

International Relations and Islam

International Relations and Islam:
Diverse Perspectives

Edited by

Nassef Manabilang Adiong

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SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

International Relations and Islam: Diverse Perspectives,
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INTRODUCTION

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ISLAM

NASSEF MANABILANG ADIONG

This edited book is a follow up of a two-part panel proposal for the 2011 Middle East Studies Association annual meeting. The authors who submitted their articles were the participants of the proposed panels. My goal was to present and put forward the idea of finding a middle way between two bodies of knowledge which were conceived from two different hemispheres of the world. International Relations (IR), a social science discipline conceived in the UK and the US (comprising the West), and Islam or Islamic Studies which was conceived in the Arab world and developed in Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and many non-Arab countries (comprising the East).

If scholars and members of the English School of International Relations were able to associate and converge their thoughts on conceptualizing International Relations with Christianity (of course the majority of them are Christians and so Western Europe is), then it is a precedent and an indication that along the strand of the Abrahamic Faiths, Islam is putatively feasible and probable to understand and interpret International Relations (IR) and vice versa. Though the danger of this idea may suggest a myriad adherence to two extreme poles of risky paradigms: (1) those IR scholars who totally ignore Islamic concepts, and (2) those Islamic scholars (ulama and Islamicists) who aim for the Islamization of knowledge. This is a matter of how we are going to find tangency or *via media* between Islam and IR without committing submission to those extreme poles.

The proposed idea is on the study of relations between International Relations and Islam, which primarily presents the title of this edition, "International Relations and Islam: Diverse Perspectives." This was initially conceptualized with the aim of looking at their conceived perceptions side by side; how Islam is interpreted by IR scholars, and vice versa. It has been the proponent's quest to feasibly and scholarly present Islam as non-alien in the Western discourse of the IR field.

The aims of this initial initiative are to show juxtaposed positions of mutual perceptions or diverse perspectives between Islam and IR based on conceived notions of contested conceptions, to eliminate deplorable and pejorative (mis)conceptions of IR scholars towards Islam and vice versa, and to add Islam to the epitome of global discourse of international relations as a major causal factor that affects the behaviours of actors (states, sub-state system, individuals, international and regional organizations, and multinational corporations) in the international community, particularly those who have an interest in and peculiar relations to the Muslim world. The process of constructing this initiative involves selecting perspectives and categories to bring to bear on the research idea.

Contemplating the Idea of an Islamic IR

The title alone of this book will surely cause havoc in the Western academia of IR, particularly those who were trained in an American IR school. European IR schools are somewhat more pluralistic in terms of how they view IR, as compared to their American counterparts. This initiative (an edited book project) is not an ‘all-knowing’ term project, but it is delimited by an ‘interrogative’ descriptive structure of explanation. It will be about various perspectives and cases on the complex relations of “Islam and IR”; how both conceptions perceive each other; its repercussions on implicit and explicit notions of human and society; and whether there are mutual or reciprocal relations or even relative relatedness, or in short, ‘interrelationships’ constructed.

But this question is apparently not the primal concern of IR; it may be more significant to sociology, psychology, theology and political science. However, we cannot deny IR’s multidisciplinary approach as an academic discipline. For many years since the interwar (interbellum) period, a bulk of IR scholars’ research work has been dealing with statecraft, war and conflict studies, state-to-state relations, and the international system, paying little attention to human affairs, human-to-human, or human-to-society relations concomitant with the roles of culture, religion, language, and other determining ‘given’ identities. Only then, at the post-Cold War period, were these matters given importance, of course, ignited by the constructivist project in the US.

Looking for an Intellectual Patronage

In the first year of my graduate studies, I did some little research on the faculty list of the IR department and noted those who may help me in this

endeavour. I initially talked to the chairwoman during the registration period and she told me that she did not know if my proposed thesis (this was done verbally not the formal process of submitting a thesis proposal) was feasible enough because, in her view, 'Is there a need to formulate an international relations theory based on religious perspective? If this is so, then there should be Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish conception(s) of IR.' I replied that this is not the point; it is as if you are saying that Islam is similar or identical to other religions or ideologies.

