



Balancing Authority and Autonomy The Shiite Clergy Post-Khamenei

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“SHIITE SEMINARIES, particularly Qom Seminary, are the [Islamic] government’s mother, the creator of this revolution...How can a mother neglect her child and be indifferent toward him, not defend him when necessary? This is impossible. Therefore, the relationship between seminaries and the Islamic Republic is based on mutual support. The government supports seminaries, and seminaries support the government...As a matter of fact, these two, Islamic government and seminaries, are interrelated, they share the same destiny. Everybody should be aware of this. Today, in Iran, the destiny of clergy and the destiny of Islam are tied to the destiny of Islamic government. The consequence of minor damage to Islamic government would be much graver for clergy and the religious community than the rest of the people.”

—Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, October 19, 2010¹

Since 1989, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became Supreme Leader, Iran’s clerical establishment has been utterly transformed, experiencing unprecedented growth in its domestic and international networks as well as its finances and personnel. Concurrent with this growth, the Supreme Leader is tightening hard-liner control over management of the Shiite clerical establishment. Thus, on July 12, the Supreme Leader privately named Ali Reza Arafai, a fifty-seven-year-old cleric who has served as Khamenei’s appointee in various positions, as the new executive director for seminaries nationwide.² Arafai’s appointment is an important step in Khamenei’s preparation of the country’s clergy for the period following his death.

In the post-Khamenei era, the guiding principle for the Islamic Republic will remain that a clerical regime needs clerical bureaucrats and foot soldiers to ensure its rule and export its ideology. The Iranian government has therefore sought to consolidate its power through the mass production of clerics, the creation of organizations to employ and control them, and the remaking of non-Iranian Shiite communities in Iran’s image. On this count, the regime’s totalitarian tendencies have increasingly expanded from areas such as the military and industry into the religious domain. In practice, though, regime efforts to exert control over the clergy have undermined clerics’ ability to legitimize the regime, given that they have forfeited their independence and

A Note on Statistics and Ideology

Regarding the statistics cited in this paper, the reader should be aware that under the Islamic Republic, one often encounters lack of transparency, confusing discrepancies, constraints on “independent” sources, and securitizing of information. In this last area, even social problems—much less political and military issues—could be defined by the government as security matters justifying state control of all related information. For example, the government recently announced that divorce statistics would no longer be published out of fear that critics would use them as evidence of social crisis or as a way to tarnish the Islamic Republic’s image.³ On September 13, 2016, Ayatollah Khamenei warned about manipulation of data after discrepancies were

found between government-published and Majlis-published statistics on economic growth, the inflation rate, and unemployment.⁴

A clear example of government handling of clergy-related statistics was a January 17, 2014, statement by Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, the head of Khamenei’s office, in which he revealed that the ayatollah pays a combined 18 billion tomans (\$6 million) in monthly salary to clerics, in addition to other regular funds for management, housing, insurance, and the like amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Not surprisingly, Golpayegani’s statement was removed within a few hours from all news agencies.⁵ This was less likely a naïve mistake than an intentional leak promoting an ideological agenda, as are most cases of publicizing or hiding statistics.

are effectively captives of Tehran. Finally, the regime has invested great efforts into ensuring that the Shiite clerical bureaucracy is thoroughly modern in its exploitation of technology to achieve its goals.

Background

So substantial has been the modernization of Iran’s clerical establishment that a prerevolutionary observer

would hardly recognize its current form. The transformation began with Khamenei’s takeover of power from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a charismatic leader who firmly believed that Shiite religious institutions should be purged of all those individuals who refused to submit to a revolutionary reading of Islam and the monarchy’s replacement by a clerical political order.

In the fall of 1991, two years after Khamenei entered office, a pivotal event came in his first official visit to Qom. Despite recognizing that many questioned his clerical credentials, he nevertheless elaborated his agenda for revolutionizing the clerical establishment as meticulously as possible. In his lengthy public address to the clerics, he even sketched out an administrative hierarchy and its explanation:

Seminaries and religious men cannot be indifferent toward the government and political affairs...This [government] belongs to you, to the clergy, religion; you have no choice. This is an Islamic republic. If you keep a distance, the republic becomes non-Islamic...One of the [seminary’s] problems is clerics’ economic issues...We have initiated seminary health insurance...I will heavily invest in it...in the housing problem...I have helped a bit in the past and intend to continue my help...The seminary lacks what every educational institution of such a caliber requires: an effective management apparatus...A supreme council should be formed...and a competent director appointed...If such a bureaucracy is created, I will provide financial aid and do my best.⁶

Millions of dollars were thus poured into the clerical establishment, aimed at bringing about quick, dramatic improvements on many levels.

The creation of this new clerical apparatus did not mean that every junior and senior cleric would receive direct financial or political benefits from the government. Rather, it established a framework outside of which an Iranian cleric could hardly operate. By making the establishment “transparent,” registering data, and putting previously oral rules in writing, the government centralized authority in its own hands, implicitly doing away with previously operating clerical structures. Only the government would be equipped to run



Ali Reza Arafī

was born into a pious family in Meybod, Yazd province, in the Persian year 1338 (1959/1960). His father was a close friend of Ayatollah Khomeini. In the year 1349 (1970/1971), he moved to Qom to begin his studies in a *hawza* (seminary),⁸ after which he became politically involved. In his early career, he held several leadership positions at universities and served as head of the Office for Cooperation between Hawza and University (*Daftar Hamkari-ye Howzeh va Daneshgah*), implementing

Khamenei's Islamization efforts. In 2011, Khamenei appointed him a member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, an organization charged with implementing the Supreme Leader's ideological agenda.⁹ Since then, he has served as Friday prayer imam of Meybod and, more important, of Qom, the heart of Iran's clerical community.¹⁰ His foremost achievement was the 2009 establishment in Qom of al-Mustafa International University, which has since played a significant role in promoting Shiite ideology both domestically and abroad.¹¹

a new structure so gigantic, costly, and sophisticated. In taking these steps, the clerical regime was likewise seeking to ensure no political opposition, arising from the clerics or elsewhere, would emerge to threaten it.

Reradicalizing the Clergy

In line with Ruhollah Khomeini's original vision, the Iranian clergy has, over the past thirty-seven years, grown into the largest, richest, and farthest-reaching clerical establishment in any Muslim nation. Gradually, clerics have become uniquely subordinated to the ruling jurist's political and economic authority. With respect to clerical organizational power and wealth, the Mashhad-based Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation is preeminent. The institution was previously led autonomously by Abbas Vaez Tabasi, who had successfully deflected Khamenei's twenty-five years of pressure to annex Mashhad's clerical organization to that of Qom. With Tabasi's death in March 2016, however, Khamenei acted quickly to realize a long-held vision: he appointed his former student Sayyed Mesbah Ameli as the institution's executive director and moved to bring

it completely under Qom's central management.⁷ To be sure, the entire clerical establishment in Khorasan province relies on generous funding from the Astan-e Qods custodian, Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, who holds political control.

Yet overall, much uncertainty remains regarding the future of Shiite clerical leadership in Iran and beyond, largely because of the advanced age shared by Khamenei, seventy-seven, and the Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, eighty-six, the wealthiest and most followed Shiite religious authority after the Supreme Leader. Given this potential leadership vacuum, Iranian clergy may find themselves depending even more heavily on the state and feeling greater confusion about their social role and status within the political structure.

Arafī's Path to al-Mustafa International University

Descended from a Zoroastrian family whose members converted to Islam in the nineteenth century, Ali Reza Arafī is one of Khamenei's closest confidants (see sidebar). Khamenei has named him to sensitive positions,

and Arafī has, in turn, been invaluable in implementing the ayatollah's ideological agenda in the clerical establishment and universities, in Iran and abroad.¹²

Arafī's role embraces three components, the first as implementer of Khamenei's Islamization of universities. To this end, he served as head of the Office for Cooperation between Clergy and Hawza—founded in 1983 under Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi to replace standard humanities textbooks with Islamized versions compatible with the new regime's revolutionary ideology—and in several other leading university-related positions. Fortifying this role was Arafī's appointment by Khamenei on June 7, 2011, as a member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, which governs ideological policy planning throughout the country's cultural arena, working nominally under the president but in practice under the Supreme Leader, using the leader's authorities and mechanisms to restrict freedom of expression in academia and beyond—and effectively violating citizens' right to education regardless of their religious or political convictions.¹³

The second component centers on his managerial talents, which he demonstrated as a young cleric by founding entities such as the Qom-based Institute of Ishraq and Irfan.¹⁴ Besides his position as a Khamenei-appointed Friday prayer imam in his hometown of Meybod, Yazd province, he was director of the city's male and female seminaries. In January 2015, Arafī was appointed as a Friday prayer imam for Qom, a prestigious position showing the government's eagerness to promote him in the country's ideological capital.¹⁵ In 2007, with Khamenei's informal approval, Arafī was appointed as a new member of the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, a hardline political body under Khamenei's authority that rules on all matters related to clerical politics. He failed, however, in his recent run for the Assembly of Experts.

