussions of how to reconcile traditional religious discourses—in Iran’s case Shi’i Islam—with modern discourses on democracy and human rights. I argue that this is in large part due to the two key aspects of Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy that I have highlighted in the previous chapters: 1) his introduction and largely unintentional secularization of Islam; and 2) the ambiguities surrounding his own contentedness with the results of his political accomplishments.

With the end goal of justifying this more nuanced understanding of Iranian political and religious discourse, in this chapter I will offer a brief examination of the work of three particularly influential Iranian thinkers: Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdulkarim Soroush. Prior to addressing these scholars, however, I will first speak briefly to the major factors that have made post-revolutionary Iran so conducive to innovative discussion of Islam and democracy. These factors include aspects of Khomeini’s legacy that have been mentioned previously. They also, however, include other non-related factors that have somehow contributed to debate. Through a discussion of these factors, I hope to ground the three scholars within larger trends in Iranian political thought.

The Emergence of Discourse

The Iranian Revolution marked a watershed moment for discussions of Islam and democracy both in Iran and across the Muslim World. As has been discussed, this was primarily due to the fact that the revolution and the Islamic state it created opened up new space for debate by forcing Islam into the public sphere. In other words, the recasting of Islam as a political ideology turned it from an
unassailable religious dogma into a publicly contestable political discourse. This phenomenon is what Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi refers to as the “secularization” of Islam. He notes that “by locating Islam in the public sphere, not only did the new constitution alter the political apparatus, legal system, education, and gender relations in Iran, it also transformed Islam from an a priori source of legitimacy into a contested body of discourses.” Ghamari-Tabrizi further suggests that bringing Islam into the public sphere highlighted exactly how contested Islam is even within the religious community. While many could agree that the government should be founded on Islamic criteria, exactly what those criteria should be was harder to determine.

The most notable change caused by the forceful introduction of Islam into the public sphere has been that of the role of the Shi’i clergy. Prior to the Revolution, the clergy—with a few notable exceptions such as Ayatollah Khomeini—were non-political actors whose religious rulings and decrees were almost exclusively related to spiritual matters. While the clergy certainly were not oblivious to the happenings of the non-religious world—as spiritual leaders they had to respond to the spiritual needs of their followers that were at times created by the non-religious world—their opinions were not required or even expected on non-religious matters. Thus, they had a certain freedom to express themselves publicly on topics and at times of their choosing. The revolution changed this. As the political ideology of the new regime, Islam was forced to become a comprehensive ideology that had an answer, or at least a position, on every issue that the ruling regime had to grapple with. As the representatives of Islam, the clergy were expected to know or at least discern these positions.

Farzin Vahdat notes that the immediate entry of Islam into the public sphere caused a number of issues for the clergy in areas in which Shi’i jurisprudence was not adequately developed to meet the

116 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 83.
117 On this topic, Ghamari-Tabrizi writes, “Not only did the new constitution create multiple sources of legitimation, it also engendered unintended socio-political and ideological consequences through its ambiguous references to ‘Islamic criteria.’ It intended to legitimate the ‘Islamization’ of society, its laws and institutions, but the shari’ah remained more as a point of contestation rather than a point of reference.” Ibid.
demands of governance. The state and thus the clergy, Vahdat writes, have been confronted with “difficulties and shortcomings of various types, primarily those rooted in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of Iran’s encounter with forces of modernity.” He elaborates, “These problems and shortcomings have forced the Shia hierocracy, which has attempted to penetrate every facet of social and political life after the revolution of 1979, to engage with practical problems and dilemmas that it rarely had faced before in its relative isolation of the madresah (seminary) settings.” Naturally, these gaps in discourse have had to be filled as rapidly as possible by the new regime; a difficult task considering the wide range of clerical opinions that exist on almost every topic. The regime has accomplished this task through the use of what Charles Kurzman calls “interpretive closure”—the constitutional right granted the valiye faqih to “end debate on a subject.”

The regime’s use of interpretive closure has resulted over the past thirty years in the establishment of a type of Islamic “party line” on a wide range of political, economic, and social issues. While this tactic has been effective in providing the regime with the concrete ideological positions needed to govern, it has not been without drawbacks. As regime positions have been established as the sole positions sanctioned by Islam, many inside and outside of the clerical establishment, whose opinions or understandings of Shi’i tradition are in conflict with the regime, have voiced their disagreement. Beyond taking issue with specific regime positions, however, many of these dissident voices share a larger critique of the Islamic Republic; namely, that a governmental system which affords absolute privilege to a certain interpretation of Islamic tradition over all others is inherently undemocratic and, perhaps more importantly, denies the tremendous diversity and vibrancy of Shi’i jurisprudential thought. Based on this critique, dissident voices have argued that without systemic

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reform the Iranian state will never be able to live up to its claims of being either “Islamic” or republican.\textsuperscript{121}

While opposition voices have been present since the regime’s inception, the reform movement has only truly emerged as an intellectually robust and politically relevant movement since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. The reasons for the emergence of the movement in 1989 are threefold. First, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini drastically changed the dynamics of the Iranian ruling establishment. Whereas Khomeini was largely revered and respected by the clergy for his unquestionable religious expertise and political acumen, his successor Hojjat al-Islam (now Grand Ayatollah) Ali Hosein Khamene’i is less so. Having ascended to the position of \textit{valiye faqih} through an eleventh hour constitutional amendment removing the requirement that the \textit{vali}-elect be of the status of Grand Ayatollah, Khamene’i is perceived by some members of the clergy as an imposter who leapfrogged the traditional channels of earning religious authority through his political appointment. Without Khomeini’s charisma and prestige, Khamene’i has thus been less effective at silencing opposition voices within the clerical establishment.\textsuperscript{122}

Second, the end of the Iran-Iraq war marked a change in the focus of Iranian political discourse from external threats to the internal dynamics of the regime.\textsuperscript{123} Although the war represented a failure in terms of Iranian efforts to export the Islamic Revolution, the end of the threat from Iraq meant that the external borders of the regime were secure. The main concern of politicians and intellectuals thus became how to refine and perfect the internal workings of the regime.

