



PROJECT MUSE®

Iranians Turn Away from the Islamic Republic

Ladan Boroumand

Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 169-181 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0014>



➡ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/745963>

IRANIANS TURN AWAY FROM THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Ladan Boroumand

Ladan Boroumand is cofounder and senior fellow at the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran. She is currently writing a book on the tectonic social changes taking place within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A little over four decades ago, when a Shia Muslim cleric named Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged in Iran and on the world political stage as the head of an unprecedented theogico-political project, few people in the West realized that they were witnessing the gestation of a new ideological challenge to the liberal-democratic worldview. For decades after Khomeini launched his Islamist revolution in Iran, the world's liberal-democratic states failed to grasp that Islamist radicalism was a direct ideological threat, even though from its inception it had proclaimed Western democracy as its main enemy.¹

During these fateful decades, Islamism in various forms has spread around the world, and today it directly targets liberal democracy and its values in the heart of Western democracies. In addition, fear of Islamism (and of immigration as its carrier) has paved the way for antiliberal nationalist movements to reemerge within Western democracies, enabling demagogues to gain influence and sometimes to win elections. Even the resurgence of authoritarianism in Russia was justified by evoking fears of what violent Islamism could unleash, as underlined by the Beslan school massacre of 2004.

It is in Iran that Islamism—or a certain strain of it, at least—has proven itself able to provide the basis of a long-enduring political project. In February 2019, the Islamic Republic of Iran celebrated its fortieth anniversary. It is the Islamic Republic that began the export of Islamist ideology by means of a vast propaganda network, as well as the provision of arms, training, and money (much of it siphoned from Iran's oil exports) to a myriad of both Shia and Sunni Islamist terror groups.²

The Islamic Republic's expansionist victories in "Western Asia"

were among the achievements that Khomeini's successor, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), celebrated as the regime marked its fortieth birthday. Yet the massive demonstrations against the Islamic Republic and its influence that broke out in Iraq and Lebanon in October 2019 and then within Iran itself in November have shed stark light on a far less glorious reality for the Iranian regime and its totalitarian Islamist ideology. If people in Iraq and Lebanon are calling for an end to Iran's meddling in their countries' affairs, Iranians themselves are demanding the dissolution of the clerical regime and even chanting "Death to the dictator!"

As of this writing in early December 2019, the brutal repression that the regime had unleashed against the demonstrations inside Iran had, according to cautious estimates, killed more than two-hundred people. These demonstrations were a reprise of rallies that had broken out all over the country at the end of 2017 and carried on until August 2018. The recurrence of intense popular protests less than two years later indicates that within Iran the Islamic Republic not only has failed to foster Khomeini's notion of a virtuous Islamic society, but indeed is facing a widespread rejection of his ideology.

In common with other Islamists, Khomeini claimed that the Koran, Islam's holy book, and the Sunnah, its prophetic traditions, are sources for comprehensive legislation that is directly applicable to all human societies at all times.³ Khomeini conceived his theogeo-political project to cure what he saw as the corruption of Westernized Muslim societies and to establish the reign of God on earth.⁴ Khomeini denied Iranian national identity, preferring to replace it with the Islamic concept of the *ummah*, the transnational community of believers.

The cornerstone of his project was the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, which means the (supreme) guardianship of the Islamic jurisprudent. A *faqih* is an adept in Islamic law. Khomeini declared that God has designated the highest-ranking *faqih* to act as the successor to Muhammad, revered by Muslims as the final and most authoritative of the prophets, in all matters—including politics and government. The absolute supremacy of the Islamic jurisprudent is the basis for the office of supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an office that by definition demotes citizens to the status of minors and denies the sovereignty of the people. Khomeini was its first incumbent.

In its traditional form, the concept of *velayat-e faqih* was modest in its reach. It was meant to apply to specific social matters such as the management of certain types of property and the care of orphans and persons lacking their full faculties. This limited guardianship was not a general writ to rule. The political system put in place by the Ayatollah Khomeini is something else altogether, since at its center is an absolutely supreme clerical "guardian" overseeing society as a whole. This system remains controversial at the highest levels within Shia Islam.