Further, I lamented, 'Why can Western scholars, particularly the pioneers of the English School of IR, associate their thoughts with Christianity?' Was this because of the Peace of Westphalia's resolutions to disputes between Catholics and Protestants, later leading to the establishment of 'sovereign' nation-states, whereby sovereignty has been a word so used (rehashed) for research by IR scholars which resulted in grand concepts like anarchy, self-help system, balance of power, national interests, power, and complex interdependence, among others? Though this is not to mean that when the notion of sovereignty emerged, the grand concepts that I mentioned immediately were conceived. Simple causation here is not enough, but a complex method of correlation is the appropriate structure of explanation.

Another professor just shrugged me off and answered that my proposal was too ambitious (period). In my mind, there is no 'ambitious' research proposal; it is only those who have concluded their research and failed to defend their work that make it ambitious. A few other IR professors responded to my inquiry that they could not help me in my research work because, simply, they are not experts on Islam, but instead, gave me links and other important resources salient to my research. However, when I approached a certain professor (we had an interesting discussion that lasted an hour or so), it gave me hope and widened my thoughts to many possibilities.

First, he was asking me several questions regarding what was on my mind. He talked about vehemently avoiding two extreme poles which I discussed in the beginning. I asked: "Can we find a *via media* or a middle way from these two ends of a spectrum?" because I do not want to pattern my research in a pendulum-style way, wherein I might become too adherent to one or other of the extreme poles. And he answered that it is possible if we can rework (adjust) its ontological propositions and find or discover appropriate epistemology. The thing that I can think of is to use a method that is immune and has defensive mechanisms in avoiding or is capable of avoiding these extreme poles.

But for now I will focus first on asking questions, observing the phenomena, and gathering a plethoric survey of literature. Secondly, he suggested possible research undertakings, like looking into the works of Edward Said, Mohammed Arkoun, Giorgio Shani, al-Zuhili, and he gave me Sabet's book to make some reports. Though I criticized Sabet's book at first, suddenly I was overwhelmed by the arguments he presented in his conclusion. He presented a conundrum style of inquiry (like puzzles designed to test lateral thinking) and basically in those puzzles you can find answers. And lastly, he humbly suggested that perhaps I might alter my research inquiry; instead of developing an Islamic theory of IR, why not divert my attention to postcolonial studies, because (in his words) it is appropriate and plausible.

International Relations and Islam, Strange Bedfellows

International Relations and Islam, two intricate terminologies; but how can I make them tangent (meeting along the same line or point)? This is not to sound like an orientalist, projecting the "incompatibility enterprise" thus you cannot find harmony; or manipulating the study based on upbringing or normative biases, e.g. using Western culture as a point of reference and making it superior to oriental culture. The orientalist has done such a great deal to make Islam incompatible, or worse, hostile to Western values, ideas, norms and traditions, declaring and pronouncing Islam's incompatibility with democracy (hinting at Western "democratic peace theory" that democratic countries or democracies do not go to war with one another, though this argument can also be associated with opposed totalitarian governments), human rights, particularly of women and gay rights, and international law, etc.

How can we advance our scholarship if we already have a preconceived perception, notion, impression and bias against Islam and its adherents, i.e. Muslims? Why did most IR scholars write that the area studies of the Middle East in the US failed miserably? According to them, experts of Middle Eastern studies in America failed to predict the war in Afghanistan and Iraq; failed to warn the West about the rise of radical or fundamental Islamic revivalist movements; failed to suggest and give guidelines for policy making procedures or to their foreign policy that would have prevented wars or mitigated hostilities or tensions between the West with the Muslim world.

I would argue that the reasons above were not the causes that made Middle Eastern studies vulnerable. There is a remarkable preconceived perception that Middle Eastern experts were unimportant in policy

making, and moreover, most of them were neoconservatives with 'attached' Israeli propaganda on their belt, e.g., Daniel Pipes (director of the Middle East Forum and Taube), Fouad Ajami (Harvard CIA/Nadav Safran Chair on Middle East Politics), Mark Steyn (a self-proclaimed expert on Muslim culture), Ibn Warraq (founder of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society), among others.

Other reasons were my following assumptions or hunches: (1) you cannot penetrate the government's circle of advisers to the president, the Congress, and the Judiciary if your views are pro-Islamic world, (2) you cannot survive academia in the US if you are straightforwardly criticizing Israel, of course with an exception of being established with the security of tenure, e.g. Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, and (3) you cannot be so outwardly visible and outspoken in the US in your rants against its foreign policy towards the Middle East and Israel. Anti-Israel has become a "taboo" in the public and academic spheres of the US.

