Review of Middle East Studies (2023), **56**, 73–87
doi:10.1017/rms.2023.2

SPECIAL FOCUS: REVISITING LEGACIES OF ANFAL AND RECONSIDERING GENOCIDE IN THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY, VICTIMHOOD, RESILIENCE AND ENDURING TRAUMA

Cultural Racism and Ethnic Cleansing: The Islamic Republic of Iran and Minority Rights

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Abstract

The phenomenon of "political Islam" has been explored in several social theories. These accounts have mainly concentrated on the forms of violence that Islamists have instigated, but the racist drive that is often embedded within political Islam has remined overlooked and unexplored, that is, at least until recently when the brutal crimes by ISIS against Yazidis and Christians in northern Iraq were widely documented and broadcasted. Even so, this tendency has only been attributed to ISIS and extreme Jihadi groups, while states infused with Islamist ideology have remained relatively untouched by such critical analyses.

This article argues that most extant theoretical frameworks on political Islam do not adequately explain the often-latent racist trend in Islamist political ideology. By building off of Foucault's theory of biopolitics and genealogy of racism, it takes the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy against the Kurds as a case study to demonstrate how power shifts in favor of Islamist factions in early-1980s Iran legitimized a racist policy toward minorities in general and the Kurds in particular.

Keywords: Political Islam; Islamization; cultural racism; ethnic cleansing; minority rights

Introduction

Exactly three months before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over the city of Mosul, Iraq, I presented a paper at a conference in Paris. During the question-and-answer period following my presentation, I was challenged by a participant of the conference for stating that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) had committed acts of genocide against the Kurds. The challenger, a scholar and an academic from Iraqi Kurdistan, questioned my conclusion and argued that although there was brutality against the Kurds, it would be an overreach

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to define it as genocide. He therefore asked me if I could name any case of genocide by the IRI against Kurds. I responded with the following well-known cases: Qarana, 68 dead (February 4th, 1979)[1]; Qalatan, 50 dead (February 5th, 1980)[2]; Inderqash, 53 dead (March 11th, 1980)[3]; Sari Qomish-e Qeshlaq, 18 dead (12/05/1981)[4]; Mahabad, 59 dead (February 6th, 1983).

In Qarana, 68 victims – women, children, and the elderly – were rounded up and beheaded. In Mahabad, 59 teenage victims were detained and then executed merely because they had family members active in the Kurdish resistance movement. All five of the events cited above occurred between 1979 and 1983, while the IRI was trying to impose an Islamic order on Kurdistan, which was met with strong popular local resistance.[5] They were all well-known cases, receiving detailed media reports and much publicity.

At the time, the IRI was waging war on the Kurds in the open. Kurdish intellectuals as well as humanitarian aid workers did not hesitate to define these as acts of genocide, but international organizations, including the UN Security Council, and the great powers were silent on this point. Why, after almost forty years after the fact, would anyone cast doubt on the genocidal nature of these acts?

To come to terms with this question, three points must be underlined. First, for some scholars "political Islam" remains an ambiguous concept despite its wide purchase in contemporary social theory. Second, in the 1980s, left-wing and democratic-liberal thinkers and writers were mainly concerned about the role of religion in mobilizing people for radical politics. Thus, while their writings relied on concepts such as "ideology," "culture," and "identity," they overlooked the role of religion as a political identity.[6] Third, there was a great deal of reluctance to consider the Islamists' massacres in Iranian Kurdistan as genocide, partly due to the above two factors and partly because of ambiguities in the meaning of the concept of genocide. No doubt, the formulation of the concept of genocide following World War II was a great achievement, but there was – and still is – disagreement about what it entails. Like most concepts in social theory, this one is contested: there are opposing interpretations of its meaning, which carry different normative implications. Before we continue, it might be useful to clarify an overlap between "political Islam," and "genocide."

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[1] Qarna (Persian: قارنا, also Romanized as Qārnā; also known as Karna and Qārneh) is a village in Beygom Qaleh Rural District, in the Central District of Naqadeh County, West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. At the 2006 census, its population was estimated at 813, including 128 families.

[2] Qalatan is a village situated between Naqadeh and Oshnavieh cities.

[3] Inderqash is a village situated around the city of Mahabad. At the 2006 census, its population was tallied at 2911, with 578 families.

[4] Sari Qomish-e Qeshlaq is a village in Feyzolah Beygi Rural District, in the Central District of Bokan County, West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. At the 2006 census, its population was 463, with 77 families.

