



## Cultural Heterogeneity In Post-Revolutionary Iran

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IN JANUARY 2018, a wave of protests rippled across Iran, marking the first civilian upheaval of any note since the Green Movement demonstrations following the disputed presidential election of 2009. The latest protests began over economic problems, such as poverty and rising prices for consumer goods, but they soon grew to include social and political demands, including objections to the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policies. Unlike the 2009 protests, which affected mainly major cities, this round spread to eighty-six cities in thirty-one provinces, although it drew fewer participants overall than its predecessor events nine years earlier.<sup>1</sup> The popular reluctance to take part was likely spurred by the government's brutal suppression of the Green Movement and its tight political grip on Iran's larger cities.



Among the proposed explanations for the recent protests, one focuses on economic grievances, arguing that poverty, inequality, and corruption are the main drivers.<sup>2</sup> Yet this case fails to explain why more than 80 percent of those arrested were younger than thirty, and why attacks also targeted religious centers such as mosques and Friday prayers sites (*mosalla*).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, an examination of the geography of the protests shows that most occurred in city centers and other places inhabited by the middle classes. For example, in Qom, the protests were mainly concentrated in the middle-class Salarieh area, not poorer districts such as Nirugah.

Immediately after the street demonstrations were put down, women initiated a subtle but powerful form of protest by removing their head scarves, tying them to sticks, and waving them for all to see. Over the ensuing two-week period, twenty-nine women were arrested for this act of defiance, according to Iranian police.<sup>4</sup> Yet the challenge was resurrected yet again on International Women's Day, March 8, when dozens of Iranian women were arrested for protesting against the general suppression of women.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another development since the January 2018 protests involves the Iranian government's suppression of Darvish Gonabadi, referring to a dervish order from the Gonabad area of Razavi Khorasan province. While friction between the order and the Islamic Republic dates to around 2005, the dynamic has opened into a full-blown confrontation in recent months, resulting in the arrest of more than three hundred Sufis, at least one of whom was killed in prison.<sup>6</sup>

In all such assessments, while the economic angle cannot be denied, the protests can be viewed through a sociocultural lens, reflecting a gap between state and society as reflected in the imposition of lifestyle choices by the former on the latter. Relatedly, Iran has historically had enough fault lines to warrant the label of a "mosaic society." These fault lines, however, remained mostly inactive until the modernization program enacted during the Pahlavi era (1925–78). Social complexities have thereafter become more evident, intensified in areas such as gender and religion by the policies of the Islamic Republic, beginning in 1979. In the context of an aging Islamic Republic, cleavages are also apparent along class and generational lines.

While scholars have written previously on ethno-religious diversity in Iran, this study argues that the sociocultural gap just alluded to constitutes a central fault line in

the country, to the point that it is rapidly undermining the Islamic Republic politically. The schism, meanwhile, can be understood in the divergent predilections of different Iranian subcultures—principally, religious-Hezbollahi versus hybrid-postmodern. For the religious-traditional class, religion indeed forms the central plank, defining all elements of social, personal, public, and private life. For those taking the hybrid-postmodern route, by comparison, greater acceptance of cultural and moral relativism prevails, even as these Iranians often value and observe religion. To them, liberty and freedom are simply as important as religion.

This gap is widened and reinforced by that between secularism and Islamism within Iran. In this contest, the state firmly supports the religious and Hezbollahi (Arzeshi/Basiji) lifestyle, with the latter terms referring to the bloc that has supported Iran's Supreme Leaders, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian regime. While adherents may come from different social and economic backgrounds as well as ethnicities, they nevertheless follow versions of the same lifestyle. Yet the countervailing emergence of the hybrid-postmodern bloc, and its acceptance among a majority of Iranians, can be seen to reflect the regime's failure to build a pure Islamic society and culture embraced by all citizens. The ascendance of the hybrid-postmodern lifestyle also explains the victory of relative moderates such as President Hassan Rouhani in recent elections.

