

IRAN'S REGIME OF RELIGION

Mehdi Khalaji

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic has modernized and bureaucratized the clerical establishment, redefined religion and created institutions to enforce this new definition. The effect has been a transformation of religion into a symbolic form of capital. By monopolizing religious affairs, the political system has become a regime of religion in which the state plays the role of central banker for symbolic religious capital. Consequently, the expansion and monopolization of the religious market have helped the Islamic Republic increase the ranks of its supporters and beneficiaries significantly, even among critics of the government. This article demonstrates how the accumulation of religious capital in the hands of the government mutually influences the nature of the state and the clerical establishment and will continue to do so in Iran's uncertain future.

“The problem is not one of constructing definitions of religion. . . . It is a matter of discovering just what sorts of beliefs and practices support what sorts of faith under what sorts of conditions. Our problem, and it grows worse by the day, is not to define religion but to find it.”

Clifford Geertz¹

The political orientation of the Shiite clergy did not originate with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Shiism had political value in Iran long before the founding of the Islamic Republic. Five centuries ago, the Safavid dynasty established Shiism as the government's official ideology. This was a historical turning point for the Shiite clerical establishment, which benefited from new political, social and economic privileges. For about five centuries, Iranian politics has been made in coordination with the clergy. Even the Pahlavi dynasty—known for its authoritarian and secular agenda—needed to give the impression that it was safeguarding Shiism as the government's official religion in order to gain legitimacy.

The overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and emergence of an Islamic Republic

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in 1979 was an exceptional development in the history of the Shiite clerical establishment. Prior to the revolution, the clergy's role had been officially limited to the realm of sacred affairs, but the post-revolution era fundamentally changed the relationship between state and religion in Iran by thrusting clerics into unprecedented positions of political power and laying the groundwork for the development of Iran's unique strand of religious authoritarianism. However, over the past three decades the Islamic Republic has consolidated power and is now imposing its will on the clerical establishment that produced it, particularly the seminaries in the holy city of Qom, as well as on society more broadly. Thus, in order to better understand religious politics in Iran, we must also examine the politics of religion or, more precisely, Iran's political economy of religion.²

Iran's regime of religion has transformed religiosity into a form of social and symbolic capital that can be bought, sold and traded in a new marketplace. Religious capital, as I define it, encompasses social status, network and class, along with educational credentials and popular perceptions of public displays of piety. These factors legitimize the outwardly religious, provide them privileges and imbue them with a unique authority in Iranian society. The government has used the following three mechanisms to confiscate religious capital: monopolizing the management of the seminaries in the hands of the state, regulating and supervising religious rituals and creating parallel institutions to implement functions traditionally monopolized by the clerical establishment. This article explores the ways in which individuals, including clerics, use socioreligious capital to improve their economic or political positions within the government-defined parameters of this new marketplace. It then explores the implications of this phenomenon for the perpetuation of authoritarianism, religious or otherwise, in Iran.

THE SHIITE CLERICAL ESTABLISHMENT: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The Shiite clergy traditionally operated within an oral culture in which rules and norms were not written but rather were transmitted verbally from generation to generation. There was no bureaucracy or administration in the seminaries. One could freely enter the seminary, attend any course of his choosing and, based on his personal relationship with his teacher, receive a salary from a *mujtahid*. One did not need permission from any authority to wear the clerical turban and mantle. Even a certificate of *ijtihad*—which is issued by a prominent seminary professor and serves as a testament to one's dedication to the study of jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—was not considered a bureaucratic credential or prerequisite.³ The certificate was more symbolic than practical and had little lasting impact on one's everyday livelihood. For example, someone could be recognized as a *mujtahid* without having the certificate, as was the case with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the

Islamic Republic, or one could obtain the certificate but choose not to undertake the tasks normally performed by a *mujtahid*.⁴

The establishment began to modernize during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925 to 1979) under a modernization project that was fundamentally paradoxical. On the one hand, the monarchy's legitimacy still stemmed from Shiism, and the Pahlavi shahs had to work within a constitutional framework that not only defined the government as Shiite, but also gave clerics exclusive authority to supervise the legislative process and ensure that all bills conformed to the *sharia* (Islamic law). On the other hand, Reza Shah imitated Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's authoritarian model for secularizing society, and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, tried to implement economic development programs without acknowledging freedom of expression and human rights. This made for a complex and problematic relationship between state and clergy throughout the Pahlavi dynasty. For example, in 1928 the Iranian parliament passed a bill mandating that people wear European-style clothes and hats instead of traditional Iranian ones. The law banned all Iranians from wearing religious dress except for certain state-defined categories of clerics, including *mujtahids* with certificates of *ijtihad* recognized by a *marja*, clerics in rural areas who had passed the necessary exams, Sunni clerics with permission to issue *fatwas*, mosque leaders, seminarians with a clerical certificate issued by the Ministry of Culture, seminary teachers, clergymen of other religions and those with permission from a *mujtahid* to transmit or teach the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve Shiite imams).⁵ The bill was an early example of the state's potential to influence and regulate the seminary because it introduced the notion of exams for clerics and formalized clerical permissions and certificates, which lent them unprecedented social value.⁶

