

Introduction

Reconstruction Jihad

Protest and Persistence

In early June 2009, Iran buzzed with anticipation of the upcoming presidential election. Crowds of people gathered in the streets, joined rallies, and chanted slogans in support and opposition of the four major candidates. They included the hard-liner or principlist incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956), the conservative Revolutionary Guardsman, Mohsen Rezaee (b. 1954), the reformist former speaker of the parliament, Mehdi Karroubi (b. 1937), and the reformist former prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (b. 1942), who was gaining in popularity. During the weeks leading up to the election, Iranians tuned into the country's first nationally televised presidential debates that took place between these four candidates. The morning after Iranians had cast their ballots on June 12, the Ministry of Interior (Vizarat-i Kishvar) announced the results. Ahmadinejad prevailed with 63.1 percent of the vote while Mousavi placed second with 34.2 percent.¹

Due to suspicions and allegations of electoral fraud, thousands of Mousavi supporters took to the streets and congregated in the public squares of Tehran and other cities to peacefully protest the results. Shortly afterward, a reformist opposition movement, known as the Green Movement (Junbash-i Sabz) (green being the color of Islam), emerged with Mousavi and Karroubi as its leaders. After the election, the movement's protestors and sympathizers burned tires in the streets, drove around honking their horns, and chanted slogans against Ahmadinejad and in support of Mousavi and Karroubi. In response, state security forces stopped these individuals, pulled over and batoned their cars, and threatened to do the same to their drivers and passengers. At night, students and residents shouted, "God is greater" (*Allāhu*

¹ "2009 Presidential Election," Iran Data Portal, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://irandatportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>.

'*Akbar*) from the balconies and rooftops of dormitories and other buildings in an attempt to challenge the state's religious legitimacy and authority. Thirty years earlier during the 1979 revolution, Iranians had chanted the same slogan against Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–80) and his secular persona and policies. The security forces subsequently raided these dormitories and buildings in search of reformist activists and partisans.

On June 20, the day after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) publicly blamed the protestors for any violence that ensued, a twenty-six-year-old woman named Neda Agha-Soltan was gunned down during a demonstration and became a symbol of the Green Movement – much like Tunisia's Mohamed Bouazizi and Egypt's Khaled Mohamed Said during the Arab uprisings that began over a year later. Following this tragic incident, an increasingly visible and forceful security presence emerged in the squares and thoroughfares of the country's cities. As the protests continued, the offices of Mousavi and Karroubi were closed, their advisers and associates were harassed and arrested, and both candidates were placed under house arrest where they remained as of 2019. During the ensuing days, weeks, and months, foreign journalists were expelled from the country while an undisclosed number of local activists, students, journalists, academics, intellectuals, and other suspected dissidents were beaten, detained, and imprisoned. To send a message to the Green Movement and the wider public, state television broadcasted the show trials and public confessions of some of these individuals.² Foreign governments that criticized the Iranian state and were suspected of backing and fomenting the demonstrations were put on notice with the detention and imprisonment of a French student and three American hikers in 2009 and an attack against the British embassy in 2011.

Between 2009 and 2011, sporadic protests that were confronted and contained by the security forces momentarily continued. After the Persian New Year (*Nowrūz*) in March 2011, the demonstrations seemed to have completely fizzled out. When all was said and done, the first three months of the postelection protests during their highest intensity had claimed between thirty-six and seventy-two lives,

² On the Islamic Republic's systematic use of torture and televised public recantations or confessions as a propaganda tool, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 124–77.

depending on the statistics that were released by the state and the opposition.³ Without discounting the degree of repression or devaluing human life, these figures were relatively low considering that the same number of lives, if not more, were often lost in a single day during the nearby popular uprisings and civil conflicts of the so-called Arab Spring. What the Iranian state aptly called the “Islamic Awakening” (*Bīdār-i Islāmī*), with the convenient exception of Iran’s Syrian ally, led to the disappearance, death, and displacement of millions of Arab citizens.