[5] There was a wide range of reports about these atrocities. For example, *Ittelahat* published an investigative report titled "The Massacres of Qarna People," *Ittelahat*, Mordad 25, 1358.

[6] *Asnad ve Didgaha (Documents and Viewpoints, Since the Establishment of the Tudeh Party of Iran Until the February Revolution of 1979)*, (Tehran: Tudeh Publishing Centre, 1982), 940–80.

Conceptual Framework

In recent years, significant disagreement between scholars has arisen on the concept of "political Islam" or "contemporary Islamism." On the one hand, some analysts have taken a more essentialist approach and consider the phenomenon in terms of a "fundamentalist" ideology, which discloses a desire for the continuation of historical form and signal a longing to return to an authentic Islamic culture.[7] On the other hand, others have taken a critical stance and argued that "at the root of the 'Islamic phenomenon' are the well-known economic and demographic problems and the policy dilemmas they pose for government."[8]

In this essay I bank on the latter theoretical perspective and therefore distinguish between "fundamentalism" as Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism as a modern political ideology whose core concerns are temporal and political. I have previously argued that the term "fundamentalism" poses a major problem in so far as it has the connotations of a return to some kind of essential and authentic Islam.[9] On the contrary, Iranian Islamists were creatively constructing selected elements of the Islamic canonical texts, combined with modern ideas, technology, and institutions to cope with the political, cultural, and social predicaments that emerged in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s.

To this end, I draw on Foucault's body of works on biopolitics, which, in a nutshell, is about governing life, or safeguarding a way of life. It concerns the "processes of life" and the possibility of "controlling" and "modifying" them. The key to a biopolitical technology of power is to introduce and establish an order and maintain and preserve its normality at the total level of the population.[10]

Foucault distinguishes between classical sovereign power and modern biopower, as well as between discipline and biopower, but he does not claim that sovereign and discipline modes of power disappear.

> We see something emerging in the second half of the eighteenth century: A new technology of power, but this time it is not disciplinary. This technology of power does not exclude the former, does not exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent. . . . [U]nlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the nondisciplinary power is applied not to man as body but to the living man, to man as living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man as species.[11]

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[7] See, for example, Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1982).

[8] Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), xvi.

[9] Said Shams, *Nationalism, Political Islam and the Kurdish Question in Iran: Reflections on the Rise and Spread of Political Islam in Iran* (VDM Verlag, 2011), 26–132.

[10] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

[11] Ibid., 242.

Secondly, I have also drawn upon Foucault's genealogy of European racism. One may ask how and in what ways racism is linked to biopower. How is racism linked to a form of power that targets the life of an entire population? According to Foucault, modern racism is not simply an irrational prejudice, a form of sociopolitical discrimination, or an ideological motive in a political doctrine; rather, it is a form of governmentality that is devised to administer a population.

In his 1976 College de France lectures, he points to the discourse of war, which finds another manifestation toward the end of the nineteenth century. According to Foucault, this discourse was particularly associated with three phenomena: biological-race thinking in a strict sense, colonial racism at the end of the nineteenth century, and various forms of ethnic nationalism.[12] All three of these systems of thought, he argued, postulated a fundamental conflict between society and its outside, and the power to kill the outside. The outside, however, is not outside the border of the state, but rather it is posed or constructed as an outside within society:

> The power to kill, which ran through the entire Nazi society, was first manifested when the power to take life, the power of life and death, was granted not only to the state but to a whole series of individuals, to a considerable number of people (such as the SA, the SS, and so on), ultimately everyone in the Nazi state had the power of life and death over his or her neighbour, if only because of the practice of informing, which effectively meant doing away with the people next door or having them done away with.[13]

One may appreciate Foucault's account with the caveat that, in the twentieth century, there was an urgent need to move beyond descriptive explanations of racism. For example, racism in the form of Nazism was a form of state racism that operated at a macro level and combined a notion of war with the sovereign power over life and death. This form of state racism resurfaced in the last decades of the twentieth century as well, albeit in an altered form. As John Solomos described:

> It is certainly clear that racism is taking on new forms in the present political environment and there is widespread confusion about the boundaries of national identity, and the role of cultural, religious and linguistic difference. The experience of the former Yugoslavia is a case in point. In the aftermath of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, we have seen not only the development of "ethnic cleansing" but the articulation of the new types of racism based on the construction of fixed religious and cultural boundaries.[14]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 259.

[14] John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 245.

As Foucault formulated this new conception of power based on models of battle and war half a century ago in the 1970s, the question – to what extent does this theoretical outlook apply to current Islamist trends in the Middle East? – is entirely fair to ask.