The final factor that sparked the emergence of the reform movement was a series of constitutional amendments pushed through shortly before Khomeini’s death. These amendments, for

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\textsuperscript{121} In a public letter written in August of 2009, Ayatollah Montazeri declared, “I hope [the leaders who have strayed] have the bravery to announce that this government is not a Republic and is not Islamic and that no one has the right to protest or criticize.” Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, “Grand Ayatollah Montazeri in response to the letter written by 293 of enlightened thinkers and intellectuals,” Ayatollah Montazeri Official Website (August 26, 2009)

\textsuperscript{122} Kurzman, “Critics within”, 345.

\textsuperscript{123} Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam and Dissent}, 185.
the first time, explicitly granted absolute authority to the valiye faqih and in turn drew heavy criticism from clerics and lay persons alike. Many of these critics, such as Ayatollah Montazeri, saw the move as a frightening indication of the even more absolutist direction in which the regime was headed after Khomeini’s death. In the face of this consolidation of the regime’s authority, many critics felt an increasing sense of urgency to make their voices heard.

The combination of these three factors facilitated the emergence of robust discussions on the ideal form of the Iranian state and more broadly on the interaction between Islam and democracy. The discussions have included both lay intellectuals and religious clerics and have been enriched by the rigorous tradition of critical discourse that has driven Iranian Shi’i seminary education for over a thousand years. Despite the diversity of voices in the movement, the debates surrounding reform of the Iranian state and more broadly surrounding Islam and democracy can be said to have crystallized around one question: how can traditional understandings of Islam and more particularly shari’a be reconciled with modern understandings of democracy and human rights? The work of the three scholars discussed in this chapter can on the most basic level be understood as a response to this question. All three offer different visions for reform of the Iranian political system that imagine the establishment of democratic government in accordance with Islamic principles. All three craft these visions in slightly different ways drawing in varying amounts on traditions of Shi’i jurisprudence and rational political thought. Interestingly, in their attempts to craft visions that are politically palatable among large swathes of the Iranian populace, all three have engaged the work of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Kurzman, “Critics within,” 343. Beyond the tradition of critical discourse that has defined Iranian seminary education, even the current Iranian state was proactive at the outset of the Republic in engaging with intellectual critiques of the regime. Ghamari-Tabrizi notes that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the regime in fact organized televised debates that included both supporters and critics in the hopes of strengthening the regime’s religious, intellectual, and philosophical legitimacy. He further notes that towards the end of his life, Khomeini reaffirmed the commitment to welcoming a “plurality of ideas and competing political agendas as a sign of vibrant society and of the strength of the revolution. He declared: ‘A society that does not have differences of opinion is imperfect.” Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 36, 139.
invoking his progressive and modernist philosophical legacy while simultaneously critiquing the state that his philosophy created.

In fact, it is through their engagement with Khomeini that I link these scholars. I argue that Montazeri’s work embodies a total reclamation of Khomeini’s vision as inherently democratic. In essence, he holds that Khomeini’s political vision was distorted by political circumstances and by those who succeeded him and thus, were he alive today, he would fully support Montazeri’s proposal to restructure the institution of velayat-e faqih in line with principles of popular sovereignty. Kadivar, I argue, attempts to reclaim only Khomeini’s intentions. His work is based on a belief that while Khomeini’s attempt to resolve the conflict between Islam and modernity is laudable, his means of doing so through the absolute institution of velayat-e faqih is dissonant with both Islamic and secular understandings of justice. Soroush’s work marks the furthest departure from Khomeini’s vision and from the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence in which Khomeini bases his philosophy. Whereas Montazeri and Kadivar locate their democratic visions firmly in traditions of Shi’i jurisprudence and employ secular rational discourses only to affirm the principles they draw from their interpretations of Islam, Soroush takes the opposite tack. He roots his vision of an ideal state in secular conceptions of democracy and, while not an advocate for social laicite, argues that the only religious values worth bringing into the public sphere are those that enhance non-religiously agreed upon democratic values.

What is most important about the way in which these three thinkers connect through their understandings of Khomeini, is that all three highlight the inherent progressivity of Khomeini’s political legacy. Regardless of how Khomeini’s philosophy influences their own conceptions of ideal government, all three understand Khomeini’s political vision as responding to the aforementioned challenge that they themselves are responding to, how to craft a vision of Islamic government that is able to meet the challenges of modern society. In this vein, I have two goals in the ensuing discussion of Montazeri, Kadivar, and Soroush. First, I hope to illustrate how Khomeini has been reclaimed by reformers as a progressive, even if flawed, political thinker and to thus further undermine the faulty
western caricature of Khomeini addressed in the previous chapters. Second, I hope to establish the vibrancy and progressivity of modern Iranian debates on Islam and democracy. In this way, I intend to dispel western assumptions about the stagnancy of post-revolutionary Iranian political discourse.

