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## 40 Years On: Reflections on the Iranian Revolution

Sevgi Adak

*Aga Khan Universtiy*, [sevgi.adak@aku.edu](mailto:sevgi.adak@aku.edu)

Touraj Atabaki

*Leiden University*

Kamran Matin

*Sussex University*

Valentine M. Moghadam

*Northeastern University*

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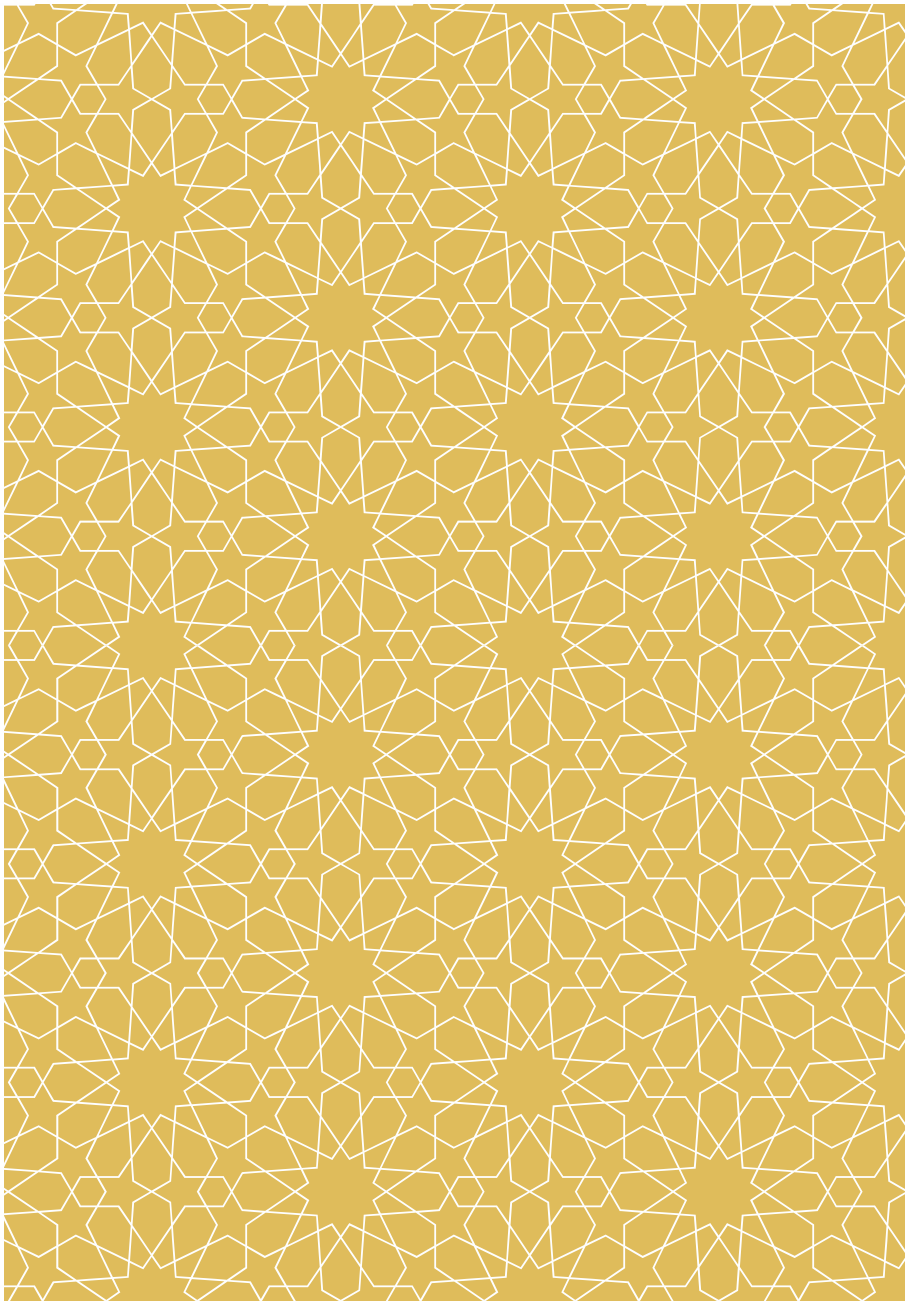
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# 40 Years On: Reflections on the Iranian Revolution

Touraj Atabaki, Kamran Matin, Valentine M. Moghadam



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## Abstracts:

### The Contentious Complexities of Ineluctability of the Iranian Revolution

Touraj Atabaki

Forty years following the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, the narratives of the revolution and its discourse are still very dominant, not only among Iranian elites inside the country, but also in the everyday life of non-elites, when people recall and cry out the revolution's mottos either in paradoxical or cynical forms. In people's recollections of the revolution, there is often a reference to the 'golden period of prosperity' prior to the revolution. By revisiting the rapid, albeit uneven economic and social development which Iran experienced during the last 15 years of Pahlavi rule (1962-1977), this paper intends to reflect on the question of the inevitability or the degree to which the Iranian Revolution could have been averted through the interaction between state and society, with reference to both economy and culture.

### Revolutions and Women's Rights: The Iranian Revolution in Comparative Perspective

Valentine M. Moghadam

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, and in particular the process of Islamisation that followed, has been much debated. An especially large literature has grown with respect to the impact on Iranian women's legal status and social positions. Studies agree that the immediate outcome was a drastic decline in women's participation and rights, especially when compared with achievements in the years before the revolution. There is less consensus on the nature of the developments and changes that have occurred since the first decade of the Islamic revolution and on the salience of class. In addition, more research is needed on how Iran fares in 'women's empowerment' measures compared with (a) the historical record on revolution and women's rights, (b) countries that experienced revolutionary change at roughly the same time as Iran (e.g. Portugal, Afghanistan, Nicaragua), and (c) Muslim-majority countries at similar levels of socio-economic development (e.g. Turkey, Tunisia). This paper will address these three under-researched arenas and thus examine the gendered legacy of the Iranian Revolution from a historical-comparative perspective.

