

## 1 Introduction

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There is a new revolution brewing in Iran. It is not a political revolution, although it was caused by one. And it is not necessarily an economic or cultural revolution, although its consequences certainly reach into both economics and culture. It is a revolution of ideas, a mostly silent contest over the very meaning and essence of Iranian identity, and, more importantly, where Iran and Iranians ought to go from here. Amid all the chaos and turmoil it caused, the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 has unleashed a far more subtle and complex, and quiet, revolution, a revolution in the Iranians' views of themselves, their surrounding world, its meaning, and its essence.

This silent – and at times not-so-silent – revolution has been underway for over two decades now and is being fought over three principal, romanticized identities: an identity rooted in traditionalist conceptions of Islam; another inspired by Islamic reformism; and a third in which neither Islam nor the weight of tradition should encumber the quest for modernity. The intellectual quest to define – or, more accurately, show the path to – an idealized identity, and the resulting contest that has been unleashed in the process, has given rise to three broad discourses in today's Iran. This book looks at each discourse, how and why it came about, what the discourse argues, and, ultimately, where it might be headed. Context, as we shall see shortly, is crucially determinative of a discourse's rise and spread, and the book will also examine the broader contexts within which each of the three contemporary discourses are being articulated.

Insofar as today's Iran is concerned, much of its “context” – political or otherwise – is shaped and influenced by the historic revolution of 1978–79. The revolution left few aspects of life in the country unchanged, with its aftermath continuing to have significant domestic, regional, and international consequences to this day. In relation to the country's intellectual life, by far the biggest consequence of the revolution was to set off three distinct yet overlapping discourses. The revolution's political success led to the emergence of an officially sanctioned,

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and subsequently conservative, Islamist discourse. Ever since its emergence, this conservative religious discourse has sought to theoretically justify the continued dominance of the traditionalist clergy over the entire political system and the cultural life of the country. The discourse has sought to strengthen the theoretical foundations and the practical powers of the absolutist institution of the Supreme Religious Guide, the *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Out of this discourse, and in reaction to it, has emerged an alternative interpretation of political Islam, one that seeks not necessarily to separate Islam from the political process but instead to reform what it sees as an increasingly intolerant and opportunistically motivated interpretation of the religion. This discourse of Islamic reformism is articulated primarily by intellectuals who were themselves once key figures within the post-revolutionary establishment. Once devoted to its ideals, these reformers became disenchanted by its excesses and its increasingly authoritarian tendencies. For just under a decade or so, from 1997 to 2005, the proponents of this discourse found a highly supportive political environment which allowed them unprecedented latitude to articulate, nurture, refine, and publicize their ideas. Unexpectedly, but quite happily, the discourse of Islamic reformism found itself in political tandem with “the reform movement,” and for a good number of years the two seemed to be riding high. But the often-bumpy road of the reform movement hit a dead-end in 2005, and the political fortunes of the reformist Muslim discourse have suffered a precipitous decline ever since. Today, the reform movement is only barely alive. In many ways, it is searching for ways to theoretically resuscitate and revive itself. And, when it does, it will once again find a ready intellectual ally in the discourse of religious reformism.

In the meanwhile, the last decade or so have seen the articulation of a new discourse – or the revamping and re-articulating of an old one – with its central foci being modernity and secularism. Still in the process of formation and somewhat embryonic, the exact contours of this secular-modernist discourse are not yet fully clear, and neither is the degree to which the educated middle classes are willing to accept and internalize it. Nevertheless, articulated in direct response to the state's perceived theocratic excesses and the political ineptitude of religious reformers, the secular-modernist discourse could indeed become an intellectual force for the state to contend with in the relatively near future. Only time will tell. What is certain for now is that Iran's 1978–79 revolution has unleashed three vibrant, and often competing, discourses.