First, if we accept that contemporary Islamism is a modern phenomenon and rooted in the context of modernity, we may grasp its emergence as an outcome of a specific process of modernization and interaction with the west. Second, if we note that contemporary Islamist discourse devalues bonds of ethnicity and language in favor of religious values, we then can argue this analytical framework serves as an excellent means and analogical device to make sense of political Islam. Thus, this article contends that this new form of cultural racism – which rests on the fixed religious and cultural boundaries – is not confined to such tragedies as the Srebrenica genocide but has been in operation in the Middle East over the past forty years. And no doubt this cultural racism bears a strong resemblance to the current resurgence of racist and extreme far-right nationalist movements in several Western societies. As Aziz Al-Azmeh writes:

> Perhaps this is the moment to note the apparently strange convergence between the fundamentalist discourse and the run-of-the-mill Western discourse (even sometimes that of Westerners who are well-informed, or think they are). Both are in agreement on giving prominence to exotic, eccentric or particularist features, and an attitude which is not new and dates from the last century. The real novelty of the last fifteen years is that this Western discourse has appeared in connection with what (in the Reagan period) was called "the struggle against terrorism," and has coincided, in Europe and the United States, with the rise of political irrationality on racial matters. It is quite clear that there is an objective correspondence, in thought as well as in politics, between Islamism in its relationship with identity and European racism in its relationship with the other: both are fundamentalist and isolationist, and both mythologize history. So, there is nothing outlandish in the idea that Jean-Marie Le Pen is an ally of Islamic fundamentalism. The natural brother of the FIS.[15]

The Fate of the Kurds in the Islamic Republic of Iran

By all accounts, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 ("the Revolution") was a major social and political upheaval. The collapse of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have had far-reaching implications for the fate of Iranians as well as the entire region. As a major historical event, the revolution unleashed a flood of books, articles, and other research on the causes and consequences of the hegemonic rise of political Islam within Iran. However, an increasingly salient and under-studied area is the relationship between the IRI, striving to install and maintain an Islamic order over its population, and the country's ethnic minorities, struggling to defend their identities in the face of a homogenizing Islamic thrust. However, this relationship cannot be adequately understood if we are reluctant to perceive it with reference to the racist component of contemporary Islamist ideology.

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[15] Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993), 57.

The Iranian Revolution brought together Iranians across social class, ethnicity, and religion. The political coalition opposed to the monarchy included clergy, moderate and radical Islamists,[16] left-wing and secular nationalist groups, and ethnic minority groups, including Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, Turkmen, and others.

During the steadfast revolutionary process, it seemed to them that breaking the old social and political framework and leaving a new utopia in its place would be an easy undertaking. The Islamists involved in the revolutionary agitations represented a broad front of the moderate,[17] radical,[18] and fundamentalist groups. They went along with accepting other groups' slogans and universalistic values, but for a considerable segment of them, the revolution was a singular event that had to address only Shiʿi ideals and values.

The Kurds were active participants of the 1979 Revolution. Following the collapse of the monarchy, various ethnic groups demanded their democratic rights and opportunity for self-rule. Under their pressure, the new Islamist rulers had no choice but to acknowledge the multi-ethnic character of the country. The euphoria of toppling the monarchy led to a strong optimism that the reconstruction of society upon a democratic basis would provide an opportunity for autonomy.[19]

In February 1979, the Provisional Government (PG) under the premiership of Mehdi Bazargan took over the affairs of the country. The composition of the PG consisted of the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI), a few National Front figures, and some independents. By and large they were middle-class, politically moderate Muslims and nationalists, and there was not any fundamentalist figure in the PG. From the outset Prime Minister Bazargan, in several speeches, acknowledged the religious and ethnic diversity of Iranians and claimed that the rights of minorities would be respected.[20]

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[16] "Radical Islam" is a term that was used to define the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran. The Mojahedin are an Iranian militant-Islamist group which played a major role in the revolution and after which advocated for overthrowing the IRI and installing their own government. Mojahedin's radical interpretation of Islam contrasts with the conservative Islam of the traditional clergy, as well as the populist interpretation developed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin – Society and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).

[17] The Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI) was formed in 1961 by well-known Iranian personalities who were closely related by ties of kinship and friendship, including Ayatollah Mahmood Taleqani, Mehdi Bazergan, and Yadollah Sahabi. The LMI was one of the mainstream parties in the "Second National Front" and after the Revolution its leader, Bazargan, became the prime minister of the provisional government, from November 6th 1979 to July 20th, 1980.

[18] Radical Islamists included the Mojahedin Khaleq and the followers of Ali Shariati, among others.