Apart from the nonviolent strategy, discipline, and restraint of Iranian opposition leaders and activists, one plausible explanation for the disparity of outcomes between the Green Movement and the Arab Spring was that Iranian state leaders and officials had come to power through a revolution from below contrary to their Arab republican counterparts, who had done so through military coups – even if they had been labeled revolutions for the purposes of legitimation and mobilization. As a consequence, Iranian leaders and officials ostensibly better understood the nuances and dynamics of social movements, popular uprisings, and peaceful protests, and how to diffuse and subdue them through a careful and delicate combination of coercion and repression, on the one hand, and accommodation and concession, on the other. As these leaders and officials had discovered during the revolution, disproportionate coercion and repression by the shah had instilled fear in activists and other citizens in the short term, but antagonized, outraged, and emboldened them in the long run.⁴ Since 1979, the noncoercive tactics of the Iranian state have strengthened it and helped it survive the Green Movement and other challenges before it. If coercion did not fully explain the persistence of the Iranian state then what did?

³ See “Iran Opposition Says 72 Died in Post-Poll Unrest,” Reuters UK, September 3, 2009, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-deaths-sb-idUSTRE58228J20090903>; “Iran Commander Says 36 Died in vote unrest: report,” Reuters Canada, September 10, 2009, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE58928P20090910>.

⁴ See Karen Rasler, “Concessions, Repression, and Political Protest in the Iranian Revolution,” *American Sociological Review* 61.1 (1996): 132–52. In the Palestinian context, see Marwan Khawaja, “Repression and Popular Collective Action: Evidence from the West Bank,” *Sociological Forum* 8.1 (1993): 47–71.

Argument and Methodology

Based on extensive ethnographic and archival research in Iran and Lebanon, this book examines how revolutionary activists at the grassroots level and political officials at the state level in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Jumhuri-i Islami-i Iran, hereafter the IRI) instrumentalized rural development and other noncoercive tactics to consolidate and maintain power and influence from the revolution until the present day. The Iranian Revolution marked its victory when the shah departed Iran on January 16 and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89) returned from exile on February 1, 1979. However, this victory initiated a crucial period of power struggles between Khomeini and his clerical faction, the Islamic Republican Party (Hizb-Jumhuri-i Islami, hereafter the IRP), on one side, and a myriad of domestic and foreign opponents, on the other, including center-left parties and politicians, shah loyalists and royalists, communists and Marxists, Sunni and ethnic separatists, traditional elites and other counterrevolutionaries, and Iraqi forces and their collaborators.

The activists and officials of the victorious IRP-led faction were not simply the ones who most effectively employed repression. They also used rural development and other noncoercive tactics against the aforementioned opponents, some of which had access to the means of coercion. While constituting a policy goal and an end in itself, rural development helped these activists and officials consolidate power at home and project influence abroad. How exactly did this happen? What were the methods that achieved this outcome? And how does a focus on rural development affect our overall understanding of the IRI's revolutionary outcome, power consolidation, overseas influence, and long-term resilience?

The cornerstone of the IRI's rural development, power consolidation, and overseas influence was a significant yet understudied organization called Reconstruction Jihad (Jahad-i Sazandigi, hereafter RJ). In English language sources, RJ has been translated as "Reconstruction Crusade." However, this name does not adequately capture the true essence of the organization or its specific interpretation of jihad, a uniquely Islamic concept. Ironically, the term "crusade" is a Western construct that denotes strong anti-Muslim sentiments. Contrary to Western perceptions and stigmatization of jihad as exclusively equated with holy war, the term in the organization's name implied a divinely

inspired, collective and individual struggle to improve society and the self through rural reconstruction and development, as well as other positive and productive endeavors.