Indeed, most grand ayatollahs have never accepted Khomeini's absolutization of guardianship and still refuse to this day to accede to his claim that clerical authority extends to matters of political rule.⁵

Khomeini: Sophistry and Usurpation

Khomeini's genius consisted in taking his controversial expanded version of a traditional clerical prerogative and amalgamating it with a modern revolutionary ideology deeply tinged by Leninism. The amalgam could not have succeeded without jurisprudential sophistry and religious usurpation. The sophistry was Khomeini's perverse transformation of the clerical guardian's limited civil prerogative into an extensive and absolute political prerogative. The usurpation was Khomeini's takeover of the title of "imam." In Shia tradition, the imams are the twelve infallible and immaculate successors to the God-given prophetic authority of Muhammad. Much to the dismay of the traditional Shia establishment, the founder of the Islamic Republic adopted the title of "Imam" Khomeini, thereby styling himself an equal to the twelve imams. Through this usurpation, he transformed the personal relationship between a chosen spiritual guide and his follower into something political—the complete obedience of a people to a charismatic leader.

Khomeini's ability to meld these elements into a new politico-religious totalitarian ideology helped him to attract an array of disparate followers with widely varying aims and ideas. All these people projected their mutually incompatible aspirations onto Khomeini. Young radicals inspired by Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Frantz Fanon, or Algeria's war for independence saw Khomeini as a fighter against injustice, capitalism, and Western imperialism. Lower-ranking Shia clerics saw him as one of their own who would raise their social status while restoring the fading authority of religion over a modernizing society. Middle-class opponents of the Pahlavi dynasty that had ruled since the 1920s pictured Khomeini as a freedom bringer and corruption fighter who would also block the communists. Old-school liberal nationalists looked upon him as a handy instrument in the effort to unite the nation, get rid of the shah, and restore the rule of law and Iran's independence. The lower classes, who had been slow to join the movement, finally rallied to Khomeini as the "Imam," the long-awaited savior who would improve their living conditions and guarantee their salvation.

While these followers were spinning fantasies about who Khomeini was and what he would do for them, he was planning to stifle individual freedom. Just as the USSR had been dedicated to the creation of a new *homo sovieticus*, Khomeini took as his aim the creation of a new *homo islamicus* in a purified society. This was the very core of his mission, and defined its modern totalitarian character. He claimed a divine mandate to rule and gave the will of the people a role that was secondary at best.⁶

The constitution that Khomeini and his allies crafted for the Islamic Republic in 1979 establishes an absolutist regime whose armed forces,

Just as the USSR had been dedicated to the creation of a new homo sovieticus, Khomeini took as his aim the creation of a new homo islamicus in a purified society. This was the very core of his mission, and defined its modern totalitarian character.

go away, however. Over the decades it has led to a deepening reformist trend.

Khomeini revealed the true nature of his project as soon as it began meeting resistance, which appeared very quickly. Women took to the streets to protest the dress code and other forms of discrimination. Not long after, Kurds, Turkmen, Sunnis, and secular left-wing revolutionaries took up arms against the emerging theocracy. Press freedom was suspended in August 1979. In December, the whole of Iranian Azerbaijan rose up to reject the new despotic constitution, only to be crushed with the complicity of Islamo-Marxist and “anti-imperialist” (pro-Soviet) forces. Regime-supported vigilantes began terrorizing the people of Iran. Following in the footsteps of the Jacobins and of Lenin, Khomeini set up revolutionary tribunals to summarily annihilate dissenters, along with revolutionary committees to watch every citizen.

By the end of 1985, after thousands of summary executions and extrajudicial killings, all the political forces that pre-dated the Islamic revolution had been dismantled and their leaders silenced, jailed, driven into exile, or killed. Nearly two-million of the country’s most active and educated citizens had left Iran. Militias and paramilitaries enforced Khomeini’s cultural restrictions. Morality police invaded citizens’ private lives. The pro-Soviet Tudeh (communist) party backed the regime as it expropriated the wealthy, seized banks, and nationalized industries in order to turn Iran into a socialist state.

