

MOVEMENT OR MOMENT?

Exploring the Modern Struggle for Democracy in Iran

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In a time where democratic backsliding threatens the sanctity of our democratic strongholds, studies on the world's would-be democracies have been placed on the back-burner. The Middle East has commonly been called a democracy desert: a region where the branches of democracy are incapable of taking root. Whether it be an inhospitable culture or the looming effects of colonial influence, the Middle East has existed in a democracy deficit since its inception following Sykes-Picot. Although semblances of democracy have taken place in various Middle Eastern countries, Iran has remained under authoritarian rule for centuries: from the Qajars to the Islamic regime. Despite wide-spread civil unrest, a lively civil society, and a diaspora who yearns for a democratic Iran, Iran has never democratized. Analyzing the two most modern pro-democracy movements in Iranian history, the 2009 Green Revolution and 2022 Women, Life, Freedom Movement, this paper seeks to explore why Iran has been unable to democratize.

I. Introduction

Throughout the vast population of Iranian diaspora exiled to the West, there remains a strong sense of national pride and optimism for the future of Iran. As a society that has been overtaken by authoritarianism, the Iranian people have found themselves caught in a cycle of protest and short-lived reform. The desire for democracy among Iranians, both in Iran and in the diaspora, is multifaceted and largely impacted by the forty-four-year reign of the Islamic regime in their country. The call for democracy among the Iranian people is rooted in their desire for the reinstatement of human rights, rule of law, and bodily autonomy, reflecting a staunch desire to live in a country that respects and protects its citizens.¹ However, before democracy can be accomplished, there must be a thorough examination of the various factors that have so far inhibited Iran's democratic aspirations. Above all else, there must be an examination into the question of why Iran has been unable to democratize.

As the global political landscape begins to see widespread democratic backsliding, many theorists have begun to study the world's former democratic strongholds and attempt to determine the cause of such decline. However, there is limited study on the states that never democratized in the first place, despite both internal and external pressure to do so. Iran is one of about thirty countries with the lowest democracy ratings in the world, and since 1979, it has been encapsulated in an Islamic regime that shows minimal signs of being overthrown in the

1 "Opinion Survey Reveals Overwhelming Majority Rejecting Iran's Regime," *Iran International*, February 4, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302036145>.

near future.² This paper will explore the potential economic, cultural and political explanations for the democracy deficit that exists in Iran.

Following the eruption of protests in 2022 during the height of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, many scholars began to question why Iran has been unable to democratize.³ Some research has taken place regarding the democracy deficit in Iran, yet minimal traction has been made in finding a solution to Iran's current crisis. Therefore, studying the modern explanations as to why Iran has failed to democratize will offer us a better understanding of how the Iranian people, and more specifically the opposition to the Islamic regime, can instill a democratic government within Iran.

The study of democratization efforts in Iran, or the lack thereof, can offer key insights into the global discussion surrounding democratization and democratic backsliding across the world. Alongside this, the examination of this research question can aid the study of Middle Eastern democracy efforts as a whole, leading to well-founded debate surrounding the crisis that can hopefully motivate both an international and regional push for democratization.⁴

This paper will examine the modern challenges to democratization in Iran, with a primary focus on two pivotal events: the 2009 Green Revolution and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom Movement. Both the 2009 and 2022 pro-democratic movements in Iran signaled a public outcry for regime change in Iran, illustrating that the Iranian people were tired of lackluster political reforms and instead seeking full-fledged political revolution. Despite countless waves of public uprising and aspirations for democratic governance, since its inception as a potential democracy following the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, Iran has been unable to incite political reform that could catalyze democracy in the country. Through a comparative analysis of these two pro-democracy movements, this paper seeks to question the modern-day explanations for Iran's inability to democratize.

A. Outline

Although the global democratic decline is undoubtedly a pressing issue for the international community to address, it is equally vital to investigate why certain countries, like Iran, have never hosted a successful democracy to begin with. In the last century, Iran has lived through four key historical moments that had the potential for democratization efforts to take root: the tenure of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh from 1951–1953, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Green Revolution of 2009, and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement. When discussing the question of why Iran has thus far failed to democratize, the 2009 Green Revolution and 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement offer vital case studies to address how Iran's current political, social, and economic makeup has inhibited democratization so far. This is due to both of their roles in what we call the "new age of globalization."⁵ Encapsulated by the insurgence of social media activism, both pro-democracy movements in 2009 and 2022 signaled a newfound call for widespread political revolution in Iran.

This study will serve to highlight the theories that best explain the modern democracy crisis in Iran, as well as what actions can be remedied in order to catalyze democratic aspirations in the country. Economic, socio-cultural, and political explanations of this research question will be explored, with the political explanation proving to be the most convincing in the context of the modern fight for democracy in Iran. Ultimately, this paper will investigate Iran's contentious path to potential democracy, in an attempt to shed light on a society of Iranian citizens whose democratic aspirations can be heard all around the world.

2 Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh, "Forget the Bomb and Help Iranians Fight Their Regime," *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/iran-republic-dissent-us-relations-hamas/675729/>.

3 Shay Khatiri, "Iranians Want Democracy. Who Are We to Say No?," *The Bulwark*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/iranians-want-democracy-who-are-we-to-say-no-protests-hijab>.

4 D. Robert Kaplan, "A Democratic Iran Is Coming and It Will Lead the Middle East," Center for New American Studies, December 16, 2022. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/a-democratic-iran-is-coming-and-it-will-lead-the-middle-east>.

5 Bayat Asef, "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/is-iran-on-the-verge-of-another-revolution/>.

II. Historical attempts to democratize

A. The nationalization of Iranian oil and 1953 coup d'état

As neo-colonialism began to rise following a brief period of decolonization in Africa and Asia, Iran found itself under British economic control. Since the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) linked the United Kingdom to Iran's economy through modern imperialism, Iran found itself under an unofficial mandate of the United Kingdom. The Iranian people remained vastly unhappy with the economic conditions and lack of autonomy under British economic rule, and thus awaited a miracle. A miracle would soon emerge in the form of an eccentric Prime Minister by the name of Mohammed Mossadegh.

When Reza Shah was exiled by the British in 1941, his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was made the new Shah. The scope of power of the Shah and his Prime Minister depended entirely on the ruling style of the Shah. Shah Reza Pahlavi took a more independent role in the operations of the state, thus allowing Prime Minister Mossadegh more jurisdiction over the country's state of affairs. Emerging among the Iranian people's calls for a leader dedicated to nationalizing Iranian oil, Mossadegh quickly became a national hero.

Motivated by the struggling Shah and an Iranian economy that was crumbling without the AIOC's partnership, the MI6 began recruiting to their cause against Mossadegh, who was quickly gaining too much popularity and threatening the Western-favored Shah's stronghold in the country. Named Operation TPAJAX by the United States' CIA and Operation Boot by the United Kingdom's MI6, the coup in Iran came to a head in August of 1953. By August 19th, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and most of his officials were ousted from power, and at risk of execution by the Shah's regime. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi returned from exile while Mohammed Mossadegh lived in house arrest until his death in 1967. With the death of Prime Minister Mossadegh, any pathway for democracy in Iran was virtually destroyed.

B. The 1979 Iranian Revolution

The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a seismic shift in not only the political, economic, and social culture of Iran, but also in the regional structure of the larger Middle East. Spurred by rising dissatisfaction with Shah Reza Pahlavi's rule of Iran, the Iranian Revolution marked a period of mass protests that ultimately resulted in the return of theocracy in Iran. The frontman of the Revolution was exiled Islamic cleric, Ruhollah Khomeini. In January of 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in Iraq and immediately began his plan to take control of the government. He initiated a dual system of government where "secular liberals" would work alongside the Revolutionary Council to lead Iran until a permanent leader could be decided.⁶

On March 30th and 31st, a referendum was held where the people of Iran were asked if they supported the newly founded Islamic Republic, led by Khomeini and his compatriots. According to "official reports," of which no records can be found, the Islamic Republic reported that 98.2% of Iranians voted in favor of the Islamic Republic becoming the primary government of Iran.⁷ As a result of this referendum, the Islamic Republic began its rule in Iran, where it remains in power today. Khomeini soon after cited *velayat-e faqih* or the guardianship of the Islamic Jurist as the dominating law of the land. The new Constitution prioritized *velayat-e faqih* as the doctrine necessary to return Iran back to proper Islamic guidance, with Khomeini named Supreme Leader of Iran.

