

**SACRED DISRUPTION: PROTEST MOVEMENTS AND SECULARISM UNDER THE
IRANIAN THEOCRACY**

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ABSTRACT

How do protest movements interact with secularism in theocratic countries? What role do they play in the broader process of secularization? Through an in-depth analysis of the 2022 Women Life Freedom protests in Iran, I find that protest movements engage with secularism by stressing a choice between a religious or secular life. By creating a tangible manifestation of burgeoning secular trends, highlighting religion as a potentially oppressive force, and emphasizing the social tensions that subtly marginalize openly religious people regardless of their political beliefs, protests embolden the already recognized social trend away from religion. I derive these findings from archival research, newspaper analysis, and key informant interviews, which together pose a holistic view of the Women Life Freedom movement. My findings contribute to theoretical understandings of secularization processes by addressing gaps in secularization theory, the religious markets model, and religious-politics theory, while also expanding identity theory in social movements to include secularism as a potentially unifying or exclusionary ideology. My research has practical implications for understanding the intricacies of theocratic governing structures, highlighting the multifaceted nature of resistance, and demonstrating the value of studying religion and secularism to understand internal political dynamics in both theocratic and secular countries.

Keywords: Secularism, resistance, identity, theocracy, protest¹

¹Title page photograph found via Hilary Homes, “Iran: One Year after the Woman Life Freedom Uprising International Community Must Combat Impunity for Brutal Crackdown,” Amnesty International Canada, September 13, 2023, <https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/iran-one-year-after-the-woman-life-freedom-uprising-international-community-must-combat-impunity-for-brutal-crackdown/>.

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If the humble cat possessed wings
He would rob the world of every sparrow egg.
It may happen that when a weak man obtains power
He arises and twists the hands of the weak.
And if Allah were to bestow abundance upon his servants, they
Would certainly rebel upon earth.

– Sa’di, *The Gulistan*, 1258 CE²

²Sa’di, *The Gulistan*, 1258, <https://classics.mit.edu/Sadi/gulistan.html>.

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CHAPTER ONE

CHANGING RELIGIOSITY AND THE QUESTION OF A SECULAR IRAN

How can one take refuge in the verses of defeated prophets

When lies blow through the air like wind?

– Forugh Farrokhzad, “Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season,” 1974³

From Washington, DC⁴ to Tel Aviv,⁵ to Shanghai⁶, the past few decades have signaled the “return of religion from exile.”⁷ Across the world, the prominence of religious faith is returning in full force, both in people’s private and public lives.⁸ Privately, religion has become only more central to people’s lives. Pew Research Center predicted that between 2010 and 2050, the percentage of the total global population that considers itself ‘unaffiliated’ will decline from 16.4% of the global population to 13.2%.⁹ Islam is expected to rise exponentially, going from 23.2% to 29.7% of the world’s population over forty years.¹⁰ The idea that the world at large will lose its appetite for religion in the near future is a myth.

³Forugh Farrokhzad, “Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season,” The Poetry Foundation, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/162647/let-us-believe-in-the-dawn-of-the-cold-season>.

⁴Frank Newport, “The Politics of Religion,” Gallup.com, September 1, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/510464/politics-religion.aspx>.

⁵David Rosenberg, “What Makes Israel’s Far Right Different – Foreign Policy,” Foreign Policy, October 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/30/religious-zionism-israel-far-right-different/>.

⁶Harriet Sherwood, “Religion: Why Faith Is Becoming More and More Popular,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2018, sec. News, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>.

⁷Mohammad Tabaar, “The (De)Secularizing Impact of Politics on Iran’s Theocracy” (Ph.D Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2012), <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/557601>.

⁸Harriet Sherwood, “Religion: Why Faith Is Becoming More and More Popular,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2018, sec. News, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>.

⁹Benjamin Wormald, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

¹⁰Ibid

With the rise of religion as a preference, the desire for religious governance structures has also grown. In the United States, Gallup used data to show the correlation between conservative partisan politics and rising Protestantism.¹¹ In India, Hindu nationalism has become more mainstream under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹² The 2022 Israeli elections saw the alliance of political parties representing the religious right, referred to as “Religious Zionism,” double their seats in the Knesset.¹³ In politics and personal life, the last few decades have shown the world that religion truly is ‘returning from exile.’ Indeed, religion has not dissipated in the face of modernity.

One of the exceptions to this trend is taking place in one of the most religiously perceived countries in the world: the Shiite Orthodox Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁴ On a private level, Iranians consider themselves less religious than ever before. In 2020, Gamaan, an independent company that runs surveys in Iran, estimated that roughly 50% of the Iranian population reported that they lost their religion.¹⁵ Two years later, in 2022, leaked government data showed that the number is climbing, as 85% of Iranians consider themselves less religious than they were five years before.¹⁶ Additionally, 50,000 of the country’s 75,000 mosques built after the Islamic

¹¹Frank Newport, “The Politics of Religion,” Gallup.com, September 1, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/510464/politics-religion.aspx>.

¹²Krutika Pathi and Sheikh Saaliq, “Once a Fringe Indian Ideology, Hindu Nationalism Is Now Mainstream, Thanks to Modi’s Decade in Power,” AP News, April 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/india-election-narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-rss-79c30c8ae750a9c037d86b9e2c1b640c>; Manolo Evans and Jonathan Evans, “For Most of India’s Hindus, Religious and National Identities Are Closely Linked,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), July 20, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/20/for-most-of-indias-hindus-religious-and-national-identities-are-closely-linked/>.

¹³David Rosenberg, “What Makes Israel’s Far Right Different – Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/30/religious-zionism-israel-far-right-different/>.

¹⁴Brianna Navarre, “The 10 Most Religious Countries, Ranked by Perception,” *US News & World Report*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/slideshows/the-10-most-religious-countries>.

¹⁵“Iranians’ Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report,” *Gamaan*, August 25, 2020, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://gamaan.org/2020/08/25/iranians-attitudes-toward-religion-a-2020-survey-report/>.

¹⁶“Government Study Shows Iranians Less Religious Than Before,” *Iran International*, February 24, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402245769>.

Revolution have closed because of low attendance.¹⁷ On a public level, support for Islamic governance has also substantially declined. Although the Iranian people voted the clerical regime into power after the 1979 Islamic Revolution with 97% of the vote,¹⁸ Gamaan reported that the results of their 2022 surveys showed that only 22% of the population favored Islamic governance¹⁹ and 81% of respondents said they would vote against the Islamic Republic if given the option today.²⁰

Although it has been growing steadily for years, the rise of secularism in Iran manifested on a popular level in the Women Life Freedom, or Zen Zendegi Azadi, movement. The 2022 protests began after the regime's morality police killed Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman on vacation in Tehran, for violating Iran's compulsory Hijab protocols.²¹ As a leaked photo of her lying in a hospital bed spread across the internet, crowds of women filled the streets outside the hospital. The ensuing protests began a period now referred to as the regime's 'war on women.'²² During the protests, rough estimates indicate that 551 people died, including 68 children.²³ The rates of detention during the protests are exponentially higher, with some estimates reaching

¹⁷"Fall in Mosque-Goers in Iran Now 'Highly Alarming' - Minister," Iran International, December 12, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312124517>.

¹⁸Majid Mohammadi, "The Referendum On the Islamic Republic Has Expired," Iran International, April 1, 2024, <https://iranintl.com/en/202404018218>.

¹⁹"Iranians' Attitudes toward Political Systems: A 2022 Survey Report," Gamaan, March 31, 2022, <https://gamaan.org/2022/03/31/political-systems-survey-english/>.

²⁰"Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2022 Nationwide Protests – Gamaan," Gamaan, February 4, 2023, https://gamaan.org/2023/02/04/protests_survey/.

²¹Haleh Esfandiari, "Woman, Life, Freedom: The Second Anniversary," Wilson Center, September 16, 2024, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/woman-life-freedom-second-anniversary>.

²²"Iran: Two Years after 'Woman Life Freedom' Uprising, Impunity for Crimes Reigns Supreme," Amnesty International, September 11, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/iran-two-years-after-woman-life-freedom-uprising-impunity-for-crimes-reigns-supreme/>.

²³"Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations Human Rights Council, April 26, 2024), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/008/67/pdf/g2400867.pdf>.

60,000.²⁴ The protests spanned the nation, with deaths recorded in 26 of the 31 provinces.²⁵ The movement's slogan quickly changed from "Women, Life, Freedom," to "Death to the dictator," and "This is the year of bloodshed. Khamenei will be toppled."²⁶ People knocked sacred turbans off of clerics' heads and burnt Hijabs in the streets.²⁷ Rooted in dissent against compulsory Hijab laws, the Women Life Freedom protests quickly became a resistance movement against orthodox Islamic governance, aiming to overthrow the authoritarian clerical establishment.

In this thesis, I answer the question: How do protest movements interact with secularism in theocratic countries? What role do social movements play in the broader process of secularization?

I argue that protests against theocracy embolden secularism by stressing a seemingly binary choice between religious and secular ways of life. When the state uses religion as justification for what people are protesting against, it intrinsically ties the two together and forces a decision between one's politics and desired way of life and their religion. Furthermore, as this connection forms, cleavages in society develop from the association that openly religious people support religious politics and secular people support the opposition. This leads to another choice, between participation in the newly forming oppositional identity group and maintaining religious beliefs. Through these mechanisms, protests embolden people to choose between a secular or a religious lifestyle, community, and identity.

The purpose of this thesis is to drive a context-driven understanding of secularism that emphasizes lived experiences and acknowledges that losing or retaining one's religion is an

²⁴Ibid

²⁵Ibid

²⁶BBC News, "Why Is Iran's Tiktok Generation Demanding 'Women, Life, Freedom'?", November 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siCHErPVMw>

²⁷Snejana Farberov, "Iranian Hijab Protesters Knock Turbans off Clerics' Heads," November 4, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/11/04/iranian-hijab-protesters-knock-turbans-off-clerics-heads/>.

active and often significant and sacrificial decision. To that extent, this thesis aims to ground our understanding of secularism under religious governance in the political and social contexts in which resistance emerges. This thesis furthermore challenges existing paradigms in secularization theory and the theory of identity-based protest movements to embolden a study of secularism that is grounded in its context.

I. Significance

There are theoretical and practical reasons to undertake this study. Theoretically, this study addresses critical gaps in the literature on the theory of social movements and the theory of secularism. Practically, by shedding light on the social mechanisms of secularism in Iran, this research is significant for policies that deal both with Iran and with theocratic countries more broadly.

Theoretical

My research is significant for theoretical fields on secularization and the role of identity in protest movements and politics. In terms of theories on secularization, my research contributes to a more informed, context-driven understanding of secularism that does not appear in the three most predominant theories – secularization theory, the religious markets model, and the religious-political theory. Most importantly, my research challenges the assumption made across theories that secularism is overarchingly a passive process that acts *on* people as opposed to being driven *by* them. Through my study of protest movements and their interactions with secular trends, I intentionally give significance to the process of losing religion, viewing it as a deeply personal and frequently substantive decision as opposed to the natural byproduct of social

changes or structures. Furthermore, my research is important for our understanding of the identity theory in protest movements because it challenges the idea that secularism exists only as an absence of religious affiliation, and not as a unique and separate facet of identity.

First, my research addresses the three predominant theories on secularization – secularization theory, the religious markets model, and the religious-political model – with a nuanced view of the context-driven and active trends toward secularity. First, secularization theory, the most discussed theory on secularism, argues that rationality and modernity lead to declines in religious belief.²⁸ This theory has developed in recent years to highlight scientific advancement,²⁹ the spread of globalization and subsequent pluralism,³⁰ the rise of privatization,³¹ and the growing security provided by modernity as key drivers of secularism.³² The overarching literature has widely criticized secularization theory for failing to predict the rise in religious belief that characterizes much of the modern era.³³ However, secularization theory's prominence in the literature has not completely dissipated, as many theorists maintain it in more tangential ways, such as arguing that rising technology leads to secularity.³⁴ By studying social movements

²⁸Kostanca Dhima and Matt Golder, "Secularization Theory and Religion," *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 1 (March 2021): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048319000464>; Michael Allen Gillespie, "The Contradictions of Enlightenment and the Crisis of Modernity," in *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 271, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226293516-010>.

²⁹Bronislaw Bajon, "David Martin: 'A General Theory of Secularization' (Book Review)," *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 45, no. 1 (1981): 160–63; Richard Dawkins, "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God," in *The God Delusion*, 1st ed (Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 137.

³⁰Peter Berger, "Secularization and the Problem of Plausibility," in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 126.; William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711934>.

³¹Thomas Luckmann, "The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1979): 121–37.

³²Ronald F. Inglehart, "Giving Up on God: The Global Decline of Religion," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 110–18

³³Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," *The National Interest*, no. 46 (1996):3.

³⁴Zübeyir Nisanci, "A Critical Review of Secularization Debates: Bringing in the Question of Human Agency and Social Movement Dynamics," *DergiPark (Istanbul University)*, 2021.

and how they interact with secularism, my research pushes back on the passivity of secularization theory. I present an understanding of secularization as a societally contested, negotiated process rather than as the inevitable outcome that secularization theory implies. My research addresses the complex, context-driven, and deeply personal nature of religious affiliation and pushes back on the notion that religion will easily be surrendered on its own as time passes.

Similarly, my research confronts the religious markets model, which argues that religion proliferates where there is a supply of it and declines when governments restrict religious expression.³⁵ By neglecting contextual conditions outside of religious pluralism, the religious markets model does not account for the multifaceted causes of secularism. In countries where authoritarian governments co-opt religious identity to control virtually every part of someone's life, the contextual implications of religious authoritarianism transcend dissatisfaction with a lack of religious pluralism. In my research, I provide an understanding of secularism that incorporates the role of salient political and cultural factors in emboldening secularism. I also further challenge the assumption echoed in the religious markets model that secularism happens as a passive process that acts on people, as opposed to being driven by autonomous and intentional decision-making on an individual level.

Finally, the religious-political theory argues that when religion enters the mortal world through politics, it inevitably leads to its secularization.³⁶ By bringing the divine into the mortal

³⁵Roger Finke, "Religious Deregulation: Origins and Consequences," *Journal of Church and State* 32, no. 3 (1990): 609–26. Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the 'Secularization' of Europe," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (1994): 230–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386688>; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2005), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=979572>.

³⁶Martin Riesebrodt, "Book Reviews *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. By Marcel Gauchet. Translated by Oscar Burge. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. Pp. Xv+228. \$24.95," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 5 (March 1999): 1525–26, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210181>

world, religion opens itself up to be questioned and scrutinized, thus leading to eventual secularization. While this theory provides a context-driven approach to secularization by emphasizing political conditions under theocratic rulership, my research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what drives religious disaffiliation once those governmental relationships are established. The religious-political theory again implies a passive secularism, in which religious governance acts on a population simply by the nature of existing, encouraging people to turn from religion by bringing light to its flaws. However, this argument again implies a pervasive passivity. Alternatively, I examine the active process of secularism by framing it as a human-driven choice and then studying how secularism occurs once original dissent is established.

Second, my research is significant for a more informed view of how identity interacts with protest movements by incorporating an understanding of secularism as a unifying ideology into the identity theory of social movements. The identity theory to explain social mobilization and protest movements argues two key roles of identity. First, collective identity is a critical enabling element of protest movements.³⁷ Second, protest movements can embolden collective identity by making it something that people unify around.³⁸ Identity theory further argues that protest movements create a distinct ‘us’ vs ‘them’ mentality that can mobilize and embolden participants of one identity structure to target the participants of another.³⁹ However, despite the plethora of literature on the significance of religion as a unifying identity trait, the literature fails

³⁷Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, “Collective Identity,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbepm039>.

³⁸Tom Postmes et al., “Individuality and Social Influence in Groups: Inductive and Deductive Routes to Group Identity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 5 (November 2005): 747–63, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.5.747>; B. Simon and P.G. Klandermans, “Toward a Social Psychological Analysis of Politicized Collective Identity: Conceptualization, Antecedents and Consequences,” *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 319–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.56.4.319>.

³⁹Steve Hinkle and Rupert J. Brown, “Intergroup Comparisons and Social Identity - Some Links and Lacunae,” in *Social Identity Theory - Constructive and Critical Advances*, ed. D. Abrams and M.A. Hogg, 1990, 48–70.

to discuss secularism in the same capacity.⁴⁰ Particularly in countries where a religious extremist government creates a stark divide between secular and religious ways of life, secularity becomes an important and defining element of someone's identity. My research addresses this gap by examining how secularism itself can function as a powerful collective identity when perceived not only as the decline of religion, but also as the emergence of another unifying identity group. Particularly as religion and religious governance show no signs of dwindling, understanding the identity-based elements of secular protests in religious states is a critical theoretical need.

Practical

From a policy perspective, my research is significant for three primary reasons: contextualizing protest movements, understanding regime stability, and anticipating potential political shifts or upheavals. Particularly as trends in religious affiliation have not provided any indication that religion or religious governance will disappear in the near future, the practical applications of my research will only become more salient for policymakers who are navigating the complex environments created by religious politics.⁴¹

First, my research is significant for interpreting social movements and the multifaceted and complex nature of resistance. By examining the intersection between secularism and protest movements, my research explores how resistance can emerge in subtle ways and in both private and public spaces. Secularism within protests often represents something more than simply

⁴⁰Bert Klandermans and Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, "Identity Formation in Street Demonstrations," in *Identities in Everyday Life*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2019), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190873066.003.0015>; B. Simon and P.G. Klandermans, "Toward a Social Psychological Analysis of Politicized Collective Identity: Conceptualization, Antecedents and Consequences," *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 319–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.56.4.319>; Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, "Collective Identity," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm039>; Bernd Simon et al., "Collective Identification and Social Movement Participation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 3 (March 1998): 646–58, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.646>.

⁴¹Benjamin Wormald, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

religious disaffiliation. It shows how resistance can occur through myriad outlets and on multiple levels, simultaneously. While resistance can look like street protests and large-scale political movements, it can also come through in the way people identify themselves and their religious beliefs. To this extent, my research is practically significant, for acknowledging and accurately gauging the scope of resistance to religious governments.

Second, my research is practically significant for understanding regime strength and stability. Protest movements in theocratic countries, particularly when coupled with already emergent secular trends, can signal deep shifts in public sentiment. Secularism in general represents a separation from the belief system that is intrinsic to the government's legitimacy. Therefore, when coupled with protest movements, secular trends can be indicative of bold, deep-seated government opposition. Not every protest movement holds revolution as its end goal, but when secularism becomes a cornerstone of a protest movement in a theocratic country, it implies a desire to get rid, not just the current leader, but the system that gives them power in the first place. Understanding how secularism engages with protest movements is significant, to this extent, for understanding the strength and nature of political dissent in theocratic countries and how the people perceive the legitimacy of their government.

Finally, my research is significant for anticipating political shifts and upheavals in states where politics and religion interact. In terms of full-blown theocracies, understanding how secularism and protest movements interact can embolden our ability to perceive political shifts as they progress. To a slightly diluted, yet still significant extent, this is similarly applicable in states that are not direct theocracies, but still engage with religion in their political systems. In the US, for example, politics and religion have always been latently interlinked. In fact, studies conducted between 2002 and 2018 determined that the religious secular balance in the US is statistically correlated to political party affiliation, as conservatives are more likely to be

religious while democrats are less likely.⁴² In 2022, *Politico* published an article that demonstrates this dynamic at play. The article, titled “Most Republicans Support Declaring the United States a Christian Nation,” broadly discusses the emergence of Christian nationalism and its correlation to right-wing politics.⁴³ To this extent, understanding how political affiliation and religious belief coincide can provide data points to help us understand changing social preferences in theocracies and countries with less overt religious politics. Understanding how religion and politics engage with one another during protest movements can help policymakers and social scientists identify and interpret political disillusionment through the lens of rising and declining religious trends.

II. Research Design

To better understand the process of secularism and how it interacts with popular resistance movements in theocratic states, I use the case study method. The case study method, as defined by Charles Lipson, is an in-depth investigation into events, actors, and relationships as a way of generating and testing hypotheses to explain outcomes.⁴⁴ I use a case study approach because it allows me to explore the “how” and “why” of my research question.⁴⁵ That is, “how”

⁴²David E. Campbell et al., “Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (2018): 551–65, Stratos Patrikios, “American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the US,” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (September 2008): 367–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9053-1>, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088891>.

⁴³Stella Rouse and Shibley Telhami, “Most Republicans Support Declaring the United States a Christian Nation,” *POLITICO*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/21/most-republicans-support-declaring-the-united-states-a-christian-nation-00057736>.

⁴⁴Charles Lipson, “Using Case Studies Effectively,” in *How to Write a BA Thesis* (United States: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 100.

⁴⁵Robert K. Yin, “Introduction,” in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3. ed., [Nachdr.], Applied Social Research Methods Series 5 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 1.

and “why” do resistance movements and secularism relate to one another under theocratic regimes? By tracing the interaction between secularism and protest movements within my case, I can get a better understanding of how secularization occurs in theocratic states and why it occurs in that way.⁴⁶ By utilizing a case study approach, I can explore how values and interests impact group and actor behavior.⁴⁷

Furthermore, by allowing me to examine a contemporary process that spans over time and is affected by the nuances that inform religious preference, I use the case study approach to formulate and illustrate my theory on the role of protest movements in the process of secularism.⁴⁸ When studying something as intricate and personal as religion and religious affiliation, the research methods must be able to capture the essence and nuances of the subject. Conducting my research with a case study approach is necessary because it will provide a window into those nuances, allowing me to get a better understanding of the “how” and “why” behind my research question.

Case Selection

To examine the relationship between protest and religious affiliation in theocratic countries, I explore the case of the Women Life Freedom movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran and the Women Life Freedom movement is the best case for me to examine secularism and protest movements because of four key elements, namely: its intrinsic significance,

⁴⁶Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, “Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 170–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006296346>.

⁴⁷Charles Lipson, “Using Case Studies Effectively,” in *How to Write a BA Thesis*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 115.

⁴⁸Robert K. Yin, “Introduction,” in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3. ed., [Nachdr.], Applied Social Research Methods Series 5 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 7; Charles Lipson, “Using Case Studies Effectively,” in *How to Write a BA Thesis*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 115.

divergence from predictions made by other theories, lack of representation in the literature on secularism, and data richness.⁴⁹

First, Iran and the Women Life Freedom movement are an incredibly important case for understanding secularism and protest under theocratic regime types. The Islamic Republic formed after a referendum during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but within a few generations, the regime has lost almost all of the domestic strength that it once had.⁵⁰ Regardless, Iran has remained one of the most religiously governed countries and one of the few theocracies in the world.⁵¹ Within the Iranian context, Women Life Freedom is the second biggest anti-regime protest since the Islamic Revolution.⁵² However, while the biggest protest, the 2009 Green Movement, protested against perceived democratic erosion after the supposedly fraudulent election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Women Life Freedom movement directly addressed the religious element of the government and the legitimacy of clerical rule.⁵³ Similarly, while the Green Movement focused on reforming the Islamic Republic while maintaining the religious clerical governing structure, the Women Life Freedom movement explicitly called for an end to the Islamic regime.⁵⁴ As the most established theocracy in the world, Iran is a critically

⁴⁹Stephen Van Evera, "What Are Case Studies? How Should They Be Performed," in *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Cornell press, 1997), 77-78.

⁵⁰Zein Basravi, "Iran's Referendum and the Transformation to the Islamic Republic," Al Jazeera, March 20, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/3/30/irans-referendum-and-the-transformation-to-the-islamic-republic>; Iran International Newsroom, "Government Study Shows Iranians Less Religious Than Before," Iran International, February 24, 2024, <https://iranintl.com/en/202402245769>.

⁵¹"Theocracy Countries 2024," World Population Review, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/theocracy-countries>.

⁵²Cesare Romano, "Why the Protests in Iran Are Different This Time," *Loyola Marymount University Newsroom* (blog), November 12, 2022, <https://newsroom.lmu.edu/feature/why-the-protests-in-iran-are-different-this-time/>. BBC News, "Why Is Iran's Tiktok Generation Demanding 'Women, Life, Freedom'?", November 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siCHerPVMw>

⁵³Ibid

⁵⁴Phil Gast, Dakin Andone, and Kara Fox, "Here's Why the Iran Protests Are Significant," CNN, January 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/30/world/iran-protests-issues/index.html>.

important context to study the interaction between secularism and protest movements against religious governments. Similarly, through its bold rejection of the established theocracy and its religious legitimacy, Women Life Freedom is a public expression of secularism unmatched in its significance.

Second, as time has passed, Iran as a whole has diverged from predictions made by other theories of secularism. In terms of the secularization theory, which argues that modernity leads to secularism, Iran was considered a ‘modern’ state before the 1979 Islamic Revolution instated theocracy, demonstrating how, within this case study, modernity does not unilaterally coincide with religious decline.⁵⁵ Furthermore, while Iran does not necessarily diverge from the religious market model and the religious-politics model, in both cases, Iran challenges them. For the religious markets model, which argues that religious restrictions cause secularism, Iran was a predominantly Shia country for a few years preceding and during the revolution, demonstrating that a lack of religious pluralism did not necessarily hinder religious growth.⁵⁶ Iran does not completely dispel this theory, because the government maintains a monopoly over religious choice.⁵⁷ However, the authoritarian nature of Iran’s government begs the question of whether it is the authoritarian suppression of religious minorities or the simple lack of religious choice driving secularism. Finally, the religious-politics model, arguing that political religion causes

⁵⁵Anthony Gill, “Religion and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.117>, Peter Beyer, “Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 289–301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711938>, Timothy Crippen, “Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation,” *Social Forces* 67, no. 2 (1988): 316–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579184.ppen>

⁵⁶Roger Finke, “Religious Deregulation: Origins and Consequences,” *Journal of Church and State* 32, no. 3 (1990): 609–26.; “National Profiles - Iran,” The Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA), 2020, <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=110c>.

⁵⁷Office of International Religious Freedom, “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran,” International Religious Freedom Report for 2023 (United States Department of State, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>.

secularism through demystification, is challenged in the case of Iran.⁵⁸ Although it somewhat rings true in that there is a religious government, Iran did not always unilaterally agree that taking religion out of politics was the answer in addressing the authoritarian government's behavior. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the reform movement in Iran stretched most of the early 2000s, and aimed not to do away with the theocratic government, but to amend it to be better aligned with people's needs.⁵⁹ Therefore, secularism cannot be explained in Iran as only the result of the existence of a religious government. Iran, therefore, fully diverges from one of the dominant theories of secularization and challenges the other two.