Hussein Ali Montazeri

For much of the 1980s Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was one of the most prominent ideologues of the Islamic Republic. A long time student of Khomeini and one of his most devoted followers, he was a key figure in the revolutionary movement and one of the most eloquent advocates for institutionalizing the doctrine of veleyat-e faqih during the period of constitutional ratification.\textsuperscript{125} Montazeri was, in fact, the designated successor to Khomeini until only months before Khomeini’s death. His right to succession was retracted when the two had a falling out over Montazeri’s criticism of a particularly bloody purge of political dissidents in Iranian prisons carried out by the regime in the aftermath of the war with Iraq.

Following his fall from grace, Montazeri emerged over the next twenty years as perhaps the most prominent religious figure in the reform movement. Until his death in December of 2009, he was widely considered to be “the spiritual leader of the [Iranian] opposition.”\textsuperscript{126} Montazeri’s critiques of the regime focused primarily on the dangers of absolutism and the need for popular sovereignty as justified by his own interpretation of Shi’i tradition. Even in his critiques, he affirmed that he had “always stood on the side of the late Imam Khomeini” and that the issues he had with the regime had resulted from distortions of the system that occurred shortly before and in the aftermath of Khomeini’s

\textsuperscript{125} Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 46.
death. Montazeri’s favor, however, did not extend to Khomeini’s successor, Khamene’i, whose legitimacy he directly challenged and whose oppressive policies he deplored.

Despite his dislike of Khamene’i, Montazeri remained committed throughout his life to the reform of the Islamic state rather than its overthrow. During his final months, however, during which popular discontent in Iran was rampant and regime repression particularly brutal, he seemed increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of reform occurring that could salvage the revolutionary state. In one of his final letters to the public in August of 2009, he wrote, “I still hope that more than this fraction of the system that has languished and endured will survive and that before it is too late, the Islamic Republic can be salvaged.” Sadly, he seemed at the end of his life to have felt that the revolution had been all in vain. The regime that had emerged from his revolutionary efforts had in many ways become no better than the Shah’s regime he had worked so hard to overthrow.

Montazeri’s primary critique of the current Iranian state was that it represents only a warped distortion of the Islamic government that Khomeini imagined. The three causes of this betrayal of Khomeini’s vision, he argued are: 1) that the Assembly of Experts who formulated the constitution had no legislative experience and was ineffective in turning the ideals of the revolution into laws; 2) in addition to their inexperience, the framers were afraid of executive abuses (such as those that had occurred under the Shah) and so weakened the executive branch of the government substantially; and 3) the entire government system, including the previous distortions, was built around the presence of Ayatollah Khomeini. With regard to this latter point, Montazeri wrote,

Due to too much devotion to Imam Khomeini, a divine and eternal image of him had been ingrained in the minds of the Experts... hence, the Experts, by and large, tried to weaken the executive branch and to make an innocuous entity out of it, and instead to invest all the power in the position of leadership, then occupied by Ayatollah Khomeini.

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129 Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, “Grand Ayatollah Montazeri in response to the letter.”
While this system was able to function relatively effectively under the charismatic leadership of Khomeini, Montazeri maintained that in Khomeini’s absence its deficiencies had been exacerbated.

What is most important to note about Montazeri’s vision for reform is that he did not reject the doctrine of velayat-e faqih outright as do many of his clerical peers. Like Khomeini, he believed that the concept of velayat (guardianship) in Shi’i jurisprudential tradition—which outlines processes by which members of the clergy become guardians for orphans or the mentally disabled—can be extended to apply to society more broadly. He wrote,

> it is obvious that such fundamental issues as defending the Islamic country and security of the society, as well as establishing an Islamic government are much more important than the mentioned instances. Nobody can claim that Islam, which has paid attention to small details, has no opinion on such vital questions.\(^\text{131}\)

Accordingly, Montazeri fully supported Khomeini’s vision for velayat-e faqih. He was adamant, however, that guardianship in terms of Islamic government, even as Khomeini imagined it, does not require absolute authority. It is rather a supervisory role in which the valiye faqih is intended to ensure that the government is acting in the best interests of the people.

In this vein, Montazeri believed that the correct role for the valiye faqih is to ensure that the executive does not wield power absolutely, not to wield power absolutely himself. He drew on Khomeini’s own work to affirm that this was an understanding that he and the late Supreme Leader shared. “You don’t need to be afraid of velayat-e faqih,” Montazeri quoted Khomeini as saying. “The faqih does not seek to oppress people. If a faqih sought to oppress people, he would not be fit for velayat... Velayat-e faqih means having power over all affairs to prevent them from going astray... we want to curb dictatorship not to be dictators ourselves.”\(^\text{132}\) This passage from Khomeini gives credence to Montazeri’s claim that Khomeini would not have supported the absolute rule of the valiye faqih. It also supports the possibility that a frustrated Khomeini may have recognized the flaws in his own vision towards the end of his life. The primary difference between the theories of the two Grand Ayatollah’s,


\(^{132}\) Ibid., 7.
however, is the mechanisms by which the valiye faqih is held accountable. In fact, it is in this regard that Montazeri offered his major “fix” of Khomeini’s theory. Whereas the checks that Khomeini laid out on the power of the valiye faqih are somewhat nebulous—he essentially argued that anyone who meets the qualifications for serving as the vali is incapable of becoming a dictator—Montazeri was adamant that the ultimate check on the authority of the vali must be popular consent. Without democratic elections, he maintains, there is no system by which the vali can productively be held accountable.133

In justifying his argument for the importance of some form of popular accountability in government, Montazeri drew on three major epistemic resources. First, he offered an examination of Shi’i tradition in which he highlighted the ways in which the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali were unwilling to accept absolute rule without the consent of their subjects.

