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Call for Papers

The Iran Analysis Quarterly is currently accepting articles for its next issue. Articles should focus on the analysis of the social, political, cultural or economic trends of contemporary Iranian society.

The editorial board reserves the right to accept or reject submitted articles. Articles may be edited and will be returned to the authors for final revision if corrections take place.

Please submit abstracts to amostash@mit.edu by October 30, 2005 and full manuscripts in Microsoft Word format by November 15, 2005

Manuscripts should be in English, not less than 2 pages single-spaced, not exceeding 14 pages single-spaced and should be consistent with the Chicago Manual of Style

Iran: Rogue State?

Ali Mostashari

Ali Mostashari is the editor of the Iran Analysis Quarterly, and an executive board member of the Iranian Studies Group at MIT, where he received his Ph.D. in Technology, Management and Policy. He is currently a LEAD operations specialist in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York City. The opinions expressed in this editorial are solely that of the author and do not represent the views of the UNDP.

Iran is now an important focal point for U.S. foreign policy. Yet many have argued that the U.S. lacks a coherent foreign policy on Iran, amounting to no more than an enormous list of “evils”: namely, that Iran exports its radical Islamist revolution, supports Hezbollah and Hamas and actively opposes the Middle East peace process, is building nuclear and biological weapons capacity, has been involved in the bombings of the Jewish center in Buenos Aires and the Khobar towers in Saudi Arabia, provides Al-Qaeda with safe passage and refuge, helps insurgents in Iraq, assassinates its own dissidents and oppresses its people, and so on.

Some of these claims are substantiated, while others are based on speculation and circumstantial evidence. Some of them are of real concern to the United States, while others are used in rhetoric to put more pressure on the Iranian government. Overall, this portfolio of Iran’s transgressions has been used to characterize it as a “rogue” state that is dangerous to its neighbors and to the world. In fact a closer look at each of these issues would indicate otherwise. Iran’s nuclear strategy in particular seems to suggest rationality rather than rogue behavior. If that is the case, then it’s time for Washington to change its assumptions in dealing with Iran.

Iran's Nuclear Strategy

The U.S. Government firmly believes that Iran's nuclear projects are geared towards nuclear weapons². The nuclear ambitions of Iran are a major concern for the U.S. for two reasons. First, it is concerned with the ability of Iran to use such weapons against Israel and U.S. troops in the region, and, second, it is concerned that the Iranian government may pass nuclear weapons to terrorists to be used on U.S. soil or that of its allies³.

While the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran are potentially grave, the urgency of the issue seems to be overemphasized. A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate recently concluded that Iran indeed is not close to a functional weapons program.⁴ According to leaks from the report published in the *Washington Post*, it is predicted that Iran is unlikely to have enough highly enriched uranium to make a nuclear bomb "before early to mid-next decade." Still, U.S. officials insist that Iran's program is of major concern. With the election of a hardliner as president in Iran and Iran's rejection of the "final" EU proposal on August 5, 2005, tensions have reached an all-time high. Iran's insistence on acquiring a fuel cycle in defiance of international pressures is seen by the U.S. as yet another indication of "rogue behavior".

² "Nuclear Weapons and Rogue States: Challenge and Response", by John R. Bolton, Remarks to the Conference of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis and the Fletcher School's International Security Studies Program, Washington, DC, December 2, 2003

³ Iranian Nuke Dreams Challenge Bush Doctrine, Fox News, Monday, April 25, 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,154407,00.html>

⁴ Kenneth Timmermann, "Nuclear dance of 1,000 veils," *Washington Times*, August 5, 2005



Seen from the Iranian leadership's perspective however, the pressure from the international community has its benefits. Iran has survived the past two decades under economic sanctions of all sorts and isolation of different degrees by the United States and the Europeans. By insisting on its rights to civil nuclear development and the appropriate fuel cycle under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has gained much without even having exhausted all of its negotiation options. Already the European Union and the United States have affirmed its inalienable rights to civilian nuclear power.⁵ After being denied 22 requests for accession to the World Trade Organization by the United States, Iran was allowed to start membership talks in May 2005.⁶ The European Union's package of incentives may be far from what Iran officially expects at this time, but it is far beyond anything that would be offered to Iran, had it not insisted on its nuclear program. Iran hopes to get more if it shows sufficient determination for its program.

At the same time, Iran seems to be careful not to openly violate the NPT and has shown itself relatively open to inspections. Its denial of unlimited access to military sites for UN inspectors may be more of a tactical move to maintain the mystique of its nuclear program rather than an active effort at hiding an advanced weapons program. At this stage, it seems that Iran would like to develop a "virtual" deterrent, or the potential capability for an actual "deterrent," rather than go for a full-scale weapons program.

⁵ "EU reaffirms Iran's "inalienable" right to nuclear energy", Khaleej Times Online, August 5, 2005

⁶ "Iran to Start WTO Accession Talks," *Weekly World Trade News Digest*, June 1, 2005

Dismissing Sanctions and Military Threats

For Iran, the consequences of the nuclear negotiations game seem to have positive payoffs with acceptable risks. If Iran is taken before the UN Security Council, there is little ground for sanctions given that it has not taken definitive steps toward nuclear weapons development.. Also, with China and Russia present, Iran has little to fear, or so it assumes—both appear ready to block sanctions. The time it takes for such processes would allow Iran to go further along its enrichment activities, increasing the stakes and strengthening its hand in negotiations.

Iran is convinced that the United States will make every effort to change the current regime in Tehran, whether or not Iran pursues its nuclear program. For Iran the threat of military action is not new; American support of the Iraqi regime in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the shooting down of the Iranian airliner in 1988 were signs for the regime that Washington would not refrain from a military confrontation. The comparative experience of Iraq and North Korea seems to have convinced Iranian leaders that a hard line would be the only thing that could save them from the fate of Iraq's Ba'ath regime.

At the same time, the threat of imminent military action by the United States to deal with the nuclear standoff is deemed insignificant in Teheran. A full-scale invasion is not expected with the U.S. military stuck in Iraq and Afghanistan, and air strikes are not a plausible option to set back the program. In fact, such attacks would surely unite the currently disgruntled public behind the regime by spurring Iranian nationalist and patriotic tendencies.



The threat of using tactical nukes against Iran, which the administration is rumored to have considered⁷, is also seen by the Iranian leadership as empty rhetoric, since the implications would go beyond Iran and could create an international crisis with unforeseeable consequences.

Mitigating Risk

Iran's risk mitigation strategies rely on improving its prominent position in the world energy market, expanding its international ties, and maintaining its influence over non-state regional and global actors.

The Energy Shield: Iran counts on its prominent position in OPEC at a time when oil prices are above the \$60 mark (as of August 2005). The importance of Iran's 4.2 million barrels per day oil production capacity in a fragile energy market is insurance against military invasion, international isolation, and potential international sanctions.

Geopolitical Status: Iran is quietly expanding its global influence by engaging China, Japan, and India in long-term energy contracts and by engaging in Iraq's reconstruction. Thanks to Khatami's reform era, Iran's relationship with its neighbors is probably at the best it has been since the 1979 revolution, and it seems unlikely that Mr. Ahmadinejad, the new president, would make any efforts to change that. Iran's strong support of Iraq's Shi'ite government and the Afghan government, both allies of the United States, has created common interests that are not easy to overlook.

⁷ "Deep Background", by Philip Giraldi, *The American Conservative Magazine*, August 1, 2005
http://www.amconmag.com/2005_08_01/article3.html

The Wildcard Factor: While Iran's influence over Hezbollah and Hamas may be gradually waning due to internal political developments in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, it has not tried to dispel fears by U.S. analysts that any threat to Iran would result in a region-wide escalation of reprisals by its protégées. Iran's position vis-à-vis al Qaeda is also unclear at this point. Admittedly, Iran has little affinity with Saudi Jihadists that are killing Shi'ites in Iraq. A strategic union between Iran and al Qaeda is therefore quite unlikely. Iran reportedly prosecuted 3000 al Qaeda members who had infiltrated Iran in the couple of years.⁸ Yet Western sources believe that Iran is holding top-level al Qaeda members, including Ayman Alzawahiri and Saad bin Laden, without returning them to their native countries as has been done with the others who have been arrested.⁹ While these assertions have not been corroborated, in case they are true the top leadership of al Qaeda could also serve as a bargaining chip with the U.S. in the future. Overall, it seems Iran is using American rhetoric on its connection to terrorist groups to caution against military threats; while Iran's conventional forces may be no match for the U.S. military, Iran hints that it has more global levers they can pull if push comes to shove, including making life hell for U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and seriously undermining the recent progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

⁸ "Iran official claims major al Qaeda crackdown," Canadian Broadcasting Service, July 17, 2005

⁹ "Iran holds Al Qaeda's top leaders," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 28, 2003

Reconsidering U.S. Policy on Iran

The above discussion would indicate that Iran's nuclear strategy is a good example of its rational behavior in international relations. While there is always a chance that Iran will overplay its hands, the basic rationale for their actions is rooted in a game-theoretic perspective of payoffs, costs and associated risks.

The image of Iran as a rogue state dates back to the days of the hostage-taking crisis and the Iran-Iraq war. A more detailed study would reveal increased rationality in Iran's foreign relations since 1988. If Washington continues to use an antiquated mental map of Iran's position in the world, it will find itself in a position where the only available options to deal with Iran would be irrational and limited.

