

**In the Middle,
on the Edge**

Essays on Iran's Middle Class Poor
Edited by Nazli Kamvari



In the Middle, on the Edge:

Essays on Iran's Middle Class Poor

Essays by:

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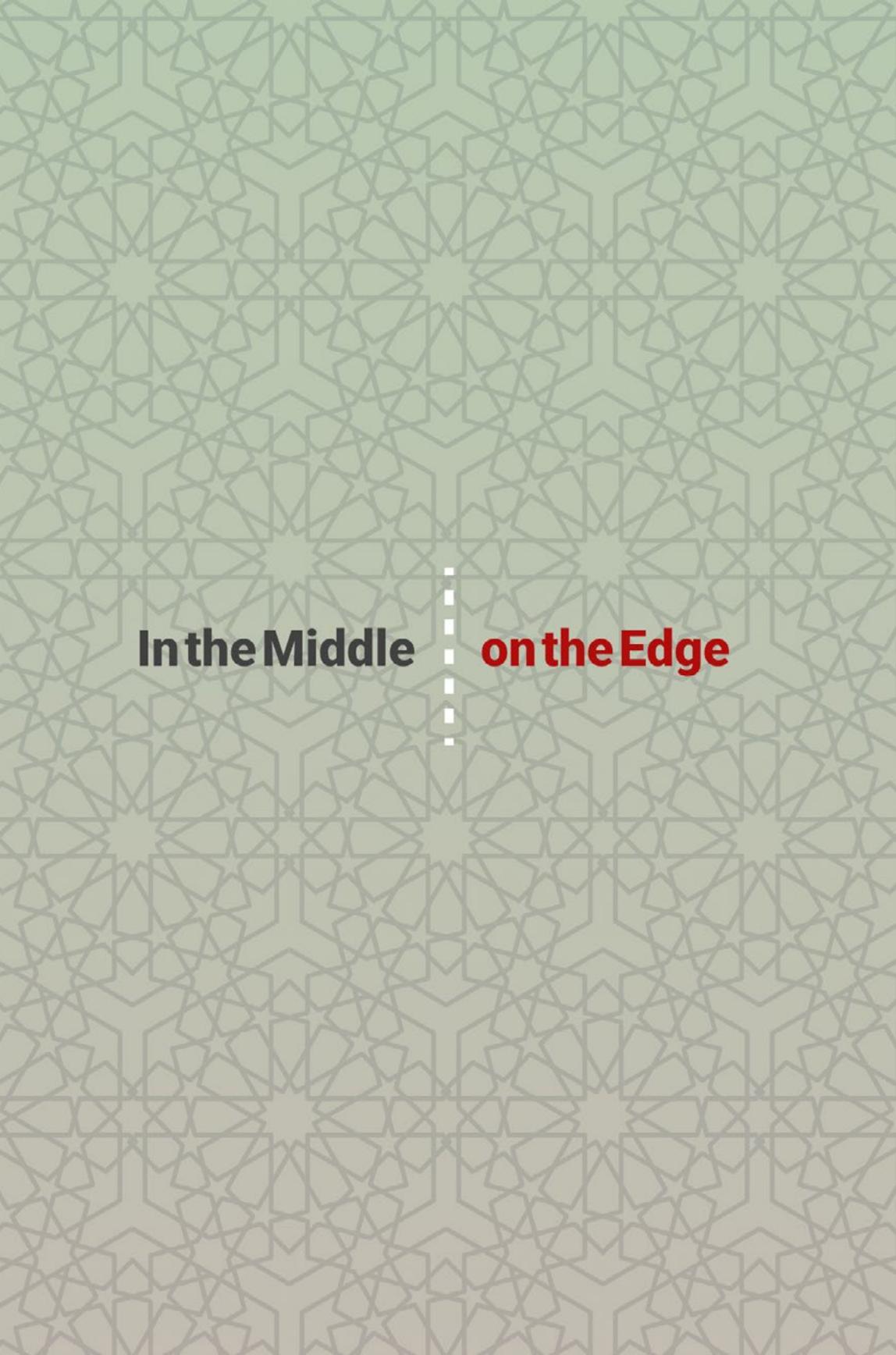


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In the Middle **on the Edge**

Introduction

The focus of Zamaneh Media is on civil society. Reporting from the citizens, asking questions about societal issues, and trying to find answers to form the central part of the content of Zamaneh. A constant theme of its reporting is about the Iranian working classes and their forms of resistance and struggle.