Critics like Hojjati Kermani argued that "in today's complex world, a religious leader does not possess the requisite knowledge to lead the people"; however, the Iranian people were too disillusioned by the shortcomings of the Shah's regime to put their trust into anything other than their faith.⁸ Khomeini was successful in capitalizing off of the vulnerability of the Iranian people and preying on their devotion to Islam in a manner that assured him and the Islamic Republic absolute power in Iran. Today, the Islamic Republic remains one of the most brutal

6 Neil Shevlin, "Velayat-E Faqih in the Constitution of Iran: The Implementation of Theocracy," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, no. 2 (1998), <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jcl/vol1/iss2/7>.

7 Zein Basravi, "Iran's Referendum and the Transformation to the Islamic Republic," *Al Jazeera*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/3/30/irans-referendum-and-the-transformation-to-the-islamic-republic>.

8 Shevlin, "Velayat-E Faqih."

dictatorships in the Middle East, and arguably the world. Although disapproval ratings for current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his regime have risen to as high as 80%, the Islamic Republic still retains its authoritarian stronghold in Iran, and prevents any semblance of democracy from taking force in the country.⁹

C. The 2009 Green Revolution

The year 2009 marked thirty years of the Islamic Republic. The majority of Iranian citizens felt disenfranchised by the regime, and watched longingly as democracies emerged in countries within South and Southeast Asia. As such, the 2009 presidential election signaled an opportunity for change. The two candidates, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, stood on opposite sides of the political podium. Ahmadinejad was the incumbent President marred by low approval ratings and a controversial presidential term, while Mousavi was a former Prime Minister whose campaign had caused a “green revolution” across the streets of Tehran.¹⁰ Going into the election, the average Iranian was hopeful for a Mousavi victory, for it constituted a higher likelihood for widespread political, economic, and social reforms.

Voter turnout on election day reached as high as 85.21%, showcasing the Iranian people’s urgency to see their voices heard in this election cycle. When announcements were officially made that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the election, Iranians immediately took to the streets in protest of alleged “electoral corruption.” It was officially reported that 63.1% of votes went to Ahmadinejad while only 34.2% went to Mousavi, yet Iranian protestors rejected these numbers.¹¹ Thus began the Green Revolution, where millions of Iranians in Tehran and other major cities across the country took to the streets in protest of the electoral fraud they deemed occurred in the 2009 presidential election.

These protests constituted the first time that a mass pro-democracy protest in Iran was to occur in the new digital era. Thus, the Green Revolution was heavily fueled by the newfound eruption of social media, as Iranians in Iran and in the diaspora took to social media to express their frustrations and urge the international community to take part in their demands for change. Therefore, when twenty-six-year-old Iranian woman, Neda Agha-Soltan was shot and killed by a Basij (Revolutionary Guard) officer in broad daylight, a new rallying cry was formed for Iranian protestors. Going forward, protestors were no longer calling for the recount of votes, they were instead calling for the end of the brutal dictatorship of the Islamic regime in Iran.

The murder of Neda Agha-Soltan was captured on video and shared across the internet for billions of people to see. As such, the Green Revolution morphed from a domestic call for fair elections to an international call for the dismantling of the regime. “Where is my vote?” emerged as the rallying slogan of the Green Movement, as the Iranian youth began voicing the regime’s loss of legitimacy. Social media was an integral factor that bolstered these protests, and the framework established by the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran set the foundation for the upcoming Arab Spring of 2011.¹² Similar to the Arab Spring, the Green Movement signified a new era of awareness regarding the “difference between a legitimate democratic vote-counting system and a system where elections are used merely to legitimize and mobilize tools of the establishment.”¹³ As a result of the Green Movement, the international community could no longer claim that Iranian citizens were against regime change, or against democracy for that. Although the Green Revolution did not elicit any long term change in Iran, it is a foundational moment in Iranian history that symbolizes the Iranian people’s long-withstanding democratic aspirations for their country.

9 Iran International Newsroom, “Opinion Survey Reveals.”

10 Charlie Szrom, “Mousavi vs Ahmadinejad: Examining Iran’s First Major Presidential Debate,” *Critical Threats*, June 9, 2009, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/mousavi-vs-ahmadinejad-examining-irans-first-major-presidential-debate>.

11 “2009 Presidential Election,” Iran Data Portal, 2009, <https://irandatportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>.

12 Somayeh Moghanizadeh, “The Role of Social Media in Iran’s Green Movement” (Thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2013), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/16337467.pdf>.

13 Mehrangiz Kar, “Democracy after the Green Movement,” in *Politics & Culture in Contemporary Iran: Challenging the Status Quo*, ed. Abbas Milani and Larry Diamond (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015).

D. The 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement

On September 16th, 2022, twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa “Zhina” Amini was murdered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) “morality police” for improper wear of her hijab. By the time news broke on social media, the people of Iran had already taken to the streets en masse to protest against the Islamic regime’s brutal suppression of Iranians, similarly to how they had done in 2009 during the Green Revolution.¹⁴ The regime was less forgiving than in 2009, and immediately began the mass incarceration and murder of thousands of protestors. It is currently estimated that over five hundred have been killed and over twenty thousand have been arrested as a result of the 2022 protests.¹⁵ The protests were quickly named the *zan, zendegi, azadi* (زن، زندگی، آزادی) or “Women, Life, Freedom” protests, in order to honor the front-running role of Iranian women in the fight for Iranian freedom. Considering the fact that in both 2009 and 2022 it was the martyrization of an Iranian woman that catalyzed the protests, it would be remiss to ignore the primary role Iranian women play in the fight for democracy in Iran.

Although the 2009 Green Revolution was also influenced by the emergence of social media as a means of political activism, the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement took this phenomenon to new levels. The Iranian diaspora, in particular, took to the streets in their respective countries of residence to show their support for the democratic movement in Iran. The international attention garnered by the movement even captured the attention of US lawmakers, as Congress adopted the MAHSA act, which sought to denounce the murder of Mahsa “Zhina” Amini and impose visa-blocking sanctions on certain foreign individuals living outside of Iran yet associated with the Islamic regime.¹⁶

The Women, Life, Freedom movement catalyzed conversations regarding Iran’s sustainability for democratic governance. As a result, conversations began among members of the diaspora regarding who could serve as viable democratic opposition to the Islamic regime, and more importantly, which individual could serve as a potential first leader of a democratic Iran. Out of these conversations emerged a coalition of Iranian activists living in the West, who first gained popularity after speaking at an event hosted by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security.¹⁷ The members of this coalition are former Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, women’s rights activist Masih Alinejad, widow and advocate Hamed Esmaeilion, Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, head of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan Abdullah Mohtadi, former soccer player Ali Karimi, and actresses and activists Nazanin Boniadi and Golshifteh Farahani. Despite its potential, the coalition has been largely unsuccessful in eliciting any real change in regards to the potential for democracy in Iran.¹⁸ Two years after the movement, Iran unfortunately remains stagnant in its quest for democracy, and will remain as such until a thorough examination of why Iran has been unable to democratize takes place.

III. Economic argument against democratization in Iran

A. Lack of economic development

Following the onset of the third wave of democracy, political scientists began to question the conditions inherent in or orchestrated for budding democracies around the world. In Seymour Martin Lipset’s 1959 article titled “Some Social Requisites of Democracy,” Lipset outlined the theory that economic growth and development is a

14 Fariba Parsa, “Mahsa Amini’s Legacy: A New Movement for Iranian Women,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/09/mahsa-aminis-legacy-a-new-movement-for-iranian-women?lang=en>.

15 “Iran: Repression Continues Two Years after Nationwide Protests,” *UN News*, United Nations, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147681>.

16 “H.R.589 - MAHSA Act,” Library of Congress, January 27, 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/589>.

17 Arash Azizi, “After a Failed Coalition Effort, Where Is the Iranian Opposition Headed?,” *IranSource*, Atlantic Council, May 10, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-a-failed-coalition-effort-where-is-the-iranian-opposition-headed/>.

18 Azizi, “After a Failed Coalition Effort.”

prerequisite for democracy.¹⁹ For decades, this theory dominated the international arena, with the argument made that a country lacking in economic development could not have potential to democratize.

Despite the foundational argument made by Lipset, in 2010, Larry Diamond proposed the question of why Arab countries, most of which entertain high per capita monetary income from oil revenue, have been unable to democratize. In his article “Why Are There No Arab Democracies,” Diamond argues that oil-rich countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran appear more economically developed than they actually are, and that it is the lacking economic structure of Middle Eastern countries that prevents them from enjoying the parallel relationship between economic development and democratization.²⁰

Diamond goes on to advance his argument by presenting the theory that it is actually these Middle Eastern countries’ reliance on oil rents that prevents them from enjoying the “organic expectations of accountability that emerge when states make citizens pay taxes.”²¹ In doing so, Diamond clarifies that the economic argument for the democracy deficit in the Middle East is a structural one, and focuses on the manner in which oil distorts the political and economic structure of these countries so as to prevent democratization. Alongside Diamond, Hossein Mahdavy outlines this theory in his essay titled “The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran,” by observing that rentier states have the ability to expand their territory and finance their projects without civilian taxation.²² As such, rentier states have the ability to “enjoy independence from their citizens” and therefore are able to avoid the expectations that come from taxation and representation.²³ This suppression of the demand for democracy by means of the liberation of state taxation in place of mineral and resource wealth is largely referred to by scholars as the rentier effect.