The implication of Iran's rationality may prove crucial in shaping U.S. foreign policy with regards to Iran, prompting a different approach in dealing with the Islamic Republic. The particular direction of such a change would depend on a fresh assessment of the rapidly changing position of Iran in the world, and dealing with Iran as a rational actor, with discernable and even predictable interests, prerogatives, and capabilities.

Based on the above discussions, I would argue that *détente* is a more effective U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Iran than the current U.S. approach. A *détente* policy could entail a serious reconsideration of the isolation strategy that has strengthened the hands of conservatives in Iran, an increased emphasis on Iran's human rights records, and a policy that is based on game theoretic perspectives in its approach.

Furthermore, a stronger alliance with the Europeans in dealing with the nuclear issue, substitution of smart-sanctions targeting proliferation activities instead of the current blanket sanctions that even prohibit Iranian students to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and the establishment of limited diplomatic ties with Iran could help in containing Iran's threat to the United States, while encouraging the Iranian regime to be a "more responsible member of the International community".

IRAN'S JUNE 2005 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE QUESTION OF GOVERNANCE

Ali Abootalebi

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Iran's much anticipated presidential election in June 2005 resulted in the unexpected victory of the conservative candidate Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Mr. Ahmadinejad, the former mayor of Tehran, ran as a populist intending on correcting the path of the revolution back to its original values of social justice, simplicity, self-sacrifice, and honor in an ideal Islamic society. He promoted "return to revolutionary values" and pledged to fight corruption and discrimination, and promised a fairer distribution of the country's vast oil wealth.

Speculations abound on whether president Ahmadinejad will turn the clock back on social and economic reforms that began in 1989 and continued throughout President Muhammad Khatami's term, although with a mixture of successes and failures. Regardless of what has been promised during the presidential campaign, it remains true that the second post-revolution generation is facing a crisis of governance in both moral arena and governance. In light of widespread economic problems, social restrictions, and monopolization of politics and political power in the hands of the religious and social conservatives and institutions, the ideals of Islamization of society and the state in Iran has for the most part failed.

The international pressure, whether as a result of Iran's nuclear program or its human rights record, or hostile pressure from the United States, or insurgency and instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the challenge of globalization altogether, has also for the past 25 years limited the state's option in realization of its revolutionary goals and ideals.

The victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in Iran's 24 June presidential election represents the ascendance of the country's second post-revolution generation and the return of the common man to the country's politics. The dispossessed, or the *Mostazafin* as the late Ayatollah Khomeini called them, have in the past, and continue today, to support the regime through self-sacrifice, simple life style, and dedication to the ideals of Islamic justice and piety. Yet, the same people have become disillusioned by the ever increasing economic gap between the rich and poor, the loss of Islamic values and morals through widespread corruption and social ills, including, by government's own admission, the presence now of close to four million addicts in Iran. As one observer has noted, "Ahmadinejad's generation sacrificed a great deal in the war, and now it wants something in return."¹

Ahmadinejad, the representative of the dispossessed, emerged from nowhere to win the 2003 municipal-council elections and then building on that to win the 2004 parliamentary elections. Soon after he became mayor of Tehran in April 2003, "Ahmadinejad imposed a system in his office building of segregated elevators for men and women. He shut down popular fast-food restaurants and converted several cultural centers into prayer halls. He banned pictures of

¹ Bill Samii, A New Paradigm and New Math in Iran, RFE/RL NEWSLINE Vol. 9, No. 121, Part III, 27 June 2005.



international football star David Beckham from appearing on advertising billboards. He also proposed that some of the soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq war be buried in one of Tehran's main squares."¹⁰ Known as a simple and humble man among his supporters, Mr. Ahmadinejad declared after his presidential victory that: "This is a great honor. But even greater is the honor to serve this nation, as mayor, president or road sweeper. It is no different. The greatest honor is to be certain that one is serving the great people of Iran." Ahmadinejad in particular has declared that he will do his best to serve the poor, farmers, and people in rural areas.¹¹

Ahmadinejad the social conservative, however, sounds like an economic nationalist and a political neo-realist in economic and foreign affairs. He wants to "build up an exemplary, developed and powerful Islamic society," and he would favor Iranian companies when awarding oil contracts. He has also talked of removing in the public sphere what he has called ambiguities and a lack of transparency."¹² In foreign affairs, he has declared, "we will continue the current policies of the Islamic Republic. In principle, dialogue with Europe, Asia, and Africa is within the framework of our foreign policy. And of course, in order to defend the rights of our nation, we will continue the [nuclear] dialogue [with Europe]." Regarding ties with the United States, the relations with Washington, he has announced, are not the key to people's problems.¹³

² RFE/RL NEWSLINE Vol. 9, No. 122, Part III, 28 June 2005.

3. BBC Saturday, 25 June, 2005.

4. Golnaz Esfandiari, Iran: Mahmud Ahmadinejad-- Fascist, Or Man Of The People,? Radio Free Europe/Radio Iran, Wednesday, 22 June 2005. Available @ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/06/6d083aa8-9743-4d60-a5af-9aa3af959f0d.html>

Mr. Ahmadinejad's neo-mercantilist views on the economy parallels his neo-realist views on foreign policy, where the state must play a central role in the management of economic and foreign affairs in the service of Iran's national interest. But, given his populist agenda and ideological commitment to the ideals of Shi'a Islam, he is expected to focus more on economic distribution than on economic growth. For example, by providing for new opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs and through combating rentierism, corruption, and economic mismanagement, Ahmadinejad has attempted to improve the level of government effectiveness in economic distribution. His economic goals are to expand the level of domestic and foreign investments in the economy but as a neo-mercantilist he remains suspicious of the "nature and purpose" of foreign investment in Iran's national resources. He has already remarked, that "One of the main topics of our economic policy is the expansion of foreign and domestic investment... We will especially use our dear Iranians [currently living abroad] who are ready to take part in developing their country... The stock market will definitely be promoted, but of course there should be some reforms".¹⁴

The majority of Iranians feel isolated from the state and, if continued, this can lead to a severe crisis of legitimacy even among the estimated 15-25 percent staunch supporters of the regime. A possible return to more conservative social agenda, such as those implemented while he was the mayor of Tehran, can only further alienate him from the majority of Iran's very young people. Ahmadinejad after all won the election under the shadow of suspicion and allegedly even outright interference on his behalf by

5 BBC World News, Monday, 27 June, 2005.



government organs like the Basij. Moreover, the challenges to socioeconomic development for the most part remain the same for the new president as they were under his predecessor: the imbalance in the institutional distribution of power between elected and un-elected governmental bodies, exacerbated by the absence of an effective system of checks and balances among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

How much power actually resides within the office of presidency is a matter for debate. Iran under president Khatami managed to withstand international pressure and still to forge ahead with relative economic development. No matter how one evaluates Khatami's administrations' performance in the past eight years, the government of the Islamic Republic, given Iran's vast resources, possesses the potentials, and is widely expected by the populace, to drastically improve the fortunes of its citizens. Compared to president Khatami, Ahmadinejad enjoys an advantage: his conservative Islamic views are, at least for now, more in line with Ayatollah Khamene'i and other Shi'a religious conservatives dominating the Islamic Republic's governing institutions. This may initially signal a reversal of the confrontational years of the Khatami administrations between the elected and un-elected bodies of the government.

However, the fact that the conservatives dominate now all three branches of the government, as well as the un-elected bodies, cannot necessarily be helpful to president Ahmadinejad. In fact, the Ahmadinejad administration will be open to criticism from all

fronts, should it fail to deliver on campaign promises. With no one to blame, the conservatives will either deliver on their so-called “Chinese model” of development, or they resort to oppression in case of widespread and intolerable failures (perhaps in line with a “North Korean model”) or will concede political concessions to the reformists. As Mostafa Madani, a political commentator has put it: “Khatami’s failure was the failure of his political agenda, but Ahmadinejad’s failure would be the failure of the state.”¹⁵

Rapid economic growth and socioeconomic development without effective governance is unlikely. Effective governance here refers to the capabilities of the state in delivering tangible economic gains and “social satisfaction” within its respected socio-cultural milieu (e.g., Islamic, Confucius, Hindu or Catholic values and traditions). This can take place within an authoritarian political context but eventually leading to political opening and democracy, as exemplified in the cases of the newly industrializing countries of East Asian or South American states (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Brazil, and Argentina). The strategy of simultaneous economic development and political democracy, however, is plausible and a more effective approach to development since it avoids prospects for harsh human rights violations, the risks of foreign interference, political upheavals, and even revolution; the experiences of Iran under the Shah, Indonesia under Suharto, the Philippines under Marcos, the former Soviet Union, and the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of China are prominent examples of economic development in the presence of

¹⁵ Madani, Mostafa, “Chera Ahmadinejad va O rah beh koja mebarad” (Why Ahmadinejad and Where he is Going,” Iran Emrooz, Thursday, June 30, 2005, available @ www.iran-emrooz.net



political authoritarianism or totalitarianism leading to revolutions, regime change or harsh political oppression. India and Japan are among successful cases exemplifying effective governance through simultaneous efforts at socioeconomic development and political democracy within the existing cultural milieu.