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## Social Cleavage Theory

Every society has fault lines that can be measured according to attributes such as religion, ethnicity, class, and generation. Further means of classification include "segment" (racial or religious), culture (traditional or modern), and economics (class).<sup>7</sup> While some of these gaps are historical, others are structural, meaning that they have arisen as a result of specific social and political developments. Moreover, while some of these cleavages are dormant, others are active, awakened by catalysts like rapid modernization and globalization. In the course of history, a potential fault line will transform into an active one when members of a group become conscious of their distinctive characteristics and willing to act based on those distinctions.

Some active cleavages crosscut and, therefore, neutralize each other, while others coincide and reinforce

each other. In a democratic system, coinciding societal fault lines can become political and lead to the creation of a new political party, while in authoritarian regimes they can become security threats and lead to state failure. As exhibited in Iran, and suggested thus far in this paper, social gaps can become political issues.

## **Iran Context**

Since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, scholars have written extensively about historical cleavages in the country, and domestic politicians have warned of the potential associated risks to the continuity of the Islamic Republic.<sup>8</sup> In a recent speech, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, warned about activating religious, geographic, social, linguistic, and ethno-religious fault lines, given the purported attempts by Iran's enemies to exploit these differences, especially ethno-religious ones, thereby undermining the Islamic Republic.<sup>9</sup>

In Iran, a multiethnic, multilingual country, only about 60 percent of the populace is Persian speaking, while the remainder is Azeri (16%), Kurdish (10%), Lur (6%), Arab (2%), and Baluch (2%).<sup>10</sup> Whereas Persian speakers mainly inhabit the country's central regions, non-Persian speakers tend to be spread along the often-less-developed border areas. Some of these ethnic groups are Shia, while others follow another branch of Islam or another religion. Altogether, some 98 percent of Iranians are Muslim, predominantly Shia (90 percent), along with populations of especially Armenian Christians and members of the Bahai faith and much smaller populations of Zoroastrians and Jews.<sup>11</sup>

Despite warnings regarding the threat to national unity posed by ethno-sectarian cleavages, and despite a weakened revolutionary regime and a hostile international environment wherein international actors have supported separatist movements, outside groups have not been able to seriously challenge the survival of the Islamic Republic.

In looking at Iran from a broader historical perspective, some argue that it is an old nation-state with a deep, contiguous history, as contrasted with other Middle East states that were created after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> For these states, sporadic ethno-religious revolts were driven mainly by enmity from regional and international powers. Such enmity also figured in attempts to destabilize Iran, such as Soviet support for the short-lived Republic

of Mahabad, a Kurdish entity, and the Azerbaijan People's Government, both after the Second World War. In these two cases, as soon as the Soviet Union withdrew its support, the movements collapsed easily.

From the perspective of social cleavage theory, some contend that the socio-ethnic and religious gaps in Iran are crosscutting and therefore neutralizing, with large-scale intermarriage and other forms of integration having a similarly neutralizing effect. For example, in the instance of Iranian Azeris, Shia Muslims who speak a Turkic dialect, a shared religion can be seen to cancel out the ethnic distinction with Persians. Moreover, widespread intermarriage between Persians and Azeris, and a prominent role in politics and the economy, has made Azeris the most successful minority ethnic group within Iranian society. For centuries, Iranian rulers came from the Azerbaijan area, including during the Safavid and Qajar Dynasties. Even the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is a native Azeri speaker. In other cases, ethno-religious differences reinforce each other, leading to stronger group identification outside the Iranian mainstream. This is true for Iranian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluch, Sunni groups that inhabit the west, southwest, northeast, and southeast of the country, respectively.

Beyond simply reinforcing ethno-religious identity, the lack of socioeconomic development, along with political suppression, has led in extreme cases to the emergence of militant groups such as the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), in Kurdistan province, and Jundallah ("Soldiers of God"), in Sistan and Baluchestan. But these groups, despite support from regional and international powers, have not succeeded in undermining the Islamic Republic, for reasons including the regime's pervasive political control.