[19] Shams, *Political Islam*, 227.

[20] Mehdi Bazargan, ed., *Masa'el va moshkelate-e nakhostin sal-e enqelab (the Problems and Challenges of the First Year of the Revolution)* (Tehran: 1982), 9, 10, 13, 43, 362.

However, the situation was much more complex. When the monarchy was toppled, the Kurds managed to gain control of the two Kurdish-populated areas in northwest Iran. Following the Revolution, the Kurdish national struggle took a more radical turn and was able to mobilize a mass movement based on the slogan, "democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan." Other autonomist movements, such as Turkmens in Gorgan province, Baluchis in Sistan and Baluchistan, and Arabs in Khuzestan province, also sprang up.

A fundamentalist camp contested the moderate Islamists of the PG, eventually driving them out of power. A precondition for their success was the formation of mass-based associations and an irregular militia, which forged their alliance with sections of the lower classes.[21]

From the outset the fundamentalists faced major opposition from different sections of society: democratic-liberals, radical mujahedin, left-wing parties, and ethnic opposition movements in Turkmen Sahra, Azerbaijan, Baluchistan, and Khuzestan. "The situation in Kurdistan was quite different. The Kurdish national resistance movement had acted, despite its local limited base, as a major obstacle in establishing an Islamic order in Iran."[22]

In late March 1979, a delegation of Kurds went to Qom to present their demands for autonomy to Ayatollah Khomeini. Although an agreement was reached between the PG and the Kurds,[23] it soon fell apart, as it was clear that the fundamentalists were not willing to recognize minority rights. On the eve of 1980, heavy fighting broke out between the Kurds and the government in Sanandaj, the capital of the Kurdistan province. After much bloodshed, a high-ranking delegation negotiated a settlement.[24]

In April 1979, a referendum was conducted in which voters were asked "yes" or "no" to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Kurdish Iranians voted overwhelmingly against the proposition. The nascent IRI, and especially the fundamentalists, were correspondingly uneasy with Kurdish claims to self-rule, and waited for the opportune time to disarm them militarily and undermine their ideology.

During this period two religious leaders emerged: Sheikh Ezzaddin Huseini in Mahabad and Ahmad Moftizadeh in Senna. The former, a cleric with a history of promoting nationalist struggle, called for the formation of a secular and democratic state with autonomy for the Kurds. The latter, who was religious but not a cleric, advocated an Islamic state. Since the Islamic regime had been trying to establish a foothold in Kurdistan, it relied on Moftizadeh to weaken the radical, secular, and democratic ideals of the Kurdish national movement.[25] Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, but Moftizadeh and his group were quickly marginalized within Iranian Kurdish society. Religious differences, therefore, played a role in their opposition toward the Islamic republic, but Kurdish political society was mostly secular and has remained so.

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[21] Shams, *Political Islam*, 190.

[22] Ibid.,192.

[23] The Kurds formulated their request for autonomy in 30 clauses; see Shiekh Ezzaddin Houssine's interview with *Kayhan*, no. 10652, Esfand 13, 1357, p. 8.

[24] Kayhan, nos. 10665 & 10666. *The Guardian*, February 22 and March 20, 1979.

[25] Shams, *Political Islam*, 174–75.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1979, Kurdish fighters repeatedly clashed with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards ("Pasdaran") or other pro-government forces. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Komala, and the Fadayan gained strength as they fortified lines of defense and trained armed volunteers to push back against the fundamentalists' offensives.

The turning point came in August 1979. In mid-August, heavy fighting broke out between Kurdish Peshmergas and the Pasdaran, who were trying to establish a military presence in the city of Marivan.[26] Having declared himself commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered the army and the Revolutionary Guard to attack Iranian Kurdistan on August 19th. A "holy war" was declared after Khomeini called the Kurds "infidels" from whom the Islamic lands must be "cleansed." After fierce fighting the IRI forces recaptured the Kurdish cities and pushed the Peshmergas into rural areas.[27]

This August offensive coincided with the opening day of the Assembly of Experts.[28] The Assembly of Experts was charged with preparing and passing the final draft of the constitution, and these two events demonstrate the extent to which the fundamentalists saw the Kurdish resistance as a major obstacle to establishing an Islamic order.