The same forces that inhibited the realization of widespread socioeconomic and political development in president Khatami's years are still present in Iran. The duality of political institutional setup in the Islamic Republic has thus far protected the state against charges of unbridled authoritarianism since popular sovereignty is realized, although with limitations, through elections and representative governmental bodies like the parliament, the office of the presidency, and city and village councils. But president Khatami's years has proven to the populace and political opposition that effective governance in the presence of overwhelming political power of the un-elected organs and leaders cannot be truly realized in Iran. President Ahmadinejad will face the same political realities as his predecessor, as the fundamental reason behind Iran's poor economic performance and social ills are the monopolization of political power in the hands of the un-elected governmental bodies, without any system of checks and balances intact to give the elected bodies at least a chance to present its case to the populace for debate and policy consideration. It is further important to note that in Iran the President and his cabinet officers and their respective ministries, as well as the Parliament, sit as a buffer zone between the very disgruntled population and the un-elected governmental bodies that are in reality the centers of power.

Therefore, the very survivability of the regime itself can be threatened if the relative sociopolitical and economic gains of past eight years are undermined and the present socioeconomic and political status quo is kept intact through harsh social policies, economic depression, and/or political intolerance and oppression.

The inclusion of progressive provisions such as freedom of speech, the press, assembly and organization in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic has not prevented the abuse of political power. The institutional imbalance of power between the elected and un-elected bodies of the government prevents the emergence of a genuine civil society immune from constant governmental interference. Agents of civil society like political associations, business and professional associations, and labor unions in Iran are either nascent, or are powerless in the face of government, or are partially or totally dependent on the government itself. Yet, agents of civil society are indispensable for the consolidation of democratic gains that often come through years of contestation and opposition to the state. Civil society can even help the cause of "Islamic" norms and values, if democratic norms and procedures oversee open competition among agents of civil society, including religious associations. The political infighting has thus far prevented the emergence of effective agents of civil society, leaving the populace vulnerable to the whims of the state.¹⁶

A combination of popular, democratic messages promulgated by the elected governmental bodies and authoritarian tendencies and policies emanating from the un-elected governmental organs

¹⁶ On the connection between Civil Society and Democracy, see Ali R. Abootalebi, "Civil Society, Democracy, and the Middle East," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Volume 2, No. 3, September 1998.



leaves the populace confused and alienated. Popular alienation from the state in the face of harsh economic and social realities has potentials for widespread social upheaval. Social frustration and anger if not channeled through organized political institutions like political opposition parties or agents of civil society can rapidly develop into political violence and revolution. This is not to argue that Iran is on the verge of revolutionary upheaval, especially given that no viable widespread political opposition to the state exists. However, the very reasons that led to the 1978-79 revolution has reemerged in Iran, including high rates of inflation and unemployment (although unemployment was not particularly high in pre-revolution Iran) and popular disgruntlement with promises of reforms, suffocation of critical intellectual and popular expression, and the increasing alienation of the populace from the political establishment.

Short of the dissolution of the Guardian Council, and by implication the Expediency Council, and the Office of the Rahbar, mechanisms to enshrine a system of checks and balances among elected and un-elected institutions is indispensable for the legitimacy and the very survival of the regime. For example, the decisions of the Guardian Council on the parliament legislative acts can be subjected to override by a majority or a supermajority vote in the parliament but subject to the veto power of the Rahbar. This would mean the dissolution of the Expediency Council, as its reason for being would cease to exist. The Attorney General (Rais-i Ghovah-i Ghazaiyah), now appointed by the Rahbar, should be subject to parliamentary approval since the position is endowed with extensive powers and responsibilities.

In order to breed more popular confidence in the system, the president should be endowed with the power of the commander of armed forces, while the power to dismiss the president for wrong doings should reside with the parliament, with the Rahbar's right of veto of such Parliamentary act be open to parliamentary override. These are merely a few suggestions open to discussion and amendments. Such institutional realignments can prove indispensable to the long-term survival of the "Islamic" Republic and in the short term realization of the advanced and powerful Islamic system that President Ahmadinejad envisions.

Such institutional reforms will not only enhance the legitimacy of the present Islamic political system, but it would also redirect people's attention away from individual politicians and their ideological leanings and factional and group orientations. Institutions would then replace individuals as focal points of attention. Once the state provides for a more balanced institutional setup, the delegation of responsibilities and liabilities become clear and the actual performances in delivering tangible benefits and social satisfaction to the citizens become the focal point of societal discussion. In such a system, transparency and accountability would replace cleavages and corruption, making it easier to fight corruption.

The level of managerial skills of the political leadership at all levels has a direct bearing on the outcome of any efforts at socioeconomic development. Corruption and ineffective management can prove debilitating and even threatening to the very survival of governments. But, corruption is most often a byproduct of the economic and sociopolitical environment and not a cause of all social, economic and political ills. President



Ahmadinejad, like his predecessor, cannot effectively combat corruption without transparency and accountability in all governmental levels. But, in the absence of an effective system of checks and balances to curtail the abuse of political power that often translates into abuse of economic power, president Ahmadinejad will have next to no chance in the realization of his political platform. Moreover, corruption in Iran feeds on the extensive government control of the economy. More than 80% percent of Iran's economy is connected to the public sector, with an estimated 30% of the economic activities in the hands of the government Foundations or *Bunyads* who pay no taxes and are under the control of the office of the Rahbar.¹⁷ President Khatami began a process of privatization of government holdings such as banks and industries that were nationalized after the revolution. How far privatization of the economy can help fight corruption is unclear, but the present system of government economic holdings lacks accountability and transparency and is a major contributor to nation-wide corruption. This situation is further complicated by the fact that among behind the scenes major supporters of Mr. Ahmadinejad are those with entrenched interests in government public holdings and those who in general oppose privatization altogether. Without some levels of privatization, Iran's economy will continue to suffer. But, the public sector also plays a central role in redistribution of income through government subsidies and programs.

¹⁷ I have previously discussed some of these issues elsewhere, see Ali R. Abootalebi, "The Struggle for Democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, volume 4, No. 3 - September 2000.

The formulation of the right balance between the private and public sectors is President Ahmadinejad's biggest challenge, especially given the very strong opposition he is going to face in the process of privatization or realignment of public/private holdings of governmental assets. For lack of time and space, I will discuss this matter in more detail in a later time.

One can argue that the problem with present political system in Iran is hard to resolve: that is, the only solution to resolve the political dilemma in Iran is through the separation of the church and the state. But short of this unlikely solution, a more balanced system of checks and balances can help reform the system from within. One thing is for sure: the ongoing political infighting and intolerance for any reasonable political discussion on reform, concomitant with serious economic and social problems Iran is facing, must change towards the realization of the ideals of the rights of the citizens enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. This can be achieved either through evolution or revolution, but the former path can serve the long term interest of Iran and Iranians so drastically better than the latter. This point must be really understood by both the political leadership and the populace.

DIVINE SUFFERING IN SHIISM: ORIGINS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Valerie Saturen

In the year 680 A.D., on the tenth of the month Muharram, a brutal massacre claimed the lives of Imam Husayn and some 50 loyal followers and family members. What became known as the Battle of Karbala has served as the pivotal moment in history for the Shi'a of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, who commemorate the tragedy each year through passionate rituals full of fervent, heartfelt emotion. For the Shi'a, keeping alive the memory of Husayn means more than simply recalling the events of his life and death. It entails active sharing in the Imam's suffering, augmented by a pervasive identification with Husayn's status as the ultimate righteous victim. Since the Shi'a doctrine is as political as it is religious, the imprint left upon the collective Shi'a identity by Husayn's death carries deep political implications that remain relevant today.

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Origins of Shi'ism

When the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, he left behind no clear instructions regarding the succession of leadership for the Muslim community, or ummah. Immediately following the Prophet's death, the community became divided between those who believed the Caliphate should be passed to an elected leader and those who argued the Caliphate belonged to the lineage of Muhammad. The former group became known as Sunnis, while the latter form the Shi'a, or "party of Ali." Frequently persecuted minorities within the larger Muslim world, the Shi'a remain steadfast in their devotion to Ali ibn Abu Talib, the cousin of Muhammad who had been raised as a brother.

To the Shi'a, Ali is "Amir al-Mu'minen," the Commander of the Faithful. When asked to justify their conviction that Ali was Muhammad's sole rightful successor, they point to Muhammad's speech following the Prophet's final pilgrimage in 632, on the way back from Mecca to Medina. Stopping the caravan at a pool called Ghadir Khumm,

Muhammad called his followers to attention and stood beside Ali, taking his hand. "Of whomever I am mawla," Muhammad declared, raising the hand of Ali, "then Ali is also his mawla" (Winters). Though scholars debate the Prophet's use of the word mawla, which has a range of connotations from "companion" to "Lord" or "King," the Shi'a maintain that Muhammad had left behind a clear indication of his intention to make Ali his successor. After losing the Caliphate to competitors three times, Ali became the fourth Caliph in 656 at the age of nearly sixty. Though the Shi'a considered his reign a belated correction of decades of injustice, the community hotly contested Ali's rule, which was plagued with turmoil and controversy. At the heart of the dispute was the murder of Uthman, the Caliph that had preceded Ali. Since Uthman's death had come at the hands of Ali's followers, many mainstream Muslims viewed the assassination as a stain on Ali and questioned the legitimacy of his reign.