The Prophet of Islam (May God’s Peace be upon Him) did not claim to be a ruler after claiming Prophecy. Only after seventy-two of the great men of Medina pledged allegiance (bay’a) to him at Mina during the hajj ritual, was the ground broken for the popular rule of the Prophet in Medina. Even then, the Prophet asked them (the great men of Medina) to elect twelve people from among themselves to mediate between them and the Prophet and to oversee the conduct of the Prophetic State.134

In addition to highlighting the Prophet’s acceptance of political accountability, Montazeri also drew on the Shi’i tradition to illustrate the differences between traditional and modern Islamic government. He argued that even if Muhammad and Ali had wielded absolute authority in all aspects of government it would not justify the appointment of an absolute ruler in a modern Islamic government. The reason for this, he argued, is that government now is vastly more complex than it was in the time of the Prophet and the expertise required to rule effectively is much greater. With this in mind, it is only logical, Montazeri asserts, that the vali, whose expertise is Islam, should “pay attention to the Islamic nature of the system and supervise the way the country is run for conformity to the Islamic tenets... while leaving other affairs to specialists in the field.”135 Furthermore, giving absolute power to

133 Ibid., 9.
134 Abdo and Montazeri, 13.
a fallible figure when the Prophet and Imam Ali, both of whom are infallible, rejected absolute power themselves goes against Shi’i tradition. Montazeri wrote, “How can we accept that the vali faqih, who is not even infallible, and hence is open to error, be considered to get treatment even higher than the Prophet and Commander of the Faithful? How can we accept that he is needless of consultation and immune to any criticism?”

Montazeri’s second epistemic resource in making the claim for popular sovereignty was the Constitution itself. He argued specifically that articles 6 and 56 outlined the need for popular sovereignty and that these two articles have essentially gone unenforced. Montazeri’s final epistemic resource is again Khomeini who he argued always envisioned Islamic government being founded on democratic elections. To support this claim he pointed at pre-revolutionary statements made by Khomeini while exiled in Najaf and Paris in which Khomeini proclaimed the importance of popular will. Montazeri also highlighted that Khomeini was prepared to accept drafts of the constitution in which velayate faqih was not even mentioned. The only reason velayat-e faqih ended up part of the constitution, he admitted, was because he himself and others advocated for it.

Certainly, [Imam Khomeini] was satisfied with the notion of healthy, free elections that would lead to establishment of a democratic government with him overseeing its performance as vali fiqh (religious jurist). However, during discussions in the Assembly of Experts of the Constitution a group of deputies including the late Ayatollah Beheshti and myself insisted that velayat-e faqih should be explicit in the Constitution.

Lastly, Montazeri cited Khomeini’s oft mentioned sentiment that each generation should have the right to choose its own government.

To bring the Iranian system back into line with Khomeini’s vision, Shi’i principles of justice, and common wisdom, Montazeri proposed that the Constitution be modified so that the valiye faqih is elected by the maraje (plural form of marja’e taqlid). More importantly, he argued, that the constitution

136 Abdo and Montazeri, 23.
137 Article 6 states, “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be conducted with reliance on the votes of the public and through elections.” Article 56 states, “Absolute governance of the world belongs to God, and He, in turn, has put human beings in charge of their social destiny. Nobody can take away this divine right from the people or subject it to the interests of a specific individual or group.” Abdo and Montazeri, 14-15.
139 Abdo and Montazeri, 18.
must specify that the faqih’s authority is not absolute but instead has jurisdiction limited only to overseeing government “compliance with Islamic criteria.”\textsuperscript{140} Within this modified system, Montazeri envisioned the clergy as removed from institutional politics with their primary task being “providing the people with intellectual and spiritual leadership, explicating Islamic rulings, making an effort to push society toward spiritual excellence, and actualizing justice.”\textsuperscript{141} He maintained that, ideally, if the government ran smoothly there would be no need for clerical involvement whatsoever. Removing the clergy from institutional politics in this way, he argued, would not only allow the state to begin to live up to the democratic ideals it has espoused for thirty years, but it would also restore the independence and vitality of the religious establishment which has been restricted by its ties to the state.

Montazeri paired his more specific calls for reform with a broader call for greater compassion and appreciation for diversity to be shown by the Islamic regime.\textsuperscript{142} In the spirit of that call, he attempted to deconstruct the regime’s monolithic depiction of the revolution as solely driven by Islam. He posited that

\begin{quote}
The Islamic Republic of Iran was not the result of endeavors made by a specific social class. Although the late Imam assumed the religious and ideological leadership of the revolution because of his valor and special understanding, registering the revolution in the name of the clergy would be an injustice to other groups. The absolute majority of the nation from clerics to academicians and from workers to businessmen, intellectuals, political groups and other social strata and even religious minorities took part in it and made the revolution victorious through their faith, unity and obedience to leadership.\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

The passage above manifests Montazeri’s desire to reinstate all Iranians with a sense of ownership over the identity of the Iranian state. It is this sense of individual ownership that he believed had been undermined by the regime’s repression of opposition voices; repression driven by a mistaken conception of what unity really means. “When [regime loyalists] talk of unity,” Montazeri wrote, “they

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142} Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, “Democracy and Constitution,” 25.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 37.
\end{flushright}
mean unconditional obedience of other people to their viewpoints not a brotherly unity that would mean tolerating each other’s views.”

Towards the end of his life, Montazeri worried that this “monopolistic tendency” would be the regime’s undoing. The true test of a just ideology, he believed, was whether you could win over your opponents rather than silencing them. By pursuing the latter tactic in its violent repression of opposition, Montazeri feared the regime was sullying the image of Islam on the global stage. “You suppose your goal is to defend Islam,” he warned in an open letter to the regime in the early 1990s, “whereas your conducts represent the pure visage of Islam as violent and the Moslems as anarchist and endangers the society’s security.”