Before developing these introductory arguments in subsequent chapters, several of the key concepts that are used throughout the book

need to be defined and operationalized. Given the focus of the book, starting out with a definition of “discourse” seems only befitting. Broadly, I have taken discourse to mean a general body of thought, based on a series of assumptions, about the nature of things as they are and as they ought to be. Discourse is meant to articulate and explain a worldview, to critically examine and decipher the present and to show signposts for the future. As such, it serves the same purpose and function as ideology. But discourse goes beyond ideology. If we take ideology to simply mean “a blueprint for political thought and action,” then discourse is the larger framework of ideas that informs it. Discourse often entails several parallel or overlapping ideologies, which all coalesce into forming the same “discursive field.” Robert Wuthnow’s definition of discourse is most useful here:

Discourse subsumes the written as well as the verbal, the formal as well as the informal, and the gestural and the ritual as well as the conceptual. It occurs, however, within communities in the broadest sense of the word: communities of competing producers, of interpreters and critics, of audiences and consumers, and of patrons and other significant actors who become the subject of discourse itself. It is only in these concrete living and breathing communities that discourse becomes meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

Along the same lines, a discursive field “provides the fundamental categories in which thinking can take place. It establishes the limits of discussion and defines the range of problems that can be addressed.”<sup>2</sup>

As we shall see in the following chapters, the three different discourses under study here are being articulated in Iran principally through books and journal articles, and, on a few occasions, through speeches and sermons, most of which are then printed as articles or book chapters and are published and distributed. In either case, it is primarily through the written word that the three discourses are being articulated. This overwhelming reliance on the print medium is not without its consequences. Those who follow the discourses and for whose consumption they are primarily produced are urban members of the middle and upper middle classes; they invariably have post-secondary or university degrees; they follow political developments and debates with interest; and, even if in the private sector, for them the state and its countless agencies are an everyday presence in their lives.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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It is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to determine the voracity and strength of each discourse among its intended audiences and among the middle classes at large. If the palpable excitement and enthusiasm with which so-called “reformist” publications are met is any indication, however, at least the two discourses of religious reformism and secular-modernism have considerable following among the throngs of educated, urban Iranians. And, adversely, because some state institutions and agencies are often used to try to institutionalize the conservative religious discourse, its popularity and appeal are extremely difficult to gauge and open to serious question. I will return to this point more fully in chapter 7.

Dependence on print journalism and book publication has its political and economic costs as well, exposing the architects of the two non-state sanctioned discourses to changes in state policy and fluctuations in the market. As we shall see in the chapters to come, periodic arrests of authors and journalists are quite common in Iran, as are newspaper closures, official and unofficial forms of censorship, and various types of political or economic harassment. Some intellectuals have taken their message to the Internet by posting essays and treatises on the World Wide Web, thus getting around some of the restrictions on publishing. But that still does not make them immune from political harassment, thus invariably influencing the premise and content of the discourse they are seeking to articulate.

It goes without saying, of course, that in any setting there is a complex, nuanced relationship between prevailing political and historical environments and the general types and nature of the discourses that initially become prevalent among scholars and the learned literati. This interaction between reality and discourse is likely to take two broad forms. At times a particular discourse may simply be a reflection of commonly perceived realities, shaped by circumstances which it in turn reinforces by bestowing on them theoretical and ideological justification. At other times, discourse may be more of a blueprint for a utopian ideal that is not yet at hand but is seen to be within grasp. These types of discourses often have ideological and theoretical foundations that are based on perceptions of prevailing circumstances. These two different types of discourses may not necessarily be mutually exclusive. In fact, they can and often do coexist alongside one another within any one given set of circumstances.

All discourses, to borrow Wuthnow's terminology, undergo somewhat distinct processes of production, selection, and institutionalization, whereby they are, respectively, formed and articulated, begin to favor some genres and neglect others, and, steadily, become “a relatively

stable feature of the institutional structure of a given society.”<sup>3</sup> In today's Iran, two of the three dominant discourses – those of religious reformism and secular-modernism – are still in embryonic stages of formation. Neither has been around long enough to go through the processes of selection or institutionalization. The third discourse, that of religious conservatism, may have been institutionalized *politically* in the sense that it has the support and endorsement of a number of powerful actors within the state, but its *social* institutionalization is seriously debatable. Only time will tell which of the three discourses discussed here will become institutionalized in the manner that Wuthnow describes. For now, the best we can do is to analyze the circumstances and the dynamics that have facilitated the production of each discourse.