Ali's chief rival was Muawiya, an ambitious leader of the Umayyads in Damascus. As an Umayyad and cousin of Uthman, Muawiya sought blood revenge for the deceased Caliph's murder and did not consider Ali a valid ruler. Backed by powerful members of the ummah, including Muhammad's second wife Aisha, he commanded Ali's attention by refusing to pay homage to the new Caliph. In December of 656, the feud came to a head with the "Battle of the Camel," the very first instance in which Muslims fought against one another. After weeklong skirmishes, Ali agreed to arbitration to resolve the conflict, sparking outrage among many of his followers. As the session drew to a close, the arbitrators agreed that Ali shared responsibility for the death of Uthman and had thus forfeited his right to rule. The triumphant Muawiya was declared Caliph in 660, setting up rule in Damascus. Outraged by the outcome of what they considered a blasphemous concession on Ali's part, a group of Shi'a formed a sect called the Kharijites, or Leavers.



They challenged Ali, whom they felt had betrayed his duty to occupy the Caliphate, and were in turn attacked by Ali's armies in July of 659. The battle, which took place in the village of Adhruh in what is now southern Jordan, decimated the Kharijites (Halm 10) in a bloody event that only served to strengthen the Kharijite identity. In 661, Ali was assassinated by Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, a member of the Kharijite sect who sought revenge for the massacre (Halm 11).

In the wake of Ali's death, his sons were encouraged to try to take over the Caliphate, but his eldest son, the 36-year-old al-Hasan, abdicated in order to prevent further bloodshed between Muslims when Muawiya advanced into Iraq. However, when Muawiya announced that his successor would be his son Yazid, a sense of urgency grew among the Shi'a as they witnessed the formation of an Umayyad dynasty that would preclude the possibility of eventual Shi'a rule. This time, they turned to the younger brother of al-Hasan, al-Husayn. The latter proved willing to attempt what his brother had declined, and in 680 he set off with a small band of followers, wives, and children for the city of Karbala, Iraq to challenge Yazid for the Caliphate. The majority of the Shi'a at the time were Arab tribal fighters from the garrison town of Kufa on the Euphrates, who were pushing the Islamic conquest into Persia. At the instigation of these anti-Umayyads in Kufa, Husayn and his supporters marched from Mecca through the harsh desert, shadowed all the while by Muawiya's formidable army. Keenly aware of the importance of water in the band's desert journey, Muawiya's forces blocked Husayn's access to the natural water sources he and his followers needed for survival. Then, on the 10th of the month of Muharram, the Battle of Karbala commenced; it was a battle that would be remembered as the pivotal moment in history for generations of Shi'a to come.

Husayn's entourage was hopelessly outnumbered, and its members were slaughtered, including the Imam himself and his infant son Ali al-Akbar. The death of Husayn was made even more poignant by the torture inflicted upon him by his foes before he died. His was a slow death, and the sixth Imam Jafar later recalled that Husayn's body had been found with "thirty-three stabs of the spear and thirty-four strikes with the sword, and his body was riddled with arrows like a porcupine" (Ayoub 118). As the massacre drew to a close, Husayn's badly mutilated body lay lifeless on the ground, and his severed head was sent to Damascus. There, Caliph Yazid added to the Shi'a's sense of injustice by defiling the head, knocking out Husayn's teeth with his staff. Significantly, the Imam was denied a proper burial, and hence was never laid to rest. His survivors returned home bereft of a sense of closure, and the wound created by his murder has remained open for hundreds of years, prompting the Shi'a to mourn the tragedy as though it had occurred just yesterday.

Judgment Day

The martyrdom of Husayn and the subsequent historical persecution of the Shi'a minority has created a deep sense of existential injustice, and like other persecuted groups such as the Jews, the Shi'a have carried hope toward a day of redemption, when past injustices will be avenged and the persecuted will achieve glory at long last. For the Shi'a, this hope is pinned on the 12th Imam, a descendent of Husayn's surviving son, who is called the Mahdi. According to the legend, the Mahdi was hidden at birth by his father to avoid the wrath of the Caliph, and has since been in "occultation," a state somewhere between life and death, awaiting the time of his return. The well into which the Mahdi was said to have disappeared has since become a shrine, attracting many Shi'a pilgrims.



The hope of the Mahdi's triumphant return has served to soften the pain of ongoing persecution for the Shi'a, and has comprised a key element in a larger theology of redemptive suffering. This messianic narrative in Shiism bears a striking resemblance to that of Christianity, sharing much of its apocalyptic imagery. The Shi'a expect the return to be preceded by terrible signs, which are referenced in numerous sayings attributed to earlier Imams. According to these sayings, the world will face eclipses of the sun and moon, and earthquakes and plagues of locusts will plunge the planet into chaos. The sun will stay still, the Tigris and Euphrates will overflow their banks, fire will drop from the sky and devour Kufa and Bagdad, the power of nonbelievers will spread, and false mahdis will spring up at the ends of the Earth and wage bloody battles against one another (Halm 37).

After a period of chaos and devastation, Uthman ibn Andasah, a descendent of Yazid, is expected to return at the head of a large army from Damascus, playing a role akin to the Antichrist of Christianity. He wreaks havoc upon the world, leading his army to Mecca and Medina in order to defeat the Mahdi. However, the Earth protects the believers by swallowing the army up (Ayouh 223). Around the same time, another figure appears and enchants the world with false miracles, leading some of the faithful astray. In the end, the Mahdi, often referred to as "the one with the sword," mirroring the imagery of the New Testament book of Revelations, will reappear on Ashura, slaying the unbelievers and destroying false mosques. He rules over paradise on Earth for a 70-year reign, which is followed by his death and resurrection. 40 days later, Husayn returns to avenge his blood and that of his beloved followers. Together, he and the Mahdi purge the world of all evil, leading to the resurrection of the dead and the formation of a peaceful kingdom in which all dominion belongs directly to God.

In addition to drawing from Jewish and Christian theology, the messianic vision of the Shi'a also incorporates Judeo-Christian figures into its narrative, cementing the relationship between the three religions. The mother of the 12th Imam is said to have been a Christian slave girl named Narjis, who was captured during an expedition against the Byzantines. Jesus, Muhammad, Simon, Peter, and Ali each appeared before her in a vision, and in the same vision she was married to Muhammad himself—making him the son of the Prophet—and blessed by both Fatimah and the Virgin Mary, drawing a strong connection to the other monotheistic religions which exert a significant influence upon Shi'a belief.

Collective Psychology and Ritual

Throughout the centuries, the Shi'a have created evolving rituals in order to commemorate the pivotal moment in their history, the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Though the details of these rituals may appear alien to Western sensibilities, parallels can be drawn to those of other cultures, including Christian groups who mark the Easter season with traditions aimed at re-creating and experiencing firsthand the suffering of Christ. The intensity of the Shi'a religious experience regarding Husayn can be attributed to a number of factors, many of them quite universal.

When faced with the tragic death of a loved one, members of the surviving group are likely to experience a mixture of three major reactions to the tragedy, impacting way in which the loss is remembered. The first is an urgent desire to preserve the memory of what happened, to ensure that future generations do not forget the injustice that has been endured. The second is an equally fervent desire to create meaning from what may otherwise be an unbearable loss, and to believe that the victim had not died in vain, and that some good will somehow come out of his or her death. Such a belief often requires a kind of rationalization process where the survivors create a mythology around the tragic event; in Shiism, this is



manifest in the belief that Husayn willed his own death for the greater good of Islam. The death thus becomes sanctified, a vehicle for the redemptive suffering of the deceased and those who identify with him. Finally, those who survive often experience a sense of collective “survivors’ guilt,” which in the case of Shiism has been amplified by a sense of complicity in the death of Imam Husayn. Immediately after his death, the remaining members of his small band of followers began to develop feelings of responsibility for the loss, both because of their failure to die with him on the battlefield and their belief that he had given his life on their behalf. These guilt feelings have then evolved into elaborate rituals, and like these rituals, have been passed down from generation to generation as part of a larger inherited identity.

The necessity of remembrance calls for the creation of ritual, which also serves to reinforce solidarity between members of the group and reinforce identity. In Shiism, it is not enough to merely retell the story of Husayn’s death or to erect monuments in his memory. Rather, one must actively participate in the Imam’s suffering, which serves the dual purpose of creating a catharsis through which collective guilt can be purged and allowing devotees to share in the process of redemption. Husayn is not merely understood to have suffered for his people; through him, his people are understood to have suffered for the world. It is a crucial aspect of religious identity that can be compared to notions of redemptive suffering in Judaism and Christianity, both of which have exercised influence upon the Shi’a tradition. Significantly, it is forbidden for a Shiite to mourn the death of any martyr, including Imam Husayn, or to refer to it as “a senseless tragedy.” This is because such a sentiment would undermine the notion that the death was meaningful and served a higher purpose. So while Ashura displays are marked by intense grief, it is not the

grief of a community enduring a loss, but rather an attempt to experience firsthand the grief of the martyr himself.

Theology of Suffering

According to Jill Dianne Swenson, religious language is “the ‘language of choice’ for the expression of the deepest needs of ordinary people throughout the world—the need for identity, relationship, and the discovery of meaning. It is the language of the oppressed” (Swenson 132). By transforming the experience of suffering into a vehicle for redemption, the powerless have the ability to transform failure into success. Defeats can become victories, and a persecuted minority such as the Shi’a can derive spiritual power from their lack of physical power. For Shiites, as for other persecuted groups such as Jews (and, more recently, Israelis) and Armenians, the memory of persecution has become a source of group solidarity and a conviction of righteousness. The key to God’s favor is to suffer, preferably directly, but also vicariously through identification with martyred figures or by participating in the suffering of Husayn himself (Winters).