Montazeri’s esteemed religious and political credentials lent great force to his critiques of the regime and as a result placed him high on the list of the regime’s most feared opponents. Although his religious credentials afforded him some protection from regime attacks he remained subject to house arrest, harassment of his followers, slander attempts by the state owned media, and even an attempt to strip him of his title of Grand Ayatollah.

Throughout the regime’s efforts to silence him, Montazeri remained resolute and in fact grew more vocal in his criticisms. He spoke out of a religious duty that he claimed compelled him to raise his voice against injustice. Even more so, he spoke because he knew others could not. He repeatedly expressed his concern that, given the state harassment he was subject to even as a founding father of the Iranian state, he was loathe to think how others without his credentials and visibility were forced into silence. While under house arrest in 2001, he lamented,

I have spent a lifetime fighting for the independence and honor of this country and defending the legitimate rights and freedoms of the people, and I have taught most of the incumbent rulers as my pupils. In a condition where I am being treated like this, what can others expect? As I have said repeatedly, I have no desire to be the Leader; nor am I interested in the position of marja’iyat. Yet, I consider telling the truth my religious duty.

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144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., 41.
146 “Profile: Iran’s dissident ayatollah,” BBC News Online (January 30, 2003).
147 Abdo and Montazeri, 23.
Montazeri’s loss to the Iranian reform movement is difficult to measure. His funeral in itself proved to be an impetus for protest, but as that event has faded into memory his absence has been noteworthy. At the current point in time, there is simply no one who can fill his shoes with the same revolutionary credentials, religious expertise, and indisputable record as an advocate for justice. That being said, Montazeri’s presence continues to be felt in the Iranian reform movement through the work of his students who have taken up the spirit of his democratic message. One of Montazeri’s most noteworthy students is Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar.

Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar

Mohsen Kadivar was twenty years old at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Caught up in the revolutionary fervor he joined the many thousands of politically active students who were at the core of the revolutionary movement and like many of his peers ended up being arrested and detained for extended periods of time by the Shah’s secret police. In the aftermath of the Revolution, seemingly inspired by the formation of the new Islamic state, Kadivar left his studies in electronic engineering to pursue a religious education in Qom. While in Qom he became a student and protégé of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. The two remained close until Montazeri’s death in 2009.

Kadivar’s trajectory as a religious and political thinker has in some ways mirrored that of his mentor Montazeri. Like Montazeri, Kadivar also transitioned from his initial excitement about the Islamic regime to disillusionment with the seeming inability of the Islamic state to live up to its espoused commitments to democracy and social justice.148 Under Montazeri’s tutelage, Kadivar matured into a calm, meticulous, and formidable critic of the Islamic regime. His poignant and unwavering attacks on the regime that are grounded in rigorous adherence to traditional standards of Shi‘i jurisprudence have earned him the respect of his fellow clerics and a loyal following among

148 Granted, the transition from support for the regime to disillusionment and critique is not an uncommon narrative in the Iranian reform movement.
religious and non-religious Iranian college students. Like Montazeri, his status as a licensed mojtahed has made his critiques of the regime particularly difficult to dismiss and has also made it more difficult for the regime to openly repress him. In the turmoil of recent years, however, the regime’s repressive tactics have become increasingly brazen and even Kadivar has been forced to reside outside out of Iran in order to preserve his safety and his right to speak. His exile has not prevented him from remaining a leading voice in the Iranian reform movement.

Like Montazeri, Kadivar’s primary issue with the regime is the absolute authority granted the valiye faqih. Unlike Montazeri, Kadivar does not attempt to salvage the ideology of the state by claiming it embodies a distorted version of Khomeini’s philosophy that was intended to be democratic. Rather, Kadivar takes the state for the absolute government that it is. He correspondingly holds Khomeini accountable for the absolute vision of velayate faqih as opposed to the democratic statements made by the former leader that were never realized in the actual ideology of the Iranian state.

Kadivar’s attack on Khomeini’s philosophy and in turn the ideology of the Iranian state is two-pronged and exclusively rooted in his examination of Khomeini’s philosophy in light of larger traditions of Shi’i jurisprudence. First, by methodically combing through the traditions of Shi’i political thought, Kadivar demonstrates that there are in fact nine typologies of Islamic government supported by noteworthy Shi’i thinkers, of which Khomeini’s is the most absolute. In this way, he highlights the tremendous diversity in Shi’i thought and thus undermines the regime’s attempt to present the doctrine of velayate faqih as an ideal of Islamic government that is agreed upon by the entirety of the Shi’i clergy. Second, beyond simply showing that Khomeini’s philosophy is one of


150 Mahmoud Sadri, “Attack from within: Dissident political theology in contemporary Iran,” The Iranian (February 13, 2002), 5.
many, Kadivar asserts that velayat e faqih is in fact a fringe doctrine supported by suspect evidence in the Shi’i jurisprudential tradition at best.\textsuperscript{151}

Interestingly, one of the most notable flaws in the doctrine, Kadivar argues, is the leap it takes in extending the concept of velayat to society at large—a leap supported by Montazeri. He writes that, based on Shi’i tradition, “No one has the right to oversee and set priorities for others [guardianship or vilaya], unless having credible religious appointment by the divine.”\textsuperscript{152} Elaborating on this fundamental flaw in the doctrine, Kadivar asserts that there is no evidence for velayat as Khomeini defines it in any major sources of Shi’i tradition. He concludes,