Third, the discussion of Iranian secularism after the 2022 Women Life Freedom protests is limited, and when scholars do study it, it is through quantitative analysis. Although Iran is one of the most predominant theocratic regimes in the world, the focus of secularization literature, particularly in recent years, has widely overlooked it in favor of Western case studies. Iran, and particularly the Women, Life, Freedom movement, is an important non-Western case study that has not yet been fully tested within the literature on secularism, but that should be examined in the context of new and pre-existing theories of secularity. Furthermore, most studies examining secularism in Iran with regard to the Women Life Freedom movement do so through quantitative analysis. The most prominent study, conducted by Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, shows that secularism in Iran is higher after the Women Life Freedom protests than it was before the protests.⁶⁰ However, likely because Women Life Freedom is a relatively recent movement, it has yet to be examined qualitatively in the literature. My case study approach provides more

⁵⁸Martin Riesebrodt, "Book Reviews *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. By Marcel Gauchet. Translated by Oscar Burge. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 5 (March 1999): 1525–26, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210181>.

⁵⁹Ibid: 48

⁶⁰Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, "The Secular-Religious Divide in Iran: An Analysis of GAMAAN's Online Surveys," in *Nonbelievers, Apostates, and Atheists in the Muslim World*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2025), 112–42, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003389293-6>.

nuances and the opportunity to analyze the processes and mechanisms that lead to secularism outside of the quantitative understanding that other studies have established.⁶¹

Finally, Iran is a data-rich case, particularly in the Women Life Freedom movement. As a huge movement in Iranian history, many academics and scholars have studied and engaged directly with the movement. To study my case, I speak to people who have direct experience studying or working on the movement and Iranian religious history. I also comb through the Columbia University online Women Life Freedom Archive,⁶² and a month of news coverage from a leading opposition and a leading regime-backed newspaper. By leveraging the lived experiences and perspectives of Iranian scholars and professionals who have engaged with the protests, I obtain a genuine understanding of the mechanisms of secularism within Iran and the Women Life Freedom protests.

My study takes place from 1979 to 2024, with a particular emphasis on the 2022 Women Life Freedom protests and the immediate aftermath. The Women Life Freedom protests were a huge uprising in modern Iranian history and marked an important moment in the country's history of social movements. By starting my research with the revolution of 1979, I situate my analysis of the 2022 protests within Iran's cultural and historical context. In doing so, I present a holistic view of the factors leading to the protest and how they contributed to trends of secularism while accounting for Iran's diverse and complicated history, religion, and culture. Additionally, by including an analysis of the two years following the 2022 protests, I can understand to some extent the aftermath of the protests and how they continue today.

⁶¹Charles Lipson, "Using Case Studies Effectively," in *How to Write a BA Thesis*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 115.

⁶²"Woman, Life, Freedom Movement of Iran," Archival database, Archive it, October 2022, <https://archive-it.org/collections/20200>.

Data Analysis

To explain the relationship between protest movements and religious affiliation, I rely on three primary sources of evidence: key informant interviews, archival sources, and newspaper coverage. By using these three different types of sources, I triangulate the resulting data to come to well-supported and substantiated conclusions.⁶³

First, through key informant interviews, I talk to 10 prominent scholars, diplomats, sociologists, activists, and journalists who work on Iran about their professional opinions on the role of secularism in the country and its relationship with the 2022 protests. I code these conversations for themes and analyze the recurrent themes within the greater context of my research question. I interview journalists, scholars, sociologists, activists, and diplomats, in particular, because they engage with the Iranian government and public as part of their jobs. As a result, these groups have developed professional opinions and insight into the domestic political situation, the Women Life Freedom protests, and changing cultural sentiments regarding factors like religion. Furthermore, I conduct key informant interviews because they provide me with a more nuanced perspective of my research question. Through key informant interviews, I have the opportunity to ask questions and follow ideas that are pertinent to answering my research question, allowing me to incorporate nuances that may not have stood out from examining written work only.

Second, I examine archival sources in the form of interviews, blog posts, and books written by people who have experience in Iranian theology or have directly engaged with the Women Life Freedom protests. I code the 315 English language sources catalogued in the *Columbia University Women Life Freedom Movement of Iran Archive* for themes, and then

⁶³Norman K. Denzin, "Triangulation," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeost050.pub2>.

analyze those themes within the context of my research question.⁶⁴ I furthermore use the Columbia University Women Life Freedom Movement of Iran Archive as a jumping off point to familiarize myself with the online spaces and authors who write and testify about the Women Life Freedom movement and Iran. Through this process, I find more materials that I code and analyze, allowing me to derive recurrent patterns across a wider range of sources. These sources provide my research with a stronger sense of the context of the Women Life Freedom movement and the way it was metabolized in Iran. They give me access to a wider range of autobiographical accounts, experiences, and perspectives than I achieve with key informant interviews alone.

Third, I code newspaper articles published within one month of Mahsa Amini's death for themes and analyze recurrent patterns to bolster my understanding of how secular themes emerged in national outward-facing forms and from the mouthpiece of the regime itself. I analyze the coverage of the protests from the two most prominent Iranian English newspapers. First, I examine *The Tehran Times*, a conservative-leaning publication that considers itself "the loud voice of the Islamic Revolution and the oppressed people of the world."⁶⁵ Second, I examine Voice of America, an American news platform that extensively covered the protests and provided its coverage within Iran.⁶⁶ By examining these two sources and analyzing their coverage of the Women Life Freedom protests, I gain an understanding of the nationwide depictions of the Women Life Freedom protests and how national rhetoric discussed, if at all, the protest's relationship with Islam. Furthermore, the Tehran Times provides a uniquely important perspective as a regime-supported news outlet. That is, as the Tehran Times portrays primarily

⁶⁴"Woman, Life, Freedom Movement of Iran," Archival database, Archive it, October 2022, <https://archive-it.org/collections/20200>.

⁶⁵"About Us," Tehran Times, March 8, 1998, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/300000/>.

⁶⁶"VOA - Voice of America English News," Voice of America, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

pro-regime stances, including it in my analysis gives my research access to perspectives that are less widely represented in my interviews and archival research.

Limitations

There are four primary limitations of my research: the short time between the Women Life Freedom protests and my thesis being written, the current geopolitical state of the Middle East, the anti-Western nature of the Iranian regime, and my lack of Persian language skills.

First, the Women Life Freedom protests took place in 2022, meaning that there have been roughly two and a half years between the start of the protests and the writing of this thesis. This means that the process of secularization may change drastically in the coming years in a way that could change the structure of secularism after the Women Life Freedom protests. The proximity of the movement means that there could be variables, such as the community provided by a unifying social movement, that may decline or change over time. I therefore limit my findings to the short-term relationship between protest movements and secularism regarding a movement that, in many ways, is still ongoing.

Second, the current geopolitical state of the Middle East, and Iran in particular, may complicate my research methods, particularly as I endeavor to investigate a sensitive topic for the regime. Following the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel, Iran's unwavering financial support for its proxy groups – Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis – has become a leading factor in the war.⁶⁷ As Iran has become more aggressive internationally and weaker internally, any conversation that brings light to the weaknesses of the regime may be disproportionately limited.

⁶⁷Al Jazeera Staff, "How Iran-Israel Tensions Have Escalated since the War on Gaza: A Timeline," Al Jazeera, April 19, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/19/how-iran-israel-tensions-have-escalated-since-the-war-on-gaza-a-timeline>.

Therefore, people may be less likely to respond to my interview requests, particularly if they have a pro-regime perspective or feel uncomfortable expressing criticism of the regime. However, I will address this limitation in two ways. First, I will supplement key informant interviews with open-source information and perspectives on the protests through newspaper analysis and archival research. Second, I have limited the biased language in my interview requests and have emphasized my desire to get a variety of perspectives by asking specifically for all responses, allowing the interviewee to write in responses, and asking for a brief explanation should the interviewee not want to speak to me for a particular reason.

Third, the anti-Western nature of the Iranian regime may inhibit the ability of my research to gather various viewpoints to contextualize my case accurately. The West and Iran have a complicated history spanning back to the 1950s when British and American intelligence agencies overthrew democratically elected President Mohammad Mossadegh and implemented their own, Western-favoring, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.⁶⁸ The Shah's violent and authoritarian policies, implemented using American weapons, eventually led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution.⁶⁹ After the exiled Shah sought cancer treatment in the US, Iranian students occupied the American embassy in Tehran, leading to the infamous Iran hostage crisis, severing and restricting ties with the US and most Western countries to the modern day.⁷⁰ Approaching the study of religious secularism and protest movements in Iran as an American, therefore, carries intrinsic social limitations. Without being able to speak extensively to the clerical establishment or the opposition groups that harbor anti-Western tendencies, the overarching picture of my case may

⁶⁸Sarah Pruitt, "How the Iran Hostage Crisis Became a 14-Month Nightmare for President Carter and the Nation," HISTORY, October 16, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/background-to-the-iran-hostage-crisis>.

⁶⁹Ibid

⁷⁰Ibid

be limited. However, by reading articles and other sources directly from the clerical regime or its supporters, I address this limitation.

Finally, my lack of Persian language skills will be a limitation to my research, especially as my inability to speak Persian emphasizes my Western perspective. However, I circumvent this disadvantage by using English newspapers translated online, and by speaking with Iranian scholars who speak English. From these conversations and analysis, I get a strong understanding of the discussion around secularization and the interaction between protest movements and secularism in Iran, even without directly engaging with Persian language sources.

III. Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided a brief introduction to my research, its purpose, significance, and methodology. In Chapter 2, I conduct a review of the existing literature on secularization theory and the theory of identity in protest movements to highlight existing gaps and limitations within the literature and to demonstrate how this thesis contributes to the scholarly conversation. In Chapter 3, I provide a historical account of religion in culture and politics in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to frame the Women Life Freedom protests within Iran's historical and cultural context. In Chapter 4, I synthesize and analyze the findings of my research, focusing on the key informant interviews, analysis of news publications, and analysis of archival materials. Finally, Chapter 5, the conclusion, revisits the significance of my research and my findings and discusses the implications of this thesis on policy and theory.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEBATE ON SECULARIZATION, RELIGION, AND PROTEST MOVEMENTS

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'

– Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” 1922⁷¹

Two bodies of literature lend themselves to the study of the interaction between secularism and protest movements. These two bodies of literature are: theories of secularism and theories explaining social movement participation by identity. In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss three theories to explain secularization: secularization theory, the religious markets model, and the political-religious theory. The religious markets model and the secularization theory are the two most prominent explanations for the growth of secularism that exist in the literature. I include the religious-politics model because it is an important theory on how religious governance, in particular, affects secularism. Then, I will discuss how secularism, as a facet of someone’s identity, contributes to their participation in protest movements through a review of the literature on identity theory in protests. Within each body of literature, I will explain the gaps presented and how my research fulfills those gaps to create a more nuanced and robust understanding of the interaction between secularism and resistance movements. Overarchingly, the literature does not explain secular trends holistically, particularly under religious government structures, as it is oversimplistic, claims passivity on the side of the individual, and neglects the role of collective belief systems in encouraging secularism.

I. Explaining the Growth of Secularism

⁷¹Max Weber, “From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,” in *Science as a Vocation*, trans. H.H. Gerth and Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 129–56.

Secularization theory posits that the prevalence of religion will decline as societies develop and become more modern and rational.⁷² Scholars within the sociology of religion heavily critique secularization theory for failing to hold up in the scope of modern religious trends, however, its residual prominence in the literature on Iranian secularization makes it an important part of the literature on my research question.⁷³ Overarchingly, secularization theory is too simplistic to accurately and holistically explain the engagement between protests and secularism in Iran.

Secularization theory developed during the Enlightenment era and was driven forward by pioneering philosophers like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.⁷⁴ Durkheim and Weber predict that people will become more secular as their lives become modern and globalized.⁷⁵ Weber, one of the most prominent pioneers of secularization theory, is credited with the term “disenchantment,” which is rooted in the idea that with the rise in modern rationality, people are less likely to be convinced by the “enchantment” of religion.⁷⁶ According to Weber, as science, rationality, and technology become more developed, people lose their connection to the sacred and substitute it for more mundane alternatives rooted in physical reality.⁷⁷ As Weber’s

⁷²Kostanca Dhima and Matt Golder, “Secularization Theory and Religion,” *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 1 (March 2021): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048319000464>.

⁷³Peter L. Berger, “Secularism in Retreat,” *The National Interest*, no. 46 (1996):3.

⁷⁴Michael Allen Gillespie, “The Contradictions of Enlightenment and the Crisis of Modernity,” in *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 271, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226293516-010>.

⁷⁵Ibid

⁷⁶Daniel Bell, “The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 31, no. 6 (1978): 29–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3823029>; Zübeyir Nisanci, “A Critical Review of Secularization Debates: Bringing in the Question of Human Agency and Social Movement Dynamics,” *DergiPark (Istanbul University)*, 2021.; Michael W. Hughey, “The Idea of Secularization in the Works of Max Weber: A Theoretical Outline,” *Qualitative Sociology* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1979): 85–111, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02390135>; William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711934>.

⁷⁷Ibid

contemporary, Durkheim, similarly argues that as societies progress, religion loses its wider functions.⁷⁸ He furthermore argues that religion is a collective choice and that people divide their societal opinions into groupings of ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane.’ From there, Durkheim believes that religion appears in the form of the first category – wherever public normative morals decrees are ‘sacred.’⁷⁹ Therefore, as societies begin to view rationality and science as a form of sacred, the divine in a traditional sense loses its appeal, and societies begin to secularize.

In the 1900s, secularization theory adapted slightly, but maintained the essence of Weber and Durkheim’s original argument. Most broadly, scholars argue that the nature of a rational, modern society is incompatible with religion. That is, as society becomes more modern, it becomes more rational and logical and hence more secular.⁸⁰ However, there are several nuances in the contemporary discussion of secularization theory. One such nuance argues that scientific advancements are the reason that more advanced societies have lost their faith in religion.⁸¹ In this vein, Richard Dawkins quotes Thomas Jefferson in his book, *The God Delusion*, saying “The priests of the different religious sects...dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight.”⁸² Furthermore, scholars argue that globalization and pluralism are the main mechanisms of modern society that instigate secularization. As globalization increases the

⁷⁸Zübeyir Nisanci, “A Critical Review of Secularization Debates: Bringing in the Question of Human Agency and Social Movement Dynamics,” *DergiPark (Istanbul University)*, 2021.

⁷⁹Thomas Luckmann, “The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1979): 126

⁸⁰Bryan R. Wilson, “Aspects of Secularization in the West,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 3, no. 4 (1976): 259; Bryan R. Wilson and Steve Bruce, “Introduction,” in *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2016), 3–12.; Frank J. Lechner, “The Case against Secularization: A Rebuttal,” *Social Forces* 69, no. 4 (1991): 1103–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579304>.; Raf Vanderstraeten, “Talcott Parsons and the Enigma of Secularization,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 1 (February 2013): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431012449236>.

⁸¹Bronislaw Bajon, “David Martin: ‘A General Theory of Secularization’ (Book Review),” *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 45, no. 1 (1981): 160–63; Peter Harrison, “Science and Secularization,” *Intellectual History Review* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1255460>.

⁸²Richard Dawkins, “Why There Almost Certainly Is No God,” in *The God Delusion*, 1st ed (Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 137.

number of religions to choose from, people begin to doubt religion as a whole, because each religion claims to be privy to divine truths while contradicting one another. This leads to the demystification of religion and the exposure of religions' human origins.⁸³ Additionally, scholars argue that it is the tendency for modern societies to encourage privatization that has led to increased secularity. As more modern mechanisms of organizing society, such as capitalism or industrialism, emerge, personal existence and religion become more private, thus driving religion out of public and eventually private consciousness.⁸⁴ Finally, contemporary scholars argue that safer societies with modern comforts encourage secularity because when survival becomes more secure, people no longer have to rely on praying to a benevolent God to ensure their survival.⁸⁵ Contemporary studies of the modernization element of secularization theory have been reaffirmed by scholars, like Ben Gaskins, Matt Golder, and David Siegel, whose empirical studies demonstrate that a rise in human development coincides with a decrease in religious participation.⁸⁶

However, the continued perseverance of religion into the modern era has shed worthy criticism on the merits of secularization theory. In the words of Peter Berger, a former secularization theorist who adjusted his argument later in his career, “The world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.

⁸³Peter Berger, “Secularization and the Problem of Plausibility,” in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 126.; William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711934>.

⁸⁴Thomas Luckmann, “The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1979): 121–37.

⁸⁵Ronald F. Inglehart, “Giving Up on God: The Global Decline of Religion,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 110–18

⁸⁶Ben Gaskins, Matt Golder, and David A. Siegel, “Religious Participation and Economic Conservatism,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 823–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12024>. ; Ben Gaskins, Matt Golder, and David A. Siegel, “Religious Participation, Social Conservatism, and Human Development,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 1125–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000765>.

This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.”⁸⁷ In fact, in the United States, regardless of science and higher education, church membership rates remain high.⁸⁸ The father of secularization theory critique is Alex de Tocqueville, who argued against secularization theory early on, writing, “Unfortunately, facts are by no means in accordance with their theory.”⁸⁹ The most prominent criticism of secularization theory is that it is not a theory at all. This critique argues that secularization theory has failed to provide empirical data or evidence, and therefore that secularization “theory” is an unsubstantiated hypothesis.⁹⁰ In the words of one such critic, Jeffrey Hadden, secularization theory is a “hodgepodge of loosely employed ideals.”⁹¹ Additionally, critics argue that secularization theory is one-sided, focusing on the decline of religion selectively while failing to acknowledge the growth of religion in other areas.⁹² A similar critique of secularization theory argues that it is a product of Western invention and fails to address patterns of secularity in non-Western parts of the world.⁹³ Furthermore, critics argue

⁸⁷Peter L. Berger, “Secularism in Retreat,” *The National Interest*, no. 46 (1996):3.

⁸⁸Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2005), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=979572>.

⁸⁹Alexis De Tocqueville, “Principal Causes Which Render Religion Powerful in America,” in *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, Revised Edition (The Colonial Press, 1900), 313

⁹⁰Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory,” *Social Forces* 65, no. 3 (1987): 587–611, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2578520>; Larry Shiner, “The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6, no. 2 (1967): 207–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384047>; R A Wallace, “Review: Sociology of Secularisation: A Critique of a Concept,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18, no. 4 (December 1979): 430–430.; Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711936>.

⁹¹Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory,” *Social Forces* 65, no. 3 (1987): 598, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2578520>.

⁹²Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, “Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (2000): 19–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657288>.

⁹³Jose Casanova, “The Karel Dobbelaere Lecture: Divergent Global Roads to Secularization and Religious Pluralism,” *Social Compass* 65, no. 187–198 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618767961>; Peter Beyer, “Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 289–301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711938>.

that secularization is not an inevitability of modern rational society, but that instead religion continues to thrive by adapting to modern contexts and needs, including by adapting itself to fit into the private realm.⁹⁴

Secularization theory has emerged as an explanation for the secularization of Iranian society, both from a historical lens and to explain current trends. Historically, both proponents and critics of secularization theory reference the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as evidence to refute or prove the validity of the secularization hypothesis. Some proponents of secularization theory argue that the Islamic Republic's use of censorship to prohibit the spread of Western ideals demonstrates an awareness that modernization and globalization are akin to secularization.⁹⁵ Simultaneously, many critiques of secularization theory directly reference the surge of religiosity that enabled the Islamic Revolution as evidence that demonstrates how secularity does not decrease in line with modernity or rationalization. These scholars argue that as Iran was a 'modern' state before the Islamic Revolution, its shift towards theocratic rule proves the secularization hypothesis wrong.⁹⁶

Secularization theory appears in two distinct ways to explain contemporary secularism in Iran: as a contributing factor and as a key driver of secular trends. The former theory, in which modernity and its accompaniments contribute but do not define or necessitate a secular age, is

⁹⁴Timothy Crippen, "Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation," *Social Forces* 67, no. 2 (1988): 316–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579184>, Nicole Bryanna Owens, "Deconstructing Secularization Theory: Religion, Secularity, and Self-Hood since the Onset of Western Modernity," *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 28, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.5070/B3282028740>, Kostanca Dhima and Matt Golder, "Secularization Theory and Religion," *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 1 (March 2021): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048319000464>.

⁹⁵William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 221, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711934>.

⁹⁶Anthony Gill, "Religion and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.117>, Peter Beyer, "Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 289–301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711938>, Timothy Crippen, "Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation," *Social Forces* 67, no. 2 (1988): 316–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579184.ppen>

the most prominent use of secularization theory in the literature on Iran. It frequently presents as part of broader frameworks that discuss modernization, urbanization, technology, and globalization as factors that support but do not necessarily drive secularization.⁹⁷ Zainab Mesgartherani, for example, writes in the *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* that while growing secular practices of Iranian Shi'ite clergymen may not occur in a process as broad as modernization, it might occur with the help of advancement in technology, which is a specific facet of modern society.⁹⁸ Similarly, Daryuosh Piri and Adlina Ab Halim argue in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Communication* that globalization is a type of modernity that leads to secularization in Iran.⁹⁹ These types of offshoots utilize different elements of secularization theory as supporting factors in broader arguments about culture, politics, or history in Iran.

Although the predominant theory incorporates but does not rely on secularization theory in its analysis of Iran, some scholars and the clerical regime itself nonetheless argue that secularization theory is the best explanation for the Iranian people's decisions regarding religious affiliation. Yousef Ali Abazari, Abbas Varij Kazemi, and Mahdi Faraji articulate this argument in their article "Secularization in Iranian Society," writing, "In Iran, secularization is tantamount to rationalization."¹⁰⁰ As Iranian society becomes more modern and rational, it becomes more secular as a result. Abdolkarim Soroush, a very prominent Iranian sociologist of religion,

⁹⁷Yousef Ali Abazari, Abbas Varij Kazemi, and Mehdi Faraji, "Secularization in Iranian Society," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, trans. Ali Hoseinipour (Routledge, 2008), 238–54.; Daryuosh Piri and Adlina Ab Halim, "Diplomacy of Iran towards Globalization: The Tension between Globalization and Islamization in Iran," 2011.

⁹⁸Zainab Mesgarteherani, "Secularization Signs in Shi'ite Clergymen's Everyday Life: A Case Study in Tehran, Iran," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 6, no. 4 (2016): 71–82, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v06i04/71-82>.

⁹⁹Daryuosh Piri and Adlina Ab Halim, "Diplomacy of Iran towards Globalization: The Tension between Globalization and Islamization in Iran," *Cross Cultural Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 82–96.

¹⁰⁰Yousef Ali Abazari, Abbas Varij Kazemi, and Mehdi Faraji, "Secularization in Iranian Society," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, trans. Ali Hoseinipour (Routledge, 2008), 252.

subscribes to a type of secularization theory, writing “Secularism emerged from two sources: the growth of modern scientific thought and rationality and the profound changes in the meaning and relationship of rights and duties.”¹⁰¹ While the latter is part of the religious-political model that I will discuss later in the chapter, the former directly claims the role of modernity in threatening religion, particularly in Iran.

Iran presents a fascinating challenge to secularization theory’s assumption that secularism occurs as part of a gradual, passive process away from religion as societies modernize. As noted by Anthony Gill, Peter Beyer, and Thomas Crippen, Iran’s status as a “modern” and democratic state before the Islamic Revolution shows that secularization theory is not true in every case, and that, particularly within the context of Iran, it has failed to explain behaviours in the past.¹⁰² In fact, Iran’s religious trajectory is the exact opposite of what secularization theory would predict, as what was considered a ‘modern,’ ‘advanced,’ society voluntarily opted for orthodox religious governance. While globalization, technology, and industrialization are likely to encourage secularism, Iran, as an example, alludes to more complex, unaccounted-for variables at work.

Secularization theory furthermore implies a passivity to secular processes, which Iran challenges through its complex relationship with religious governance. The premise of secularization theory is that societies become less religious gradually as they develop more rational and modern tendencies. However, in countries like Iran, which are governed by authoritarian theocratic governments and have religion forcibly injected into their daily lives, it is

¹⁰¹ Abdolkarim Soroush, “The Sense and Essence of Secularism,” in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000).

¹⁰² Anthony Gill, “Religion and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.117>, Peter Beyer, “Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 289–301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711938>, Timothy Crippen, “Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation,” *Social Forces* 67, no. 2 (1988): 316–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579184.ppen>

irrational to assume that the process of secularism is happening without the explicit participation of the public. As opposed to a passive drift toward secularism, the Iranian theocracy and the weaponization of religion in modern Iranian society imply a more complex, active, and less linear trajectory than secularization theory argues. By focusing on secularism as a relatively passive process in which people gradually become secular with the growing modernity of their society, secularization theory omits any discussion that secularism can happen actively or in response to religion's role in society.

By taking a more context-driven approach, my research addresses the gaps that secularization theory fails to explain or incorporate into its understanding of how secular trends move within societies. My research addresses secularization theory's failure to explain the Iranian context by highlighting how secularism can emerge actively, not solely because of 'modernization,' but as a result of concrete and specific cultural contexts and political struggles. In Iran, in particular, the authoritarian structure of the regime and its emphasis on religious orthodoxy necessitate a context-driven view of secularity that acknowledges factors outside of development that can lead to secular growth. This approach recognizes individual agency in choosing personal religious beliefs and acknowledges the role of lived experience interacting with religion on a daily basis in decision-making about religious affiliation. Rather than as a passive, inevitable consequence of development and modernity, by studying protest movements, my research frames secularism as an active choice made by people within their political and social environments.

The Religious Markets Model of Supply and Demand

The most prominent theory to explain religious affiliation across countries today is the religious markets model, which posits that religion exists much like a conventional economic market, rising and falling with changes in supply and demand. This theory predicts that religious affiliation will grow when states do not intervene in the marketplace of religious ideas, instead letting religious organizations compete for adherents, and will decline when the religious market is stifled.¹⁰³ Although Iranian secularization technically fits under this theoretical explanation because of the limits on religious expression imposed by the government, this model again proves over simplistic in explaining Iranian secular trends.

The religious markets model is the most prevalent model to explain the status of religion and secularity in the world today, especially after secularization theory failed to explain the lack of decline in religious affiliation in ‘modern’ and ‘rational’ states. Religious markets theorists approach secularization from the supply side, as opposed to the demand side, as secularization theory did.¹⁰⁴ Instead of emphasizing how the demand for religion is created, scholars emphasize how supply-side factors influence the demand, and how competition on the supply side leads to a growth in religious participation.¹⁰⁵ Overarchingly, scholars speculate that religious deregulation causes the rapid growth of popular religion and vice versa, religious regulation leads to more secularism.¹⁰⁶ Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone describe how the religious markets model perceives secularization in an article for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* titled “A

¹⁰³Roger Finke, “Religious Deregulation: Origins and Consequences,” *Journal of Church and State* 32, no. 3 (1990): 609–26.