In Islam, like Christianity, one transcends the human plane through submission to God’s will. Both Christ and Husayn did not want to die, yet each is understood to have accepted his fate out of love for humankind. Like his father Ali, Husayn is believed to have accepted and even welcomed his agonizing fate, though only after a period of intense internal struggle. “Physically weak and crushed by a heavy fear of death, Husayn went to the tomb of the Prophet, where he wept bitter tears until he fell asleep with exhaustion at the break of dawn” (Ayoub 121). While deep in sorrow, the Imam made a conscious decision to give up his life on behalf of his followers. Tradition dictates that a tablet came down from



heaven proclaiming “Oh Hussein, we did not make death and martyrdom an obligation for thee. Thine is the choice” (Ayouh 122). Given the choice between life and martyrdom, Husayn threw the tablet back up to heaven, signaling that he had chosen death.

As mediums between God and humankind, Imams have the capacity to occupy a sacrificial role, transcending the border between life and death, between the material and the eternal. To the Shi'a, the martyrdom of Husayn serves as a metaphor for universal human suffering, and for the loss of innocence all humans must eventually face. Hence, the story of Husayn's life and death often features the poignant juxtaposition between his pure, in many ways idyllic childhood beside the Prophet and the cruel nature of his eventual demise. When Yazid was about to defile the head of Husayn, he was scolded: “I have seen the Prophet kiss this mouth.” These childhood images are invoked even in the death of Husayn, dramatizing not only an individual death, but also the universally human death of innocence.

Passion Plays, Ashura, and Politics

Throughout the centuries, Shiites have commemorated the central moment in their history through the emotional rites of Ashura, the tenth of the month Muharram. In many ways, the Ashura ritual bears a resemblance to the Christian rituals of self-flagellation that persist in parts of Southern Europe, the Philippines, and Latin America. Like these rituals, the Ashura ritual enables followers to participate in the divine drama by taking part in the Taziyeh performance. This performance involves an elaborate re-enactment of the Battle of Karbala, reciting of the story of Husayn, and processions in which young men flagellate themselves with whips or swords until the streets run with blood.

There is also the Ziyarah ritual, in which the believer undertakes a pilgrimage to Karbala and other sacred sites, symbolizing the renewal of a covenant. Karbala is considered as sacred to Shiites as Mecca, and if one dies while visiting a tomb under persecution, one becomes a martyr. Upon arriving at the martyr's tomb, the supplicant then professes sorrow and love for Husayn, cursing Husayn's enemies. During the pilgrimages, the reverence for water in Shiism becomes evident, and visitors to Iran during the summer will find people offering them water. The sacred symbolism of water owes itself to the significance of water at the Battle of Karbala, where the victims suffered incredible thirst. In fact, one lasting symbol of Shiism is the hand of Husayn's half-brother Abulfazi, which was cut off when he tried to get water for Husayn, demonstrating his loyalty and selflessness.

Participation in Ashura demonstrations serves, in part, as penitence for collective guilt over the death of Husayn (Kermani). In its earliest incarnations, the Taziyeh contained an element of atonement on the part of those who had survived Husayn instead of becoming martyrs along with the Imam. By inflicting suffering on themselves, his early followers could make up for the fact that they had not shared his fate on the battlefield. The earliest origins of the ritual can be found in the long lamentation sessions held by the women in Husayn's camp and, interestingly, the women of Yazid's own household, where they were allowed to lodge before Yazid sent them back to Medina. In Kufah, city folk beat their heads and breasts, "weeping in remorse over their treachery" (Ayouh 152).

During the Umayyad era, members of the Hashemite clan created lamentation poetry in Husayn's memory, which was read during private gatherings that featured much weeping. Poetry remained an integral part



of the ritual, which featured the marathil, or elegy poem. Weeping, for men and women alike, was considered a noble sign of one's personal commitment to Husayn. The sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, once said "he who recites poetry about Husayn, causing 50 persons to weep and weeps himself, will have a place in paradise" (Ayoub 159). The Imam repeated this, reducing the number of those weeping until finally concluding, "even if one recites poetry about Husayn and weeps himself alone...his will be paradise on the Day of Resurrection."

Husayn himself is said to have promised "there is no servant whose eyes shed one drop of tears for us, but that God will grant him for it the rewards of countless ages in paradise" (Ayoub 143). The fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abidin, was the first to bring the expression of sorrow into participation in suffering, affirming that sorrow and weeping were a source of salvation. Fatimah, venerated as the mother of Husayn, is known to the Shi'a as the mistress of the House of Sorrows, which actually includes all of creation. In the drama of the return of the 12th Imam, it is Fatimah, the embodiment of the feminine Shi'a ideal, who is to act as the final vindicator.

Processions evolved in Iraq around 963 AD, eventually growing to incorporate professional mourners. A shrouded and bloodied horse was initially used in the procession, which eventually evolved and grew to include all of the major characters in the battle story. As the ritual expanded, leaders began to recognize its political potential, which led them to either promote or discourage it, depending on political aims.

Early Abbasid leaders encouraged the Taziyeh to legitimize their own authority, but when it became a political threat, leaders such as al-Mulawakkil (847-861 AD) tried to crush the movement and forbade pilgrimages. This, in turn, only contributed to its popularity, since

participants could now enjoy the status of suffering for their cause and achieving at least symbolic martyrdom.

In more recent history, Reza Khan produced a similar effect by outlawing the Taziyeh, which he deemed a “primitive ritual.” Ashura rituals thus became an integral symbol of the Revolution. The ban augmented popular dissatisfaction and the image that the Shah was compromised in his attitude toward Islam, paving the way for the Taziyeh to become a key feature of the political uprising. Ayatollah Khomeini, key figure in the Revolution and leader of the Islamic Republic that took shape afterward, encouraged Taziyeh passion plays for political purposes. “These mourning sessions,” he asserted, “have developed young men and youths who go voluntarily to the war fronts seeking martyrdom and feel unhappy if they don’t achieve it.” Khomeini also remarked that “These Ashura mourning gatherings develop such mothers who urge their sons to go to the war fronts, and if they do not return, the mothers wish they had more sons to send” (Davis 49).

Later, the more liberal-minded Khomeini banned ritual scalp-cutting because it has been used to tarnish the image of Islam in the West. Many contemporary Shiite theologians oppose the practice, saying that blood is impure under sharia. In Lebanon, leaders of Hezbollah have recently begun to encourage adherents to donate blood during Ashura instead of engaging in self-flagellation. The ritual has also long been surrounded by controversy and frowned upon by clerics because of its representations of holy figures, which is considered by Orthodox Muslims a form of idolatry. Nonetheless, the tradition persists.

Martyrdom in Shiism

Given the importance of redemptive suffering in Shi'a theology, it follows that the political outgrowth of this concept is the role of martyrdom in political movements.

In Shiism, death can become redemptive when it takes place within the context of jihad, which means righteous struggle. By participating in the suffering of those who have died, however, one can achieve some form of the martyr's sanctity, though actual death is exalted to a greater degree. The act of martyrdom is seen as a dramatization of the most central value of Shiism, the sacrifice of one's individual well being for the sake of the society. This principle is so important, in fact, that many Shiites sign letters, "self-sacrificingly yours" (Kermani).

Imam Husayn is frequently called "Prince of Martyrs" (sayyid al-shuhadda), and the centrality of his suffering and death for the cause of Islam has been augmented by the fact that not only Ali and Husayn, but all subsequent Imams have likewise been martyred. Much of Iran's subsequent history, which has been fraught with its fair share of violence and turmoil, has been "viewed through the prism of the tragic death of Husayn, seen by Shiites everywhere as the greatest single act of human suffering and redemption" (Ayoub 233).

Martyrdom and the Revolution

In 1978 and 1979, the Islamic Revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, overthrew the government of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini "began his long campaign against the monarchy on the afternoon of June 5, 1963 in an Ashura sermon at the Faiziyeh seminary in Qom" (Abdo 234). Though the

revolution was not entirely religious in nature, the history of Shiism created a deep imprint on the movement, which drew a connection between the oppression revolutionaries faced under the Shah and the legacy of the Shi'a as an oppressed and persecuted minority. The revolution sparked many bloody clashes, creating scores of martyrs. Among the more notorious of these clashes was a demonstration in Jaleh Square in Tehran on September 8, 1978. During the protest, soldiers opened fire on the crowd of 20,000 demonstrators, killing hundreds and wounding thousands more. The date became known as Black Friday, and served as a key event in precipitating the downfall of the Shah. Khomeini referred to the day as "the victory of blood over the sword."

In response to the massacre, riots broke out in Tehran, and protestors burned symbols of Western influence, including shops, liquor stores, and theaters. Workers went on strike. Tensions peaked in December with the coming of Muharram, augmenting religious emotion and adding fuel to the inferno. Khomeini's popularity swelled as he delivered inciting speeches during the days of mourning, Muharram. These days of religious mourning were universally transformed into political demonstrations. The SAVAK (National Organization for Intelligence and Security) would then crack down, creating more martyrs and enhancing the political-religious mood. In 1978, during the Muharram ceremony, demonstrators battled with the Shah's troop, smearing their hands with the blood of the victims and raising them toward heaven. Khomeini said, "Our movement is but a fragile plant. It needs the blood of martyrs to help it grow into a towering tree." The image would later find itself invoked by other revolutionaries, one of whom recalled his experiences during a rally, proclaiming, "I saw the bullets hitting [a martyr's] face and his body and I wanted to throw myself into the war. A young woman scooped up soil from the battlefield. The soil was bloody, bloody, bloody. She put it into a flower bed to help



the flowers grow." (Sciolino). The significance of the religious mood, and the depth of the revolutionaries' identification with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is embodied in the famous rallying cry of Ali Shariati: "Every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala," which became the slogan of the 1979 Revolution (Abdo 233).

