

# 1 State Formation and Citizenship

## An Investigation beyond a Eurocentric Gaze

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### 1.1 Introduction

*Women and the Islamic Republic's* central argument is simple: If we shift our gaze from institutions and elite political contestations to everyday encounters, we will see how the Islamic Republic's hybrid governance structure produces citizens who cross, abide, and (at times) manipulate the state's formal boundaries. This pushes the postrevolutionary state toward a balancing act to pacify its female population.

More specifically, by exploring the experiences of diverse groups of women during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and in the postwar years, this book demonstrates how women's contextually contingent remaking of their rights, responsibilities, and statuses in postrevolutionary Iran also intermingles with, shifts, and conditions the state formation process as a consequence of what was, at least initially, an imposed war (Hiltermann, 2010). Previous investigations of non-elite women's and other populations' everyday encounters have shown how the state employed “women” as an important trope for the postrevolutionary state, as well as how women, in turn, used the trope to make the state answer to their concerns (Bayat, 2010a; Deeb, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Moallem, 2005; Osanloo, 2009). *Women and the Islamic Republic* contributes to these studies by addressing a significant gap in this literature: I explore the effects of the Iran–Iraq war *on the status and formation of women's rights, roles, and responsibilities* in conditioning the state's formation. Each chapter illustrates the different forms and scales of citizenship that my interlocutors performed in postrevolutionary Iran within the broader milieu of legal inequality and ambiguous governance. My interlocutors also negotiated citizenship within the context and legacies of the Iran–Iraq war, as well as the Shi'i foundation of the state, which venerates female religious figures who crossed public/private boundaries (Povey and Rostami-Povey, 2012).

By studying statecraft as entailing acts of citizenship, *Women and the Islamic Republic* contributes to feminist political theory and the feminist

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struggle to move beyond resistance in discussions of women and the state. The importance of my non-elite female interlocutors to the conditioning of the state formation process is not tied to the Iranian context. Rather, my exploration of gendered citizenship in contemporary Iran can more broadly help us understand the substance of citizenship, as well as the state formation process for hybrid regimes in the region (De Souza and Lipietz, 2011). This book, then, does not take citizenship as central to state formation because of the Eurocentrism that plagues political science despite being a “global discipline” (Acharya, 2014, p. 649). Instead, by sidelining a Eurocentric gaze, I join other scholars who question their own assumptions to demonstrate what the post-1979 Iranian experience teaches us conceptually about citizenship and the art of statecraft.

### 1.2 Postrevolutionary Conflicts: Numbers and Logistics

The Iran–Iraq war, as well as the emergence of a civil war between the state and its opposition, placed the Iranian state in a unique position to shape women’s rights struggles in postrevolutionary Iran. As such, this section will briefly historicize the 1980–1988 period. The victory of the 1979 revolution and conflict between different oppositional forces after the fall of the Shah coincided with the start of the Iran–Iraq war. In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, beginning what would be an eight-year war. Farhi (2004) has argued that coherent statistics do not exist regarding the number of people who participated in the Iran–Iraq war during different periods. This renders all estimations problematic.

There is limited scholarly research and social analysis of the Iran–Iraq war, and the Islamic Republic continues to dominate this discourse (Saghafi, 2001). However, for the purpose of presenting a broad statistical perspective, I offer the following data, which I verified through several and mostly reliable sources. This conflict resulted in the death of an estimated 188,000–213,000 people at the front; approximately 16,000 were killed in city bombings and attacks (Ghasami, n.d.; Sepahe Pasdarane, Revolutionary Guards website). According to Farhi’s research, between 1.5 and 3 million people participated in the war, with Iran’s population growing from 35 million in 1979 to 50 million toward the end of the war in 1986 (Farhi, 2004).