RJ was officially established as a revolutionary organization (*nahād-i inqilābī*) between June 16 and 17, 1979.⁵ RJ was established nearly two months after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sipah-i Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami, hereafter the IRGC), and, alongside it, was considered the IRI's most important revolutionary organization. It contained thousands of activists, who came from diverse geographic, demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological backgrounds. Some RJ members consisted of university students and other educated, radical, and religious youth. As RJ underwent greater expansion, formalization, and professionalization, it created a division of labor based on specialization, including construction, agriculture, hygiene, education, and culture. In addition to becoming increasingly specialized, RJ's organizational structure became more centralized, hierarchical, and top-down with a central council (*shūrā-i markazī*) in Tehran and a staff (*sitād*) in the provinces that issued directives and allocated resources to personnel at the township or district level.

RJ undertook an ambitious rural development campaign and spread revolutionary and religious values throughout the countryside, where nearly half the population resided.⁶ To this end, RJ expanded and improved rural infrastructure (roads, bridges, electricity, and water), offered agricultural and financial assistance (labor, training, inputs, and credit), provided education and healthcare (schools, libraries, clinics, baths, vaccinations, and medication), and disseminated propaganda and proselytized religion. Politically, RJ organized rallies and influenced elections, established councils and denounced dissidents, and provided logistical support to security and military forces in contentious regions and on the warfront. While attempting to validate its existence, promote its expansion, and undermine its competitors, RJ

⁵ Ministry of RJ, *The Ten-Year Performance of RJ from 1979 until 1989* (Tehran: Ministry of RJ, 1991), 6 (Persian); Mohammad Javad Iravani, *Institutionalism and Jihad-e Sazandegi* (Tehran: Ministry of RJ, 1998) (Persian), 184; Ministry of RJ, *Twenty Years of Effort for Reconstruction: A Glance at Twenty Years of RJ's Performance and Achievements* (Tehran: Ministry of RJ, 2001), 18 (Persian).

⁶ Dilip Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 254; Mustafa Azkia, "Rural Society and Revolution in Iran," in *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution*, ed. Eric Hooglund (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 97.

helped Khomeini and the IRP gain popular support and demobilize their opponents. After helping Khomeini and the IRP consolidate power domestically in 1983, RJ became a government ministry and helped them project influence overseas by undertaking rural development in other parts of the Muslim and developing world, including sub-Saharan Africa and Lebanon's Shi'i territories.

This book serves as a corrective and a supplement to other scholarly works that exclusively attribute the IRI's consolidation and resilience to its use of repression through coercive institutions, including revolutionary courts (*dādgāh-i inqilābī*), club-wielding partisans of God (*chamāqdār-i hizbullahī*), and the IRGC.⁷ Mansoor Moaddel, for instance, contends that, "terror is the essence of the Islamic Republic."⁸ Without disputing the importance of repression in understanding the IRI's historical and political processes and outcomes, the book argues that rural development and other noncoercive tactics also explain its survival and persistence. Having helped overthrow the shah largely through popular protests and other nonviolent means, RJ members and IRP officials presumably recognized the limits of coercion in terms of its ability and potential to alienate and antagonize the population in the long run, as had occurred under the shah during his reign and downfall.⁹ Rather than depend exclusively on the hard power of the IRGC and other coercive institutions to consolidate power, the IRI simultaneously relied on the soft power of RJ and other revolutionary organizations and government institutions to garner support and marginalize opponents.

While RJ is considered among the IRI's most important revolutionary organizations and has parallels worldwide, it has never received sustained scholarly attention. This leaves significant lacuna in explaining the successes and challenges of the IRI's efforts to consolidate power at home and project influence abroad. The scholarly works that examine RJ mainly do so through the analytical framework of rural

⁷ See Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); and Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁸ Moaddel, *Class*, 260. ⁹ See Rasler, "Concessions," 132–52.

development and downplay the organization's political importance, namely its contribution to the IRI's domestic consolidation and foreign policy.¹⁰ Moreover, these works do not fully trace RJ's evolutionary trajectory nor do they consider how it constituted a cause, outcome, and reflection of the IRI's broader political and socioeconomic trends.

