

IRAN

From Religious Dispute to Revolution

Michael M. J. Fischer

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

*To the warm, courageous, and complex people of
Iran, and to my parents and our intellectual and
religious traditions*

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53711

www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

Copyright © 1980 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
Introduction copyright © 2003 by the Board of Regents of the University of
Wisconsin System
All rights reserved

5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fischer, Michael M. J., 1946–

Iran : from religious dispute to revolution / Michael M. J. Fischer

p. cm.

Originally published: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN 0-299-18474-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Shiites—Iran. 2. Islam and politics—Iran. 3. Iran—Politics and government—
1941–1979. 4. Iran—Religious life and customs. I. Title.

BP192.7.I68 F57 2003

306.6'97'0955—dc21 2002074034

vices, and the creation of "sacrifice zones" outside the enclaves of wealth and transnational trade. This was the fear of the 1980s articulated by such intellectuals as the Palestinian Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (1966), the Moroccan Abdullah Laroui (1976), and the Pakistani Fazlur Rahman (1980). In the Iran of the 1970s, where less dire circumstances prevailed, and a more classic form of revolution unfolded, we can perhaps hope for a more Islamic liberal future. It is a different model and historical trajectory than the hopes for liberal Islam in other parts of the Islamic world: "civil Islam" in Indonesia (Heffner 2000), or a possible *de facto* pluralism and Islamic liberalism in Egypt constructed out of contending groups holding each other in check, rather than sudden procedural democracy or any of the other sudden "solutions" proposed by various contending ideologies (Binder 1988).

Theories of Revolution and Social Changes

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

You usually had two sorts of Arab operatives to deal with: one set acted as if having an agent from Iran was like having the Prophet's own right-hand man at the helm, while the other lot were pugnacious and sneering, treating the Persians as if the ancient battle of Qaddisiyah between the two races had never ended. . . . The man who had answered him in Persian said, "He says you've come here to spy." "Well, we all have to get to America somehow." . . . "He's a Pakistani. Another whiz from over there. They say if it had been his job the WTC building would have come undone in half a minute."

—Salah Abdoh, *The Poet Game*

In my writings on the Iranian revolution, I sketched out a series of explanatory frames or models, which I thought needed to be factored together into multicausal models to help ask informed questions for continuing to monitor and make sense of an ongoing social process. Among these questions are those that consider generations of Islamic response to Westernization, colonialism or neocolonialism, the history of Iranian revolutions, the structural patterns of revolutions, the institutional dynamics of Shi'ism, and the social agendas being contested and proposed. The revolution of 1977–1979 was the fifth time since 1873 that an alliance of secular and religious forces had come together either to force a change in the political system or in major policy directions; it was the first time, however, that the religious forces were able to play the dominant partner.

In a comparative essay on Islamic movements over five generations from the 1870s to the 1970s and from the Maghreb, or North Africa, in the west to the Indian subcontinent in the east, I sorted through a class and generational analysis (chart 1). Organizationally, the Islamic movements of each generation provided both positive legacies and new problems for the succeeding generations. With renewed (and lay) *ijtihad* (interpretations for new conditions) and sociopolitical engagement in the eighteenth and nineteenth century came also a weakening of older evaluative skills, and as yet a lack of new technocratic ones. In the next generation of the modernist reformers (Afghani, Abduh), science and technology and tutelary democracy became slogans, but the political economy of dependency was severely underestimated, and an elitism *vis-à-vis* the lower classes was cultivated. In the mid-twentieth-century, neofundamentalism brought political organization of the masses and a kind of ademicocratic populism (Muslim Brotherhood, Maududi's *Jamiat-i Islam*) with a continuing devaluation of traditional evaluative skills and a totalitarian anti-pluralist attitude towards those who were not members of the organization. In the post–World War Two generation, Islamic socialism brought ideals of economic reconstruction and social welfare as responsibilities of the state, but dictatorial means were reinforced and these decayed into corrupt authoritarianisms. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamic resurgence brought movements against corruption and searches for moral identity, but where these became instituted in states (Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia) provide very different modes of established state Islam) there was an inability to live up to ideals of justice (renewed corruption), and a lack of clarity about strategies for the economy and social welfare.