For the regime, "divide and rule" has served as one effective strategy for controlling minority groups. For example, in cities like Urmia, where Kurdish and Azeri communities coexist, the regime uses this policy to effectively play the groups against each other. Further diluting group identity are the many clans within each, many with distinctive characteristics. Iranian Baluch, in particular, comprise more than 150 different clans and families, some of which the regime coopts to achieve its own ends.<sup>13</sup> Also, the interests pursued within a given group are hardly uniform, with some members identifying with the center of the country for various reasons, while others ally with the periphery. The Islamic Republic, for its

part, has sought to alter the ethno-religious balance by adopting repopulation policies, such as encouraging moves by Persian speakers and Shia to Sistan and Baluchestan province and Khuzestan province.<sup>14</sup>

Through the Basij, Iran's civilian militia, the Islamic Republic has successfully recruited and organized people from various ethno-religious groups and used them to silence and control others (e.g., the Baluch). This has occurred, for example, in Sistan and Baluchestan as well as Kurdistan, where the regime has perceived security threats in ethno-religious minorities. As a result, the Islamic Republic has implemented, in these provinces, a "People's Sustainable Security Plan" (*Amniyat-e Paydar-e Mardomi*), a program rooted in granting security responsibility to tribal elders and other local actors. According to this plan, local Basij members, who are intimately knowledgeable about the terrain and its inhabitants, are given authority over the rest of the population.

In facilitating local administration, the regime can effectively stave off ethno-religious threats. A possible perk here for the central government entails sympathy from minority groups against their more strident members, wherein the regime could be cast as a force against terrorism. Such dynamics could, in turn, boost nationalism and the regime's popular legitimacy. In a worst-case scenario, sectarian areas could establish some level of autonomy in their border enclaves, yet without posing a threat to the central government.

### **Tradition vs. Modernity**

While many scholars have focused on ethno-religious gaps in Iran, this paper argues that the cleavage between tradition and modernity—defined as a "historical gap by which the society is divided into two parts with different lifestyles and political attitudes"—is, in fact, even more important, given that it encompasses all facets of society and politics.<sup>15</sup> This break, as noted earlier, emerged during the Pahlavi period, beginning in 1925, when the shah sought to Westernize, modernize, and secularize his country using a top-down approach. This campaign elicited massive discontent from among traditional forces within Iranian society.

Following decades of attempted modernization, the Islamic Revolution was perceived by many as a backlash by the forces of tradition. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has tried to reverse the modernization policies advanced

by the shah's monarchy, seeking to de-Westernize and desecularize Iranian society and politics. In the 1980s, favor generally tilted toward these anti-modern forces. Yet despite his anti-Western discourse, Ayatollah Khomeini embraced policies and delivered unorthodox fatwas on a wide range of social issues, from women to the arts, that unintentionally encouraged a modernized form of "Muslimness." He even issued fatwas suggesting permission for sex reassignment surgery.<sup>16</sup> In fact, while Khomeini was vigorously pushing to Islamize society, he actually paved the way for the later secularizing of Islamic jurisprudence through support for *maslaha*, a doctrine that gave priority to the state's expediency over sharia and the religious sector. Yet even as his fatwas on topics such as women's education were progressive compared to existing norms in the *ulama* (community of Muslim religious scholars), and sought to reconcile religion with modern realities, traditionalists have remained ascendant in Iranian seminaries.

By the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, new political elites were emerging in Iran, however, reinvigorating the case for modernity. In fact, the Islamic Republic's education and health policies have paradoxically accelerated the modernization of Iranian society.<sup>17</sup> Expansion of general and higher education throughout the country has led to rapid modernization. For example, the number of students enrolled in Iranian universities jumped from 67,286 in 1970 to 4,367,901 in 2014.<sup>18</sup> Globalization and the introduction of information and communication technologies have further muddled the tradition-modernity gap, touching people from all social classes and societal blocs—this time much more quickly and profoundly than during the Pahlavi era. Demographic changes, namely a growing youth population, have also played a role.

One associated development, introduced earlier, has been the emergence of different Iranian subcultures, some of which create strains for the regime, even possibly throwing into doubt its stability and ultimate survival. On this front, the youth population of Iran's urban areas is preeminent. Indeed, a study of modern Iranian history shows urban youths to have played an important role in episodes of social and political change.