Soon after, Khomeini was exiled and took up residence in Iraq. The Shah later urged Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to expel Khomeini from his exile and Iraq complied. Thus, Khomeini's interpretation "took on even more popular credence as the Shah further confirmed and validated the myth." (Swenson). The brutal crackdowns inflicted on the revolutionaries by the SAVAK intensified the popular image of the Shah as Yazid. The regime collapsed during the two holiest days of the Shi'a calendar, when a group of soldiers rebelled and attacked members of the Shah's Imperial Guard. The Shah fled Iran, and Khomeini assumed power.

A national referendum in March of 1979 created the Islamic Republic; here, as always, loomed the memory of the Battle of Karbala. During the referendum, green (the color of the Prophet) indicated "yes," and red (the color of Yazid's army) meant "no." Posters showed a young martyr clutching a green ballot from beyond the grave (Abdo 234). The colors were familiar to all Iranians as those worn during the Taziye. Once the Republic had been established, Khomeini continued to use historical associations and messianic imagery in order to legitimize his rule, seeking to establish a connection between himself and Imam Husayn in the minds of his followers. Elements of this mythology continued to influence Iranian society long after the Revolution, especially during the nation's ensuing eight-year war with neighboring Iraq.

Martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq war broke out soon after the creation of the Islamic Republic, when Iraq invaded in September of 1980. At least 30,000 Iranians were killed and 500,000 were seriously wounded during the war, which included fierce house-to-house combat. Though many factors contributed to the conflict, much pertained to the dispute over the border, particularly the Shatt al-Arab, which provided Iraq's only access to the sea. However, religious, ethnic, and political factors also played a major role. In the aftermath of the Revolution, Saddam Hussein sought to take advantage of Iran's vulnerability and instability as it pieced together a new social structure. In addition, Hussein viewed the Shi'a revolution as a potential threat toward Sunni domination in Iraq, where the Shi'a have long constituted an oppressed majority. Within this atmosphere of insecurity, the Hussein regime executed Al-Sadr, a prominent Iraqi Shiite cleric influenced by Khomeini, exacerbating further tensions.

During the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom continued to play a key role in the dominant Iranian ideology. Since casualties were so high and the magnitude of loss so great, the exultation of martyrdom provided desperately needed morale, urging the Iranians onward and offering consolation for their staggering losses. Numerous pamphlets urged Iranians to sacrifice themselves for their country, including a popular booklet written by Ayatollah Murtuza Mutahery. Mutahery, the author of *Awaited Savior*, had attended lectures during the Revolution that featured recitations of the teachings of Husayn. He was a key figure during the Revolution, a loyal disciple of Khomeini. The booklet opens by quoting Imam Ali and features numerous references to the sayings of both Ali and Husayn. Martyrs, exhorts Mutahery, are "like a candle, whose job it is to burn out and get extinguished, in order to shed light for the benefit of



others" (Mutahery 8). Mutahery also uses Khomeini's metaphor regarding the nurturing, life-sustaining qualities of sacrificed blood, explaining that "blood flows into the veins of society" (26).

The booklet is full of references to Husayn and Ali, such as the reminder that "In the early days of the Imam, many Muslims had a special spirit, which may be called the spirit of longing for martyrdom. Imam Ali was the most prominent of such people" (17). He continues, "We always have Imam Ali's name on our lips and claim to be devoted to him. If mere verbal professions could do, no one would be better Shiites than we are. But true Shiism requires us to follow in his footsteps, too" (18). Numerous sayings of Ali follow. "The Commander of the Faithful Imam Ali used to say, 'I prefer 1,000 strokes of the sword to dying in bed'" (22). The image of Karbala persisted in Iranian propaganda throughout the war. In September of 1982, Mohsen Rezaie, head of the Revolutionary Guards, announced he was ready to "liberate Karbala" (Abdo 246). Meanwhile, paintings during the war depicted a road with Karbala at the end and people marching on it as a form of propaganda.

The ideal of martyrdom is embodied by Mohammad Hosayn Fahmideh, of the Basiji (Popular Mobilization Army or People's Army), which did "human wave" assaults in which men and boys as young as nine years old used their bodies to clear mines. Fahmideh was only 12 years old when he tried to stave off Iraqi troops during the fierce urban combat. He threw himself under an Iraqi tank and exploded a grenade on November 10, 1980, becoming a model for future suicide missions. Streets and buildings are named after him. Khomeini proclaimed, "Our leader is that 12-year-old child who threw himself with his little heart against the enemy. He is worth more than a hundred pens and a hundred tongues" (Davis 49). 1986, Iran celebrated the martyrdom of Fahmideh by issuing a commemorative

stamp. Later, the Basiji became Iran's religious police, drawing power from the martyr status of their fallen comrades.

Memory and Public Space

The performance of ritual is not the only way in which the memory of past suffering is kept alive for the Shi'a; public space is another arena in which the legacy of martyrdom exerts a strong influence. In Lebanon, Shiite Muslims and Christians alike face constant reminders of the ravages of Civil War in the form of imposing monuments. During the Iranian Revolution, public space became another vehicle for communicating the link between past and present. Since public space is a key staging ground for historical remembrance, the Revolution faced the additional task of using the physical environment to highlight certain elements of the past (the martyrdom of Husayn) and draw attention away from others (the pre-Islamic artifacts cherished by the Shah, such as Persepolis). Wall graffiti reminded Iranians that those who died in the upheaval did the work of Husayn, while those who fought were doing the work of Zeynab, who kept the survivors of Karbala together and safeguarded their story for future generations (Swenson). Today, the presence of these fallen heroes is still felt, and public space in Iran remains filled with the specter of the martyrs of the past. In Tehran, the extensive Martyrs Museum honors those killed in the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, and many streets bear their names. For years, a fountain stood beside one of the city's major highways overflowing with red water to symbolize the blood of the nation's martyrs (Davis 47). Pictures of martyrs grace billboards and murals alongside portraits of Khomeini and the Imams.

In some ways, the renderings are uniquely Shi'a; to the majority of Sunnis, such displays border on idolatry. Ironically, however, they are reminiscent of the ever-present images of Saddam Hussein the former leader once



insisted on displaying throughout Iraq. Like his nemesis Saddam, who tried to link himself to the glory of the past by portraying himself as Nebuchadnezzar, Khomeini increased his influence by creating in the minds of his people an association to the beloved Husayn.

The martyrs' faces also fill large memorial cemeteries such as the Golestan e-Shahadda, or Garden of the Martyrs, which contains the victims of the Iran-Iraq War. The cemetery, located in Esfahan, displays photographs of Khomeini, and each grave is adorned with a large picture of the martyr beneath it, haunting visitors and reminding them of the humanness—and often, the youth—of those who lost their lives. The public role of martyr culture is evident in a similar cemetery in Tehran, called Behesht e-Zahra, which features park benches, public toilets, a playground, convenience store, computer center, restaurant, and a Metro station. During the war, this was a major gathering place for mourners, with professional flagellants and military musicians. Next to each grave is a glass case holding personal mementos such as childhood toys and bloodied clothing worn at the time of death, and photographs display rows of often youthful faces. Even amidst the day-to-day routine in Iran, reminders abound of the tragic element of humanity and its loss of innocence.

Conclusion

For the Shi'a, like many other groups, the powerful interplay between historical injustice, religion, and nationalism has exerted tremendous influence upon collective identity. Throughout the centuries, memories of suffering and persecution have overlapped to create an evolving narrative that remains an integral part of cultural and political life. The vivid memory of Husayn's quintessential martyrdom remains alive in yearly rituals, public displays, and the ongoing struggle of those who remain

ensnared in the violence around them. In the Shiite regions of modern Iraq, murals remind passersby of the sacrifice of prominent Shiite cleric Sheik Muqtada al-Sadr, whose religious identity and ties to Iran led to his assassination in 1999 at the hands of the Hussein regime. What was once Saddam City has been renamed Sadr City, and his face graces posters in Iraq, often placed next to images of Imam Ali. Murals depicting the horrors of Abu Gharaib prison provide additional reminders of the modern-day relevance of martyrdom and its implications. While rooted in the memory of a tragedy centuries old, the narrative of redemptive suffering remains an integral part of Shi'a identity and continues to exert a powerful influence upon the dynamics of the Middle East.

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HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSES IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN: TRADITIONALISTS, RELIGIOUS MODERNISTS AND ISLAMIC POST- MODERNISTS

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Together with concepts such as civil society and Islamic democracy, the fundamental concept of human rights is a major focus among Iranian intellectuals in contemporary Iran. This essay explores the opinions of Iranian thinkers on human rights and makes an effort at analyzing the meaning of human rights within three dominant intellectual discourses in Iran. These include traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism.

Introduction

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Shah's regime was criticized by Western states for violating human rights, but such criticism was rare and far in between in the bulk of his time as monarch. It was only towards the end of that regime that criticism with regards to human rights issues in Iran became more intense and addressed a broader scope. In the post-revolution era however, the criticism against the current Islamic government in Iran has been recurrent and explicit. Right from the beginning the West has sharply criticized the Islamic Republic for infringing on the rights of minorities and ethnic groups, and women. This criticism has continued for the past 25 years, and throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly maintained that the West and specially the Zionists have resorted to human rights as a pretext to apply pressure on Tehran.