The 1979 revolution, which is often misperceived as an antimodern, radical development, revolutionized the clerical establishment, perhaps more than any other social institution. Since coming to power in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the current supreme leader, or ruling jurist, of the Islamic Republic—has bureaucratized the seminaries and created a vast administration to handle every aspect of clerical life, including health insurance, student housing, curricula, clerical credentials and more. The establishment now has very strict rules regulating admissions, the issuance of credentials and granting permission to wear clerical clothing. In 2010, a law further restricting clerical dress was passed. In some seminaries,

The post-revolution era fundamentally changed the relationship between state and religion in Iran by thrusting clerics into unprecedented positions of political power.

students must even swipe a magnetic card to check into their classes.

In addition to the educational and moral requirements outlined above, the new law introduced a political element and requires clerics to have a practical commitment to the principle of guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*), i.e., Iran's system

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of clerical rule in which absolute authority is vested in the supreme leader. Any cleric failing to demonstrate this ideological commitment is subject to punishment or is prevented from wearing the Shiite clergy's signature turban for a set period of time or even permanently.⁷ Furthermore, *ijtihad* certificates and other seminary credentials, which in the past were largely symbolic, are now considered equivalent to academic credentials when evaluating candidates for positions in universities or government bureaus. Most political positions require candidates to have attained the status of *mujtahid*, including six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, who must pass an exam and

provide their certificate of *ijtihad*. These six ayatollahs are appointed directly by Supreme Leader Khamenei and oversee the legislature to ensure that bills do not contradict Islamic law or the Iranian constitution. The Guardian Council also vets all candidates for public office, monitors elections and certifies their results.

GUARDIANSHIP OF THE JURIST: A NEW SOLUTION FOR AN OLD PROBLEM

According to Shiite theology and classic jurisprudence, only one of the infallible imams, the Twelfth Imam, can establish a religiously legitimate government. But in his absence, a Muslim sultan, whether he is just or unjust, should be obeyed because he protects the interests of the Muslim community.⁸ The Safavid period from 1501 to 1722 was a turning point in the evolution of Shiite theology because the Safavids established Shiism as the state religion and consequently created the first religiously legitimate government since the occultation of the Twelfth Imam.

From the Safavid era onward, religious authorities cooperated closely with the political system but were never absorbed into it and thus maintained their social and economic independence.⁹ In the course of the last five centuries, whenever the monarchy was weak, the clergy gained power and leverage to pressure the government to accommodate its agenda. Conversely, when the monarchy was strong, the government felt less of a need to oblige the clergy. These long-standing tensions culminated in the Constitutional Movement, in which the clergy played a pivotal role; its success in 1906 led to constitutional limits on the authority of

the shah. However, this era also marked the beginning of a new phase in the tensions between monarchs and clerics. The monarchy made new efforts to curtail the power of the clerical establishment—especially the Pahlavi shahs who sought to secularize and modernize every aspect of Iran's judicial and educational systems—and thereby deprive the clergy of its traditional sources of social and legal status.

Ayatollah Khomeini's reinterpretation of the theory of guardianship of the ruling jurist represented an attempt to find a solution for this historically deep-rooted conflict. According to the theory, the monarchy was to be abolished and the most learned Shiite jurist would replace the shah as the head of government. However, many Shiite jurists disagreed with Khomeini's views on politics and religion and his theory on clerical rule; thus the potential for conflict between the ruling jurist and the other jurists emerged. Khomeini's solution for the problem posed by legitimate dissent to his theory from Shiite theologians was to regard the orders, views and *fatwas* of the ruling jurist as superseding those of other jurists. In Khomeini's theory, other jurists assume the status of ordinary people who are obliged to comply with the orders of the ruling jurist on any issue related to the public sphere, but they maintain their traditional influence over rituals, personal affairs and other realms where individuals are free to follow any jurist they choose.¹⁰

Once Khomeini assumed power as Iran's first supreme leader and realized that he could not run the country merely by implementing the *sharia*, he elaborated his theory further in 1988 by raising the issue of expediency (*maslaha*) of the regime. The principle of expediency established that if Islamic or national law contradicts the interests of the regime, the ruling jurist has the religious authority to overrule Islamic law or the constitution. This principle has become a defining characteristic of the Islamic Republic and is a primary reason why Khomeini's political theory is viewed as such a novelty. It refined the criteria of an Islamic government based not on Islamic doctrine or the *sharia*, but rather based on the will and wisdom of the ruling jurist.¹¹ The political implications of this theoretical innovation for Iran's democratic institutions are substantial. In practice, this principle dictates that the Islamic Republic will function democratically until the popularly elected institutions contradict the will of the supreme leader, and he has the constitutional and religious authority to manipulate and control them.