Mass political protests, in particular, have posed a repeated threat to the country's various political regimes. In these, young Iranians have been central. To this end, some scholars have labeled Iran a revolutionary country, given the disproportionate number of

revolutions and rebellions it has experienced, as compared to other Muslim-majority countries and developing nations.<sup>19</sup> Nearly all these movements began in cities rather than rural areas, a rule that applies to the 2018 demonstrations.<sup>20</sup> From this point of view, urban transformations can perhaps be perceived as more important than rural developments when predicting the future course of Iranian leadership. Furthermore, sociocultural components of the urban-rural divide deserve close attention.

Notwithstanding the emphasis here on the urban scene, expanded information and communication technologies have reached people living even in remote areas. Relatedly, a study on the generational transformation in Iranian villages shows that youth lifestyles differ dramatically from lifestyles of older generations, resembling instead those of youths in urban areas.<sup>21</sup>

Given its self-identification as an ideological regime, the Islamic Republic has sought to Islamize the production and consumption of symbolic content and everyday activity, embodied in the notion of an “Islamic Iranian lifestyle.”<sup>22</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei has pushed relentlessly for the re-Islamization of Iranian culture by promoting such a lifestyle. For him, “imitating the west on the issue of lifestyle, which includes architecture, civil life, human environment, and social relationships, is the goal of global imperialism to subdue Iranian people.”<sup>23</sup> That is why, in his view, implementing an Islamic lifestyle is the responsibility of the Islamic establishment.

Yet such attempts at Islamization have ultimately failed in the face of a more modern, diverse Iranian society. As noted earlier, one prominent split involves adherence to the religious-Hezbollahi lifestyle versus the hybrid-postmodern one, as depicted in figure 1. For the first, religious purism can be viewed as the central tenet, while for the second, a principal end goal is the pursuit of enjoyment, even if these Iranians do observe and genuinely believe in Islam. In this alternative lifestyle, Islam is just no longer the focal point.

Within a lifestyle that can be termed “religious-Hezbollahi,” two main subcultures are identifiable: Hezbollahi-Arzeshi and traditional. While these two have much in common regarding social and cultural values, they are politically distigushed by their support, or lack thereof, of *velayat-e faqih* and overall clerical involvement in politics. Indeed, whereas the traditional group is apolitical, favoring a separation between religion and politics, Hezbollahi-Arzeshi adherents actively

support the Islamic regime and its leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, as a representative of the Hidden Imam, a salvational figure in Twelver Shia Islam, the branch predominant in Iran. They therefore believe obeying the Supreme Leader is mandatory.<sup>24</sup> For the traditionalists, by comparison, traditionalist grand ayatollahs such as Ali al-Sistani, based in Najaf, Iraq, hold much appeal for their distance from nationalist politics.

In return for supporting the regime, the Hezbollahi-Arzeshi subculture—which also includes the Basij—receives regime support.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, while the Hezbollah and Basij components of this triad have operated since the dawn of the Islamic Republic, the Arzeshi (“valued”) represents a new sub-bloc, with the term coined in response to the growth of the 2009 Green Movement, and referring to Iran’s conservative camp.<sup>26</sup> Regarding Hezbollah, as Shirin Saeidi has written, the group “does fall within the loose right-wing coalition due to its conservative understandings of religion...[and] due to its commitment to the absolute rule of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.”<sup>27</sup>

While the Islamic Republic concomitantly promotes religious traditionalism and the Hezbollahi-Arzeshi lifestyle, viewing the latter as an ideal model,<sup>28</sup> more and more Iranians, as noted, are taking the hybrid-postmodern route. Prominent subcultures within the hybrid-postmodernists include Aryahi (Persian chauvinists) and “rich kids.” Of these, the former seek to recognize Iran’s deep historic traditions, honoring Cyrus the Great and celebrating Persian holidays instead of Muslim (or Western) ones. Also known as “Kouroushiha” (lit. Supporters of Cyrus), this subculture gradually entered the mainstream about a decade ago. Adherents observe Cyrus the Great Day (October 29), when they visit the leader’s tomb. The participation of thousands of Iranians in this ceremony in 2016 so unnerved Islamic Republic leaders that they unofficially banned it and imposed de facto martial law in Fars province, where the tomb is located. In recent years, Aryahi ceremonies such as Govehgi, a wedding rite in which couples exchange Persian vows rather than the Arabic *Nakeh*, have likewise gained in popularity.<sup>29</sup> Another marker of the Aryahi lifestyle is use of a Persian calendar rather than a Muslim/official one.