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of contemporary Iranian political history knows that the three discourses discussed in this book are by no means novel to modern times and have, in fact, been a recurrent, if not persistent, feature of Iran since the early 1900s. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 saw the two discourses of Islamic reformism and traditionalism compete for greater political space and popular appeal as articulated especially by Ayatollahs Mirza Hosein Na'ini and Fazlullah Nouri respectively. Within one or two decades, both of these discourses had largely given way to a new, politically supported discourse, this one featuring secularism, the embracing of modernity, economic development, and statism. Although the secular-modernist discourse of the 1990s places a strong emphasis on democracy and civil society instead of statism, in most other areas it overlaps significantly and has important commonalities with its earlier variety.

Given their long histories in Iran, then, what is so special about these discourses now? The answer to this important question is found throughout the book. It can be briefly summarized as follows: the articulation of, and the interplay between, each of the three discourses of religious conservatism, religious reformism, and secular-modernism in contemporary Iran, especially since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, are unique – and also highly significant – for two main reasons. First, despite having important elements and features in common with previous, parallel discourses, today's discourses address themes and issues that in many cases did not exist in the past and are unique to the predicaments and circumstances of post-revolutionary, post-Khomeini Iran. Insofar as the religious conservative discourse is concerned, for example, some of the themes it tackles have long informed the worldview of its architects: ultimate authority belonging to

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 9–10.

God; conceptions of *ijtihad* and *taqlid*; literalist interpretations of the Qur'an; and the like. But the question of whether a *Vali-ye Faqih* should or should not also be a *Marja'* is something that has come directly out of the experiences of the Islamic Republic in general and the post-Khomeini era in particular. Moreover, while the predecessors to today's religious reformist discourse also addressed issues such as *ijtihad* and hermeneutics, as well as constitutional government in Ayatollah Na'ini's case, notions such as civil society, dialogue among civilizations, and "theo-democracy" (see chapter 5) are inventions of the latest version of the discourse. The differences between today's secular-modernist discourse and its intellectual ancestors tend to be even more stark, with democracy seen as the centerpiece of modernity today rather than the statism that was praised, or at least tolerated, in the 1920s and the 1930s.

Second, and even more important than the differences in the intellectual contents of the three discourses of today, is the actual *context* within which they are being articulated now and are competing with one another. Today Iran finds itself at a historical juncture that is unique in its recent past. Today's Iran is the product of a mass-based, religiously inspired and directed revolution, a theocracy featuring the rule of a supreme jurist, a bloody war that is still very much alive in the collective memory of Iranians, a highly politically charged population with widespread access to the latest forms of communication technology, and almost unprecedented levels of domestic and international political tensions. Since structures and environments affect the shape and direction of discourse, the discourses of today differ from those of the past in important ways. More significantly, today's discourses address wider and intellectually more sophisticated audiences, they have different goals and different "targets" for change, and they define themselves in relation or in opposition to a theocratic political system. For the first time in the history of modern Iran, worldviews about politics and the individual's role and place in it are being articulated at a time when Islam informs the official guidelines of public policy. Moreover, globalization, information technology, and the diffusion of norms, values, and ideas across national boundaries have never had the ease and the speed with which they travel today. The resulting consequences for the ideas that are formulated and expressed today as compared to twenty or thirty years ago are far-reaching. For the first time, each of the three discourses find themselves in competition with one another within a theocratic political system that lacks ideological and often institutional cohesion, frequently opting to support the conservative discourse but at times giving timid backing to the reformists as well. The very fact that Iran is a young theocracy with