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SHIITE CLERGY: PRIME BENEFICIARIES OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

There is no official statistic defining the exact number of Shiite clerics in Iran, but the total number of male and female clerics—including seminary students and various bureaucrats and government officials—is estimated at over 350,000, or approximately 330,000 more clerics than before the revolution.¹² This tremendous growth is indicative of an unprecedented quantitative shift in the number of clerics,

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as well as a qualitative shift to a new clerical nature. While clerics in pre-revolutionary Iran were limited to jobs such as teaching in seminaries, preaching and performing religious rituals and ceremonies like marriage, divorce and funeral services in post-revolutionary Iran, they have innumerable positions in the fields of politics, education and even the military.

Clerics are employed at every level of almost all government bureaus, and a number of high-ranking political positions are reserved for the clergy.¹³ For example, according to Iran's constitution, the supreme leader, the head of the judiciary, six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, the intelligence minister and all eighty-six members of the Assembly of Experts—a body that appoints the ruling jurist and oversees his activities—must be chosen from among clerics. Furthermore,

the supreme leader has representatives in universities and the security forces, including the police, ground forces, air force, navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as in a number of other government bureaus and in various countries in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, almost all of whom are clerics.

The Islamic Republic has also played a significant role in establishing a broader and more effective transnational network of Shiite clerics. In the wake of the 1979 revolution, for example, a flow of young, non-Iranian Shiites—fascinated by Khomeini's revolutionary version of Shiism—entered the holy cities of Qom and Mashhad to study Shiite theology and Islamic ideology. Moreover, students flocked to Iran not only from countries with large Shiite communities like Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon and Pakistan, but also from North America, Africa, Europe and Asia. For example, Al-Mustafa International University in Qom, which functions under the direct supervision of Supreme Leader Khamenei, not only admits foreign seminary students but also has branches in more than sixty countries.¹⁴

The Islamic Republic has greatly encouraged Iranian and non-Iranian Shiites to study in its seminaries, which has accelerated the globalization of the Shiite clerical establishment and revolutionized the financial networks of Shiite religious

authorities. The clergy's regular use of the Internet has enabled the *marjas* to create their own networks. Each *marja* has dozens of representatives throughout the Muslim world who collect religious taxes from his followers. In places where his representatives are not available, he can disseminate his views and collect taxes via his official website. Accordingly, sources of clerical income are no longer confined to Iran, but are now also drawn globally. The Iranian government strictly controls the financial network of *marjas* with followers outside of Iran, however. If a *marja* wishes to have a transnational presence, he is required to have an office in Qom, which allows different government agencies to monitor his financial activities. For example, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who heads the seminary in Najaf, Iraq, has assets, foundations and offices in Iran that are much larger and more economically viable than his assets in any other country, including Iraq.¹⁵

The clergy is also playing a greater role in Iran's economy, particularly through its work with religious charitable organizations. Clerics, at the supreme leader's behest, supervise all religious endowments in the country, many of which are worth billions of dollars. After the revolution, many ayatollahs also created charities and nonprofit foundations that today receive annual funds allocated as part of the overall budget of the executive branch of the Iranian government, as well as financial aid from the supreme leader's personal coffers. Some of these entities have further enriched themselves through government-authorized monopolies over the import, export and trade of certain products. Examples include Imam Sadiq University, run by the head of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani; the Ghadir International Foundation, run by Ayatollah Abu-Qassim Khazali, a former member of the Guardian Council; the Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute, run by Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi; and Ayatollah Nasir Makarem Shirazi's Amirmomenin Foundation.¹⁶

Additionally, in coordination with the Islamic Republic's cultural attachés abroad, the government organizes, trains and sends clerics to Muslim and non-Muslim countries to proselytize Shiism through the Office of Islamic Propaganda in Qom and the Islamic Propaganda Organization in Tehran.¹⁷ Usually, clerics with superior language skills receive significant government salaries, and they augment their earnings by collecting religious taxes from worshippers—a third or more of which is traditionally given to the collector. Additionally, clerics now oversee sports clubs and teams, the movie industry, TV and radio production, the media and cultural productions such as books and music. In sum, we can see that it is difficult to define the job of a cleric today because they are involved in a multitude of religious and nonreligious activities.