This book is the first in English that uses RJ as a central unit of analysis and examines it as a microcosm of the political and social changes and continuities that have transpired in the IRI during the last four decades. Within the field of Iranian studies, the book comprises one of the few that adopts an institutionalist approach, especially in the nonmilitary realm,¹¹ toward analyzing critical aspects of the IRI's history and politics, including its grassroots mobilization, state-society relations, contentious consolidation, wartime operations, bureaucratic centralization, intra-elite factionalism, associational life, foreign policy, and cultural production. The book disaggregates the Iranian state by tracing the evolution of a critical yet neglected organization and ministry from the 1979 revolution to the present day. It contextualizes the case of RJ within the overall political and socioeconomic development of the IRI, helping to explain the success of the Iranian revolution and the state's internal and external development policies, as well as its overall resilience and the conflicting dynamics of its attempts to mobilize and institutionalize activists. The book is not only relevant to Iranian and Middle Eastern history and politics. It has comparative

¹⁰ See Asghar Schirazi, *Islamic Development Policy: The Agrarian Question in Iran* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993); Ali Shakoori, *The State and Rural Development in the Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and Azkia, "Rural Society," 96–119. The lone exception is the early eyewitness assessment of RJ that predicted some of its later changes that are documented in this book: Emad Ferdows, "The Reconstruction Crusade and Class Conflict in Iran," *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports* 113 (1983): 11–15.

¹¹ For scholarly works on the IRGC and the rest of the military and security apparatus, see Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988); Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Saied Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (Washington, DC and New York: Windrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press, 2015); and Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (London: Routledge, 2016).

implications for analyzing revolutionary outcomes across other geographic regions and time periods.

Methodologically, this book relies on a wealth of empirical data from Iran and Lebanon. This data is highlighted by over one hundred and thirty semi-structured interviews in Persian and Arabic with government officials, former RJ members, rural development experts, and provincial and rural residents. The book includes the testimonies of these interviewees while maintaining their anonymity to protect their identity. Most of these interviews were conducted during three separate visits to Iran – each three to four months in duration – between 2009 and 2011, and one visit to Lebanon in the summer of 2012. Given that RJ mainly operated in rural areas outside the capital, semi-structured interviews and participant observation were conducted in the provinces and regions of Azerbaijan, Bushehr, Fars, Golestan, Isfahan, Khorasan, Semnan, Tehran, Yazd, Southern Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and South Lebanon. In Tehran and Beirut, these interviews and observations were triangulated and supplemented with an analysis of textual sources in Persian and Arabic at libraries and archives, including the National Archives and Library of Iran (Sazman-i Asnad va Kitabkhanih-i Milli-i Iran), the Parliamentary Library (Kitabkhanih-i Majlis-i Shura-i Islami), the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad (Vizarat-i Jahad-i Kishavarzi), Hizbullah's Consultative Center for Studies and Documentation (al-Markaz al-Istishari li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Tawthiq), *as-Safir* (The Ambassador) newspaper, *al-Hayat* (Life) newspaper, the French Institute of the Near East (L'Institut français du Proche-Orient), and the American University of Beirut (al-Jami'ah al-Amrikiah fi Bayrut).

Organization and Chronology

This book examines the history and evolution of RJ and the IRI during the last four decades. The book's nine chapters are organized by chronology and theme. The book has been divided into the key stages of RJ's trajectory from its establishment and mobilization as a popular movement and a revolutionary organization between 1979 and 1983, to its conversion into a government ministry and a merged entity between 1983 and 2001. In the process, the book delineates the major transformations that occurred within RJ and its members on a mezzo and micro level. These organizational and individual transformations

corresponded to the broader or macro, political and social changes and continuities that transpired during critical junctures in the IRI's state formation, including the revolution, war, consolidation, bureaucratization, and factionalism. RJ's evolution offers valuable insights into the IRI's history, politics, economy, and society during the past forty years.