Even Edward Said experienced the orientalist backlash. It was right after the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, many reports were pointing out that the suspects were of Middle Eastern origin. Said's office was bombarded with calls and emails from the media who wanted to know his opinion regarding the matter while he was in Canada giving lectures. Said thought that the reason they were calling him was because he was apparently from the Middle East; he was a Christian Palestinian. Little did they know that the suspect(s) was/were home-grown white American citizen(s).

How can we avoid, mitigate, and solve this "orientalist enterprise?" I suggest that Muslim countries or even non-Muslim countries who sympathized with the goals of Muslim countries can create a multilateral agreement condemning anti-Muslim acts. Muslim countries can invest in the international media to establish a worldwide News company vis-à-vis BBC or CNN. Invest more in popular culture by creating movies, TV series, documentaries, concerts, and other tools propagating or germinating informative means that would directly hit or influence people about the stories in the Muslim world. Muslim countries, particularly the Arab world, can extensively invest in 'international education' by funding researches about Islam, the Middle East, and Muslims around the world without political strings attached to them. However, this all changed after the events of 9/11.

Moving on, we should intensively and rigorously look into the etymology of International Relations and Islam. If we talk about Islam, are we referring to the religious aspects of it or to political Islam? Are we speaking of Islam as a total way of life that transcends its religious status?

How will Islam provide a structure of explanation in interpreting international relations theory? Is IR embedded within the realms of Islam naturally or constructively? IR scholars see Islam as ‘the Other,’ while most of the Islamic scholars interpret IR as alien. I think this is because of the dogmas or fatwas imposed by the Hanafi school of law, which delineated Muslims from non-Muslims by identifying two abodes: the abode of Islam (Dar al-Islam) and the abode of war (Dar al-Harb). Sometimes most of the early Muslim jurists relegated the abode of war as the abode of unbelievers (Dar al-Kufr).

We should be careful in contextualizing these terms and applying them to the present. During the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim jurists placed a third abode which is at the middle or between the first two abodes: the abode of covenant (Dar al-Ahd). It refers to non-Muslim governments which have a peaceful relationship (through binding agreements or treaties) with Muslim governments that prioritize protection and security of Muslims’ land and property. The abode of Islam does not only refer to Muslim nations or states, it also refers to Muslims practicing their faith in non-Muslim countries. The concept of *ijtihad*, or making some independent interpretation for legal decisions, had greatly impacted Islam. Since the inception of the four schools of Islamic laws and jurisprudence within the strand of the Sunni tradition, the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’I, and Hanbali have developed Islam (on a positive note) as more colourful and evolving.

But, on the other hand, this has weakened Islam because of their different legal interpretations concerning the hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad), and sometimes they no longer refer to the source of Islam, the Holy Qur’an. They made conflicting and contradicting fatwa (binding or nonbinding) and legal decisions implemented under Shari’ah law, a combination of the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah (practices of Prophet Muhammad). But how will this affect finding a convergence with International Relations? Declaring and imposing different interpretations of Islam by Muslim jurists themselves made it possible for other Muslim jurists in other parts of the world, e.g. in China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, etc., to give their own interpretations, sometimes basing them on their own culture to express appropriateness or approximation, applicability, and adjustment.

IR scholars tended to perceive and study Islam in the prism of the secularist epistemology of great Judeo-Christian tradition, i.e. the concept of separation of Church and government. How is it possible to find a middle ground between two ends of a spectrum? In Islam, religion and politics are in unison, in contrast with IR, where religion and politics are

totally separated. It sounds like a melodramatic sentiment with the ingredients of Rudyard Kipling's famous saying, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Finding a Remedy?

If we are going to look for some putative solution and avoid hindrances, whether ascribing Islam as an ideology or religion towards international relations, then we might find answers. Katerina Dalacoura's text on "Political Islam and International Relations: A Dangerous Case of Mutual Neglect?" in 2004 talks about the concept of globalization as a via media framework. She argued that "Islamist movements can be seen as examples of non-state actors par excellence and their impact on the international system can be understood in their capacity to bypass the state and establish direct relations with other societies." The problem I see here is how she will be able to differentiate those movements that were state-driven with irredentist motivation from those with Islamicate characterizations. In the context of globalization, it is still debatable how Muslim societies are affected and of course how they respond or react to it.