In Iran, crude oil production has been an integral aspect of the economy since oil was discovered in the country in 1908. The neo-colonial strategies operated by the British-led Anglo-Iranian Oil Company affirmed Iran’s reliance on oil in order to bolster its economy and maintain its political position in the Middle East. Since the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1953 under Prime Minister Mossadegh, Iran has capitalized off of its role as a key oil-producer for the international arena. Although competition from neighboring states threatens Iran’s edge, Iran’s oil rents have allowed the Islamic regime to retain its place in the international community and continue its onslaught of human rights grievances with minimal accountability from the world’s strongest democracies and democratic institutions.

Despite Iran’s dominant place in its regional neighborhood, its reputation among its own citizens is less than favorable. The reality of the matter is that Iran failed to engage in what could have been transformative industrialization, leaving the Iranian economy reliant on oil as a single commodity. As a result of this, Iran’s real capita GDP has plummeted from \$13,329 in 1976, pre-Islamic Revolution, to \$9,421 in 2009 during the onset of the 2009 elections and subsequent Green Movement.²⁴ As such, the worsening economic conditions that Iranian citizens face has destroyed the people’s confidence in the regime’s ability to follow through on their promises, thus inciting calls for regime change, and even further, democracy.²⁵

Stanford’s Iran 2040 project highlights Iran’s rising crude oil production, noting that although Iran remains one of the more economically diverse countries in the Middle East, “oil revenue still constitutes approximately 30% of the government revenues and more than 20% of the real gross value added.”²⁶ To put this in comparison,

19 Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>.

20 Larry Diamond, “Why Are There No Arab Democracies?,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/why-are-there-no-arab-democracies/>.

21 Diamond, “Why Are There No Arab Democracies?”

22 Hossein Mahdavy, *The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

23 Benjamin Smith and David Waldner, *Rethinking the Resource Curse* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

24 Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

25 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*.

26 Pooya Azadi et al., “The Future of Iran’s Oil and Its Economic Implications,” Stanford Iran 2040 Project, Stanford University, October, 2016, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1et3G2-kIAoq9Rd_d9ZRNcmnMa0HMyO2P/view.

the United States oil revenue only makes up about 8% of total government revenues.²⁷ When utilizing Diamond's argument, it remains true that Iran's economic structure, namely its reliance on oil rents, provides a deterrent for democratization in the country. As exemplified by the 2011 Arab Spring, it is equally true that citizens who are dissatisfied with national economic conditions will revolt. Considering that Iran ranks 78th for human development with an average index of 0.781, it is untrue that Iran's oil-rich economy is synonymous with proper economic conditions for its citizens. Ultimately, it is true that Iran's lack of economic development, outside of its oil economy, is partially responsible for its lack of democracy, yet it does not provide an all-encompassing explanation for why Iran has been unable to democratize thus far.

The primary question that comes into play when considering Iran's lack of economic development resulting from the rentier effect as a deterrent for democratization is how countries with far lower GDPs than Iran have democratized successfully. Beginning with Lipset and his argument that economic growth and development is required for democracy to take root, the common assumption among political scientists and economics scholars has been that high levels of economic growth catalyzes democratic governance.²⁸ However, this theory has more recently been challenged by economists like Daron Acemoglu who argue that "countries switching to democratic rule experience a 20% increase in GDP over a twenty-five-year period, compared to what would have happened had they remained authoritarian states."²⁹ It is argued that this GDP increase is bolstered by increasing investment, schooling, and economic reforms while reducing social unrest.³⁰ In essence, Acemoglu is arguing that it is actually democracy that fosters economic growth, not economic growth that fosters democracy.

Acemoglu's argument clearly comes into play when considering countries like Indonesia and Senegal in comparison to Iran. Indonesia, which democratized in 1998, quickly experienced rapid economic growth following the eruption of democracy, and more specifically, fair elections. Indonesia's GDP went from \$95.45 billion in 1998 to \$165 billion in 2000 just two years after ousting Indonesian President Suharto, which many scholars feel is a result of the country's rapid democratization.³¹ In addition to Indonesia, Senegal currently boasts a "partly free" ranking of 67/100 on Freedom House's Democracy Index, yet reported a GDP of only \$27.68 billion in 2022. Iran, whose GDP was noted as \$413.5 billion in 2022, clearly shows a much higher rate of economic development than Senegal, yet is nowhere near as highly ranked by the Freedom House Democracy Index. Ultimately, if the argument is that countries with high economic growth, and as such, high GDPs, have a higher likelihood to democratize, then Iran complicates this theory. Using Indonesia and Senegal as examples, it is clear that although "democracy can produce generally favorable results for economic development," it is not always true that economic development is a prerequisite for democracy, as formally theorized by Lipset.³² Iran's projected GDP for the year 2024 is currently set at \$464.18 billion, almost five times higher than Indonesia's GDP when it began the path to democracy and almost thirteen times higher than Senegal's projected GDP for 2024. As such, the argument that lacking economic development is the primary cause for Iran's absence of democracy is insufficient.

If economic growth was the sole prerequisite for democracy in any given country, then Iran would have democratized decades ago. However, this is not the reality. It is ultimately true that rentier states, especially those in the Middle East, have proven disadvantages to democracy as a result of their reliance on the oil economy and lack of taxation. However, it is in no way the sole or leading cause for the lack of democracy in the region nor in Iran.

27 "Oil and Natural Gas: Supporting the Economy, Creating Jobs, Driving America Forward," American Petroleum Institute, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/api-082021.pdf>.

28 Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy."

29 Peter Dizikes, "Study: Democracy Fosters Economic Growth," *MIT News*, March 7, 2019, <https://news.mit.edu/2019/study-democracy-fosters-economic-growth-acemoglu-0307>.

30 Daron Acemoglu et al., "Democracy Does Cause Growth," *Journal of Political Economy* 127, no. 1 (2019), <https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Democracy%20Does%20Cause%20Growth.pdf>.

31 Dan Slater, "What Indonesian Democracy Can Teach The World." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0006>.

32 Slater, "What Indonesian Democracy Can Teach The World."

IV. Cultural argument against democratization in Iran

A. Islam as incompatible with democracy

Twenty-one years ago, when asked about the compatibility between Islam and democracy, former UN ambassador to the US Jeane Kirkpatrick responded: “The Arab world is the only part of the world where I’ve been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions.”³³ Illustrated in Kirkpatrick’s statement is the reality of orientalism present in the modern argument against Islam and democracy. The idea that the Arab World is incapable of forming “rational decisions” solely because democracy has failed to prosper in the region highlights the West’s lacking perception of why there is a democracy deficit in the Middle East.

The advent of the term “Orientalism” came at a harrowing time in the fight for global democratization. In 1978, Cold War politics began to diffuse and Western liberalism began to gain more traction around the world. As a defeat of Soviet-Communism approached in the next decade, the American government sought to promote democratic interests farther than they ever had before. Despite this, the late 1970s also marked a turning point in the potential for democracy in the Middle East. As the onset of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, 1979 signaled not only the beginning of the end of Iranian democracy prospects, but also the introduction of a potential explanation for the challenges surrounding East-West relations thus far. The concept of “Orientalism,” popularized by Edward Said, is a construction of the Orient (otherwise known as the East), that seeks to dehumanize and demoralize the region against a more advanced and deserving West.³⁴ Founded as a Western ideal, the concept of democracy is inherently Orientalist, for it disregards the complex political and socio-cultural makeups of the non-Western states the world has historically pushed to democratize.³⁵

The problem is that a push for democratization that fails to acknowledge the unique foundations of a given territory is an effort that is bound for failure. This is illustrated by the democracy deficit rampant in the Middle East. For the past few decades, Western superpowers like the United States and United Kingdom have tried and failed to bolster democracy in the Middle East. This is in part due to their failure to first understand the difference in economy, culture, and political structure present in the Middle East that makes the region less prone to democratization than other regions. Democracy is not one size fits all. As such, the Western push for democracy in the Middle East should prioritize creating a lasting political structure that can bolster freedom and stability while still acknowledging the unique challenges such a transition might take.