When Khomeini died at age 86 in June 1989, the regime managed a peaceful transfer of power to his successor Khamenei. Unorthodox and near-heretical though it was, the new Islamist ideology proved that it could survive the demise of its charismatic inventor. Yet the wave

courts, and media all are subject to the direct authority of the unelected supreme leader. The document also creates a system for filtering and vetoing candidates that perverts elections into a cooptation mechanism, useful for regulating competition within the ruling oligarchy but unable by design to produce a truly democratic result. The grand ayatollahs who opposed Khomeini’s politicized version of Islam were silenced, put under house arrest, or defrocked for promoting an “American Islam.” The split in clerical ranks over the religious legitimacy of Khomeini’s project would not

of extrajudicial killings that authorities launched as Khomeini's demise approached told another story. The slaughter went on until, a decade into Khamenei's rule, more than three-thousand political prisoners had been killed, along with several hundred intellectual dissidents and exiled oppositionists. If the Islamic revolution's enemies had been soundly defeated, why would the regime have been so anxious to wipe out poets and writers, scholars of ancient Iran, nonviolent and isolated nationalist leaders, Christian priests, and Baha'i citizens?

What connected the victims was that, claiming their freedom of conscience, they had openly rejected the ideal of *homo islamicus* put forth by the Islamic Republic. They could not defeat the regime politically, but their very existence suggested its ideological failure. This made them all the more subversive and "objectively" dangerous at a time when the regime was facing a twofold though still-invisible ideological crisis unfolding within its own power structure.

Hardly a decade after the Islamic Republic's founding, its revolutionary-socialist, Leninist ideological component was foundering. This was true not only because socialist economies do not deliver, but also because *glasnost* and *perestroika* in Mikhail Gorbachev's USSR had begun undermining the certitudes of the leftist ideologues who had been among Khomeini's supporters. In January 1989, Khomeini wrote a letter to Gorbachev (b. 1931), who had come to power in 1985. Khomeini warned him against resorting to Western remedies for Soviet communism's economic and social problems. The real objective, the ayatollah insisted, was "not to get trapped, while tearing down the walls of Marxist illusions, in the prison of the West and the Great Satan."⁷

Khomeini had never before felt compelled to write a top Soviet official with strictures against communism's war on God, but the prospect of the Soviets turning toward Western ways stirred the ayatollah out of his silence. Khomeini had no problem with communism denying people's liberty; his objection was only to denying it in the name of historical materialism. By the West and the Great Satan, Khomeini meant—at the deepest level—the principles of liberal democracy.

The Threat of Shia Reformism

The second and even graver strand in the Islamic Republic's twofold ideological crisis came not from beyond Iran's borders, but from within the regime's own precincts. Disillusioned revolutionary clerics and Islamist intellectuals drove this crisis. Traditionalists in Iran's influential Shia seminaries had long criticized Khomeini's ideology from the standpoint of customary Shia quietism, which held that clerics should avoid politics altogether. A key figure among those clerics who opposed Khomeini's theogico-political project from the start was the distinguished scholar Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (1923–99). The son of the founder of Qom

Seminary (Iran's largest) and a student of Khomeini but also of Western philosophy (with a special focus on the thought of Immanuel Kant). Haeri Yazdi exposed Khomeini's terminological sophistry and the invalidity of his religious arguments for absolute guardianship.⁸ Haeri

Shia liberal theology has the merit of forcing revolutionary Islamism to reveal its failure to produce an alternative theory of state and society capable of countering the liberal-democratic model.

Yazdi, inspired by his own classical understanding of Koranic teachings, restored the freely willing, autonomous individual as a necessary postulate both for Islam as a religion and for the foundations of the body politic.

His strong stand against Khomeini's political theory and other policies resulted in Haeri Yazdi's being placed under house arrest from 1980 to 1983. His objections to absolute guardianship were published in the West in Persian in 1995 and became available

to a much larger public. What distin-

guished Haeri Yazdi from the traditional quietist ayatollahs was that he took up the challenge of modernity and on the basis of Shia principles devised a democratic political theory.