Within Iranian history over the past five centuries, a similar structural analysis of cleric-led struggles could be done sorting by factions, organizational form, and political engagement with the state (chart 2). Across the western Islamic world in the past century, there has been a shift of class power from the shahs, sultans, and upper elements of the patrimonial structures of the Safavid-Qajar-Pahlavi and Ottoman empires into the hands of the bureaucratic and petite bourgeois classes. The locus of the dramatic movements of these structural changes occurred in the politicized arenas of the big cities, where masses of urbanizing peasants and overeducated, underemployed, *declassé* bourgeoisie could be mobilized in demonstrations that had the power to constrain, if not change, political power. At times, as in the Iranian revolution, these became the sites to demonstrate that political and social power had already shifted. The comparative canvas allowed for a mapping of religiosities as they varied by class and social segment, and as they were reformatted and reformulated under changing conditions.

Against this broad comparative canvas, the changes within Iran could be sketched with sharper focus. The earlier essay "Islam and the Revolt of the Petite Bourgeoisie" (Fischer 1982), was inspired both by Marx (the ideas of a social revolution across generations with organizational learning across countries and regions; structural changes being confirmed and legitimated

Chart 1. Contributions and Failings of the Six Generations

	ENDURING CONTRIBUTIONS	FAILINGS
(1) Puritanical religious reformism (premodern fundamentalism—18th–19th centuries)	• Jihad; • Sociopolitical engagements	• Loss of old scholarly historical and evaluative skills. • Lack of new technocratic skills.
(2) Modernist reformism (Afghani, Abduh, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ataturk, Iqbal—early 20th century)	• Science and technology; • Democracy	• Underestimation of the political economy of dependency. • Elitism vis-à-vis the lower classes.
(3) Neofundamentalists (Muslim Brotherhood, Maududi's <i>Jamiat-i Islam</i> —1930s, 1940s)	• Political organization; • Populism (ademocratic)	• Continued devaluation of historical skills. • Totalitarian (antipluralist attitude toward nonmembers).
(4) Islamic socialism (Nasser, Destour, Ba'th, Bhutto—post-World War II)	• Economic reconstruction; • Social welfare	• Need for dictatorial means: decay into corrupt authoritarianism
(5) Islamic Resurgence of the 1970s, 1980s	• Leverage against corruption; • search for moral identity	• Inability to live up to Islamic ideals of justice. • Lack of clarity about fundamentalist versus modernist program.
(6) Transnational, political Islam (postnational, amodernist) 1990s, 2000s	• Telemedia: extension & undoing of religious position-taking; • Democratization (Iran, albeit with religious hardliner constraints); • Global alliances across traditional sectarian and national divides	• Deadlocked struggle between ideals of <i>jumhuriya</i> (republic) vs <i>imara</i> (<i>emir, imam</i>; autocracy); • Narrowing space for pluralism; • Increased para-state violence, terror; • Increased vulnerability to globalization

by renegotiating the legal structures of property and civil rights regulating the mixed modes of production; and the constraints imposed by the global political economy whereby crises occurred first not necessarily at the center of power, but eventually to succeed had to force change at the center and throughout the system) and by Max Weber (the idea of multicausal heuristics with four or five levels of interaction including: psychological anxiety