In the daily reporting on the lower strata of society and on the marginalized and discriminated areas, it is constantly pointed out that the story of poverty in Iran is not limited to the situation of being poor but becoming poor is also an essential aspect of the issue. Being pushed below the poverty line, especially in the last ten years, has been a constant topic of reporting and discussion in Iranian media. Becoming poor is a problem for all the lower strata of Iranian society, but if we make an analytical distinction between getting poor and getting poorer, it is justified to pay special attention to “becoming poor,” knowing that it involves strata that are not considered poor, and the perception inside and outside these strata has been that they do not become poor. It places the Middle Class Poor at the center of a social query. Why were they pushed into such a situation? Which sector of society do they form now? How has their lifestyle changed? What prospects do they envision for themselves? How do they make their demands? How do they resist and protest? How do the youth of this sector view their lives and destinies? Asking such questions has motivated the works of these essays and their collection in the form of this book.

The subject of the impoverished strata of the middle class, or as it is commonly called, the Middle Class Poor, has been raised directly and indirectly in many economic and social studies. At least since the 1960s, it has been the subject of research on downward mobility in American sociology.¹ Asef Bayat, an Iranian sociologist, has used this concept to explain social movements in the Middle East, and his research has

led others to pay special attention to this sector in explaining social dynamics in the region.²

The essays published in this book deal with the Middle Class Poor in Iranian society from various angles. They examine their overall social being and specific aspects of their lives.

Parviz Sedaghat, in his essay titled “The Expansion and Contraction of the Middle Class in Iran,” investigates the role of the middle class in the class configuration of Iranian society. According to this economist, “Today’s middle class in Iran is under pressure from two sides. The first is the more structural trends in the global capitalist economy and the information technology revolution, which have de-skilled many of the formerly specialized activities of the technocrats and have blurred the distinction between this group and working-class wage earners. Second is the government’s closed political and economic structure, which has put all classes under duress, including this sector.” The author examines political passivity in middle class segments and looks at the formation of social movements to remedy this passivity.

The subject of Mohammad Maljoo’s essay titled “More Consumption, Less Satisfaction” is the dissatisfaction of the middle class with the standard of living in Iran. The author believes that “the decline in living standards from 2010 onwards, due to sanctions and other quantitative and qualitative disturbances in lifestyle, has led to increased dissatisfaction among the middle class.”

After the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), a period of free-market economics called “Reconstruction” began, centered on strengthening a middle class close to and supporting the government. The 1990s were generally beneficial for the middle class in maintaining and improving the material standards of its living, although dissatisfaction with political tyranny remained. The crisis over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear activities began in early 2001 and has since had a profound effect on the country’s economy, with consequences such as international sanctions against Iran.

“The Effects of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Nuclear Dreams on the Country’s Middle Class” is the title of Bahman Ebrahimi’s essay (alias, resident in Iran). He writes, “The Iranian government seeks relative stability in international equations, but problems of internal legitimacy combined with ideological and geopolitical conflicts with Western powers and their allies in the region prevent it from achieving security and normalcy. To get out of this situation, it seems that Iranian leaders intend to acquire nuclear weapons or want to be on the threshold of producing them. This ambition has periodically exposed the Islamic Republic to severe economic sanctions. In such a situation, Iran’s middle class is exposed to economic insecurity and fluctuations in its level of welfare, which causes great dissatisfaction. This study examines the effects of this situation on the Iranian middle class.”

One of the prerequisites for entering the middle class has always been higher education and job specialization. But in recent years, having

a university degree does not guarantee anyone’s entry into this category. Maryam Ghahremani, an Iran-based researcher, in her essay “Lost Time,” addresses this issue in relation to the unemployment crisis among university graduates. She discusses the “social and psychological consequences” of this crisis, “an issue that is often overlooked in existing research on unemployment among higher education graduates.”

The title of the book you are holding is *In the Middle, on the Edge: Essays on Iran’s Middle Class Poor*. There is now a movement in the Iranian society from the middle to the periphery that was not previously evident in Iran to be of this magnitude. One can ask, “What is margin, where is margin, and what is the role of the margin in explaining social status?” Iman Ganji, in his essay “Slums and the ‘Invisible’ Populations of Neoliberalism,” looks at the category of the Middle Class Poor from the perspective of marginality. One consequence of the marginalization of the middle class is their influx into informal settlements. The author examines the mix of slum dwellers and the middle classes to form a militant coalition.

Do marginalized middle classes form an explosive mass? Bijan Farzaneh (a pseudonym), in the essay “A Brand New ‘Dangerous Class?’” addresses this question. Farzaneh writes, “The December 2017 nationwide protests irreversibly changed the political discourse in Iran. Asef Bayat uses the term ‘Middle Class Poor’ to explain one of the main factors that emerged in the Iranian political sphere after the protests. This concept is consistent with his views on the Arab revolutions and the angry youth of the Middle East. This essay tries to explain the components of the definition put forward by Bayat and places the history of the Iranian Middle Class Poor at the beginning of the so-called Reform Period two decades ago. To understand how the Middle Class Poor came into being, in addition to the history of the last twenty years, one must look at some of the older indicators in the class construction of Iranian society.” Bijan Farzaneh analyzes the role of the Middle Class Poor in the formation of the recent social movements.