Different sources seem to suggest the following regarding women’s participation in the war: According to one source, 6,601 women are considered martyrs of the war by the Islamic Republic, but approximately 100 of these women were killed by the Pahlavi Monarchy prior

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to the revolution (Ghasami, n.d.; Saeidi, 2008). Estimates suggest that 27 percent of these women were martyred in Khuzestan, southern Iran, parts of which were occupied from 1980 to 1982 (Safavi, 1389/2010). During the war, about 22,808 women volunteered as first-aid medics on various warfronts. Scholars based in Iran argue that 2,276 female doctors also worked on the front lines (Anon., 1390/2011; Ghasami, n.d.). In 1984, the Revolutionary Guards trained 4,000 female volunteers to carry out intelligence-gathering operations (Moghadam, 1988). While these statistics are hardly definitive, we can surmise that Iranian women had a significant presence in the Iran–Iraq war.

The number of Marxist groups, organizations, and parties grew in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. As Behrooz (1999, p. 105) argues:

While prior to the revolution there had been perhaps a dozen such groups, after it their numbers grew to perhaps over 80, and this number increased as Marxist groups began to fragment into smaller units. Indeed, after the revolution it became common for any gathering of a few Marxist activists to call itself an organisation or party and claim to be the rightful vanguard of the working class. Hence, it is neither possible, nor perhaps necessary, to produce an account of all Marxist organisations, parties, and groups in the post-revolutionary era. It is safe to suggest that whatever happened to the major organisations and parties also broadly happened to the smaller ones.

*Women and the Islamic Republic* focuses on different Marxist groups. One of the largest Marxist organizations post-1979 was the Fadaiyan. In June 1980, it split into two factions: aksariyyat (majority) and aqaliyyat (minority). While the aksariyyat were willing to negotiate with the newly established regime, the aqaliyyat believed in armed resistance against the regime. During this time, the organization had fewer than 100 members, but it was estimated to have had over half a million devoted supporters (Behrooz, 1999, p. 105).

Paykar was a small organization that had between thirty and fifty influential members (Behrooz, 1999). Paykar is believed to have had thousands of supporters that were former Muslim Mojahedin who had moved away from religion and toward Marxism (Behrooz, 1999). The organization was influential in the Kurdistan region, where it ideologically supported militant Kurdish groups, such as the Komoleh. The Tudeh was another Marxist organization that lacked popular support in post-1979 Iran. This was partly because it could not garner significant popular support after the 1953 coup. In 1980, it sided with the aksariyyat faction and revamped its ideological framework (Behrooz, 1999). By 1981, the Tudeh Party had lost its connections with other leftist groups, including the aksariyyat. The Tudeh and aksariyyat both collaborated with the newly established regime to suppress other leftist groups

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(Behrooz, 1999). Smaller organizations such as the Organization of the Worker's Path (Sazman-e Rah-e Kargar) were important not because of their large support base – which did not exist – but because of their approach to instigating discussion among Iranian leftist organizations (Behrooz, 1999).

Another Marxist group with an insignificant number of supporters was Communist Unity (Sazman-e Vahdat-e Komonisty), but between 1979 and 1981 it continued to generate debates within the left through publications by a small circle of intellectuals (Behrooz, 1999). The Communist League of Iran (Etehadieh Komonistha-ye Iran) was a Maoist organization that began an armed struggle against the Islamic Republic in 1982 (Behrooz, 1999). The Iranian left grew post-1979 but did not enjoy popular support the way Ayatollah Khomeini did. Nevertheless, their experiences within prisons clarify leftist women's engagement with the postrevolutionary regime's gender policies in a space that continues to be of great importance in current Iran.

People from various backgrounds fought and died in defense of Iran, including members of the Islamic Mojahedin and the leftist Feda'iyyin guerrilla group (Saghafi, 1378/1999; Tagavi, 1985). Efat Mahbaz (2008), a supporter of aksariyyat, remembers this: Her brother Ali, also connected to aksariyyat, was arrested and executed a month before he was to leave for the front to offer medical support. Ali Mahbaz was an expert in laboratory science and a supervisor of the laboratory at Sarkhah Hasaar Hospital prior to his execution in the fall of 1981. Moreover, leftist political prisoners were not indifferent to Iran's war with Iraq. Efat Mahbaz (2008, p. 271) remembers being freed after seven years in prison:

As we were freed from prison, many Iranian prisoners of war were also released by Iraq. Like many other Iranians, I too went to greet these prisoners near Azadi Square upon their return to Iran. They had sorrowful faces with cold smiles on their lips. They were given red roses to hold. The suits they had on appeared to be in pain. Most of the people [that had come to welcome them home] were crying. Everything came together in a way that I instinctively began to compare them to political prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

The Iran–Iraq war served as a backdrop to the experiences of leftist political prisoners from behind bars, but it also shaped the Islamic Republic's view of its opposition. In another illustration, memoirs of Iranian prisoners of war have claimed that in the last few years of the war Iraqis relied on members of the Islamic Mojahedin as translators

<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own and occasionally edited by my dear friend Zahra Abbasi.

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during interrogation of Iranian fighters (Hosseini-pour, 1391/2012). The war was understood from and lived in different perspectives, many of which still require further investigation.

After the 1979 revolution, different political factions initially thought that supporters of Khomeini, who had quickly gained popular support, would share power with them (Arjomand, 1988). This would not, however, be the case. In the 1980–1985 period, women (and men) associated with Marxist–Leninist organizations or the Islamic Mojahedin faced mass imprisonment and execution as the Islamic Republic Party gained control of institutions under Khomeini’s leadership (Shahidian, 1997). Many believe that a second revolution took place from 1980 to 1983, as well as a civil war, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran.

In 1981, the Islamic Mojahedin retaliated against the consolidation of power by the Islamic Republic Party and its human rights violations in prisons by killing over 1,000 influential clerics and laymen in bombing attacks (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2009). One local nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Iran estimates that the Mojahedin killed close to 17,000 armed and unarmed Iranians between 1980 and 2012, with most of the killings having taken place between 1980 and 1988.<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Amjadian was a prisoner of war in Iraq when he was killed by the Mojahedin only twenty-five days before he was to be released following six years of imprisonment. The following is his friend’s reaction to witnessing his death, as shared with Amjadian’s family:

The free spirit Shahid<sup>3</sup> engaged in the combats accompanying his brothers and was also a prisoner of war. He was martyred by the filthy hands of the hypocrites.<sup>4</sup> You, family of the free Shahid Amjadian! The night of Mahmoud’s martyrdom, you were not there to mourn his death. It was unbelievable how the whole campsite was in grief of his death! In the campsite where I was imprisoned, the doors were closed and prayers were already said. That night, after Salah<sup>5</sup> was observed, every single one of the men there was stricken with inconsolable grief.

His friend continued:

Even though they did not know yet if he had been martyred for sure, they faced to Qiblah<sup>6</sup> and mourned his death. The sound of crying and mourning made one

<sup>2</sup> Shaheed (2012, p. 13). For more on these killings, see the website for Habiliaan, a local NGO in Iran that has documented the names of victims and locations of their deaths: Habiliaan, Iran, accessed in 2012, [www.habiliaan.ir/en/](http://www.habiliaan.ir/en/).

<sup>3</sup> The Iranian prisoners of war are called *Azadeh* (free), signifying their free spirit.

<sup>4</sup> In the Islamic Iranian jargon, the term *Monafeqin* (hypocrites) refers to the Islamic Mojahedin.

<sup>5</sup> An obligatory religious duty in Islam that must be observed five times a day.

<sup>6</sup> Mecca: In Islam, all Muslims face Mecca at the time of prayers as an indication of unity.

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Iraqi soldier (guards of the prison) so curious that he had come behind the doors to see if we were making trouble. The mourning stopped, but sound of grief was heard occasionally. The guard called me and said: “Come out! Go wash your face. Your brother is not dead yet!” The guard tried hard to stop the mourning, but in vain. Believe me, they cried so uncontrollably and loudly that the Iraqi soldier told me: “Go tell others that your brother is not martyred. Do not worry!” The enemy knew that our brother was already martyred. (Amjadian, 1381/2002, pp. 18–19)