Chart 2: Clerical Struggles in Iran

Generation (1–6) internal factions (a–c)	State–Clergy Relations
Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722) patronage by the state: seminary students, shaykh ul-Islam, judges, endowment administrators vs withdrawal of clergy to Iraq and into quietism (Akbaris)	
Qajar Dynasty (1785–1925) competition	
1. Puritanical Reformism a) Activist dominance-seeking Usulis vs b) Scholarly, quietist (e.g. Ansari)	
2. Modernist Reformism (al-Afghani, Dowlatabadi, Roshdiyeh): a) Conservatives: anti-constitution anti-modernists: Nuri, Imam Jomeh of Tehran; vs b) Moderates: pro-constitution, anti-modern schools: Khorasani, Behbehani, Modarresi; vs c) modernists: Dowlatabadi, Roshdiyeh;	
Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979) 1925–1941 suppression of clergy: • seminary students: from 5–6,000 (1924) to 3,000 (1935) to 740 (1940); • secularization of schools, law, dress, endowments	
3. Neo-Fundamentalists: <i>Fada'ayan-e Islam</i> , Kashani:	
4. Social democracy, Mossadeq, National Front	
1941–1960 a) Conservative, clerical elite, pro-stability: Borujerdi, Behbehani, Sharestani; vs b) Neo-Fundamentalist, non-elite clergy: Kashani; vs c) leftist clergy (Borge'i, Lajevardi)	
1960–1977 reemergence of clergy, cooperation with crown: 1947: 5–6,000 seminary students; 1949: Borujerdi convocation; 1953: Behbehani and Sharestani praise the shah; 1955: Anti-Baha'i campaign;	
5. Islamic Revival a) conservative, clerical elite (Kho'i, Shariatmadari, Golpayegani, Khonsari); vs b) opposition clerics (Islamic renewal:	
opposition to the state in parliament and extralegally; struggle against becoming a declassé stratum: 1960: Borujerdi breaks state-clergy truce 1960–63: <i>Goftar-e Mah</i> , debates about <i>marja'iyat</i> (leadership of the clergy)	

Chart 2 (continued)

- Khomeyni, Shirazi, Sadeq Rohani,
Taleqani, Mahallati, Montazeri);
vs
c) mediating reformers (Motahhari,
Beheshti);
vs
d) royalists (Mahdavi, Inam Jom'eh of
Tehran;
1963: 15 Khordad demonstrations
against the shah's White Revolution;
1965–73: *Hosayniyeh Ershad*, Shariati;
1970: arrest of Taleqani, exile of 48
; seminary teachers from Qum;
1971: Khomeyni tells people to boycott
shah's 2,500 years of monarchy;
celebration; guerrilla actions begin
1972: 5 Mujaheddin guerrillas executed
(students of Taleqani);
1975: 15 Khordad demonstrations
against the Rastakhiz Party;
1977–79: revolution overthrows Pahlavi
monarchy

Islamic Republic of Iran

6. Transnational Political Islam

1980s, early 1990s

- a) protection of the revolution:
• assassination of faction leaders in
Europe, America (e.g. Bakhtiar,
Tabataba'i)
• Iraq–Iran war
• seizure of American Embassy
b) export of the revolution
• coup plots in Bahrain; uprising in
Saudi Arabia;
• arms, money, men support of
Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad in
Lebanon, Syria, Palestine;
• guerilla, terrorist, paramilitary
training camps for foreign
nationals
• efforts to project influence into
Afghanistan, Central Asia;
• appeal to African Americans;
• use of the Hajj as venue for
propagating the revolution;
struggle over *velayat-e faqih*:
• 1990: Ayatullah 'Ali Araki issues
fatwa contradicting one by
Khomeini, thereby asserting
independent religious authority
• 1990: followers of Ayatullah
Montazeri question Khomeini's
qualifications to be *faqih*;
• 1991: Majlis passes amendment
to election law: absolute
loyalty to the *faqih* is condition
for running for elective office;
100 parliament deputies visit
Montazeri in Qum in protest;
• 1992: purge of Majlis, cabinet, and
candidates for election;
struggle over the media:
• *Voice and Vision of Iran Broadcast*
chief, Mohammad Hasemi-
Rafsanjani promotes openness;