Table 1: Sample of Endowments Receiving Government Funds in 2010²²

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Allocated Funding</i>	<i>Function</i>
Islamic Culture and Relations Organization	\$80,000,000	Conducts public diplomacy and supervises cultural attachés
Endowment and Charity Organization	\$48,780,000	Supervises endowment and charity activities
Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization	\$1,759,000	Coordinates all pilgrimages outside of Iran
Office of the Supreme Leader in Universities	\$1,500,000	Ensures that university curriculum and teaching conforms to the official ideology
Imam Khomeini Institute for Education and Research	\$8,300,000	Trains educators and encourages Islamic principles in the humanities
Islamic Propaganda Organization	\$65,940,000	Publishes books, journals and software; dispatches clerics to preach domestically and abroad
Al-Mustafa International University	\$118,426,800	Educates foreign clerics
Imam Reza Shrine	\$12,000,000	Funds used for encouraging visitors to the shrine
Alzahra University	\$1,620,500	Educates women
Aid to Mosques and Religious Activities	\$33,102,600	Encourages mosque attendance
Aid to Nongovernmental Religious Institutes	\$35,000,000	
Center for Mosque Affairs	\$15,000,000	Funds salaries of imams and other mosque expenses
Aid to Cultural and Religious Centers	\$45,000,000	
Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong	\$4,000,000	Enforces Islamic rules in the public sphere
Asra Institute	\$6,000,000	Publishes the religious thoughts of Ayatollah Javadi Amoli
Imam Sadiq Institute	\$3,000,000	Aims to enrich theological discourse in the Muslim community

Council for Representatives of Clerics in Seminaries	\$2,000,000	
National Center for Responding to Religious Questions (domestic)	\$2,000,000	Answers inquiries about Islamic ideology
National Center for Responding to Religious Questions (abroad)	\$2,000,000	Answers inquiries about Islamic ideology
Islamic Propaganda Office, Qom Seminary	\$52,242,000	Protects the legitimacy of the supreme leader
Supreme Council of the Seminaries	\$80,840,000	Funds and manages the clerical establishment
Center for Services to the Seminaries	\$15,824,860	Provides housing and health insurance for the clergy
University of Islamic Sects	\$3,522,800	Recruits Sunni students to study in Iran
Planning Council for Khorasan Seminaries	\$6,500,000	Funds the clergy in Khorasan, Iran

Source: Adapted from the government's most recent budget bill, as approved by the parliament (Majlis) in May 2011.

HEAD OF STATE AND CLERGY

Before the revolution, the clergy was perceived to be the highest socioreligious authority and had maintained its independence from the government. After 1979, the confluence of socioreligious and political authority made the clerical establishment completely dependent on the government. Iran's supreme leader today is not only the chief of state and commander in chief of the armed forces, but he is also the *de facto* head of the seminary, which has become a more centralized and rationalized institution under his tenure.¹⁸ The clerical establishment today is a bureaucratically sophisticated, multidimensional complex that not only legitimates the government but also serves as its primary training center. The nationalization of the seminaries in Qom, Mashhad and other cities in Iran has subjected the clergy to an unprecedented level of politicization and government control. They are administrated by the Supreme Council of the Seminaries, whose members are appointed by the supreme leader. Created in 1995, the council is in charge of policy planning, seminary issues, religious education and guidance, "preventing the penetration of foreigners in seminaries and protecting clerics against the influence of deviant currents."¹⁹ According to its charter, *marjas* who believe in the

theory of guardianship of the ruling jurist can also participate in appointing or dismissing the members of the council, suggesting a more diffuse system in which the entire clerical leadership has a voice in the administration and management of the seminaries.²⁰ In reality, however, the supreme leader is the only real authority with the power to shape the council in his own favor. In addition to the seminaries,

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more than 400 religious institutes for Islamic research, outreach and propaganda exist in Qom, and dozens of similar institutes are also at work in cities such as Mashhad and Esfahan.²¹ These organizations must operate according to rules set up by the council, whose members have all proven their loyalty to Khamenei.

Ayatollah Khamenei revolutionized the bureaucratic structure of the seminary from a traditional, oral-based order to a modern, digitized system. This transformation has enabled the state to monitor clerics, to control their private lives and public activities and to shape their political orientation. For instance, in the pre-Khamenei era, the government had little control over salary distribution in the seminaries because each *marja*

could independently determine which seminarians to support. Today, salary distribution is computerized and centrally controlled by the Center for Management of the Seminary, which falls under the purview of the Supreme Council of the Seminaries and determines clerics' eligibility to receive salaries.²³ The Center now has complete control over the exact amount of money *marjas* can distribute to clerics, many of whom do not work outside the seminary and greatly depend on the salaries they receive from each *marja*. At this point, it is irrelevant whether clerics have doubts about the religious and political legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, for all clerical affairs are conducted within a framework that is indirectly defined by Ayatollah Khamenei, and all clerics have become indirect beneficiaries of the regime of religion. Even *marjas*, who do not directly depend on the government, must undertake financial transactions through a government-controlled system. Furthermore, while clerics could previously study or teach in seminaries without permission from any authority, seminaries are now governed by a more restricted, university-like system.²⁴