institutions that seem not to have taken their final shape yet is bound to affect state–religion relations in the coming decades. Whether it becomes a bastion of some idealized, conservative Islam, or alternatively one of a reformed and supposedly modernized Islam, or whether it remains a theocracy at all, in name or in actual substance, depends as much on the depth and resilience of each discourse as on political and institutional developments. What is certain is that the silent revolution of ideas underway in Iran today is bound to have consequences for the Iranian polity for decades to come. In short, the discourses under discussion here are both different and unique in themselves and are also being articulated within unique historical circumstances. As such, their study both in terms of what they say and what they mean for their intended audiences, as well as the unintended consequences they might have on the larger polity, are key to a better understanding of contemporary Iran.

I should also clarify my use of the term “intellectual.” Below, in chapter 3, I offer a rather detailed definition of intellectuals as defined and operationalized by Iranian thinkers themselves. For my own usage here, in line with the arguments of Edward Shils and most other observers of intellectuals, I do not draw distinctions between *intellectuals* and the *intelligentsia* as two distinct social categories.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have argued that there are a number of important differences between the two groups. In general terms, the argument goes, the intelligentsia is made up of the learned elites who are distinguished from the general population by virtue of their higher levels of learning and their philosophical expositions on the nature of the surrounding world. Intellectuals, on the other hand, are active critics of the social and political orders, thinkers for whom thought alone is insufficient and must be actively propagated and be made to understood by larger audiences.<sup>5</sup>

At least for the purposes of this book, I conceptualize intellectuals and the intelligentsia as being the same social group: learned men and women – made up mostly of academics, writers, and journalists – whose

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Power and Other Essays* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972), and the collection of essays in S. N. Eisenstadt and S. R. Grubard, eds., *Intellectuals and Tradition* (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> While not necessarily distinguishing them from the intelligentsia, Lewis Feuer defines intellectuals as “that section of the educated class which had aspirations to political power either directly by seeking to be society’s political rulers or indirectly by directing its conscience and decisions . . . Always the intellectual regarded himself as somewhat chosen; he had a mission conferred upon him as a modern Moses by history. And this sense of mission is intrinsic to the consciousness of the intellectual . . . The intellectual is an amalgam of the prophet and the philosopher-king.” Lewis Feuer, “What Is an Intellectual?”, in Alexander Gella, ed., *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals: Theory, Methods, and Case Study* (London: Sage, 1976), pp. 49–51.

primary function is to reflect on their surroundings and, by doing so, encourage the emergence of intentional or unintentional worldviews and discourses. At times, as the opportunity arises, the two groups may become separated from each other by their passion and their conviction with regard to ideas, and by the means and methodology through which they convey those ideas to their intended audiences. There are entirely different dynamics at work when someone gives a speech in a public square to a large audience gathered to hear him, as compared to when one reads a book or an essay in the quiet of one's house. The key here is context and circumstance. In certain contexts, which often occur during extraordinary times, the intelligentsia may be defined as a larger social group of learned elites from whom a smaller group of intellectuals emerge and advocate certain ideals with uncharacteristic enthusiasm and determination. In specific relationship to Iran, such circumstances may have existed in the years immediately preceding and following the 1978–79 revolution, but not anymore today, more than a quarter century later. Not surprisingly, as discussed in chapter 3, the “revolutionary” intellectuals of the 1970s have today turned into what one Iranian scholar calls “discourse” intellectuals. As such, distinguishing between intellectuals and the intelligentsia in today's Iran is somewhat meaningless.