- Minister of Culture & Islamic
Guidance, Khatami, promotes
revival of film industry;
• 1992–93: purge of Khatami and
Hashemi-Rafsanjani;
1997–2002
jumhuriyeh vs velayat-e faqih:
a) pro *jumhuriyeh*:
• 3 generations: Ayatullah Montazeri;
President Khatami, Soroush;
students;
• newspapers: *Salam*, *Khorlud*, *Asr-e*
Ma, *Ruh-e No*;
• groups:
—Islamic Iran Participation Front
(est. 1998): many from
Association of Combatant;
—2 Khordad Front: Islamic left,
ILPF; and Servants of
Construction (centrists and
right of center);
—former Students of the Imam's
Line: Abbas 'Abdi, Ayatullah
Musavi Kho'eyniha, Behzad
Nabavi, Massoumeh Ebtekar,
Sa'id Hajjarian;
vs
b) pro *Velayat-e faqih*: Khamene'i;
• newspapers: *Jomhuriyeh Eslami*,
Resaleh;
• control of judiciary and coercive
state institutions: Council of
Guardians; Judiciary chief
Ayatullah Mohammad Yazdi;
Special Clerical Tribunal;
Revolutionary Guards; Ministry
of Information (linked to murder
of six intellectuals);
• Combatant Clergy Association; Qum
Theological Lecturers'
Association

- a) projection of liberal Islam:
• international success of Iranian
cinema;
• President Khatami's call for a
dialogue of civilizations;
civil society; rule of law;
vs
b) projection of fundamentalist Islam:
• continued support of arms, men,
for Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad;
secret arms shipment to
Palestine Authority;
vs
c) projection of pragmatic geopolitics:
• cooperation with the U.S. in support
of Northern Alliance against
Taliban in Afghanistan;
• enforcing of oil embargo on Iraq in
tacit cooperation with the U.S.;
• attention to building oil pipeline to
India, bolstering relations with
South Asia;

structures, locus in the stratification system of different forms of religiosity, consequential differences of organizational forms of discipline, symbolic or cultural forms of motivation and valuation, the "world-historical" horizon or context of the global political economy).

A later essay "The Iranian Revolution: Five Frames for Understanding" (Fischer 1993) sketched overlays of five structural temporalities or social dramatic forms of unfolding. Two of these were the five generational analysis and the five centuries of cleric-led struggles in Iran. The third reminds that revolutions have a processual form—they are not events, but unfold over time—and asks whether this revolution fits into the pattern of other revolutions. There were two temporalities of revolution as outlined above, and elaborated in *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*: a drama of a short (fourteen month) unfolding, and a structural process of a century-long unfolding. Neither are deterministic, both can have alternative paths and outcomes, and even retrospectively can be given alternative accountings, and recontextualizations. The fourth frame is the Shi'ite form of this revolution—the power of symbols and drama, rhetorical framing and persuasive cultural interpretations—which served as the mobilizing idioms. The fifth frame resides in the social agendas of the revolution, which are still two decades later being fought over, and which is why this book ended not with the triumphalism of the revolution proper, but with "victory and its problems," with the challenges that the revolution had put on the public agenda for itself. These included political development, economic policy, social and cultural policy, and foreign policy.

Concerning political development, it is worth recalling that the initial slogans of the revolution in 1977–1979 were: to implement the 1905 Constitution, to allow Parliament to be more than a rubber stamp, to implement the clause allowing mujtahids to veto legislation that violated Islam, to allow open trials and due process, and to have political pluralism, decentralization, and regional autonomy. With the radicalization of the revolution during 1979–1981, a new Islamic constitution replaced the 1905 Constitution. As the revolution took over the institutions of the state, the dominant Khomeyni faction of the revolutionary coalition (initially the Islamic Republican Party) created parallel institutions to the existing state institutions to enforce its revolutionary goals in a classic maneuver. So, for instance, the Revolutionary Guards became a parallel military force, and revolutionary committees were set up in ministries and economic enterprises. Slowly the Islamic Republic consolidated, and there was later a slow movement toward a more democratic process, albeit hampered by oversight institutions controlled by the more theocratic wing of the revolution. Still, by the end of the 1990s, the more democratic forces had twice overwhelmingly elected a President of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Muhammad Khatami, who had campaigned on the slogans of civil society and open democracy. (See also Brumberg 2001 for an account of the political maneuvers since the revolution to "reinvent Khomeyni.")