The rich kids, meanwhile, are avid followers of a modern, Western lifestyle. This includes participation in traditions such as Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and even Christmas. As their moniker implies, they live extravagantly, wearing brand-name clothes and flaunting their

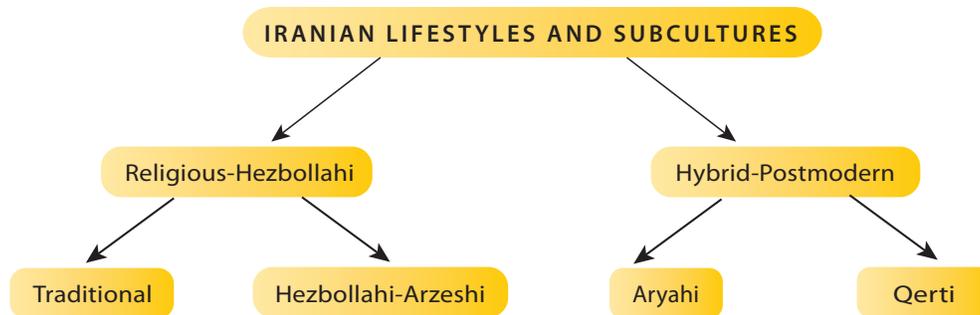


FIGURE 1

wealth, including on social media. They are also known to consume alcohol and, in some cases, recreational drugs.<sup>30, 31</sup> Perhaps more generously, they are typically cosmopolitan, and more pragmatic and individualistic relative to their fellow Iranians.<sup>32</sup>

The rich kids of Tehran in particular have drawn heavy attention from scholars and the news media, despite their relatively small numbers.<sup>33</sup> The Hezbollahi camp mocks the rich kids bitterly, calling them “Qerti,” a derogatory term with resonances such as foppish, effeminate, vapid, or inane.<sup>34</sup> Especially in reference to young men, the term connotes emasculation and shallowness.

### **Trends in Iranian Religious Observance and Lifestyle**

As this text has shown so far, compared to the Hezbollahi-religious lifestyle, the hybrid-postmodern orientation is more focused on materialistic values and consumption. Yet despite demands by the clerical establishment that Iranians “resist consumerism, and therefore individualism, pluralism, hedonism and romanticism through ‘self-thematizing Islamic religion,’” most Iranians have accepted both Islam and consumerism and are pursuing hedonism, leisure, and gratification while simultaneously remaining mindful of otherworldly asceticism.<sup>35</sup>

Needless to say, the distinction between these overarching subcultures includes many shades of gray. While, for example, the two share much in use of social media, the codes they follow in dress and social relationships differ unmistakably. The hybrid class, for its part, is characterized by apparently contradictory prac-

tices, such as mourning for Imam Hussein, the first Shia Imam, during the Ashura festival while also marking the Western holidays noted earlier.<sup>36</sup> Religion indeed represents an area of sharp difference. For the religious-Hezbollahi class, true Islam is reflected in the views of the *ulama*. Without a *marja*—a high-ranking Shia cleric who serves as a source of emulation—true Muslim observance is impossible.

By contrast, those subscribing to the hybrid-postmodern lifestyle tend to view Islam in personal terms, separating it from their social and political lives. Correspondingly, most people in this category believe clerics should restrict their activities to the religious sphere and its rituals, while refraining from interference in social or political issues in which they lack expertise. Some even hold the more controversial view of “Islam minor clergy,” wherein any layperson can answer his or her own religious and spiritual questions.<sup>37</sup> Conjoined with the rise of hybrid-postmodernism has been a dramatic decline in political and social religiosity, such as attendance at Friday prayer or mosque.<sup>38</sup> An increasing number, in turn, eschew following official clerical lines on Islam, instead leaning on their own personal interpretations. According to one Iranian woman from the country’s rural south, she and her like-minded peers “still have Islam in their hearts,” but “they no longer [seek] out local clerics for guidance on personal matters.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike many traditionalists, such individuals see being Iranian as equally important to being Muslim.