The principle of Velayat e Faghih is neither intuitively obvious, nor rationally necessary. It is neither a requirement of religion (Din) nor a necessity for denomination (Mazhab). It is neither a part of Shiite general principles (Osoul), nor a component of detailed observances (Forou’). It is, by near consensus of Shiite Ulama, nothing more than a jurisprudential minor hypothesis.\textsuperscript{153}

Although Kadivar thoroughly debunks Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government as jurisprudentially unjustifiable, he does not reject Khomeini’s project in its entirety. He understands the doctrine of velayat e faqih as an attempt by Khomeini to provide a jurisprudential mechanism by which conflicts between traditional Islamic precepts and forces of modernity can be reconciled.\textsuperscript{154} For Kadivar, this reconciliation is the ultimate challenge facing modern Shi’i jurisprudence. Khomeini, he argues, recognized this, and believed that the answer was making fiqh subject to the absolute guardianship of the state, thus granting the state the ability to modify or ignore precepts deemed to be unhelpful in the administration of government. “Based on [Khomeini’s] view,” Kadivar writes, “an

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{152} Mohsen Kadivar, “An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam,” Social Research, vol. 70, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 669. Interestingly, in making this assertion about velaya Kadivar references the work of Montazeri to seemingly support his claim for lack of velaya. This runs contrary to other works of Montazeri read by the author that demonstrate support for Khomeini’s extension of guardianship to society at large. Unfortunately, the author’s inadequacies in the Persian language prevent him from examining all of the relevant sources.
\textsuperscript{153} Mahmoud Sadri, “Attack from within,” 5.
\textsuperscript{155} Fiqh roughly translates as jurisprudence (the science of religious law).
Islamic state can prevent anything – whether worship-related or otherwise – that contravenes the interests of Islam, for as long as it does.”

In theory, Kadivar posits, Khomeini’s philosophy offered the potential to ameliorate some of the conflicts between traditional Islamic precepts and modernity. The problem of course was the aforementioned way in which Khomeini’s theory departs from “the framework of traditional Islam and the accepted methods of formulating opinions.” All the same, Kadivar concludes that Khomeini’s attempt to tackle the conflict between Islam and modernity is worthy of emulation.

Although Ayatollah Khomeini’s idea is open to serious criticism, his courage in criticizing traditional fiqh, whilst remaining appreciative of it, is laudable, as is his acknowledgement of the fact that the accepted methods of formulating opinions in fiqh were ineffective when it came to dealing with the problems of the modern world.

Based on this understanding of Khomeini, Kadivar situates himself as continuing Khomeini’s legacy of inquiry.

In contrast to Khomeini’s absolutist solution, Kadivar proposes that the correct way to reconcile traditional strains of Islamic thought with modernity is not through the elevation of one strain over all others, but rather through an appreciation for the plurality of Islamic viewpoints on a given topic and a rational weighing of the merits of each viewpoint in a modern context. This process under girds the school of thought that Kadivar refers to as “intellectual Islam” or “Islamic modernism.” Kadivar argues that the founding idea of Islamic modernism is that,

in historical Islam, the sacred message has been mixed with the customs and conventions of the age when revelation was made, that all of traditional Islam’s problems in the modern age emanate from the customary part of traditional Islam, and that the sacred message can still be defended with great pride.”

The goal of Islamic modernism, he argues, is to access the principles behind Islamic precepts by shedding the “sediment of time-bound customs.” This goal is achieved through the use of dynamic ijtihad, which empowers fuqaha to formulate opinions based on “primary religious principles (usuł)” by

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156 Ibid., 58-59.
157 Ibid., 59.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid., 65.
160 Ibid.
allowing the use of reason to evaluate the relevance of social circumstances in which a precept was revealed.\textsuperscript{161}

Through his own use of dynamic \textit{ijtihad}, Kadivar attempts to determine the absolute rights afforded each individual based on an understanding of Islamic tradition mediated by reason. Determining these rights and ensuring that the Islamic government protects them, he maintains, is the most effective safeguard against authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{162} This contrasts with the opinions of his mentor, Montazeri, who instead emphasizes popular consent as a check on authoritarianism. For Kadivar, respect for the absolute rights of the individual is a prerequisite for any semblance of democratic government. One of the most important of these absolute rights that he feels the Iranian regime violates, is freedom of religion. The regime’s imposition of a specific religious ideology, Kadivar argues, undermines rather than strengthens religious belief in Iranian society. “If force and threats are used to keep people in a religion,” he writes, “then that religion is at best superficially observed rather than deeply internalized.”\textsuperscript{163} The current regime’s repression of opposition voices, he argues, only highlights the weakness of their ideology and displays a lack of confidence in Islam as a compelling belief system. “It is only weak value systems and religions,” he maintains, that fear intellectual challenges whereas “religions and beliefs that rest on solid foundations do not fear competing in the marketplace of ideas.”\textsuperscript{164}

\textit{Abdulkarim Soroush}

Soroush, like Montazeri and Kadivar, was an ardent supporter of the Iranian Revolution. Unlike the two preceding scholars, he is not a member of the clerical establishment. His lack of

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{162} Kadivar writes, “To safeguard against the unbridled corruption that necessarily stems from absolute authority, strict legal limitations must be imposed—nationally absolute rights should be the prerogative of all citizens, with the understanding that the state cannot undermine this right under any circumstance.” Kadivar, “An Introduction to the Public,” 677.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 131)
clerical credentials, however, did not prevent him from becoming a prominent figure in the early years of the Iranian state. Just as Montazeri was a leading clerical ideologue for the regime and advocate for the doctrine of *velayate faqih*, Soroush was the leading non-clerical ideologue responsible for affirming the regime’s legitimacy from a non-clerical perspective. As a founding member of the Iranian Cultural Revolution Council (CRC), “Soroush exemplified the new regime’s attempt to construct a hegemonic legitimacy for the Islamic Republic outside its traditional social base.”\(^{165}\) As a passionate and idealistic young intellectual, Soroush initially remained committed to the regime even as its repressive tactics grew more brutal. In a public speech at the time, he proclaimed,