The remedy I can think of is to construct or reconstruct ontological propositions and find appropriate epistemology to decipher Islam in the 'schema' or views of a specific or certain international relations theory; put all possible ideas and concepts together and initially develop a theoretical or conceptual framework. It will guide me in determining what things or variables I should look for. Though I do not want to use the word 'variable' because it is a scientific term, I do however see it as a useful word for this initiative to denote cases supporting my claim or main idea. Consequently, most of what I have written here are inquiring ideas that bedazzle my mind regarding Islam and IR.

Chapters Presentations

Two various divisions are presented, the first one being general perspectives from different backgrounds or cases: the veil, feminism, and European polity. The second one is a specified case in Turkey, with various perspectives: significance of Turkey, its democratic experience, and the role of a scholar/practitioner.

Daniel's take on the meaning and political symbol of the veil is to "challenge the Western stereotype that the Islamic veil is oppressive, and offer new avenues of insight – illustrating that the symbolism of the Iranian revolution is relevant today." The article on Islamic feminism authored by González "addresses the demographic profile of Islamic feminists based on a pilot study of Kuwaiti college students." Varon discusses the debates and discourses that are taking place in Europe of whether there can be "various levels of integrating Islamic and European principles into a Muslim's daily life."

Doğanyılmaz's article tells the unique story of Turkey's international relations. Duman deciphers the relations of Islam and democracy via the Arab Spring and Turkish experience. And lastly, Gözaydın's biographical representation of the current Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu, details his scholarship and its impact on Turkey's foreign policy.

The chapters were alphabetically arranged by the author's surname, e.g. chapter 1 – Daniels, chapter 2 – Doğanyılmaz, chapter 3 – Duman, etc. Please be advised that it is the sole discretion of the chapter's author regarding how s/he expresses his/her posited claims, arguments, and facts. However, for any erroneous grammatical or typographical words, phrases or statements, the editor expresses full responsibility. *Mea maxima culpa!*

CHAPTER ONE

VEIL: MEANING AND FAILURE OF A POLITICAL SYMBOL

JESSICA L. DANIELS

Abstract: In academia, as in the political realm, discourse divides the world between two cultural poles: East and West, where historic Orientalist positions reaffirm Western cultural superiority and Eastern inferiority. Nowhere is this more evident than in the pervasive practice of veiling among Muslim women, which has stimulated a great deal of debate since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 symbolically rejected the Eurocentric ideology that one must conform to Western stereotypes in order to follow Western models of change. The following study first brings attention to the rise of Islam in political rhetoric, and the conflicting interests which it breeds. I end with a discussion of veiling, discussing relevant scholarly works. My foremost aim is to challenge the Western stereotype that the Islamic veil is oppressive, and offer new avenues of insight – illustrating that the symbolism of the Iranian revolution is relevant today.

Key Words: Veil; Hijab; Niqab; Burqa; Orientalism, Iranian Revolution.

The political map of the Middle East was redrawn to a large extent by European colonial powers in the first half of the twentieth century. Conventional wisdom assumed Middle Eastern regions and territories would adopt the European model of a nation-state through colonial tutelage, or at least, through contact with the West. Underlying this claim is the assumption that ideologies, such as modernism and nationalism, are European in essence, as any attempt made by non-European nations to adopt these ideologies is an explicit attempt to copy the West. This dichotomy nonetheless leaves the Middle East in a bind: it is unable to maintain the current state of affairs or to initiate change without inviting accusations of harbouring colonialist aspirations. As historian Reinhard Schulze explains, “it demands that the Islamic World be on principle

excluded from the history of modernities because it is bound to a religion which it has not traversed the 'politico-ideological progress that made Europe into a 'historical idea.'"¹ Here, Schulze illustrates the complex divide, while also drawing attention to the historical context of secularization, which engendered the modern world, and thus erased from the history of political entities that did not follow a similar trajectory.

The imperialist design that gave rise to the contemporary Middle East directly influenced the understanding of modernity in the region. Histories written on behalf of modernization theory produced a style of writing and thinking about the Middle East that became prevalent throughout the Developing World.² Edward Said illustrates this relationship in *Covering Islam*. He warns that the history of the West's efforts on behalf of modernization and development in the Middle East can never be understood unless it is noted how the policy itself produced a thought and habit of seeing the region in a certain way, a way which increased the political, emotional and strategic investment in the idea of modernization.³ Engagement with the meaning of modernity became the primary means through which imperialism impacted the Middle East.