¹⁰⁴Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (1993): 27–39.

¹⁰⁵Ibid

¹⁰⁶Roger Finke, “Religious Deregulation: Origins and Consequences,” *Journal of Church and State* 32, no. 3 (1990): 609–26. Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (1994): 230–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386688>; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2005), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=979572>.

Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the “Secularization” of Europe,” in which they used quantitative and historical data to argue that “regulated religious economies” are the primary source of secularization, not “a lack of individual religious demand.”¹⁰⁷ According to Stark and Iannaccone, the religious markets model seeks to dispel the notion of secularization instead replacing it with a focus on how supply influences people’s ability to access satisfactory religion, not their desire to.¹⁰⁸ Stephen Warner, a pioneer of the religious markets model, calls this change in how scholars interpret direction and intentionality behind religious affiliation a “paradigm shift in process,” particularly concerning the role of organized religion in the United States.¹⁰⁹ Case studies that support the religious markets model hypothesis examine this process in varying global environments. Specifically, there are case studies in support of this hypothesis in American cities,¹¹⁰ Sweden,¹¹¹ Muslim communities,¹¹² Russia,¹¹³ comparatively across nations where

¹⁰⁷Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (1994): 230–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386688>;

¹⁰⁸Ibid

¹⁰⁹R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (March 1993): 1044, <https://doi.org/10.1086/230139>.

¹¹⁰Roger Finke, Avery M. Guest, and Rodney Stark, “Mobilizing Local Religious Markets: Religious Pluralism in the Empire State, 1855 to 1865,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 2 (April 1996): 203–217.; Andrew Greeley, “Review: Religious Diversity and Social Change: American Cities 1890–1906. by Kevin Christiano,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 6 (May 1989): 1438–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229164>.; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2005), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=979572>.

¹¹¹Eva M. Hamberg and Thorleif Pettersson, “The Religious Market: Denominational Competition and Religious Participation in Contemporary Sweden,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (1994): 205–16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386686>.

¹¹²Mark Chaves, Peter J. Schraeder, and Mario Sprindys, “State Regulation of Religion and Muslim Religious Vitality in the Industrialized West,” *The Journal of Politics* 56, no. 4 (November 1994): 1087–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2132075>.

¹¹³Jerry Pankhurst, “Russia’s Religious Market: Struggling with the Heritage of Russian Orthodox Monopoly,” in *Religion in a Changing World: Comparative Studies of Sociology*, ed. Madeleine Cousineau (Wastport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 129–37, https://www.academia.edu/29054903/Russias_Religious_Market_Struggling_with_the_Heritage_of_Russian_Orthodox_Monopoly.

governments lifted religious regulations,¹¹⁴ comparatively across ‘developed’ Western nations,¹¹⁵ under Latin American authoritative governments,¹¹⁶ and specifically in the context of Western democracies.¹¹⁷

Although it is the most predominant theory to explain religion and secularization, the religious markets model does not escape criticism. There are three categories of critiques of the religious markets model: critique of the interpretation of pluralism, contrasting empirical evidence, and lack of perspective. First, secularization theorists condemn the religious markets model’s interpretation of religious pluralism as a driver of spiritual activity. The basis of the religious markets model is that diversity in the religious marketplace is a pillar of religious proliferation.¹¹⁸ However, as I mentioned in the section on secularization theory, many theorists argue that pluralism leads to an increase in secularism as religion loses its reputation when several conflicting religions seem to undermine each other.¹¹⁹ Prominent secularization theorists, including Emile Durkheim and Peter Berger, argue that pluralism undermines religious belief

¹¹⁴Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (1993): 27–39.; Anthony Gill, “An Economic Model of Church-State Relations,” in *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*, accessed October 11, 2024

¹¹⁵Laurence Iannaccone “The Consequences of Religious Market Structure: Adam Smith and the Economics of Religion,” *Rationality and Society* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 1991): 156–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463191003002002>;

¹¹⁶Anthony Gill, “An Economic Model of Church-State Relations,” in *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*, accessed October 11, 2024, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fNDIwOTIhX0FO0?sid=8035e711-5c1c-4c68-ad4b-1a985660a3be@redis&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_47&rid=0.

¹¹⁷Mark Chaves and David E. Cann, “Regulation, Pluralism, and Religious Market Structure: Explaining Religion’s Vitality,” *Rationality and Society* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 1992): 272–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463192004003003>.

¹¹⁸Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “Religious Choice and Competition,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 5 (1998): 761–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657339>; Roger Finke, Avery M. Guest, and Rodney Stark, “Mobilizing Local Religious Markets: Religious Pluralism in the Empire State, 1855 to 1865,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 2 (April 1996): 203.

¹¹⁹William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711934>.

because it exposes religion's human origins.¹²⁰ With many religions that argue different things, people begin to view religion more clearly as a product of human imagination.

Second, contrasting empirical studies have led to doubts about the universality of the religious markets model. Although, as aforementioned, there have been empirical case studies that support the religion-markets model, there have also been empirical studies that argue against it. For example, Kenneth Land, Judith Blau, and Glenn Deane's 1991 article for *The American Sociological Review* titled "Religious Pluralism and Church Membership: A Spatial Diffusion Model," surveys Church attendance from 1910 - 1930 and finds that religious diversity leads to a decline in membership.¹²¹ Alternatively, Judith R Blau, Kenneth C Land, and Kent Redding's article published in *Social Science Research*, "The Expansion of Religious Affiliation: An Explanation of the Growth of Church Participation in the United States 1850-1930" posits that religious monopoly causes an increase in religiosity.¹²² To this extent, Blau et. al write, "Our conclusion is that religious monopoly – not diversity – fuels religious expansion."¹²³ The empirical conclusions regarding the validity of the religious markets model are nebulous.

Finally, the model is seen as being overly simplistic, failing to recognize the other influences that can lead to people's religious preferences. Most broadly, critics posit that boiling down a complex and personal variable like religion to a simple supply-side or demand-side

¹²⁰Peter Berger, "Secularization and the Problem of Plausibility," in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 126. Durkheim as analyzed in Roger Finke, Avery M. Guest, and Rodney Stark, "Mobilizing Local Religious Markets: Religious Pluralism in the Empire State, 1855 to 1865," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 2 (April 1996): 203.

¹²¹Kenneth C. Land, Judith R. Blau, and Glenn Deane, "Religious Pluralism and Church Membership: A Spatial Diffusion Model," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 2 (April 1991): 237.

¹²²Judith R Blau, Kenneth C Land, and Kent Redding, "The Expansion of Religious Affiliation: An Explanation of the Growth of Church Participation in the United States 1850–1930," *Social Science Research* 21, no. 4 (December 1, 1992): 329–52, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0049-089X\(92\)90001-W](https://doi.org/10.1016/0049-089X(92)90001-W).

¹²³Ibid

approach that relies on rational theory is overly simplistic.¹²⁴ More specifically, scholars criticize the religious markets model for failing to account for identity variables, such as gender, the strength of a community, culture, and other social factors, in making broad generalizations about the state of religion in a society.¹²⁵ As most of the research and case studies to explore rational choice theory are in the U.S. and the global West, the cultural, social, and political factors of non-Western countries are not acknowledged in the theory's formation.¹²⁶ Another important variable that the religious model fails to account for is the social and political context of a society. Instead of viewing social environments as culturally dense with varying political and cultural factors that contribute to religious demand, the theory of the religious markets model makes broad assumptions regardless of the social and political context of a society.¹²⁷

Although this school of thought addresses the element of religious regulation present in Iran, it nevertheless fails to answer my research question because it creates a passive and overly simplistic notion of secularism and fails to acknowledge the role of Islam in Iran before the Islamic Revolution. The Iranian Regime, without a doubt, limits religious expression and prevents any semblance of a free religious economy. In 2023, the U.S. Department of State

¹²⁴Carl L. Bankston, "Rationality, Choice, and the Religious Economy: Individual and Collective Rationality in Supply and Demand," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 2 (2003): 155–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512580>.

¹²⁵François Gauthier, "(What Is Left of) Secularization? Debate on Jörg Stolz's Article on Secularization Theories in the 21st Century: Ideas, Evidence, and Problems," *Social Compass* 67, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 309–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768620917327>; Evelyn Bush, "Explaining Religious Market Failure: A Gendered Critique of the Religious Economies Model," *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 3 (2010): 304–25; D. Paul Johnson, "From Religious Markets to Religious Communities: Contrasting Implications for Applied Research," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 4 (2003): 325–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512213>; Steve Bruce, "Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations of Religious Behavior," *Sociology of Religion* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 193–205.

¹²⁶Stephen Sharot, "Beyond Christianity: A Critique of the Rational Choice Theory of Religion from a Weberian and Comparative Religions Perspective," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 4 (2002): 427, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712301>.

¹²⁷Carl L. Bankston, "Rationality, Choice, and the Religious Economy: Individual and Collective Rationality in Supply and Demand," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 2 (2003): 155–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512580>.

released a report titled, “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran,” which decisively shows how the Islamic Republic restricts religious pluralism within its borders through laws that prohibit “any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam.”¹²⁸ However, there is more at work in the rising secularism within the Iranian public than a supply-side explanation. The religious market model stipulates that Iran is becoming more secular because there is a lack of religious choice, however, that argument neglects not only cultural and historical preferences but also the lived experience under an authoritarian regime type. As a result of Iran’s authoritarian government, any understanding of secularism that sees it as only a passive process, in which people get secularized gradually due to things outside of their control, is problematic because it neglects the idea that secularism can be an active choice people make in response to their broader situations.

Furthermore, the religious markets model fails to acknowledge the lack of religious pluralism in pre-Revolutionary Iran. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, in 1950, Iran was 97.5% Muslim. In 1970, that number went up marginally to 97.7%, continuing to form a vast majority.¹²⁹ Furthermore, during the 2009 protests and throughout the reformist period, a time that I will talk about extensively in Chapter 3, Iranians continued to support an Islamic establishment; they just wanted to amend it to include social and political rights.¹³⁰ Secularism in Iran, therefore, cannot be attributed blanketly to restrictions on religious proliferation and pluralism. Islam was, in modern history, always a predominant force in Iran.

¹²⁸Office of International Religious Freedom, “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran,” International Religious Freedom Report for 2023 (United States Department of State, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>.

¹²⁹“National Profiles - Iran,” The Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA), 2020, <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=110c>.

¹³⁰Ibid: 48

Therefore, the lack of religious pluralism would not make sense as the sole driving element of secularism.

To address these issues, my research presents a context-driven understanding of secularization that acknowledges the wide variety of social and political factors that can contribute to secularism outside of merely the loss of religious choice. I examine protest movements and secularism in Iran to demonstrate how secular identities can emerge from broader political and social environments shaped by authoritarian control. In the case of Women Life Freedom, secularism is not simply a passive response to the absence of alternative religious options but instead is an active rejection of a broader system of religious authoritarianism imposed by the state.

The Political Theory of Secularization

Finally, the religious-politics theory of secularization argues that solely the presence of religion within a state is a cause of secularization. Although this theory has less literature on it, it is relevant to my research because it argues that religious governments, like Iran, drive secularization in society. While it is less prominent in the overarching literature on secularization, the literature on explaining secularization in the Iranian public frequently discusses this theory. Although the religious-politics model provides a context-driven understanding of secular processes, it fails to address how secularism works once original dissent against a government is established. It also implies a level of inevitability and passivity that limits our understanding of secularism to a gradual process of disillusionment. My research addresses these flaws by integrating an analysis of social movements and by stressing that the important variable is the nature of religious governance, not simply its existence.

The religious-politics body of literature can be synthesized by Marcel Gauchet, whose work takes a historical perspective on secularization within the state and argues that in the age of emperors and kings, political leaders drew the sacred into human life, leaving it open to be contested, and leading to its rejection.¹³¹ Although in the modern day there is less acceptance for leaders who claim that the divine anointed them to rulership, the infusion of religion into politics in more covert ways nonetheless opens it up to criticism, making it appear more mundane and therefore scrutable. The overarching literature focuses this discussion on the secularization in American political dynamics. In American politics, scholars theorize that party polarization, paired with the religious or secular demographics of each political party, has made American liberals more secular and conservatives more religious.¹³² Accordingly, public perception of each party is the root of much of the subsequent secularization.¹³³ Empirical studies researching the causal direction of this relationship in the US show that it likely goes from political identity, as either liberal or conservative, to religious identity.¹³⁴ This means that as people understand their political views more deeply, they find themselves accepting or rejecting religion in a way that aligns with their political persuasion, and not the other way around. In synthesis, when people

¹³¹Martin Riesebrodt, “Book Reviews *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. By Marcel Gauchet. Translated by Oscar Burge. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 5 (March 1999): 1525–26, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210181>.

¹³²David E. Campbell et al., “Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (2018): 551–65, Stratos Patrikios, “American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the US,” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (September 2008): 367–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9053-1>, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088891>.

¹³³Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 3 (1998): 634–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647642>.

¹³⁴Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, “Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012,” *Sociological Science* 1 (2014): 423–47, <https://doi.org/10.15195/v1.a24>.

experience the tangible reality of religious rule, they begin questioning it, eventually stripping religion of its divine and inscrutable-seeming nature.

Scholars utilize this theory in two ways to explain Iranian secularization. First, scholars argue that the introduction of religion into politics has led to the passive secularization of the Iranian public. Sa'id Hajjarian, a prominent Iranian reformist and once the head of the Islamic Republic's Intelligence Ministry, argues in favor of this theory in his essay, "The Process of Shi'i Jurisprudence's Secularization." Hajjarian essentially argues that religion in Iran has declined because Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, sacrificed it in the political realm when he established the Islamic Constitution.¹³⁵ Additionally, as aforementioned, Abdolkarim Soroush, a prominent Iranian theorist of religion, makes an argument in his essay "The Sense and Essence of Secularism," which explains Iranian secularity as a mix between modernization theory and the religious-political model.¹³⁶ Soroush argues that the emergence of human rights norms in particular have created criticism of states that govern by Islamic teachings, which emphasize the "duty-bound" nature of the individual.¹³⁷ As people disagree with the state, they question whether they also disagree with the religion behind it.

Second, the religious-politics model offers a discussion of how the authoritarian structure of the Islamic Republic has actively affected secularization. As the Islamic Republic became more authoritarian and as people retained more liberal views, this theory argues that there is a gradual rejection of and disillusionment toward Islam, culminating in a shift toward secularity.¹³⁸

¹³⁵Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "From Etelā'āti to Eslāhtalabi: Sa'id Hajjarian, Political Theology and the Politics of Reform in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 6 (November 2014): 987–1009, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.942565>.

¹³⁶Abdolkarim Soroush, "The Sense and Essence of Secularism," in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=272554>.

¹³⁷Ibid

¹³⁸Mansoor Moaddel, "Secular Shift Among Iranians: Findings From Cross-national & Longitudinal Surveys," *Freedom of Thought Journal* 12 (2022): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.53895/ftj1209>; Mansoor Moaddel, "The Iranian

However, despite the religious-politics model's general applicability to studying the relationship between religious governments and people's belief systems, it nonetheless provides an inadequate answer to my research question. From a causal perspective, the religious-politics model frames secularism under theocracy as a gradual disillusionment with religion due to a government's corruption and demystification of the sacred. To this extent, it implies that secularization is an inevitable outcome of religious governance and is encouraged when religious governments use violence and authoritarianism under the guise of religious purpose. However, demystification of religion as a form of government did not emerge unilaterally in the case of Iran. During the 2009 Green Movement protests, for example, the Iranian people identified the clerics as the source of their dissatisfaction, while still using symbols rooted in Shia Islam to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. For example, people could be heard shouting Allah Akbar (God is great) from the rooftops while protesting the Islamic establishment.¹³⁹ Although the Islamic regime was horrible, Islam itself could still be considered great. In other words, people still believed that Islam and their desired government structure could be compatible. They were not immediately disillusioned with the religion of Islam when the regime used it for their own purposes. Instead, they recognized that the regime was mobilizing Islam to consolidate power, and were able to separate the two. Over time, this call for reform changed to a desire to overthrow the clerics, and the belief that Islam could be compatible with governance declined. However, despite this eventual shift, Iran demonstrates how the relationship between secularism

Revolution and Its Nemesis: The Rise of Liberal Values Among Iranians," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 29, no. 1 (January 2009): 126–36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2008-048>; John Madeley, Mirjam Künkler, and Shylashri Shankar, "Charles Taylor's A Secular Age and Secularization from Below in Iran," in *A Secular Age Beyond the West* (United States: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 185–212, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108278195.009>.

¹³⁹Abbas Varij Kazemi, "Appropriating the Past: The Green Movement in Iran," *Global Dialogue*, April 28, 2013, <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org//articles/appropriating-the-past-the-green-movement-in-iran>.

and religious affiliation is inherently more complex than simply a formed association between religion and government policies. While this theory is correct in explaining some level of Iranian secularism, it nonetheless does not fully capture the nuances of religious governments and their relationship with their constituency.

My research addresses this lack of dimensionality by emphasizing an examination of the internal mechanisms of political dissent that can lead to people actively reconceptualizing their religious beliefs and relationships to religious institutions. By studying the nuances of political dissent, I examine the processes that exist within government opposition that cause people to become disillusioned with their religious beliefs. As the religious-politics model deals with government dissatisfaction, it needs to be amended with a conversation of protest movements, the most outward-facing demonstration of political dissatisfaction. Through this conversation, I provide a more nuanced view of what happens within political opposition to encourage secularism. By rooting my study in the lived experiences of people under theocratic governments, my research contributes to a more context-driven understanding of how people use religion to modify or reject their relationship with the government.

III. Where Social Movements and Religion Meet: Identity Theory

Identity theory posits that social movements embolden and are emboldened by people's sense of a collective and unifying identity. While this body of literature outlines mechanisms of identity mobilization during social protests, it does not discuss how secularism can become one of those unifying identity markers. Although secularism unifies and operates in a similar way as theorised in the identity theory of social movements, secularism itself does not appear in the literature. My research fills this gap in the literature by discussing how protest movements can

embolden a collective secular identity, particularly in states with a harsh divide between the secular and religious.

Overarchingly, identity theory argues that the notion of a ‘collective identity’ plays a critical role in the dynamics of and willingness to engage in protest movements.¹⁴⁰ Eric Klandermans, one of the pioneers of protest identity theory, argues that social cleavages exist throughout society as a byproduct of the many conflicting identities that people hold. When events happen, those identities become emboldened and brought to society’s attention to become rallying points for social movements. Klandermans argues that this process of politicization strengthens the identity of protesters as well as bolsters the social movement itself.¹⁴¹ The literature describes identity theory in protest movements as either top-down or bottom-up. Top-down creates what scholars refer to as “deductive identity,” in which the organizers imply common identity. Bottom-up creates an “inductive identity,” in which like-minded individuals share a common identity or grievance with the system. Inductive identity implies identification with the other participants in a movement, whereas deductive identity implies an identification with organizers or leadership.¹⁴² Scholars undertake case study examinations of identity theory through analysis of the elderly people’s movement in Germany, the Gay liberation movement in

¹⁴⁰Jacqueline van Stekelenburg, “Collective Identity,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm039>.

¹⁴¹Bert Klandermans and Jacqueline van Stekelenburg, “Identity Formation in Street Demonstrations,” in *Identities in Everyday Life*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2019), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190873066.003.0015>; B. Simon and P.G. Klandermans, “Toward a Social Psychological Analysis of Politicized Collective Identity: Conceptualization, Antecedents and Consequences,” *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 319–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.56.4.319>; Jacqueline van Stekelenburg, “Collective Identity,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm039>; Bernd Simon et al., “Collective Identification and Social Movement Participation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 3 (March 1998): 646–58, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.646>.

¹⁴²Tom Postmes et al., “Individuality and Social Influence in Groups: Inductive and Deductive Routes to Group Identity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 5 (November 2005): 747–63, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.5.747>; Bert Klandermans and Jacqueline van Stekelenburg, “Identity Formation in Street Demonstrations,” in *Identities in Everyday Life*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2019), 309, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190873066.003.0015>.

the US,¹⁴³ the Irish Republicans,¹⁴⁴ Great Britain post-World War Two,¹⁴⁵ the virtual disability march in 2017,¹⁴⁶ and farmers' protest in the Netherlands,¹⁴⁷ among others. Through these case studies, scholars identify the source of "identity" in identity theory as ranging from race to political creed, sexual orientation, and nationalism.

Notably, within the scope of identity theory is the argument that unity around a shared identity also translates into targeted resentment of identities held in competition. The social cleavages that exist between identities within society create divisiveness during political mobilization between those who are "in" and "out." This divisiveness builds cohesion around the "in" identity and creates resentment against the "out" identity.¹⁴⁸ Thus, social movement participation based on identity includes not only unity surrounding the common identity but also unity against competing or threatening identities.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³Bernd Simon et al., "Collective Identification and Social Movement Participation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 3 (March 1998): 646–58, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.646>.

¹⁴⁴Robert W. White, "Structural Identity Theory and the Post-Recruitment Activism of Irish Republicans: Persistence, Disengagement, Splits, and Dissidents in Social Movement Organizations," *Social Problems* 57, no. 3 (August 2010): 341–70, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.3.341>.

¹⁴⁵Rodney Stark, "Class, Radicalism, and Religious Involvement in Great Britain," *American Sociological Review* 29, no. 5 (October 1964): 698, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2091420>.

¹⁴⁶Hanlin Li et al., "Slacktivists or Activists?: Identity Work in the Virtual Disability March," in *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '18: CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Montreal QC Canada: ACM, 2018), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173799>.

¹⁴⁷Marga De Weerd and Bert Klandermans, "Group Identification and Political Protest: Farmers' Protest in the Netherlands," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29, no. 8 (1999): 1073–95, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199912\)29:8<1073::AID-EJSP986>3.0.CO;2-K](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199912)29:8<1073::AID-EJSP986>3.0.CO;2-K).

¹⁴⁸Steve Hinkle and Rupert J. Brown, "Intergroup Comparisons and Social Identity - Some Links and Lacunae," in *Social Identity Theory - Constructive and Critical Advances*, ed. D. Abrams and M.A. Hogg, 1990, 48–70.

¹⁴⁹Caroline Kelly, "Group identification, intergroup perceptions and collective action," *European Review of Social Psychology* 4 (1993): 59–83.; Caroline Kelly, "Intergroup Differentiation in a Political Context," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 27, no. 4 (1988): 319–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1988.tb00835.x>; Steve Hinkle and Rupert J. Brown, "Intergroup Comparisons and Social Identity - Some Links and Lacunae," in *Social Identity Theory - Constructive and Critical Advances*, ed. D. Abrams and M.A. Hogg, 1990, 48–70.

Religion, in particular, is a powerful tool in mobilizing resistance through the identity theory of protest movements.¹⁵⁰ In the words of Jeffrey Seul, a lecturer in divinity at Harvard Divinity School, “No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity.”¹⁵¹ There are a few reasons for the saliency of religion as a unifying political ideology. First, religious norms, values, and behaviors help people construct value systems that, when internalized, can motivate action and belief systems.¹⁵² Secondly, as those belief systems take a philosophical approach to addressing tangible manifestations of poverty, social marginalization, and insecurity, religion is exceptionally appealing as a rallying force, because it creates the basis of an alternative political order.¹⁵³ Finally, there is a correlation between religious identity and a sense of national identity that transcends political order, thereby emboldening religious movements by promising that reform would not lead to a loss of national identity.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger, “Does Religion Make a Difference?: Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict,” in *Religion in International Relations*, Culture and Religion in International Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003), 107–45, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982360_5; Rachel Devon, “Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion, by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 55, no. 1 (May 16, 2018): 305–10, <https://doi.org/10.60082/2817-5069.3263>.

¹⁵¹Jeffrey R. Seul, “‘Ours Is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, And Intergroup Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (September 1999): 553–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343399036005004>.

¹⁵²Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 6 (November 2001): 685–704, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038006003>.

¹⁵³Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger, “Does Religion Make a Difference?: Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict,” in *Religion in International Relations*, Culture and Religion in International Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003), 107–45, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982360_5.

¹⁵⁴Sasa Nedeljković, “The Correlation Between Religious Identity and National Identity - The Participants of Student Protests in Belgrade 1996/7,” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 46, no. 1–2 (April 2001): 89–98, <https://doi.org/10.1556/AEthn.46.2001.1-2.10>.

However, identity theory has a huge gap in the study of religion, as it fails to address unity around secularism as an identity group during protests aimed at dismantling a religious state. The current literature on identity theory surrounding the Women, Life, Freedom movement primarily focuses on the shared womanhood across participants.¹⁵⁵ The element of womanhood is critically important to understanding the formation and relative successes of the movement, however, it is not the only identity variable at play. For example, Women Life Freedom is widely supported by men in the country, with one marker being that most executions from the regime following the protests targeted male participants in the movement.¹⁵⁶ When ABC News interviewed Nasrin Rahimieh, an expert on Iran at UC Irvine, in September 2023, she spoke about the reason for male participation, saying, “The reason why it’s cross-gender is simple: it is about the rights of the individual.”¹⁵⁷ In this case, the “rights of the individual” refer in some regards to the right to reject Islam in public and private spaces. It is, in essence, the right to a secular identity within Iran.

Additionally, some scholars even argue that most non-religious movements nonetheless tap into religious rhetoric and ideals, thus demonstrating how religious identity is prevalent across most protest movements.¹⁵⁸ However, when states, such as Iran, experience revolution with inherent and intentional secular attributes, such as the burning of religious symbols like the Hijab or throwing turbans off of clerics’ heads as was seen throughout the movement, it is hard

¹⁵⁵Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “A Nation in Turmoil, A Field in Crisis: The Upshots of Woman, Life, Freedom,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 4 (November 2023): 777–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460>; Manijeh Daneshpour and Sima Hassandokht Firooz, “Women, Life, Freedom: The New Unveiling of Feminism,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 34, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2022): 390–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2022.2142450>.

¹⁵⁶Somayeh Malekian and Camilla Alcini, “Men Targeted by Iranian Regime as Women Protest for Equal Rights,” ABC News, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/men-now-targeted-iranian-regime-women-protest-equal/story?id=103291751>.

¹⁵⁷Ibid

¹⁵⁸Anna L. Peterson, “Religious Narratives and Political Protest,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 1 (1996): 27–44.

to argue that those movements are still religious. In fact, it neglects the entire purpose of the Women Life Freedom movement's anti-religious authoritarianism mission. Without acknowledging how secularism operates in protests, it undermines the work of activists who hope to make a conscious social presence in Iran around secularism. Imposing latent religiosity on secular movements only works because the literature on identity theory does not consider secularism as a type of unifying identity.