The third component, a major accomplishment related to his managerial skills, has involved his organization of seminaries for foreign citizens in Iran and abroad. In September 1979, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, responding to rising interest among young

Muslims abroad in studying Shia Islam in revolutionary Iran, founded the Council for Managing Non-Iranian Seminary Affairs in September 1979. The council, headquartered at the Hojjatieh Seminary in Qom and encompassing multiple national and international branches, especially in Africa,¹⁶ sought to provide ideological training to foreigners in Iran and, if possible, in their home countries. It also supported foreigners in building infrastructures for ideological propaganda and networking in their home countries. When tensions mounted between Ayatollah Khomeini and Montazeri in 1986, the Supreme Leader took steps to limit his counterpart's control over the institution by restructuring and expanding it. This appropriation of Montazeri's authority was part of a broader campaign by Khomeini during which he dismissed the cleric as his successor as Supreme Leader; later, Khamenei completed the job by forcibly severing Montazeri's links to religious entities with which he was affiliated.

In 1993, Ayatollah Khamenei decided to modernize and personally take over control of the institution, separating it into (1) the Global Center for Islamic Sciences, dedicated to foreigners in Iran; and (2) a Seminaries Abroad section, devoted to ideological training outside Iran. Arafī headed both divisions until 2009, when his proposal to merge them into a unified al-Mustafa International University (MIU) garnered Khamenei's approval. As the university's president, Arafī has magnified the regime's efforts to export its revolutionary ideology, building a colossal infrastructure in Iran and dozens of other countries toward this end and constructing a sophisticated international network rooted in strengthened ties with groups like Lebanese Hezbollah and partnerships with other academic, religious, or political institutions or individuals. MIU is a significant instrument at the regime's disposal for proselyting Shiism and Islam on a national and international level, including through the publication of *sporadic reports* on its success in encouraging conversion to Shiism or Islam.¹⁷

In a January 2016 interview with the *hardline journal Ramz-e Obour*, Arafī emphasized the nonnegotiability of the principle of exporting the revolution.

“Revolution is international by nature,” he said.¹⁸ He then proudly recalled his twenty-year international record and his regular relations with various entities in “more than one hundred countries.” He explained: “We have relations with clerical centers in Syria and Lebanon, and from time to time, we make a trip to [those countries]...Usually, each time I go to Lebanon, I have a meeting with [Hezbollah leader] Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah lasting somewhere between five and nine hours.”

By Arafī’s estimation, 45,000 foreigners from 126 countries have graduated from MIU since its inception, with 25,000 individuals from nearly 130 nationalities currently studying there.¹⁹ A great number of these individuals live in Qom with their families. Worldwide, more than 6,500 female seminarians are studying at MIU branches. According to a young Iranian seminarian based in Qom, MIU has been critiqued for favoring aspiring American and European clerics over those of other origins through provision of better services.²⁰ Such a claim is likely validated by the regime’s desire to improve its reputation in the West even more than in non-Western countries.

Other startling statistics relating to MIU include its 70 branches worldwide; regular relationships with more than a hundred other centers internationally; 150 websites; publication of 50,000 works in 45 languages as well as 70 journals; and management of 400 clubs with 8,000 as members.²¹

The size and scope of MIU branches outside Iran vary, but all appear to be flourishing. A detailed introduction on [MIU’s main website](#) reveals the enormous scale of its activities inside and outside the country.²² MIU has founded several other affiliated entities, such as the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies,²³ and even runs an extensive intramural sports program for students and their families.²⁴



Ali Reza Biniāz, who directs the Imam Khomeini Seminary in Syria and serves as an MIU representative, believes one achievement of his seminary over the past four decades has been to train clerics to gain a “jihadist spirit and continue the Islamic resistance path.” In

his interview with the Jamaran website in 2012, Biniāz said that during Israel’s thirty-four-day war with Hezbollah in 2006 and other conflicts, Lebanese fleeing their country were supported by the seminary. Referring to the then-new war in Syria, Biniāz reflected, “Even in recent tensions, Imam Khomeini Seminary has been a base for seeking people’s rights and also continuing resistance against American and Israeli conspiracies.”

According to Biniāz, the 2012 student body comprised 80 percent Syrians and the rest foreigners, most of whom left after the war began: “Before the existing war, 1,500 clerics, Syrian and non-Syrian, were studying in Syria. Of that number, 650 were female and male seminarians from thirty-five countries...”²⁵ As already indicated, Syria’s Imam Khomeini Seminary is only one of many such institutions founded by Iran since 1980. As reported by an Iranian expert on Syria, “Especially since Najaf had its own problems at that time and many Arab countries did not have a good political relationship with the Islamic Republic, their Shiite citizens were coming to Syria to study religion.”²⁶

In Lebanon, Khamenei has founded several seminaries and helped Hezbollah control all the country’s Shiite seminaries.²⁷ For instance, in 2011, the Baqiyyatullah Seminary was opened in Nabatiyah by both Iranian and Hezbollah officials.²⁸ On July 16, 2016, in his meeting with a delegation of Qom clergy led by Mohammad Hassan Zamani, a deputy on international affairs for Iran’s seminaries, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah insisted on the necessity of increasing cooperation between the Qom seminary and Hezbollah in “various cultural, religious, revolutionary fields.”²⁹ Furthermore, Ayatollah Sistani’s apparatus, led by Javad Shahrestani, his Qom-based son-in-law, cooperates in various ways with Hezbollah.³⁰

The most important domestic Iranian MIU branch is in Mashhad, where more than 3,000 foreigners from forty-six countries are studying. As in other branches, clerics’ spouses and children also receive various educational and welfare services. In addition to the current students, more than 3,000 have graduated from the branch and returned to their countries to assume religious or political positions. Most Mashhad MIU seminarians come

from neighboring countries like Afghanistan, but some hail from Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, China, Tajikistan, France, Arab countries, and elsewhere.³¹

In a 2014 interview, Hojatoleslam Muhammad Hassan Ibrahim, Khamenei's representative in Afghanistan, estimated that nearly 9,000 Afghans study in Iranian seminaries and about 10,000 Afghans in Iran's universities.³² In an earlier interview, Ibrahim had noted that up until 2005, about 54,000 junior and senior Afghan clerics were living in Iran, either in or outside seminaries.³³ Out of 65,000 legal Afghan residents in Iran—with the tally climbing to more than a million when illegal Afghans are accounted for—16,000 live in Qom, of whom 1,500 study in Qom province's fourteen universities.³⁴ In 2009, Iran's Qom-based MIU signed a letter of understanding with Afghanistan's Ministry of Hajj, Guidance, and Endowments to cooperate on religious education and research.³⁵ The Kabul MIU branch opened in 2012,³⁶ and Shiite clergy in Afghanistan depend heavily on the institution for their administrative services and credentials.³⁷

The Indian subcontinent also has a strong connection to Iran's Shiite establishment. According to Mehdi Mahdavi Pour, Khamenei's representative in India, more than ninety Shiite seminaries are active in India and more than a thousand Indians are studying at the Qom seminary.³⁸ Also in recent years, in Pakistan, the Khamenei-founded and funded Jamaat al-Urwat al-Wothqa, headed by Sayyed Javad Naghavi, had 600 students to start with. A seminary for women, Umm al-Kitab, was also formed, beginning with 400 students.³⁹ According to the Iranian Basij militia, Pakistani graduates from Iranian seminaries have formed jihadist groups in Pakistan.⁴⁰ Reinforcing this point, in March 2015, the funeral service for seven Pakistanis killed in Syria was held in Qom.⁴¹ The next month, in his meeting with the Pakistani ambassador to Tehran, Arafī urged more cooperation between MIU and the Pakistani government.⁴²

In a 2015 interview, Hojatoleslam Gholam Reza Sanatgar, who heads the Improvement Bureau in the Imam Khomeini Higher Educational Complex, reported that the previous year, to mark Ramadan,

MIU deployed eight hundred Iranian and non-Iranian clerics as missionaries and preachers to sixty countries. Such deployment of clergy overseas is a task shared by MIU and Iran's Islamic Culture and Relations Organization.⁴³ According to Sayyed Mehdi Hosseini, the president of al-Mustafa Online University, MIU's online branch, 7,000 students are now studying online. The online university is planning to admit 100,000 students in 2024.⁴⁴



Arafī's recent appointment as executive director of Iran's seminaries, to sum up, appears to have been driven by his matchless experience in international networking and infrastructure building, his management knowledge, skill, and creativity, as well as his mastery of advanced communication technology and cyberspace.⁴⁵ In this role, Arafī follows this lineup of other leaders, beginning in 1992: Mohammad Momen, Reza Ostadi, Hashem Hosseini Boushehri, Morteza Moqtadai, and Boushehri again. All are older than Arafī, guided by a traditionalist mindset, not known for breakthrough ideas, and much less familiar than he is with modern leadership, academia, and technology.