Most notably, there remains an assumption that the primary reason for the deficit of democracy and abundance of autocracy in the Middle East lies in the Islamic faith and culture prominent within Middle Eastern societies. Some theorists argue that it is the theory of despotism common in Islamic teachings that accounts for the lack of democracy in Middle Eastern countries. However, this theory does not account for why Iran, a state that is now an Islamic theocracy but was once an absolute monarchy, is any different from a country such as the United Kingdom in its potential for democratization.

Although the opinion of some Western scholars takes an Orientalist approach that Islam is incompatible with democracy and therefore cannot be democratic, there are Muslim scholars who advocate for the opposite. Aziza Al-Hibri, for one, argues that “democracy and Islam are not only compatible, but indeed that democratization in Muslim states can “enhance” the rule of Islamic law.” It is rather the perversion of the Islamic faith that makes way for the promotion of authoritarianism and destruction of democratic potential. Ultimately, it is vital to note that the study of democracy is not inherently designed to serve non-Western entities, and as such, any study of democratization or democratic backsliding must first take a moment to acknowledge their own shortcomings. In order to circumvent this crisis, it is vital to refrain from boxing potential Middle Eastern democracies into the same standards as Western societies who were founded on different principles under different conditions.

33 Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

34 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978).

35 Yahya Sadowski, “The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate,” *Middle East Report*, no. 183 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012572>.

Iran, as a majority Muslim country, has never democratized. Although Middle Eastern countries like Egypt and Tunisia, and Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Senegal have democratized, none stand as shining examples of democratic transitions that can serve as a catalyst for regime change in the Middle East.³⁶ Although it would be remiss to simplify the struggle for democratization in the Middle East to solely blame Islam, there is some merit to the difficulties Muslim countries face when democratizing. For one, it is important to note that “the process of democratization cannot be separated from the debate on political secularization.” As such, Muslim democracies must adapt democracy to best suit the teachings of the Quran.³⁷ This becomes difficult when the issue of interpretation is considered.

It is easy for authoritarian leaders, especially those who hold high positions of power in the Muslim community, to pervert Islam to best suit their political agendas. The most notable example of this can be seen with Iran’s Ruhollah Khomeini and his *velayat-e faqih* (ولایت فقیه). Based on the Quranic verse: “O you believers, obey God, obey the prophet and obey those in charge among you,” *velayat-e faqih* allows Iran’s Islamist Jurists absolute power over all public affairs.³⁸ Khomeini’s version of Islam is surely incompatible with democracy, but that is not to say that Islam itself is inherently toxic for an emerging democracy. Alongside the issue of interpretation is the issue of attitude. It is a commonly held belief that Muslims or citizens of Muslim countries have negative attitudes towards democracy, either as a result of indoctrination or as a result of its Western origins. In his book, “Are Muslims Distinctive,” Steven Fish discusses the fact that “it is possible that many [Muslims] do regard democracy as a Western invention and, in their own lands, a foreign import. If many do hold such a view, they might be less likely than non-Muslims to hold democracy in high esteem.”³⁹ It is impossible to refute the fact that anti-Western attitudes exist in the Middle East, and more specifically, in Iran. It is also impossible to refute that such attitudes have the ability to sour Muslim citizens’ perception of democracy. However, it is not the case for the large majority of Muslims or non-practicing citizens of Iran, and therefore cannot be attributed as the primary cause for the lack of democracy in Iran. When testing Muslim attitudes toward democracy, Fish found that “living in a country with a large Muslim population does not have any discernible statistically significant effect on one’s support for democracy.”⁴⁰ The same can be said for Iran, especially when considering the fact that Iran International reported in 2022, after the onset of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, that “88% of the population favor[ed] a democratic political system while 67% of the population [were] against having a system governed by religious law.”⁴¹ Ultimately, it is overwhelmingly clear that there are structural burdens in the way of Muslim democracies, however, there is no causal link to be identified between a characteristic of Islam and a propellant for democratization.⁴²

Although Muslim democracies, like those found in Indonesia and Senegal, have fluctuated in their stability, the fact still remains that Muslim democracies have existed, and thus, have the capability to exist. It is once again an Orientalist assumption to equate the entire religion of Islam to the decline of democracy in the Middle East. Ultimately, it is true that democracy is scarce in the Middle East and thus far non-existent in Iran. However, it is untrue that there is any certain characteristic inherent within the Islamic faith that makes Muslim majority countries incapable of democracy. Islam itself is not anti-democratic. Rather, it is the distortion of Islam in the pursuit of corrupt political agendas, like that seen in the Islamic regime, that has thus far inhibited democracy in Iran, and in the larger Middle East.

36 Steven M. Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive?: A Look at the Evidence* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

37 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*.

38 Shevlin, “Velayat-E Faqih.”

39 Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive?*

40 Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive?*

41 Maryam Sinaiee, “Over 60% Of Iranians Want Transition From Islamic Republic,” *Iran International*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202204015794>.

42 Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive?*

V. Political argument against democratization in Iran

A. Lack of high dominance democratic leadership

High dominance democratic leadership is a theory that constitutes a democrat's dominant leadership style as a protection against democratic backsliding. As referenced by Steven Fish in his 2024 book titled *Comeback: Routing Trumpism, Reclaiming the Nation, and Restoring Democracy's Edge*, "high dominance leadership is reality-shaping and conflict-embracing, and it favors the language of the aggressor, the righteous, and the triumphant."⁴³ What constitutes a high dominance democratic leader varies case by case, but some common characteristics include demeanor, decision-making, and international reputation. The theory of high dominance leadership is normally attributed to authoritarian leaders, yet in recent years, there's been a burst of high dominance democratic leaders who have paved the way for the protection of democratic strongholds. As democratic backsliding grows more rampant, the existence of high dominance democratic leaders provides a necessary competitor to high dominance authoritarian leaders. Rather than adopt the traditional liberal attributes of patience, fairness, and progressiveness, international leaders who fight for democracy as staunchly as autocrats fight against it have proven to be the most impactful.

The Middle East is no stranger to high dominance leadership. The emphasis of despotism in Islamic teachings allows for the prevalence of political leaders who seek absolute power in their governments. Whether this be dictators, monarchs, or presidents, the high dominance leader has evolved with the changing needs of the region. In Iran, three political leaders stand out as high dominance political leaders, with only one being a high dominance democratic leader. These three are Reza Shah, Mohammed Mossadegh, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Both Reza Shah Pahlavi and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini acted as high dominance political leaders with authoritarian tendencies. Reza Shah channeled his desire for despotism into an absolute monarchy that overthrew the Qajar dynasty, while Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini channeled his desire for despotism into the formation of an Islamic Republic to replace the Pahlavi dynasty. In contrast to both these figures, Mohammed Mossadegh serves as Iran's only high dominance democratic leader in the nation's modern history.⁴⁴ As a champion of the people and Prime Minister under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Mossadegh channeled his desire for lasting change in the country into concrete action and a hardened political reputation. The closest Iran has been to a budding democracy was found under the leadership of Mohammed Mossadegh, a high dominance democratic leader. Throughout the forty-four-year reign of the ruling Islamic regime, the Iranian people, both in the diaspora and in Iran, have hoped for a dominant democratic leader to emerge to no avail.

High dominance political leadership is considered by some theorists a vital condition for successful governance, whether democratic or dictatorial. Historically, Iran's authoritarian regime has had no issue presenting a brutal, yet strong political leader.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Iran's opposition to the regime has been unable to present either a unified base or a high-dominant democratic leader. Without a singular figure to serve as the potential president of the first democratic government of Iran, Iran is unlikely to achieve democracy. Theorists Asef Bayat and Ahmad Hashemi validate this argument, further emphasizing that Iranian opposition is not currently at a point where they can confidently organize an opposition to the regime. Despite this, Bayat remains optimistic when mentioning that although Iran is not at a point where a full-scale revolution seems likely, since 2017, Iran has been set on a "revolutionary course" that has the undeniable potential to adapt itself into a democratic revolution. All they need to catalyze such regime change is a high dominance democratic leader at the forefront of the movement. Bayat argues that the best chance at the aforementioned democratic revolution relies on the Women, Life, Freedom movement growing into a respectable political alternative to the incumbent Iranian regime.⁴⁶ In

43 M. Steven Fish and Laila M. Aghaie, *Comeback: Routing Trumpism, Reclaiming the Nation, and Restoring Democracy's Edge* (Rivertowns Books, 2024).

44 Roham Alvandi and Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The United States Overthrew Iran's Last Democratic Leader," *Foreign Policy*, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/30/the-united-states-overthrew-irans-last-democratic-leader/>.