My research builds upon the identity theory of social protests by emphasizing the importance of acknowledging secularism as an identity group. By studying the role of secularism in the Iranian Women Life Freedom movements, my research argues that, particularly under theocratic regime types, secularism is a critical and dynamic element of someone's identity. Throughout my research, I examine Women Life Freedom to understand how identity can form around a communal non-religiosity just as it can around religiosity. By looking at how social movements in Iran metabolize secularism in protest against the religious regime, my research addresses the absence of discussion of a communal secular identity in the literature on identity theory.

Conclusion

My research fills critical gaps in secularization theory, the religious markets model of secularism, and the religious-political model by presenting a context-driven and active understanding of secularization. By undertaking a study of protest movements and secularism, my approach examines the frequently neglected cultural, political, and social variables that contribute to secular trends. Additionally, studying protest movements creates a dialogue around the active element of secularism, which prioritizes people's intentional decisions and beliefs as

opposed to focusing on how external variables create gradual shifts in religiosity that people passively engage with.

Additionally, my research addresses gaps in the literature on the identity theory of social movements by incorporating secularism as a unifying facet of identity in protest. The current literature on identity's role in protest movements does not discuss how secularism can be a unifying identity, which is a critical gap that needs to be addressed, particularly in the context of conflicts between religious governments and a secular populace.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF POPULAR ISLAMIST POLITICS

The word Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means everything. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect.

– Ayatollah Khomeini, October 7th, 1979¹⁵⁹

In this chapter, I explore the complex and multifaceted role of Islamist politics in Iran, focusing on its cultural, historical, and national significance, particularly as it intersects with resistance, governance, and revolution. The nature of religion and governance in Iran is inherently very complex, but this chapter aims to unpack some of that complexity by tracing how religious politics have garnered support and dissent since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. I begin by exploring the 1979 Islamic Revolution, its promises, both secular and religious, and its outcome. Then I discuss the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent reconstruction period. Next, I look at the reform movement of the early 2000s that sought to amend the failures of Islamic governance. I then discuss the 2009 Green Movement and the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Finally, I provide a discussion of the political atmosphere and protest movements of the 2010s, which demonstrated for the first time since the 1979 Revolution a newfound frustration with Islamist politics and a desire not to reform, but replace, the religious institution.

The aim of this chapter is to contextualize the Women Life Freedom movement as the culmination of a long history of religious and political debate and negotiation. Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has been discussing and questioning their desired form of government and how, if at all, religion and the religious class should fit into it. Across many of the key informant

¹⁵⁹Oriana Fallaci, “An Interview With KHOMEINI,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1979, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/10/07/archives/an-interview-with-khomeini.html>.

interviews that I will discuss and analyze in Chapter 4, a common theme was the need to situate the Women Life Freedom movement within Iran's complex history and relationship with protest and religion. This chapter fulfills that need, providing the necessary context to frame the Women Life Freedom movement within the history of Iran's relationship with Islam and the clerical class.

I: Causes of the Islamic Revolution

The 1979 Islamic revolution, which deposed the Shah and brought the clerical government and Ayatollah Khomeini into power, is arguably the most important event in modern Iranian history. Particularly in the study of how religious institutions and the state intersect, the revolution is important because it brought to power the government structure that exists today. In this section, I give a brief historical account of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Then I explain the causes of the revolution, namely: class struggle and inequality, ideological and cultural elements, Western influence, and religious corruption. Then I describe how political Islamist appeals, an organizational advantage, and domestic political conditions allowed the clerics to come out as the leaders of the revolution.

The Islamic Revolution began in 1978 in protest against the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's government. Pahlavi took the throne of Iran in 1941. In the first decade of his rule, he acted more like a figurehead at the head of a constitutional monarchy.¹⁶⁰ However, in 1953, the Shah rose to prominence when a Western-backed coup deposed the elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq.¹⁶¹ Following the coup, the Shah took action to consolidate his power. In

¹⁶⁰US Department of State, "180. Intelligence Report 2035-72," Office of the Historian, May 1972, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/d180>.

¹⁶¹Ibid

the mid-1960s, the diversity of Iran's political discourse deteriorated into a dictatorship. For over a decade from 1965 to 1977, there was one prime minister who was loyal to the Shah. In 1975, the two-party system was replaced with a one-party system that further consolidated the authoritarian power of the Shah.¹⁶² The government expanded its military and a secret police force that crushed any political opposition.¹⁶³

Between 1958 and 1963, the Shah began a period of modernization efforts known as the "White Revolution."¹⁶⁴ The White Revolution was divided into a six-point program that emphasized, above all, land reform and education. The goal was to make Iran into a "modern" society.¹⁶⁵ In the words of historian Ali Ansari, the revolution was meant to "convey a sense of peaceful and bloodless but drastic change."¹⁶⁶ Driven by the massive influx of wealth caused by Iran's oil exportation, the revolution was defined by grandeur and emphasized that Iran was at the beginning of a great period of wealth and global influence.¹⁶⁷ In 1963, a referendum was held that gave the Iranian people the opportunity to vote on the six-point program of the Revolution.¹⁶⁸

Until the referendum, the clerics had been working with the government, hoping to influence what they saw as a dangerous and un-Islamic White Revolution while maintaining the

¹⁶²Elton L. Daniel, *The History of Iran*, vol. Second edition, The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2012), 161

¹⁶³Ibid

¹⁶⁴Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies*, July 1, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004408>.

¹⁶⁵TIME, "Iran: The White Revolution," TIME, February 11, 1966, <https://time.com/archive/6889177/iran-the-white-revolution/>.

¹⁶⁶Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies*, July 1, 2001, 583, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004408>.

¹⁶⁷Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 162

¹⁶⁸Azar Tabari, "Role of the Shi'i Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics," Libcom, May 9, 2014, 70 <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>

Shah's rulership.¹⁶⁹ However, the referendum was seen as a direct challenge to their leadership and place in society, as it supposedly sought to direct control away from the clerics and towards the Shah's government.¹⁷⁰ The future Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, gave a famous speech on June 3rd, 1963 called "The Afternoon of Ashura", in which he publicly denounced the Shah and the referendum, calling it "contrary to all the interests of the Iranian nation and conducted at bayonet-point."¹⁷¹ This speech led to his arrest two days later and subsequent protests across the country that for the first time combined the clerics, bazaars, and student movements in opposition to the Shah.¹⁷² Following the protests that he led against the Shah, Khomeini lived in exile until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.¹⁷³

The Islamic Revolution began softly in 1978 when an editorial published by the government-funded newspaper *Ettela'at* made personal attacks on Khomeini. The article offended much of the Iranian public, who had begun to view Khomeini as an emergent voice of reason in opposition to the Shah.¹⁷⁴ Among these attacks, the newspaper called Khomeini "an adventurer, without faith, and tied to the centers of colonialism... a man with a dubious past, tied to the more superficial and reactionary colonialists."¹⁷⁵ A few days later, protests in response to the paper's slander of their respected religious leader erupted in the religiously significant city of

¹⁶⁹Ibid

¹⁷⁰Ibid

¹⁷¹Ruhollah Khomeini, "The Afternoon of 'Ashura,'" ICIT Digital Library, June 3, 1963, <https://www.icit-digital.org/articles/the-afternoon-of-ashura-june-3-1963>.

¹⁷²Azar Tabari, "Role of the Shi'i Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics," Libcom, May 9, 2014, 71 <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>

¹⁷³Suzanne Maloney and Keian Razipour, "The Iranian Revolution—A Timeline of Events," Brookings, January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-iranian-revolution-a-timeline-of-events/>.

¹⁷⁴Ibid

¹⁷⁵Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, "The Revolution," in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 214–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.16>.

Qom, which was squashed by the Shah's police, leading to the death of five protestors.¹⁷⁶ The newspaper's attempt to undermine the burgeoning discontent by attacking Khomeini directly only emphasized his importance within the movement and counterproductively rallied people around him further.¹⁷⁷

The revolution began in earnest on August 19th, 1978, when 477 Iranians were killed in a fire at Cinema Rex in Abadan.¹⁷⁸ The revolutionaries claimed that the government's secret police, the Savak, had started the fires, and huge protests began in the country.¹⁷⁹ On September 8th, now known as Black Friday, the Shah declared martial law, enabling his security to kill over 100 protesters in Jaleh Square in Tehran.¹⁸⁰ Black Friday was a pivotal rallying point during the Revolution, and by December, millions of Iranians had taken to the streets in protest of the Shah. The protests became so overwhelming that on January 16th, 1979, the Shah made a farewell address and fled Iran.¹⁸¹ Khomeini returned to Iran from exile, where he had been living after opposing the Shah in the 1960s, on February 1st to encourage the final stage of the revolution to topple the remnants of the Shah's government and force the Prime Minister to flee.¹⁸² On March 30th, the regime held a referendum on whether Iran should become an "Islamic Republic," which passed easily. On October 14th, the "Assembly of Experts," an elected body of clerics, passed

¹⁷⁶Suzanne Maloney and Keian Razipour, "The Iranian Revolution—A Timeline of Events," Brookings, January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-iranian-revolution-a-timeline-of-events/>.

¹⁷⁷Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, "The Revolution," in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 214–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.16>.

¹⁷⁸Suzanne Maloney and Keian Razipour, "The Iranian Revolution—A Timeline of Events," Brookings, January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-iranian-revolution-a-timeline-of-events/>.

¹⁷⁹Ibid

¹⁸⁰Ibid

¹⁸¹Ibid

¹⁸²Ibid

the Islamic Constitution, instituting Khomeini's velayat-e faqih, or the guardian of the jurist, which imbued ultimate authority to the Supreme Leader.¹⁸³

The causes of the revolution can be divided into two primary categories: popular and religious concerns. In terms of religious concerns, the clergy and more traditional factions of society feared that Islam in Iran had been corrupted during the Shah's reign, and sought a religious government to replace it. In terms of popular concerns, the people advocated for the revolution to address the Shah's imperialism, rampant class struggle and inequality, and authoritarianism. The clerics who led the revolution came to power both as a result of their resources and because they mobilized the rhetoric of Islam as the carrier of popular demands for noninterference, societal equality, and political freedom.

The religiously motivated side of the revolution argued that the clerical class and hence Islam as a whole was threatened by religion's decline in power and influence under the Shah, and that a decline in respect for Islam would lead to the disappearance of Iranian culture on a larger scale.¹⁸⁴ The Shah's government introduced elements tied to Western secularism, including drinking and gambling, and permitting sexually explicit films and music to proliferate.¹⁸⁵ These types of social reforms aggravated the clerical establishment, because the reforms violated the Muslim legal code, Shari'a.¹⁸⁶ In particular, the religious base was concerned about a process called "westoxification." Westoxification, a term coined by the Iranian intellectual Jalal

¹⁸³Ibid

¹⁸⁴Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, "The Revolution," in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 214–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.16>.

¹⁸⁵Ibid

¹⁸⁶Azar Tabari, "Role of the Shi'i Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics," Libcom, May 9, 2014, 68 <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>

Al-e-Ahmad is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Islam as “indiscriminate borrowing from and imitation of the West, joining the twin dangers of cultural imperialism and political domination.”¹⁸⁷ Westoxification is the notion of being “intoxicated” or “infatuated” by Western society, and therefore easily susceptible to the West’s “moral laxity, social injustice, secularism, devaluation of religion, and obsession with money.”¹⁸⁸ The religious class feared that Westoxification would lead Iranians to abandon their culture and religion in favor of mirroring Western society.¹⁸⁹ As they projected a decline in the prominence of Islam in Iran in the face of these new reforms, the clerics feared spiritual alienation for Muslims as well as a loss of their own power within society.

The growth of women’s rights under the Shah particularly angered the clerical class as Khomeini argued that it was emblematic of a broader threat to traditional Muslim values.¹⁹⁰ The Shah gave women the right to vote and run for office, restricted men’s power in divorce processes and their ability to have many wives, and proliferated information on birth control.¹⁹¹ Khomeini viewed the growth of women’s rights as the epicenter of westoxification, understanding it as a threat to Iranian culture and religion by Western powers.¹⁹² A series of cleric-led protests began in 1962 because of a local election bill that both gave women the right

¹⁸⁷John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford Reference Online Premium (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003).

¹⁸⁸*Ibid*

¹⁸⁹Shirin Deylami, “The Ayatollah Khomeini: Gender and Sexuality in the Fight against Westoxification,” in *Globalizing Political Theory*, ed. Smita A. Rahman, Katherine A. Gordy, and Shirin Deylami (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023).

¹⁹⁰Willem M. Floor, “The Revolutionary Character of the Iranian Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4 (1980): 510.

¹⁹¹Ervand Abrahamian, *A HISTORY OF MODERN IRAN* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166

¹⁹²Shirin Deylami, “The Ayatollah Khomeini: Gender and Sexuality in the Fight against Westoxification,” in *Globalizing Political Theory*, ed. Smita A. Rahman, Katherine A. Gordy, and Shirin Deylami (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023).

to vote and allowed people to choose their holy text to be sworn into elected office on.¹⁹³ The clerical establishment saw these types of reforms as a huge threat, not just to their own power, but to the sanctity of Islam as well. For example, Ayatollah Kunsari, a prominent cleric, wrote that he protested the local election bill because of “women’s interference in social matters. Since this will involve women in corruption and is against the will of God, it is prohibited by Islam and must be stopped.”¹⁹⁴ Khomeini voiced his own opinion in a letter to the Prime Minister at the time, Assadollah Alam, writing, “the ulama made it public that women's franchise and the abrogation of the condition to be a Muslim to be allowed to elect or to be elected is contrary to Islam and the constitution. If you think that you can replace the Holy Quran by the Zoroastrians' Avesta, the Bible, and by some misguided books, you are mistaken.”¹⁹⁵ Religious activism in the revolution appealed to those who feared the decline or dilution of Islam placed their hope in \ Islamic governance as a way of remedying it.

Secondly, and arguably more widespread, was a populist revolution, through which the people advocated for regime change because of economic, political, and national preferences that were driven by a rise in popular politics with Islam as its carrier. Through the populist movement, people joined together across gender and religious identities in support of the revolution. In a speech that Ayatollah Khomeini gave on February 1st, 1979, upon returning to Iran after the Shah fled, “Declaration Upon Arrival at Tehran,” he acknowledged the populist nature of the revolution and the appeal that it had to those who did not subscribe to his faith system. “Victory has been attained by the unity of purpose not only of the Muslims, but also of

¹⁹³ Azar Tabari, “Role of the Shi’i Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics,” Libcom, May 9, 2014, 68 <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>

¹⁹⁴ Willem M. Floor, “The Revolutionary Character of the Iranian Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4 (1980): 510.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

the religious minorities, and by the unity of the religious leaders and the politicians. Unity of purpose is the secret of victory.”¹⁹⁶ The popular causes of the Revolution are widely debated, but the key elements include a combination of anti-imperialism, class struggle and inequality, and anti-authoritarianism.

First, anti-imperial criticisms were a critical driver of the revolution, and stem back to the Shah’s rise to power via a coup in 1953. Following World War II, most of Iran’s oil was owned by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which was controlled by the British government and owned by British shareholders.¹⁹⁷ AIOC’s refinery in Abadan was a critical British asset, producing 85% of the fuel needed by the Royal Navy and the Air Force’s operations in Asia.¹⁹⁸ Using Iranian oil, AIOC paid roughly 170 million pounds in taxes to the British government, 115 million pounds to British shareholders, and invested 500 million pounds in other oil operations outside of Iran, while only paying Iran 105 million pounds in royalties.¹⁹⁹ They also were known for enacting extreme ecological damage, and consistently implemented racist policies that discriminated against Persian workers and inhibited Iranians from rising through the ranks of the company.²⁰⁰ The AIOC’s influence first became truly challenged in 1953, when the people elected Muhammad Mossadeq as Prime Minister. Mossadeq had run on the incredibly popular platform of oil nationalization, and he was immediately perceived by the British as a threat.²⁰¹ The US joined the British in fearing Mossadeq as his liberal policies compounded Cold War era

¹⁹⁶Ruhollah Khomeini, “Declaration Upon Arrival at Tehran,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, February 1, 1979, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/imam-khomeini-declaration-upon-arrival-tehran>.

¹⁹⁷Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 10

¹⁹⁸Ibid: 12

¹⁹⁹Ibid: 15

²⁰⁰Ibid: 16-17

²⁰¹Ibid: 48

fears of communism spreading.²⁰² In 1953 M-16 and the CIA instigated a coup to overthrow Mossadeq and bring the Western-sympathetic Shah into power.²⁰³ The coup began the Shah's legacy as a product of Western imperialism and a puppet of British and American oil interests. Throughout his time in power, the Shah fed into the narrative that he was a byproduct of Western intervention. The coup got rid of labor unions and independent political parties.²⁰⁴ Additionally, much of Iran's oil was under a virtual monopoly of American and British oil companies,²⁰⁵ and the US provided military assistance, training, and financial aid to the new government.²⁰⁶ The Shah also built railroads and renovated port cities to give the country access to Western economies and societies.²⁰⁷

In the lead-up to and during the revolution, the clerical establishment mobilized the rhetoric of imperial threat to rally people against the Shah. In addition to rallying the clergy around a perceived threat to Islam, the Shah's Western sympathies were becoming increasingly unpopular in a global age of revolution and anti-imperial struggle. In a 1964 speech made from exile, Khomeini condemned the Shah, arguing that he gives special concessions to Americans in Iran for money. "The government has sold our independence," he said, "reduced us to the level of a colony, and made the Muslim nation of Iran appear more lowly than savages in the eyes of the world!"²⁰⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, an Iranian historian, identifies the coup itself as a critical step

²⁰²Mostafa T. Zahrani, "The Coup That Changed the Middle East: Mossadeq v. The CIA in Retrospect," *World Policy Journal* 19, no. 2 (2002): 93–99.

²⁰³Ibid

²⁰⁴Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 87 (1980): 21–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011417>.

²⁰⁵Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 563

²⁰⁶Ibid

²⁰⁷Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 165

²⁰⁸Ruhollah Khomeini, "Speech Denouncing American Influence in Iran," professorcampbell.org, 1964, <http://www.professorcampbell.org/sources/khomeini.html>.

in enabling the Revolution, writing, “In an age of nationalism and anti-imperialism, he came to power as a direct result of the CIA-MI6 overthrow of Mossadeq – the idol of Iranian nationalism. In an age of neutralism, he mocked non-alignment and Third Worldism. Instead, he appointed himself America’s policeman in the Persian Gulf, and openly sided with the USA on such sensitive issues as Palestine and Vietnam.”²⁰⁹ The leader of the clerical resistance, Ayatollah Khomeini’s distinct anti-foreign perspective included fears that the influx of foreigners and foreign influence in Iran would weaken the strength and power of the clergy and could threaten Islam in Iran more broadly.²¹⁰ The Shah’s incompatibility with the new age of self-determination and independence, compounded with the threat that his Western sympathies supposedly posed to traditional Islamic values, created a critical rallying point for the revolution.

Second, class struggle and inequality were critical drivers of the revolution, as much of Iran’s suffering during the late years of the Shah built frustration with the system and a desire for change. Following the Shah’s rise to power in the 1950s, Iran experienced a huge oil boom, with revenue jumping from \$34 million in 1953 to \$5 billion in 1973.²¹¹ This led to an increase in the quality of life for many middle-class Iranians, but it also significantly deteriorated the quality of life in the big cities. By the time of the revolution, 42% of people in Tehran had inadequate housing, and there was neither an adequate sewage system nor public transportation.²¹² Economic inequality grew rapidly during this period as the regime sought to bolster the economy by supporting private entrepreneurs, which significantly benefited the wealthy while marginalizing

²⁰⁹Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 157

²¹⁰Azar Tabari, “Role of the Shi’i Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics,” Libcom, May 9, 2014, 67 <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>.

²¹¹Ervand Abrahamian, “Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 87 (1980): 21–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011417>.

²¹²*Ibid*

the low and middle class.²¹³ These conditions were exacerbated by widespread corruption in the upper classes, particularly tied to the Pahlavi family and their foundation, The Pahlavi Foundation.²¹⁴ By the late 1950s, Iran was considered one of the most inegalitarian societies in the world.²¹⁵ Compounding the economic stress and inequality was the perceived moral degradation that took place in impoverished areas, as socio-economic stress led to upticks in drug use, alcoholism, and prostitution.²¹⁶ As suffering grew, the perceived moral degradation of Iranian society compounded the concern that I discussed above; the Shah's Iran was descending into chaos and immorality.

While the urban classes were frustrated with widespread inequality in the cities, rural farmers and peasant classes were exhausted by the broken promises of land reform from the Shah's White Revolution. According to the Shah's promises, excessively large plots of land under single ownership were to be sold to the state and then divided among the peasant class.²¹⁷ However, those land reforms were widely considered unsuccessful. Only roughly half of the land meant to be distributed was actually divided, and only half of the targeted recipients, the village peasant families, received any land.²¹⁸ Of those that did receive land, roughly three-fourths did not receive land that the government had deemed large enough to sustain a living.²¹⁹ People who had initially found hope in the promise of land reform were discouraged and angered by the

²¹³Ibid

²¹⁴Ibid

²¹⁵Ibid

²¹⁶Ibid

²¹⁷Elton L. Daniel, *The History of Iran*, vol. Second edition, The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2012), 160

²¹⁸Eric Hooglund, "Rural Iran and the Clerics," *MERIP Reports*, no. 104 (1982): 25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011173>.

²¹⁹Ibid

Shah's failure to deliver. As conditions declined in rural areas, people fled to the cities and occupied "shanty-towns," magnifying the country's struggles, exacerbating the strained resources in the cities, and ultimately becoming the base of the upcoming revolution.²²⁰

Third, disapproval of the Shah was amplified by political authoritarianism, which included censorship and the use of force and torture against political opponents. In 1975, the Shah formed the Resurgence Party, which would become the only political party in Iranian politics.²²¹ Those who did not join the party were threatened with jail time or asked to leave Iran as traitors.²²² The creation of the Resurgence Party alienated three critical sectors of Iranian society: the intelligentsia, the clergy, and the bazaaris. The intelligentsia were sidelined as the Shah imprisoned academics, writers, and poets who spoke against him.²²³ The Resurgence Party built offices inside the bazaars and implemented policies based on minimum wage. This was seen as a threat to the power of the bazaaris and their control over the markets.²²⁴ Finally, the Resurgence Party unilaterally implemented measures that limited the power of the clergy, such as selecting pro-Shah mullahs to lead prayer in the biggest mosques, and arresting dissident clerics who criticized the government.²²⁵

Rumors that the Shah had been using torture on political dissidents further exacerbated fears that the Shah's power was unchecked. In a conversation with Pope John II, Khomeini referenced torture, saying, "He roasted our young people in boiling pots, charred them on fire,

²²⁰Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 188

²²¹Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 87 (1980): 21–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011417>.

²²²Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 90

²²³Ibid

²²⁴Ibid

²²⁵Ibid: 91-92

cut their limbs.” Independent human rights groups like Amnesty International confirmed that the Shah had been using torture against his political opponents as early as 1975.²²⁶ When American President Jimmy Carter was elected in 1977 and began emphasizing the human rights records of American allies, the Shah felt pressure to begin improving political conditions within Iran.²²⁷ However, by relaxing his repressive measures against regime dissidents, the Shah allowed for the emergence of an even more radical and enraged dissenting populace.²²⁸

Notably, throughout the revolution, women were active in criticizing the Shah and bringing the Islamic Revolution to fruition.²²⁹ In an interview with author Haleh Esfandiari, one woman who had participated in the revolution, Nazanin, said, “I wanted the revolution to win. I was hoping for some justice and equality. I only saw the secular side of it, not the religious one.”²³⁰ Many women wore the floor-length chador for religious reasons, yet many also turned it into a symbol of the revolution and its roots in Iranian nationalism.²³¹ Simin Daneshwar, an Iranian writer, wrote in the newspaper *Kayhan*, “If the price of winning the revolution is covering my head, I will do it proudly.”²³² However, that sentiment would be short-lived.

²²⁶Bernard D. Nossiter, “Khomeini v. Shah: What the Record Says,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 1979, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/26/archives/khomeini-v-shah-what-the-record-says-khomeini-v-the-shah-what-the.html>.

²²⁷Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 98

²²⁸Ibid

²²⁹Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, “The Revolution,” in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 229, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.16>.

²³⁰Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructing Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 63.

²³¹Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, “The Revolution,” in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 218, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.16>.

²³²Sepideh Zamani, “Iranian Daughters: Struggling for the Rights Their Mothers Lost in the Revolution,” *Fikra Forum: An initiative of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 13, 2023,

Historian Shaul Bakhash describes the immediate shift, saying “[they] loved the revolution, not knowing it would not love them back.”²³³ Following the establishment of the government, Khomeini instituted several measures, including mandatory veiling, decreased rights in marriage or divorce, and being prohibited from participating in specific employment sectors.²³⁴ The “morality police” were established to oversee the implementation of those laws.²³⁵ On March 8th, 1979, International Women’s Day, tens of thousands of Iranian women protested the implementation of these new laws. Their chant, “In the dawn of freedom, we have no freedom,” encapsulates both the hope posed by the Islamic Revolution and its ultimate failure to provide for them.²³⁶

The clerics became the leaders of the revolution for three reasons: the emergence of Shia liberation theology, the ability for the clerics to organize across the country, and the fact that the clerics were exempt from the same type of oppression that other resistance groups faced from the Shah’s government. First, the religious class was able to frame the popular struggle for equality and anti-imperialism with Islam as its carrier through the proliferation of Shia liberation theology. The idea of Islam as a carrier for leftist ideals was introduced by the Iranian theologian,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-daughters-struggling-rights-their-mothers-lost-revolution>.

²³³Haleh Esfandiari, “Iranian Women: From Enthusiasm to Rebellion,” The Wilson Center, February 3, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iranian-women-enthusiasm-rebellion>.

²³⁴Arzoo Osanloo, “Lessons from the Suffrage Movement in Iran,” The Yale Law Journal, January 20, 2020, <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/lessons-from-the-suffrage-movement-in-iran>.

²³⁵Sepideh Zamani, “Iranian Daughters: Struggling for the Rights Their Mothers Lost in the Revolution | The Washington Institute,” Fikra Forum: An initiative of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 13, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-daughters-struggling-rights-their-mothers-lost-revolution>.

²³⁶TIME, “World: The Unfinished Revolution,” TIME, April 2, 1979, <https://time.com/archive/6850481/world-the-unfinished-revolution/>.