### Iranian Left, Radical Change, and the National Question

Kamran Matin

Four decades after the 1979 revolution, Iran is simmering with popular discontent. The conjunction of thirty years of illiberal neo-liberalisation, catastrophic corruption, the Islamic Republic's loss of legitimacy, the crisis of reformism, and the US economic sanctions are wearing most Iranians' patience thin. In a sense, Iran is approaching a revolutionary crisis. Under these circumstances what should a radical left political strategy look like? This paper addresses this question by focusing on the problematique of agency. Theoretically, it draws on Trotsky and Gramsci. Empirically, it invokes the 1979 revolution as well as more recent developments within the Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey and Syria to argue that a successful leftist political strategy ought to avoid class-reductionism and foreground social justice, radical democracy, gender equality and plural nationhood. Only such a strategy will be able to engage and mobilise subaltern classes, women and nationalities in particular, as the social backbone of a radical democratic hegemonic project.

# Introduction

Sevgi Adak

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is widely seen as one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. This is so not only because of its dramatic consequences for the political, social and cultural landscape of Iran and the Middle East, but also because of the way it shuffled the dynamics in international politics and the world economy on a global scale. As a world historical event, it continues to cast a shadow on the contemporary developments and debates in the Middle East region and beyond, and inform political and theoretical questions regarding social change. In fact, one of the major impacts of the Iranian Revolution was felt in the academic debates on the causes and trajectories of social revolutions, shedding new light on the relationship between the role of ideology, state capacity, social mobilisation, international context and historically salient social structures.

The three articles that are compiled together in this first paper of the *Abdou Filali-Ansary Occasional Paper Series* are the short versions of the papers presented at a panel discussion held at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations on 23 May, 2019. Marking the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the aim of the panel discussion was to revisit the debate on the causes and impact of the revolution for Iran and beyond, from various angles, employing the conceptual and theoretical tools of different disciplines. Three questions, in particular, guided the interdisciplinary dialogue and political reflections on this world historical event: How should we analyse the conditions underpinning the revolutionary dynamics in Iran in the global context of the 1970s? How should the Iranian Revolution be analysed in an historical-comparative perspective? And, what is the legacy, or rather, the multiple legacies, of the revolution for the political struggles in Iran and the Middle East today?

By engaging with these rather broad questions through their own lenses and areas of expertise, the authors reflect on one specific aspect while reconsidering some of the most salient issues stemming from the political and scholarly debate on the Iranian Revolution forty years on, namely the question of inevitability, the consequences of the revolution for women and the national question in Iran. Touraj Atabaki's article focuses on the last 15 years of the Pahlavi regime and addresses the question of whether the Iranian Revolution could have been averted. By putting the relationship between the state and the society at the centre of his analysis, Atabaki analyses the rapidly shifting dynamics of Iran's social, political and economic development in this period and comes to the conclusion that the revolution could have been avoided by the shah, at least in two instances. Valentine M. Moghadam's article provides a fresh look at the question of how the revolution affected Iranian women in terms of women's empowerment indicators. Analysing Iran in comparison to countries that experienced revolutionary change at about the same time as Iran and other Middle Eastern countries with comparable socio-economic development levels, Moghadam underlines the impact of Islamisation in the Iranian case and points to state policies as the main obstacles to women's rights and political participation. Finally, Kamran Matin focuses on the current crises the Islamic Republic of Iran faces 40 years after the Iranian Revolution and explores the components of a successful left strategy for political change. Having analysed the main positions of the Iranian left and the way in which they have been historically engaged with classical Marxist theory, Matin suggests that the success of a leftist strategy for political change in Iran depends on a critical reflection on this theory and a fundamental shift in the approach to the national question in Iran.

# The Contentious Complexities of Ineluctability of The Iranian Revolution

Touraj Atabaki

Erik Hobsbawm has called the Russian Revolution ‘the central event of the twentieth century’, with ‘its practical impact on the world far more profound and global than that of the French Revolution.’ Regarding the Iranian Revolution, Hobsbawm identified it as ‘one of the central social revolutions of the twentieth century.’ The twentieth century certainly witnessed other key social revolutions, such as the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, which according to Hobsbawm fall into the same category as the Russian Revolution, at least in terms of their global impact. But how about the Iranian Revolution? Are there any common features between the Russian and Iranian Revolutions in terms of their goals, ideological organisations, or long-term outcomes. In my reading, if one compares and contrasts the two revolutions as they happened, there are some conspicuous similarities:

- A- Both were caused by the uneven social and economic development of the Tsarist and Pahlavi monarchies alongside the agency of authoritarian modernisation, where there was modernisation without modernity. Tsar Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi both asserted that they needed to be acknowledged as major player in world politics.
- B- Both revolutions were unpredictable. Two months prior to the February Revolution of 1917, Lenin stated in an address to Bolshevik youth supporters who visited him in Zurich that although they might live to see the proletarian revolution in Russia, he, at the age of 46, could not expect to live long enough to do so.

Almost one year prior to the Shah’s departure from Iran, American President Jimmy Carter proclaimed that under the ‘great leadership of his majesty the king,’ Iran had become ‘an island of stability’ in one of the most troubled regions of the world.