Haeri Yazdi's modern theological refutation was not the only religious challenge to the state ideology. As of the late 1980s, a revolt was brewing among rank-and-file proponents of revolutionary political Islam. One such Islamist militant was Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), who in the early 1990s rejected the validity of the absolute-guardianship concept and even questioned the clergy's monopoly on interpreting religion.⁹ Soroush was not a cleric, but he had been a protagonist of the Islamic cultural revolution and was an important public intellectual with a large audience among Muslim students.

Another reformist theologian, the former revolutionary cleric Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959), argued that the Koran is not a "book of law" but a book of spiritual guidance. Muhammad's governing methods, claimed Kadivar, should be seen as suited to Muhammad's era—the time of the dawn of Islam fourteen centuries ago—but not necessarily to ours. To oppose the Khomeini regime's resentful and violent God, Kadivar coined the term "merciful Islam," which acknowledges the individual's complete freedom of thought and conscience, and prohibits any punishment in this world for blasphemy or apostasy.¹⁰

Another former proponent of political Islam, the dissident theologian Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari (b. 1936), offered a new way to read religious texts that defended modern individualism, democracy, and human rights. Regardless of their absence in Islamic sources, he writes, these concepts best serve the idea of natural justice, which according to Islamic teachings is the highest goal of the body politic.¹¹

The failure of Mohammad Khatami's reformist presidency (1997–2005), followed by the regime's brutal crushing of the 2009 Green Wave movement—the last collective effort to find an Islamism with a humane face—convinced Soroush, Kadivar, and many lesser-known clerics and intellectuals that the religious democracy they had believed in was an illusion. These figures differ on important theological issues, but they have reached the same views of humanity and of the role of religion in the public sphere. According to Islam properly understood, they contend, the realms of politics and religion are separate. God has created humans with autonomy and free will, made them his lieutenants on earth, and endowed them with sufficient natural reason to handle worldly affairs. If we define secularism as a viewpoint that is not antireligious, but that separates religion from the political sphere and calls on the state to be neutral in religious affairs, we are now witnessing the development of a liberal-secularist, democracy-friendly theology within Shia Islam.

While many clerics are openly apolitical, only a few are openly reformist. How can those few provide a counterweight to the regime's many ideologues with their ample funding and access to state media? Social media are widely used in Iran as elsewhere. Ideas circulate and they reach Shia seminarians. Both traditional quietists and modern reformers are recruiting within Iran's religious schools. Time and again since 2012, Supreme Leader Khamenei has warned against secularism in the seminaries and denounced forces that he says are trying to split these institutions from the government of the Islamic Republic. Other senior regime ayatollahs have spoken repeatedly of the influence that reformist Shia theology wields within the seminaries, and have deplored the fashion among young seminarians for professing a lack of interest in politics.

Liberal-secularist ideas and the controversies surrounding them reach beyond the precincts of religious schools. Refractory clerics preach liberal theology to the public. In January 2019, the Special Clerical Court defrocked Hasan Aghamiri, also known as the "Telegram cleric," for his use of that encrypted-messaging app. He received a two-year suspended prison sentence as well. His real offense was his use of his considerable preaching talents to promote Kadivar's "merciful Islam." Aghamiri has about two-hundred-thousand followers on Telegram and 2.3 million on Instagram. Merciful Islam is important enough for Supreme Leader Khamenei to have attacked it directly. In an 11 July 2015 address, Khamenei warned university students: "Sometimes slogans are chanted that appear to be Islamic while their content is not Islamic." Merciful Islam is one such expression, he continued. "The term merciful Islam is a keyword for notions rooted in liberalism, that is what is called liberalism in the West." In the same speech, Khamenei associated "merciful Islam" with "American values," meaning those consecrated in the Declaration of Independence and promoted by "George Washington, his acolytes, and successors."¹²

The essence of the regime's version of Islam is to negate the autonomous individual, while the essence of "American Islam" is to affirm the individual and the individual's free will. Shia liberal theology has the merit of forcing revolutionary Islamism to reveal its failure to produce an alternative theory of state and society capable of countering the liberal-democratic model.