Regarding economic policy, the original goals of the revolution con-

cerned the reduction of oil production so as to utilize more effectively the revenue to stimulate other domestic economic production, and the reorientation of trade in order to break out of dependency relations with the U.S. and Europe. The eight-year war with Iraq during the 1980s forced Iran's economy into a nationalization of banks and industry in a kind of command or state capitalism, from which it is only gradually trying to free itself.

Social and cultural policy—women's rights, the position of minorities, land reform, wealth redistribution, and cultural revolution through reform of education and control of the media—all continue to be heavily contested. The demographics of a population explosion with a majority under the age of having firsthand memory of the revolution seems to suggest that the puritanical and theocratic reaction of the 1970s and 1980s will wane, allowing Iran's more tolerant traditions to reemerge. But such predictions are notoriously unstable in environments of continuing difficulties in the political economy.

As concerns foreign policy, early foreign policy goals of the Islamic Republic dealt with asserting independence of action and escaping the subordination felt to ensue from supplying oil to the U.S. and Europe by changing the configuration of foreign trade. A degree of success in this area came from increased trade with India, South Africa, and East Africa. A corollary of this objective was the protection of the revolution from external attack (the Iraqi invasion) and being drawn back into the same political economy relations with the U.S. and Europe that the revolution sought to break. The seizure of the American personnel as hostages was a dramatic gambit to ensure this break (as well as helping to pass the highly contested new Islamic constitution). As often noted, this was also a media event, with demonstrations being skillfully staged in front of rolling American news cameras. Assassination of dissidents in Europe and the U.S. was also a tactic used to discourage the kind of mobilization abroad that had helped topple the shah. (Shapur Bakhtiari in Paris in 1991 and Ali Akbar Tabataba'i in Washington, D.C. in 1980 were two of the higher profile of some twenty plus assassinations.) Active "export of the revolution" was another foreign policy goal that emerged with the Khomeyni faction's consolidation of the revolution, albeit, initially, largely by demonstration effect and cultural propaganda. The example of "Khomeyni" reenergized Islamic fundamentalist groups elsewhere with the hope that seizure of the state and the creation of an Islamic state were possible. Appeals to African-Americans to rise up against the U.S. fell on deaf ears, but an artistic legacy of this propaganda and cultural effort may be seen in the early stamp issued by the Islamic Republic of Iran on which the faces of Bilal, the first muezzin of Islam, and Malcolm X are fused (see Fischer and Abedi 1990: 254).

Direct export of the revolution was considerably less successful. Shi'ites were arrested in Bahrain in 1996 for plotting a coup, and there was repeated conflict with the Saudis during the annual hajj in Mecca over using that global meeting as a stage for mobilization. In the 1980s, Iran supported

Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad in Lebanon, the latter claiming responsibility in 1983 for the suicide car and truck bombings in Beirut of the U.S. Embassy (killing 69), the U.S. Marine barracks (killing 243), the French paratroop headquarters (killing 58), and in Sidon an Israeli military building (67 died). After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, open as well as covert use of funding and weapons supply to Islamic movements elsewhere began to increase. By the 1990s, a RAND corporation analyst claims Iran was spending \$100 million per year in support of terrorist groups abroad, and providing in Iran training camps for several groups (Hoffman 1998). By 1996, Iran was sending three cargo jets a month to Damascus with weapons for Hezbollah. Iran also supported Shi'ite and Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan, becoming even an ally to the U.S. of sorts in the ousting of the Taliban in 2001–2002. In December 2001, a ship off Israel was seized while attempting to smuggle weapons from Iran to the Palestinians. Iran's participation in the growing use of international terror by resistance and insurgency movements and by states using terror as a covert form of foreign policy is difficult to track given both its covert nature and its contested status within the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It appears that such operations as the smuggling of arms to the Palestinian Authority—not just to Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad—are further internally contested policies between the so-called conservative hard-liners and the proponents of President Khatami's efforts to open relations to the West.