In addition to setting up a new system to manage the seminaries, the government has implemented other mechanisms to solidify its control over the clerics. The Special Court for the Clergy and the Imam Jafar Sadiq 83 Independent Brigade are among the coercive tools the government employs to repress dissent in the seminaries and to ensure that its voice is unified and in line with what the

government wants the people to hear. The Imam Jafar Brigade is a branch of the Basij, a militia subordinate to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard that is staffed by guerrilla-clerics who wear a military uniform and a turban. Its primary function is to secure the city of Qom and to monitor clerics throughout the country and intimidate those who fail to toe the regime line, thereby ensuring political and ideological control over the clergy.²⁵

The Special Court for the Clergy is charged with preventing devious influence in the seminaries, protecting clerics' dignity and trying members of the clergy accused of criminal acts.²⁶ The head of the court, who is appointed by the supreme leader, operates independently of the judicial system, which has enabled the court to disregard Iran's legal procedures when expedient. Since its establishment in 1987, hundreds of clerics throughout the country have been imprisoned and executed.²⁷ In addition to the Special Court, the head of the Department of Statistics and Selection, which is ostensibly under the auspices of the Center for the Management of the Seminary, acts on behalf of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security and surveils clerics in both their public and private lives.²⁸ The Ministry's deputy on clergy affairs and the Office of the Supreme Leader's deputy on clerical relations also play a significant role in political and ideological control of the clergy through their visible presence in all *marja* offices, in high-level courses taught by *mujtahids* and in administrative positions in religious schools nationwide.²⁹ In this way, the government has successfully engulfed the management of seminaries by transforming them into a modern and sophisticated bureaucracy. Let us now turn to the government's other two mechanisms for seizing religious capital: the regulation of religious ritual and the creation of institutions to enforce its definition of religion.

THE STATE: THE CENTRAL BANK OF RELIGIOUS CAPITAL

Clerics before 1979 had nearly exclusive access to religious capital, in that religious truth and orthodoxy were more or less defined by the clergy, and clerics throughout Iranian history have used this religious capital to mobilize people in support of or against the monarchy.³⁰ In other words, clerical institutions were the only authorities that could legitimately produce the commodity of salvation, and their knowledge and piety afforded them status in Iranian society. However, clerics have lost that monopoly over the past three decades as their roles have evolved, as the function of religion in society has changed and as a new religious space has emerged in which they are no longer the only actors. Government organizations (such as state-run media and educational institutions) religious intellectuals, radical Islamists, religious singers (*maddahs*) and others occupy and compete for this space. However, the state increasingly controls all religious capital and assets.

By constructing a new regime of religion, the government has gradually taken over the religious field and has set new rules regarding who can define religious truth. All clerics or Shiite worshipers who do not adhere to the government's ideology are accused of propagating "American" or "false" Islam.³¹

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Prior to the Islamic Revolution, mosques traditionally were run by local businessmen. Using their connections, they could request that anyone serve as prayer leader of their mosque, either temporarily or permanently, to respond to the religious needs of their community. This was true in all mosques, whether they were located in big cities or in remote villages. However, the Islamic Republic uprooted this tradition when it created a Committee for Mosque Affairs to regulate the activities of mosques throughout the country. Each mosque was also turned into a recruitment center for the Basij, where youths receive military and ideological training. Therefore,

the committee works closely with Basij commanders to run the mosques and has sole responsibility for appointing prayer leaders to mosques and outlining their job descriptions.³² The government also appoints Friday prayer leaders in each city and oversees their activities through the Council for Friday Prayer Imams Policy, which issues guidance to all Friday prayer leaders regarding what to say in their weekly sermons.³³ There is yet another committee dedicated to prayer itself, whose countrywide network works to encourage people to attend mosques for collective prayer.³⁴ Clerics are therefore not even free to run their own mosques.

While the Islamic Republic has usurped and bureaucratized religion, it has also imposed its version of religion on people's private lives. After the revolution, the government redefined Islam and began to re-Islamize society as if pre-revolutionary Iran had not been a Muslim country. The government is now the final arbiter of whether movies, street names, architecture, dress and daily conversations are Islamic or un-Islamic.³⁵ In recent years, Islamizing the humanities departments of universities has become a top government priority.³⁶

Islam, especially the government's version of Shiism, has gained tremendous weight in Iranian society over the past thirty years. Not only must all those applying for government jobs be loyal to the constitution, which enshrines Shiite Islam as the state religion, but one's public persona as a devout Shiite has become a form of social capital that allows one to gain others' trust, expand social and financial networks and strengthen business relationships.³⁷ In addition, religious taxes paid to government-endorsed religious authorities are exempt from federal

taxes—a privilege that disproportionately benefits wealthy businessmen.³⁸ In other words, the government now has the sole authority to oversee all market exchanges of religious capital; it has become a sort of central bank that sees itself as the exclusive source for printing, validating and regulating religious currency. In order to survive in today's Iran, it is almost impossible not to be a Muslim. Whether or not Iranians believe in the legitimacy of the government or support its religious ideology and politics, they are forced to participate, willingly or unwillingly, in the growth of the religious market by spending hard currency for religious purposes and religious currency for practical, political and economic purposes.