The move away from belief in the clergy has various explanations. For starters, many Iranians resent the religious establishment for failing to deliver on promises to improve daily life in the country. Discouraged clerics in Qom thus report: “Clergymen have no role in the

hearts and minds of people as they did 38 years ago.” And: “People don’t even answer us when we say hello... It’s like they’re not on speaking terms with us.”<sup>40</sup>

The religious-modernist rift is evident in many sectors throughout Iranian society:

### RISE OF NON-MUSLIM FAITHS

The trend toward more-intuitive Muslim belief has resulted in the rising popularity of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, whose Iranian branch is known as Irfan. Among Iranian youths, the Gonabadi dervishes are one popular Sufi group, a status that has led to their intensified suppression by the Islamic regime since 2005. One related entity is Irfan-e Halgheh, which was formed by Mohammad Ali Taheri and espouses the notion of inter-universal mysticism. The precepts embraced by the sect grew so popular among urban youths that the group was dissolved by the Iranian security services. Several other spiritual institutions have emerged as well, attracting thousands of Iranians who feel exhausted by political Islam. In February 2018, the Islamic Republic executed Karim Zargar, a television broadcast manager who led a local branch of the Eckankar spiritual group that had hundreds of followers.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to mysticism, the widening presence of religions such as the Bahai faith, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity signal rising secularization. Home-based churches operated by converts from Islam are a tell-tale indication of the de-Islamization of Iranian society. Meanwhile, Zoroastrianism is especially popular among the Aryahi and urban youths, notwithstanding a ban within the faith on proselytizing. Aryahi and others see Zoroastrianism as truly Iranian, having long predated the arrival of Islam to the country. They also value its emphasis on happiness, as opposed to Islam, which they see as an Arab religion based on mourning and sadness (*azadari*).

### NAMING OF CHILDREN

The choosing of names also distinguishes the religious-Hezbollahi class from its hybrid-postmodern counterpart. Thus, classic Islamic names such as Muhammad and Ali for boys and Fatima and Zahra for girls are very popular among the religious class. For the hybrid-postmodernists, old Iranian names or “hybrid” names such as Nazanin-Zahra or Muhammad-Arsham have gained traction.<sup>42</sup> Some parents even use names that sound (somewhat) Western, such as Tamara.<sup>43</sup> Almost

four decades after the 1979 revolution, choosing modern or authentic Iranian, Persian or ethnic names has become part of the struggle to shape identity, mainly in opposition to that enforced by the state.

### WEARING THE VEIL

The hijab represents another field on which conflicting worldviews play out.<sup>44</sup> Recognizing the hijab as a foundational expression of the Islamic lifestyle, the Iranian regime has tried to enforce wearing it. Yet while traditionalists champion the veil, those pursuing a modern lifestyle view the practice as anti-normative.<sup>45</sup> A study focusing on the city of Tabriz confirms that women favoring a traditional lifestyle consider wearing the veil far more positively than women who embrace more-modern lifestyles.<sup>46</sup> For the religious-Hezbollahi faction, the chador—a women’s outer garment that covers from head to toe—makes for the best hijab. For hybrid-postmodern adherents, donning the hijab is a personal issue whose details should be left up to each woman.

To be sure, despite the government’s efforts to the contrary, the trend is moving toward those who believe hijab use should be left up to each woman. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies, a research organization affiliated with the Iranian president’s office, half of all Iranians now believe the hijab represents a personal issue that should not be enforced by the state.<sup>47</sup> Correspondingly, wearing of the proper hijab has fallen dramatically since the government mandated the practice in 1983. For example, according to one study, only 29 percent of women in the city of Sanandaj wore a proper Islamic hijab; the rest wore improper ones, including the comparatively improper *khaleeji* style. Meanwhile, in Tonekabon, a small northern city of some 45,000 inhabitants, police evidently issued 22,000 morality warnings for women wearing an improper hijab. The hijab, having lost overall symbolic power, has thus become a tool of resistance for some in the hybrid-postmodern bloc.