Ali Shariati, who died before the revolution began in 1977, yet continues to be known as one of the architects of the revolution.²³⁷ Shariati introduced the idea of “Shi’i liberation theology,” in which he argued that Islam was a way to address the qualms of the poor and suffering and that the ulama class had a right to govern the people to do so.²³⁸ By integrating Marxist concepts, emphasizing class struggle, anti-capitalism, and imperialism, with Islamic teachings, he pulled both religious and secular needs together and created an ideological basis for the revolution. Years later, Ayatollah Khomeini would reflect on how political Islam became the voice of the revolution, saying, “I have said time and time again that to build a society on the basis of the principles of Islam is an ideological choice, not just a religious one. Islam, in fact, is an ideology in which religion represents one aspect.”²³⁹

Second, there was the tangible organizing power of the religious establishment network of mosques and traditional influence. The clerics had over ten thousand mosques across the country, as well as informal religious associations that were able to spread the revolution effectively and easily across Iran.²⁴⁰

Third, in the face of widespread political oppression, the clerics emerged as the sole remaining actors capable of criticizing the Shah. Following the Shah’s widespread political oppression, mosques and the religious elite were the last remaining organized structure that had the potential to control the narrative of the revolution.²⁴¹ The main forces of government

²³⁷Nathan Olsen, “Revolutionary Religion: Shia Islam and the Iranian Revolution,” *E-International Relations* (blog), September 3, 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/09/03/revolutionary-religion-shia-islam-and-the-iranian-revolution/>.

²³⁸Ibid

²³⁹Kasra Aarabi, “The Fundamentals of Iran’s Islamic Revolution,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, February 11, 2019, <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution>.

²⁴⁰Asef Bayat, “The Making of Post-Islamist Iran,” in *Post-Islamism*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford University Press, 2013), 35–65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.003.0002>.

²⁴¹Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, “Ideology and Iran’s Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, accessed February 19, 2025, <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/ideology-and-irans-revolution-how-1979-changed-world>.

opposition, including liberals, guerrilla fighters, and student activists, were targeted and dismantled by the Shah's government in the years preceding the revolution.²⁴² Asef Bayat, a prominent sociologist on Iran, wrote, "for over twenty-five years of autocratic rule, since the 1953 coup, all of the effective secular political parties and nongovernmental organizations had been removed or destroyed ... In short, the secular groupings, while extremely dissatisfied, were organizationally decapitated."²⁴³ In the space, the clerics emerged as the voice of the revolution and were able to mobilize the aforementioned resources and organizational capacity to lead the movement.

II: Creating the Islamic Republic

After the overthrow of the Shah, the revolutionaries, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, began setting up their government and consolidating power. First, I describe the government that was set up following the revolution, including the Islamic constitution and the structure of government. Then I discuss three elements of society targeted by the Islamic Republic to help consolidate power: academia through the cultural revolution, gender segregation and decreased rights for women, and the suppression of political dissidents.

After the revolution, the clerical government acted quickly, electing a president, establishing a court system, and implementing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Guardian Council, and the Assembly of Experts. The IRGC is essentially the Supreme Leader's militant group and serves a dual purpose of protecting the Ayatollah from the military

²⁴²Asef Bayat, "The Making of Post-Islamist Iran," in *Post-Islamism*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford University Press, 2013), 35–65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.003.0002>.

²⁴³Ibid: 63

in the event of a coup and enacting the Supreme Leader's will as asked.²⁴⁴ The Guardian Council, which determines Sharia compliance as laws pass through the parliament, and as individuals take leadership positions.²⁴⁵ Finally, the Assembly of Experts is a body of jurists elected by the Guardian Council whose job is to serve as a check on the Supreme Leader's behavior, although there is no saying whether they ever have.²⁴⁶ The President is elected by the people and serves for a term of four years, with a maximum of two terms. The President passes policy initiatives and engages in diplomacy, although always under the authority of the Supreme Leader.²⁴⁷ The parliament contains 290 seats that comprise different geographical districts in Iran. Five of those seats are reserved for the representation of religious minorities.²⁴⁸

Following the creation of the government, the Islamic Republic put forth a new Islamic Constitution to the people's approval via referendum. The constitution laid out the new structure of government and summarized the elements that the people wanted in their revolutionary government. The constitution created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was tasked with "fulfilling the ideological mission of Jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."²⁴⁹ It also emphasized that the new government was committed to a free society with social and economic benefits. It set out sixteen points that the regime promised to allocate its resources toward delivering. These points included "ensuring political and social freedoms," "the complete elimination of all forms of despotism and

²⁴⁴CFR Editors, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," Council on Foreign Relations, November 12, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/irans-revolutionary-guards>.

²⁴⁵CFR Editors, "The Islamic Republic's Power Centers," Council on Foreign Relations, June 26, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

²⁴⁶Ibid

²⁴⁷Ibid

²⁴⁸Ibid

²⁴⁹"Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (Rev. 1989) Constitution," Constitute, rev. 1989 1979, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.

autocracy,” the “elimination of imperialism,” “the participation of the entire people in determining their political, economic, social, and cultural destiny,” “the abolition of all forms of undesirable discrimination,” and “securing the multifarious rights of all citizens, both women and men, and providing legal protection for all, as well as the equality of all before the law.”²⁵⁰ The promises struck a chord with the population and encouraged support for the new government and its promises.

However, notably, most of the constitution’s promises to provide basic rights and freedoms were conditionalized by clerical authority to determine compatibility with Islamic principles and the overarching principle of velayat-e faqih. For example, Article 24, which preserved freedom of the press, is conditionalized by, “except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam.”²⁵¹ Similarly, Article 26, which protects the right to form political organizations and religious societies, is conditionalized by saying that the freedom of religious and political assemblage is preserved, “provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.”²⁵² Much of this power was constitutionally enshrined in the aforementioned principle of velayat-e faqih, or Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Velayat-e faqih gave authority over the entire government and political structure to the clerical establishment, which was then under the purview of the Supreme Leader.²⁵³ The constitution intentionally preserved a level of ambiguity which, when coupled with the enshrined principle of velayat al-faqih, gave the Supreme Leader and his establishment essentially unbridled authority over the country.

²⁵⁰Ibid

²⁵¹Ibid

²⁵²Ibid

²⁵³Kasra Aarabi, “What Is Velayat-e Faqih?,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, March 20, 2019, <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/what-velayat-e-faqih>.

Once the government had been established, the regime began a “cultural revolution,” aimed at addressing and replacing the Western influence in Iranian society with a culture more in line with Islam.²⁵⁴ The regime started a media campaign praising members of the clergy, banned the use of European names, purged the public domain of any reminiscence of the Shah’s name or legacy, and attacked members of the Bahai faith by purging them from government institutions, closing their places of worship, and arresting and executing their leaders.²⁵⁵ On a broader scale, three groups in particular, academic institutions, women, and political dissidents, experienced the brunt of the regime’s efforts to consolidate power.

The first sector targeted for reform was education. This was done primarily during the early years of the Islamic Republic, through a transformation of higher education. The purpose was to address potential dissent on college campuses by aligning academia and higher education with the new political and ideological goals of the establishment.²⁵⁶ Following the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini was not popular among college students, to the extent that even many of those who were Islamists had a preference for the Shia liberation theory of Ali Shariati over Khomeini’s radicalism.²⁵⁷ Sensing a potentially dangerous bastion of political dissent on college campuses, Khomeini and the newly formed Islamic Republic established the Cultural Revolution Task Force to ‘Islamize’ and rid universities of external influence.²⁵⁸ During the first three years, from 1980 to 1983, the regime closed all universities in Iran. When they reopened, the

²⁵⁴Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). 177

²⁵⁵*Ibid*: 176 - 177

²⁵⁶Association for Iranian Studies, “The Cultural Revolution in the Universities of Iran 1981-87,” accessed March 17, 2025, <https://associationforiranianstudies.org/content/cultural-revolution-universities-iran-1981-87>.

²⁵⁷Editor, “The 1980 Cultural Revolution and Restrictions on Academic Freedom in Iran,” *Iran Press Watch* (blog), March 4, 2020, <https://iranpresswatch.org/post/20819/1980-cultural-revolution-restrictions-academic-freedom-iran/>.

²⁵⁸*Ibid*

government placed strict ideological and political guidelines for who could be admitted to or employed by universities.²⁵⁹ The motivation behind the cultural revolution can be best expressed by Khomeini himself, who said in a 1979 speech to a group of students, “If our schools, our universities are not corrected and reformed, we have no hope that an Islamic Republic shall ever take shape in this country.” He then goes on to market the benefits of education reform, arguing that if schools and universities are “reformed into becoming centers of human training, as Islam would suggest, not only will that guard our country from the hands of the devils, moreover it shall enable it to stand on its feet without dependence on foreigners.”²⁶⁰

Gender segregation and other reforms to limit women’s agency in Iranian society began quickly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic and became one of the most contentious social reforms that came out of the Revolution. Following the revolution, women’s bodies took on the impetus of the newly formed regime’s social agenda. As previously discussed, the discussion of women’s dignity and freedoms was a big element of the revolution, as many clerics feared that the social liberties that women held under the Pahlavi dynasty threatened the breadth and power of Islam. Addressing a woman’s place in the newly formed Islamic Republic was an opportunity to openly rebuke what was perceived as Western values and create the foundation for a more traditional societal structure.²⁶¹ These measures included almost immediate mandatory veiling for all women.²⁶² Women were prohibited from travelling abroad without permission from a male guardian, and could no longer be judges.²⁶³ It was also prohibited for men and

²⁵⁹ Association for Iranian Studies, “The Cultural Revolution in the Universities of Iran 1981-87,” accessed March 17, 2025, <https://associationforiranianstudies.org/content/cultural-revolution-universities-iran-1981-87>.

²⁶⁰ Nader Entessar, “Educational Reforms in Iran: Cultural Revolution or Anti-Intellectualism?,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 47–64.

²⁶¹ Nesta Ramazani, “Behind the Veil: Status of Women in Revolutionary Iran,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 29

²⁶² Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804786331>.

²⁶³ Ibid

women to be together in public unless they were married or closely related, and women were denied entry into technological or scientific disciplines.²⁶⁴ One of the most impactful changes was the regime overturning the Family Protection Law, which gave women under the Pahlavi regime rights in the divorce process, raised the age of marriage, and restricted polygamy.²⁶⁵

Additionally, the regime segregated Iran by gender, limiting women's agency in their everyday lives. This segregation aimed to ensure that Tehran would be viewed as an Islamic city, through the "moral purification" of public spaces.²⁶⁶ Public spaces, including buses, cinemas, and classrooms, were sectioned off into male and female areas.²⁶⁷ Women were prohibited from going to public pools and jogging in the parks.²⁶⁸ Physical infrastructure was built to create tangible barriers between the genders. Beaches and ski slopes were divided into sections by a tarp to prevent either side from seeing one another.²⁶⁹ Lower education was strictly segregated, and in higher education, male and female students were separated by a tarp.²⁷⁰ In his book, Alaytollah Khomeini wrote about the necessity for gender segregation in the creation of an Islamic state, referencing desegregated cinemas, theatres, dance halls and swimming pools as

²⁶⁴Yassaman Saadatmand, "Separate and Unequal Women in Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1995), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1311901832/citation/3A22C6C2426B4190PQ/1?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

²⁶⁵Nesta Ramazani, "Behind the Veil: Status of Women in Revolutionary Iran," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 29

²⁶⁶Nazanin Shahrokni, "The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran," in *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (Oakland (Calif.): University of California press, 2020).

²⁶⁷Ibid: 3

²⁶⁸Ibid: 10

²⁶⁹Ibid: 11

²⁷⁰Yassaman Saadatmand, "Separate and Unequal Women in Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1995), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1311901832/citation/3A22C6C2426B4190PQ/1?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

examples of, “activities which have torn the veil of modesty from [young people] and smothered the spirit of piety and valour in them.”²⁷¹

Women pushed back against these new restrictions on their freedoms both overtly and in secret. The most prominent example of immediate and open resistance to the regime’s policies toward women was a demonstration of March 18, 1975, in Tehran that mobilized thousands of women in protest against the regime’s social policies.²⁷² More covertly, women began pushing back on the regime in their private lives, through small acts of resistance. Nazanin Shahrokhi described Iranian women’s covert resistance in her book, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran*, by citing the notion of “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” an idea pioneered by Asef Bayat.²⁷³ Bayat defined the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” as “silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives.”²⁷⁴ Shahrokhi used examples, like women reapplying makeup after going past university checkpoints and wearing their veils more relaxed in the cover of nighttime, to demonstrate how, in subtle ways, women have pushed back against the regime’s policies since the beginning of the Islamic Republic.

The third area of society targeted in the aftermath of the revolution was members of political opposition groups and journalists. Following the formation of the Islamic Republic, the revolutionaries began to systematically weed out and imprison people whom they suspected to be loyal to or supporters of the Pahlavi state. They established the Islamic revolutionary courts,

²⁷¹Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Position of Women from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Juliana Shaw and Behrooz Arezoo (The Institute for the Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, n.d.). 160

²⁷²Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804786331>.

²⁷³Nazanin Shahrokhi, “The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran,” in *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (Oakland (Calif.): University of California press, 2020). 12

²⁷⁴Ibid: 46

in which clerics appointed by Khomeini were tasked with establishing Islamic Justice. This justice was frequently arbitrary, and those being tried rarely had representation or were allowed to provide a defense.²⁷⁵ The group of people tried in the Islamic Revolutionary courts included former ministers and government officials as well as businesspeople and other private individuals.²⁷⁶ The courts did this by mobilizing the Sharia Law of Retribution against people that they deemed counter to the revolutionary efforts.²⁷⁷ In the first four years after the revolution, the number of imprisoned people in Tehran alone was upward of sixty thousand.²⁷⁸ Between 1981 and 1985, the regime executed nearly eight thousand political opponents and integral members of alternative political parties as “counter revolutionaries,” or “sowers of corruption on earth.”²⁷⁹ Many known political oppositionists were also forced to go on television and take back all of their earlier-held political beliefs.²⁸⁰

III: Iran-Iraq War and Reconstruction

Although the promises of the regime and its practical implications were misaligned, there was no time for dissent against the new regime to truly build, as 1980 brought the start of the almost decade-long Iran-Iraq war. In this section, I start by describing the Iran-Iraq war and how it became a tool of power consolidation for the Islamic Republic. Then I describe the period immediately following the war, known as ‘Reconstruction,’ and its role in setting the stage for the reform movement in the early 2000s.

²⁷⁵Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 775

²⁷⁶*Ibid*

²⁷⁷Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 177

²⁷⁸Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 775

²⁷⁹Ali Fathollah-Nejad, “The Revolution’s Broken Promises,” in *The Iranian Revolution at Forty*, ed. Suzanne Maloney (Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctvkrkk1k.6>.

²⁸⁰Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 181

The Iran-Iraq war began as the byproduct of both territorial disputes over the Ahatta al-Arab River and ideological disputes caused by the perceived exportation of Shia Islamism into Sunni Iraq following the Revolution.²⁸¹ The war began in September 1980 when Saddam Hussein invaded Iranian territory. It lasted eight years and inflicted Iranian casualties upwards of 206,000 people, roughly 16,000 of whom were civilians.²⁸² The Iran-Iraq war brought Iran together behind the nation, leveraging a shared Persian identity. It was a critical moment in the early history of the Islamic Republic because it allowed the government to unify its population against a shared enemy while using the war to consolidate its power militarily and politically.

The Iran-Iraq war created a threat for the Iranian people to unify around, despite the cleavages of political discontent forming in society. Although popular discontent with the regime's policies was brewing in the months leading up to the war, Hussein's foreign invasion was essentially the first time in modern history that a foreign power had launched a full-scale invasion into Iran.²⁸³ The threat to Iran, as something bigger than the Islamic Republic, was enough to call together hundreds of thousands of Iranians, both supporters and opponents of the regime, to the front lines to fight the foreign invasion.²⁸⁴ In the words of Historian Abbas Amanat, the war "electrified" Iranian society.²⁸⁵

The external threat and the willingness of fellow Iranians to sacrifice themselves for their country created a unifying sentiment that temporarily assuaged political discontent with the

²⁸¹Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 101

²⁸²Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 175

²⁸³Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 832

²⁸⁴Ibid

²⁸⁵Ibid

Islamic regime. An Iranian Arab prisoner of war told an aid worker that the reason why the Iranian Arabs of Kuzestan, who came into frequent confrontation with the regime over their exploitation and neglect, was the emergence of a threat to broader Iran. He described his reason for fighting a government he once protested against, saying, “We wanted Arabic to be the first language in our schools, and we wanted more of the money the government earned from the oil in the province. But they wouldn’t agree with our demands, so we demonstrated. As a result, they sent a new governor to Madani in the province, and he used violence against the people. We defended ourselves, but when the war started, it was our duty to defend our country.”²⁸⁶ Another prisoner of war, who identified as being “not very religious” further emphasized the unity of the Iranian people during the war, saying “I didn’t go to war to die for Islam. I went to defend Iran.”²⁸⁷

The regime recognized the potential for the Iran-Iraq war to consolidate its domestic control, and emphasized religious and political propaganda and rhetoric throughout. Those who died in the war were given venerated status and labeled as martyrs for the Iranian cause and for the Islamic Republic. “Martyr’s sections” were constructed in cemeteries across the country, murals of religious martyrs were built in the streets, and bridal canopies with religious imagery and dialogue were set up at the houses of unmarried war victims.²⁸⁸ The government also encouraged a practice called “martyrs’ last testaments,” in which young soldiers would write letters to be read by their families or published in newspapers after their deaths.²⁸⁹ Martyr Adel Karami wrote in his testament to this effect, saying “I implore you, the martyr-nurturing and

²⁸⁶Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 198 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>.

²⁸⁷Ibid: 219

²⁸⁸Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 837-838

²⁸⁹Ibid

sacrificing people of Iran, a request that all the martyrs have and that is that you refrain from hurting and upsetting the Imam...”²⁹⁰ The emphasis on the will of those who gave their lives supporting the Islamic Republic was an incredibly potent tactic to suppress notions of dissatisfaction with Islamic rule. Thus, the war was successfully framed as a battle “of the good against the evil,” with the clerical regime taking on the role of the good, and Iraq of the bad.²⁹¹ In the words of historian Ervand Abrahamian, the Iran-Iraq War provided the regime with “a highly potent rallying cry,” and became a “patriotic as well as a religious-inspired revolutionary war.”²⁹²

The regime also took action within domestic institutions, building up its grasp on governing structures and the military under the guise of the war effort. From a military perspective, decentralized Iranian militias morphed into the “fully fledged military force” of the Army of the Revolutionary Guards, and the government expanded its intelligence ministry.²⁹³ The regime also nationalized trade and expanded welfare programs like ration cards to provide for daily necessities.²⁹⁴ Furthermore, the regime continued implementing and expanding the cultural revolution, leading to a growth in media censorship and other social measures to encourage an Islamic society.²⁹⁵ The Islamic Republic instituted these types of programs and reforms during the Iran-Iraq war, using the cover of the war effort to construct and build up institutions and laws that still impact Iranian civil society today.

²⁹⁰Nader Nazemi, “Sacrifice and Authorship: A Compendium of the Wills of Iranian Martyrs,” *Iranian Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (1997): 266

²⁹¹Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 839

²⁹²Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 176

²⁹³Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). 175

²⁹⁴*Ibid*: 176

²⁹⁵*Ibid*: 177

The aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war can be defined by two simultaneous and important moments: Ayatollah Khomeini's death and succession by Ayatollah Khamenei, and the beginning of the reconstruction period.

First, Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1988 of terminal cancer and heart disease, marking what is considered the end of the first phase of the Islamic Revolution.²⁹⁶ When Khomeini passed, between two and five million people attended his funeral, a testimony to his political and cultural impact.²⁹⁷ The months leading up to Khomeini's death were characterized by a final attempt to consolidate and strengthen the clerical regime that he had built.²⁹⁸ In this time, he executed over 2,800 prisoners from the Iran-Iraq war, as well as members of the political opposition to the Islamic Republic.²⁹⁹ Historian Evrand Abrahamian discussed this, saying, "Khomeini, in his dying years, was eager to leave behind disciples baptized in a common bloodbath. The killing would test their mettle, weeding out the halfhearted from the true believers, the weak-willed from the fully committed, and the wishy-washy from the resolute."³⁰⁰ To some extent, this strategy worked, as his intended successor, Ayatollah Hussein Montazari, resigned in protest of the regime's violence.³⁰¹ In the aftermath of Khomeini's death, the Constitutional Reform Council, which Khomeini created in the days before his death, named Ali Khamenei as the new supreme leader.³⁰² The council also abolished the Prime Minister's office,

²⁹⁶Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 303; Abbas Amanat, *Iran : A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 866

²⁹⁷Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 304

²⁹⁸Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182

²⁹⁹Ibid

³⁰⁰Ibid

³⁰¹Ibid

³⁰² Ibid

and reduced the power of the Majlis, as well as bolstered the power of the Council of Guardians to oversee appointments for the Assembly of Experts.³⁰³

Second, the country underwent a period of reconstruction led by the newly elected President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had been a student of and confidant to the late Supreme Leader, and had served as the Speaker of the Majlis during the Iran-Iraq war.³⁰⁴ Rafsanjani's goal in his election campaign and throughout his presidency was reconstruction, a feat that involved addressing both the social and economic impacts of the war, while also building up Iran's ability to engage in foreign policy. He filled his cabinet with highly educated intellectuals, many of whom studied in Western academic institutions.³⁰⁵ Economically, Rafsanjani took steps to rebuild Iran's industries. He privatized hundreds of factories that the state had nationalized since the revolution, invested heavily in oil infrastructure, rebuilt damage to infrastructure and housing caused by the war, and privatized state-owned agricultural land.³⁰⁶ He also emphasized opening Iran to international trade.³⁰⁷ Socially, Rafsanjani worked to liberalize parts of Iranian civil society. He created examinations for clerics to take to prove their qualifications, brought religious councils to Tehran so he could keep an eye on them, and openly attested that the time of assassinating political opponents was over.³⁰⁸ He also established the

³⁰³Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 305

³⁰⁴Ibid: 308

³⁰⁵Saïd Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2009), 57

³⁰⁶Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 300

³⁰⁷Ibid: 310

³⁰⁸Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019), 346.

Women's Social-cultural Council.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, under Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami became the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance.³¹⁰ Khatami removed some of the restrictions that the regime placed on the press and music.³¹¹ He restored Iran's political relations with the EU and applied for World Trade Organization membership, a request that was denied.³¹²

However, his attempts at reform were somewhat unsuccessful and led to a growing disillusionment with the Islamic Revolution. Socially, Rafsanjani faced opposition from and ceded to the right-wing majority in the Majles.³¹³ When he ran for reelection, the Guardian Council systematically disqualified his radical opposition and, in effect, secured his victory.³¹⁴ His efforts to privatize business were stifled by clerics who insisted that those companies were taken under the control of charities that were essentially alternative facets of the government, and restrictions on freedom of the press and opposition political groups remained high in practice.³¹⁵ From a foreign policy perspective, the geopolitical situation during his term was not as conducive to ending Iranian isolationism as he had hoped.³¹⁶ Economically, when the price of oil, Iran's main export and the financier of Rafsanjani's reconstruction efforts, fell drastically, it caused an economic crisis that would soil his legacy. Foreign debt skyrocketed as oil exports

³⁰⁹Saïd Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2009), 64

³¹⁰*Ibid*

³¹¹*Ibid*

³¹²Seyed Amir Niakooee and Ehsan Ejazi, "Foreign Policy and Economic Development: Iran under Rafsanjani," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 5, no. 19 (November 1, 2015): 191.

³¹³Saïd Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2009), 63

³¹⁴*Ibid*

³¹⁵Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 122 - 123

³¹⁶*Ibid*: 122

translated into less money, and imports remained high. The rial lost considerable value to the dollar, making foreign debt harder to pay off and imports more expensive to buy.³¹⁷

IV: Early Reform

The reform movement emerged following Rafsanjani's presidency with the election of his former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Muhammad Khatami. The movement altered Iran's politics in favor of reforming the Islamic Republic to return Iranian politics to the promises of democracy and freedom made during the time of the Revolution. In this section, I give a brief overview of the ideology of the reform movement and its foundational philosophers. Then I describe the emergence of the reform movement under Khatami's presidency and the reasons that it waned towards the end of his term. Although the Green Movement in 2009 is part of the reformist campaign, I discuss this with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the following section.

The goal of the reform period was to amend the Islamic Republic to preserve Islamic governance while pursuing social and economic harmony through the emergence of post-Islamist ideology. Post-Islamism is a term coined by Asef Bayat. Bayat describes post-Islamism as emerging in the period following Rafsanjani's presidency. Bayat defines post-Islamism as a "blend of republican ideals and religious ethics with 'democracy' as its political mission."³¹⁸ Part of the emphasis in post-Islamist ideology is the idea that the Islamic state is a threat not only to the people but also to the religion of Islam itself. Bayat argues that it was an "attempt to secure

³¹⁷Ibid: 122

³¹⁸Asef Bayat, "The Making of Post-Islamist Iran," in *Post-Islamism*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford University Press, 2013), 35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.003.0002>.

both the sanctity of religion and the rationality of the state.”³¹⁹ In the words of historian Ali Ansari, “this was to be a project which would fulfil the democratic promise of the Islamic Revolution”³²⁰

The reform period was characterized by the rise of religious intellectuals like Mohsen Kadivar, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mojtabeh Shabestari, and Khatami himself, who pioneered post-Islamism as a way of addressing Iran’s social, economic, and political issues. Most reform era intellectuals had at one point served key roles in the revolutionary project and within the Islamic state structure; however, over time, there appeared an ideological shift towards the importance of free market economies, human rights, and scientific discovery.³²¹ They also emphasized a notable shift in the interpretation of religious texts and Islamic doctrine. The reformist intellectuals rejected the notion that there was one true reading of the holy text, with some going so far as to push back against the concept of having a leader whose job was to espouse ultimate authority over the interpretation of such texts.³²² They widely rejected the imposition of religion in people’s public and private lives, arguing, in the words of Asef Bayat, that “faith and freedom are two sides of one coin.”³²³

Khatami began trying to institute the reformist agenda almost immediately upon his election. The Khatami government emphatically supported emboldening freedom of the press and social participation.³²⁴ By 2000, there were 95 newly registered political parties and

³¹⁹Ibid: 48

³²⁰Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019).

³²¹Asef Bayat, “The Making of Post-Islamist Iran,” in *Post-Islamism*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford University Press, 2013), 49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.003.0002>.