CONCLUSION

The Islamic Republic of Iran has commoditized religion, making clerics one of the main beneficiaries of the new religious marketplace. Despite this fact, they are relatively ambivalent about post-revolution Islamic ideology. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic has made Iranian clerics the richest clergy in over a thousand years.³⁹ On the other hand, it has turned traditional Shiite political thought on its head and forced the clergy to work within the regime of religion, whose parameters are defined and enforced by the government. Traditional Shiism regards monarchy as a legitimate political order and obedience to it as a religious task. They rarely say so publicly, but many traditional clerics believe that, although the Islamic Republic is not technically a monarchy, the ruling jurist is in fact a Shiite king who protects the interests of Shiites worldwide. This helps explain the clergy's de facto support for the Islamic Republic, even while many are so-called traditionalists or quietists, meaning they do not advocate political Islam or Khomeini's theory of the guardianship of the ruling jurist. They can hold traditional Shiite views on legitimate government and still benefit from their tacit support of the ruling jurist as long as they avoid public confrontation with the regime. This is the real meaning of a quietist Shiite jurist: one who is not entirely indifferent toward government, who recognizes the Shiite government in Iran and who refrains from publicly protesting against it.

The main challenge Shiite clerics will face in the future is whether and how to create an alternative for the Islamic Republic that rejects Iran's Shiite authoritarianism but still grants them the same political and economic privileges as the current system. Since 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei has strengthened his position as supreme leader based not on his religious credentials, but by relying on the security and intelligence apparatus and empowering it, particularly the Islamic

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Revolutionary Guard. Khamenei's military backing only makes the clerics more subservient to him. Hence, in a post-Khamenei era, the ability of clerics to act independently from the security and intelligence apparatus will be limited.

If we consider possible future outcomes, either an anti-clerical, military government or a secular, liberal-democratic, pro-Western government is likely to succeed the current regime, neither of which seems very promising for the clergy. The Islamic Republic is already exhausting its religious capital, as evidenced by the declining popularity and prestige of clerics, diminished mosque attendance and increasing support for secular and liberal values in Iran.⁴⁰ Clerics today are living in an era in which few new theories are being conceptualized. They have failed to challenge the theological underpinnings of the state and to produce a new political theory for an Islamic government that differs from Khomeini's theory but maintains their privileged status in society. Therefore, the clergy as a whole is left with no alternative but to be supportive—or at least not publicly critical—of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ironically, thirty years of clerical rule have undermined the clergy's ability to operate independently, to influence future political and social developments and to act as a check on authoritarian rule. The Islamic Republic's days may soon be numbered, but it is unlikely that the clergy will take a lead role in any future movement to significantly reform Iran's regime of religion. 

NOTES

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 1.

² One of the first scholars to study religion in Iran from the perspective of political economy was an eminent Iranian philosopher based in Germany, Mohammad Reza Nikfar. His collection of essays, *Political Economy of Religion*, is currently available on RadioZamaneh and will be published in Farsi in a forthcoming book.

³ Although the Shiite religious hierarchy is more defined than its Sunni counterpart, there is no consistent or well-defined system to denote various clerical ranks. The terms and titles are somewhat fluid and have changed over time. The most qualified and learned *mujtahids* (seminarians who study Shiite jurisprudence for many years and are trained in *ijtihad*, or methodological interpretation of the sacred texts) become a *marja-e taqlid*, or source of emulation. This occurs through an informal process whereby *mujtahids* garner admiration and respect among their peers and the *marjas* based on the number of followers they attract, students they support and religious dues they collect. In the modern era, members of the clergy who have not yet attained *mujtahid* status are referred to as *hojjat al-Islam* (proof of Islam), whereas the title *ayatollah* (sign of God) is reserved for *mujtahids* and *ayatollah al-uzma* (grand ayatollah) for the sources of emulation.

⁴ A recent example for this is Ali Falsafi (1920 to 2006), one of a limited number of disciples of Grand Ayatollah Abulqasim Musawi Al-Khoei to receive a certificate of *ijtihad* from him. Despite his credentials, he was reluctant to be regarded as a *marja*. He never published a book of legal codes (*resaleh-ye amaliyeh*), which normally would signal a desire to be followed by worshipers. A brief biography of Falsafi is available at Seyyed.com, <http://www.seyyedan.com/Files/html/rejal/falsafi.htm>.