The deterioration of the middle class status cannot be explained by economic factors alone. One must look at political, ideological, and economic factors together. This is especially true of the situation of women in this class, where gender discriminations based on religious ideology lead to political and cultural repression and subsequently to economic deprivation.

Nazli Kamvari examines this issue in her essay “Affective Acts of Speech in the Online and Offline Campaigns against Honor Killing, Sexual Assault, and Compulsory Hijab.” “Since 2006,” she writes, “Iran has entered a recession with the gradual imposition of tougher economic sanctions over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear enrichment program. Middle class women, who fought at the forefront of the struggle for their rights, were affected by the closing of political and economic spaces. After 2009, the state control apparatus increased its pressure on women’s rights activists. The crackdown was particularly evident in the One Million Signatures Campaign, during which large numbers of

women were arrested and imprisoned. The repression, along with the diminishing role of Iranian women in the economy, changed the form of non-ideological, 'demand-driven' and reformist campaigns and shifted them in other directions."

The term "middle class" should not be used in a homogeneous sense. A person from the Middle Class Poor living in the central areas of the country is different from a person from the same class but living in the periphery. This difference may also be manifest in religious, ethnic, or gender identities. Identity differences lead to differences in political orientation. Media Khanlari (a sociologist living in Kurdistan, a pseudonym), in her essay entitled "Kurdish Identity and Class Degradation," reflects on the results of a study about an ethnic community in the service sector in Sanandaj. She raises the question of "what is the relationship between the weakening of a class position and the tendency to find meaning in ethnic identity?"

One aspect of understanding social classes is knowing how they represent their problems in arts and culture. Omid Mehregan, in his essay "Open Images of a Closure," examines the representation of the life of the middle strata in Iranian cinema of the last decade. He considers this representation to be unsuccessful and writes, "The cinema of the last decade in Iran represents the middle classes peculiarly. This peculiarity does not reside in the themes rather in the cinematic style in which the films refrain from answering those questions they have been able to ask in an unprecedented way. This failure in representation is a sign that the Iranian society lacks the tools to formulate real solutions or satisfactory resolutions to its problems, including broken marriages, infidelity, and poverty." The author analyzes in detail four films from recent Iranian cinema that deal with the problems of the middle classes.

The essay "The Middle Class and the Drug Crisis in Iran" by Yekta Sarkhosh looks at a way of dealing with life problems that is especially common among young people: turning to drugs. He writes, "First, I will present a historical summary of drugs, stimulants, and psychotropic substances and their use in Iran. I then look at the evolution of prohibitive and criminal laws related to drug use or trafficking. One of the main questions we face is whether the preferred drugs, consumption patterns and consumer strata have changed in the last forty years. How can these changes be analyzed in the context of the social and economic developments?" According to Yekta Sarkhosh, many drug users in Iran come from the middle classes and the Middle Class Poor but reports strongly tend to deny this. He writes: "The growing economic misery in Iranian society in recent decades has led to the impoverishment of the middle class. Segments of this class have committed all kinds of drug-related crimes to meet their economic needs and earn a living."