> I need to emphasize... that God has consecrated the emergence and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This divine blessing has descended upon us like the coming of a springtime to an arid land and it is the duty of all peoples of this country to be content and grateful for the blooming of this spring. Like a tree, they ought to submit themselves to this breeze and wear the green garment of appreciation. Otherwise, God forbid, they will suffer retributions if they show no gratitude towards God’s benevolence.\(^{166}\)

Soroush’s unapologetic perspective for the suffering inflicted on opposition voices for the regime, is a far cry from his current role as perhaps the regime’s most well known critic.

Soroush’s transformation from regime ideologue to regime critic, however, did not occur overnight. Despite his comment above, as the regime’s tactics grew increasingly repressive, Soroush began to question whether or not the state was truly living up to the Islamic and democratic values that it had claimed to embrace in the Iranian constitution. For this reason, he quickly became a voice of moderation on the CRC who counterbalanced those in favor of even fiercer repression of opposition voices.\(^{167}\) Eventually, Soroush’s disagreements with the regime led to his resignation from the CRC. Since his disassociation from the regime he has become a driving force in “lay intellectual reform movements” and a respected critic of the regime in both religious and non-religious circles.\(^{168}\)

As a lay theologian, Soroush represents a very different kind of threat to the established regime than did Montazeri or does Kadivar. While the two clerical critics are dangerous to the regime because

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\(^{165}\) Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, 37.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 127.

\(^{167}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{168}\) Abdo and Lyons, 148.
they challenge the religious legitimacy of the state ideology, Sorough is dangerous because he challenges the clergy’s exclusive right to offer authoritative interpretations of Islam. In other words, Sorough’s work identifies “scientific knowledge as the point of reference for the plausibility of religious knowledge.” By making religion subject to human reason, he thus makes lay scholars, with no official religious expertise, equally capable of evaluating the merits of religious knowledge. In this way, Sorough has expanded and continues to expand the realm of debate and *ijtiād* regarding Islamic precepts to include voices from outside of the clerical establishment. Sorough, on the most basic level, is contesting who has the “authority to produce religious knowledge” and it is thus no surprise that he has met with repeated attacks on his ideas and person by regime loyalists who wish to preserve the Islamic state’s monopoly on religious interpretation.\(^{170}\)

At the core of Sorough’s political and religious project is the assertion that “Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam.”\(^{171}\) What Sorough means by this is that the concept of *fiqh* is built around distinguishing between the “essential” or unchangeable (*daruri*) and “non-essential” or changeable (non-*daruri*) aspects of Islamic tradition. While there are certain standards by which one goes about establishing such distinctions, the process of *ijtiād* still produces varying results depending on the person initiating the interpretive act. Given the tremendous diversity of possible interpretations of Islamic precepts, Sorough argues that while we may be perfectly justified in holding some interpretations to be more correct than others, we should not be “dogmatic about their application.”\(^{172}\)

Rather than dogmatic attachment to or imposition of one interpretation or ideology, Sorough proposes that any society sincerely pursuing truth must recognize the essentiality of affording its citizens the freedom to recognize and embrace religious truth on their own. “Freedom,” he argues, “is itself a truth (haq) but more importantly the condition of freedom allows the emergence and

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\(^{169}\) Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, 203.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 219.


\(^{172}\) Ibid., 14-15.
affirmation of truth. Conversely, Soroush holds, absolute power “subdues truth.” The current regime’s mistake, he argues, is that it believes it can wield absolute power justly when others have not. Regime loyalists, he maintains, “do not seem to realize that ‘absolute power has only one logic; to subdue truth; to turn it into its handmaidens’... power controls the man, not the other way around.” Essentially, Soroush reveals himself as a believer in the adage, “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Furthermore, he argues that the benefits resulting from the exercise of absolute authority are superficial at best. With regard to the Iranian regime’s imposition of a particular Islamic ideology, he declares that Islam is only truly enhanced by the voluntary submission of believers not their forced adherence.

As an alternative to the absolute governmental ideology offered by the regime, Soroush proposes a vision for “religious democratic government” designed to meet the spiritual and non-spiritual needs of Muslim citizens. The aim and challenge of establishing a religious democratic government, he writes, “is threefold: to reconcile people’s satisfaction with God’s approval; to strike a balance between the religious and the nonreligious; and to do right by both the people and by God, acknowledging at once the integrity of human beings and of religion.” Recognizing the imperfections of fiqh in establishing principles of government, Soroush instead turns to principles of governance derived from rational thought. He argues that whatever influence religion wields in government must be “in accordance with the dictates of collective ‘reason.’”

In this regard, Soroush differs distinctly from Montazeri and Kadivar who derive the importance of democratic values from their understandings of Islam. Soroush, by contrast, explicitly

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174 Ibid.
175 Ibid., 101-102.
176 Ibid., 103.
178 Ibid., 128.
identifies democratic values as deducible through non-religious means and in turn regards them as a standard to which public religion must be held. “It is the religious understanding that will have to adjust itself to democracy not the other way around,” he writes. “Justice as a value, can not be religious. It is religion that has to be just.” In this vein, he suggests that there is no need to place the burden of elucidating core democratic principles on religion itself. “Rather, the discourse on religious government should commence with a discussion of human rights, justice, and restriction of power (all extrareligious issues). Only then should one try to harmonize one’s religious understanding with them.” In this way, religion can be understood to affirm and bolster democratic values without being judged to be an essential precursor or progenitor of those values.