Since to be modern meant to have a modern state, the early years of the twentieth century saw the nation-state concept evolve into the ideological and political focus of the Islamic world. There is no doubt that the rise of imperialism and creation of nation-states during the nineteenth century Europe dramatically impacted history; but it is false to presume that societies that have not followed the same trajectory are less progressive. For instance, the majority of contemporary writers assume that ideological movements that occurred in Europe were exclusively of European origin, whereas similar aspirations in other parts of the world are regarded as European imports, and evidence for the superiority of Western thought. For this reason, revolutionary movements in the Middle East are often depicted as backward, regressive and undemocratic. As Edward Said puts it, "given the current state of academic studies of Islam, there is not too much to be found there by way of rectification... generally, this has disqualified it to cover Islam in ways that might tell us more than we are otherwise aware of beneath the surface of Islamic societies."⁴ The Islamic doctrine can be seen as justifying capitalism, socialism, militancy, fatalism, ecumenism, exclusivity, or a tremendous lag between academic

¹ Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*. p.2.

² Formerly known as Third World.

³ Edward Said. *Covering Islam*. (Vintage Books, 1997), p.3.

⁴ Ibid, iv.

descriptions that particular realities to be found in the Islamic world become apparent. In other words, scholarship on the Middle East tends to be biased, causing an extremist or militant view.

Many academic experts on Islam fail to admit the offensively political context of their work.⁵ The study of Islam is situated within a biased context as many writers fail to present the objective truth in what they say, emphasizes Said. "Objectivity is accustomed to inhere in learned discourse about other societies, despite the long history of political, moral, and religious concern felt in all societies, Western or Islamic, about the alien, the strange and different," he writes.⁶ For this analysis, I will follow Joan Wallach Scott's interpretation of discourse, which she finds to refer to a reading, "to the imposition of meaning on phenomena in the world."⁷ While it is false to say that all discourse on Islam and the Middle East is coloured by the political, economic and intellectual contexts in which it begins, the majority of academic writing is devoid of regional perspectives.

Prime among such misconceptions is the deployment of religious terminology in contemporary ideologies in the Islamic world. Generally speaking, there is a consensus on 'Islam', which takes the form of making it a scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. There is evidence within the discourse of broad generalizations, without sufficient knowledge of the region and culture. Accordingly, the radical acts of a few politically motivated Islamists (commonly referred to as fundamentalists) are a declaration of the intent of the majority, and the actions of the few have come to represent the voice of all Muslims. This notion of a fixed Muslim culture obscures the realities and complexities of the civilization at large. For example, in recent years "Islamic Fundamentalism" has been portrayed in Western media as a major world threat. The term fundamentalist has come to imply a singular identity for the region and religion at large, when it does not provide an accurate account of reality.⁸ It is thus impossible to approach the Islamic world without first disaggregating the history from its historiography.

As such, it is important to begin with a discussion of this discourse, and the connection between power and knowledge in the modern world, as evidenced in the manifold linkages between academic writings on the

⁵ Ibid, Ivii.

⁶ Ibid, Ivii.

⁷ Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.7.

⁸ <http://www.twf.org/News/Y1997/Fears.html>.

Middle East and the formulation of foreign policy in the Western world. Studying this political discourse is best understood through specific political and historical contexts in order to grasp the implications being put forth. In order to grasp the implications of the ideas being advanced it is important to look at the way in which ideas are expressed and implemented in an effort to highlight the local nature of the global conflict between Islam and the West. Consider, for example, the Iranian revolution of 1979, wherein Islam rendered itself a chief adversary to colonialism, and competed directly and explicitly with liberalism and socialism, rather than with Judaism or Christianity. In this instance, the discourse containing Islamic terms and symbols are not necessarily religious. Here, Islam is not communicating with other religions, but with a European political discourse.⁹

Scholarly Rhetoric

For the abovementioned reasons, the following analysis is primarily focused on Iran, as the Iranian example highlights the importance of considering religious, political, and ideological principles. The case of Iran shows that, while it is surely inevitable that such styles of politics will be favourably and unfavourably compared, taking a one-size-fits-all approach to politics for such diverse cultures is not an effective approach. The consistent failure to introduce Western societal norms into the region abundantly illustrates this point. Iran embodies both the essence of Islamic complaint against the West, while representing its unique culture separate from its neighbouring nations. Iran, for example, has its own language and is the only nation, aside from Iraq, that is predominantly Shi'ite.