Greeted coldly by some clerical elders, Arafī's appointment reflects Khamenei's recently reiterated intention to invigorate the clerical role in supporting the revolution. In an August 1, 2016, speech, Arafī thus stated: "In the course of the development of the Islamic Revolution and the condition of the contemporary world, the clerical establishment [*hazeh*] should convert its enormous heritage into an effective [practical program]."⁴⁶ As Mesbah Ameli, the director of the Khorasan seminary, stated, "A director and teacher who is indifferent to the revolution cannot build a revolutionary seminary...We need long-term planning...a comprehensive program...a new action plan [to change the seminary curriculum's] structure and content."⁴⁷ Even the Tehran seminary created a "revolutionary seminary base" aimed at realizing the Supreme Leader's ideal of "the Islamic Revolution's new seminary man," as described by Gholam Reza Shah Jafari, a deputy at the Tehran seminary.⁴⁸ Using a military term, "base," for a clerical entity along with a

utopian Marxist term, “new man,” reveals the Supreme Leader’s discontent over traditional residues within the establishment. This Khamenei-driven discourse on revolutionizing the seminary has been accompanied by a massive campaign by government-associated clerics. Mohammad Mehdi Mir Bagheri, the head of Qom’s Islamic Sciences Seminary for Academics, and an Assembly of Experts member, stated that the “Islamic Revolution has changed the seminary’s mission... fighting Western civilization is the main priority of the seminaries.”⁴⁹ Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamadani, a Qom-based *marja* and an outspoken supporter of the regime, claimed that “a revolutionary seminary clears the way for the Appearance [return of the Mahdi, or Shiite messiah].”⁵⁰

As vague as terms like “revolution” or “convert” may sound to outsiders, older or traditional ayatollahs hear in them the prospect of unpleasant, drastic changes to the status quo with unpredictable or unmanageable consequences, thereby deepening concerns about the direction in which the Supreme Leader is taking the establishment. Such traditionalists, though, are loath to express their views publicly, lest they invite retribution from the government.

For his part, Arafī has proved his full political loyalty to Khamenei, along with his understanding of the leader’s ideological aspirations and objectives for Shiite clergy in Iran and beyond. He has likewise demonstrated the resolve necessary to further “globalize” the revolution. In one early speech after he assumed office, Arafī emphasized that acquiring “a macro-international vision is vital for the clerical establishment... We need clerics who [can respond] to the world’s future developments.”⁵¹ Such statements, and Arafī’s attendant qualities, make him the ideal ideological tough guy, in Khamenei’s view, to carry out the “cultural soft war against the West.”

Ever Expanding Clerical Ranks

In the mid-1970s, Iran likely had no more than 10,000 clerics, junior and senior, in the entire country. But today, unofficial conservative statistics suggest the clerical population could be as high as 400,000,

excluding some 40,000 foreign clerics in the country from mainly Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; female clerics; and thousands of students in different areas of Islamic ideology, studying at hundreds of universities nationwide. These foreign groups represent a phenomenon that emerged after the revolution. Meanwhile, 2,000 clerics alone work at the Center for Management of Seminaries (*Markez-e Mudiriāt Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), the central governing body for Iran’s clergy.⁵²

In April 2016, more than 19,000 applicants took admissions tests for the 2016–17 academic year. They were seeking to attend any of 475 religious schools in forty-nine centers (thirty provincial, nineteen urban) throughout the country. Of the test takers, a very high proportion, 17,000, will be admitted.⁵³ Reportedly, applicants to Qom alone included 500 university bachelor’s or master’s degree graduates, ages twenty-two to thirty, including in hard sciences such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Apparently, the urge to swell the clerical ranks can hardly be satisfied. Ali Akbar Rashad, the head of the Council for Tehran Province Seminaries, says Tehran now has some 15,000 clerics but that responding to “cultural and outreach needs of a big city such as Tehran” requires 300,000 clerics—an implausible claim, since that would represent one cleric for about every fifty inhabitants.⁵⁴ While Rashad appears to have underestimated the number of clerics in Tehran, or else limited them to current seminarians, reaching his stated objective would require massive financial investment.⁵⁵ Muhammad Hossein Kabirian, who heads Tehran province’s “seminaries of brothers,” or male seminaries, does note that Tehran now has sixty active seminaries: “In Tehran, fourteen advanced courses, including courses by Ayatollah Khamenei and [Judiciary Chief] Ayatollah [Sadeq] Larijani, are taking place and 800 teachers are running seminary classes.”⁵⁶

Traditionally, teaching advanced courses (*kharej*) in Shiite jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its methodological principles (*usul*) was so prestigious that only well-established senior ayatollahs were given the task. Indeed, teaching *kharej* can be likened to holding

an endowed chair at a prominent university, a sign of the highest academic achievement. But since both the title of ayatollah and the role of teaching advanced courses have been politicized—now qualifying their bearers to assume political positions—the number of such courses and their teachers have taken off, at the expense of instructional quality and course content. According to reliable sources, in the 2015–16 academic year, Qom saw 119 advanced courses on *fiqh* and 74 on *usul*; Mashhad, 33 courses on *fiqh*, 26 on *usul*. More than 300 in each discipline are taught in the rest of the country. Intermediate-level courses are also way up, even as compared to a decade ago, with, for example, 273 *fiqh* and 360 *usul* courses taught in Qom.⁵⁷

For preliminary-level students, a mark of the current climate is reduced choice regarding textbook and teacher, a situation forged by the establishment. If unmarried and nonlocal, students might be offered a dormitory room at the school. Thus, today in Qom, some 3,500 unmarried seminarians lodge at about eighteen schools.⁵⁸ But such preliminary-level students overall number some 7,700 at forty-two schools, out of more than 90,000 total seminarians in Qom.⁵⁹

According to the official Hosseini Boushehri, in 2014, 1,200 applicants were admitted to the Qom seminary.⁶⁰ Khorasan seminary director Mesbah Ameli announced that Khorasan province currently has 149 religious schools, or madrasas, 105 for men and 44 for women, encompassing 23,484 male and 4,248 female seminarians.⁶¹

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of other Qom-based clerics have ceased to study for different reasons, such as employment in government or clerical-establishment bureaus or institutes. According to Sayyed Samsam al-Din Qavami, the Friday prayer imam in Qom's Pardisan district, 12,000 clerics live in the district.⁶²

Besides the government's cultural revolution policy, implemented since 1980 and aimed at Islamizing academia and pursuing significant financial, ideological, and security investment to deepen the clergy's influence over universities, the Supreme Leader's Office of Representation in University (*Daftar-e Nemayandegi*

Dar Daneshgah) has launched a special seminary for university students and graduates called the Islamic Sciences Seminary for Academics (*Howzeh Uloom Eslami-ye Daneshgahian*). The seminary, established in 1998, has been expanded over time.⁶³ In the 2015–16 academic year, according to its director, Hojatoleslam Ali Harizavi, 4,200 academics were enrolled in the seminary, 20 percent of whom have university doctoral or master's degrees.⁶⁴ The seminary now has forty-two branches nationwide.⁶⁵

Najaf's Slow but Sure Revival

"Sayyed Abul Hassan [Isfahani, 1860–1946, a prominent marja based in Najaf] held that empowering the Qom seminary would lead to the failure of the Najaf seminary."

—Grand Ayatollah Musa Shobairi Nanzani⁶⁶

The rapid growth of the clerical establishment is not limited to the Islamic Republic, a trend that owes to Iran's financial support as well as the increasing wealth of Iranian ayatollahs and their financial sponsorship of peers throughout the Middle East, boosting Shiite communities large and small. Najaf, in particular, host of the world's oldest Shiite seminary, declined under the despotism of Saddam Hussein and Iraq's Baath Party leadership. Yet in the last decade, despite poor security conditions and urban development, Najaf and other cities, such as Karbala, have rebounded.

According to a report by Farid Modarressi, a journalist close to Sistani's office, Najaf by 2009 had twenty-seven old religious schools serving as dormitories for seminarians.⁶⁷ In recent years, between ten and fifteen new schools have been founded, with curricula mostly inspired by Qom seminaries. These include Imam Hassan (founded and run by Abu Ammar Raghif), Saheb al-Amr (Sayyed Abul Ala Hindi), Shahid Sadr (Sayyed Kadhim al-Haeri), Jamaat al-Imam al-Mahdi (Sayyed Sadr al-Din Qabanji), Dar al-Hikma (Sayyed Ammar al-Hakim), Imam Kazem (Sayyed Hossein al-Hakim), Ahl al-Bait (affiliated with the Islamic Dawa Party), and the Imam Khomeini School, founded in 2009 by Ayatollah Khamenei and now run by Sheikh Ali Waeli.⁶⁸ The

Imam Khomeini School is operating under al-Mustafa International University and currently serves about a thousand seminarians.