⁵ According to Twelver Shiism, the twelve imams are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and are his legitimate successors, who claim spiritual and political leadership of the Islamic community. For a historical account of the formation of Twelver Shiism, see Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and*

Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam: Abu Ja'Far Ibn Qiba Al-Razi and His Contribution to Imamite Shi'ite Thought (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993).

⁶ Mahmoud Delfani, "Siasat-e Mottahid Ashekl Sakhtan-e Albeseh va Mas'aleh-ye Javaze Ammameh dar Chalesh ba Rowhaniyat-e Shia-ye Iran va Eragh" [The political unification of the dress code in confrontation with the Shiite clergy in Iran and Iraq], *Motaleat-e Irani* [Iranian studies] 1383, no. 3-4 (2004): 86–87; Stephanie Cronin, "Modernity, Change and Dictatorship in Iran: The New Order and its Opponents, 1927–29," *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 2003): 1–36.

⁷ Supreme Council of the Seminaries Act 745 [in Farsi], art. II, § 4, cl. 5 (2010), <http://www.shora-yeaali.net/laws/law-content.aspx?id=344>.

⁸ The Twelfth Imam is a Shiite messianic figure known as the Mahdi, or "Lord of the Age," who is believed to be in occultation until Resurrection Day when he will return to establish a reign of justice on earth. Maziar Behrooz, "The Islamic State and the Crisis of Marja'iyat," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 16, no. 2 (1996): 94; Tawfiq Alsaif, *Nazariyat as-Solta fil Fiqh as-Shii* [The theory of power in Shiite jurisprudence] (Beirut: al-Markaz as-Saqafi al-Arabi, 2002), 101–10.

⁹ Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785–1906; The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909 (Studies in Middle Eastern History)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Imam Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist* (London: Alhoda, 1970).

¹¹ Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 16, 210.

¹² The clerical establishment deliberately does not announce the number of its members. These figures were quoted to this author by representatives of religious authorities, including some seminary authorities, in several off-the-record interviews from June 2007 to November 2010.

¹³ On the broad scope of involvement of clergy in the Ministry of Education, see Shirzad Abdollahi, "Az Shaye-eh ta Vaqeiyyat" [From rumor to reality], *Khabar Online*, 2 May 2010, <http://www.khabar-online.ir/news-62230.aspx>.

¹⁴ Al-Mustafa International University, <http://en.miu.ac.ir/>.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the financial networks of the Shiite clergy and Ayatollah Sistani, see Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf>.

¹⁶ "University President" [in Farsi], Imam Sadiq University, <http://www.isu.ac.ir/English/President.htm>; "Quran Researchers among Islamic Republic of Iran's Officials," International Quran News Agency, 16 August 2009, http://www.iqna.ir/en/news_detail.php?ProdID=449149; "Biography" [in Farsi], Ayatollah Mizbah Yazdi, <http://mesbahyazdi.com/english/index.asp?biography/index.htm>; "Biography" [in Farsi], Ayatollah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, <http://english.makarem.ir/biography/>.

¹⁷ "Mission Statement" [in Farsi], Islamic Propagation Office, <http://www.dte.ir/Portal/Home>.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see Mehdi Khalaji, *Nazm-e Novin-e Rohaniyat dar Iran* [The new order of the clerical establishment in Iran], 3rd ed. (London: Mardomak, 2011), available online at Mehdi Khalaji, "Jomhoori-e Eslami va Nazm-e Novin-e Rohaniyat" [Islamic Republic and the new order of the clerical establishment], *Iran Nameh* 2-3 (Summer/Fall 2008), <http://fis-iran.org/fa/iran-nameh/volxxiv/orderofclericalestablishment>.

¹⁹ Charter for the Supreme Council of the Seminaries, 28 November 1995, <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/legislation/charter-supreme-council-s>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3, art. VI.

²¹ "Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi: Islamic Culture Based on Science" [in Farsi], Iranian Students' News Agency, 13 November 2008.

²² This list reflects only the government-funded portion of these organizations' budgets, which represents a fraction of their overall income. Total income figures are unavailable as those organizations do not release financial records or other documents, and many religious entities receive ad hoc or

annual budget supplements from the supreme leader. The full text of the source document is available on the Iranian government's official website at <http://www.dolat.ir/Images/News/AttachFile/3-3-1390/FILE634418325212812500.pdf>.

²³ "Qom seminary students pay tuition fees digitally" [in Farsi], *ITran*, 24 August 2007, <http://www.itiran.com/?type=news&id=8372>.

²⁴ For more information on the seminary admissions process, see the webpage of the Education Deputy of the Center for Management of Qom Seminary, <http://www.howzeh-qom.com/default.aspx?siteid=1>.