### PHYSICAL BEAUTY

Vanity in showier forms also shapes the discussion. The social media pages of Iranian youths are filled with pictures of overt beauty—often through sculpting at fitness centers but in other cases through cosmetic surgery. Nose jobs, tummy tucks, and breast enhancements are the most common interventions embraced by hybrid-postmodernists, and a sense of competition has

emerged regarding cosmetic surgery among both men and women. Too much makeup, for both genders, is a way of life, a clear split from the view of the religious-Hezbollahi class. According to the head of Iran's cosmetic surgery association, more than 20,000 nose jobs are performed every month in Tehran.<sup>48</sup> Iran is, in fact, the seventh-largest cosmetics market in the world and second in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

### ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA

The difference between Hezbollahi and hybrid lifestyles often shows itself in entertainment choices. Here, religious-Hezbollahi people rely mainly on Iranian television and radio channels, perceiving satellite programs as immoral tools of cultural invasion employed by the West. Many religious families resist pleas from younger children to install satellite dishes in their homes. The hybrid group, by contrast, relies more on satellite programs than on Iranian TV. Despite the official government ban on satellites, most Iranians, even in rural areas, use them. Tastes in music for the hybrid group include largely Western forms and Iranian pop, compared to the religious class, whose members listen mainly to religious singing.<sup>50, 51</sup>

### PETS

Yet another display of independence by the hybrid-postmodern group is pet ownership. Traditionally in Islam, dogs have been considered unclean animals and forbidden within most Iranian households. Now, however, owning dogs has become common, especially among hybridists. Also, while the Islamic Republic has banned taking dogs to parks, young people evade this regulation by walking them in other public spaces, such as on the street, even in conservative neighborhoods in Tehran and other big cities. While many see pet ownership as a way of simply enjoying life, others view it as an act of rebellion "to show that [they] are different."<sup>52</sup>

### TOURISM

In the travel sphere, both the religious-Hezbollahi and hybrid-postmodern classes visit religious sites—in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia—but mainly the hybridists journey for pleasure, especially to countries like the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Thailand, Armenia, and Georgia. But the hybrid tourists, it must be noted, also travel to religious sites for reasons other than pure religiosity—including spirituality and adventure. The

Arbain walk, in which people march toward Karbala, Iraq, to commemorate the forty days of martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the third Shia Imam, encompasses an interesting such mix, attracting hundreds of thousands of Iranians from both the religious and hybrid groups.<sup>53</sup> Other trips, however, draw mainly religious participants, such as "Travelers of Light" (*Rahian-e Nour*), a tour of Iran-Iraq War battlefields. The Islamic Republic strongly promotes these programs in order to teach new generations about Islamic and revolutionary values such as martyrdom.<sup>54</sup>

### MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

As in other areas, the hybrid-postmodernists have increasingly asserted their preferences in the field of marriage and family, choosing in dramatically greater numbers—as contrasted with traditional religious families—to live with a partner before marriage or simply not get married.<sup>55</sup> While some are attracted to non-marital cohabitation, known as "white marriage," for economic reasons, others find it exciting. A taboo in Iran as recently as a few years ago, white marriage is now evidently sought by more than 15 percent of Iranian youths.<sup>56</sup>

### MOSQUES AND COFFEEHOUSES

Whereas the religious-Hezbollahi class typically comes together in mosques and Basij offices, the hybrid-postmodernists convene in coffeehouses and shopping malls. According to a well-known Arzeshi activist, "The coffeehouses are usually an improper environment for Hezbollahi, in terms of ethical considerations, and do not belong to Hezbollahi lifestyle."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the number of mosques increased rapidly in the first decades after the 1979 revolution—from about 9,500 to 74,000 today—reflecting the regime's goal of creating an Islamic society suited for religious people. Likewise, in the 1980s, about 30,000 Basij offices went up, with Hezbollahi people, in turn, filling the streets. Coffeehouses and shopping malls, by comparison, have only proliferated in Iranian cities in the last two decades or so, beginning especially during the reformist era (1997–2005) when President Mohammad Khatami led the country.