However, the fundamentalists had won only a pyrrhic victory, and soon its tactical gains from the August offensive would backfire. During the three-month civil war in Kurdistan, the IRI was unable to consolidate their authority beyond major towns and military checkpoints on the main roads between them.[29] Extrajudicial executions by the Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali generated a deep-seated resentment against the Islamic regime.[30]

By late September and October 1979, the Peshmergas pushed government forces back to their barracks and governed the area with virtually complete control. Soon after the U.S. embassy hostage crisis,[31] Khomeini made a U-turn over the Kurdish issue and ordered a halt to the military intervention. The two sides agreed to a ceasefire, and Khomeini sent a message to the Kurds asking them to join the rest of the Iranian Muslim nation to turn their anger and rifles against the United States.[32] He assured them of internal self-rule within the Islamic Republic. He then sanctioned an official delegation consisting of some of the ex-PG ministers to strike a deal with the Kurds, who had formed a Kurdish People's Representation. Interestingly, throughout the negotiations, Khomeini never formally recognized the Kurdish delegation's legitimacy.[33]

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[26] For press reports, see: *Ettela'at* and *Daily Telegraph*, August 20 and 21, 1979.

[27] Shams, *Political Islam*, 230–31.

[28] The Assembly of Experts was the deliberative body empowered to discuss and pass the new constitution of Iran. Its formation dated back to 1979, when a constituent assembly was needed to draft a constitution. Debates over the nature of that body ultimately led to the formation of a small, expert-based group rather than a larger assembly of representatives from across the country. The Assembly was dissolved after the constitution was ratified in December 1979.

[29] *Kayhan*, Aban 20, 1358/ November 29, 1979.

[30] Shams, *Political Islam*, 231.

[31] On November 4th, 1979, 52 U.S. diplomats and citizens were held hostage after a group of militarized Iranian college students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran and seized hostages. A diplomatic standoff ensued. The hostages were held for 444 days, being released on January 20th, 1981

[32] *Kayhan*, Aban 27, 1358/ December 6, 1979.

In November 1979 the taking of hostages at the U.S. embassy, orchestrated by the fundamentalist faction, brought down the PG and ended Bazargan's premiership. On November 15, 1979, the Assembly of Experts approved a draft of the Iranian constitution as the foundation of a thoroughly Islamic state. In the meantime, the ceasefire in Kurdistan was holding, but the new authority in Tehran refused to enter serious negotiations with Kurdish representatives, who had formed the Kurdish People's Representation.[34]

By winter 1980, the fundamentalists began preparing to make a final attempt to take control of Iran's Kurdish areas. In mid-April 1980, the central government launched a new offensive following the election of President Abdul Hassan Bani-Sadr. After weeks of heavy fighting and airstrikes, cities and towns such as Kamyaran, Sanandaj, Marivan, Saqqez, Baneh were seized by government forces.[35]

By the time the army and Islamic Guard occupied these cities, the Iran–Iraq war broke out, which gave the Iranian Kurds an opening to regain control of the countryside. However, beginning in late 1982, Kurdistan became a major focal point of operations in the Iran–Iraq war, and Iranian forces launched a massive offensive against the Kurds in 1983, ultimately re-establishing government control over the Kurdish areas. By 1985, the IRI had won the battle militarily but not ideologically. After more than four decades of implementation, the IRI authorities have recently admitted that the Islamization project has not yet achieved its objectives.[36]

The war against the Kurds is the backdrop against which acts of genocide were systematically planned and executed by Iran's Islamist establishment. The death toll rose to more than 50,000, of whom 45,000 were believed to be civilians.[37] After more than forty years, there is still no societal consensus on the Islamization campaign and the holy war against the Kurds, and the Kurdish question still haunts present-day Iran. Thus, the question arises: How can one explain the troubled relationship between Islamist rule and the Kurds who wanted autonomy?

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[33] Shams, *Political Islam*, 231.

[34] The Kurdish People's Representation was composed of the KDP, Komala, Fadayan, and Sheikh Ezzadin Hussaini.

[35] *Kar,* year 2, no. 57, May 7, no. 58, May 13, and no. 59, May 20, 1980.

[36] Islamic authorities have recently expressed this view. For example, the interior minister who recently warned Islamization has failed and that secular trends and women's movements are major obstacles against Islamic values, which still have not institutionalized after forty years. See Donya-e-Eqtesad, "The Minister of Interior warned about the danger of women to the revolution," September 18, 1979, https://tinyurl.com/3dy8zjk9.

[37] "Sept Ans d'Aide Medicale au Kurdistan d'Iran 1981–1987," Unpublished document, housed in the library of the Kurdish Institute, Paris, GEN. 1158, 33.