There is already a rich body of literature in English that examines intellectual trends in modern Iran, though none, to my knowledge, focuses specifically on the post-Khomeini era.<sup>6</sup> This literature has added immensely to our knowledge of contemporary Iranian intellectuals' efforts to come to grips with such vexing issues as modernity, authenticity, identity, and the like. Not surprisingly, the primary consumers and beneficiaries of this literature have been Western academics and

<sup>6</sup> A notable sample of such works include, among others, Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2001); Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: NYU Press, 1993); Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998); Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernity in Iran (1953–2000)* (Leiden: Brill 2001); Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Negin Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemmas of Authenticity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Negin Nabavi, ed., *Intellectual Trends in Twentieth Century Iran: A Critical Survey* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); and Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002).



scholars. My goal here has been to look specifically at those Iranian intellectuals who have had the greatest impact in shaping ideas and perceptions inside Iran, many of whom, at one point or another, have lived, or studied, or even written and published outside of Iran. Nevertheless, the primary focus and target of their intellectual endeavors have been inside the country.

I have sought to portray here as thorough and accurate a picture of the three discourses as possible. Despite my best efforts to have access to the widest and most representative spectrum of books and articles from each discursive field, however, I would not be surprised at all if some of the key publications with significant impact in each discourse have slipped by or fallen below my radar screen. Also, the fact that the discourses discussed here are still in the process of formation – that this round of discourse-making is still an on-going process rather than a historical episode belonging to a distant past – adds a further layer of difficulty to their study. Mindful of these challenges, I have taken as my central task here the presentation of a snapshot of the life and goals of each discourse from its birth in the 1980s up until the present. Perhaps years from now, at some point in the future, a more reflective work can assess the long-term successes or failures of the three discourses. For my part, the best that I can do at this point, as I have tried in chapter 7, is to offer some educated guesses about potential future trends based on present evidence.

In laying out the arguments of the book, I start in chapter 2 with an examination of the political and historical contexts within which the three discourses have emerged, looking specifically at developments in post-revolutionary Iran, especially after the consolidation of the Islamic Republic became fairly certain in 1988–89, and how these events have influenced the intellectual endeavors and outlooks of the country's thinkers. Chapter 3 offers an examination of the country's current crop of intellectuals, looking specifically at how they see their roles and responsibilities, what informs their definitions of what an intellectual is, and how they go about constructing idealized visions of the future. The three following chapters examine each of the discourses, beginning with the conservative religious discourse in chapter 4, the reformist religious discourse in chapter 5, and the secular-modernist discourse in chapter 6. The book concludes with chapter 7, which assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of each discourse and ends with some thoughts on possible scenarios for the future. In the end, I hope to have made a modest contribution to our collective understanding of contemporary Iran, a fascinating and maddeningly complex country.

## 2 Emerging Iranian discourses

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For nearly three decades now, Iran has attracted much of the world's attention as a supposed bastion of radical Islam, a key player in the global war on terrorism, and a central force in – and often an alleged cause of – turmoil in one of the most unstable regions of the world. The considerable focus thus directed at Iran's volatile internal politics and its foreign relations has all too often overshadowed attention to more subtle developments unfolding inside the country, particularly among its learned elites and opinion makers. That these unfolding dynamics are of profound and long-term cultural and intellectual consequences makes detailed and careful attention to them all the more imperative.

This chapter argues that the evolving direction of Iran's 1978–79 revolution, from its inception up to the present, and the trials and travails of Iranians as a whole over the last quarter century have given rise to three competing worldviews, three discourses, each of which advance their own interpretations of the present and the ideal path to follow in the future. In broad terms, these discourses can be categorized as religious conservative, religious reformist, and secular-modernist.

The religious conservative discourse can be most readily identified with the religio-political establishment that came to power after the revolution's success. It seeks to explain the world, and more specifically its vision of the ideal social and political order, in terms that it claims most closely reflect the letter and the spirit of the arguments of the regime's founder, Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini. The protagonists of the religious conservative discourse maintain that Iran's cherished Islamic tradition and heritage provide the perfect blueprint for its political system, its social order, and its cultural values and aspirations. Translated into reality, this means the institutionalization of the theological notion of the Absolute Jurisconsult (*Velayat-e Mutlaq-e Faqih*) in the political realm, and the protection of the country's Islamic norms and values against the corrupting and corroding influences of Western modernity.

Although often closely linked with the Islamic Republican state, the religious conservative discourse operates parallel to, but separate from,