- C- For both revolutions, external pressure mattered. For the Russian Revolution the catalyst was the First World War, while for the Iranian Revolution it was US Democrat President Jimmy Carter’s liberalisation policy and the withdrawal of US backing for Iran’s monarchy.
- D- Both revolutions were internationalist in tone. Their immediate impacts could be traced beyond their national frontiers.
- E- And finally, both revolutions aimed for a totalitarian regime, intending, though unsuccessfully, to give birth to a new man: *Sovietsky Chelovek* in the Soviet Union, and *Ensan-e momen va movahhed-e taraz-e din*<sup>1</sup> in Iran. However, both ended up creating *Mafiosi Sans Frontières*.

On the question of the historical inevitability of the two revolutions, one could come up with a series of ‘what ifs.’ Regarding the Russian Revolution, Tony Brenton asks: ‘Could things have gone differently? Were there moments when a single decision taken another way, a

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<sup>1</sup> انسان مومن و موحد طراز دین

random accident, a shot going straight instead of crooked ... could have altered the whole course of Russian, and so European, and world history?' (Brenton 2016: 2)

How about the inevitability of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79? In my opinion, a top-down question could by its very nature be nostalgically irritating if one were to ask **What could have been done at the top to avoid the revolution at the bottom.** The alternative bottom-up question would be teleologically alleviating: **To what extent was Iran ready for the radical change?**

Although these two questions seem different, in my judgment they are very much intermingled. Revolution or any social episode is only avertible when it happens. Forty years after the Iranian Revolution, the common frameworks used to contextualise the revolution are:

- 1- Conspiratorial-imperialist interventions ending the age of authoritarian modernisation, or
- 2- Verbal discourse, or Shi'i theology and clericalism jumping on the back of the westoxification of Third-Worldism, calling for the return to oneself. Michel Foucault prefers to call this the return of political spirituality.

In my reaction to the question of inevitability or avertability of the Iranian Revolution, while avoiding the essentialist approach of naming a singular reason for the revolution, I opt to ground my approach in political sociology and revisit the revolution by examining the interaction between state and society with reference to both economy and culture. In other words, I would like to emphasise the state's deficiency in creating even development and the societal reaction to the prevailing uneven development. The period I adopt for my study of this interaction is the long fifteen years prior to the revolution, i.e. 1962-1977. During these fifteen years, Iran went through rapid, albeit uneven economic and social development, juxtaposed with a move from milder forms of autocratic governance to a more repressive kind of political dictatorship. Even though at the beginning of this period, the degree of political exclusion for both right and left of the political opposition differed, by the end of the period, almost all sides of the political spectrum were subject to insistent repression.

This period was inaugurated by the introduction of the Third Five Year Development Plan of 1962-67. Indeed, the plan was the road map and backbone of what the Shah later called the White Revolution. In May 1961, after eight years of wide-ranging repression which overrode every corner of the political sphere in Iran, a rally was organised by the followers of Mosaddeq in northern Tehran, calling for an end to political exclusion and repression. Three months later, in August 1961, the Shah held his own rally in eastern Tehran where he announced the introduction of a series of widespread economic reforms which he intended to implement.<sup>2</sup> A year and a half later, in January 1963, a referendum was held initiated by the Shah's reform programme; a series of far-reaching socioeconomic plans which he opted to call the White Revolution. Although there was great confusion among the various political

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<sup>2</sup> The program of widespread economic reforms that the Shah promised was in fact the brain child of Hassan Arsanjani. Arsanjani was a longstanding advocate for land reforms and also a renowned expert in agriculture who had prepared this plan at the request of the Prime Minister, Ali Amini. See: Afkhami, G. (1999) *Ideology, Process and Politics in Iran's Development Planning. An Interview with Manouchehr Gudarzi, Khodadad Farmanfarmain and Abdol-Majid Majidi*, Washington: Foundation for Iranian Studies, pp. 167-170. Amini, I. (2009) *Zendegi Siyasi Ali Amini* (Political Life of Ali Amini), Tehran: Nashr Mahi, p. 171 and 385. Afkhami, G. (2001) *Ideology, Process and Politics in Iran's Development Planning. An Interview with Alinaghi Alikhani*, Washington: Foundation for Iranian Studies, 2001, p. 37.



parties and organisations about how to react to these governmental reforms, one could nevertheless see that for the opposition it was almost impossible not to endorse the Shah's reforms. The protest motto of the students of Tehran University at that time was perhaps the best marker of this perplexity: 'Yes to the reforms, No to the dictatorship.'

Returning to the question of the inevitability of the revolution. My argument is that 1962 was the best year in which the Shah could have avoided the revolution, if he had been able to keep a balance between economic and political development. I do not support the conventional argument that the Shah's government lost its credibility and legitimacy following the 1953 coup, never being able to regain it. The world has witnessed abundant examples of far more brutal political regimes than that of the Shah in 1962 which retreated in favour of national reconciliation. The Shah missed this option however.

Following the implementation of the Third Five Year Development Plan and the White Revolution, Iran went through a period of rapid economic growth, thanks to the colossal increase of oil revenue from 29 billion Rials in 1963 to 182 billion Rials in 1972. This increase of more than 500% in oil revenue enabled an 8.8% growth in national GDP. Within this, the average annual growth-share of the industrial and mining sectors was 7.7% (*Gozaresh 'Amalkard Barnameh 'Omranī Sevvom 1341-1346*, 1968).

In this period, the migration of the work force from rural to urban areas resulted in a decrease of the labour force in the agricultural sector and an increase in the workforce in urban industries. Hundreds of thousands of villagers surged towards the cities. Employment in the new large industries was amongst the final destinations of this migration which grew by 4.2% to more than 2 million people (*Gozaresh 'Amalkard Barnameh 'Omranī Sevvom 1341-1346*, 1968).