³²²Ibid: 51

³²³Ibid:51

³²⁴Ibid

organizations, 174 new daily papers, and 40 new women's publications.³²⁵ Iranian foreign policy also greatly expanded, as Khatami sought to end Iranian isolationism and amend relationships with the West. He reopened diplomatic ties with the UK, made progress on restoring a friendly relationship with EU states, and improved the relationship between Iran and the Gulf States.³²⁶ During the first years of his presidency, Iran became "a society reborn," marked by an "immense sense of vitality and energy" among civil society.³²⁷

However, Khatami's attempt at reform was limited by Khamenei and the more hardline conservative Islamists in the government, leading to a disillusionment with the promise of the reformist agenda and eventually culminating in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. The reform movement posed the first major threat to the conservative hard-line regime by challenging both their ideological and political legitimacy.³²⁸ As a result, they worked from the beginning of Khatami's presidency to stall and undermine reform objectives. The hardliners first came for his ministers, imprisoning and forcing several of them out of office.³²⁹ Then they came for his social policies. Khamenei himself directly intervened to preserve a law that limited freedom of the press, a move that led to the closure of numerous reformist publications and the imprisonment of several journalists.³³⁰ During his second term, any reformist legislation that made its way through the Majles would be blocked from becoming law by the Guardian

³²⁵Ibid: 61

³²⁶Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 340

³²⁷Asef Bayat, "The Making of Post-Islamist Iran," in *Post-Islamism*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford University Press, 2013), 60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.003.0002>.

³²⁸Ibid: 61

³²⁹ Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 124

³³⁰Ibid: 125

Council.³³¹ Additionally, as the reformists used all of their political capital to advocate for social and foreign policy reforms, the suffering economy fell by the wayside, leading many middle and lower class former reformists to be doubtful.³³² As the economy faltered, the job market also suffered, leaving thousands of highly educated young Iranians similarly disillusioned with the reform agenda.³³³

Despite initial success, the failure of Khatami's government to successfully implement the reformist agenda led to a sense of collective disillusionment. When the Guardian Council vetoed reformist candidates running to replace Khatami after his term limits were met, the reformist camp boycotted the election, which, when combined with a growing frustration with the failure of reform to better living conditions, led to the victory of hard-line conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

V: Ahmadinejad and the Green Movement

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency and the 2009 Green Movement were critical events in the evolution of dissenting political opinion in Iran. In this section, I first go into Ahmadinejad's presidency and the steps that he took to dismantle Khatami's reformist legacy. Then I discuss the 2009 Green Movement, a mass protest that arose when Ahmadinejad's reelection victory was supposedly rigged by the clerical establishment. I also discuss the interesting role of religious advocacy in the Green Movement, and how its eventual failure led to the abandonment of the reform movement and the emergence of the current demands to overthrow the Islamic Republic once and for all.

³³¹Ibid: 125

³³²Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>. 362

³³³Ibid

Ahmadinejad was part of a generation whose political consciousness had been formed by the Iran-Iraq war. He blamed the US and the international community more broadly for failing to protect Iranians against Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons and human rights abuses during the war, and he viewed Islamic governance as a way to reclaim Iranian identity and history.³³⁴ Throughout his campaign, he pronounced that Iran "must return to the roots of the revolution."³³⁵ During his first term, Ahmadinejad rolled back many of Khatami's social reforms, including closing prominent newspapers, censoring films and books, and purging universities of secular and reformist intellectuals.³³⁶ He also instituted domestic policies that decreased accountability for the government and directed the money from growing oil revenue directly towards religious institutions.³³⁷ From a foreign policy perspective, Ahmadinejad did not share in Khatami's desire for better relationships with the West. He deepened the cultural and social divide between Iran and the West and emphasized anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric, going so far as to host and speak at a 2006 Holocaust deniers conference in Tehran.³³⁸ He also differentiated himself from Khatami's openness to negotiations on international monitoring of Iranian nuclear sites, by taking a confrontational, anti-imperialist stance on Iran's right to develop nuclear capabilities.³³⁹ His unwillingness to negotiate with the US and European powers

³³⁴Ray Takeyh, "A Profile in Defiance: Being Mahmoud Ahmadinejad," *The National Interest*, no. 83 (2006): 16–21.

³³⁵*Ibid*: 17

³³⁶Alireza N. Haghighi and Victoria Tahmasebi, "The 'Velvet Revolution' of Iranian Puritan Hardliners: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Rise to Power," *International Journal* 61, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 968, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200606100412>.

³³⁷Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019), 378

³³⁸Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 390 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>.

³³⁹*Ibid*: 84-86

on Iranian nuclear facilities led to widespread sanctions from the United Nations Security Council.³⁴⁰ These sanctions were doubled down by the US in 2010 to further put pressure on the Iranian economy to encourage negotiations.³⁴¹

The Green Movement started following Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009. Going into his reelection campaign, Ahmadinejad was up against Mir Hossein Mousavi, a popular reformist candidate who himself had been involved in the revolution and had been Prime Minister during the Iran-Iraq war.³⁴² Mousavi sought to amend the Islamic Republic and provide new freedoms. His campaign emphasized freedom of speech, women's rights, and republicanism.³⁴³ He had also been endorsed by the former president of Iran, Khatami, who, as aforesaid, was a symbol of the early days of the reform movement.³⁴⁴

The election brought hope to many Iranians who were optimistic for a reformed Iran. Part of the enthusiasm towards the new reformist candidate had to do with Obama's election in 2008, which brought a sense of hope as the new President talked about a willingness for the US to open talks with Iran.³⁴⁵ Another element was the televised debates between the candidates, which brought up criticisms of the regime and the system, as well as giving people a taste of what a free

³⁴⁰“Brief History of US Sanctions on Iran,” Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University, July 21, 2017, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/brief-history-us-sanctions-iran/>.

³⁴¹Ibid

³⁴²Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 147

³⁴³Ali Akbar, “The Green Movement in Iran: Reformist Roots and Objective,” November 17, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2667372X-01010002>.

³⁴⁴Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 158

³⁴⁵Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 400

and open political discourse would feel like.³⁴⁶ Expectations were especially high, as many people believed that the reformists who had boycotted the election that had initially brought Ahmadinejad to power would vote with enthusiasm in this election.³⁴⁷ A journalist who covered the election described the period of campaigning before the election as if “a breeze of liberty was blowing through the streets.”³⁴⁸

However, the results of the election were a resounding 63% in favor of Ahmadinejad, winning him a second term despite the momentum behind the reform movement.³⁴⁹ Discrepancies and suspicious activity behind the vote count led to a consensus that the results had been rigged by Khamenei’s establishment.³⁵⁰ Protests erupted in the streets over the next six months, with an estimated three million people participating.³⁵¹ The movement’s motto was a simple call for democracy: “Where is my vote?”³⁵² The regime and the new administration responded with force, mobilizing the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, a paramilitary organization under the Supreme Leader’s purview, to beat, arrest, and kill hundreds of protesters.³⁵³ The government also systematically tried roughly 100 of the important leaders of the Green Movement on television, forcing them into confessions that emphasized the US’s role in creating a movement meant to undermine the Islamic Republic.³⁵⁴ Furthermore, in an attempt

³⁴⁶Ibid: 402

³⁴⁷Ibid: 402

³⁴⁸Ibid: 401

³⁴⁹Ibid: 402

³⁵⁰Ibid: 402

³⁵¹Mandy Taheri, “What’s Changed 15 Years after Iran’s Green Movement,” *Newsweek*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/whats-changed-iran-since-green-movement-presidential-election-1913321>.

³⁵²Hamid Rezai, “Green Movement in Iran,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm468>.

³⁵³Abbas Milani, “The Green Movement” (The Iran Primer, n.d.).

³⁵⁴Ibid

to contain the narrative of the protests, newspapers were shut down and journalists were imprisoned.³⁵⁵

The target of the movement quickly evolved, from anger over the election to anger over the regime as a whole and its infringement on human rights and civil liberties. A manifesto of the Green Movement, signed by some of the most influential leaders of the Iranian reformist movement – Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Ayatollah Mohajerani, Akbar Gani, and Abdolali Bazargan – describes the more expansive goals set out by the movement. The manifesto asks to abolish the process of vetting political candidates by religion, the release of political prisoners and investigation into torture and murder of dissidents, independence for universities, banning military and security forces from politics, and banning the use of Friday prayers to espouse religious political ideology.³⁵⁶ Furthermore, on the first anniversary of the protests, Mousavi issued the “Charter of the Green Movement,” in which he described the need for reform in Iran that transcended the pleas for democracy echoed in the streets. He talked about the regime’s corruption, a decaying rule of law, and violations of human rights, as well as the critical need to reform the current system.³⁵⁷

The impact of the Green Movement on Iranian politics is different in terms of short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, the Green Movement was considered a failure, to the extent that it did not achieve its goals or provide any substantive reform. The widespread and violent oppression by the regime’s security forces discouraged and demobilized the protestors.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵Ibid

³⁵⁶Abdolkarim Soroush et al., “Manifesto for Iran’s Green Movement,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2010): 32–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2010.01154.x>.

³⁵⁷Mir Hossein Mousavi, “The Green Movement Charter,” FRONTLINE - Tehran Bureau, June 16, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/the-green-movement-charter.html>.

³⁵⁸Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019), 390.

By January 2010, the movement had tapered down with little to no visible political effect.³⁵⁹ However, regardless of the movement's failure to institute substantive change, the Green Movement was nonetheless a very socially influential pro-democracy movement emblematic of the growing fissures in Iranian society between the reformists and regime-loyal hard-liners in the early 2000s.³⁶⁰ In the medium to long term, the Green Movement signaled the beginning of the end for the reformist movement. In the words of Nader Hashemi, a professor at Georgetown University, the Green Movement was still part of the "time when many still believed that a reformist and democratic change in the regime was possible."³⁶¹ With the Green Movement's failure to deliver substantive changes, Iranians became more cynical of the potential to enact change by electing reform candidates. In the words of Alex Vatanka, a director of the Middle East Institute's Iran program, "In the 2009 elections, many Iranian voters came to vote for change, thinking the system could be gradually reformed... Today, and definitely this young generation of Iranians, do not believe that change is possible through the ballot box."³⁶²

One interesting part of the Green Movement and its quest for reform is its relationship with the institution of religion. By both integrating Islam and criticizing the regime, the Green movement emphasized a tension that had been growing between Islam itself and the Islamic Republic. Although the movement was secular in nature, religious symbols and rhetoric were nonetheless very present. People shouted Allah Akbar (God is Great) from their rooftops at night and chanted "Ya Hossein, Mir Hossein," which called on the important Shia religious figure

³⁵⁹Ibid

³⁶⁰Abbas Milani, "The Green Movement" (The Iran Primer, n.d.).

³⁶¹Mandy Taheri, "What's Changed 15 Years after Iran's Green Movement," Newsweek, June 15, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/whats-changed-iran-since-green-movement-presidential-election-1913321>.

³⁶²Ibid

Imam Hussein to help Mir Hussein Mousavi in his quest for reform.³⁶³ In his famous “Charter of the Green Movement,” Mousavi writes that the Green Movement is “loyal” to Iranian “religious values and principles,” and argues that the movement is necessary to preserve Islam in Iran by “strengthening the moral aspects of Islam.”³⁶⁴ He argued that by not forcing people to abide by religion, and by separating the government and the clerical establishment, Islam can be protected from degradation by association.³⁶⁵ Although religion was by no means a defining element of the Green Movement, it nonetheless made an appearance, both as something that people rallied around to protect and as something that people used to protest against the regime.

VI: After the Green Movement

Despite the success of the reform movement in rallying people around the idea of reform, its failure to provide substantive political changes led to a growing frustration in the 2010s and the 2020s, which effectively changed the nature of anti-government rhetoric from reforming to overthrowing and replacing the Islamic Republic. This section describes the political environment in Iran in the 2010s and 2020s, giving special attention to the election and policies of president Hassan Rouhani, the worsening economic situation and the subsequent protest movements in 2017 and 2019, the downing of flight PS7552 by the Iranian security forces, and the water protests under President Ebrahim Raisi. Throughout my analysis of the protests, I further explore the changing emphasis from reform during the Green Movement to revolution in the 2010s.

³⁶³ Abbas Varij Kazemi, “Appropriating the Past: The Green Movement in Iran,” *Global Dialogue*, April 28, 2013, <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/appropriating-the-past-the-green-movement-in-iran>.

³⁶⁴ Mir Hossein Mousavi, “The Green Movement Charter,” *FRONTLINE* - Tehran Bureau, June 16, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/the-green-movement-charter.html>.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*

Ahmadinejad was replaced in 2013 by the moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani, who tried to appeal to the reformist agenda by emphasizing democratic principles and human rights.³⁶⁶ He was supported by Khatami, who viewed him not as the ideal candidate, but the best one available.³⁶⁷ He vowed to “desecuritize” the political sphere and free the former Green Movement leaders, like Mir-Hussein Mousavi, who had been put under house arrest.³⁶⁸ The emphasis of his campaign was on addressing the economic issues that Iran faced because of Western sanctions through revived foreign policy and improving relations with the US.³⁶⁹ He singled out the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the US as the path that Iran could take to economic development.³⁷⁰

However, despite Rouhani’s attempts at moderate reforms, his presidency was characterized by poor economic conditions and minimal social changes.³⁷¹ Free speech remained limited, as did freedom of the press. Similarly, rights for women and religious minorities did not change.³⁷² Additionally, Rouhani had made the mistake of selling the JCPOA to his people as an economic cure-all.³⁷³ He implied that once nuclear-related sanctions were lifted, Iran would be

³⁶⁶Ibid: 128

³⁶⁷Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019), 396

³⁶⁸Ibid

³⁶⁹Ibid: 397

³⁷⁰Ibid: 397

³⁷¹Michael Axworthy, *Iran : What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170

³⁷²Tzvi Kahn, “Under Rouhani, Iran’s Extremism Persists Under Rouhani, Iran’s Extremism Persists,” Foreign Policy Initiative, October 29, 2014, <https://www-jstor-org.revproxy.brown.edu/stable/resrep07233?sid=primo&seq=1>.

³⁷³Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon (GB) New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2019), 397

able to rejoin the world economy. However, the vast majority of American sanctions were omitted from negotiations surrounding the JCPOA and remained even after nuclear-related sanctions were lifted. Human rights and terrorism related sanctions and limitations on the use of the US dollar or US financial markets remained, and despite Rouhani's promises, Iran continued to be blocked from the global economy.³⁷⁴ Historian Ali Ansari describes the political environment surrounding Rouhani's presidency as "optimism soon gave way to disappointment and then despair as the political and economic situation in the country grew gradually worse."³⁷⁵

The first set of protests under Rouhani, the Dey protests, took place in 2017 and started in the city of Mashhad, but grew quickly to encompass between 70 and 100 cities and towns and thousands of people.³⁷⁶ The target of the protests was the stagnant economic conditions and rising food prices, which Rouhani's campaign had promised to fix, alongside pleas for more social freedoms.³⁷⁷ Key slogans of the movement included "Bread, Job, Freedom," which advocated for socio-economic equality, and "You've turned Islam into a tool to oppress the people," which targeted the religious establishment and its social policies in particular.³⁷⁸ In one

³⁷⁴Ibid: 400

³⁷⁵Ibid: 401

³⁷⁶Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis" (The Brookings Institution, April 28, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-Four-Decades-On-English-Web.pdf>.

³⁷⁷Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Confronts 3rd Day of Protests, With Calls for Khamenei to Quit," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/iran-protests-rouhani.html>.

³⁷⁸Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis" (The Brookings Institution, April 28, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-Four-Decades-On-English-Web.pdf>.

video, students at Tehran University chanted “this is the end of their adventure,” targeting both the hard-line regime supporters and the reformists.³⁷⁹

More protests began after an abrupt rise in fuel prices in 2019 and again grew into broader anger and resentment against the regime. The 2019 protests were bigger than the 2017 Dey protests, and occurred primarily in low-income areas across the country.³⁸⁰ Chants during the protests included “Shame on the Islamic Republic,” “Death to Khamenei,” and “This month is the last month! It’s time for Seyyed Ali to go.”³⁸¹ The regime’s bloody handling of the protests was even more shocking. The internet was cut off, reformist politicians were imprisoned, and roughly 1,500 people were killed.³⁸² In one particularly gruesome account, *The New York Times* reported that in the city of Mahshahr, the IRGC surrounded, shot, and killed somewhere between 40 and 100 unarmed protestors.³⁸³ Mohamad Holmordai, Mahshahr’s representative in the Majles, addressed the Supreme Leader on television, saying, “What have you done that the undignified Shah did not do?”³⁸⁴ The crackdowns following the election were so extreme that they are now known as “Bloody November.”³⁸⁵

³⁷⁹Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran Confronts 3rd Day of Protests, With Calls for Khamenei to Quit,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/iran-protests-rouhani.html>.

³⁸⁰Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>.

³⁸¹“Interactive Iran Protest Timeline,” *National Union for Democracy in Iran*, September 15, 2024, https://nufdiran.org/resource_analysis/interactive-iran-protest-timeline/.

³⁸²“Iran: No Justice for Bloody 2019 Crackdown,” Human Rights Watch, November 17, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/17/iran-no-justice-bloody-2019-crackdown>.

³⁸³Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>.

³⁸⁴Ibid

³⁸⁵A. B. C. News, “A Year after ‘Bloody November,’ Reformists in Iran Still Fight for Legitimacy,” ABC News, November 19, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/year-bloody-november-reformists-iran-fight-legitimacy/story?id=74300820>.

The protests in 2017 and 2019 built off one another and mobilized the rhetoric of overthrowing the regime in a novel way, unseen in 2009. Unlike in 2009, which sought to reform the establishment, these protests directly challenged the Supreme Leader and his ability to provide for Iranians. Nic Robertson, a CNN reporter, said about the anti-Khamenei rhetoric, “This is something that didn’t happen in 2009. This is a huge thing to happen in Iran. People don’t say that publicly on the streets.”³⁸⁶ This new rhetoric was so novel that it made many political theorists predict that Iran’s religious government was on the verge of collapse. In 2019, the U.S.’s National Security Advisor, John Bolton, tweeted, “With the recent protests in #Iran, we can see the danger that the regime is in.”³⁸⁷ Rudy Giuliani similarly wrote, “These are the kinds of conditions that lead to successful revolutions.”³⁸⁸ Unlike the days of the reform movement, the new demands made by Iranians centered around overthrowing the religious establishment.

A third series of protests erupted in January 2020 after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shot down Ukraine International Airlines flight 752, killing all 176 people on board.³⁸⁹ This came in the direct aftermath of IRGC retaliation strikes on an Iraqi airbase following the American assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.³⁹⁰ For three days, the Iranian government denied any responsibility for the crash, leading to widespread distrust and anger when it was later revealed to have been caused by the IRGC.³⁹¹ The son of the former Shah, Reza

³⁸⁶Phil Gast, Dakin Andone, and Kara Fox, “Here’s Why the Iran Protests Are Significant,” CNN, January 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/30/world/iran-protests-issues/index.html>.

³⁸⁷Seth G. Jones and Danika Newlee, “Iran’s Protests and the Threat to Domestic Stability,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies Briefs*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-protests-and-threat-domestic-stability>.

³⁸⁸ Ibid

³⁸⁹Ehsan Mehrabi, “Flight PS752 Downing Destroyed Public Trust In Iranian Government,” Iran Wire, January 9, 2023, <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/112424-flight-ps752-downing-destroyed-public-trust-in-iranian-government/>.

³⁹⁰ Ibid

³⁹¹ Ibid

Pahlavi, went to Twitter to condemn to downing of the flight, writing, “The downing of PS752 was a terrorist attack. Those responsible for this horrific crime, from Ali Khamenei to the IRGC terrorists ringleaders, should know that this case will soon be addressed in an Iranian court.”³⁹² The protests in the aftermath of the incident incorporated thousands of Iranians and led to brutal government crackdowns, perpetuating the idea that Iranians could not trust the Islamic Republic to keep them safe or to tell them the truth.³⁹³ The notion of the Iranian people versus the Islamic Republic had become a prevalent dialogue across the nation.

Roughly one year later, in August 2021, Ebrahim Raisi, a hard-line cleric, was sworn in as the president of Iran with the lowest recorded votes in Iranian history.³⁹⁴ Only 48% of the voting-eligible population voted, and many of the ballots were spoiled or blank, demonstrating the widespread disillusionment with the regime and its capacity to serve the people’s interests whatsoever.³⁹⁵ Raisi was a regime loyalist who had spent his career as a judge and played a role in the execution of thousands of political opponents in the 1980s.³⁹⁶ During his time in power, he built up Iran’s nuclear capabilities, established close relationships with China and Russia, and

³⁹²Reza Pahlavi [@PahlaviReza], “The Downing of #PS752 Was a Terrorist Attack. Those Responsible for This Horrific Crime, from Ali Khamenei to the #IRGCterrorists Ringleaders, Should Know That This Case Will Soon Be Addressed in an Iranian Court. I Wish Peace to the Ukrainian Arliner Victims and Their Families.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, January 7, 2025, <https://x.com/PahlaviReza/status/1876760533292007496>.

³⁹³“Iran Plane Crash: Protesters Condemn ‘lies’ on Downed Jet,” *BBC*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51079965>.

³⁹⁴Peter Beaumont, “Who Was Ebrahim Raisi and What Were His Policies at Home and Abroad?,” *The Guardian*, May 20, 2024, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/19/ebrahim-raisi-irans-hardline-president-dogged-by-execution-claims>.

³⁹⁵Saeed Azimi, “Iran Elections: Record-Low Turnout Shows Even Regime Loyalists Are Unhappy,” *Stimson Center* (blog), July 1, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-elections-record-low-turnout-shows-even-regime-loyalists-are-unhappy/>.

³⁹⁶Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “Iran’s War Within,” *Foreign Affairs* (New York, United Kingdom: Council on Foreign Relations NY, October 2021).

doubled down on Iran's support of regional organizations, including Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Palestinian Jihad.³⁹⁷

Two prominent protest movements emerged during Raisi's presidency: the water protests and the Women Life Freedom movement, which I discussed in chapter one. The first set of protests, known as the water protests, began in 2021, under Raisi's presidency.³⁹⁸ *The New York Times* reported that at the time of the protests, roughly 97% of the country was facing some level of water scarcity.³⁹⁹ The lack of water meant that both livestock were dying of thirst, and entire villages did not have running water.⁴⁰⁰ The protests went on peacefully for two weeks in Isfahan in central Iran, with the regime even allowing farmers to go on television to discuss their grievances.⁴⁰¹ It was not until the protests began to spread that the regime resorted to its typical tactic of violent repression.⁴⁰² It grew to a wider movement because the peaceful protests were violently squashed by regime forces who used ammunition and tear gas. Mirroring the discontent with the overarching establishment and a desire for foundational change, the protesters chanted "Mullahs get lost," and "Reza Shah, bless your soul."⁴⁰³

³⁹⁷Pranjal Pandey, "Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi Dies in Helicopter Crash, Leaving Behind a Polarizing Legacy," *CounterPunch*, May 2024, 1–4.

³⁹⁸Peter Beaumont, "Who Was Ebrahim Raisi and What Were His Policies at Home and Abroad?," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2024, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/19/ebrahim-raisi-irans-hardline-president-dogged-by-execution-claims>.

³⁹⁹Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Clamps Down on Protests Against Growing Water Shortages," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-water-shortages.html?smid=tw-share>.

⁴⁰⁰Rogayeh Rezaei, "A Year On From the 2021 Water Protests, Has Anything Changed in Khuzestan?," *Iran Wire*, July 25, 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/provinces/106012-a-year-on-from-the-2021-water-protests-has-anything-changed-in-khuzestan/>.

⁴⁰¹Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Clamps Down on Protests Against Growing Water Shortages," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-water-shortages.html?smid=tw-share>.

⁴⁰²Ibid

⁴⁰³Mostafa Salem Hande Atay Alam and Reuters, "Iran Protests: Water Crisis Demonstrations Continue, with Chants in Capital," *CCN World*, July 21, 2021,

Conclusion: Situating Women, Life, Freedom

The Women, Life, Freedom movement emerged out of the fraught political environment of contemporary Iran. Freedom and democracy have been the Iranian people's desire since the Islamic Revolution, while the clerics have wanted power and influence. Authoritarian religiosity, economic conditions, and human rights violations have been a topic of conversation and protest in the Iranian public sphere since Rafsanjani's presidency in 2001. The 2009 Green Movement, 2017 Dey Protests, 2019 Protests, shooting down of PS752, and the 2020 protests, as well as the cyclical election of reformist and moderate candidates, show a long-held frustration with the regime's false promises. The 2022 protests did not emerge from within a vacuum but are informed by the goals of the Iranian people and their relationship with the government since before the revolution in 1979. This process of political development is crucial to fully understand the nature of Iranian secularism and the social condition that Islam was in when the Women Life Freedom movement began.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/middleeast/iran-protests-water-crisis-intl/index.html>; Rogayeh Rezaei, "A Year On From the 2021 Water Protests, Has Anything Changed in Khuzestan?," Iran Wire, July 25, 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/provinces/106012-a-year-on-from-the-2021-water-protests-has-anything-changed-in-khuzestan/>.

CHAPTER FOUR

VIOLENCE, IDENTITY, AND ISLAM

We replaced one corrupt monarch with thousands of corrupt clergy... We were already Muslims and did not have a revolution to become Muslims... our dreams were of equality, independence, and justice... but I hope that when they leave we will still be Muslims... and my God can be Great again

– Anonymous, May 23, 2003⁴⁰⁴

This chapter is an analysis of the data that I collected throughout my key informant interviews, archival research, and newspaper articles. This analysis proceeds in three parts. First, my data suggests that Women Life Freedom represents a manifestation of the latent secular forces in Iranian society. The movement created something tangible out of trends towards secularism that had otherwise been popularly understood through subtle social changes and statistics. Second, my research shows that the Islamic Republic's appropriation of religion for violent and authoritarian means drove people to associate religion with suffering. This relationship was emphasized during Women Life Freedom when violence and state imposition in the name of Islam was at its most exaggerated. Finally, I analyze how protest movements confront people with a choice between either being religious and seeming to support the regime, or being part of the growing secular identity group. This creates a social incentive towards secularism, particularly as being religious automatically associates you with the regime and subsequently with its authoritarian and violent policies. Through this exploration of emerging secular identities, I also show how social media emphasized the visual element of the movement, further identifying secularism with political opposition.

⁴⁰⁴Nasrin Alavi, ed., *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 118-119 found via: Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 332 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=1318299>.

On a broad level, my findings indicate that protest movements embolden secularism because they present people with a seemingly binary choice between accepting or rejecting religion in their lives. When states use religion to justify what the people are protesting against, it ties religion to suffering, and asks people to choose between a religion that they associate with pain, or a secular life that has been framed as its antithesis. Furthermore, as people make connections between the religion itself and its political doctrine, they also make connections about religious people and their political allegiances, leading to the formation of secular and religious identity groups within society that are seemingly pitted against one another, again, presenting the individual with a choice.