Since 2003, Ayatollah Khamenei has founded more than a hundred schools in Iraq, all now supervised by his representative in Iraq, Sayyed Mojtaba Hosseini, who succeeded Sheikh Muhammad Mehdi Asefi after his death in 2015.⁶⁹ Asefi, a returnee to Iraq after his Saddam-era exile in Iran who was close to the Dawa Party, helped Khamenei expand his influence within the country's Shiite community and clerical establishment. Hosseini, born in 1954 in Khamenei's hometown of Mashhad, was previously Khamenei's representative in Syria, custodian of the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, and its Friday prayer imam from 2003 until 2014. During his decade of service, he acted boldly in cementing ties between Iran and the Syrian government as well as Hezbollah.⁷⁰ In July 2015, Hosseini was introduced in Najaf as the new representative by an Iranian delegation from the Supreme Leader's office, including Mohammad Ali Taskhiri, another Iraq "returnee," and Mohsen Qomi. Separately, the Supreme Leader maintains a representative in each of Shia Islam's four holy sites: Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, and Kadhimiyyah. Ahmad Ehsani holds this position in Najaf.⁷¹

In a June 2016 interview, Hosseini explained the Tehran regime's rationale for such a massive investment in religious institutions and the clerical establishment: "Since we believe *velayat-e faqih* [guardianship of jurist] is not limited to any territory or a specific border, we witness today that the religious people of Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain are loyal to the leader of the revolution [Khamenei]...efforts for dissemination of the culture of *velayat-e faqih* should be intensified inside and outside the country."⁷² In 2010, a similar school with the same name was founded in Karbala, led by Sheikh Khalil al-Shemri.⁷³ Also in Najaf, Ayatollah Sistani founded a school called Dar al-Elm, in which more than five hundred seminarians are studying under fifteen to twenty teachers.

Moreover, after Sistani, who pays Shiite clerics a salary of 170,000 dinars per month (equivalent to

\$145), Khamenei pays the highest salary, amounting 120,000 dinars per month (about \$103). No other marja from Iran pays a regular salary to clerics in Iraq.

Reportedly, some fifteen advanced courses are being taught in Najaf by prominent ayatollahs such as Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim, Sheikh Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, Muhammad Baqir al-Irawani, and Muhammad Reza al-Sistani, Ayatollah Sistani's older son. Since most Shiite clerics left Iraq under Saddam, the current seminary is much younger than Qom's. Muqtada al-Sadr also has founded about ten schools in Najaf and pays a monthly salary of 30,000–70,000 dinars (\$25–\$60) to clerics loyal to him.⁷⁴

If the current trajectory holds, the Shiite establishments in both Iran and Iraq will continue their growth in the coming years but at unequal rates, preventing Iraq from competing with its neighbor.

Emergence of Women Clergy

Before the Islamic Revolution, Iran had almost no women serving as clerics or in clerical training, and only privileged women in religious or clerical families could afford to study religion, taking private courses from their immediate relatives. Today, the situation is entirely transformed. According to Mahmoud Reza Jamshidi, director of the country's Seminaries for Sisters (*Howzeh-haye Elmieh-ye Khaharon*),⁷⁵ more than 470 seminaries nationwide are now dedicated to female seminarians. He reports that more than 750,000 Iranian and non-Iranian women are studying in fourteen majors in Islamic sciences and more than 90,000 female clerics have already graduated. In 2012, women seminaries are reported to have enrolled about 10,000 new students per year.⁷⁶ Based on recent figures announced by Ali Reza Hajizadeh, the education deputy at Jamaat al-Zahra, Iran's largest female seminary, his institution is now educating 13,000 seminarians.⁷⁷

Women clerics also have access to hundreds of institutions and clubs for research, Islamic outreach, and related endeavors. According to Jamshidi, more than 350 religious schools for women are under construction, 180 of which will soon be ready for use.

Furthermore, 5,000 female students and 7,000 female clerics who maintain regular blogs benefit from financial and technical support from state organizations.⁷⁸ To be sure, compared to male clergy, women are more restricted by regulations and systematic surveillance. For instance, a regulation bans women clergy from using Latin terms in their correspondence.

Throughout the country, women preachers and singers now lead a wide variety of rituals and female congregations. Many have also been employed by government bureaus, such as the Ministry of Education, to teach religion in schools. By design, female seminarians follow a curriculum that diverges from that of their male peers. According to this model, women are expected to be trained relatively quickly on practical matters of Islamic law and ideological orientation, guidelines for leading religious ceremonies, and oratorical skills aimed at impressing audiences through eloquence. Syllabi and textbooks for women are too poor-quality to allow them to compete intellectually with men; the same holds, in general, for foreign clerics. Given rigid segregation, intellectual exchanges between men and women are severely restricted.

The Clergy's Crisis of Rationality

In clerical tradition, leading an advanced course on *fiqh* or *usul* suggests the teacher is a *mujtahid*, *faqih*, or an ayatollah, intellectually capable of independently understanding religious texts and deducing divine law. He is thus religiously barred from following any other ayatollah or religious authority. In recent decades, though, such positions have been politicized and otherwise diluted of their previous significance. The government has interfered in the granting of such titles and positions to clerics who serve Tehran blindly, whatever their intellectual credentials. The curricula and educational materials have suffered as a result. Varying design and formatting of such materials has not disguised the corresponding intellectual weakening of the establishment as a whole.

In large part, these developments represent the high-level response to intellectual and theoretical challenges posed especially by the young, educated,

urban middle class, which lacks enthusiasm for the revolution and its faded ideals. To muffle these dissonant voices, whether in universities or the media, the government has built a cohesive clerical mechanism aimed at maintaining the brutal hegemony of Islamic ideology and its official representatives. For progressive clerics such as Nematollah Salehi Najaf Abadi, Mohsen Saidzadeh, Ahmad Qabel, Mohsen Kadivar, and Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari, freedom of speech is not tolerated in the clerical community or the broader public sphere. Police-state suppression by sophisticated means thus targets not only political dissidents but also religious reformists seen to threaten the model of conformity demanded by the police state.

In the current scene, ayatollahs and other religious leaders may or may not have followers, depending on their managerial talent, social power base, financial network, sometimes genealogy, or personal preferences. If an ayatollah attracts considerable numbers of followers, he is called a grand ayatollah, or *marja*—a source of emulation. In Iran today, some thirty clerics operate a *marja* apparatus, although hundreds are qualified to do so, at least theoretically.⁷⁹ Grand ayatollah status is signaled by publication of a *resaleh*, or legal practical guide, and success in appealing to a decent number of worshipers. All grand ayatollahs who reside in Iran have an office in Qom, even if they live elsewhere. Currently, Sistani is the only *marja* living outside Iran who nonetheless has major offices in Qom and other cities. Other grand ayatollahs living outside Iran do not similarly maintain a visible office in Qom, nor do they likely have many Iranian followers. When Sistani and Khamenei eventually die, the numbers of grand ayatollahs are expected to increase, generating the further fragmentation, fragility, and frailty of independent religious authorities, the result in part of greater national or local, rather than broader Shiite, identification.

The passing of these two Shiite leaders will create uncertainty in other ways as well. Over his three decades in power, Khamenei has systematically transformed Shia Islam into an ideological tool to serve the government's numerous needs: e.g., providing

legitimacy, imbuing the Shiite masses with a sense of their historical role for political purposes, training cadres for service, and providing “soldiers” in the soft war against Western and regional enemies. This approach has succeeded, relatively speaking, thanks to the infusion of immense sums of money toward transforming a stagnant, medieval-style religious institution into a modern bureaucracy, complete with digital technology and advanced communication tools. By 2011, 90 percent of the clerical establishment’s administrative services had become digitized.⁸⁰

Senior clerics have been meaningfully involved in this transformation. They have agreed to this role largely to benefit from the massive financial resources provided by the government but also because the government employed its various coercive tactics to ensure clerics wouldn’t deviate from government orthodoxy. Reflecting the scale of government investment in the clerical establishment, in the current Persian calendar year, an administrative bureau known as the Center for Seminary Service (*Markez-e Khidmat-e Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), responsible for such areas as health care provision and affordable housing, received \$134 million. Aside from their substantial private-sector earnings, senior clerics receive unpublicized funds from the Supreme Leader’s office to run more than 400 institutes defined as research, educational, outreach, or media entities. In all, the clerical establishment and its affiliated entities get more than \$500 million of the executive branch’s budget. Apart from reaping several quiet advantages, such as sanctioned monopolies, they receive more than \$1 billion annually from the ruling jurist’s office.⁸¹

By accepting this staggering windfall, however, senior clerics have forfeited their symbolic capital as an intellectually dynamic force—flexible as opposed to Western-style academic frameworks—their freedom of expression, and most important, their insulation from and ability to respond autonomously to interventions and manipulations by the regime.