This narration illustrates the heartache that Iranians experienced because of the Mojahedin’s acts of violence. Viewing prisoners mainly through their group identity, the Islamic Republic in turn carried out mass arrests and executions of all opposition forces. Some imprisoned members of the Islamic Mojahedin were connected to those who were actively fighting the Islamic Republic outside prison. For instance, Nasrin Parvaz (2002, p. 99), a member of the Union of Communist Militants (which merged with the Komoleh shortly after the revolution) who was initially given an execution sentence, stated that imprisoned members of the Islamic Mojahedin would steal money from leftist prisoners to send to their organization outside prison. She describes the complex system Islamic Mojahedin had created to support their organization (Parvaz, 2002, p. 122):

They were Mujaheds that had become penitents [*tavvabs*] in prison. After some time, their organisation establishes relations with the organisation outside of prison. At the same time, they continued to work closely with interrogators. This collaboration was so extensive that at one point they were able to sneak a film of someone’s torture out of prison. They were even able to steal the files of some of their friends and save them from execution. The interrogators trusted them so much that they were allowed to go home and rest for a few days, and then return to prison.<sup>7</sup>

Within this context of attacks and counterattacks, the precise number of political prisoners from 1980 to 1988 is impossible to determine. Indeed, most researchers agree that only certain individuals within the Islamic Republic’s ruling elite could verify this information.<sup>8</sup> However,

<sup>7</sup> I have both interviewed Parvaz and read her work. Parvaz’s memoir is over 300 pages and in Farsi. Parts of the memoir have been translated into English; see Parvaz and Namazie (2003). Her writing and poetry can be downloaded here: [www.nasrinparvaz.org/web/](http://www.nasrinparvaz.org/web/). Parvaz’s claims here regarding the Mojahedin’s complex interaction with prison officials are also supported by Talebi (2011, p. 80).

<sup>8</sup> This question was posed to Shadi Sadr, Ervand Abrahamian, and Reza Afshari via online communication. All three are experts on the plight of political prisoners in postrevolutionary Iran, and none were able or willing to offer an estimate. On March 11, 2012, in an email exchange, Abrahamian stated that it is “impossible to give even half-estimates” as prisons were “revolving doors” during the 1980–1988 years. In an email

we do know this for certain. From 1981 until 1988, mass arrests and summary executions were common. We also know that the terror and mass arrests that followed the 1979 revolution resulted in the relocation of 4 million Iranians to the West, particularly the United States (Afshari, 2001). And, during the 1988 massacre, up to 1,000 prisoners in Tehran's Evin prison were executed; many more in Karaj's Gohardasht prison met the same fate (Robertson, 2011, p. 75).

Abrahamian (2008, p. 181) estimates that at least 8,000 executions took place between 1981 and 1985, and most of the executed were members of the Islamic Mojahedin. Between 1980 and 1988, 10,588 political prisoners are believed to have been executed in total.<sup>9</sup> Prisoners believe that everyday prison conditions improved between 1984 and 1987. This was a period when Ayatollah Montazeri's followers occupied key administrative positions (Robertson, 2011, p. 35). Afshari (2001, p. 105) argues that Montazeri and his followers had a significant role in removing the fanatical networks that maintained power within the prison system.

Additionally, prisoners remember resisting the state more forcefully during this period. They recall being more confrontational with guards, even attacking them when they heard news that the state was nearing collapse from relatives, visitors, and other prisoners who would join at later stages (Robertson, 2011, p. 36). For instance, in 1988, when news reached prisoners that fewer Iranians were willing to go to the front lines of war, Marxist prisoners refused to observe the Muslim fast during Ramadan (Robertson, 2011, p. 37). However, at times when Iran was losing at the front, such as the 1988 period when it was forced to end the war, prisoners also experienced the worst treatment, including summary executions and increased lashings.

While the level of violence fluctuated, dominant trends in the conditions at Evin prison in Tehran and Gohardasht prison in Karaj, as well as in the treatment of political prisoners, allow us to draw some tentative conclusions about female prisoners' experiences. The former political prisoners included in this study were held either with the general population or in solitary confinement. During the most difficult torture, they were held in solitary confinement, itself a form of torture (Mesdaghi, 1383/2004). Men and women were oftentimes held on different levels of

exchange on March 13, 2012, Afshari added that it becomes particularly difficult to make an estimate given that we still have limited knowledge of prisons in the provinces that are distant from Tehran.