Along with the increase of the workforce in the large industries came a perceptible improvement in the living and working conditions of this workforce. The average 25% annual increase of salaries in some sectors even reached 200-400%. In addition to this, the provision of health care and free housing needs to be mentioned.

A strong female presence in all professions including an increase in the number of female workers, widespread literacy programs, increased higher education opportunities, improved healthcare and communication networks among others, were the direct outcomes of such a development state. The population mobility resulting from these reforms led to the increased rights of citizens whom the Shah, borrowing from leftist vocabulary, referred to as 'free-liberated men' and 'free-liberated women.'

On the other hand, the large-scale rural migration to big cities resulted in the excessive, uncontrolled and unhealthy growth of slum settlements; another indicator of uneven development. In fifteen years, the population of Iran increased from 23 million in 1961 to 34 million in 1976, while the urban population doubled from 8 million to 16 million (*Gozaresh-e Moqaddamati-e Sarshomari-e Nofous va Maskan*, 1976) comprising 48% of the total population in 1976. The biggest growth occurred in Tehran with an increase from 2.7 million to 4.5 million in a decade (1966-1976) (Kazemi 1980: 3). Due to the high rate of migration, the big cities could not fully meet the demands of the newcomers. Reaching a pinnacle in the mid-1970s, slum dwellers, while residents within the boundaries of the urban conurbations, did not contribute to the urban economy. Estimates placed the total number of slum dwellers between 500,000 and one million (Abrahamian 2008: 139). In 1976, slum dwellers made up 11% of the total population of Isfahan and 10% of the population of Kermanshah. (*Mohandsin-e Moshaver-e Tarh va M'emari, Tarh-e Tavandmansazi va Saman Dehi-e Sokonatgahay-e Qeyr-e Rasmi-e Shar-e Esfahan. Gozaresh-e Marhaleh-e Aval. Shenasyi-e Mahalat-e Qeyr-e Rasmi*, 2006; Khatam 2002: 33-4). The growth of the number of these

urban slum dwellers soon proved that this group could potentially have a strong impact on any political change.

The uneven development, as such, could not have caused drastic consequences on its own, including political and economic instability. The government policy of injecting new-found wealth into the economy through increasing public expenditure led to a widening gap between demand and supply. Higher incomes and subsidised prices increased consumption by 12% which led to a sharp increase in inflation by 18% annually. On the whole, the economic crisis undermined what the Shah's government had achieved a decade earlier. The gradual signs of unrest among the labouring poor (not industrial workers) was an indication that the government's apparatuses were unable to control the subordinated classes.<sup>3</sup>

As far as the middle classes were concerned, the demand was more political. Although the middle classes benefitted from the economic growth which occurred together with notable economic and social development, nevertheless, the exclusive and coercive political practices prevailed as before. While in the social sphere changes in the urban/rural relationship became more conspicuous, the political space still suffered from the post-1953 coup repression.

Thus, the 15-year period which started with the inauguration of the Third Five Year Development Plan in 1962, paved the way for the foundation and consolidation of a new developmental state and the rapid economic growth which resulted in the deepening economic crisis of 1977. Therefore, in contrast to the common and predominant paradigms of revolutions, the Iranian Revolution was the outcome of more than a decade of rapid economic growth followed by a short period of economic stagnation or decline (Davis 1962: 1-19).

Returning to the question of the inevitability of the revolution, my conclusion is that it would have been possible to avert it. If in August 1977 the Shah had decided to replace his long-term Prime Minister Hoveyda with a figure such as Shahpour Bakhtiyar or Dr Gholamhossein Sadighi instead of with economist Jamshid Amouzgar in order to control the economic crisis, he could have done so.

The Shah lost his chance of averting the revolution for a second time. What happened after August 1977 was nothing short of an aggregation of perplexities. The revolution was getting under the skin of the big cities, although it had been predicted and prepared for by many.

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How was the Russian Revolution of 1917 remembered in the Soviet Union forty years later in 1957 when all the founders of the revolution were dead or executed? Was there any question about the inevitability of the 1917 Revolution amongst the common people and non-party elites in 1957? No valid documents or narratives exist to answer this question. In contrast, some forty years following the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, narratives of the revolution and its discourse are still very dominant in Iran, not only among Iranian elites inside the country, but also in everyday life, when people recall and cry out the revolution's mottos either in paradoxical or cynical forms.

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive study of the economic and political crisis leading to the 1979 Iranian the Revolution see: Bashiriyeh, H. (1984) *The State and Revolution in Iran, 1962-1982*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

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# Revolutions and Women's Rights: The Iranian Revolution in Comparative Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Valentine M. Moghadam

The nature of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and especially the process of Islamisation that followed, has been the subject of much scholarly discussion and debate. A large literature has grown on the revolution's impact on Iranian women's legal status and social positions. Studies agree that the immediate outcome was a drastic decline in women's participation and rights, especially when compared with what had been achieved in the years before the revolution. There is less agreement on the nature of the developments and changes that have occurred since the first decade of the Islamic revolution and on the salience of class. Four decades after the Iranian Revolution, it is worth taking stock of how the revolution affected Iranian women's legal status and social positions at a time when other countries also experienced revolutionary changes, and where they are today.

In the longer paper, I examine how Iran fares in "women's empowerment" measures compared with (1) the historical record on revolution and women's rights, (2) countries that experienced revolutionary change at roughly the same time as Iran did: Portugal (1974), Afghanistan (1978), Nicaragua (1978-79), and (3) MENA countries today at similar levels of socio-economic development: Algeria, Turkey, Tunisia. For the latter, sources of data include the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*, the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report*, and the UNDP's *Human Development Report*.