Islamism and Minority Rights

From the outset, Khomeini and other leading figures of the fundamentalist camp were claiming that Islam is a political community far superior to any nation-state, and that Islam recognizes no differences based on ethnicity, culture, and customs. In practice, the Islamic regime established its power through the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities within Iran, including Kurds. It has imposed a strict interpretation of the tenets of Shiʿi Islam on the entire population of Iran. Building an Islamic state has basically been the work of Islamists. In the case of the Kurds, they were forced to align themselves with their own political community.

The Kurds were asking for autonomy. Hence, the revival of Islamic values in Iran did not resemble a return to the "good old days" of Ottoman or Qajar rule, with their delegation of authority to the different *millat*s(religious communities) in a highly decentralized political structure. On the contrary, Islamism in Iran represented a bizarre juxtaposition of the centralized power of the modern nation-state with the religious ambitions that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, derived from the eschatological and nostalgic traditions of the Shiʿi religious heritage.

Therefore, it is crucial to draw a distinction between traditional Islamic revivalism and contemporary Islamism. Although the former seeks the implementation of shariʿa (law), it does not concern itself with the political form of the state, and for the traditional Islamist, shariʿa is mainly a legal question, not political. In contrast, while the latter, contemporary version of Islamism talks about revolution and social change, it has a purely political connotation.

Given the forced Islamization of society, or its "war against infidels," the imagery of war was more appropriate for Iran's fundamentalists than the revolutionary language they cloaked themselves in. They were Islamic fighters, and they had to be "ready" at all times to be "mobilized" to the "fronts" of war against infidels; "counter-attacks" were to be expected from the alien and infidel forces.

Despite their quick and swift success elsewhere, the fundamentalists' military and political progress in Kurdistan ran into powerful resistance from the Kurds. However, the Iraqi invasion and the subsequent state of emergency provided convenient cover for the fundamentalists to accomplish their unfinished business in Kurdistan. The Kurdish national movement, which was the last barricade to establishing a fully theocratic government in Iran, faced a big obstacle.[38]

The fundamentalists' drive to Islamize the country ran into further obstacles because the strong-armed application of Islamic morality was met with public defiance. The cornerstone belief of the Iranian Islamists' theory of an Islamic state was the sovereignty of God over the universe. They assert that sovereignty belongs only to God, that he is the lawgiver, so no one is entitled to issue orders or defy those of God. Anyone with an understanding of the concept of sovereignty in the literal sense, i.e., as absolute power, would find any kind of sovereignty in a state to be in conflict with the sovereignty of God. The Constitution, however, "defines the Islamic Republic as a state ruled by Islamic Jurists (*fuqaha*'). In accordance with verse 21/105 of the Qur'an and on the basis of the trusteeship and the permanent Imamate, it is a state of jurists."[39] Thus, strictly speaking, it is the defense of the *faqaha*'s interest in the name of the sovereignty of God that was at stake in the exercise of these powers. In fact, "Khomeini functioned as the highest legislative power until parliament began passing laws in August 1980."[40]

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[38] Shams, *Political Islam*, 1888.

Even when the parliament started its work it was unclear how the fundamentalists were going to implement shariʿa. Although the constitution of the Islamic Republic recognized shariʿa as one source of law, this was not the constitution's only stipulation on the law. "The first decision aimed at changing the powers of the two legislative institutions gave parliament full authority. . . to pass laws with absolute majority." Disagreement arose between parliament and the Guardian Council when Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of parliament, "asked Khomeini to make use of the powers accorded to the most eminent jurist and leader regarding several resolutions passed by parliament – in other words to decide how this contradiction could be resolved."[41]

> When this solution could not resolve problems resulting from a contradiction between shariʿa and the demands of modern legislation, and when recourse to other regulations based on adopting the shariʿa proved equally unsuccessful, Khomeini intervened with a very far-reaching measure. In January 1988 he declared that an Islamic state had the right to disregard Islamic ordinances when passing resolutions and framing laws.[42]

It is ironic that Ali Shariʿati, one of the main theorists of "radical Islam,"[43] who was against the *fuqaha*'s traditional interpretation Islam, warned against a situation wherein members of the religious hierarchy monopolize political power, as they imagine themselves to be the vice-regent of God and executors of His commands on earth. In such a state, people have no right to express themselves, criticize, or disagree with their rulers.[44]

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[39] Ali Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987) 12.

[40] Ibid., 62.

[41] Ibid., 62.

[42] Ibid., 64.

[43] Radical Islam is a term constructed by Ervand Abrahamian to distinguish the Islamism of Mojahedin-i-Khalq and 'Ali Shariʿati from Khomeini's Islamism, see, *Radical Islam: Iranian Mojahedin - Society & Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).