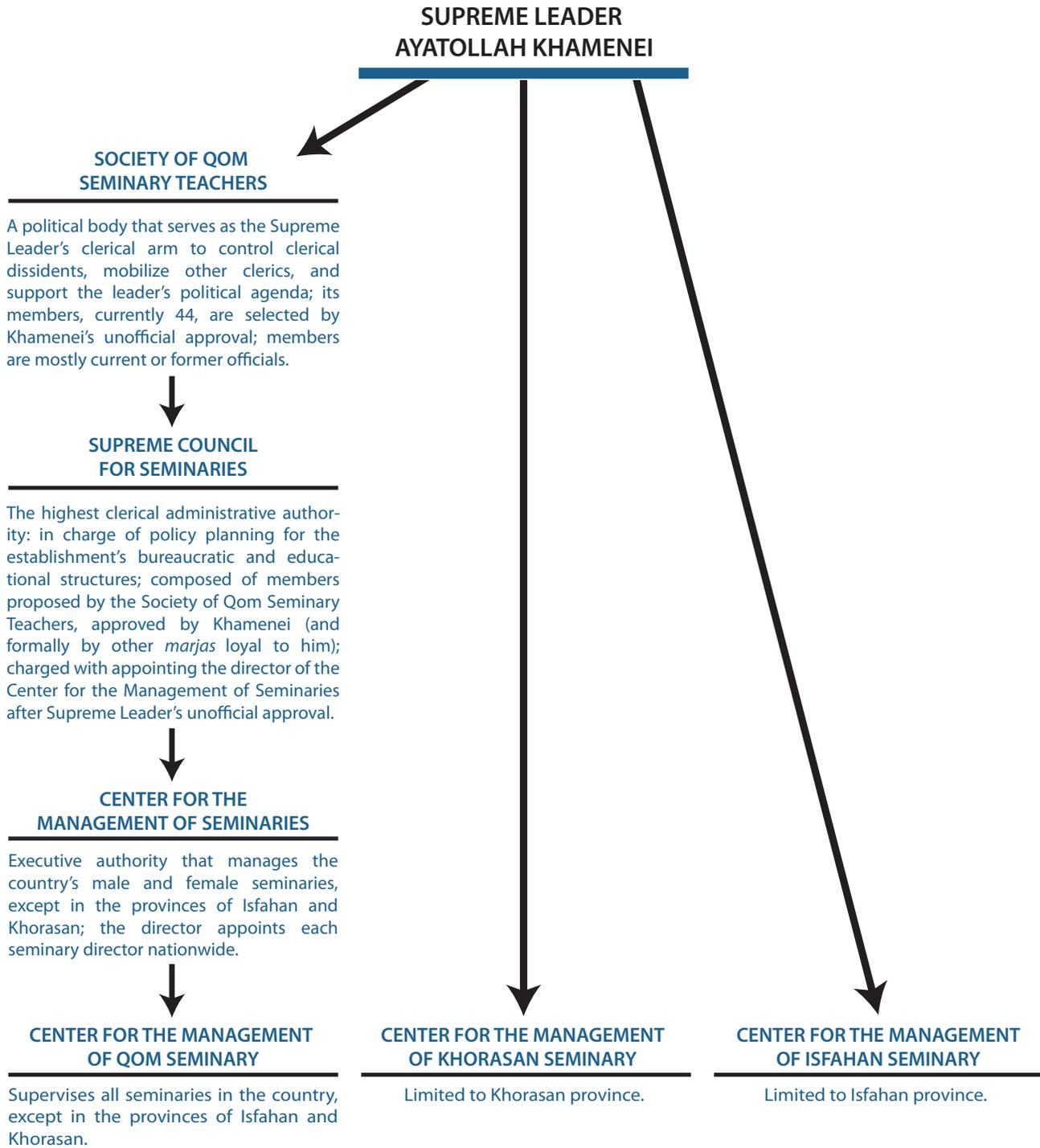
According to official statistics, in addition to high-ranking positions in the government, some of them reserved exclusively for clerics or ayatollahs, more

than 600 clerics are employed in the ideological-political directorate of the army, more than 800 in the judiciary, 12,000 as preachers in the Organization for Religious Endowments and Charitable Affairs, and tens of thousands in almost every government bureau from universities and military to the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2013, the establishment’s officials announced that more than 40,000 clerics had submitted applications for employment by the government.⁸² In 2015, officials reported that about 2000 clerics work for the Ministry of Education.⁸³

The number of applicants has increased annually, with more than 17,000 new seminarians entering each year. Yet the resulting economic impact on the clerical establishment has been double-edged: whereas before the revolution taxes and donations had been the sole basis of the clerical economy, they now constitute only a small part of it. At the same time the entire economic structure, financial resources, and networks of the Shiite clergy are entirely subject to government control and monitoring in Iran and to a lesser extent abroad.

Far from state surveillance and intrusion prior to 1979, typical clerical services such as leading congregational prayer, preaching at religious gatherings, or guiding pilgrims to carry out their duties properly were totally managed by clergy. But in the last four decades, especially under Ayatollah Khamenei, the clergy’s freedom and autonomy to provide traditional services have been denied by the government. Today, even minor services and trifling interactions with society that could be rewarded either symbolically or materially require official government permission followed by ideological investigation into the candidate’s qualifications. Dozens of government bureaucracies now control mosques, religious centers, and rituals nationwide. The Committee for Mosque Affairs, Committee for Friday Prayer, Islamic Development [outreach and propaganda] Organization, and Qom Seminary’s Office of Islamic Outreach are among the massive organizations operating under direct supervision by the Supreme Leader.

According to Sayyed Reza Taghavi, head of the



Policy Planning Council for the Nation's Friday Imams, Friday prayer takes place in more than 850 cities in Iran. The employees of the Friday Prayer Committee exceed 40,000.⁸⁴ Taghavi's deputy on provincial affairs says there are demands for holding Friday prayer in a hundred more cities and that the government is planning to provide such services soon. According to him, 218 *mosallas*, or Friday prayer centers, are under construction.⁸⁵ Ibrahim says that since 2011, the average age of more than 70 percent of imams is thirty-five.⁸⁶

Iran has about 80,000 mosques,⁸⁷ and the Qom seminary's Office of Islamic Outreach deploys 10,000 clerics to those mosques to lead Muharram rituals.⁸⁸ Currently 126 mosques are under construction and up to 30 mosques will be opened in Tehran this year.⁸⁹ Ironically, highly personal rituals such as *itekaf*, or spiritual retreat, have become organized, bureaucratized, and controlled by a government entity called the National Committee for Itekaf. According to the committee's report, more than 14,000 men and women—of whom 90 percent were young people—participated in this ritual in 2016 at twenty-two Qom mosques.⁹⁰

Winning through Temptation— and Intimidation

Augmenting the symbiotic relationship between clerics and the government are a gigantic complex of religious endowments,⁹¹ more than 11,000 Shiite saints' shrines,^{92, 93} and religious tourism, all of which are controlled by the Supreme Leader and aimed at serving his ideological agenda and meeting his regime's financial needs. Regardless of clerics' political or ideological attitudes toward the government, they often cannot resist its magnanimous benefits and services.

Nor do they elude retribution if they fail to comply with the regime's whims. Thus, among the entities in charge of ideological surveillance and punishment over the clerical establishment are

- the division for clerical affairs in the Supreme Leader's office, headed by Ahmad Marvi;
- the division on statistics and investigation within the Center for the Management of Seminaries;
- the Intelligence Ministry's deputy on *marjaiya* and clergy affairs;
- the Intelligence Protection Organization (of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), now headed by Hojatoleslam Hossein Taeb;
- the Special Court for Clerics, which employs more than 4,000 clerics;
- the independent⁹⁴ Brigade 83 of the Jafar Sadeq Corps, currently commanded by Hojatoleslam Hossein Tayebi Far, Khamenei's former representative in Isfahan province;
- the Saheb al-Zaman IRGC branch, which commands the Basij organization in the Qom and Khorasan provinces and, in cooperation with the Imam Hossein squadron, oversees 14 Basij resistance bases in Qom and Mashhad and 170 Clerics' Basij bases; and
- the Organization for Basij Clerics, restructured by Khamenei as an independent entity in 2000.

For instance, as Hojatoleslam Mohammad Jamali, head of the Gilan province branch of Organization for Basij Clerics, explained in a 2013 interview, the organization that year had 3,000 members, including 800 women clerics.⁹⁵ In Gilan province alone, the organization was operating through thirty bases in seminaries and religious schools. The organization occupies three Basij resistance bases in the province, one for "sisters" and two for "brothers." Among its several divisions, the role of "jihadist groups" is important, with hundreds of its members receiving monthly special military training in its "jihadist camps." Several reports have linked the organization with the Qods Force.