This section does not cover all of the drivers of secularization in Iranian society but focuses on the ones that made the biggest impact and appearance in the Women Life Freedom protests to provide an understanding of how protest movements engage with secularism in theocratic countries. For that reason, I do not include an overt discussion of factors like rapid urbanization and deteriorating economic conditions in my analysis of secularism dynamics as they evolved during the protests in 2022.

Additionally, in order to maintain anonymity for my key informants, I have randomly assigned them each a pseudonym from the list of popular names in the US and Iran. Furthermore, I have kept their biographies brief and have altered them slightly to protect my interviewees' privacy.

I. Manifesting Data

The first theme that emerged across sources was that Women Life Freedom represents a culmination of the already developing secular trends in Iranian society. Secularism in Iran was not catalyzed by the Women Life Freedom movement, however, the overtly secular tones and

symbolism of the movement intentionally renounced religion at a previously unseen scale. Although the protest movements of the 2010s advocated for revolution to replace the Islamic regime, the rhetoric and behavior of the Women Life Freedom movement emphasized, in particular, a social rejection of Islam as well as the clerics. In this way, Women Life Freedom represents the physical manifestation of the secular trend that has been gradually building in Iranian society. It personified the statistics on secularism and the general social suspicion that religion was becoming less popular, and in doing so, created something tangible that people could point to to visualize secular Iran.

Establishing Secularism Before Women Life Freedom

Secularism is a phenomenon that has been latently present in Iranian society for years, and has presented itself both statistically and anecdotally. Ali, an assistant professor of Philosophy and Religion at a leading EU University and the creator of critical quantitative analysis on Iranian secularism, talked about this in our conversation. Ali referenced work he had done on changing baby name popularity in Iran, saying, “Between 2009 and 2022, the decline of the use of Muslim baby names is very significant. I am talking about basic names like Muhammad or Fatima or Hussain. All of these names are declining. It confirms that a significant proportion of people who have not been wanting to live a religious life.” Another symbol of the declining religiosity pre-ceding the Women Life Freedom movement was the steep decline in fertility rate across Iran. Whereas in 1989, the average fertility rate was 5.1 children per woman, it now sits around 1.7 children per woman.⁴⁰⁵ Shay Khatiri, a senior fellow at the Yorktown Institute, wrote about this trend in an article titled *The Islamic Republic is Killing Islam in Iran*, saying, “Iranians have been poor in the past, but they still had high fertility rates despite being

⁴⁰⁵Shay Khatiri, “The Islamic Republic Is Killing Islam in Iran,” *The Bulwark*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/the-islamic-republic-is-killing-islam-in-iran>.

high on the misery index... Religiously unaffiliated people, on average, have fewer children than religious people.”⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, marriage rates in Iran have declined from roughly 80,000 in 2013 to roughly 500,000 in 2019.⁴⁰⁷ Instead, traditional marriage has been replaced in part with “White Marriages,” where young unmarried Iranian couples live together.⁴⁰⁸ Furthermore, as I referenced in the first chapter, in 2020, two years before the protests began, survey data collected by an independent company, Gamman, showed that roughly 50% of Iranians reported that they had “lost their religion,” meaning that for years before the protests, people had been rethinking their relationship with Islam.⁴⁰⁹ These statistical trends hint at the idea that orthodox religiosity has been on the decline in Iran for a while.

Anecdotally, scholars and Iranians alike acknowledge that secularism has been growing for decades. For example, in a dispatch published by PBS Frontline in December 2012, the correspondent interviewed a series of young Iranians, most of whom discussed their growing disillusionment with the Muslim faith. One of the young men interviewed, Morteza, said that the “religion in my life melted away day by day.” Another, a young woman named Solmaz, testified to her religiosity, yet emphasized that she practiced *her* Islam, not necessarily the regime’s Islam: “Political rulers choose their views, but they are laying waste to the whole religion for the sake of their politics.”⁴¹⁰ In 2019, *The Economist* reporter Nicolas Pelham visited Tehran and wrote,

⁴⁰⁶Ibid

⁴⁰⁷Bitā Ghaffari, “Iran’s Urban Youth Falling out of Love with Marriage,” *Financial Times*, September 6, 2024.

⁴⁰⁸Ramin Mostaghim and Sarah Parvini, “‘White Marriage’ a Growing Trend for Young Couples in Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-white-marriage-20150529-story.html>.

⁴⁰⁹“Iranians’ Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report,” Gaaman, August 25, 2020, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://gamaan.org/2020/08/25/iranians-attitudes-toward-religion-a-2020-survey-report/>.

⁴¹⁰“A Faith of Their Own: Islam and Iranian Youth,” FRONTLINE - Tehran Bureau, December 2, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/12/dispatch-a-faith-of-their-own-islam-and-iranian-youth.html>.

“Alcohol is banned, but home delivery is faster for wine than for pizza.”⁴¹¹ Furthermore, Dina Nayeri wrote in an article for *New York Magazine* about this dynamic, saying, “Iranians are always joking about the dusty, unopened Quran everyone keeps on their coffee table to wave around in case the morality police stop by. In academic discourse and mountainside conversations and dentist’s office chats and afternoon gossip, they have been whispering and debating and shouting to one another about secularism and faith for a while now.”⁴¹² She further reflected on her childhood, writing about seeing her cousins from Iran when they came to visit her after she and her family fled Iran as a child. She writes, “Inevitably, they would shake their heads and say, ‘Iranians back home aren’t that religious, you know.’ At first, I didn’t believe them.”⁴¹³ What Nayeri is getting at is the idea that secularism has been a subtle discourse in Iranian society for a considerable time. All of these different markers from the 2000s and 2010s show that secularism in Iran is by no means a newly emergent phenomenon.

Women Life Freedom, and Acknowledging a Secular Iran

While secularism has been growing in Iran for a while, Women Life Freedom provided that growth with a tangible visual depiction so that it is no longer a debatable phenomenon. Women Life Freedom essentially took Iranian secularism and presented it to society and the world at large as a demonstration of the trend that had long been growing latently. Dina Nayeri puts this well in her aforementioned *New York Magazine* article, asking, “Is Iran really a country of devout people, or have many, until now, just kept their nonbelief to themselves in order to be

⁴¹¹Mustafa Akyol, “The Mahsa Amini Protests and the Ayatollahs’ Gift to Secularism | Cato Institute,” CATO Institute, October 6, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/mahsa-amini-protests-ayatollahs-gift-secularism>.

⁴¹²Dina Nayeri, “Why Is Iran’s Secular Shift So Hard to Believe?,” *New York Magazine*, October 21, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/iran-secular-shift-gamaan.html>.

⁴¹³Ibid

safe?”⁴¹⁴ Nayeri asks an important question, and judging by the statistics and anecdotal evidence, which hint at growing secularism in the years before Women Life Freedom, the answer is, cautiously, that Iranians have been secular for a while, and Women Life Freedom presented an opportunity to bring that secularism to the surface. Whereas in the past, people might keep the “dusty, unopened Quran” in their homes, just in case, Iranian society has grown more emboldened and less afraid to express their secular identity.

The tangible expression of Iranian secularism through Women Life Freedom made it something that could no longer be denied publicly or privately. My interviewees talked about this extensively as one of the biggest results of how publicly the Women Life Freedom movement expressed popular secularism. They argue broadly that Women Life Freedom brought a moment of irrevocable truth about something that had seemingly remained hidden, and that once expressed, it is hard to try to force back into hiding. Andrew, the head of political affairs at an embassy in Tehran, discussed this with me in our interview, saying that for the regime, it is like the “cat is out of the box” with Women Life Freedom. Ali similarly discussed this, saying that after Women Life Freedom, if the system was theoretically going to be reformed, “it would have to be a reform which allows people to express who they are in public, and that means that the nonreligious identities are less hidden than in the past.” The reason for this is that Women Life Freedom pulled the “hidden” secularity out of Iranian society, and once it is out there, as Andrew alluded to, it is hard to pretend it does not exist.

II: Correlating Religion with Violence and Politics

The second common theme across sources was the Islamic Republic’s weaponization of religion. By emphasizing the regime’s ‘Islamic’ purpose, religion and politics became

⁴¹⁴Ibid

inextricably linked. Therefore, when Islam became the justification for violence and government imposition in people's private lives, it started being viewed as an oppressive force, causing people to turn away from it. Women Life Freedom emphasized this relationship because it provided a place for the regime to openly demonstrate just how violent and authoritarian its policies are.

Turning Islam into the Islamic Republic

When clerics asserted ultimate authority over Islam, their political doctrine and the religion itself became inextricably linked. In both the private and public sectors, the regime has intentionally connected its behavior to Islam as a whole, creating an inseparable relationship between the two. The regime openly defines its mission as to guide people, by any necessary means, toward paradise, imposing restrictions as needed to ensure that the people live pious and sinless lives.⁴¹⁵ They then use religious in-tone rhetoric such as referring to America as “the Great Satan,”⁴¹⁶ and the Women Life Freedom protests as a result of “all the devils of the world having gathered together,”⁴¹⁷ to stress the regime's entanglement of their political motives and Islam. When mixed with the violent suppression of protests and personal freedoms, Islam becomes the ultimate tool for the Islamic Republic to assert control and justify its behavior.

Viewing Islam as Violence and Oppression

Due to the association between the government and religion, people begin to identify Islam as an enabling factor in government interference and violence, causing Islam and prayer to

⁴¹⁵Ajam Media Collective, “Baraye: Understanding Iran's Song of Protest and Compassion,” *Ajam Media Collective* (blog), February 9, 2023, <https://ajammc.com/2023/02/09/baraye-irans-song-of-protest/>.

⁴¹⁶Nicholas Kristof, “Iran Uses Rape to Enforce Women's Modesty,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2022, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/17/opinion/iran-women-rape.html>.

⁴¹⁷Maziar Motamedi, “Children among Dead as Iran Sees Large Protests, Strikes,” *Al-Jazeera*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/17/children-among-dead-as-iran-sees-large-protests-strikes/>.

take on the same negative associations. Samyar, one of the leading sociologists on the study of Iranian secularism and religion, described this relationship to me, saying, “When religion becomes the dominant discourse, then the religious ideas themselves become the target of ideological attack.” He argued that opposition to the regime has intrinsically changed how many people view religion, noting that “many Iranians no longer only talk about how bad the Islamic Republic is, sometimes they say how bad this religion is.” Ali reiterated this point, saying, “The whole point of a theocracy is that it entangles religion and politics, so criticisms of politics become automatically translated into criticism of religion.” Sara, an Iranian-born and educated activist who worked to monitor abuses in Iran for a prominent human rights organization, similarly reflected on the changing nature of religion in Iran, emphasizing that within the people she works with, the “few I know who were praying are not praying anymore because it is so hard to disentangle.” She also emphasized how intertwined religious affiliation and politics are in Iran, arguing that “the moment you start opposing the state, you have to define your relationship with religion.” Reflecting this sentiment, Amir-Ali, an Iranian-born bilingual correspondent for BBC World Affairs, described secularism in part as a result of people seeing “the regime as representing the religion Islam, so Islam for them is now execution, poverty, isolation in the world.” James, a professor of sociology with a focus on religion in Muslim countries at a leading US university, also corroborated this. He described the situation in Iran as a case of “power tainting religion.” The regime’s co-opting of Islam as a political tool makes prayer and personal religious affiliation inextricably linked to the lived experience of being the subject of a violent and authoritarian government.

Secularism as Resistance

Two primary mechanisms, the regime's use of violence and imposition in people's private lives, are particularly notable in transforming people's lived experiences into a secular response. The first variable, regime violence, encourages people to identify Islam as a force of oppression. When people experience violence and pain in the name of religion, they want to distance themselves from the source of their suffering. Samyar discussed this in our interview, arguing that criticizing the regime's violence necessitates not only being critical of Islam as a religion in the present context but also going back and criticizing the foundation of the religion and the Prophet Muhammad himself. "He was the one who started the government. They invaded other countries. They beheaded men who resisted and used their women as concubines... When you criticize Khomeini for killing so many people, they respond that the Prophet Muhammad did the same thing," he argued. Ali emphasized this relationship, as well, saying, "The violence used by the state in the name of religion is causing people to turn away from it... All of the information, qualitative and quantitative, again and again confirms it." A photographer who participated in the protests and was interviewed by The Center for Human Rights in Iran, similarly argued that one of the most important things that the Women Life Freedom protests did was that it "shifted the mindset of the older generations, revealing the true face of the regime to the more religious sectors of society." He then expands on this, saying, "If seeing a 12-year-old child shot in the head with a military weapon doesn't awaken your conscience, then nothing will."⁴¹⁸ The photographer saw two effects of the protests: convincing regime hard-line supporters to abandon the regime, and convincing the "more religious sectors of society" to abandon their religion. Secularism in the context of the regime's violent handling of the Women Life Freedom protests presented itself as a way of rejecting the source of suffering.

⁴¹⁸"Images of Resistance: Photographers Who Documented Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom Movement," *Center for Human Rights in Iran* (blog), September 16, 2024, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/09/images-of-resistance-photographers-who-documented-irans-woman-life-freedom-movement/>.

Second, the government's frequent interference in people's lives causes people to confront their religious beliefs in their day-to-day lives. The idea of regime violence driving secularism is important, however, it is not the only variable. Ali discussed this in our interview, saying, "I think it is dangerous for people to say it is just a reaction to the regime's violence. You miss the depth of not wanting to be what the regime wants you to be." The idea of not wanting to be what the regime wants you to be is manifested in the regime's frequent and overreaching control in people's private lives and personal decision-making. Nazanin Shahrokni and Spyros Sofos wrote about this phenomenon in an article in Truthout magazine, arguing that for the regime to establish itself and its legitimacy, "the 'Islamic' needed to be confirmed in the everyday, performed by citizens in their everyday movement and interactions." They argue that this "imbues the everyday, mundane practices with political meaning." As a result, people's lives and personal practices have been "turned into spaces of contestation" in which rejecting Islam privately and publicly translates to resisting the government and its authoritarian policies.⁴¹⁹

When people highlight Islam as the force that enables the government's access to their private lives, secularism becomes a way of subtly pushing back at the government's role in their lives. I talked about this dynamic in my conversation with Aria, an Iranian-born and raised journalist. Aria is the grandson of a prominent Ayatollah, the author of several books on Iranian politics, and has served as an advisor to former President Mohammad Khatami and as a translator for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He believes that secularism is occurring as an active "rejection of the imposed nature of religion" in people's everyday lives. Rejecting religion becomes a way of rejecting the structure of government that dictates their entire lives. Cecilia, a journalist who is currently a fellow at a prominent American think tank and the founder of an

⁴¹⁹Nazanin Shahrokni and Spyros Sofos, "Students in Tehran Protest Gender Segregation in University Dining Hall," Truthout, October 28, 2022, <https://truthout.org/articles/students-in-tehran-protest-gender-segregation-in-university-dining-hall/>.

Iran-based initiative at an American research institution, corroborated Aria's perspective, labeling the process of secularization as a "backlash against enforced Islam." Amir-Ali, furthermore, discussed this dynamic in our interview as having particular significance in understanding the growth of secular attitudes in terms of the younger generations. He noted, "You could be punished just for listening to music. You could be slashed for drinking alcohol. You could be put behind bars and be slashed and punished for dating a woman or being arrested with a woman who is not your relative, sister, or mother." On one such occasion, in 2014, seven young Iranians were arrested and sentenced to ninety-one lashes for posting a YouTube video of themselves dancing to the song "Happy" by Pharrell Williams. Their crime was violating Islamic law, as it is illegal to dance with members of the opposite sex or appear without a veil.⁴²⁰

Clerical dissidents to the Islamic Regime reaffirm the idea that frequent imposition into daily life and regime violence cause secularism, as they underscore the need to take religion out of politics for fear that the Islamic Republic is corrupting Islam in the mind of the public. To this extent, Aria spoke to me about his experiences talking to clerics while researching in Iran. He noted that some clerics believe that "the more we impose religion on people, the less religious they will be." In an interview with Middle East Eye, an anonymous cleric from the holy city Qom supported this when he testified that "the majority in the Qom seminary, or at least a large percentage of clerics, are against the Islamic Republic, because it has both weakened Islam and clerics in the eyes of people."⁴²¹ The clerical establishment understands that the Islamic Republic's authoritarian policies and incursion into its people's private lives, while justifying their behavior with Islam, is an inherently secularizing behavior because it will make people

⁴²⁰"Iran: Happy Video Dancers Sentenced to 91 Lashes and Jail," *BBC News*, September 19, 2014, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29272732>.

⁴²¹"Iran's Qom Clerics Draw Ire for Studious Silence over Mahsa Amini Protests," Middle East Eye, September 28, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-mahsa-amini-protests-qom-clerics-silence-ire>.

resent the religion. James talked about this extensively during our conversation. He argued that religious dissidents have always existed and play a critical role in defending religion from corruption in the public sphere. According to James, religious dissidents and their plea to separate religion from Iran's current government show how secularizing the authoritarian and violent practices of the regime are. Those who would benefit from a more religious population do not want religion to be forced on people, or to become a tool to justify violence, precisely because it causes people to turn away from it.

Protest Movements and Emboldening Religious-Political Dynamics

These two dynamics – imposition into people's private lives, and justifying violence – were incredibly evident during the Women Life Freedom movement. First, the protests emphasized how deeply the regime's influence permeates people's day-to-day decisions and life choices. When Mahsa Amini was killed over her Hijab, emphasis of popular discontent was put on the regime's social policies and the use of Islam as a way of exercising control. Andrew reflected on the secularism of Women Life Freedom in our interview, arguing that "The nature of the trigger for the protest had something to do with the secularity of it. The imagery of a young woman being killed for allegedly not entirely correctly displaying this symbol of the regime that is rooted in religious history." Similarly, Hossein, the chair of the department of political science at a top American university and a respected voice on Iranian foreign policy, highlighted how one of the Women Life Freedom movement's main goals was to address religious interference, which he views as the single most contentious issue facing the Islamic Republic and Islam as a whole within Iran. Part of what struck such a chord for people was the sense that it could happen to anyone who let their Hijab slip back during a moment on the street while they were minding their own business. The idea that Islam allows for somewhat private moments to lead to death

was particularly visceral during the movement. Many of my interviewees directed me towards the anthem of the movement, a song called Baraye by the later arrested Shervin Hajipour, which exemplifies the dynamic of the protests and captures how the protesters targeted the regime's influence on people's private lives in particular. Baraye, which translates to "for the sake of," includes lines like "because of the fear we feel when we kiss," "for longing to have an ordinary life," and "for freedom." One of the most powerful lines reads, "because of this mandatory paradise."⁴²² Through the protest song, Hajipour criticized the regime's imposition on people's lives, and articulated the everyday activities, such as kissing, that are prohibited by the regime's defense of Islam. He specifically highlights Islam as the justification for government intervention, with his line about "mandatory paradise," referencing the Islamic Republic's forced morality in people's private and public lives.

Second, the government's handling of the Women Life Freedom protests was an abrupt demonstration of how religion can be used as a tool of violence by the regime. Amir-Ali referred to Mahsa Aminia's funeral as a direct example of how we can see violence leading to a rejection of religion. Thousands of people attended Amini's funeral, with Amir-Ali estimating roughly 80% were men. However, the funeral went against Islamic tradition, as usually there is a cleric who recites a verse from the Quran, as is customary in most religions for a leader to say a prayer or recite a verse at a funeral. At Amini's funeral, they did not allow a cleric; instead, ceding the time to a female teacher who talked about Amini's death being a direct result of old, hardline religious people, and particularly, how their violent policies led to Amini's death. In another case, Majidreza Rahnavard, a protester who was executed, used his last words to reject Islam in

⁴²²Ajam Media Collective, "Baraye: Understanding Iran's Song of Protest and Compassion," *Ajam Media Collective* (blog), February 9, 2023, <https://ajammc.com/2023/02/09/baraye-irans-song-of-protest/>.

particular, saying, “Do not pray to the Quran. Just celebrate and play celebrating music.”⁴²³ By asking people not to pray moments before he was executed for participating in the protests, Rahnavard sent a powerful signal that he attributed his untimely death to the Islamic Republic more broadly, and the Quran specifically. This perspective was reinforced in my interview with Samyar, who discussed Women Life Freedom as an example of how secularism was born from “real experiences” of people living under a “religious regime or experiencing religious violence.” The protests emphasize how the Islamic Republic’s use of religion in people’s everyday lives in violent and authoritarian ways has turned Islam into a symbol of oppression.

Notably, the violence and imposition into people’s private lives compounded the already burgeoning rejection of Islamic governance that emerged following a disillusionment with reforming the Islamic Republic. The inability to find a point of equilibrium between Islam and Iran’s desired form of government contributed to the politicization of the act of secularism. The reform movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s emphasized the capacity for the Islamic Republic to modify its orthodox policies and allow for freedoms to proliferate while maintaining an Islamic government. Religion itself was still viewed, to some extent, as a vehicle for revolutionary ideals that had been hijacked by a corrupt establishment. However, the reform movement’s failure to institute such changes led to a sentiment that Islam was the thing standing between the people and the freedoms that they had fought for in the revolution. During Women Life Freedom, this sentiment was exceptionally clear. Alireza Eshraghi articulated this in an article for The Middle East Research and Information Projection, saying that “if the Green Movement played jiu-jitsu by converting the regime’s sources of power in discourse, the Mahsa Amini movement is playing Karate: overwhelming the opponent by breaking his sacred

⁴²³Nassim Khadem, “‘Don’t Pray, Play Music’: What 23-Year-Old Majidreza Told His Executioners Minutes before Being Hanged,” *ABC News*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-17/iran-uprising-executions-protests-revolution-trials-torture/101780606>.

discourse.”⁴²⁴ Sara similarly argued that after the failure of the reform movement, the idea that “we can prove to them that the real religion would be more tolerant,” has been rendered ineffective. Instead, Sara argued, “they’re like, all of it can go to hell together. We don’t care.”

III: Creating Identity Out of Absence and The Politics of Aesthetics

The second common theme throughout my research, and particularly of note regarding the Women Life Freedom protests, was the formation of an identity group out of the absence of religion. In contemporary Iran, the act of displaying or not displaying religiosity transcends religious preferences and presents as a public declaration of a person's political beliefs, whether meant that way or not. As Islam is so intertwined with politics, people are put in the position of having to defend their religious beliefs or else be associated with the authoritarian government. Emerging from the rejection of religion is a secular pre-Islamic Iranian identity, which is further encouraged, to the regime’s dislike, by the proliferation of visual communications technology and social media. Overarchingly, these elements lead to religious and secular identity groups being pitted against one another in the political sphere, leading to secularism’s heightened appeal for the vast majority of Iranians who do not support the Islamic Republic.

Viewing Muslim Identity as a Symbol of Regime Support

Those who are religious are put in the place of either explaining themselves or facing subtle social marginalization. When asked what factors emerging from Women Life Freedom have been the most impactful on secular attitudes, Aria cited “peer pressure from their peers.” “It is very 'uncool' in Iran to be extremely religious.” He argued that because of this fear of social perception, people are less likely to engage with organized religion or profess their religious

⁴²⁴Eshraghi, Alireza. “Iranians Are Done Debating.” Middle East Research and Information Project, October 19, 2022.

beliefs openly. Sara corroborated this belief: “Religious people who are not with the regime really struggle to explain themselves to their brothers and sisters... if you’re religious, the burden is on you.” She goes so far as to say that Iranians have begun using Islamophobia as a way of protesting. “To that extent, Iranians are Islamophobic sometimes. I think it's not about Muslims, but the Islamic Republic, but you are in the middle of it when a state declares itself the custodian of religion.” In particular, Sara cited the practice that grew in prominence during the movement of throwing turbans off of clerics' heads when you see them in the street. She criticized this practice, noting that dissenting clerics existed and that Islam and its believers should be able to be held separate and apart from the regime and its policies. Andrew talked about this dynamic in our interview as well, saying, “The regime and religion are so connected to each other that religious participation is somehow an endorsement of the regime, which many people disagree with.”

Regardless, by being religious, the social assumption is immediately made that you support the Islamic Republic’s orthodox policies. Andrew discussed this process, saying, “Participating in religion now is viewed as perpetuating a system that you don’t necessarily subscribe to.” In a similar vein, rejecting religion openly would send a signal of rejecting the system as well. A photojournalist participating in the protests described the moment he saw an older Hijab-clad woman fighting with a member of the Basij on the streets. He writes, “She turned to them and said, ‘You are not one of us; you are criminals. I wear the Hijab for myself, not for your government. You’ve made it so that when people see us on the street, they think we support the regime.’” She then turned to the crowd and shouted, “I swear to God, I’m not with them, but I wear the Hijab because I believe in God!”⁴²⁵ Iran Human Rights describes another

⁴²⁵ “Interview: Iranian Photojournalist Recounts State Violence During Woman, Life, Freedom Protests,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran* (blog), October 22, 2024, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/10/interview-iranian-photojournalist-recounts-state-violence-during-woman-life-freedom-protests/>.

example that came up in an interview with a 55-year-old woman named Zohreh, who testified, “I grew up in a very religious family and have always worn chador. I never take it off, not even when traveling. A few days ago, I was walking in my neighborhood when I saw three young unveiled girls. As soon as they saw me with my chador, they loudly chanted: ‘Death to Khamenei’. I immediately responded: ‘hopefully!’”⁴²⁶ Author Farnaz Haeri described her experience as a protester looking outwards at a woman who was fully covered, emphasizing the immediate association made between religious clothing and visuals and politics. She writes, “An austere-looking woman wrapped in her black chador, prayer beads in hand, gets on the bus. She fingers her prayer beads and repeats an invocation under her breath. There’s bound to be a fight between us, I think to myself... “May you always be safe, my daughter. Please take very good care of yourself.”⁴²⁷ In her narrative, Haeri describes her initial association between the woman’s clothes and her political affiliation. Similarly to Zohreh and the woman that the photojournalist described, practicing religion openly directly associates you with oppression and authoritarianism. When Islam becomes the force of oppression and suffering, being a Muslim is perceived as being an enabler or even a supporter.

Identifying religious individuals with the Islamic regime was not something that emerged solely from the side of the protesters and their aesthetic associations, but also from the government itself, which stressed that the conflict was uniformly between the religious and secular, the pious and the heretics. Because the Islamic Republic claims that it acts by Sharia, the

⁴²⁶“Gender Apartheid in Iran Is Crushing Women’s Lives and Futures,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran* (blog), March 6, 2025, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2025/03/gender-apartheid-in-iran-is-crushing-womens-lives-and-futures/>.