[44] Shariʿati asserted that "Theocracy means the rule of the clergy over people; the natural effect of such a government is despotic oppression, because the clergy believes itself to be the vicegerent of God and the legitimate authority for implementing what is it believes to be God's commands on earth. In such state, people have no right no right to express themselves, criticise, or disagree the clergy," 'Ali Shariʿati, *Collected Works,* Vol. 22. (Tehran: Agah Publishers, 1982), 197.

> He knows no hesitation in committing any transgression and violation, for he sees in them the will of God. In addition, he believes those who oppose him are "accursed by God", lost and deviants, "untouchables" and the "enemies of God and religion", who have "no right to be alive".[45]

As Foucault elaborates in his 1976 College de France lectures, racism is the vehicle by which thanato-politics coincide with biopolitics; that which "allows biopower to mark caesuras in the biological continuum of the human species, thus reintroducing a principle of war into the system of 'making live.'"[46] This description captures the sovereign biopolitical system that Khomeini and his followers planned to install, and from the outset they made it clear that they would welcome the prospect of going to war with anyone who dared disagree with them.

In contrast to the assertions of so-called Iranian reformists, who believe Iran is in urgent need of returning to Khomeini's legacy and the constitution, Khomeini's views and legacy do not support the rights of free citizenship that marks the beginning of the modern age, but rather facilitate the entry of shariᶜa into political calculations. To be precise, this legacy embedded racism, as racism comprises ways of justifying the structured inequalities between different groups of people. To put it differently, a racist ideology perceives society as consisting of strata in a hierarchy, with preferred stratums, "white" or "Muslim" at the top and inferior groups, such as "black" or "non-Muslim," nearer the bottom.

For the sake of the creation of "an Islamic government," the new Islamic ruling class were not opposed to terrorizing, "cleansing," expelling, and killing the members of competing social groups. The Kurds may have borne the brunt of these acts of violence, but other ethnic and religious groups also fell victim to this cultural racism, such as the Bahá'í community, who were immediately deprived of citizenship rights.

For example, on January 16th, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, during an interview with Professor James Cockcroft before he returned to Iran, stated that Baha'is would not have religious freedom in post-revolution Iran.[47] In February 1991, a confidential letter issued by the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council on "the Baha'i question" and signed by Supreme Leader Khamenei himself, signaled an increase in efforts to extirpate the Iranian Baha'i community through more "silent" means.

In 2004, Iranian authorities demolished the shrine and grave site of Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi (Quddus), a Babi leader. Baha'i youth are not permitted to attend institutions of higher education in Iran unless they identify themselves as followers of one of the four religions, Islam, Christianity,

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[45] Ibid., 18.

[46] Foucault, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, Remnants *of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 84.

[47] During an interview before returning to Iran with Professor James Cockcroft, Khomeini stated that Baha'is would not have religious freedom. See James Crockcroft, "Select interviews by and of Cockcroft on Iran, including Khomeini in Paris, 1978–1979 , + articles and award-winning book," July 29, 2014, https://www.jamescockcroft.com/node/265.

Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, recognized by the state on university entrance exams.[48]

While to some observers the extermination of the Baha'i community may seem to stem from religious enmity between them and the Shiᶜi, the IRI's inhumane treatment of the Gonabadi Order, who are Shiᶜi themselves, challenges this understanding. As does the government's treatment of the Iranian Sunni population, whom the IRI has failed to properly integrate by depriving them of the chance to fulfill higher political positions such as cabinet ministers. It may surprise some observers that in the past forty years, the Iranian Sunni population has campaigned for a Sunni Mosque in Tehran to no avail. The fact of the matter is, the Islamists of Iran prohibited the practice of any cultural or religious tradition falling outside their narrow definition of Islam.

Iran's Islamic state thus proved to be exclusionary. It was the ascendency of Shiᶜi precepts through the coercive power of the state over the social, cultural, and political life of all segments of society. Therefore, all ethnic and religious minorities have been subjects of discrimination, injustice, and killings. Both the Kurds and Baha'is of Iran have been subject to "cleansing" and extermination. The atrocities wreaked by the Islamic Republic against these two communities can only be described as a multidimensional genocide, with ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions.

While these atrocities in Iran were overlooked in the 1980s, a decade later a United Nations Commission of Experts was commissioned to investigate violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which it defined as "ethnic cleansing."[49] This article contends that the Islamic Republic's policy toward the Kurds and other minority groups can be perceived as a form of "cultural racism" and "ethnic cleansing." Thus, it proposes a hypothesis that the power shift following the Revolution generated a move from assimilation to ethnic cleansing in Iran's policy toward its minorities.