In particular, the deaths of some Basij clerics in the Syrian war have been publicized, including that of Hojatoleslam Mustafa Khalili, the "fourth cleric-martyr and defender of the Shrine from Ahvaz," as announced in February 2016. An undated graphic posted on the organization's website depicts the Basij clerics who have died in Syria. It lists twenty-four "martyrs": one from Alborz province, seven from Khuzestan

province, one from Semnan, two from Mazandaran, five from greater Tehran, two from Qom, one from Ardabil, two from Golestan, one from Qazvin, and two from Afghanistan.⁹⁶ The organization is currently headed by Hojatoleslam Ali Kazem Bahram, who formerly led the ruling jurist's office for the Ahvaz Imam Ali IRGC branch. Like the rest of the Basij organization, such individuals are focused on fighting "Western cultural invasion," and "commanding good and forbidding wrong." They stop women in public with warnings regarding noncompliant dress, and men for not following government regulations for social appearance and interaction with others. In practice, such figures serve as "religious police" who also get involved in suppressing political dissidents and their activities.

In this discussion, the IRGC presents an interesting contrast to the clerical establishment. Whereas both fervently seek control of government funds and power, the IRGC tries to disguise its activity whereas the clergy is omnipresent, either as employees in government bureaus or ideological police, exerting their corrective rulings at such venues as kindergartens, hospitals, beaches, metro stations, and elsewhere, not to mention their frequent appearances on state television and radio. Occupying a divergent range of jobs, clerics comment on the most private matters, even details of sexual interaction, as well as public affairs. The clerical establishment has thus become an ever-present enforcer of the government's authoritarian agenda.⁹⁷

Despite the government's scale of investment and sophistication of its techniques, it has, in the broader sense, failed to persuade the Iranian people of the merits of its cultural agenda. This failure is reflected in religious practice among ordinary Iranians. For instance, the relationship between a practicing Shiite citizen—say, a woman under thirty-five—and her chosen *marja* has changed dramatically, as compared to the prerevolution era. Even a practicing religious citizen does not unquestionably follow her or his *marja*'s religious decrees entirely, let alone his nonreligious advice such as recommendations for elections or other political and social events. Ideals and values such as gender equality, tolerance toward non-Shiites, or

belief in human rights have penetrated the hearts and minds of even society's most religious strata. Hence, worshipers' approach to their *marja* has become more eclectic, with absolute obedience yielding to the calls of conscience and common sense.

Appropriating Popular Islam

In considering the Iranian clergy's interlinked relationship with the Islamic government, one must not reduce causes to fear of the police state or seduction by wealth and power. The crisis in the clerical establishment began long before, in the late nineteenth century, when currents of modernity deprived its members of historically deep-rooted monopolies not only over interpretation of religious texts or management of religious rituals but also of their symbolic and material capital, status, assets, and credibility. The clergy's monopolies over endowments, the juridical system, and educational institutions are just a few examples. Today, only by relying on the state's extraordinary resources can the clergy quiet their critics—although only temporarily.

As for these adversaries, the Iranian Shiite clergy might classify them as follows: representatives of what anthropologists call "popular Islam" as opposed to "official Islam"; ritual-based Islam versus Islam focused on sharia; and intellectual interpreters of Islam. Popular Islam, like vernacular language, by its fluid and dynamic nature does not submit completely to official authority, but after the revolution the government tried to appropriate this trend for political purposes, in many cases offering it as a counterweight to the clergy's inadequate strength or motivation to serve the government's agenda.

The growth of popular Islam over the last three decades is exemplified in the *maddahs*, or religious singers, who have attracted the masses, and especially youth, desperate for entertainment, even if that entertainment comes in religious packaging.⁹⁸ But the growth of *maddahs*, as implied already, owes largely to the government's well-planned agenda to weaken clergy and their authority over religious rituals. Indeed, investment in popular Islam provides greater short-term

rewards than investment in the clerical establishment. As compared to clerics, who have preexisting ideological frameworks that might clash with those of the government, ordinary worshipers and *maddahs* lack such institutional roots and are thus presumably more malleable. As of 2009, more than 45,000 religious clubs (*hayat mazhabi*) were registered in Iran, 5,500 of them for women.⁹⁹ According to a 2010 report, 48,000 licensed *maddahs* and fifty-one training centers for the licensing of *maddahs* were operating nationwide. In Tehran alone, 5,595 *maddahs* were active.¹⁰⁰ Unlicensed *maddahs* are estimated to number more than 100,000.¹⁰¹ In seeking benefits like health care and pensions, *maddahs* can turn to various types of government-funded institutions.¹⁰² Besides the House of the Nation's *Maddahs* (*Khane-ye Maddahan-e Keshvar*), founded in 2009, a university specializing in *maddahi* was founded in Tehran in 2014.¹⁰³ Dozens of *maddahs* reportedly have been deployed to Syrian war zones as religious singers or warriors. The House of the Nation's *Maddahs* also deploys *maddahs* to Muslim countries, Europe, and elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ And an organization for *Basij maddahs* seeks to maintain these singers' ties with the IRGC.¹⁰⁵

Another threat, not at all easily appropriated by the government, is posed by "religious intellectuals," who advocate an alternative reading of Islam more compatible with Western cultural and political values—and consequently more appealing to the country's educated urban religious population. This religious intellectualism emerged under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, when the shah ceased his antireligious policies out of fear of communism and to enhance his religious legitimacy. Various religious institutions, media entities, and other activities sprang up as a result. Whereas this prerevolution religious intellectualism mainly buttressed political Islam, the revolutionary clergy at least tolerated it as a means of mobilizing urban middle-class youth for their agenda. Yet in the decades following the revolution, religious intellectuals have become mostly anticlerical critics of Islamic ideology, seen as a challenge by both government and the clergy. Secular intellectuals, too, inspired by

Western and leftist thinking, have found their voice in the last two decades and cut into clerical dominance of public discourse.

On the other end of the spectrum are those seeking a more stimulating Islam in the face of an establishment bound to the status quo. Small but influential pockets, found within the military, *Basij*, and government sectors, subscribe to apocalyptic theories and messianic trends. Broader perhaps is adherence to Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, which seeks an Islam less focused on sharia or entirely free of it. Secret networks associated with Sufi movements, which embrace an esoteric mindset, are despised by clergy and state alike. For different but probably more fundamental reasons, Sunni Islam is likewise seen by the establishment as both an internal and an external threat, likely resulting in a less forgiving stance toward Sunnism than even that previously held by Iran's Shiites. In his early speeches after assuming office, Ali Reza Arafai has likewise expressed his concerns about Sunni influence. As is usual in government discourse, he identified the general Sunni threat with Wahhabi Islam, associated with Iran's rival Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁶

Outside Islam, Christianity and the Bahai faith are attracting fast-growing numbers of Iranians, alarming religious and political authorities. In recent years, *marjas* and other senior clerics have constantly lamented the expanding influence of Christianity in the Islamic Republic.¹⁰⁷

On July 19, in his first public speech as executive director of Iranian seminaries, Arafai expressed his deep concerns about the multitude of "Qom's rivals," including converts to Sunni Islam or Christianity: "The clerical establishment has been the origin of a revolution, and naturally it faces a countless army of adversaries and competitors. Today, the atheist movement has nearly five hundred million advocates...Qom is responsible before all these rivals, because its waves have penetrated into Iran too. Moreover, we are not only responsible for Iranians, we have to work for the entire world." He added: "Christianity is another rival that is running more than academic centers in the world; it produces thousands of articles and journals

every day and owns hundreds of radio and satellite TV channels...Today in Iran too, [underground] home-based churches in Tehran and Karaj are growing."¹⁰⁸

As reflected in Arafī's remarks, a drift toward atheism or nonreligious forms of spirituality unsettles Iran's gatekeepers no less than conversion to other religions or branches of Islam. For the establishment, all such developments suggest a "Western cultural invasion" or "soft war" that is rapidly and radically changing the lifestyle, vision, and normative principles of Iranian citizens. Islamic ideology itself is at stake in this contest, and the government has admitted, in various ways, that it is losing. Signaling this loss even within families integral to the clerical establishment, senior clerics and establishment officials in recent years have repeatedly complained about the increasing prevalence of "moral corruption and deviation" among seminarians and younger generations of clerics. To fight this contagion, the establishment created a new division called the "Deputy on Seminaries' Edification" to provide programs for the moral refinement of clerics and their families, invisible monitoring of their public behavior, and evaluation of their educational credentials based partly on morality tests. Furthermore, in coordination with the Special Court for Clergy, the division uses coercive mechanisms to correct or discipline violators of the establishment's moral codes. This is primarily intended to prevent the clergy's social image from being tarnished.