Yet it is evident that Western misinterpretations of Islamic political language have had a number of effects on the historiography of the Middle East. Among the many misapprehensions that persisted in modernization theory was one that seemed to have a special pertinence to the Islamic world, namely, that before the advent of the United States, "Islam existed in a kind of timeless childhood, shielded from true development."¹⁰ Schulze further emphasizes the tendency of scholars to undervalue change within the Islamic world. He criticizes views that argue that Islam is an authoritarian, homogenizing structure that lacks basic citizenship rights and freedom, and instead embodies a "world in which human life does not have the same value as it does in the West, in which freedom, democracy,

⁹ Ibid, p.10.

¹⁰ Said 30.

openness and creativity are alien.”¹¹ Propagated by the media and within academia, the East/West dichotomy reinforces the negative stereotype because the complicated West/East division enables simplistic equations to be made. The separation evidently fuels and shapes European and American political projects within and outside of the region which shape the primarily Muslim Middle Eastern citizens, into an *other* to be feared and separated from.

Of all the culturalist explanations that are invoked to “explain” the alterity of the Islamic world, none is more poignant and loaded than the stereotype of an oppressed Muslim woman. From apologists to detractors, the field of Middle East studies is obsessed with either disproving allegations of Islamic misogyny, or confirming the validity of such generalizations. In the absence of serious studies that aim at understanding how Muslim women figure out their status within what is – like all other societies – a complicated social fabric, most of the current discourse either bemoans the stigmatization of gender in Islamic law, or seeks to shield what must be a “helpless” Muslim woman from being deployed as a pawn in the existential conflict between the West, and its imagined nemesis, the Islamic world. “Brown women,” we are told, “do not need the white man to save them from brown men.”¹²

This paper will address the political undercurrents of various aspects of the discourse on the veil, which is used principally to highlight the oppression of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is a particularly fecund site for exploring culturalist explanations of political events, not only because it is at present considered the West’s single greatest challenge, but also because it is quintessentially well-suited to the clash of worldviews that dominate international relations today. Brought to power in the aftermath of the twentieth century’s last great revolution, the Islamic government in Iran offends not only America’s global hegemony but also attacks liberalism and socialism with equal zeal. It is a game-changer, and its very existence undermines uncritical investigation. If the veil is seen as the symbol of Islamic oppression, it thus binds religious difference, cultural and societal diversity, and varied political motives into one solid representation that receives the most scrutiny. As Scott describes, the

¹¹ Asef Bayat. *Making Islam Democratic*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2007, p.3.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Turia + Kant, 2000), p.287.

symbolism of the veil reduces differences of ethnicity, a culture “that stands in opposition to another singular entity.”¹³

My analysis seeks to break the cycle of ridicule and present an outlook which is grounded in Iranian history, taking into account pluralities within Islamic culture, and the nuanced political language of Islam, which is seeking to redress imperialist and domestically generated political injustice. By focusing on Iran, I will show that one of the means through which Middle Eastern political movements can create solidarity is embracing authentic cultural practices that are alien to the culture they are opposing, as well as using Islamic political symbolism to foster social cohesion and nation-building among Muslims. To make sense of how the revolution in Iran still holds relevance in contemporary politics, I will show how the political discourse created a community of identification for Muslims that might not have existed otherwise. The veil became a rallying point, something to defend, which had symbolic value even for those who did not wear it.

Section 1: Iran in Historical Context

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran sparked a shift in social scholarship regarding the effects of the reinvigoration of Islam in the Iranian state, as well as the relationship of Islamic values to the formation of modern nation states. Reza Shah Pahlavi became the leader of Iran after overthrowing the Qajar king in 1925, establishing the Pahlavi Dynasty (which ended with his son, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was forced to leave Iran in 1979). Reza Shah’s attempt to establish a modern Iran centred on the idea of the nation-state as the central form of political organization. Characterized by centralized authority and military strength, the Shah’s plan was part of a general engagement with the meaning of modernity that became the primary concern for Iran in the early years of the twentieth century. As the Iranian government consolidated its rule, much of the propagated rhetoric regarding women’s rights was contrary to the vision the electorate.