To summarise my argument: The Islamisation process that followed the Iranian revolution seriously undermined women's roles, especially when compared with outcomes in Portugal, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. Since then, Iranian women have made notable advances in educational attainment and health, and their resistance to social restrictions is widespread, but they remain burdened by structural and institutional constraints and an inability to organise and mobilise – burdens that do not exist in most of the comparator countries. The main contradiction seems to be that the massive gains in education have not been accompanied by gains in employment and political participation, and here the comparison with Tunisia and its 2011 political revolution is especially illuminating. This reality indicates that the main hindrances to women's participation and rights lie not at the level of family and individual decision-making and norms, but rather at the level of state policy.

## ***Iran, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Portugal: Explaining Differences***

I begin the paper by drawing on my previous research on gendered revolutions and their outcomes (Moghadam 1997, 1999, 2003, 2013), where I develop a model of two types of gendered revolutions: the patriarchal and the emancipatory. What determines each type of revolution and its gender outcomes? Domestically, the chief determinant appears to be the ideology of the revolutionary movement (and/or its dominant forces) and of the new state. Social structure is also salient, in that a given population (or a large or prominent segment of it) should be sufficiently prepared for the intended social transformation and to help realise

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of a longer paper prepared for the panel *40 Years On: Reflections on the Iranian Revolution*, held at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, London, 23 May 2019.

it. In terms of ideology, Iran's Islamist movement was in a category of its own, whereas Portugal, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua were guided by a socialist ideology. In terms of social structure, Portugal was arguably the most developed of the four countries compared in this section, and Afghanistan the least developed.

In general, where revolutionaries or the leadership of the democratic transition are guided by a modernising and socialist ideology and left parties are influential, and especially where women and their organisations have had a strong presence (itself dependent on the country's social structure), the outcome is more likely to be emancipatory in gender terms. Where those conditions are not present, and especially where revolutions or political movements have been guided predominantly by religious or nationalist ideology, patriarchal outcomes are more likely to occur. Despite temporary disruptions in the course of the revolution as women take part in protests and struggles, pre-existing patriarchal gender relations are often carried over in the post-revolutionary situation. This is less likely to happen, however, when a "critical mass" of women has entered the public sphere in the pre-revolutionary situation, and when large numbers of women take part in the revolution and assume decision-making and leadership roles. Thus, structural determinants of gendered revolutionary outcomes and transitions seem to be: (1) the pre-existing social structure and the nature of gender relations; (2) the movement ideology and goals; and (3) the extent of women's participation in the movement and leadership.

In Iran, the principal determinant of the gendered revolutionary outcome was the ideology of the revolutionaries. Although left-wing organisations and movements were part of the anti-Shah revolutionary coalition and in the early days of the post-revolutionary period appeared popular and influential, the Islamic revolutionaries were the dominant force and went on to build an Islamic state. Theirs was a religious and cultural-nationalist ideology that called for the re-establishment of the traditional Muslim family, soon codifying a "patriarchal gender contract" premised upon the male breadwinner and female homemaker ideal. Although Iranian women had taken part in the massive street demonstrations of 1978 and early 1979, their slogans had been those of the broader revolutionary coalition, and not those that might be more typical of women's interests (e.g. equality of women and men, women's autonomy and self-determination, full political and social citizenship rights, etc.) – at least not until March 1979, when they were too weak to challenge the Islamists. Most importantly, women were nowhere in the revolutionary coalition's leadership, which was dominated by clerics (exclusively men), male nationalist leaders and male leftists.<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the National Union of Women was formed – but this occurred in the absence of a mass social movement of women. The novelty of feminism as an ideology, the novelty of autonomous women's organising and, perhaps most significantly, the absence of a sizable female working class precluded any real influence on the politics and positions of the Left's organisations, let alone the Islamists. In contrast, women had been working in Portugal since the 1960s, and in Nicaragua, many women worked in the rural sectors. But the principal difference between the Iranian revolution and the revolutions in Portugal, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua lay in the ideology of the revolutionary leadership and the new state.

All four revolutions experienced trajectories that were quite different from each other as well as, to some degree, different from the initial agenda and immediate outcome. The data shows, however, that decades after the revolutions Iran still lags behind Portugal and even low-income Nicaragua on several important gender indicators, particularly those pertaining to women's political representation and leadership. On educational indicators, Iranian

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<sup>2</sup> Ashraf Dehghani, head of the splinter group Fedayee Guerrillas, was the exception.

women do very well, but overall Iran is ranked very low on the Gender Inequality Index, given also the large number of legal and policy restrictions on women's mobility and rights.

We now turn our attention to how Iranian women fare in relation to several MENA countries at similar stages of socio-economic development: Algeria, Turkey, and Tunisia. On measures such as secondary school and tertiary enrollments, and health, Iran does very well. On labour force participation and political representation, however, it remains behind its comparators. Iranian women are far behind their counterparts in Algeria and Tunisia on important measures such as women's political representation and leadership and involvement in professions such as university teaching staff and judges.

