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The Intellectual and Political Landscape of Iran Before and After the 1979 Revolution

A conversation with Michail Theodosiadis

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Could you briefly outline the intellectual and political landscape of Iran on the eve of the 1979 Revolution?

Iran has undergone a turbulent intellectual trajectory since 1979. The Revolution was launched and carried to victory with the participation of diverse intellectual currents whose influence decisively shaped the post-1979 landscape. Although heterogeneous, many of these currents leaned to the left. Across much of the world at the time, Marxism set the dominant terms of debate, and Iran was no exception. Numerous leading literary and intellectual figures were Marxists or shared left-leaning convictions. Even Islamist thinkers drew selectively on Marxist concepts and vocabulary to

formulate their understanding of Islam and their political project. Different strands—Islamic Marxism, Soviet-style orthodoxy, Maoism, and various forms of Third-Worldism—competed before and during the Revolution and left a lasting imprint on the formation of the Islamic Republic.

How did the Revolution reshape this intellectual landscape?

The Revolution was the work of a broad coalition of currents, but immediately after, one current gained clear ascendancy: Islamism as articulated by Khomeini and his followers. This is why many adherents of other tendencies still speak of the Revolution as having been “stolen” from them. Over time, Khomeini’s political program, often rendered in English as “Guardianship of the Jurist” (*velāyat-e faqīh*), secured the upper hand and was enshrined in the constitution of the new regime. It would be a mistake, however, to claim that the intellectual imprint of other currents was wholly purged. Elements of the Islamic Republic’s statist economic orientation, its anti-liberal ideology, and its anti-Western rhetoric reflect the legacy of leftist groups that participated in the revolutionary coalition.

How did the landscape change in the years following the Revolution?

It changed quite radically for several reasons. Some of the most important intellectuals died on the eve of the revolution or shortly thereafter. To mention two, Ali Shariati, who was probably the most influential intellectual before the revolution, died without witnessing the Islamic regime that adopted many of his ideas; and Morteza Motahari, a leading intellectual and prominent religious scholar, was assassinated after the revolution. The most consequential transformation, however, had a profound effect on the intellectual scene: the establishment and subsequent dominance of the Islamic regime itself. It altered the landscape so profoundly that many pre-revolutionary intellectual projects, which had responded to the secular and pro-Western character of the pre-revolutionary regime, became irrelevant after the revolution. Moreover, the new regime was inherently opposed to secular thought, so the dissemination of these ideas was severely restricted, and intellectuals who espoused them left the country and largely disappeared from public life until much later, when limited openings

within the regime and the development of information technologies once again allowed their work to circulate within Iran.

Could you explain the ideology of the Islamic regime founded after the revolution?

One can distinguish two aspects of its ideology. One was influenced by the leftist ideas that were dominant before the revolution: a statist economy; anti-Western, especially anti-American, ideas; an emphasis on the poor; and the nationalization of private enterprises. Another fundamental element was the Islamist doctrine developed by Khomeini. One should bear in mind that, before the revolution, Khomeini, while in exile, elaborated a political doctrine based on Shiite theology and thought that was quite unique; even among religious scholars, it was not a majority view. After the revolution, this doctrine, through some surprising moves by his followers during the meetings on the draft of the new constitution, was enshrined in the constitution. It seems that not many people were familiar with this doctrine, which was quite marginal, and that is why you do not see it mentioned in the revolutionary movement. There were only vague ideas about an Islamic government, the rule of Islam, and republicanism. So Khomeini's doctrine seemed to come out of the blue.

Is this the doctrine of the “Guardianship of the Jurist” (velāyat-e faqīh)? Could you mention its main aspects?

Yes. Briefly speaking, Shi'ism is a minority branch of Islam, whereas Sunnism comprises the global majority, with Shia Muslims representing roughly 10–13 percent of the world's Muslim population. Shi'ism is the predominant religious tradition in Iran. Within Twelver Shi'ism, religious scholars trained in Islamic law—the *fuqahā'*—hold recognized authority as jurists and as guides whom laypeople emulate in their religious practices. Their influence varies across individuals and periods, but collectively they have played a central role in shaping the religious and social life of Shi'i communities. When it comes to politics, most jurists have espoused a “quietist” or limited view of clerical authority. But a certain Mullā Aḥmad Narāqī (d. 1829), a jurist living in the 19th century, advocated an expanded role for Shi'ite religious authorities that went beyond the commonly recognized limited role accepted by most Shi'ites. This was a minority view and remained

highly contested among prominent scholars, but Khomeini systematized and radicalized this doctrine in his 1970 Najaf lectures, where he was living in exile, arguing that qualified jurists should exercise political as well as religious authority over Muslims. This was the political doctrine that was enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution after the revolution, shaping all aspects of the new regime.

In my recent studies, I have argued that Khomeini's regime is rooted in the idea that human intellect can perfectly comprehend and implement divine will. Elevated as a Platonic philosopher-king, Khomeini claims to represent the *al-insan al-kamil* (perfect man), exemplifying the philosopher's trap in practice. Plato argued that a 'Great Legislator' must shape a social reality in the image of a divine logos. As Hamid Dabashi claimed, this is echoed in al-Fārābī's philosopher-ruler version, upon which Khomeini's theocracy is (allegedly) justified. Do you agree with this statement? How do you situate the 1979 revolution in the broader history of Iranian political thought? Were there precedents that influenced its ideological foundations?