45 Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf.

46 Asef, "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?"

contrast to Bayat, Hashemi emphasizes the need for the current opposition movement to first repair the flaws in its own political leadership before attempting to overthrow the current regime.⁴⁷ Hashemi exposes the current opposition movement for its “Persian chauvinism, political patriarchy, and Shiite fundamentalism,” and states that the pro-democracy movement in Iran must first represent the rights of all Iranians before they attempt to democratize. Despite their difference in opinion regarding what exactly the current opposition is failing at, both Bayat and Hashemi agree that the current democratic movement against the Islamic regime is not sufficient to bring forth democracy in Iran.

Today, Iran largely lacks a strong democratic opposition to the Islamic regime. Although there have been budding leaders to emerge in the aftermath of widespread protests like the 2009 Green Revolution and 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement, no clear leader of the opposition has been identified.⁴⁸ In addition to this, virtually all potential democratic leaders of Iran do not live in Iran, and have instead immigrated to the West out of fear of persecution and possible execution at the hands of the Islamic regime. Despite this, it is important to note that it is not impossible for a high dominance leader of the democratic opposition to emerge outside of Iran yet still bring forth democracy in Iran. Although the end result was a dictatorship rather than a democracy, Ayatollah Khomeini was after all successful in leading the Iranian Revolution and overthrow of the Shah despite his long-term exile in Iraq. Considering the wide-scale censorship and political repression present under the current Islamic regime in Iran, it is highly unlikely that a democratic leader of the opposition will emerge within the current political system in Iran, much less be able to catalyze a political movement without first being imprisoned or executed. Therefore, it is more important than ever for the democratic opposition that exists outside of Iran to begin mobilizing for regime change. The first step of this process must be the cultivation of a high dominance, democratic leader of the opposition against the Islamic regime.

An observation must be made on the brutal cycle citizens of authoritarian regimes find themselves encapsulated in: once authoritarianism takes charge, it is difficult for democracy to take root, and it is only through revolution that such a change can take place. Such a revolution has been attempted in two separate instances in the last two decades, once in the 2009 Green Revolution and again in the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement. In both instances, widespread civil unrest and opposition to the regime, although vastly impactful in the domestic and international struggle for democracy in Iran, have not resulted in any meaningful reforms or the dismantling of the regime. Ultimately, the lack of high dominance democratic leadership in both 2009 and 2022 has contributed to the failure for any semblance of democratization in the country.

B. The 2009 Green Revolution

2009 marked a distinct moment in Iranian history, not only as an election year but also as the onset of the Green Revolution. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was named President of Iran, despite complaints from citizens of irregularities at the polls. Although a formal complaint was made to the Guardian Council, no formal action was taken and Ahmadinejad took responsibility as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Four years later, a new election emerged as an opportunity for change in a country nearing economic ruin. Elections were held on June 12th, 2009, and by June 13th, 2009, and the Islamic Republic News Agency named Ahmadinejad as the continuing President of Iran.⁴⁹ Massive unrest erupted within the country, as Iranian citizens took to the streets to express their outrage at what they claimed to be fraudulent election results. Matters grew more serious when runner-up Mir-Hossein Mousavi made a public statement denouncing the election and calling Ahmadinejad’s government “illegitimate.”⁵⁰ The same day, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made a statement to the Iranian people calling the election a “divine assessment” and asking the citizens of Iran to stand behind Ahmadinejad and his government, who he

47 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*.

48 Arash Azizi, “Opposition Politics of the Iranian Diaspora: Out of Many, One - But Not Just Yet,” *Clingendael*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/opposition-politics-iranian-diaspora-out-many-one-not-just-yet>.

49 “Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran,” Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, August 12, 2021, <https://iranhrdc.org/living-in-the-shadows-of-oppression-the-situation-of-christian-converts-in-iran/>.

50 Ian Black, “Mir Hossein Mousavi Calls Iranian Government Illegitimate,” *The Guardian*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/01/mousavi-iran-presidential-elections-protest>.

claimed was selected by Allah.⁵¹ The utilization of faith as a tool for suppression is a common strategy operated by the Islamic regime, and particularly by Khamenei. However, in this instance, the attempt to bury any controversy surrounding the 2009 election results spearheaded a form of civil unrest unheard of since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Green Revolution marked the first instance since the Islamic Revolution that Iranian citizens attempted to regain control of their government and instill democracy in place of the regime. Despite this, it was ultimately the failure of the Green Movement to provide strong democratic leadership and consolidate into a “disruptive” coalition that allowed the Green Movement to succumb to just a moment.⁵²

C. The 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement

The year 2022 is the most recent instance of worldwide protest to the Islamic regime in Iran to date, as Iranians and non-Iranians alike stood in support of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Instigated by the murder of twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa “Zhina” Amini at the hands of the *gasht-e ershad* (گشت ارشاد), otherwise known as the morality police, Iranian society erupted into widespread protest. The morality police is a specialized police force established by former President Ahmadinejad, intended to monitor the behavior of Iranian citizens to ensure they act in accordance with the national laws. In reality, the morality police is primarily concerned with the maintenance of Iranian women’s dress, namely their hijab or head covering. There has been rampant disapproval for the overarching hijab mandate in Iran, as GAMAAN reports that over 72% citizens blatantly oppose the compulsory hijab.⁵³ The civil unrest that followed Zhina’s murder was therefore a long time coming. After months of protest, severe civilian crackdowns took place, as the Supreme Leader and President Raisi approved the imprisonment of thousands of citizens to Iran’s most notorious prisons. Following the 2022 protests, it has been reported that over 12,500 protesters were imprisoned at Evin Prison alone.⁵⁴ Despite this, spirits ran high among Iranian protests, both in Iran and in the diaspora; ultimately, protests did not fizzle out until much later in the movement. Upon realizing that his usual tactics of fear, intimidation, and unlawful imprisonment would do little to quell civil unrest, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei took a new approach. In a public statement to new graduates of the police academy, the Ayatollah proclaimed to the masses that “these riots and this insecurity were a design by the US and the occupying, fake Zionist regime [Israel] and those who are paid by them, and some traitorous Iranians abroad helped them.”⁵⁵ In this instance, the Supreme Leader attempted to capture the support of his audience by finding a common enemy to unite behind: in this case being the US and Israel. However, what the Ayatollah failed to realize is that the large majority of Iranian citizens had long ago united in their belief that their largest enemy is the regime, and he as the dominant leader of such an institution has excluded himself from their loyalties. With the majority of Iranian voters united against him as a common enemy, 2022 had the potential for true democratization efforts in Iran. Following such wide-scale international and domestic protests, the next step was to identify a clear leader of the democratic opposition: someone who could reignite the spark of revolution growing in Iran. The Iranian people, namely those who put their lives on the line to protest for the freedoms, were seeking a high dominance democratic leader to stand behind. Yet, one never emerged. It was ultimately the lack of a high dominance leader of the opposition to the regime that has allowed for the regime, and in turn Khamenei, to remain in power today and prevent democracy from taking root in Iran.

51 Muhammad Sahimi, “Mousavi’s Defying Statement to the Iranian Nation,” *Tehran Bureau, PBS*, June 21, 2009, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/06/mousavis-defying-statement-to-the-iranian-nation.html>.

52 Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*.

53 Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, “Iran Protests: Majority of People Reject Compulsory Hijab and an Islamic Regime, Surveys Find,” *The Conversation*, September 28, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/iran-protests-majority-of-people-reject-compulsory-hijab-and-an-islamic-regime-surveys-find-191448>.

54 Patrick Wintour, “Almost 12,500 People Arrested in Iran Protest Crackdown, Says Rights Group,” *The Guardian*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/21/arrests-iran-protest-crackdown-plaint-thousands-in-jail>.

55 Maziar Motamedi, “Iran’s Khamenei Blames Israel, US in First Comments on Protests,” *Al Jazeera*, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/3/irans-khamenei-blames-israel-us-in-first-comments-on-protests>.

D. The opposition to the Islamic Regime

The leading democratic opposition group to the Islamic regime in Iran grew out of the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement when a coalition of Iranian expatriates joined forces to shed light on the humanitarian crisis in Iran, and used the momentous opportunity to advocate for an international call for democracy in Iran. It is important to note the difficulty for democratic opposition groups to form within Iran, which is why the only semblances of a coalition have been found in the United States and other Western states to which Iranians have immigrated en masse. Attempts at forming opposition groups within Iran have been unorganized and uncoordinated, as leaders of the opposition focus too heavily on reforming the current system rather than demanding regime change. Beyond this, it is equally difficult for opposition groups to emerge when considering the fact that “without an independent judicial system, opposition groups cannot state their goals and plans in public without censorship.”⁵⁶ In a strategic move designed to protect the regime from infiltration by any form of opposition, the Islamic regime has made Iran inhospitable to democracy; that is, unless a coordinated effort is made by a coalition of individuals united under a common goal (freedom and democracy) and a high dominance democratic leader.