Why are the seminaries distancing themselves from the regime and paying attention to a handful of liberal theologians? It is because the seminaries worry that Iranians are losing faith in Islam. This disaffection has been growing since the inception of the Islamic Republic. In 2000, an official survey found that 75 percent of all Iranians and 86 percent of students did not say their prayers. By 2009, half the country's mosques had become inactive.¹³

The Rise of Other Beliefs

Iranian society has not been waiting for Shia theology to reform itself. In a highly subversive yet largely unnoticed form of dissidence, considerable numbers of people have been choosing other spiritual alternatives. Various brands of mysticism—some traditional and some modern, some Islamic and some not—have been attracting many followers.

As the mosques empty, Sufi Muslim houses of prayer are filling up. The regime's intelligence services warn that disillusioned former Hezbollah militants are attracted to Sufi denominations.¹⁴ Iran's only openly active Sufi order, that of the Gonabadi Dervishes (it claims four-million adherents), has been subject to violent crackdowns since the mid-1990s. Their website (*majzooban.org*) promotes the teachings of the reformist theologian and human-rights advocate Shabestari. The closure and destruction of the Gonabadis' prayer houses; the arrest and persecution of their spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh (b. 1927); and the jailings, beatings, and executions to which Gonabadi adherents have been subjected reveal a regime that is lashing out as it loses its most passionate followers to a spiritual and nonlegalistic type of Islam.

Seeing people abandon state-approved orthodoxy for a traditional form of spiritual Islam with a long history in Iran is not the only challenge that the Islamic Republic is facing on the religious front. Other Iranians are leaving Islam altogether. Iran today is witnessing the highest rate of Christianization in the world.¹⁵ Remarks by new converts suggest that they seek a loving and peaceful God to replace the vengeful, violent God promoted by the regime.¹⁶ Executions and extrajudicial killings of Christian pastors, restrictions on church activities, and the arrest and persecution of new converts have not stopped the developing trend of conversions to Christianity.

In 1979, the number of Iranian Christians from a Muslim background was around five-hundred.¹⁷ Precise numbers are hard to come by, but

as of 2005, Christian-demographics expert Patrick Johnstone estimated the number of Christian converts in Iran coming from a Shia Muslim background at about forty-thousand.¹⁸ Today, just a decade and a half later, the total number of Christians in Iran (including converts as well as members of traditional Christian minorities) is estimated at close to a million people out of a total population of about 83 million.¹⁹

Statistics on those who have simply turned away from organized religion—whether opting for a general, unaffiliated form of theism, for agnosticism, or for atheism—are even harder to come by than numbers on Christian converts. As of November 2019, the “Iranian Atheists & Agnostics” Facebook page had about 192,000 followers. Although we lack statistics on Muslim-to-Baha’i conversions in Iran, the regime’s incessant persecution of the outlawed, peaceful Baha’i minority may signal fear of this religion’s appeal. Now with several million adherents around the world, the Baha’i Faith is native to Iran, having begun among Shia dissidents in nineteenth-century Persia. In sharp contrast to what the Islamic Republic preaches, Baha’i beliefs affirm gender equality, the separation of religious from political authority, and a democratic and clergy-free organization of religion.

Iranians’ fascination with Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia, is yet another worrying phenomenon for the regime. The Islamic Republic funds seminars and publications to counter the trend among Iranians to look for their national identity amid the glories of pre-Islamic Persia. Near the end of October 2016, thousands of people gathered in south-central Iran at the tomb of Cyrus the Great (ca. 600–530 B.C.E.), the founder of the first Persian Empire. There, they celebrated the unofficial annual holiday that honors him by chanting such slogans as “Iran is our country, Cyrus is our father.” A senior regime cleric denounced the assembly participants, asking how they could dare to “gather around Cyrus’s tomb and chant the same slogans [about Cyrus] that we chant about our supreme leader.”²⁰ Since then, the regime has blocked the annual tomb gathering.