Finally, we return to the subject of revolution and compare Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution with Tunisia's 2011 democratic revolution. This also helps explain why Tunisia's gender indicators are so much better than those of Iran (see also Moghadam 2019). Both Iran and Tunisia are Muslim-majority countries located in the Middle East and North Africa region, and both experienced revolutionary upheavals that were nationwide, cross-class, and non-violent. Here the common features end, for Iran's 1979 revolution and Tunisia's 2011 revolution had very different outcomes, especially for women's participation and rights. I make several arguments:

- Iran's was the first *social* revolution that broke with the past only to result in an Islamic Republic; in contrast, Tunisia had a more limited *political* revolution that retained previous institutions, values, and norms to embark on a peaceful and procedural democratic transition, with its republican model intact.
- Temporality is important; women's rights have become institutionalised in world society and indeed in the world polity, through the numerous treaties that have been signed and diffused by IOs, INGOs, and of course the UN. This was the case by the time Tunisia had its revolution but was not so in the late 1970s, when Iran had its revolution. Related to this point is that women's legal status and social positions, and their experience with modernisation, were more limited in Iran in 1979 than was the case in Tunisia in 2011.
- The Iranian left and the secular forces were not in an advantageous position in 1979, compared with Tunisia in 2011; civil society and political party development in each case was profoundly different, with implications for the dominant ideology of the revolutionary movement and afterwards. Although in neither Iran nor Tunisia did leftists form a sustained united front, in Tunisia leftists and secularists did form such fronts on at least two occasions, which helped to check the progress of the Islamists. Alliances between the left, secularists, and feminists in Tunisia prevented backsliding on women's rights and in fact enabled new gains for women's participation and rights.

Significant explanatory factors also include discursive and ideological changes over 30-35 years in the feminist and left movements, with both embracing democracy as well as secularism. Neither democracy nor secularism nor feminism was an established norm in Iran in the late 1970s. Forty years on, the Islamic Republic remains in place and the political elite staunchly opposed to change.

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# The Iranian Left, Radical Change, and the National Question

Kamran Matin

Four decades after the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is beset with a manifold crisis: a socio-economic crisis of nearly thirty years of illiberal neo-liberalisation, a legitimacy crisis due to deepening social inequality and systematic governmental corruption, and a foreign policy crisis resulting from Iran's regional interventions and the effective demise of the nuclear deal and crippling US sanctions. With the political bankruptcy of the regime-embedded reformists, streets have increasingly become the main site for the expression of popular grievances and political discontent. Indeed, in late 2017, early 2018 Iran experienced a winter of discontent as large numbers of people in numerous cities and towns across the country took to the streets and demonstrated against poverty, unemployment and corruption. There has also been a general strike in Kurdistan and several high-profile labour strikes and workers' sit-ins over the past year or so followed by waves of police repression. All in all, Iran is arguably approaching, if not experiencing, a general crisis.

Under these circumstances what should a left political strategy look like?

The answer to this question is not straightforward largely because there is no unified Iranian left. However, for the purpose of the present argument two main tendencies could be distinguished: the 'anti-imperialist left' and the 'economist left'.

The 'anti-imperialist left' intellectually and politically draws on the legacy of the Stalinist Tudeh party. For this tendency IRI's apparent anti-imperialism over-determines its broader political strategy towards IRI. This has, for example, led Iran's anti-imperialist leftists to support IRI's intervention in Syria in support of Bashar Assad's brutal regime, and oppose the Kurdish national movement, even in neighbouring countries, as an imperialist plot to partition Iran. The 'economist left', which admittedly is not an ideal description, refers to the new left and radical Marxist groups and tendencies that have a strategic focus on anti-capitalist struggle within Iran to the relative neglect of national and gender questions. For this camp, it is the exigencies of fighting the national bourgeoisie that over-determines its broader political strategy. In other words, in political terms the anti-imperialist left is 'externalist' while the economist left is 'internalist'. Given IRI's severe suppression of dissent, neither camp exists in an organised manner inside Iran but mostly as discursive fields in the public sphere and social media.

What both of these left tendencies share is a basic assumption that the working class is the main socio-historical agency for a radical progressive political transformation in Iran. And relatedly, both tendencies tend to view the national question of so-called 'minorities' as a distraction from anti-imperialist and class struggles. This perspective on agency and subaltern national movements in turn rests on a broader theory of capitalist development that is uncritically adopted from classical Marxism. In contrast, I suggest that the articulation of a successful political strategy by the radical Iranian left depends on a critical reflection on this theoretical framework. In what follows I sketch this argument focusing on the national question and how it can be a central element to a successful leftist political strategy in Iran.



The Marxist left's assumption that the working class forms the decisive revolutionary agency in the capitalist epoch is derived from Marx's theory of capitalist development. Marx assumed capitalism would progressively divide society into two major classes: proletariat, and the bourgeoisie. For Marx, the proletariat was a 'universal class' with 'radical chains' and therefore its emancipation amounted to the emancipation of the whole of society. It was therefore the leading historical agency and central to a socialist transformation in capitalist modernity. This view was based on Marx's study of England as the home of the first systematic development of capitalism. It was rendered universally valid through Marx's conception of capitalism's expansion as an essentially transnational process. Marx saw this process unfolding in a temporally differentiated fashion generating essentially similar outcomes in different countries. Interestingly, this stance was in tension with Marx's own empirical observations of capitalist development in backward European countries and the colonial and non-European world (cf. Anderson 2010). Late in life, Marx (1977: 572) issued a stern warning against turning his 'sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophic theory of the general path every people is fated to tread ...'. Nevertheless, Marx's belated concerns did not bear on the basic theoretical framework of historical materialism, which subsequent Marxists applied to their local and national contexts.

It is therefore unsurprising that Marxism has been vulnerable to the charges of Eurocentrism and historical unilinearism. The intellectual roots of these problems however lie deeper in the basic assumptions of Marx's general social theory, namely, historical materialism. More specifically it can be traced to historical materialism's basic premise of the 'double relationship' formulated in *The German Ideology*, i.e. the claim that 'the production of life ... appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as natural, on the other as a social relationship' (Marx and Engels 1970: 50; 1993: 87). Marxist social theory therefore elides the intrinsic multiplicity of the social world and hence the whole plane of inter-societal relations. Indeed, Marx's monumental *Capital* involves an explicit abstraction from international relations (Marx 1990: 727). Consequently, key theoretical concepts of Marxism, including that of revolutionary agency, are necessarily formed by reference to the internal dynamics of a particular society, i.e. England, and then generalised as universal. Marxist ideas of 'uneven development' and 'imperialism' implicitly addressed the consequences of this fateful neglect of societal multiplicity. However, both ideas were derived from the internal logic of the capitalist mode of production and therefore reproduced the deep theoretical neglect of societal multiplicity and its consequences of 'difference, coexistence, interaction, combination, and dialectical change' (Rosenberg 2016: 135–141).