While Soroush is unapologetic about privileging democratic values that he has identified independently of Islam, he is careful to demonstrate that his vision of government is by no means anti-religious. He asserts that he is advocating for “political secularism” rather than “philosophical secularism.” In other words, his vision entails an institutional separation of religion and state but poses no threat to individual religiosity, a common fear that he hears expressed by Iranians regarding his philosophical project. “Democratic religious regimes,” Soroush argues, “need not wash their hands of religiosity nor turn their backs on God’s approval.” Democracy does not require anyone to renounce their beliefs, it requires only tolerance of “different points of view and their advocates.” Towards this end, he asks, “Who says the precondition for tolerance of ideas and their bearers is the renouncing of one’s own beliefs? One may consider an idea absolutely false while judging its bearer blameless, respectable, and even commendable.”

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180 Ibid., 132.


Within Soroush’s vision, religion becomes a characteristic of democratic government only to the extent that it is desired by the populace. Democracy by nature, Soroush holds, dictates that,

The government of the people is a government fit for the people, not for the Gods. It is established and demolished through the will of the people. This will is, in a religious society, nurtured and inspired by religion and religious reason, but the religious edification and inspiration does not diminish the democratic nature of the religious government in the least.”

In this regard, he draws a distinction between “religious government” and “jurisprudential government.” Based on the democratic principles he has outlined, he argues that “religious government is inconceivable except over religious people” who thus allow their religious beliefs to inform their democratic participation in society. By contrast, jurisprudential government, such as that imposed by the Iranian Islamic state, “is feasible over both the religious and nonreligious” as it rejects individual freedom to pursue religious truth and instead compels its subjects to embrace a certain religious ideology.

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184 Ibid., 152.
185 Ibid., 146.
186 Ibid.
Conclusion

The Increasingly Global Implications of Iranian Reform

The reformist visions discussed in Chapter 3 are fiercely disputed by regime loyalists. Correspondingly, the proponents and supporters of these visions are subject to frequent harassment and repression. As hinted at in the discussion of Montazeri, the esteemed Grand Ayatollah spent much of his last decade living under house arrest so that the regime could closely regulate his capacity to air public critiques of the Islamic state. The two younger critics discussed in the chapter, Kadivar and Soroush, have also been subject to harassment by the regime and are now both living abroad; forced into exile out of fear for their physical safety and out of a desire to maintain some level of freedom so that they can continue to advocate for reform.

In the face of this fierce repression, the values and ideals of the reform movement still increasingly appear to be gaining traction in Iranian society. The recent Iranian Nobel Prize Winner, Shirin Ebadi, for instance, notes that democratic culture in Iran is growing stronger. She posits that while the realization of democratic government may still be far off, a social commitment to democratic values is something increasingly embraced by much of the populace. “Democracy is a culture, and it’s the democratic people that can build democracy,” she notes. “Fortunately, this is a culture that we do have in Iran.”

Other scholars also highlight ways in which the supporting pillars of the absolutist regime are being undermined. Ahmad Sadri asserts that the decreasing lack of support for the regime ideology among the clergy poses an ongoing threat to the regime’s ability to religiously affirm its own legitimacy. Furthermore, Said Arjomand highlights that popular support for the regime ideology is

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187 Kurzman, “Critics from within.”
also waning as evidenced by the increasingly young population’s lessening commitment to the idea of “politically following religious leaders.”

Exactly how events in Iran will unfold in the near future is difficult to predict. What remains certain, however, is that the reform movement continues to exhibit a strong attachment to the idea of maintaining the Islamic character of the Iranian state. Islam is seen by many Iranians as the key pillar in the unique Iranian identity that has developed over the past thirty years somewhat independently of cultural forces from the East and West. The persistence of Iranian popular attachment to Islamic government paired with burgeoning discussions surrounding the possibilities of democratic reform ensures that discourses on Islam and democracy in the country will remain robust and compelling.

Furthermore, the unique set of circumstances in Iran that have allowed for the proliferation of such sophisticated and vibrant discussions of religion and democracy has leant developments in the nation an ever increasing global significance. As Soroush notes, religious democracy is something the contemporary world finds “unattainable or undesirable.” And yet, visions of religious democracy (in the general sense rather than the Soroushian sense) are exactly what Iranian intellectuals, both inside and outside of the clerical establishment, continue to pursue. Their success or failure in this endeavor will undoubtedly have immediate implications in the surrounding Muslim countries of the Middle East. It is also becoming increasingly clear, however, that the quest to craft a democratic state that retains a religious identity could have implications that stretch across the globe. The successful completion of such a quest would challenge long held beliefs in the western world about the undeniable preferability of secular governance and would in turn force societies both east and west to reconsider the role that religion can play in a democratic public sphere.

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Kadivar, Mohsen. “This Iranian Form of Theocracy Has Failed.” Interview by Erich Follath and Gabor Steingart. Spiegel Online, July 1, 2009.


I reference a number of Khomeini’s works in this volume including:

• “A Warning to the Nation/1941” – p. 169-173.
• “In Commemoration of Martyrs at Qum/April 3, 1963” – p. 174-176.
• “The Incompatibility of Monarchy With Islam/October 13, 1971” – p. 200-208
• “The Anniversary of the Uprising of Khurad 15/June 5, 1979” – 268-274.
• “Thirty Million People Have Stood Up (December 29, 1978),” interview by Algar. – 321-328.