The role of women within society was of considerable importance for the modernizing aspirations of the Shah. Inspired by Kemal Ataturk’s drastic reforms in Turkey, and impressed by his modernizing policies, Reza Shah encouraged the formation of a ladies’ centre. His mission in

¹³ Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, p.17.

building this was to prepare the grounds for unveiling women in 1936. Accompanying that were several changes made to personal status laws in Iran, hitherto the domain of the Islamic shari'a. Arzoo Osanloo explains, "legal developments [under Reza Shah's rule] included the formal codification of laws for the first time. Personal status laws, including laws on marriage, divorce, custody, guardianship, and inheritance, were integrated into the civil legal system and codified in increments during this period."¹⁴ He instituted policies that affected women's lives within the public sphere (including laws on marriage, divorce, etc.) as well as women's dress.

Further, the growing gap between socio-economic classes, caused by the Mohammad Reza Shah's top down modernization policies, paved the way for growing opposition to his rule. As a result, many liberal and Islamic groups began to expand, as well as many Islamic groups calling for a reversal of unveiling and reforms throughout the 1960s and 70s.¹⁵ As Nikki Keddie states, "it became clear that unveiling was part of a class cultural division with modernized middle and upper classes wearing Western styled clothes, and in popular *bazaar* class returning to all covering *chador*, though without face veils."¹⁶ There was thus an evident distance from those who benefited from Western influence and those who did not.

Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 revolution, argued that the revolution would pave the way for an Islamic Republic, which in time would lead to an Islamic society, adhering to the tenets of Islam. Khomeini sought to transform the educational and judicial systems and make them compatible with Islam, thus demonstrating to the world true social justice and true cultural, economic, and political independence. As such, women were encouraged to take up the chador to show that there has been a revolution of profound change in Iran distinct from any revolution that previously occurred in the United States and Europe.

Beginning of the Pahlavi State

World War I ended with the growing influence of British and Russian military and political nobles in Iran. The country did not have a standing

¹⁴ Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.25.

¹⁵ Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

army and, therefore, lacked the military power to resist their European adversaries and to prevent the country from becoming a pawn between the two superpowers.¹⁷ Keddie describes the political climate of this time in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*: “when war began, the Iranian government declared neutrality, but Iran was strategically located and four powers used it as a battlefield. The Turks moved into Azerbaijan¹⁸ in the fall of 1914 after the Russians withdrew. The Germans played on anti-British and anti-Russian sentiments.”¹⁹ With Russian influence spreading in the northern part of the country, Reza Shah successfully overthrew the standing Qajar monarch in 1921.²⁰

The condition of the state under the rule of Ahmad Shah Qajar (r. 1909-25), the last ruler of the dynasty, was weak and decentralized. The Iranian monarchy’s lack of initiative regarding reforms crucial to preventing foreign intrusion led political interest groups to consider regime change. Among them were the *Majlis* – the parliament, the lower house of the Iranian government that came into power at the conclusion of the 1906-07 Constitutional Revolution; the *ulama* – the religious scholars; and the *bazaris* – urban merchants involved in small scale production, banking and trade. Though these political groups have continuously aligned together throughout history to prevent foreign intrusion and corrupt government practices, this time they diverged on specific issues of reform and the means of limiting Qajar power.²¹

The coup d’état that eventually saw the appointment of Reza Pahlavi to the throne marks a turning point in modern Iranian history. Reza Shah’s succession came at a time when international powers posed a significant threat to the country’s territorial integrity. Because of the rise of European imperialism in the Middle East at the conclusion of World War I, his attempts at state building were favoured by political elites who saw a strong central government as the surest guarantee of Iran’s independence. If Iran was to withstand further European interference the government had

¹⁷ Anasri notes: *Ulama* is the plural of ‘m,’ a learned individual, more commonly associated with religious scholars, and generally utilized with reference to the clerical class; see Ali Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (Longman, 2003). *Majlis* is literally translated as ‘Assembly,’ or more commonly as ‘Parliament.’ *Ibid*, pp.ix, 12-13.

¹⁸ Azerbaijan is bounded by the Caspian Sea to the east, Iran to the south, Armenia to the west, Georgia to the northwest, and Russia to the north.