<sup>9</sup> These data come from [www.iranrights.org/farsi/memorial-search.php?pagenum=0](http://www.iranrights.org/farsi/memorial-search.php?pagenum=0). Many thanks to Leila Mouri and Shadi Sadr for helping me find this information.



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the Evin and Gohardasht prisons. They saw each other in the corridors and during visitations, and they were sometimes placed in the same room when brought in to see the dead bodies following an execution (Mesdaghi, 1383/2004). Forcing prisoners to see and touch the corpses of their former comrades was, for prison officials, a “teaching moment” they believed would encourage other prisoners to submit to the demands of interrogators (Mesdaghi, 1383/2004).

Discussions around the use of rape in prisons circa 1980–1988 are rampant and controversial. In a 2011 report, Sadr argues that rape was common during this period in Iran’s prisons. In my interviews with fifty former political prisoners (2008–2009) now living in Germany and Sweden, however, interviewees were adamant that rape was not widespread at the time.

Significantly, Sadr and I had interviewed some of the same women. During a conference in 2012 at Oxford University, I saw Sadr and some of our interviewees. I asked the interviewees why they had given us different responses to the question of rape. Most ignored my effort at starting a debate, but one woman became outraged that I would suggest that prison rape was not widespread and mentioned it had long been settled in memoirs. She believed that because many former prisoners, including Nasrin Parvaz and Iraj Mesdaghi, had discussed the rape of women in prison, I should not be concerned about this inconsistency, and she viewed my curiosity itself as an indication of my carelessness.

I will always remember the faces of a few leftist men sitting next to her at the lunch table changing color as they physically leaned in toward me with looks of disgust. It was one of the few times during my research where I lost my confidence. I was scared. My fear was not of a physical confrontation but of the scholarly concern of hurting my interlocutors in the process of research. As more prison memoirs were published, this issue became hazier. For instance, Shahrnush Parsipur (2013, pp. 38–39) observes,

In truth, I never heard prisoners talk about sexual abuse. But it was rumored that on their final night, young girls sentenced to death were wed to the guards so that they wouldn’t be buried as virgins. It was said that if a girl was buried while still a virgin, she would lure a man to follow her to the grave. My only proof that this might have been happening were Shahin’s last words [this prisoner had stated that her interrogator had touched her breasts, and she felt this meant she would be executed. Indeed, she was executed shortly after the alleged incident]. I did know a couple of other prisoners who had gotten close to having sexual relations with the guards, but in one instance it was a prisoner’s strategy to stop her torture, and in another, deeply affectionate feelings had developed between an interrogator and a prisoner.



### 1.3 Ambiguous Citizenry Structures and War

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These inconsistencies capture the complexity of working with memories, as well as of the formation of analysis in qualitative research, and raise many questions: What is at stake in such claims for a feminist lawyer living in exile (Sadr) versus former political prisoners who are also living in exile? Given the conservative elements in Iran's left as well as the political work that the terms *rape* and *prostitute* carry out in Iranian society, could it be that shame, self-care, and self-preservation prevented some women from discussing rape with me, an outsider?

These questions will continue to unsettle me and complicate the possible uses and boundaries of ethnography in general and interviews in particular. Reflecting on such moments of the research process reminds me of Hartman's (2008) emphasis on recognizing what may never be retrieved in the lives of the marginalized. At the same time, Hartman insists on thinking imaginatively about that which we cannot know for certain by using, with restraint, innovative reading practices such as an investigation of narratives.