²⁵ For more information on the Imam Jafar Sadiq 83 Independent Brigade, see an interview with Mojtaba Zonnor, its founder and first commander, in "Padideh-ye No Zohoor-e Tollab-e Razmi-Tablighi: Nabz-e Jaded-e Siasat-e Irani be Ravayat-e Mojtaba Zonnor" [A New Pulse of Iranian Politics in the Narrative of Mojtaba Zonnor], *Hamshahri-e Mah* 80 (August 2011).

²⁶ Ordinance for the Special Prosecutor's Offices and Courts of the Clergy, art. I, 6 August 1990, <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/legislation/scc/>.

²⁷ On the history and legal legitimacy of the Special Court of the Clergy, see Emad al-Din Baqi, *Ghodrat va Rohaniyat* [Power and the Clergy], (Tehran: Sarayi, 2004); Majid Mohammadi, *Special Court for the Clergy: Raison d'être, Development, Structure and Function* (New Haven: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, August 2010), http://www.iranhrc.org/files.php?force&file=pdf_en/LegalCom/Special_Court_for_the_Clergy_854451794.pdf. There are dozens of reports by clerics who have been condemned and since released by this court. See, for example, "Karbaschi Memoirs, From the Prosecutors and the Special Court for the Clergy" [in Farsi], *Critique of the Special Court for the Clergy* (blog) [in Farsi], 22 November 2008, <http://www.naghdeyvezeh.blogfa.com/post-59.aspx>.

²⁸ "Dialogue with the Center for the Management of the Seminary Deputy for Selection and Statistics" [in Farsi], *Hawzeh.net*, 2002, <http://www.hawzah.net/fa/MagArt.html?MagazineID=0&MagazineNumberID=4237&MagazineArticleID=28095>.

²⁹ Interview with the heads of two *marjas'* offices in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, June 2007.

³⁰ For example, clerics during the Qajar dynasty banned the use of tobacco in opposition to the shah's tobacco concession to the British and played an important role in the Constitutional Movement. Important elements of the clergy sided against Reza Shah Pahlavi and supported Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq's nationalization of the oil industry in the 1950s, and Ayatollah Khomeini allowed some political groups opposed to Mohammad Reza Shah to use religious taxes to advance their political cause. Eric Rouleau, "Khomeini's Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 59, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 1–20.

³¹ Ayatollah Khomeini is probably one of the most outspoken critics of the Shiite clergy in the history of Shiism. He labeled clerics who did not support his theory as backward, stupid, monarchist, colonized minds and supporters of American Islam. Mehdi Khalaji, "Royaniat be che Dard-e Jomhoori-e Eslami Mikhorad" [What is the clergy's function in the Islamic Republic], *Mardomak*, 20 June 2010, <http://www.mardomak.org/story/Khalaji-On-independence-of-clericks>.

³² Interview with nine imams of Tehran mosques, April 2008 to July 2010; "Activities to Implement the Basij Organization of Neighborhoods and Mosques to Begin Next Year" [in Farsi], Fars News Agency, 6 January 2009, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8810131195>.

³³ Council for Friday Prayer Imams Policy [in Farsi], <http://imamatjome.com>.

³⁴ "Staff History" [in Farsi], Prayer Center, <http://center.namaz.ir/page.php?page=showarticles&cat=32&id=1&office=center>.

³⁵ For example, earlier this year Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi criticized Iranian young people for using expressions such as "I desire it" or "I like it" or, when parting, "take care" or "see you," calling these expressions Western and un-Islamic. Furthermore, the police set strict rules for wedding ceremonies to ensure that they are held according to Islamic criteria. "Mesbah, concerned about youth culture, says 'rather than say "goodbye," say "I watch you"'" [in Farsi], *Saham News*, 12 August 2011, <http://sahamnews.net/1390/05/75522/>; "Police are not involved in organizing weddings" [in Farsi], *Hadeseh.com*, 22 July 2005, <http://www.hadeseh.com/b/archives/005847.php>.

³⁶ Since taking office in 1989, Supreme Leader Khamenei has warned about the dangers of a Western "cultural invasion" for Muslim youth. For the full text of his 2009 speech on this issue, including the danger of the humanities, see "Remarks in a meeting with university professors" [in Farsi] (speech, location unknown, 30 August 2009), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7959>.

³⁷ Job application, Zanjan Province, <http://b.taut.ir/Conditions.aspx>.

³⁸ Islamic Republic of Iran Direct Taxation Act, art. 139 (1995), <http://www.tccim.ir/images/Docs/Rules/Maliyathaye%20Mostaghim.pdf>.

³⁹ Khalaji, *Nazm-e Novin-e Rohaniyat dar Iran*.

⁴⁰ Mansoor Moaddel, "The Iranian Revolution and its Nemesis: The Rise of Liberal Values among Iranians," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, no. 1 (2009): 126–36.