The current coalition best suited to represent the Iranian democratic opposition, though never formalized, was composed of Reza Pahlavi, Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmailion, Shirin Ebadi, Abdullah Mohtadi, Ali Karimi, Nazanin Boniadi and Golshifteh Farahani. During a panel at Georgetown University, the eight-member coalition announced their intentions to overthrow the Islamic regime in Iran, though no formal plan was mentioned.⁵⁷ Although the 2022 movement served as an integral moment for the potential democratization of Iran, the lack of structural organization in the democratic opposition, as well as their failure to present a clear leader of the group is what ultimately led to their downfall.

Although the coalition never formally elected a leader, the political status of former Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi allowed him to operate with a certain level of leadership that a portion of the Iranian diaspora was quick to accept and welcome. However, Reza Pahlavi has not proven to be a strong candidate for the future democratic leader of a free Iran, for he does not fit the mold of what a high dominance, democratic leader can and should be. The Shah’s reign was a highly decisive time in Iranian history, and the Iranian people are greatly divided on their opinion regarding the former Crown Prince. The future leader of the democratic opposition, as well as the potential leader of a free Iran, cannot be politically controversial before they have even entered office. It is much too unstable of a foundation to set. As such, the current democratic opposition to the Islamic regime, or what is left of it, does not currently boast an adequate leader. This is their largest failure. Now almost two years later, the democratic opposition group of exiled Iranian activists is fractured and without any tangible actions to support their promises for a free Iran.

Since the Iranian Revolution, multiple alternate opposition groups have emerged, the most notable being the MEK, or People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran, as well as countless ethnic groups composed of Kurdish, Azeri, and Baluch opponents to the regime. One common characteristic unites all opposition groups to the Islamic regime: their lack of coordination with one another.⁵⁸ Rather than having various, fractured opposition groups who lack the coordination necessary to take on the Islamic Regime, it would be more beneficial for said opposition groups to find common ground that may allow them to rally together. Said coordination could be facilitated by a high dominance democratic leader that stood for the wellbeing of each opposition group, but internal polarization and deficient organizational structure have prevented such a figure from emerging. Rather than standing behind one united front, opposition groups to the regime instead target each other, and in doing so, they promote the stability and legitimacy of the Islamic regime in Iran. It is difficult for the Iranian people to maintain hope for any semblance of democracy in Iran without a clear leader of the opposition presented to them. A high dominance democratic leader could be the catalyst for regime change in Iran, but so long as the democratic opposition to the regime prioritizes ego over action, there is seldom a chance for democracy to take root in Iran.

56 Kar, “Democracy after the Green Movement.”

57 Ali Alfoneh, “The Iranian Opposition Abroad: Lack of Unity Limits Prospects,” The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 9, 2023, <https://agsiw.org/the-iranian-opposition-abroad-lack-of-unity-limits-prospects/>.

58 Ata Hoodashtian, “The Fractured Opposition to the Islamic Regime,” *Fikra Forum*, The Washington Institute, February 7, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fractured-opposition-islamic-regime>.

E. Comparison case study: Brazil and President Lula

When comparing democratic governments and authoritarian regimes, the primary difference is found in the balance of power. While democrats gain power through the support of their constituents, autocrats take power by any means necessary. In order to fight against democratic backsliding and instate democracy in countries who lack it, there must be an adoption of certain qualities of high dominance democratic leadership among proponents of democracy. There is seldom a better example of a high dominance democratic leader than President Lula of Brazil. Tasked with leading a country riddled with socio-economic inequities, high crime rates, and widespread corruption under former President Bolsonaro, Lula emerged as a beacon of social justice and positive development. During his presidency, Brazilians took inspiration from the January 6th coup in the United States as members of the far-right attempted to instate a coup to overthrow President Lula. The strategy of high dominance democratic leadership shined during this crisis, as Lula swiftly squashed the insurrection and installed a federal state of emergency in order to promptly address the rioters. In addition to this, “Lula said that his government would prosecute anyone who had attacked Brazil’s democracy.”⁵⁹

The strategy operated here by President Lula is eerily similar to the actions of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran. However, where Khamenei utilizes a dominant leadership style in order to quell his opposition and elicit absolute rule in his regime, Lula utilizes a dominant leadership style in order to protect Brazil’s democratic governance from authoritarian challengers. It was ultimately Lula’s similarity to Bolsonaro in strength and conviction that allowed him to challenge him during a presidential election, and ultimately win. In order for Iran to formalize its democratic opposition to the region, a leader like-minded to President Lula of Brazil should emerge as leader of the opposition. Until then, it is unlikely that any semblance of democracy will take root in Iran, without a clear leader capable of encompassing the same dominance as the Supreme Leader, or in contrast, President Lula.

F. Patterns of repression

The 2011 Arab Spring marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Middle East. For the first time in centuries, revolution was accomplished rather than reform. Dictators like Mubarak, Gaddafi, and Ben Ali fled their respective oases, while the youth of the Middle East demanded the emergence of democracy in their countries. Like in 2009 and 2022 Iran, 2011 marked a period of hope for the Arab world. It was common for political scientists to theorize that this was the moment for democracy in the Middle East. Despite outstanding expectations, democracy still remains scarce in the region.

In her 2020 book titled “After Repression,” Elizabeth Nugent argues that it is the patterns of repression present under an authoritarian regime that set the standard for political behavior during a democratic transition. Nugent utilizes Egypt and Tunisia as case-studies in her argument to showcase how widespread vs. targeted repression can influence the rate of polarization present in a country during a democratic transition, and thus explain its success or failure to democratize.⁶⁰ As exemplified by political theorist Hannah Arendt, repression is utilized as a means to destabilize and demobilize an entire society, so as to allow a totalitarian regime indefinite control.⁶¹ As seen in the case of Middle Eastern countries, modes of repression are conjoined with the perversion of Islam in order to dehumanize opponents of the regime in a manner that disbands them both physically and spiritually. As such, opposition groups, or more notably pro-democracy opposition groups, are faced with repression by the regime and internal polarization spurred by the repression they have faced.

When analyzing Iran’s failure to democratize, it is first vital to acknowledge that it is impossible for the Western perception of democracy to be compatible with all states’ potential for democratic governance.⁶² Rather,

59 Jack Nicas, “Two Capitol Riots. Two Very Different Results,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/08/world/americas/brazil-us-capitol-riots.html>.

60 Elizabeth Nugent, *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transitions* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

61 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace, 1973).

62 Sadowski, “The New Orientalism.”

the notion of democracy, as created by the West, must be adapted in order to fit the socio-cultural and economic conditions of a given state. With this, theorists Nasser Momayesi, Ali Abootalebi, Ramin Jahanbegloo and Ali Alfoneh all argue that Iran's failure to democratize stems from the current Iranian political structure's inability to facilitate a mechanism for political participation that would allow Iranian citizens to formally exercise their desire for democracy. Jahanbegloo in particular highlights the liveliness of Iranian civil society as an avenue for Iranian political culture that has largely been wasted by the regime's opposition forces.⁶³ He emphasizes that the lack of opportunity for the Iranian people to participate politically forces them to engage in violent political protests that serve to further polarize the pro-democracy opposition rather than unify them. Similarly, Abootalebi and Momayesi remind proponents of democracy in Iran that although political participation was once a societal norm, electorate participation fell from 80% during the Parliamentary Elections of 2000 to 41% during the Presidential Election of 2021.⁶⁴ This largely stems from the Iranian people's frustrations with the stagnation of the reformist movement, and the beginnings of repressed political participation that began to take place under the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei. The Iranian people remain a highly educated, politically motivated class of people, yet Iran's failure to offer productive avenues for political participation and civic engagement make the prospect for democratic coalition-building highly unlikely.⁶⁵

Even when opposition groups are able to outlive their dictators, they are soon thereafter faced with attempting to repair their broken coalitions, where political behavior is marred by the psychological torture faced under the dismantled repressive regime. As exemplified by Nugent, repression is not simply a "behavioral constraint but rather an influential lived experience—an emotional, psychological, and physical trauma that serves as a defining life event" and oftentimes destroys the future likelihood for coalition-building and organizing.⁶⁶

As a result of this demoralization, a common phenomenon seen in the Middle East is the exportation of democrats to the West, otherwise known as the brain drain. Rather than stay in the country where their worst memories of repression exist, many activists and democrats instead flee to the West where they may contribute to democracy without the fear of imprisonment and possible death. The patterns of repression existent in past and current regimes set a cycle of horror where even when Middle Eastern countries are able to break free from the grips of authoritarianism, there is debris surrounding any semblance of democratic transition they aim to partake in.