Previously, Iranian "teahouses" held a prominent spot in urban society, but these were mainly places where working people could drink tea and smoke hoo-kah while resting and chatting. Now, coffeehouses have emerged from their previous position as clandestine

meeting places away from the state's glare, when they essentially served as alternatives to the relative safety of home gatherings. As contrasted with the previous era, coffeehouses function more like their U.S. or European equivalents today, as places to meet and realize a distinctive lifestyle. Coffeehouse-goers can enjoy themselves. In addition, coffeehouses cater to different interest areas, such as Tehran's Blues Coffee Shop, which attracts motorcyclists devoted to the blues.<sup>58</sup> The rise in the number of coffeehouses has been staggering. According to Eskandar Azmoudeh, who heads the country's café association, from 2012 to 2014 the tally in Tehran rose from 20–30 to about 80.<sup>59</sup> Other statistics indicate that, as of 2014, there were as many as 320 coffeehouses in the capital, official and unofficial.<sup>60</sup>

The growth in shopping malls has likewise been enormous, expanding from a handful in 2010 to about 260 in 2016.<sup>61</sup> The importance of the mall as a gathering place for the hybrid-postmodern class was exemplified recently when more than a thousand teenagers gathered at the Koroush Mall in Tehran for a planned event. After the police blocked it, fearing disorder, the teens demonstrated and chanted slogans against the regime.<sup>62</sup> The rise in art galleries across the country also marks an interesting trend. In Mashhad alone, the number increased from nineteen to forty-two from 2013 to 2017.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, the challenges to the Islamic regime in Iran are manifold, with a bulging youth population central among them. In a country of some 81 million residents, about 52 percent are younger than thirty, with a median national age of twenty-nine.<sup>64</sup> Iran also has more than four million university students.<sup>65</sup> Over the nearly four decades since the inception of the Islamic Republic, the growth of this youth population, along with social changes, rapid urbanization, and a failure to fulfill promises, has thwarted the achievement of Iran's cultural policies.

Iranians are also, as noted earlier, highly tech-savvy. Reports cite 47 million mobile phone users and about 57 million Internet users, with 70 percent Internet penetration.<sup>66, 67</sup> Despite being filtered, social media is very popular in Iran, to the extent that 58 percent of Iranian Internet users are on Facebook.

The failure of the regime to successfully implement its social policies has also spurred a widening rift between the two main national subcultures: the religious-Hezbollahi group and the hybrid-postmodernists, the latter of which emerged largely in reaction to regime strictures. Whereas the religious bloc largely supports Iran's domestic and foreign policies, the hybridists show little similar enthusiasm. One irony of the current situation is that, after decades of national Islamization, it is the religious-Hezbollahi class that is retreating to closed spaces to carry out its religious beliefs, whereas the hybridists appear to be moving into the daylight, reclaiming public spaces and the streets. The overall result is the shrinking of the regime's social base and the emergence of a legitimacy crisis for the leadership.

Finding itself at a turning point, the Iranian leadership can either choose to continue with its current policies—likely shedding more of its base and relying increasingly on coercion to hold power—or transform itself, thereby possibly restoring some legitimacy and expanding its social base. One possible route here, of which evidence has surfaced among the political elites, involves greater absorption of nationalistic elements to satisfy a growing desire for Iranian nationalism. Historically, the Islamic Republic has embraced such a policy when convenient, such as during and after the Iran-Iraq War. The appeal to nationalism likewise surged under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in office from 2005 to 2013, and has expanded even further since the rise of the Islamic State (IS). The hardline Ahmadinejad stressed “nationalistic Iranian themes in an attempt to carve out a new political constituency.”<sup>68</sup> Through this policy, he secured a loan of the Cyrus Cylinder in 2010 from the British Museum to the National Museum of Iran. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, for its part, sought to burnish its sullied post-Green Movement image by stirring up nationalist sentiment against the threat posed by IS.

Although unlikely while Ayatollah Khamenei remains alive, the transition from a theocratic-authoritarian to a nationalist-authoritarian regime is a plausible scenario for some time in the future. If such a shift occurs, the leadership will likely shunt the Islamic components of society to the margins. But the real loser will be political Islam, whose era in Iran will have come to an end. The West should prepare for this potential transition.

## Notes

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