Among classical Marxist thinkers Leon Trotsky was arguably alone in implicitly but directly addressing the theoretical omission of societal multiplicity in Marxist social theory through his idea of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD). 'Unevenness' represents and foregrounds the ontological condition of societal multiplicity, and 'combination' captures its consequences leading to a conception of 'development' as intrinsically interactive and multilinear. In other words, 'external' and 'internal' are mutually constitutive and dialectically reshape each other precluding unilinear social change. UCD's recognition and comprehension of societal multiplicity and therefore inter-societal relations entails a dynamic conception of historical agency that is not derived solely from the dialectic of capital and labour. A particularly illuminating site of this argument is the phenomena of the nation and nationalism whose theorisation has been correctly described as 'Marxism's great historical failure' (Nairn 1975: 3). I have shown elsewhere (Matin 2019) that rather than being an ideological by-product of capitalism or a form of false consciousness – as Marxists have tended to assume – the nation and nationalism are in fact constitutive of historical

capitalism. I will sketch this argument before briefly commenting on its crucial implications for the political strategy of the Iranian left amidst the current crisis in Iran.

The nation is an abstract community whose historical specificity lies in its political form of capitalist sovereignty. But it has a double-life. It first emerged in England (later Britain) as a re-enchanting response to the disenchantment of imperial capitalism. However, the uneven and combined nature of this process precluded its modular replication elsewhere through reversing the key moments of its original formation. *Within* late-comer societies, that is, later than Great Britain, nationalism forges the nation before capitalism, which geopolitically over-determines the process from *without*.

Thus, in non-capitalist societies which directly or indirectly experienced the pressure of capitalist Britain, nationalism, rather than capitalism, forged the nation as the political-ideological unification of still socially concrete individuals; a process for which the violent construction of a 'national' identity from a *particular* ethnicity or language was the most possible, and hence most common, route (cf. Dirlik 2002: 436). In multi-cultural and multi-ethnic contexts (that is, most of the world) this by default meant the formation of subalternised 'minorities' which, unless granted substantive autonomy, launched their own mimetic autonomist or irredentist nationalist projects against emerging unitary nation-states (cf. Hobsbawm 1977: 16-17).

This process is precisely what happened in Iran, Turkey, Iraq and most other so-called 'late-comer' countries. In Iran, Persian language and culture came to form the ideological core and consciousness of the modern state and its unitary conception of national identity. This involved the subordination of the pre-existing political-cultural configurations of non-Persian peoples and their ruling elites, which hitherto had high levels of autonomy in a decentralised, semi-confederal system. This pre-national polity had no territorial definition as was the case with all pre-capitalist polities which were essentially dynastic and tribal in structure. The project of defensive state-formation which the Iranian ruling classes embarked upon under colonial and imperial pressure from European powers therefore involved the construction of a culturally defined political hierarchy, i.e. the modern Iranian nation state. In this new polity the nation and its interests were defined in terms of only one of the several cultures, languages and religions that existed within its geography, i.e. Persian (Twelver) Shi'ism. It was this Shi'i-Persian state that led Iran's subsequent industrialisation and capitalist development. As a result, and from the start, the capitalist socio-economic hierarchy contained an inbuilt ethno-cultural hierarchy that co-determined its dynamics and consequences as well as the terms and forms of resistance to it. Thus, class divisions were embedded in a complex cultural-political field giving rise to a pattern of regional inequality and uneven development that to a considerable extent coincided with the distribution of non-Persian ethnolinguistic communities. These communities therefore turned into subaltern 'minorities' due to their politically and culturally subordinate status within the new unitary nation-state. The often-cited centre-periphery inequality in Iran only partially reflect this condition.

Under such circumstances, class formation and class divisions involved a level of ethno-cultural definition that makes any hegemonic political project that centres on class struggle alone highly limited in its popular appeal and political efficacy. For example, the 2009 'green movement' failed largely, or at least partly, because its strategic focus on liberal-democratic demands neglected the question of national minorities as well as class and gender. Few cities outside Tehran participated in the protest movement beyond its early stages. The main cities in Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Khuzestan and Baluchistan largely remained bystanders during Iran's 2009 summer of protests since the movement failed to effectively engage their culturally sharpened political sensibility. Conversely, the recent labour strikes failed to spark

any wider political movement and protests. The reason was that their leaders, but especially some sections of leftist activists and intellectuals outside these strike actions, tended to deny any link between the workers' demands and broader political demands, particularly the question of the oppression of national minorities. To be sure, more severe state repression might have been a reason for this stance. However, one can also detect a deeper intellectual reason for this avoidance of the national question.

At the core of this failure, as I have been trying to argue, lies a conception of agency that is monadic and that does not correspond to the developmental specificities of modern Iran and the nature of its social and political contradictions. The remarkable success of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey further supports this argument. HDP entered the 2015 general elections in Turkey with a radical progressive agenda that was multi-focal in nature and hence rich in its hegemonic potentials. It appealed to the working classes, subaltern national and religious minorities and marginalised groups including LGBTQ groups, and crucially, women. In effect, HDP re-embedded the Kurds' longstanding struggle for cultural and political self-institution in a wider radical political programme that foregrounded social, economic, ethnic, religious and gender inequalities. This enabled HDP to attract large numbers of voters outside its Kurdish heartland. Indeed, the strategy was an instant success and despite the Turkish government's relentless subsequent suppression, HDP retained its status as the third largest party in the parliament in the last general election. Furthermore, it played a decisive role in the defeat of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in recent municipal elections.