A Futile Struggle for Clerical Independence

However much Iran's clerical establishment appears to be in lockstep with the regime, it finds itself in an impossible dilemma: the clerics rely on government largesse for their increasingly sophisticated infrastructure, but they cannot hope to retain popular legitimacy if they are seen as a mere extension of Tehran. At least some members of the establishment have agonized over this codependence, which has hardened over the last three decades. And Ayatollah Khamenei has made plain that the Shiite clergy

should have no illusions about their common fate with the country's Islamic government. Indeed, he has menacingly urged the clerics to remain "revolutionary" and become even more so—which to him at this point means mainly anti-American, although it also means upholding the belief in an Islamic government rooted in governing all dimensions of public life through strict implementation of sharia. To this end, a number of initiatives are now under way to ensure the establishment conserves this revolutionary spirit, including through repression of defiant elements and even harassment of passive ones. In March 15, 2016, addressing the council representing Qom's seminaries, he warned about the danger posed by those clerics who explicitly reveal their lack of faith in revolutionary ideals or whose disguised disloyalty or disinterest goes unnoticed.¹⁰⁹

Despite these enormous government pressures, clerics have made piecemeal efforts to establish autonomy. Toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, young clerics managed to convince Ayatollah Khomeini to allow them to form a Council of Representatives for Seminarians (*Majmou-ye Nemayandegan-e Tulab va Fozalai-ye Howzeh*), an administrative entity wherein representatives are selected by an internal vote for each province. Yet over its three decades, the council has failed to become a key decisionmaking voice in the clergy's administration. In a report published in February 2014, clerics from this body, ironically perhaps, showed their deference to Western democratic models in seeking empowerment through the council's seventh election: the report, published on a clerical news website, was titled "Clergy Majority Participate in the Democratic Process of Seminary."¹¹⁰

Another initiative, begun in 2003 by a few dozen clerics and seminary teachers—the Assembly of Intermediate- and Advanced-Level Teachers—defined its mission as addressing institutional needs and problems.¹¹¹ Despite all its cautionary measures and coordination with the relevant authorities, this new entity was perceived as having a hidden agenda in competing with the fundamentally government-linked Society of Qom Seminary Teachers and pursuing depoliticization

of the clerical community. Notwithstanding associated pressures, the assembly survived and expanded thanks to support from a majority of Qom's respected *marjas*, support that revealed their epidemic distress over the clerical establishment's future autonomy. At its latest public conference, held in the office of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Vahid Khorasani on May 20, 2016, more than a thousand teachers attended.¹¹² However, the survival of such initiatives depends on constant reassurances to the government about a commitment not to defy the authorities or challenge the status quo. Inevitably, the government has imposed constraints on this group that effectively render it ceremonial, a mere "pretender to independence." This arrangement ultimately satisfies the aims of neither party, denying the clerics enough independence to soothe their unhappy collective conscience while undermining their ability to legitimize the regime because they themselves lack autonomy.

Conclusion

With these broader trends in mind, the summer 2016 appointment of Ali Reza Arafī as executive director of the country's seminaries can be regarded as a turning

point in the further radicalization of the Shiite clerical establishment. The move is aimed at more effectively serving the government's totalitarian ideological agenda inside Iran and its policy of exporting the revolution in the Middle East and beyond. Arafī's background and skills in managing the highly influential Al-Mustafa International University, with its global network and robust ties to Islamist individuals and organizations, qualify him uniquely to lead the country's largest and oldest institution. In paving the way for Iran's regional hegemony, such a multidimensional and multitasking body, under Arafī's management, could become as essential as the Qods Force under Qassem Soleimani's command. Indeed, the appointment follows a series of other appointments to sensitive positions in entities like Astan-e Qods Razavi and the Armed Forces General Staff. The common characteristics of all recent appointees are their fairly young age, their possession of modern advanced managerial skills, and their personal loyalty to Khamenei and ideological affinity with him. The Supreme Leader hopes that placing such competent hardliners in key positions will secure the government's anti-American and anti-Western path after his death.

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From 1986 to 2000, Khalaji trained in the seminaries of Qom, where he studied theology and jurisprudence, earning a doctorate and researching widely on modern intellectual and philosophical-political developments in Iran and the wider Islamic and Western worlds. In addition to his own writing, he has translated the works of the humanist Islamic scholar Muhammad Arkoun.

In 2000, Khalaji moved to Paris, where he studied Shiite theology and exegesis in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. He also worked for BBC Persian as a political analyst on Iranian affairs, eventually becoming a broadcaster and producer for the Prague-based Radio Farda, the Persian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Notes

1. For the full text of his speech, see “Bayanat Dar Didar-e Tulab va Fozala va Osatid-e Howzeh Elmieh-ye Qom” [Remarks on the visit of students and scholars and teachers of Qom Seminary], October 21, 2010 (13 Dhul Qadah 1431), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/print-content?id=10357>.
2. The private, or unofficial, appointment was made through the Supreme Council for Seminaries, which operates under the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers umbrella, so as to avoid accountability.
3. “Tavaqof-e Ilam-e Amar-e Talaq Az Soo-ye Sazeman-e Zebt-e Ahval” [Data freeze for Divorce by the Organization for Civil Registration], Iranian Students News Agency, August 2, 2016 (12 Mordad 1395), <http://washin.st/2dxRTGP>.
4. See a report on his speech on his official website: “Didar-e Masulan-e Setad-e Sarshomari-ye Nafos va Maskan Ba Rahbar-e Inqalab” [Visit of officials from the general population and housing census staff with the leader of the revolution], September 13, 2016 (23 Shahrivar 1395), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=34336>.
5. Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, “18 Milliard Toman Shahrieh Mahianeh-ye Khamenei bi Tulab” [18 billion tomans of Khamenei’s monthly salary to seminarians], Digarban, January 30, 2014 (10 Bahman 1392), <http://www.digarban.com/node/16683>.
6. “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Fozalai Howzeh-i Elmieh-i Qom” [Remarks on the public meeting of scholars of Qom Seminary], February 19, 1992 (30 Bahman 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2587>.
7. For Khamenei’s appointment of Mesbah Ameli to be executive director of the Mashhad clerical establishment, see the letter on Khamenei’s official website: “Intisab-e Dabir va Ozai-ye Shora-i Aali, va Mudir-e Hawzeh-ye Elmiye-ye Khorasan” [Appointment of secretary and members of the supreme council and director of the Khorasan Seminary], March 8, 2016 (18 Esfand 1394), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=32533>.
8. “Ayatollah Arafı Mudir-e Howzeh Elmieh-ye Qom Shod” [Ayatollah Arafı became head of Qom Seminary], *Nasim Online*, July 2, 2016 (12 Tir 1395), <http://washin.st/2d2ixqU>.
9. Intisab-e Ozai-ye Shora-i Aali-ye Inqalab Farhangi Baraye Doore Jadid” [Appointment of members to the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution for a new term], June 7, 2014 (17 Khordad 1393), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=12615>.
10. “Ayatollah Arafı: Baz bi Hajj Mi Ravim va Faryad-e Marg ber Amrika Sar Mi Dahim” [Ayatollah Arafı: Again we go to Hajj and give a shout of “Death to America”], *Aftab News*, June 5, 2016 (14 Khordad 1395), <http://washin.st/2dibvzc>.
11. “Darbare Ma” [About us], al-Mustafa International University, <http://miu.ac.ir/?fkeyid=&siteid=1&pageid=140>.
12. The author knows Arafı closely since particularly the 1990s, when he spent time in the Qom seminary.
13. For Arafı’s appointment as a member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, see the letter on Khamenei’s official website, “Intisab-e Ozai-ye Shora-i Aali-ye Inqalab Farhangi Baraye Doore Jadid” [Appointment of members to the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution for a new term], June 7, 2014 (17 Khordad 1393), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=12615>.
14. The institute’s official website is <http://www.eshragh-erfan.com/>.
15. On June 3, 2016, in his Friday prayer sermon, he bashed Saudi Arabia for “depriving” Iranians of going on hajj: “Being deprived of hajj is sign for us of being revolutionary and oppressed. The world should know that we will attend hajj again and shout our declaration of disassociation (*baraa*) from pagans and death to America again.” For a report on his sermon, see “Ayatollah Arafı: Baz bi Hajj Mi Ravim va Faryad-e Marg ber Amrika Sar Mi Dahim” [Ayatollah Arafı: Again we go to Hajj and give a shout of “Death to America”], *Aftab News*, June 5, 2016 (14 Khordad 1395), <http://washin.st/2dibvzc>.
16. Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Memoirs*, chapter 8, available online on his official website, <https://amontazeri.com/book/khaterat/volume-1/471>.
17. For an example of al-Mustafa International University’s allegedly successful efforts to teach Shiite principles to non-Iranians, see “Ashnai Ba Jameh al-Mustafa Gorgan; Markez-e Amoozesh Vizhe Ahl-e Sanat” [Meeting with the al-Mustafa Gorgan community; Sunni training center], *Rahyafte*, July 1, 2016 (11 Tir 1395), <http://washin.st/2dgyOeA>.
18. For the interview, in the hardline, pro-government publication *Raja News*, see “Paiye Sadoor-e Inqalab-e Islami Yek

Tofekr Tamadoni Ast / Sayyed Hussein Nasrallah Goff: Shojaat-e ma Az Shojaat-e Rahbar-e Inqalab Ast” [The basis of exporting the Islamic Revolution is a civilizational thought / Sayyed Hussein Nasrallah Said: Our courage is from the courage of the Supreme Leader], *Raja News*, February 18, 2016 (29 Bahman 1394), <http://www.rajanews.com/news/234979>.