Consequently, the question of human rights has emerged as one of the most important and controversial subjects within the Iranian society. In this essay I will try to explore the opinions of Iranian intellectuals on human rights and attempt an analysis of the meaning of human rights within the



context of traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism. I use Stuart Hall's (Hall 1992) definition of discourse as a certain way of representing a theme, where the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way, but also limits the other ways the topic could be constructed.

The Iranian society is at a transition stage from tradition to modernity. A society that is neither wholly traditional nor wholly modern, is called an anomic society, to use Emil Durkheim's definition. The discourse of tradition continues to dominate the Iranian society with a firm grip and it has even been suggested that the Iranian revolution was a revolt against modernity. The elements of modernity however are gaining within every aspect of Iranian society. This is happening at a time when yet another discourse, that of post-modernism is penetrating the Iranian society and mentality.

With regards to human rights, traditionalists look at human beings, the world and the centrality of mankind in creation from a particular perspective. In his book "Run away World", Anthony Giddens indicates that "although the term tradition is used as a process, regrettably little is spoken about tradition". Giddens (1999) has introduced four main principles for tradition:

1. Tradition is confronted with various forms of formality behaviors.
2. To a large extent tradition is a collective phenomenon.
3. Tradition has always acted as a guardian.
4. Tradition has always been an exciting and sentimental subject.

However, it seems that Giddens is mostly concentrating on the outward appearance of tradition rather than its roots and foundations.

His emphasis is mostly laid on customs, rites and deeds in a traditional world rather than on its universal doctrine, whereas in this article we emphasize tradition as a belief system.

In addition,-Eric Hobsbawm (1992) shows that many of the traditions which we think of as very ancient in their origins were not in fact sanctioned by long usage over the centuries, but were invented relatively recently.

Within the traditional discourse, mankind is considered as unrivaled and superior to every other creature. However such a unique and exclusive position does not grant man much weight or value. He is seen as a creature of God and as committed to God. By relying on divine inspiration or the word of God he becomes aware of his duties. In this discourse man has special duties against every issue and subject. He is responsible towards God, his family, his parents, neighbor and even himself. Secondly in the traditional discourse the outlook of man toward the world is excessively sacred and such an approach stems from his weakness.

Should we enter the province of ethics, values such as humbleness and humility corroborate the above perspective. The main point in this framework is obligating mankind instead of allowing him rights and privileges. This theory is proposed in contrast with the discourse of modernity, in which man is regarded as a central and leading figure in the world. The emphasis on Humanism, which began at the time of Renaissance, is one of the important foundations of the theory of modernity. Alongside humanism, belief in reason, science and progress are the four major principles in the modern age (Golkar 2000) and (Manochari 2001).



In the modern discourse the relationship of man with himself and the world changes. Here man becomes the central axis of the universe and by relying on his reason as one of his most essential and important distinctions versus other creatures, man tries to discover the secrets of the world. By relying on an extraordinary human essence and self, modern man has converted the world into a waterway and is trying to explore the world in order to dominate it. The “death of God” in the modern age is interlinked with the birth of mankind. In this discourse the essence of being a human grants every man a series of rights. In fact the meaning of human rights, which was raised during the French revolution, originated from this perspective. Human right was the offspring of the period of enlightenment when man gradually usurped the place of God. (ARSLAN 1999:203)

But this view of man and the world is now faced with challenge. Postmodern views of mankind and its position in the world have totally altered the dynamic. If Nietzsche declared the death of God as the ultimate mark of modernity, Foucault speaks about the death of subject. Mankind, who had become the central nucleus of existence during modern age, fell from his high position in the postmodern age. Reason, with its elevated rank from the point of view of ontology or epistemology, and as the only source and foundation of legitimacy for every element, trembled with Rousseau and Kierkegaard and disintegrated with Nietzsche and Freud. Nietzsche lowered the rank of reason to the level of fate. In fact as suggested by Lucas, the era of deterioration of reason has arrived. In the postmodern view the modern man who was the embodiment of human rights no more existed and that which existed was a mere theory. It is here that once more one must re-assess and reevaluate the concept of human rights.

The gap between tradition and modernity has emerged as one of the most important sociological gaps among Iranian thinkers and philosophers for more than 150 years (Milani: 1999). As Milani points out, the challenge between tradition and modernity is the key to understanding Iranian political and social history. Although for the last two decades another player i.e. postmodernism has entered the field, tradition and modernity continue to be the two superior discourses and theories that govern Iranian society.

If we look at the Iranian society from the perspective of the Human Rights charter, we can see that several major opinions in this regard. Modernists accept the International Human Rights Charter as the leading aspiration of humankind and try to enforce it in Iran. According to this group, human rights are universal in scope, relying on universal reasoning. Therefore they see the dignity of mankind as a fundamental pillar of human rights, regardless of color, ethnic descent or religious beliefs. The principle of equality among mankind is the most essential principle within this perspective. Humankind as such can devise common law for the life on earth by resorting to reason, which is aloof from any emotive inclinations. Article 1 of Human Rights Charter indicates the significance of equality of mankind. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. According to the charter every human is born free and everybody has equal rights and privileges. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs.

The majority of human rights advocates in Iran are modernist intellectual who believe religion belongs in the private sphere and that decisions in the public sphere should only reflect rationality. Therefore, the Shari'a



(Islamic law) cannot be the foundation of jurisprudence in modern life. This discourse has been attacked from two camps. Predominantly the attack has come from conservative traditionalists and more recently by postmodernists.

Traditionalists and human rights in Iran

In contemporary Iran, and in defiance to the global acceptance of human rights, there are some traditionalists who clearly oppose the idea of human rights as liberal and western values. For example Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah

Yazdi in opposing the universality of human rights values once retorted, "Should we feel ashamed of executing Islamic injunctions...? If the Westerners do not like it, it is their problem, but the death penalty and floggings are fundamental principles of our religion." (Savyon 2001)

In rejecting the slogan "Iran belongs to all Iranians", he stated:

"Is it for people to set forth their wishes, even though these are contrary to Islam? [Does that mean that] Iran belongs to all Iranians and everyone is equal? Does it mean that a Baha'i is equal with a religious authority? Today they are trying to recognize the Baha'is with the slogan 'Iran belongs to all Iranians.' Is not a Baha'i considered an Iranian? If people are considered equal and, therefore, citizens should also be considered equal and of the same rank? Does it mean that a Baha'i can become a president because he is a human being and an Iranian? Are these considered human rights? Are we defending these kinds of human rights? Is this the purpose of our Revolution?" (Kazemzadeh 2000:33).

In opposing the universal concept of human rights, the most important feature of the arguments by traditionalist clerics is that a person does not have automatic or inherent rights because of their humanity alone. From their perspective humans have duties, and can be given rights only when they fulfill these duties. For example, according to Ayatollah Khomeini's

image of humankind and God, while humans do have obligations to God; only God has rights.

While God or his representative on earth might grant humans rights, he can just as easily take them away again because rights are gifts of God, not of nature (Amirpur 2004). In this framework Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi in discussion of sources of rights, writes:

“ Thus all ‘rights’ and duties, whether moral or legal revert to the prudent will of ALLAH [SWT]. In cases where wisdom can minutely discover the requirements of prudence, there will be no need for divine revelation. But in most of the cases need for divine revelation and prophecy is felt because of complexity and lack of comprehension by ordinary wisdom of all the changes and pressures of their effects and the exact balancing of preferences and evaluation”. (Mesbah Yazdi : 2003).

In summary in this paradigm humans do not have rights that are essential to being human.

Islamic Modernists and Human Rights

While emphasizing that the concept of human rights has a liberal sense to it and has its roots in Western schools of thought, a majority of modernist Islamic thinkers do not wholly reject the Human Rights Charter. Instead they seek to replace the Charter with an Islamic version of human rights. The declaration of Islamic Human Rights or the Cairo Statement has been signed by the Islamic states for the same reason. Islamic modernists metaphorically have one leg in the traditional camp and another leg in the modernity camp, and seek to combine between two discourses (tradition and modernity).

As Kurzman has detailed, among reformist scholars throughout the Muslim world, there are three prominent modes of shari'a interpretation: “the liberal shari'a”, “the silent shari'a”, and “the interpreted shari'a”. In the



following, Kurzman's definitions will be adapted specifically to the human rights discourse of reformists. Liberal shari'a finds that Islam explicitly sanctions positions compatible with human rights norms.

It finds that respect for human rights is inherent in Islam and in fact pre-dates Western liberalism. Silent shari'a argues that Muslims may take positions compatible with human rights in the areas that the shari'a leaves room to do so. This is because in areas not specifically addressed by the primary sources of Islamic law, Muslims must themselves determine the public good. Interpretive shari'a maintains that despite being divinely inspired, the shari'a is open to multiple human interpretations, all of which are equally valid. Thus, interpretations of Islamic law that incorporate international human rights norms are just as authentic as traditional interpretations. (Shadi Mokhtari: 472)

Although this framework helps us to have a better understanding of Iranian human rights debates, it is very difficult to find modernist Islamic intellectuals that exclusively rely on one of these positions. Almost all Islamic modernists use all of the three arguments in human rights debates. On the one hand they try to prove that human rights have not been a new topic but do have a religious basis. Mohaqeq Damad is one of the representatives of that camp. According to Damad, human rights are the same commandments that during the course of centuries have been issued by the great prophets from the words of God. He maintains that no religion can devise human aspirations and goals and protect human dignity better than Islam (Damad: 2001). Such an approach to human rights, which gives an Islamic blend, alongside its western sense issues from a weaker point. Among its many detractors, this view is often criticized as being apologetic.