This is a good question, but a complex one. The debate turns on the origins of Khomeini's doctrine. One influential view emphasizes the Shi'i juridical background and treats his theory as an elaboration of ideas already present in that tradition. This is how Khomeini himself frames it: he argues that only a ruler fully knowledgeable in Islamic law, the shari'a, can apply it to the full range of human affairs, including public matters, and that no one is more qualified than the jurists (*fuqahā'*) to apply Islamic Law. He supports this claim with ḥadīth evidence, reports attributed to the Shi'i Imams that are taken to confer a form of delegated authority on jurists, though this evidence is contested and its scope is not unambiguous. A second genealogy attributes the doctrine to Khomeini's engagement with the mystical thought of Ibn 'Arabī, especially the idea of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) as the metaphysical axis of the cosmos; on this reading, the Guardian Jurist embodies that role, and the political theory grows from a mystical anthropology. Whether these approaches align with Plato and Afarabi is a further question, since many scholars hold that neither thinker endorsed the supra-rational epistemic claims associated with the mystics.

Your work explores both the secular and religious dimensions of Khomeini's authority. Could you elaborate on how these dimensions interact and sometimes conflict?

Khomeini's thought undergoes a significant transformation after he comes to political power. Before the revolution, his writings and speeches were primarily religious in character, grounded in jurisprudence and theological reasoning. However, the experience of actually governing exposes the practical limits of his earlier doctrine and prompts a gradual revision that, in my view, distances it from its original religious foundations. His central argument for the necessity of a Guardian Jurist was the proper implementation of Islamic law. Yet, once in power, he increasingly recognized the tensions between the demands of political governance and the prescriptions of the *sharī'a*. In response, he came to accept—quite controversially—the legitimacy of suspending or overriding certain elements of Islamic law when required by the “interests of the Islamic state” (*maṣlaḥat-e nezām*). This marks a decisive shift: the political takes precedence over the legal and theological. From this perspective, Khomeini's later thought moves toward a distinctly political, even secular, rationale for authority—one that can be reconciled with religious doctrine only with difficulty.

How do Western political theories—particularly those of thinkers like Leo Strauss—help us understand modern Iranian political thought?

When it comes to Leo Strauss, on whose thought I have worked extensively, I would say that his interest in religion is of paramount importance for understanding societies like Iran, where religion continues to play a significant political and cultural role—something largely absent from most Western contexts. In a sense, Strauss makes it possible to take religion seriously again. I believe that in the West, since at least the French Revolution, the proper understanding of the relationship between politics and religion has significantly diminished, for understandable reasons: modern regimes were founded in large part to overcome what Strauss calls the “theological-political problem.” That project has been so successful that awareness of the problem itself has largely vanished from contemporary scholarly perspectives.

Are there intellectual movements in contemporary Iran that you believe are underappreciated or misunderstood internationally?

I would say that political thought in post-revolutionary Iran remains understudied. There is substantial scholarship from sociological and historical perspectives on this period that could be complemented by work in political thought. From this perspective, sustained attention to post-revolutionary political thought would constitute a form of scholarship on comparative or non-Western political theory, a vibrant and still developing field of study.

How have younger Iranian scholars and activists contributed to the reinterpretation of political thought since 1979?

Hegel has this famous saying that “the Owl of Minerva takes its flight only at dusk.” This has sometimes been taken to mean that genuine understanding of historical events comes only after an era has run its course. I think this also applies to the understanding of the political thought of Iranian thinkers in the past 40–50 years by contemporary scholars. Whether enough time has passed to give us a good perspective on these thinkers is not obvious. Perhaps it has not. Some of these thinkers are still alive, and many of the scholars who are supposed to study these figures are their contemporaries, have experienced first-hand many of the events discussed by these thinkers, and have often formed very specific judgments on the character, profile, and historical role of these thinkers. These factors can potentially skew our understanding of these figures. At the same time, perhaps enough time has passed: we are gradually gaining enough distance from these figures, especially considering that some of the prominent thinkers have already died. What also suggests to me that we are at the end of a period—one that may prepare us to have a good understanding of this era—is that we seem to have difficulty in producing new intellectuals and that the political situation in Iran appears at a decisive turn, ready to change fundamentally.

How does the Iranian political landscape compare with other similar regimes or in the Middle East?

In my experience, what distinguishes Iran from similar countries in the Middle East is that it has actually had the experience that many Middle Eastern thinkers have long hoped for without ever experiencing it directly—namely, an Islamic government. This

largely negative experience has had a clear impact on Iranian intellectuals and their self-understanding, one that one often doesn't see among non-Iranian thinkers. As a result, secularism and even anti-religious ideas are comparatively popular among Iranian intellectuals—positions that, in my view, are less prevalent among intellectuals in other Middle Eastern countries and can be striking—even shocking—to them when they meet their Iranian counterparts.

Looking forward, which intellectual trends or political movements do you believe will be most influential in shaping Iran's future?

This is a difficult question. The answer perhaps depends on how you see the future. I think we often assume we know how the future will look. For instance, the prevailing view is that we will have increasingly less-religious societies, more centered on economic activities, commerce, and technology, more cosmopolitan, and more mixed culturally. In that case, one would surmise that political doctrines that are less religious, less nationalistic, less left-leaning, and more globalist will be more popular. But it is also argued that the future is completely unpredictable, so perhaps we will see a more nationalistic, less global, economically communitarian, more religious world. In that case, political doctrines corresponding to these tendencies will be more influential. In other words, much depends on the context of reception. Although political doctrines shape societies, they also respond to political-social events.