What remains clear is that the current generation of violence has become increasingly sophisticated, the world a more dangerous, not less dangerous, place in the past twenty years, particularly for the Middle East from the Levant to Central Asia, with Iran caught in the middle, caught in the currents, but also an active player both trying to protect itself and work its way through an often deadlocked revolution.

Future(s)

Any film is like a poem, it is not interesting just to repeat. And that is what Iranian cinema is doing, like poetry bringing out something different. . . . Film should depict reality and transform it. . . . Something happens in front of the camera, and it is the first moment it happens, new life takes shape in front of the camera.

Samira Makmalloof, in Meyvan Makmalloof's How Samira Made the Blackboard

Nonetheless, for Iran I remain an optimist: it strikes me that the Iranian revolution, while excessive during its Terror, was never as bloody as it was portrayed to be by its opponents (not as bloody as the French or Russian revolutions for instance), and that despite the many terrible events and hardships the Iranians have had to suffer over the past several decades (including the very bloody Iran-Iraq War), there does seem to be a *long durée* process toward transformation. Above all, I think Ayatullah Shariatmadari will be proven correct: the hard line religious leaders have discredited themselves and the idea of a theocracy. The young generation of Iran will decide. We

will see in the coming years what the balance will be between those who continue the revolutionary guards and other parallel institutions of the revolution (including the Committee for Special Operations⁵ of the Ministry of Intelligence named in the German arrest warrant for Ali Fallahian, the Minister of Intelligence, in the case of the assassination of three Kurdish dissidents and their translator in Berlin in 1992; Fallahian also is named with three others in an Argentine indictment for the 1994 bombing of a Buenos Aires Jewish community center that killed eighty-five and the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires that killed twenty-eight) versus those who have so vocally rallied to the call of President Khatami for building a new and open civil society.

Although a firm political secularist, I am unpersuaded that a society must choose to be either secular or religious: I live, after all, in a majority Christian country, where Christian politicians are held in check by strong traditions of separation between church and state. Separations of *dawlat* (government) and *din* (religion) have also operated through the history of Muslim polities. Increasingly culturally and religiously diverse citizens get along because of separations between church and state, democracy, and civil society. And it works particularly well when we can share one another's traditions, which serve as reservoirs of generations of human experience and ethical struggle, rather than as to-the-death-dogmas. Iran's struggles to achieve its own balances of social justice and tolerance, economic and social well-being, and sense of fair play in the community of nations draw upon its considerable cultural resources and experiences, much of which over the centuries it gifted to the fund of humanistic stories and understandings of both Western and world-wide civilization.

Notes

1. Exports of oil and gas provided two thirds of Soviet exports to the capitalist world in the 1980s; ninety percent of the exports were oil, gas, raw materials and precious metals—"an external trade structure typical of underdeveloped countries" (Castells 1998: 6, 21). There were of course other sources of distortion in what Castells calls a statist system of surplus value appropriation, in which "about 40 percent of industrial production was defense related, and the production of enterprises that were engaged in the military-industrial complex reached about 70 percent of all industrial production (ibid 22). The similarity is to the revenue stream that protected the state, for a time, against demands from the citizenry for decision-making participation.
2. This continues to be an important caution, but see Pinto (1999) for a sobering reminder that policy debates contain quite a range of positions. The United States tends to guide foreign policy by economic and political considerations alone, but in the field of contestation over how to respond to, for instance, the use of international terrorism by "political Islam" targeted often at the U.S. in the Middle East, there are a range of confrontationalist and accommodationist positions.
3. Pakistan's literacy rate, barely 30 percent, is below that of Haiti, Rwanda, and Sudan according to UN figures, and its spending on education has declined to around two percent of GNP, far below that of Bangladesh, Iran, or Turkey. Public