¹⁹ Nikki Keddie. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New York: Yale University Press, 2006), p.73.

²⁰ Anasri, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p.32.

²¹ Anasri, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p.13.

to change, and the weak Qajar dynasty (1779-1925) to be deposed. Thus, the early years of Reza Pahlavi's ruling were spent on a series of opportunistic moves directed toward maintaining government control and gaining support of the political elites and intellectuals. The monarch's reliance on military force as the way to build a strong centralized state is one of the main defining characteristics of the Pahlavi autocracy.

By 1923 Reza Shah was the prime minister and was pushing through fundamental social and political reforms in the country. In *Modern Iran Since 1921*, Ali Ansari draws attention to the work of M.R. Ghods who states, "In the early years of Reza Khan's rise to power, he was seen as a modernizing reformer who could give Iran national unity and restore the country's pride and independence."²² There was initially no marked opposition to the reform measures by Reza Pahlavi, and the *Majlis* terminated Qajar rule.²³ A month later the *Majlis* invested dynastic sovereignty in him.

Although the Shah's power was met with little opposition from the *Majlis* and political elites, the reforms initiated by the Shah were contrary to his promises, acting conversely with the orders of the *ulama*.²⁴ For example, he established ten new ministries including Financial Affairs, Justice and Education. Ansari points out that the Shah's changes, including the registration of family names and the adoption of a new calendar, were viewed by the *ulama* as a break with the country's traditional government and the reordering of society to a Western model.²⁵ The Shah also imposed the draft as an instrument to state building. The Shah's relationship with the *ulama*, the *Majlis* and the *bazzaris* was further severed with the initiation of a universal conscription program. However, this program was met with opposition from the *bazzaris* who would be deprived of labourers. As Ansari puts it, "needless to say this enthusiasm for the military, its primacy over all other organs of government, and the general trend towards the militarizing of society which is presaged did not bode well civil-military relations in the Pahlavi era."²⁶ Therefore, in establishing an army aimed to centralize state power the government was met with opposition.

The army's grasp on civilian life and the lack of representative government formed the basis for political opposition to Pahlavi rule to

²² Ibid.

²³ Schulze. *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, p.85.

²⁴ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p.38.

²⁵ Ibid, p.45.

²⁶ Ibid, p.28.

come throughout the twentieth century. Schulze states, “The new Shah deliberately gave himself a military appearance, and the army itself controlled vast realms of the bureaucracy and was in practice the executive body of the various reforms.”²⁷ The most profound change enacted by the Shah was the elimination of the veil. On Jan 8, 1936 Reza Shah announced the law according which wearing *chador* was against the law, thereby officially outlawing the veil. From that day, the police were ordered to forcibly remove the veil from women if necessary.²⁸ This clashed dramatically with many of the religious and moral values of Iranian society. Moreover, an Islamic society was resistant to changing its attitudes towards veiling because of the law. Consequently, policies such as this led to the decline of Reza Shah’s popular appeal. Laws requiring unveiling were later enforced by literally pulling the veil off women’s heads.²⁹

The Shah’s regime remained absent of a political compromise that could protect a balance of power and simultaneously legitimize the regime. The existence of the government was based on strong militaristic rule, and had not succeeded in convoking a national congress that would depart from the tradition of the *Majlis*.³⁰ Although Reza Pahlavi’s reforms were undertaken to create a unified nation, incremental centralization was met with increased resistance. As Evrand Abrahamian tells in *Iran Between Two Revolution*, “the Pahlavi state, in short, was strong inasmuch as it had at its disposal powerful means of coercion. But it was weak in that it failed to cement its institutions of cohesion into the class structure.”³¹ Subsequently, Ansari notes that while the Shah sought to suppress the traditional elites they were not and could not be eliminated.³² The weak connection between the monarch and the bureaucracy, along with his over-reliance on the military as the predominant instrument of governance eventually created an authoritarian dictatorship in Iran. In other words, although the monarchy was preserved, the country lacked a representative counterpart. The Allies deposed the Shah in 1941 as he displayed increased affinity for the German bloc in the early days of the Second

²⁷ Schulze. *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, p.85.

²⁸ http://www.fouman.com/history/Iranian_History_1936.html.

²⁹ Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.87.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.84.

³¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. (New York: Princeton University Press 1982), p.149.

³² *Ibid*, p.44.