Khomeini abolished Iran’s existing legislature, replacing the National Consultative Assembly and Senate with the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the dozen-member Guardian Council. The change of adjectives was no afterthought: Khomeini ranked Iranian national identity well behind Islamic identity. Iranians who seek to reclaim that national identity are yet another indicator of the regime’s ideological crisis.

Rejecting the Islamic Republic

The crisis revealed itself in the streets during December 2017 and January 2018, when protests spread across eighty Iranian cities. Imams in charge of Friday prayers had their offices, the regime’s propaganda headquarters, set on fire. People shouted slogans denouncing the regime’s

handling of the nation's social, economic, and cultural problems. Demonstrators made clear their full rejection of the regime's ideology with slogans such as "Death to *velayat-e faqih*," "The Leader has become God while the people beg," and "Our enemy is here, they lie when they say it is America." Demands for a secular republic or even the return of the monarchy were also heard. In February 2018, a massive street confrontation erupted between security forces and Gonabadi Sufis protesting Ta-bandeh's house arrest and the arbitrary detentions of other Sufis.

Since 1979, women have been challenging totalitarian rule. They have suffered fines, insults, floggings, jail terms, and even death because they have insisted on their dignity and rights. Some now openly defy the regime's dress code, removing their headscarves despite the security forces. By casting aside the veil, they show that they do not accept the regime's claimed authority either to interpret religion for them or to impose a religious code on them. In the streets of Iran, these women embody the ideas of a free conscience and the principled separation of religious from civil authority.

Noting where such radical words and deeds point, and heeding popular demands for an end to religious rule, Iranian defenders of civil and human rights have sought to give clear voice to the movement. After the 2017–18 protest wave, fifteen high-profile dissidents (some in jail or exile) issued a statement calling for a popular referendum to secure a peaceful transition to a "secular parliamentary democratic regime." In June 2019, fourteen rights activists invited the people to demand Khamenei's resignation and a new constitution. In August 2019, fourteen activists on behalf of women's rights blamed the regime for its discriminatory laws against women, and demanded a secular democracy. They too addressed not the authorities but the people of Iran. Soon after, fourteen female activists in exile signed a statement in support of Iran's women, vowing to make their voices heard around the world. Since then, Iranian netizens—Persian remains the third most-used language online—have launched a support campaign called "I am the fifteenth one."

Taken together, the religious and ideological developments briefly surveyed here suggest that tectonic cultural and ideological shifts are occurring within Iran, and have been occurring since well before the latest wave of protests. The regime's only response, however, even as the country is changing under its nose, is harsh repression. This may suppress angry citizens for a time, but it also intensifies their anger and pushes them toward behavior that may be less visible but will by that same token be more radical and subversive.

The recurrence of widespread popular demonstrations, such as the protest wave that was going on at the time of this writing in late 2019, is a symptom of Iranian society's radical estrangement from the ideology and the regime founded by Ayatollah Khomeini. What happened at official Friday prayers on 16 March 2018 in Isfahan, Iran's third-larg-

est city, cast this estrangement into high relief. Congregants—many of them farmers infuriated by government inaction in the face of drought—turned away from the regime-sponsored preacher and chanted, “Backs to the enemy, faces to the motherland.”²¹ Openly calling the regime “the enemy” and appealing by contrast to “the motherland” is one more sign that the people of Iran are coming to view the Islamic Republic as a foreign occupier imposing an alien ideology.

For the last four decades, Iran has been the crucible of the world’s third major ideological challenge (after fascism and communism) to liberal democracy. In 1906, Iran’s modern political era began with the Constitutional Revolution, which can be understood as an effort to import a protodemocratic worldview into a traditional tribal monarchy with an established clergy. That project, though it drew some religious support from within Iran, eventually failed. It gave way first to the Pahlavi autocracy and then, when that was overthrown at the end of the 1970s, to the Islamic Republic.