Mohaqeq Damad maintains that human rights are the fruits of religious thoughts and commandments of prophets (Damad: 2001). Another person that upholds this perspective is Mohammad Khatami. Khatami states,

“The discourse of human rights appears to be a secular discourse, with no essential connection with the religious outlook. However, for those familiar with the deeper layers of religious reason and understanding, it is clear that the concept of human rights is both ontologically and historically rooted in religious thoughts,”(Cummings: 2001).

Mohaqeq Damad insists that such an interpretation of human right differs with its western sense and such a difference is related to the rank of mankind in the world of creation. A review of the introduction of the Human Rights Charter and Islamic Human Rights declaration wholly exhibits such difference. The latter declaration says that members believe in Allah to be the God of the world and the creator of the Universe and has created mankind in its best form and has given dignity to him and has appointed him as his vice on the earth to develop and improve and has entrusted the execution of divine commandments to him. (Damad: 2001).

This is the main difference between these two discourses. The liberal nature of Human Rights Charter ensues from the fact that mankind is the center and leading player in the world. Such an intelligent man can discover his path to happiness himself. But in the traditional discourse it is God who is placed in the center of the universe.

Mohaqeq Damad states:

In Islam it is God who is the central theme and governor. If we are speaking about human beings we are speaking about a man who originates from God and its end is to join God. In other words human temper and behavior comes from divine inspiration (Damad: 2001).



This difference is very important. Here we can see that the human referred to in the Human Rights Charter differs from the human represented in the traditional doctrine.

By claiming that human right has not been a new subject but has been stipulated in religions and especially Islamic teachings from the beginning; the traditionalists have sought to defend themselves against the modernist viewpoints.

Religious intellectuals or Islamic modernists are the main symbol of this faction. They are seeking to strike a new doctrine by choosing certain principles from both tradition and modernity in combination to obtain a new blend that incorporates both the privileges of tradition and modernity, and in the meantime does not suffer from the key flaws from any of these camps. Concerning human rights these thinkers believe that Islam is one of the early religions that gave weight to human dignity. According to the Quar'an "we bestowed dignity and honor to mankind, and the dignity of mankind has been ascertained by the Creator and covers all mankind". (Bastenegar 2000:246)

Commenting on this topic, Mehdi Bazargan says: "we should we lay aside selfishness and bias and examine what happened 1300 years ago and we can see that all that the European nations have boasted about human rights is but a drop of water against an ocean of wisdom in original Islam" because the prophets were the first who announced the natural and inherent rights of liberty for mankind. (Bastenegar 2000:144)

According to these thinkers the Human Rights Charter is a series of essays and articles, which have been written from the doctrines of Islamic Thought. The majority of these articles aim to corroborate the claim that human rights is a subject that has been expressed in the best form in Islam.

According to such philosophers, human rights and the recorded Islamic principles do not conflict with each other at all.

Another important Islamic modernist is Abdolkarim Soroush, who has had great influence on discourse of reformism or post-revolutionary discourse (Mokhtari 475) – the discourse of post-fundamentalism (Jahanbakhsh: 2003) or post-Khomeinism in Iran.

Soroush's Theory of "Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge" had rightly targeted a very sensitive yet fundamental aspect of the prevalent religious understanding—its epistemic foundations. Arguing that any understanding of religion is humane and thus time-bound, Soroush's theory successfully launched the thesis that no understanding of religion is ever sacred, absolute or final. (Jahanbakhsh: 2003:247)

Although Soroush distinguishes between religion and the understanding of religion, he doesn't expand his logic. His approach is hermeneutic and stops in epistemology failing to address ontology, because Soroush as a Muslim cannot believe in relativity of truth at the ontological level. For him, human rights are the commandments of human reason. This means that they cannot be in conflict with religion because on principle, nothing unreasonable can be God's will.

The fact that human rights were established in a non-religious context does not mean that their implementation is impossible or unnecessary in an Islamic state. On the contrary. While human rights are the brainchild of humans, the fact that they do not contradict religion means that God's rights are not being infringed upon. The logical consequence of this line of argument is that a whole series of punishments recognized by Islamic law



need no longer be applied, e.g. the amputation of hands for stealing. Nor is it, according to Soroush, absolutely necessary to follow Islamic laws down to the letter. To justify this point, he differentiates between first- and second-degree values.

Second-degree values relate exclusively to the details of belief and therefore differ from religion to religion. First-degree values, on the other hand, such as justice, are the really important ones, he claims (Amirpur: 2004). Although Soroush tries to justify that human rights and Islam are not contradictory his approach is not only apologetic but fails to solve the problem.

The Post Modernists and Human Rights

A third perspective about human rights in Iran is that which is promoted by post modernists. It is difficult to give a clear definition of postmodernity. Bell indicates that "Postmodernism is a flight from philosophy – I think of Foucault or Derrida or Rorty – into cultural history, rhetoric, or aesthetics and the denial, if not the subversion, of universalist and transcendental values" (Bell, 1996 P.298). Others think post-modernity is an emancipatory discourse that opens space for marginalized discourses. By emphasizing postmodernist epistemology, the existence of absolute and objective truth is rejected and truth is rendered as a traditional and subjective issue. Therefore, according to Foucault, man has died. In such a paradigm, man had lost his central power and role in the world and one could not establish a principle on such a platform. From that viewpoint only discourses exist that cannot be compared with each other and enjoy the same credit. Each theory has its own rules and criterion, which is given credit by those who believe in that discourse so we cannot compare the different discourse or paradigm with one another. Feyerabend spoke about this principle as *incommensurability* (Against Method: 2000)

From this perspective the universal nature of human rights is disputed and human rights have been localized or replaced by local human rights. According to this view human rights is an issue, which emerges from the heart of western modernity and liberalism and can be acceptable within that framework only. As a result one cannot apply such principles to other, non-western perspectives. As such each discourse must convey a meaning of human rights that issues from the heart of that discourse. The myth of universal nature of human rights has collapsed and one can no longer resort to human rights as a standard to evaluate all the states in the world.

In conclusion, on the one hand, postmodernism appears to be incompatible with the idea of rights because of its hostility to the conceptions of the autonomous subject and universality. On the other hand, the postmodern discourse does not underestimate “modern” ethical issues like human rights. This brings about two controversial conclusions: the adoption of an unreflective pragmatism by postmodernists towards human rights, and the abandonment of a foundationalist approach to rights adopted by rights theorists. (ARSLAN: 1999).

The introduction of such a current of thought into the Iranian society and mentality is recent. The pioneers of this school of thought in Iran have entered through the artistic field. In fact it was from 1991 and with the publication of postmodern art philosophy books onward that postmodernism found its place in the Iranian community as a critical method of thought. Although many thinkers benefit from the principles of the postmodernist school, few consider themselves to belong to that theory, because as mentioned earlier such a theory is in conflict with



Islamic theory and one cannot combine and integrate these two discourses with each other. It is exactly for that reason that the majority of Iranian postmodern thinkers are trying to discover a fixed essence to render postmodernism a flexible world.

These people are benefiting from postmodernism principles as a mechanism only. Perhaps it is interesting to note that one of the most important recent words that have entered the Persian language is the term discourse (*goftemAn*). This term, which was invented by Dariush Ashoori, a secular researcher and disciple of Nietzsche in Iran, is now being used extensively by the public. In last decade, postmodernism has attracted a majority of young Iranian intellectuals, since it allowed them to criticize the traditionalists, challenge dominant interpretations and open the space for the marginalized groups. Yet it is difficult to find someone who readily accepts the label of postmodernist. It is not for a lack of understanding of what postmodernism is. Rather, the underlying reason is that they live under an Islamic ideological system that sees TRUTH as objective and in the hand of clerics. Hence, affirming postmodernism is equivalent to challenging the Islamic system.

Ironically many Islamic traditionalists are presently trying to criticize Western countries and localize the human rights with the assistance of postmodernist theory, and with this maneuver to thereby escape from the pressure of criticism from the modernity camp. In fact, for a short period of time in Iran, traditionalists were using postmodernist theories as tools to counter modernist challenges and saw postmodernity as an ally for fighting modernity. But soon they realized that postmodernism did not provide them with critical reasoning as a solid platform, since "all that is solid melts into air". Islamic postmodernists, on the one hand seek to break the authority of Islamic traditionalists and open the space for new

interpretations and yet on the other hand cannot accept the major claim of postmodernism about the subjectivity of truth. Ironically, they thus seek to use postmodernism as a tool against the hegemony of western and liberal values.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, right now three major discourses or paradigms prevail in the Iranian mentality with regards to human rights: The traditional discourse, modernity and postmodernism. While one group accepts the Human Rights Charter to be the general aspiration of mankind, another group opposes the Charter and maintains that arrogant Western states are benefiting from human rights as a political lever to suppress independent states. They try to form and consolidate Islamic human rights and raise it as the general aspiration of Muslims versus the liberal human rights phenomenon, whereas others believe human rights to be a universal phenomenon belonging to all mankind and call for acceptance of such rights by all people. Alongside these two major camps another group supports local human rights that emerge from the heart of their own society. Thus, a better understanding of these perspectives allows for a better understanding of the current discourses on human rights in Iran.

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