G. The 2009 Green Revolution

The 2009 Green Revolution marked the first pro-democracy movement in Iran's modern history. For the first time since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iranian society made a statement against the Islamic regime and urged the international community to begin paying attention to their attempts at a democratic transition. Iranians were no stranger to repression, as many citizens recalled the brutal tactics operated by the Shah and his henchmen in order to foster royal absolutism after the imprisonment of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953.⁶⁷

Bravely, the youth of Iran took to the streets after the fraudulent 2009 presidential elections that reinstated Mahmoud Alinejad as President of Iran, and demanded regime change. The Islamic regime, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and newly inaugurated President Ahmadinejad were quick to employ their standard modes of repression: the framing of protestors and acceleration of trials to allow for mass executions. Within a month of the election, Amnesty International reported that "at least 112 people had been executed . . . and almost half

63 Ramin Jahanbegloo, "Is Iran Democratizing?: The Role of the Intellectuals," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (2000), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/is-iran-democratizing-the-role-of-the-intellectuals/>.

64 Ali Abootalebi, "Iran's Struggle for Democracy Continues: An Evaluation of Twenty-Five Years after the Revolution," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2004), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_jun04/meria04_aba01.pdf.

65 Jahanbegloo, "Is Iran Democratizing?"

66 Elizabeth R. Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization," *World Politics* 72, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887120000015>.

67 Richard W. Cottam, "Human Rights in Iran under the Shah," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 12, no. 1 (1980), <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1913&context=jil>.

were executed in three mass executions in Karaj and Zahedan.”⁶⁸ The Islamic regime is infamous for the mass execution of political prisoners, with mass graves making the exact number of deaths impossible to determine. However, a new tactic employed by regime forces during the 2009 protests was the killing of protestors during the protests itself.

Twenty-six-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan’s murder at the hands of the Basij (Revolutionary Guard) was documented on video and spread around social media for millions to see. The advent of social media activism during this period, as exemplified by the Arab Spring just two years later, caused an increase of international attention on instances of human rights abuses like those taking place in Iran. As such, the Islamic regime began more aggressive, widespread tactics to repress protestors, utilizing “mass round-ups, a succession of show trials, lengthy prison sentences and grisly executions.”⁶⁹ By 2010, only one year after the onset of the Green Revolution, calls for continued protests were met largely with silence. Defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi called for a peaceful rally to celebrate the anniversary of the protests, yet many Iranians feared persecution from the regime, therefore participation was much lower than the year prior.⁷⁰

As exemplified by Nugent, patterns of repression, in this case being widespread repression tactics, not only provide immediate discouragement but also long-lasting physical and psychological deterrents to mobilization against regimes. The mass imprisonment, mass execution, and mass dehumanization of Iranian freedom fighters puts the democratic opposition to the regime in an unfavorable place. However, the Iranian people are resilient.

Despite the fact that widespread protest like that of the Green Movement was put on pause, the youth in Iran now had a unified vision: one that encapsulated a free Iran. Similar to Nugent’s theory in Tunisia, although political repression is physically and psychologically taxing on the people and has the ability to bolster polarization, it is equally likely to unite the masses in a manner that is necessary for a democratic revolution to take place. In Tunisia, sharing the common trauma of political repression proved to bolster camaraderie and unity among proponents of Tunisian democracy. It is likely that, with the right amount of support from the diaspora, Iranians can feel the same sense of unity that Tunisians experienced a decade ago. Without an end in sight, it is impossible to ask the Iranian people to continue to sacrifice themselves for nothing but a moment of social media virality. In order for protests like the 2009 Green Revolution to be worth their cost, there must be an organized effort to consolidate power in democratic opposition groups to the regime so that key moments of energy do not fizzle out before they are able to elicit any real change.

H. The 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement

Thirteen years after the Green Revolution, history repeated itself in a disturbing manner. Mahsa “Zhina” Amini joined Neda Agha-Soltan as a martyr for the Iranian fight for freedom from the Islamic regime. Catalyzed by the brutalization of an Iranian woman, both the 2009 Green Revolution and 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement utilized social media as a protection against the regime’s modes of repression. As exemplified by Nugent’s theory of repression and polarization, the youth of Iran were bonded from past experience in 2009, and therefore emboldened to stand together when history repeated itself in 2022. Within a week of Amini’s murder, large-scale protests ensued across major cities across the world. Members of the Iranian diaspora, alongside international proponents for democracy in Iran, took to the streets to showcase their support for the Iranian fight for democracy. Almost immediately, the Islamic regime began its usual tactics of widespread repression, yet this time, on a more brutal scale than ever before.

Two years after the onset of the 2022 protests, the UN’s Fact Finding Mission on Iran released a 500+ page report detailing the modes of repression utilized by the Islamic regime in the aftermath of Amini’s murder. The report outlines countless human rights violations operated by the Islamic regime in Iran, including but not limited

68 *Iran: Election Contested, Repression Compounded* (Amnesty International Publications, 2009), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/123/2009/en/>.

69 Robert Tait, “Iran Election Anniversary Protests Face Severe Crackdown,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/09/iran-election-demonstration-green-repression>.

70 Tait, “Iran Election Anniversary Protests.”

to “murder, imprisonment, torture, rape, and persecution on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and religion.”⁷¹ As a pro-democracy movement founded in the protection of women’s rights in Iran, it is disturbing to note that men and women of all ages were reported to have been subjected to “rape, gang rape, rape with an object, beatings, flogging, burning, electric shocks, suspension, and stress positions” while incarcerated without trial by the Islamic regime.⁷² Mass sex-based violence utilized by the Islamic regime has been a new repression tactic that has created increased psychological damage to the protestors captured after the 2022 protests. As affirmed by Nugent’s theory of targeted repression, the utilization of sex-based violence against certain Iranian protestors will pose long-term consequences on the morale of the democratic opposition to the regime.

Alongside this, the sheer number of mass executions that have taken place following the 2022 protests has been nothing short of alarming. Human Rights Watch reports that over twenty thousand have been arrested and over five hundred killed as a result of the protests, thus showcasing the widespread repression tactics utilized by the Islamic Regime to both imprison and murder any and all of its opponents.⁷³ Almost two years after the onset of the protests, it is unfortunately clear that the regime’s modes of repression have been successful in dismantling the domestic democratic opposition.

Minimal opportunity exists for the Iranian people in Iran to organize in a manner that would allow for a consolidated effort to dismantle the regime. Despite this, they still attempt to do so. Motivated by the unifying call for a free Iran, the same citizens who took to the streets in 2009 led the protests in 2022, and will surely make their presence known again in the next pro-democracy movement in Iran. As such, it is all the more necessary for the democratic opposition living abroad to begin the process of forming a coalition of democratic opponents to the regime, united under a high dominance democratic leader that can bolster the voices of Iranian citizens facing repression and garner enough international attention to catalyze regime change in Iran. As Nugent theorized in Tunisia, the shared experience of repression faced by Iranians in both 2009 and 2022 has unified the people against a common cause: the Islamic regime. As such, the Iranian people, backed by both the Iranian diaspora and the international community, must capitalize off of their joint mission to instill a free, democratic Iran and prevent internal polarization from standing in the way of this goal.

I. Comparison case study: Egypt and Tunisia

In a little over a decade, three large-scale protests shaped the foundation of democracy proliferation in the Middle East: the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, the 2011 Arab Spring, and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran. Despite the virality of each protest, both in the digital and political world, none enabled lasting democracy in the Middle East. Despite this, the Arab Spring was more successful than the Green Revolution and Women, Life, Freedom movement in facilitating a democratic transition. In her book “After Repression,” Elizabeth Nugent dives into the theory that patterns of repression can influence rates of polarization, and as such, propel or inhibit democracy from taking place. Utilizing the case studies of Egypt and Tunisia, Nugent presents two modes of repression: targeted repression, as utilized by Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and widespread repression, as utilized by Zine el-‘Abidine Ben ‘Ali in Tunisia.⁷⁴

Repression has been a long-utilized tactic by authoritarian regimes, and Middle Eastern autocracies have been no different. However, the patterns of repression utilized in each state have been varied and as such have yielded conflicting outcomes. In the case of Egypt, the use of targeted repression towards members of the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in increased levels of polarization among varying opposition groups. When the time came to transition away from Mubarak’s regime, the high levels of polarization among the conflicting opposition groups

71 “Executions, Murder, Rape, Torture Used to Repress ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Protests Detailed in 500+ Page UN Report,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, March 19, 2024, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/03/crimes-against-humanity-state-atrocities-in-iran-revealed-in-first-report-of-un-fact-finding-mission/>.