### 1.3 Intersections between Ambiguous Citizenry Structures and War in a Hybrid Regime

Feminist scholars generally agree that women's citizenship is often compromised in postrevolutionary periods as they are pushed back into the home (Hatem, 2000; Joseph, 2000; Tetreault, 1994; Vickers, 2008). Iran's formal citizenry framework and unique experience with war in the postrevolutionary period animated the possibility for innovative gendered approaches to citizenship. My investigation of citizenship in the postrevolutionary Iranian state illustrates that, in addition to explicit legal inequality, the ambiguity surrounding the legislation of Islamic law engenders what Nyers (2011) has identified as "irregular citizenship": namely, that "citizenship has not been revoked per se, but ... rendered inoperable, or 'irregularised.'"

Minoo Moallem (2005) asserts that the Islamic Republic implements a citizenry agenda through the transnational notion of an *Islamic Ummat* to downplay the diversity among Muslims in Iran as well as abroad. Moallem (2005, p. 24) states: "The patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality as a major subject of religious and cultural discourses converges with hegemonic notions of sexuality that privilege heteronormativity in the context of modernity and postmodernity. Thus, both gendered and sexual citizenship are created (and of course contested) as sites of exclusion and inclusion."

The Iranian constitution explicitly addresses civic rights as well as social rights. The problem is that these rights are inconsistently upheld

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and overshadowed by a vague notion of Islamic authenticity. For instance, as Paidar (1995) has argued, the Iranian constitution identifies the state as being responsible for adhering to Islamic law with respect to women, but the constitution refers to Islamic law “as an extra-constitutional criteria in many of its articles” (p. 261). Paidar has illustrated, for instance, that Article 21 – which addresses the protection of mothers and the family – identifies the state as being responsible for also protecting women’s rights within an Islamic legal framework. However, there isn’t any clarification on what women’s rights are or what qualifies as Islamic law. I agree with Paidar’s assessment that “this resulted in the subjection of the constitution to a divine law outside and above it” (p. 261). *Women and the Islamic Republic* demonstrates that in addition to conflict over explicit legal inequalities, citizenship’s irregular nature in Iran has intensified elite and non-elite contestation over the term in practice as well as theory.

In another example, Paidar (1995, p. 261) notes that Article 151 identifies the state to be responsible for providing military service for all citizens within the boundaries of Islamic law. Whether women should be permitted to defend the country in the context of war remains vague, though. In some instances, the law is unambiguous regarding women’s rights but equally irregular. While Iranian law does not ban women from biking, for example, in 2016 Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, identified women’s cycling in public as impermissible.<sup>10</sup>

While Khamenei’s fatwas in relation to social issues are national law according to Article 110 of Iran’s constitution, they are not legislated the same way throughout the country because of the controversy that surrounds the exceptional amount of power the position of Supreme Leader has been granted in Iran’s post-1988 constitution. Khamenei’s rulings, then, are not equally and consistently abided by in practice by other state agents, including his representatives, or by the population at large.<sup>11</sup> Iranian women in Kurdistan’s province of Marivan, for instance, have been prohibited from cycling in public. As a result of such

<sup>10</sup> See BBC Persian’s reporting on this topic: [www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/09/160918\\_126\\_khamenei\\_cycling\\_women\\_forbidden](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/09/160918_126_khamenei_cycling_women_forbidden). See also the Supreme Leader’s official website: <http://leader.ir/fa/content/16227/دوچرخه-سواری-بانون-سوار>.

<sup>11</sup> In another instance, while Iran’s law and the Supreme Leader view music concerts as permissible, Ayatollah Alamolhoda, who is the Supreme Leader’s representative and the leader of Friday prayers in Mashhad, does not allow music concerts to take place in the holy Shi’i city: [www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/285820/سر-نباید-دیگر-بیاید-مشهد-به-باید-فاسق-تور-یست-چرا](http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/285820/سر-نباید-دیگر-بیاید-مشهد-به-باید-فاسق-تور-یست-چرا). On Alamolhoda’s position and how it conflicts with the Supreme Leader’s views on this issue see: [www.ghatreh.com/news/nn33212192/است-رهبری-نظر-خلاف-صدر-صد-الهدی-علم-اظهار-ات-کرمانی-حجتی](http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn33212192/است-رهبری-نظر-خلاف-صدر-صد-الهدی-علم-اظهار-ات-کرمانی-حجتی).