Chapter 1, "Inception (1962–1979)," outlines the developments that led to RJ's establishment as a popular movement and its grassroots mobilization to the provinces and villages. This chapter takes us back to the transformative years before and after the fall of the shah. Beginning in 1962, the shah's White Revolution and land reform narrowed the urban-rural divide and unleashed and accelerated other structural forces of modernization that contributed to the revolution as well as RJ's subsequent establishment and mobilization. Through bricolage and boundary activation, RJ members and IRP officials appropriated the shah's Literacy, Health, and Extension Corps (*Sipah-i Danish, Bihdasht va Tarvij*), and attempted to validate the IRI and differentiate RJ by framing its mission as repairing the alleged destruction that the shah had caused the provinces and villages.

Chapter 2, "Expansion (February 11–November 6, 1979)," examines how RJ safeguarded its existence, promoted its expansion, and undermined its opponents through its interactions with government officials and institutions. In an effort to gain and maximize recognition, responsibilities, and resources from the state, RJ exploited its dual structure by lobbying the IRP and the revolutionary council (*shūrā-i inqilābī*), and circumventing the center-left and the bureaucracy – which sought to restrict the organization's expansion for ideological and political reasons. To the disapproval of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan (1907–97) and the center-left, RJ members influenced Khomeini and the IRP to endorse RJ's official establishment as a revolutionary organization and a parallel institution to the bureaucracy between June 16 and 17, 1979. RJ further undermined and marginalized the center-left by manipulating and exacerbating its political and ideological differences with the IRP, culminating in Bazargan's resignation, President Abolhassan Banisadr's (b. 1933) impeachment, and the IRP's control of the state.

Chapter 3, "Consolidation (1979–1989)," explores how RJ further safeguarded its existence and promoted its expansion by demobilizing its opponents and those of the IRP, including shah loyalists and

royalists, communists and Marxists, Sunni and ethnic separatists, traditional elites and other counterrevolutionaries, and Iraqi forces and their collaborators. By monitoring these adversaries and embellishing the threat that they posed to the IRI, RJ created a self-fulfilling prophecy by radicalizing and pushing Khomeini and the IRP into further confrontation with them. The Cultural Revolution (1980–83) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) facilitated and accelerated the mobilization and expansion of RJ and allowed it to help the IRI in its efforts to Islamize the provinces and villages, and repel invading Iraqi forces and their allies along the western border. RJ further marginalized its opponents and those of the IRI by physically and ideationally penetrating the provinces and villages through infrastructure, healthcare, education, culture, and religion.

Chapter 4, “Demobilization and Institutionalization (1983–2001),” deciphers the mezzo or organizational causes and outcomes of RJ’s institutionalization, which reflected the IRI’s macro or broader changes and continuities. As a revolutionary organization, the resource dependency of RJ on IRP officials rendered it vulnerable to their preferences to convert it into a ministry. Reflecting the IRP’s own trajectory, culminating with its dissolution in 1987, the intensified factionalism that existed between leftist and rightist RJ members rendered the organization susceptible to elite designs regarding its bureaucratization, particularly among IRP rightists who were concerned with its increasing radicalization and influence. While some RJ members vehemently opposed the organization’s institutionalization, the outcome precipitated its transition into a rational-legal administration in three ways. First, as a ministry, RJ achieved greater organizational stability and certainty by delineating clearer and predicable hierarchies, careers, and responsibilities. Second, RJ improved its financial transparency and accountability by subjecting its budget to governmental scrutiny and parliamentary oversight. Third and finally, RJ bolstered its internal professionalization and expertise by investing in recruitment, training, and research.

Chapter 5, “Disillusionment and Mobility (1983–2001),” argues that rational-legal administration did not exhaust the list of mezzo or organizational outcomes that resulted from RJ’s institutionalization. RJ’s rational-legal administration encountered six limitations that exposed and exacerbated the organization’s preexisting deficiencies, the IRI’s structural shortcomings, the shah’s neo-patrimonial legacies,