The current turn by many Iranians toward alternatives to the Islamic Republic’s harsh Islamism, such as liberal Shi’ism, Sufism, the Baha’i Faith, Christianity, and agnosticism or atheism, signals that Iran may now be on a new course. This course is taking it toward becoming the first Muslim-majority society to weave into its spiritual, social, and intellectual fabric the principled separation of religion and the state characteristic of the liberal-democratic worldview—and to do so by a process that comes more fully “from within” than from outside. Ironically, the Islamic Republic itself has been the driver of that process, impelling a pathbreaking democratic response to its totalitarian claims. If the process succeeds—and signs both dramatic and subtle suggest that it is succeeding in the hearts and minds of Iranians as they demand freedom from the brutal rule of Khomeini and his successors—then it may lend new force to the liberal-democratic cause worldwide.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Jérémie Langlois for his help with research in the preparation of this essay.

1. On 1 February 1979, Khomeini flew back to Iran from his exile in France. On March 1, he said: “What the nation wants is an Islamic republic; not merely a republic; nor does it want a democratic republic or a democratic Islamic republic. It wants an Islamic republic. . . . This form [the democratic form] is a Western notion and we do not want a Western form.” On March 9, he added: “Do not accept those who, wielding their venomous pens, bring up such things as ‘national’ and ‘democratic’ (systems) and write against Islam. We want an Islamic (republic); the nation wants Islam. . . . Our nation unanimously wants an Islamic republic.” *Sahifeh-ye Imam: An Anthology of Imam Khomeini’s Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters, Volume 6, January 29–April 12, 1979* (Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, 2014), 244, 309, <http://staticsml.imam-khomeini.ir/en/File/NewsAttachment/2014/1700-Sahifeh-ye%20Imam-Vol%206.pdf>.

2. The Preamble to the 1979 Constitution states that in addition to the mission of national defense, the Islamic Republic's armed forces "will be responsible . . . also for fulfilling the ideological mission of *jihad* in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world." See the unofficial English translation at www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html. In the 1980s, Majlis (Parliament) speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said that Iran had "no intention of hiding the export of Islamic revolution. The Islamic revolution does not confine its true and noble nature to geographical borders." He is quoted in Itamar Rabinovich and Haim Shaked, eds., *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume IX, 1984–85* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1987), 151.

3. On 3 February 1979, Khomeini said: "Islam considers all the facets of human life. . . . Islam is a religion of politics; it includes a government." *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, 6:41.

4. On 1 March 1979, Khomeini said: "The West had humiliated us, crushed our morale and made us Westernized. We will eradicate this Westernization; together with the Iranian nation and its support, we will erase all traces of Westernization, all its corrupt vestiges—not its civilized aspects—all its corrupt morals, all contemptible Western songs. We will create a 'Mohammedan' country." *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, 6:242–43.

5. The role of religion and the clergy in politics has never been taken as something "obvious" in Shia theology. The idea of handing supreme political authority to a clerical guardian was Khomeini's own, unprompted by any precedent. See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 268–70. See also Mohsen Kadivar, *Andishe Siyasi dar Eslam* (Political thinking in Islam), vol. 1, *Nazariyyeh-ha-ye Dawlatt dar Fiqh-e Shi'a* (Theories of the state in Shia canon law) (1st ed., Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, 1998), 24–25. Finally, Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 156, notes that "doctrinal objections to the *velayat-e faqih* have been voiced by the Grand Ayatollahs Kho'i, Qomi, and Shari'at-madri. . . . and by Ayatollahs Baha' al-Din Mahallati, Sadeq Ruhani, Ahmad Zanjani, Ali Tehrani, and Morteza Ha'eri Yazdi."

6. On 5 February 1979, Khomeini said: "He whom I have designated [meaning Mehdi Bazargan, as provisional premier] is to be made obeisance to; the nation must obey him. This government is no ordinary one; it is a canonical government. Opposition to this government is opposition to the canon laws and is tantamount to rebellion against religion. Rebellion against religion is meted [sic] with a heavy punishment in our laws and jurisprudence. I warn those who might entertain such an idea to sabotage [this government] and, God forbid, stage an uprising against this government; I declare that the punishment of those elements in Islamic jurisprudence is very heavy. Rebellion against this government is rebellion against God." *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, 6:54.