⁴²⁷Farnaz Haeri, “Braving Tehran’s Roundabout, Maidan Valiasr,” in *Women Life Freedom: Voices and Art Form the Women’s Protests in Iran* (London: Saqi Books, 2023), 31.

Muslim legal code, anyone “opposing the laws is considered as enmity with the religion.”⁴²⁸ The regime has called the protests a Western orchestrated “war against God and martyrs,” and has executed protestors on the charges of “enmity” or “war” against God.⁴²⁹ Ayatollah Ali Khomeini himself was quoted saying that the sacrifices of the killed regime forces, “are a manifestation of all the ethical values that lie in martyrs and martyrdom.”

The story of Milad Ostad-Hashem, who was killed by a shot in the back in Tehran during the protests, exemplifies the imposed dichotomy between the religious and the secular from the regime’s perspective. The government news outlets described Milad as a member of the Basij and labeled him a ‘martyr’ for the Islamic cause.⁴³⁰ To support their claim, they published a photo of him performing religious rituals. His family pushed back on this, responding that “He took part in religious rituals, but he also loved hip-hop music and hated this regime.” By using this rhetoric, the regime emphasizes that the conflict is an ideological one, pitting the religious against the secular. Martyrdom, in particular, holds significance for Shia Islamism because of the martyrdom of the religious figure Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala in 680.⁴³¹ Even religious people who gave their lives protesting against the regime can become propaganda because of their religious beliefs.

Furthermore, by emphasizing that the clerics do not preside over or serve the Iranian people, but the Muslim people of the world, the regime perpetuates a distinction between a

⁴²⁸Jill Filipovic, “Women. Life. Freedom: An Interview with Iranian Journalist in Exile Negar Mortazavi,” Substack newsletter, *Jill Filipovic* (blog), October 14, 2022, <https://jill.substack.com/p/women-life-freedom>.

⁴²⁹ Maziar Motamedi, “Children among Dead as Iran Sees Large Protests, Strikes,” Al-Jazeera, November 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/17/children-among-dead-as-iran-sees-large-protests-strikes/>; Henna Moussavi, “Fuel to the Fire: How the Islamic Republic Has Responded to Civilian Uprisings,” *The Oxford Middle East Review* (blog), December 9, 2022, <https://omerjournal.com/2022/12/09/fuel-to-the-fire-how-the-islamic-republic-has-responded-to-civilian-uprisings/>.

⁴³⁰Parham Ghobadi, “Iran Security Forces and State Media Cover up Protester’s Death - Source,” *BBC Persian*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63504452>.

⁴³¹“Husayn Ibn Ali - Biography, Death, & Significance,” Britannica, March 20, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Husayn-ibn-Ali-Muslim-leader-and-martyr>.

religious and secular identity. The Islamic constitution writes, “all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim people.”⁴³² This idea of a global Muslim identity was enforced by both Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei in their respective foreign policy projects and domestic political rhetoric. In a 1980 speech in Qom, Khomeini made this distinction clear: “We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah. For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world.”⁴³³ Khamenei has doubled down on this in his time as Supreme Leader, using much of Iran’s money and resources on “consolidating unity across all Muslim countries and nations,” by supporting proxy groups in conflicts ranging from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Houthis in Yemen⁴³⁴ The result of this rhetoric a sense that the regime’s priorities are outside the country, with the large network of Islamist proxy groups and militias fighting in conflicts spanning the region. Particularly as issues grow at home, the regime’s prioritization of funding religious militant groups makes it clear that the Islamic Republic is first religious, and second Iranian.

It is unsurprising that Iranians, therefore, view other elements of the regime’s identity, such as its military presence outside of Iran, through a similar identity-based mechanism as they view secularism. In October 2023, when one of Iran’s proxy groups, Hamas, launched an attack on Israel, much of the Middle East rallied around the Palestinian cause. However, in Iran, much of the population counterintuitively supports Israel. According to Amir-Ali, the “majority of

⁴³²“Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (Rev. 1989) Constitution,” Constitute, rev. 1989 1979, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.

⁴³³Matthias Kuntzel, “From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad,” Hoover Institution, December 1, 2006, <https://www.hoover.org/research/khomeini-ahmadinejad>.

⁴³⁴Sayyid Ali Khamenei, “Imam Khamenei on the Importance of Maintaining the Unity of the Ummah,” Crescent International, June 1, 2004, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/imam-khamenei-on-the-importance-of-maintaining-the-unity-of-the-ummah>.

people don't want to criticize Israel because of the simple fact that they don't want to be seen with the same line of the Islamic Republic... These people are ashamed to even condemn Israel for its behavior in Gaza.” Samyar furthered this perspective, arguing that as a result of the association between the regime and the Palestinian cause, Trump and Netanyahu have become “more popular in Iran than they are in their own countries.” This mechanism functions in the same way as secularism, particularly during the Women Life Freedom protests. The inseparability of religion from politics and the automatic association between religious people and the oppressive regime encourages people away from religion and toward a secular belief system that is more in line with their political views. In 2009, people took to the streets chanting “Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I give my life for Iran,” emphasizing the dissociation between secular Iran and the Islamic Republic’s ummah.⁴³⁵

Constructing an Iranian National Identity

The expression of an alternative identity group, which sides against the regime and its authoritarian policies, emerged in the form of pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism, which was widely emphasized throughout the Women Life Freedom protests. Ali introduced this idea, arguing that “it is not just that secularization can be conceptualized as decline. It's an increase of something else.” He identified that thing as rallying around an identity group distinct from religion and manifested in pre-revolution history. “If I write the Iranian regime on social media, people will get angry,” he said, “They tell me I have to say the Islamic regime instead. The concept of Iran is mobilized against the idea of the Islamic Republic. People will even point out things like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps does not have the word Iran in its title. They say, “Look at

⁴³⁵Jeffrey Goldberg, “Neither Gaza, Nor Lebanon, I Give My Life to Iran!,” *The Atlantic* (blog), September 18, 2009, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2009/09/-neither-gaza-nor-lebanon-i-give-my-life-to-iran/26842/>.

these Islamists. They care more about Islam than about Iran.” He later expanded on this, saying that Islam and the clerical regime are perceived as an “alien, colonizing force” inside the country. The intentional division between Iran and the Islamic Republic creates separate groups of identity: those who are Iranian, and those who are part of the colonizing political force that is defined by religion. Samyar discussed this phenomenon as well, saying, “In Iran, secularism is a discourse, an ideology, a set of ideas about social relationships, about politics, a form of government, the role of religion in society, and so forth. This has become a revival of the traditional, ancient, Iranian identity.”

Many of the outward-facing parts of the protests reference this idea through chants and other demonstrations of resistance. Some such chants include, “From Yazd to Kurdistan, we give our lives for Iran,” “We will fight, we will die, we will get Iran back,” “We do not want the Islamic Republic, we do not,” and “From Zaheda to Tehran, I sacrifice my life for Iran.”⁴³⁶ Mohsen Shekari, a 23-year-old protester, exemplifies this sentiment, using his last words before being executed for participating in the protests to say, “janam fadaye Iran,” translating to “I sacrifice my life for Iran.”⁴³⁷ A third example is a set of guidelines created by the Iranian Diaspora Collective for journalists reporting on Women Life Freedom, which urged people to, “make clear distinctions between the people of Iran versus the government. We suggest “people of Iran,” or “Iranians,” when referring to civilians, and refrain from using “Iran” when referring

⁴³⁶Human rights Activists News Agency, “Iran Protests 2022 -Detailed Report of 20 Days of Nationwide Protests in Iran” (Human Rights Activists, October 2022).

⁴³⁷Nassim Khadem, “‘Don’t Pray, Play Music’: What 23-Year-Old Majidreza Told His Executioners Minutes before Being Hanged,” *ABC News*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-17/iran-uprising-executions-protests-revolution-trials-torture/101780606>.

to its government, The Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁴³⁸ The resistance has become a moment of unification around the idea of the pre-Islamic secular Iranian identity.

The Islamic Republic acknowledged the emergence of this new identity group, which separates the Islamic Republic from Iran, and sought to undermine it during the protests by associating it with imperial intervention. During the protests, the Islamic Republic rushed to stop the spread of social media, limit the validity of Western news sources, and openly cite the West as the source of the newly forming pre-Islam Iranian identity. Tara, a journalist who reported on Women Life Freedom for a prominent government-backed Iranian newspaper service, addressed this in an email to me, justifying her disapproval of the protests because, “I believe it was more of a politically orchestrated campaign than a genuine grassroots movement. It was, in my view, a project orchestrated by Western countries to exploit the Iranian government's shortcomings and wrong policies.” *The Tehran Times*, a regime-supported and backed news organization, consistently emphasizes the distinction between the West and the Muslim community in Iran. In one article, journalist Martin Love writes about the protests, “given the moronic, hypocritical reactions people like Jake Sullivan, along with the organs of propaganda in the U.S, can demonstrate by throwing a blanket of condemnation over Iran or Islam, it’s best that ANY Muslim country try to avoid feeding the propagandists in the U.S. government and its captured media.”⁴³⁹ In another article, *The Tehran Times* quotes Ayatollah Khamenei on the protests saying, “The conflict is over the independence, resilience, and the power of Islamic Iran.”⁴⁴⁰ This

⁴³⁸Iranian Diaspora Collective and Global Freedoms 501(c)(3), “How to Talk About Iran - A Living Document,” Google Docs, 2024, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xrAH0HUDbBpsYj2W7R9KN2NWOCdgI7qhWN0zqH5oj5A/edit?tab=t.0&usp=embed_facebook.

⁴³⁹Martin Love, “U.S. Objections to Anything in Iran Are at Bottom Selectively Hypocritical ...,” *Tehran Times*, September 18, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/476856/U-S-objections-to-anything-in-iran-are-at-bottom-selectively>.

⁴⁴⁰“Leader: Riots Engineered by U.S., Israel, and Treasonous Iranians Abroad,” *Tehran Times*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/477264/Leader-Riots-engineered-by-U-S-Israel-and-treasonous-Iranians>.

type of rhetoric, which appeared in over three out of every four articles I read on the Tehran Times website for the month following the protests, drives home the idea that the secular West is in direct opposition to the Islamic Republic and the religion of Islam more broadly. Although this mission failed, the regime's attempt to reunify secular Iran and the Islamic Republic against a common enemy demonstrates the significance of this new identity group and the threat it poses to Islam in Iran.

Identity and The Aesthetic of the Digital Age

The idea of a pre-Islamic Iranian identity was spurred on during the protests by the heightened use of social media and visual forms of communication. Through the heavy use of social media, the impetus was put on the individual to express their political views not only verbally, but also through visual depictions of identity that could complement an increasingly visual movement. In this context, it was no longer enough to identify as anti-regime; you must display that identity. Photos and videos were a huge part of the protest movements. A video of two young girls being forced to the ground by three chador-clad women and thrown into a white van has 37.9k views.⁴⁴¹ Another, of tear gas canisters fired at protesters, was posted on Twitter and received 22.7k views.⁴⁴² The famous Iranian actress Taraneh Ali Doosti's post on Instagram

⁴⁴¹ دادبان [dadban4@], "مادر نفس حاجی شریف، نوجوان ۱۴ ساله: دخترم را با صورتی زخمی، لب‌های ورم کرده، لباس پاره، از ماموران ارشاد تحویل گرفتم مریم عباسی، مادر نفس حاجی شریف، دختر نوجوان ۱۴ ساله‌ای که در یکم تیر از سوی ماموران گشت ارشاد در تهران مورد ضرب و جرح قرار گرفت، از ماموران طرح نور شکایت کرد. <https://t.co/JZbPju98Cn>," Tweet, *Twitter*, August 6, 2024, <https://x.com/dadban4/status/1820878821228474494>

"Iran: Two Years after 'Woman Life Freedom' Uprising, Impunity for Crimes Reigns Supreme," Amnesty International, September 11, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/iran-two-years-after-woman-life-freedom-uprising-impunity-for-crimes-reigns-supreme/>.

⁴⁴² RadioFarda, "این‌ها را به مردم رشت شلیک می‌کردند." میدان شهرداری رشت به، [RadioFarda], "تازگی، صحنه درگیری معترضان و نیروهای حکومتی بود. شامگاه یکشنبه ۲۵ تیر و پس از آن‌که ماموران حکومتی بر سر موضوع #حجاب اجباری قصد بازداشت سه تن از زنان در میدان شهرداری این شهر را داشتند با مقاومت مردم" <https://t.co/IwvEqrpPeQ>," Tweet, *Twitter*, July 18, 2023, <https://x.com/RadioFarda/status/1681246562326806528>; Amnesty International, "Iran: Authorities Doubling down on Punishment against Women and Girls Defying Discriminatory Veiling Laws" (Amnesty International, July 26, 2023).

without a veil holding a sign captioned Women Life Freedom in Persian has over 1.7 million likes.⁴⁴³ The video of Shervin Hajipour singing his aforementioned protest song Baraye has more than 2.4 million views.⁴⁴⁴ One video taken by Gazaleh Chalabi and posted to social media posthumously shows the moment that the girl died from a shot in the face by the security forces. Niloofar Rasooli, an Iranian writer and journalist, described the process of viewing the video, saying, “We see the crowd, we see the fire. It is night. It is cold... She raises her voice, loudly changing, ‘Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. We are all together...’ We take shelter in her voice for just a moment. And then she is shot. We are all fatally shot.”⁴⁴⁵ In much of the content, there is a blatant dichotomy. The young woman in jeans and bare hair kicked to the ground by a group of women all clad in black with black shoes and obscured faces. The visual of the last thing Chalabi saw being a sea of bare-headed women, contrasted with her violent death seconds later. The visceral visual depictions that have characterized the media around the protests create the impetus not only to identify in favor of the movement but to express that through a visual depiction. As the movement is rooted in opposition to compulsory Hijab laws and religiously imposed authoritarianism, the visual emphasis translates to unveiling and shirking of religious symbols, thus contributing to the aforementioned separation between religious and secular identity groups.

Conclusion

Through examination of the Women Life Freedom movement, I find three primary interactions between the protests and secularism. First, the Women Life Freedom movement

⁴⁴³Taraneh Ali Doosti, “غیبت آخر تو، کوچ مرغان صدا، ختم این غائله نیست” #زن_زندگی_آزادی #مهسا_امینی, Instagram, November 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkwBqrkraMU/>.

⁴⁴⁴Shervin - Baraye | شروین - برای (YouTube, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8xXiqyfBg0>.

⁴⁴⁵Niloofar Rasooli, “In Her Voice, We Are All Together: The Death of a Protestor,” in *Women Life Freedom: Voices and Art Form the Women's Protests in Iran* (London: Saqi Books, 2023), 48–51.

presented a physical manifestation of the latently growing secular trends in Iranian society. Through this presentation, Iranians were able to fully introduce the magnitude of the country's secular shift. Second, the protests emboldened the association between religion and state violence. The Islamic Republic's appropriation of religion has linked Islam to the regime's politics virtually inseparably. When the regime then used Islam during the Women Life Freedom movement as a justification for violence and intrusion into people's private lives, people found it harder to continue supporting the underlying religion. Third, the protests strengthened the formation of a secular identity group centered around pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism. This identity group built social incentives around rejecting religion, and emphasized that the political landscape presents a choice between being religious, and therefore automatically associated with supporting the Islamic Republic, or a secular Iranian, and therefore aligned with the political opposition. The importance of social media and visual communications technology to the movement further entrenched the division between the secular and the religious identity groups by emphasizing the importance of displaying identity outwardly.

Together, these findings show that protest movements play a role in emboldening secular trends by emphasizing a need for people to choose between a religious or a secular way of life. When political religion is called into question, people are forced to confront their religious beliefs, and are asked to make a concrete decision between what is framed as a binary choice between religion and secularism. By magnifying the interlinkage between government violence and religion, people are faced with a choice between their religion and their desired lives. Similarly, as the association between religion and politics is cemented, so is the association between religiously identifying people and the government regime, leading to profound social repercussions. To this extent, people are forced to make a choice between their religion and their social acceptance.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The security forces just looked at me! And I felt free.

– Unveiled Tehrani woman, 2022⁴⁴⁶

This thesis began by asking the questions: how do people's religious beliefs change during protest movements in theocratic countries? What role do social movements play in the broader process of secularization? The existing scholarship to answer these questions discusses secularism as a relatively passive process, examining the factors that influence people's decisions regarding their religious affiliation without considering how religious affiliation is truly a choice that people make about how to live their day to day lives and how to define their relationship with God and religious communities. This thesis sought to challenge the assumption that secularization is something that happens *to* people, with an examination of the dynamics that emerge when people directly and intentionally challenge their theocratic governments. As a result of my findings, I have argued that protest movements embolden secularization, because they create conditions that confront people with the need to make a choice between a religious and a secular identity and life.

The Women Life Freedom protests in Iran provided a uniquely valuable case for studying the relationship between protests and secularization in theocratic countries. Unlike previous movements, Women Life Freedom directly confronted the regime's social policies and aimed to dismantle the religious establishment. The movement's widespread media presence and significance as a big protest movement in modern Iranian history meant that it had ample empirical data to study and draw conclusions from. Furthermore, as Iran more broadly strains the

⁴⁴⁶Dina Nayeri, "Why Is Iran's Secular Shift So Hard to Believe?," New York Magazine, October 21, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/iran-secular-shift-gamaan.html>.

logic of the most prominent theories on secularization, studying Women Life Freedom provided insight into how those theories either fail to hold up or need to be reconceptualized.

I. Findings

My research led to three primary findings, which, when examined together, illustrate how protest movements impose a seemingly binary choice between religion and secularism. These three findings can be succinctly put as:

1. Protest movements bring latent secular trends to the forefront of social consciousness
2. Protest movements illuminate religion as a source of oppression
3. Protest movements create opposing secular and religious identity groups

First, protest movements emphasize latent secular trends, creating a tangible manifestation of the growing disillusionment with religion. Particularly in countries where people are incentivized to identify as religious for reasons outside of their actual beliefs, protests represent an outward expression of the suppressed disillusionment with religion that existed as only a whisper before.

Second, protests emphasize religion as a source of oppression, and in doing so link people's political views and lifestyle preferences with their religious beliefs. As religion and politics become increasingly intertwined and as the negatives of political religion become an amplified conversation during protests, rejecting religion can be an active choice that symbolizes a rejection of the government as well.

Third, as the connection between religion and personal politics is emboldened, an exclusionary separation between religious and secular identity groups builds. Those who are outwardly religious are viewed immediately as supporting the government and face subtle social marginalization as a result. Alternatively, those who are not religious find community within the

group of people who similarly openly espouse secularism. For religions, such as Islam, that have visual symbols, like the Hijab, that are present in daily life, the growth of visual communications technology stresses the distinction between identity groups. Visual media emerging from protests strengthens the notion that to reject the government, you need to do more than just identify with political opposition – you have to show that opposition visually through a rejection of religious symbols and clothing.

From these findings, I conclude that protests embolden secularism by creating conditions that make people feel like they have to make a binary choice between accepting or rejecting religion in their lives. When states use religion to justify what the people are protesting against, it ties religion to suffering and asks people to reflect on how their religion has manifested itself in the world. The choice then becomes whether or not your preferences align with how the religion has been presented in your lived experiences, leaving little room to maintain both your religion and your political ideology. Furthermore, as people make connections between the religion itself and its political doctrine, they also make connections about religious people and their political allegiances, leading to the formation of secular and religious identity groups within society. When these groups are seemingly pitted against one another, it again presents the individual with a choice. Protests serve as moments of personal reckoning with religion, calling religious individuals to reflect on and choose between religion and secularism.

Notably, there are several important limitations to my findings. First, my lack of Persian language skills limited the perspectives that I was able to include in this research. The people that I spoke to and sources that I read were in English, however, I did take steps to access sources that either tangentially or directly engaged with the protests to increase my proximity to the

movement. All of the people that I spoke to have lived in, worked in, or studied Iran, and most of them speak Persian. This allowed me to get an understanding of the protests and the themes of secularism throughout them; however, my perspective and research would have been more decisive had I been able to speak to people in Persian or engage with Persian online sources.

Second, while I was able to interview 10 key informants, my interviews were limited to the original aspirations I had when I started my research. Aiming for upwards of 15 interviews, I was five short of my goal. With more interviews, my findings would be more conclusive. However, by using triangulation to identify common themes across different types of sources, I was able to incorporate enough sources that I feel confident in my findings.

Finally, my findings are constrained by the proximity of the Women Life Freedom protests. With only two years separating the beginning of researching this thesis and the official end of the protests, my results are limited to short-term interactions between protests and secularism. As the Women Life Freedom movement continues to develop in many ways, its medium to long long-term impacts are yet to be seen. The long-term sustainability of the dynamics that I identify should be reexamined once more time has passed and once they are able to fully develop.

II. Significance

My findings are significant for understanding resistance, challenging and amending current understandings of secularism, emphasizing the importance of qualitative research, and creating informed policy on theocratic and religiously governed states.

My findings are important for understanding the multifaceted and intimate nature of resistance. They demonstrate how, in the face of political opposition, foundational elements of people's culture and identity can be abandoned. The process of giving up religion, or even just

beginning to scrutinize it more thoroughly, is an intrinsically personal process. However, when people in Iran began to isolate it as a force of oppression, and were faced with a choice between Islam and a sense of political and social liberation, they chose the latter. Resistance and protest can take many forms. It can be both implicit and explicit, both intentional and unintentional. It can also appear in unexpected ways, particularly within people's personal identity markers and understandings of themselves and their relationships with faith and God, among other things. My research shows how personal protest and resistance can be, and encourages an examination of the covert, yet still sacrificial, ways that people show opposition to their government.

Additionally, my research shows how important it is to study and understand religion and the loss of religion. In my second chapter, I review the main theories to explain declines in religion: the secularization theory, the religious markets model, and the religious-politics theory. Each of these theories neglects nuances and minimizes the fact that diverging from a culturally ingrained and personal belief system is a substantive difference in someone's life. Although Iran is an extreme case, with religion being used to impose draconian measures and enact violence in people's everyday lives, my research nonetheless emphasizes that changes in religious affiliation are nuanced and complex processes that cannot be explained by blanket theories that stipulate a single external factor, like modernization or religious pluralism, are the cause of changes in people's religious preferences. I mention briefly in my second chapter that religion and politics empirically appear to run along similar lines in the US, for example, as in Iran, although to a lesser extent. People who are more left-leaning politically tend to be less religious, and those who are more right-leaning tend to be more religious. My research stresses that this type of relationship is important, and that understanding it lends more insight into political dynamics and societal relationships than simply assuming it to be a product of modernization or religious pluralism.

Along this vein, my findings contest the religious-politics model of understanding secularism. The religious-politics theory, which argues that religion becomes demystified and eventually abandoned when it enters politics, in some ways is reflected in my research, as my findings show how political religiosity broadly can encourage secularism. However, while the religious-politics model also provides some context to understand my case, my findings suggest that the factors which encourage secularism have more to do with how a religious government behaves than simply the existence of religious governments. The religious-political model is true only for people who are under religious governments, as was my case. However, my research indicated that it was less so the process of religion gradually being dismantled and called into question when it is used as a framework for governments to rule by, and more so the authoritarianism, violence, and oppression exhibited by the government that led to secularism. My findings imply that it is more so the nature of someone's relationship with a religion or a religious government than it is simply the act of their being a religious government.

Furthermore, my research emphasizes the importance of using qualitative methodology in studying protest movements or secularism. Using interviews and archival research to create a holistic view of the Women Life Freedom protests allowed me to grasp some of the implicit processes that exist subtly in people's experiences. Whereas the impact of identity group formation and global social media communities would be somewhat diluted or even lost by purely quantitative analysis, those themes emerged very prominently in the conversations that I had with people and the sources that I analysed. When examining future protest movements or processes of secularism, my research emphasizes the need for qualitative analysis to gain access to nuances that are potentially inaccessible by pure data alone. Particularly considering the nuanced way that religion presents itself in people's lives and thought processes, using

qualitative analysis to study secularism can contribute to a more intimate understanding of people's relationship with religion.

Finally, my findings can help policymakers create more informed perspectives on protests and upheaval in countries governed by religious politics. Secularism during protests represents more than momentary dissatisfaction with a religious government. It reflects deep-seated discontent not only with the people in charge, but with their entire ideological underpinning. Aiming at the foundational base of legitimacy, secularism implies the visceral rejection of a religious government. Protest movements and resistance are inherently complex phenomena, and understanding how to respond to them requires as much contextual information as possible. Both for the government that is facing resistance and for policymakers studying a movement in another country, by exploring the meaning of secular resistance, my findings lend insight into how secular upheaval emboldens and entrenches dissatisfaction with the government.

III. Future Research

There is still much that is unsolved about processes of secularism, both as its own field of study and how it engages with protest movements. First, more research is needed on the remaining elements of protest movements that can contribute to secularism. My research presents two key findings, both of which have implications for understanding current theory, methodology, and policy. However, there are undoubtedly more mechanisms that arise during protest movements to encourage people to reevaluate their relationship with religion. Future research should incorporate more qualitative analysis by conducting a wider range of interviews and analyzing Persian language sources to elucidate the processes that my research likely was not privy to because of time constraints and language barriers.

Second, more research should be done on how secularism and politics engage in countries not governed by such a clear-cut religious class. Research done on the impact of religious political parties that exist within generally secular states, for example, can shed more light on how the mechanism of secularization exists within politics on a less extreme scale. At the start of this thesis, I discussed how religion and religious politics are growing in prominence in some parts of the world. Although religious politics remains powerful, most of the examples of religion and politics interacting are at a less extreme level than a full-blown theocracy. More research should therefore be conducted on how protests metabolize the varied extent of religious involvement in politics.

IV. Conclusion

This thesis is prefaced by a verse written by the Persian poet, Sa'di. In that verse, Sa'di warned of the danger of power, even for the most holy and moral people in society. "If Allah were to bestow abundance upon his servants," he writes, "they would certainly rebel upon earth."⁴⁴⁷ As religion launches its return from exile almost 800 years later, Sa'di's words carry only more significance. This thesis explored what happens when societies resist unchecked power in the name of God and his abundant "servants.". It shows that when people protest religious leadership, internal mechanisms call them to make a broader reevaluation of their choice between a religious and a secular society, identity, and life. Particularly in the context of the rise of religious belief and politics in parts of the world, this thesis shows the importance of understanding how and why people's religious affiliations change, and what those changes mean for religious societies and the world at large.

⁴⁴⁷Sa'di, *The Gulistan*, 1258, <https://classics.mit.edu/Sadi/gulistan.html>.

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