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[48] The Babi movement was based on the teachings of the Bab, Sayyid Ali Muhammad (1819–50), a young Shirazi merchant who elaborated a novel interpretation of Shiᶜi Islam. In 1844, he announced he was the intermediary (the *bab* or "gate") between the Shiᶜi faithful and the expected messianic figure of the Twelfth Imam. Bab was detained and executed by Iranian authorities in 1850.

Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nur (1817–92), was the most distinguished personage to embrace the cause of the Bab and later became known as Baha'u'llah. He claimed to be the promised one and prophet, and in 1863 he faced exile and imprisonment. Once Baha'u'llah had announced that he was the promised one foretold by the Bab, many Babis accepted him, adopting the name of "Baha'is," i.e., "followers of Baha'u'llah." Whilst rooted in Babism, the Baha'i movement diverged from it in various ways, notably in Baha'u'llah's absolute prohibition on his followers taking up arms to defend themselves as the Babis had done, and his wide-ranging vision of a new world order. See, John Walbridge, "Essays and Notes on Babi and Baha'i History" *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Bahá'í Studies* 6.1 (2002–03).

[49] Genocide is defined as "the mass expulsion or killing of members of one ethnic or religious group in an area by those of another." When a UN commission empaneled to look into violations of international law in the former Yugoslavia defined ethnic cleansing in its interim report S/25274, in S/1994/674, the commission defined ethnic cleansing as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas."

> Racism stands apart by a practice of which it is a part and which it rationalizes; a practice that combines strategies of architecture and gardening with that of medicine – in the service of the construction of an artificial social order, through cutting out the elements of the present reality that neither fit the visualized perfect reality, nor can be changed so that they do.
>
> The consequence is that racism is inevitably associated with the strategy of estrangement. If conditions allow, racism demands that the offending category ought to be removed beyond the territory occupied by the group it offends. If such conditions are absent, racism requires that the offending category is physically exterminated.[50]

Conclusion

In Iran, political Islam gained momentum and mass support by the political use of religion. The fundamentalists mobilized mass support by the novelty of "an Islamic state," which was advertised as a means of establishing equality and prosperity for all, but from the outset they pushed back their moderate Islamic, nationalist, and left-wing rivals and monopolized political power for themselves.

At the heart of the Islamist theory of the Islamic state are two core propositions: first, that the creation of an Islamic state is necessary to re-establish Islamic culture and order; and second, this will be achieved through Islamization and implementation of shariᶜa. Islamist rule in Iran has shown that the state's authoritarianism, whether structural or otherwise, has been responsible for aggravating political and social disparities.

For decades, Western analysts and policymakers encouraged mainstream Islamists to embrace the democratic process, respect for rule of law, and parliamentary politics. However, the logical alternative for Islamists was to pursue the exclusion of any competing group, namely, by keeping minorities out of power altogether. This is even more salient where the minority is regionally based and focused on capturing regional power, as in the case of Iranian Kurds, who have proven stronger and more durable in their resistance to the Islamic state and the Islamization process than other minorities.

During the first four years of the IRI (1979–83), a strong and viable resistance movement was launched by a coalition of Kurdish political groups. Even though the Kurdish forces and the Kurdish masses shouldered the brunt of the struggle, stirred to action by a feeling of national oppression, they portrayed themselves as fighting for the freedom of all of Iran. Although there was some expression of solidarity from the left and secular-liberal groups, in general the majority of Iranians failed to appreciate the national character of the Kurdish resistance.

In addition, the Kurdish national movement faced a major predicament and threat from the central government, which justified political coercion in the name of religion. In fact, the IRI's head of state (*valli-e faqih*), the supreme leader, while unelected, has paramount authority in deciding the affairs of the country. Thus, when Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared jihad against "infidel" Kurds, he authorized Iran's security forces to crush their resistance with the express backing of the state.

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[50] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) 65.

Between 1979 and 1983, the IRI armed forces and Revolutionary Guard killed more than 50,000 Kurds and razed dozens of Kurdish villages and several cities. This war found justification in the Islamist ideology of the clerics who seized power in the wake of the revolution. To conclude, we should not shy away from defining Iran's military actions against its Kurdish minority as atrocities borne out of an ideology of cultural racism – a powerful analytical concept that not only explains the series of policies imposed on the Kurds in Iran, but also those against other minorities in the region by other contemporary Islamist movements.

Cite this article: Shams S (2023). Cultural Racism and Ethnic Cleansing: The Islamic Republic of Iran and Minority Rights. *Review of Middle East Studies* **56**, 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.2