A more radical version of HDP's project in Turkey is the project of 'democratic confederalism' in Syrian Kurdistan better known as Rojava. Democratic confederalism is a dynamic process of state-deformation in which popular and communal councils systematically hollow out existing state structures, replacing their hierarchical and patriarchal relations of authority with horizontal, gender-egalitarian relations of self-administration based on a use-value oriented and environmentally sensitive cooperative economy. The project places national, class, gender and environmental questions at its political and strategic core. As a result, the conception of radical agency is by default plural and horizontal. The speed with which the project became a mass-movement with remarkable degrees of success under most unfavourable (geo-)political and economic circumstances is testimony to the efficacy of the movement and its approach to transformative agency. In addition, the ferocious violence and deep enmity with which the Turkish state and other reactionary forces in the region have assaulted this experience is a measure of the historical threat it poses to the *status quo* in the region.

To be sure, circumstances in Iran are rather different than in Turkey and Rojava. To start with, there is no constitutional democracy, party politics, or fair elections in Iran comparable to those of Turkey's. Nor is Iran experiencing a breakdown of central state authority due to war as was the case in Syria. Nevertheless, there is huge political energy and dynamism in Iranian society today for which the natural political and discursive channel is the radical left. And yet, the single-track nature of the left's political and ideological discourse prevents it from strategically engaging and absorbing this political energy and dynamism, which has multiple sources irreducible to the contradiction between capital and labour alone.

A new left that seeks to have real impact on Iran at a time when the country is beset by a general crisis and craving for change must reframe its political strategy through a sustained and critical reflection on its intellectual foundations. Due to the effects of Iran's experience of uneven and combined development, class struggle has no inherent priority over the struggle of oppressed national minorities, marginalised groups and women. Any political strategy that focuses on only one of these aspects or organises their significance hierarchically is

unlikely to attract the subaltern masses and effectuate radical, progressive change in Iran. Given the ethno-linguistic demography of Iran and the degree to which relations of political and economic subordination are openly charged with Persian-cum-Iranian nationalism, the explicit integration and advocacy of equal status, rights and recognition of Iran's subaltern nationalities is indispensable to an effective and successful left political strategy in Iran.

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## About the Authors:

**Sevgi Adak** is Assistant Professor at AKU-ISMC. Previously, she was a research fellow at the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, and taught at Sabancı University, Istanbul, and Istanbul Bahçeşehir University. Her research focuses on the history of women's activism in Turkey and aspects of Turkish secularism and the dynamics of state-society relations in the early Turkish republic. She is co-editor of the BIA/IB Tauris *Contemporary Turkey* series and is author of *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in Turkey: Gender, Power and Resistance under the Kemalist Regime* (IB Tauris: Forthcoming).

**Touraj Atabaki** is an Honorary Research Fellow at the International Institute of Social History and Emeritus Professor of Social History of the Middle East and Central Asia at Leiden University. Previously, he worked at Utrecht University and Amsterdam University. Atabaki's previous research interests comprised historiography, ethnic studies and the practice of authoritarianism in Iran, Ottoman Turkey and everyday Stalinism in the Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the last ten years his research interests have focused more on labour history and the history of work. He has coordinated a project on the 100-year social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. Atabaki has written extensively on the 19th- and 20th-century history of Iran, Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia. His latest publications include *Victims of Their Faith. The Lives and Fates of Iranian Political Activists and Migrant Labours in the Interwar Soviet Union* (Co-author: L. Ravandi-Fadai, 2016); *The Road Not to Taken. Leftist Guerrillas in the Late Pahlavi Iran* (Co-ed: N. Mohajer, 2017); and *Working for Oil. Comparative Social Histories of Labour in the Global Oil Industries* (Co-eds: E. Bini and K. Ehsani, 2018). For Atabaki's research and publications, see: <https://socialhistory.org/en/staff/touraj-atabaki>

**Kamran Matin** is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Sussex University, UK, where he teaches International History, International Theory, and Middle East Politics. His research interests include the international dimension of historical change, critique of Eurocentrism, modern state-formation, nationalism and Iranian modernity, and Kurdish politics and history. He is the author of *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change* (Routledge, 2013) and co-editor of *Historical Sociology and World History: Uneven and Combined Development over the Longue Durée* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), and co-editor of Palgrave's *Minorities in West Asia and North Africa* (MWANA) series.

**Valentine M. Moghadam** is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, Boston, and former Director (2012-7) of the International Affairs Program. Previously she was Professor of Sociology and Director of Women's Studies at Purdue University and Illinois State University; section chief at UNESCO in Paris, where she led policy-oriented research on gender equality and development in the Social and Human Sciences Sector; and senior researcher at the United Nations University's WIDER Institute in Helsinki, Finland, where she coordinated the research program on women and development. Born in Tehran, Iran, she received her higher education in Canada and the U.S. Her areas of research include globalisation, transnational social movements and networks, comparative revolutions, and women and gender relations in the Middle East and North Africa. She is the author of many publications, including *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (1993, 2003, 2013) and the award-winning *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (2005). She has authored a number of journal articles and book chapters on gender and the Iranian revolution, and on women, work, and political participation in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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The Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC),

Aga Khan Centre, 10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN, UK.

T +44 (0)20 7380 3800 [ismc@aku.edu](mailto:ismc@aku.edu) [www.aku.edu/ismc](http://www.aku.edu/ismc)

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