19. Ibid.
20. For Reza Taran’s report on the MIU on his website, see “Talabe-haye Khareji Koja Dars Mi Khanand?” [Where are foreign students studying?], July 13, 2013 (22 Tir 1392), <http://washin.st/2cHmV8V>.
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 94. "Independent" of the armed forces and police.
 95. For Muhammad Jamali's interview with the Iranian Students News Agency, see "Masool-e Sazeman-e Basij-e Tulab va Ruhanian-e Sepah-e Quds-e Gilan Khabar Dad: Jezb va Sazmandegi-e 3 Hazar Talabe va Ruhani Dar Een Sazeman" [Officials of the Organization for Basij Scholars and Clerics of the Qods Force of Gilan announced: Recruitment and organization of 3,000 students and clerics in this organization], *ISNA-Gilan*, December 1, 2013 (10 Azar 1392), <http://gilan.isna.ir/Default.aspx?NSID=5&SSLID=46&NID=67613>.
 96. "Agr Shahedai Madafe-ye Haram Nabudand, Azheri Az Haram-e Ahl al-Bait Nabud" [If they were not martyrs defending the shrine, there was no effect of the Ahl al-Bait], Basij Tulab [Basij Scholars], http://basijtollab.ir/sites/default/files/01_0.jpg.
 97. Mahmoud Malekdar, the deputy on Seminarians and Alumni of Qom Seminary, claims the "Atlas for Clergy Careers" will be published soon. In the atlas, careers have been divided into three categories: exclusive careers for clerics, common careers, and illegal careers. For instance, clerics cannot work as postmen. See his interview in Fars News, "Chape Atlas Mushaghil Hawzooi / Tulab Nabayad Vared-e Mushaghil Mamnooeh Shavand" [Publication of hawzah employment / Students should not enter illegal jobs], Fars News Agency, July 20, 2016 (30 Tir 1395), <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13950430001596>.
 98. For a popular website with information about *maddahs*, see <http://panegyrist.setayeshgar.ir/>.
 99. "Khabar Khoosh Baraye Maddahan-e Keshvar" [Good news for the country's maddahs], *Shafaf*, April 7, 2009 (18 Farvardin 1388), <http://washin.st/2dnwWQL>.
 100. "48 Hazar Maddah va 51 Amoozeshgah Maddahi Ba Mujavez" [48,000 maddahs and 51 maddah educational institutions with licenses in the country], *Mashregh News*, May 10, 2011 (20 Ordibehesht 1390), <http://washin.st/2dEOgij>.
 101. According to the chair of trustees at the House of the Nation's maddahs: "Tadod Maddahan Faal Dar Keshvar?" [How many maddahs active in the country?], *Fararu*, November 8, 2012 (18 Aban 1391), <http://washin.st/2cYeoXu>.
 102. For some efforts to organize maddahs, see "Che Tadod-e Maddah Dar Sath-e Keshvar Faaliat Mi Konand?" [What are the numbers of active maddahs across the country?], *YJC*, August 15, 2015 (24 Mordad 1394), <http://washin.st/2dLNC70>.
 103. "Daneshkade-ye Maddahi Daneshju Mi Pazirad / Samandahi Khaharan Maddah / Vorood-e Khane-ye Maddahan bi Faaliat-hai Iqtasadi" [Maddah faculty accepts students / Organizing sisters' maddah / Opening of maddah houses to economic activities], *Aghigh*, May 5, 2014 (15 Ordibehesht 1393), <http://washin.st/2dm3td0>.
 104. "Rah-andazi Daneshkade Uloom va Funoon-e Maddahi / Izam-e Maddah Bi Keshvarhai Khareji" [The setting up of a faculty of maddah arts and sciences / Dispatch of maddahs to foreign countries], Mehr News Agency, December 7, 2011 (16 Azar 1390), <http://washin.st/2cYeYo2>.
 105. For the official website, see <http://www.basijmaddahan.ir/>.
 106. "Hoshdar-e Mudir-e Howzeh-hai Elmieh Bi Faaliat-e Klisa-hai Khanegi Dar Keshvar" [Warning of the head of seminaries on the activities of domestic churches in the country], *Khabar News*, July 20, 2016 (30 Tir 1395), <http://washin.st/2dN3sug>.
 107. For Ayatollah Lottollah Safi's statement, see "Ayatollah Safi Bi Raees-e Daftar-e Tablighat Eslami-ye Qom Darbare Uloom Jadid Che Gof?" [What did Ayatollah Safi say to the head of the Islamic Propagation Office of Qom about new sciences?], *Khabar Online*, April 23, 2012 (4 Ordibehesht 1391), <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/209121/culture/4555%E2%80%8C>.

108. For Arafī's statements on the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization–aligned news site Mehr News, see “Hoshdar-e Mudir-e Hawzeh-ha-ye Elmiye bi Faaliat Kelisa-ha-l Khanegi Dar Keshvar” [Warning of the director of the seminaries on domestic church activities in the country], Mehr News Agency, July 19, 2016 (29 Tir 1395), <http://washinst/2dnx8z8>.
109. For Khamenei's March statements on his official website, see “Inqalabi Geri Dar Hawzeh” [Revolutionism in the hawzah], March 15, 2016 (25 Esfand 1394), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=12598#58978>.
110. “Musharakat Hadakthari Howzooyan Dar Faryand Democracy-ye Howzeh” [Maximum participation of seminarians in the democratic process of the seminary], *Fordu News*, February 26, 2014 (27 Bahman 1392), <http://fordunews.com/newsF-24750.html>.
111. For its official website, see <http://www.neshasteasatid.com/>.
112. “Ba Hazoor-e Ayatollah al-Azami Vahid Neshast-e Osatid-e Howzeh Bargozari Shod” [Seminary teachers' meeting takes place with the presence of Grand Ayatollah Vahid], *Hawzah News*, May 12, 2016 (23 Ordibehesht 1395), <http://hawzahnews.com/detail/News/379641>.

For Further Reading

For Khamenei's views on clergy and seminaries, the following transcripts of his speeches are instructive:

- “Bayanat Dar Didar-e Jameh Kasiri Az Elman va Tulab-e Howzeh-i Elmieh-i Qom va Mudaris-e Elmieh-i Tehran” [Remarks on the visit of a large number of scholars and students of Qom Seminary and schools of Tehran Seminary], February 21, 1990 (2 Esfand 1368), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2268>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Osatid va Fozala va Mubalighan va Pazhuhoshgaran-e Howzeh-haye Elmieh-ye Keshvar” [Remarks on a public meeting of teachers, scholars, missionaries, and researchers of the country's seminaries], November 29, 2007 (8 Azar 1386), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3412>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Ruhanian” [Remarks on the public meeting of clergy], June 16, 1993 (26 Khordad 1372), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2673>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Ruhanian” [Remarks on the public meeting of clergy], February 6, 1994 (17 Bahman 1372), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2702>.
- “Bayanat Dar Aghaz-e Dars-e Kharej-e Fiqh” [Remarks on the start of Kharej], September 22, 1991 (31 Shahrivar 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2491>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Ruhanian-e Ostan-e Kerman” [Remarks on the public meeting of clergy from Kerman province], November 11, 1991 (20 Aban 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2510>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar-e Masoolan-e Dafatar-e Sazeman-e Tablighat Eslami” [Remarks on the visit of administrators of the Islamic Propagation organization], November 11, 1991 (20 Aban 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2509>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar-e Masoolan-e Majale-i Hoozeh” [Remarks on the visit of Strand magazine officials], February 17, 1992 (28 Bahman 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2584>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Ruhanian [Remarks on the public meeting of clergy],” February 19, 1992 (30 Bahman 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2588>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Fozalai-ye Howzeh-i Elmieh-ye Qom” [Remarks on the public meeting of scholars of Qom Seminary], February 19, 1992 (30 Bahman 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2587>.
- “Bayanat Dar Didar Jami Az Ruhanian” [Remarks on the public meeting of clergy], March 4, 1992 (14 Esfand 1370), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2604>.