7. Khomeini in fact had never before sent a written message to any foreign leader, and would never send another (he died in early June 1989). The letter, dated 1 January 1989, may be found in *Sahifeh-ye Imam: An Anthology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters, Volume 21, March 21, 1988–June 5, 1989* (Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2014), 217–27.

8. See Fatimah Jaffer, "Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, An Insight into His Intellectual and Political Philosophy," Center for Islamic Shi'a Studies Research Series/04, February 2018, <http://shia.studies.org/docs/pdfs/mehdi-haeri-yazdi---an-insight-into-his-intellectual-and-political-philosophy>.

9. On Soroush, see Valla Vakili, "Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush," Occasional Paper Series, No.2, Council on Foreign Relations, January 1997.

10. See Mohsen Kadivar as quoted in English by Mahmoud Sadri, "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar," *International*

Journal of Politics, Culture and Society 15 (Winter 2001): 265, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.485.7599&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. For a selection of Kadivar's writings in English, see en.kadivar.com.

11. See Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, "Why Islam and Democracy Go Well Together," interview with Jan Kuhlmann, *Qantara*, 6 July 2012, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-mohammad-mojtahed-shabestari-why-islam-and-democracy-go-well-together>.

12. Khamenei's speech appears in the original Persian at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=30255>. The translation here is by Ladan Boroumand.

13. Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 313.

14. In a 1996 speech at Bu-Ali Sina University in Hamedan, Iran, then-Deputy Intelligence Minister Saeed Emami said: "One of those [classes of anti-Islamic Republic dissident groups] is religio-denominational. For instance, the dervishes' thoughts, which are horrific ideas and are growing in the country. There are very corrupt people among them, and we have arrested many of them. . . . They were attracting in particular Hezbollahi youth." For the original audio of this speech, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y61TehH_9GI. The passage quoted here was translated by Ladan Boroumand.

15. In 2014, Mark Bradley estimated that conversions to Christianity in Iran were growing at an annual rate of 19.6 percent. See Bradley, *Too Many to Jail: The Story of Iran's New Christians* (Oxford: Monarch, 2014), 36. See also Stoyan Zaimov, "Iran Is Witnessing 'One of Fastest Growing Church Movements,' but Christians Face Intense Persecution," *Christian Post*, 16 October 2018, www.christianpost.com/news/iran-is-witnessing-one-of-fastest-growing-church-movements-but-christians-face-intense-persecution.html.

16. Mustafa Akyol, "How Islamism Drives Muslims to Convert," *New York Times*, 25 March 2015. www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/opinion/islam-conversion.html.

17. Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th ed. (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2010), 465.

18. Duane Alexander Miller, "Power, Personalities and Politics: The Growth of Iranian Christianity Since 1979," *Mission Studies* 32 (April 2015): 71.

19. For a 2014 statistical estimate of Muslim-background Christian believers in Iran as numbering 100,000 to 370,000, see Bradley, *Too Many to Jail*, ch.1. In 2015, Duane Alexander Miller and Patrick Johnstone estimated the number of BMBs ("believers in Christ from a Muslim background") in Iran at 100,000 to 500,000. See Miller and Johnstone, "Believers in Christ from a Muslim Background: A Global Census," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11, Article 10 (2015): 8, www.religionjournal.com/pdf/ijrr11010.pdf. As of 2019, Open Doors USA, an NGO dedicated to opposing the persecution of Christians, estimates Iran's total Christian population (not all of whom are BMBs, since historically Christian minorities have long existed in Iran) at 800,000. See www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/iran.

20. "Iranians Arrested After Celebrating Ancient Persian King Cyrus the Great," Reuters, 31 October 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-rights-history-idUSKBN12V174.

21. "Isfahan Farmers Protest and Mock Friday Prayers," Radio Farda, 17 March 2018, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/isfahan-farmers-friday-prayers/29105705.html>.