72 Center for Human Rights in Iran, “Executions, Murder, Rape, Torture.”

73 “Iran: Crackdown on Dissent Ahead of Protest Anniversary: Year After Mahsa Jina Amini’s Death, Ramped-Up Repression.” Human Rights Watch, September 15, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/15/iran-crackdown-dissent-ahead-protest-anniversary>.

74 Nugent, “The Psychology of Repression and Polarization.”

prevented stability that could have come from a democratic transition. By allowing only certain leftist opposition groups to operate, while simultaneously targeting members of the Muslim Brotherhood as enemies of the state, the Mubarak regime's targeted modes of repression destroyed any potential for a coalition of regime opponents to take root. Instead, the targeted repression operated by the regime fostered polarization that would keep Egypt unstable even after Mubarak was ousted.⁷⁵

In the case of Tunisia, by contrast, widespread repression was utilized against all opponents to Ben Ali's regime, and as such, there was no feeling of otherness and lessened feelings of polarization among varying opposition groups once a democratic transition ensued. This made it much easier for Ennahada to win the first election following the Arab Spring and become the first leading political party of a democratic Tunisia.⁷⁶ Although Ben Ali's regime enacted repression in waves that incorporated new opposition groups each time, the employment of widespread repression by the time the Arab Spring came allowed for Tunisian opposition groups to unite under a common cause against Ben Ali, rather than stew in their own polarization against one another. Identity formation is integral to this theory, and it is vital to note that the common experience of repression felt by members of the Tunisian opposition to Ben Ali's regime allowed for each opposition group to identify with the "larger collective of active opposition," rather than their own individual belief systems.⁷⁷

Due to the despotic nature of the Islamic regime in Iran and its brutal modes of repression, Iran does not enjoy the same multitude of domestic opposition groups that Egypt or Tunisia had. There is no Ennahada or Muslim Brotherhood in Iran that could lead a democratic transition if the time came. At best, there exists a small coalition of expatriates who, although disconnected from Iran due to their Western residency, remain united in their desire to see a democratic Iran free from the Islamic regime.

The Islamic regime has been best known to follow the Tunisian model of widespread repression, as all opponents to the regime are brutally cracked down, regardless of their religious, political, or ethnic affiliation. Despite this, Iranian opposition groups have not been able to enjoy the same levels of decreased polarization felt by the Tunisian opposition to Ben Ali's regime. Rather, the democratic opposition to the Islamic regime remains unable to cooperate with one another, and better yet, form an organized front that can withstand repression tactics from the Islamic regime. This is in contrast to the very much unified population of Iranian youth who continuously take to the streets in support of not only a free Iran, but one another. Ultimately it is the politicization within the pro-democracy opposition, and its susceptibility to internal corruption and polarization, that has thus far prevented its success. In order to cultivate a coalition capable of taking on the Islamic regime, the democratic opposition must return to its roots and recall its joint vision for a free Iran, just as Tunisia was able to do.

Despite the fact that a catalyzing event similar to the Arab Spring took place in 2022 in Iran, little has been accomplished in the fight for democracy. As such, the reality remains that the Iranian democratic opposition needs a high dominance democratic leader to lead them into a new age. The Iranian people must not wait for the next murder of an innocent Iranian woman in the streets as a catalyst to demand change. Instead, the Iranian people must get politically organized, elect a high-dominant democratic leader, and incite strategies against the Islamic regime's known modes of repression in order to facilitate a democratic transition in Iran.

VI. Conclusion

Women, Life, Freedom or *zan, zendegi, azadi* (زن زندگی آزادی) erupted as the rallying cry for Iranian's fight for freedom against the Islamic regime in Iran. Propelled by a history of activism, whether it be the 1953 demand for the nationalization of Iranian oil or the 2009 calls for fair and free elections, Iranians have been fighting for freedom for over a century. Iranians boast a strong history of self-advocacy, and remain proud of their ability to withstand colonization and remain a key figure in the Middle East. This is why it is so puzzling why, despite civil unrest and consistent demands for regime change, Iran has historically been unable to democratize.

Iranian history showcases a strong democratic tradition among the Iranian populace, without an avenue to execute such aspirations into the country's government structure. However, as said by Sadegh Zibakalam, chief

75 Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization."

76 Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization."

77 Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization."

political scientist at Tehran University: “the spring of freedom of the Iranian people is near.”⁷⁸ In order to achieve democracy in Iran, there must be an acknowledgment of the opposition’s shortcomings, as well as a consolidated effort to spearhead a democratic movement.

A. Concluding argument

A lively and youthful civil society, which propelled democracy efforts in Brazil, has been unable to establish democracy in Iran. A catalyst found through mass protest, which propelled Egypt and Tunisia towards democratic transition following the Arab Spring, has twice been incapable of instituting democracy in Iran. Iran remains one of the most oil-rich countries in the world, yet economic development has not been able to explain Iran, or the larger Middle East’s, democracy deficit. The argument that Islam and democracy are incompatible has been dismantled by the democratic governments of Indonesia, Senegal, and Turkey. Yet, despite all this, there is still no one explanation for why Iran has been unable to democratize. However, there is a culmination of compelling evidence that can best explain this unfortunate phenomenon.

Cultural and economic explanations have thus far failed to explain why Iran exists in a democracy desert. However, evidence derived from the lack of high dominance democratic leadership and patterns of repression in past and current regimes showcases the newfound importance of considering political psychology in potential explanations for why Iran has been historically unable to democratize. Without an organized democratic opposition group led by a high dominance leader, nor a strategy for how to circumvent the physical and psychological effects of widespread repression, Iran is unlikely to democratize. Without an organized, educated effort, this movement will diminish into nothing more than a brief moment in history. However, by mobilizing the Iranian people to consolidate the democratic opposition and fight against these commonly used repression tactics, Iranians can once and for all take their country back for themselves.

When observing both the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom Movements, one thing is for certain: these were not simply moments in history. Rather, these two movements emulate the larger, century-long struggle for a democratic Iran. What unites both of these movements is the strength and leadership of the Iranian people. There is no doubt that democracy can be achieved by and for the Iranian people, but there must first be a consolidated effort to mobilize into an organized, unified coalition with a clear high dominance, democratic leader stood at the forefront of the movement. Alongside this, there must be a firm stance against internal polarization among said opposition groups caused by past trauma from political repression at the hands of the Islamic regime. Through this, the Iranian people can end the brutal cycle of oppression that has terrorized their country for decades and once and for all enjoy freedom and democracy in Iran.

B. Global impact of democratization efforts in Iran

In his 2016 book, “Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed,” Misagh Parsa highlights the need for a democratic revolution in Iran. On two occasions, once in 2009 and once in 2022, the Iranian people grew close to achieving this dream. However, due to a lack of political organization and mobilization, as well as an unwillingness to acknowledge the psychological effects of centuries of repression, the democratic transition in Iran has remained on pause.

It is vital that democracy efforts in Iran remain at the forefront of the international community’s priorities. Efforts to incite democracy in Iran would not only serve as a momentous success for the people of Iran, but also for the geopolitical landscape of the world. As illustrated by the theory of “neighbor emulation” presented by Brinks and Coppedge, the propulsion of democracy in one country more often than not catalyzes democratization in neighboring countries as well. For decades, the Middle East has lacked a strong example of democracy to aspire towards.

A democratic Iran would re-shape the Middle East, with potential for stronger diplomatic relations with the West, nuclear non-proliferation, and stronger counter-terrorism efforts in a region that presents a vast danger

to the United States and its allies in its current political make-up. If not for the protection of human rights as it relates to the Iranian people, the international community must show a vested interest in democratization efforts in Iran for it promises a newfound sense of geopolitical balance that could shape the new world order.

In 2007, Gallup found that over 89% of Iranians showcased widespread support for democracy.⁷⁹ There is a stark necessity to stand behind the Iranian people as they remind themselves that change is possible. Through the combined efforts of social media activism, the bolstering of domestic activists, and the mobilization of regime opponents, democracy is not only possible in Iran, but it is viable. A cycle has begun, one that encapsulates repeating moments that have set Iran on a “revolutionary course.”⁸⁰ While the path to democracy in Iran is full of harrowing challenges, both for the Iranian people and its allies, it is a necessary fight that holds the potential for domestic, regional and international transformation. A democratic revolution is brewing, and a democratic Iran is on the horizon.

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79 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*.

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