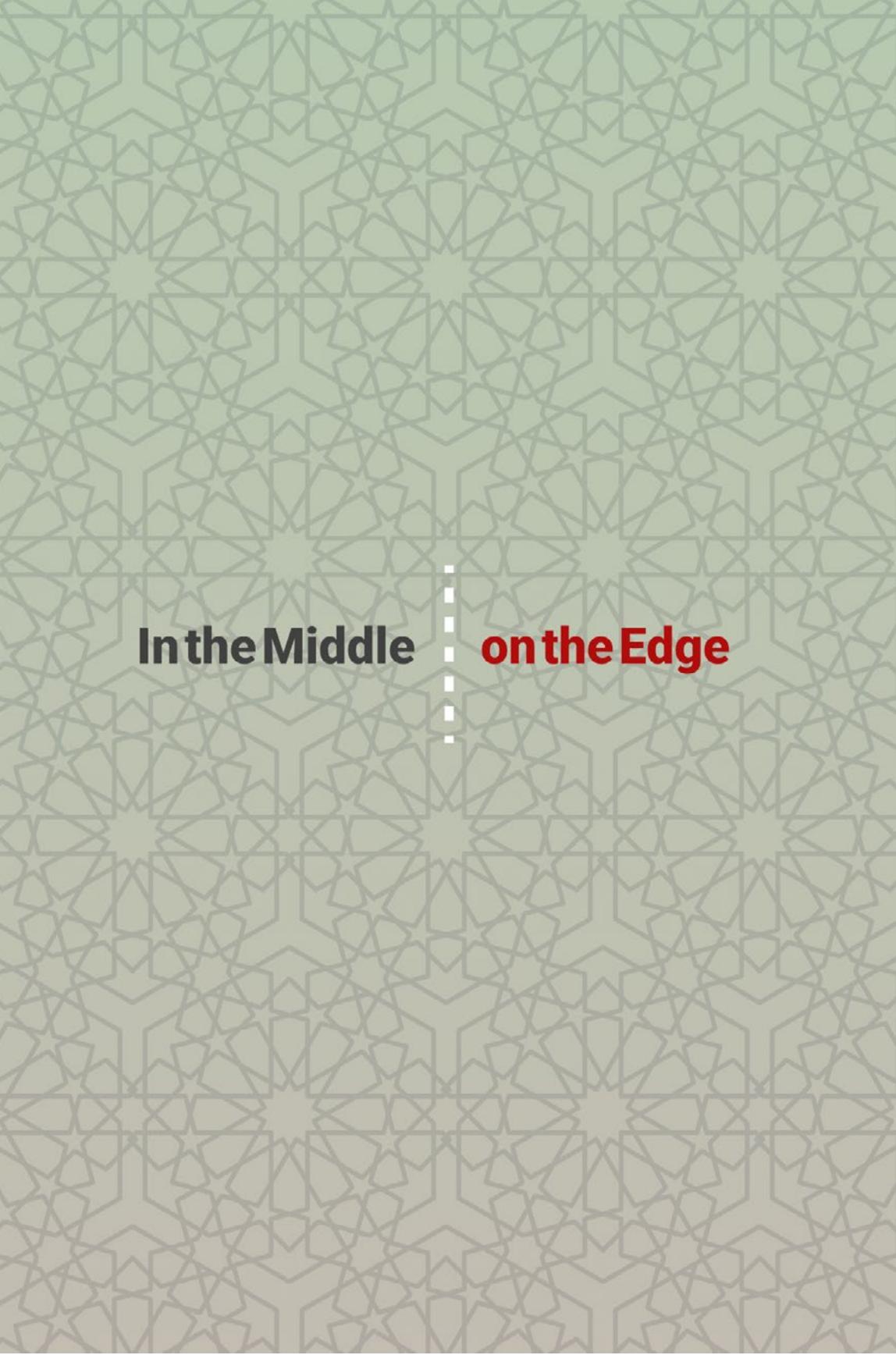
Any study of the complexities of Iranian society can at best explain an issue or set of related problems. The essays in this collection, while analyzing their topics, point to the lack of field studies and accurate statistics about social classes in Iran, and we like to draw attention to these shortcomings as well.

Endnotes

1- Thomas Tissue, "Downward Mobility in Old Age," *Social Problems*, Volume 18, Issue 1, Summer 1970, 67-77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/79988>.

2- Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. 2nd Ed. 2013, Stanford: Stanford University Press.





In the Middle  on the Edge

The Expansion and Contraction of the Middle Class in Iran

By Parviz Sedaghat

Abstract:

This article examines the relative share of the Iranian middle class in the total class configuration of Iranian society and depicts the current perspectives on this class.

Following the defeat of the Green Movement, in which middle class activists formed its main body and leadership, the participation of the middle class in social protests declined sharply from the early 2010s onwards. This decline occurred due to a set of structural factors. The Iranian middle class is under pressure from two sides. First, the structural trends in the global capitalist economy and the information technology revolution have de-skilled those jobs that were once the specialty of technocrats. This trend has diminished the distinctions of this group from the wage-earning working class. The second is the closure of the political space and economic opportunities, putting the middle class in a tight spot. Given this overview, this article examines the political passivity of the middle class and examines the role of social movements in overcoming this passivity.

The present article focuses on evaluating the relative share of the middle class in the class composition of present-day Iran, as well as the context of its formation and development in the modern period, while

trying to depict its present outlooks.

It has been argued that since the structural political and economic obstruction of the early 2010s, and more specifically following the failure of the Green Movement, whose main body consisted of middleclass activists, middleclass participation in social protests has drastically declined. This is despite the fact that the economic status of this class has worsened during this period.

The Differences and Similarities between the Middle Class, the Working Class and the Petite Bourgeoisie

The middle class is a controversial concept. For some it is a mythical class that pioneers democratic change. For others it is not a “class” per se, and in fact consists of social strata, most of which belong to the working class because their labor power has inevitably become a marketable commodity. Scholars continue to offer various and sometimes contradictory views about the middle class. This article does not look to enter into a theoretical debate about the concept of the middle class, but rather provides a definition and reviews its economic, political, and social ups and downs in order to provide a rough picture of the middle class in the class composition of present-day Iran.

By focusing on the decisive role of the ownership of the means of production in shaping a class society, the inevitability of the sale of labor-power (acceptance of exploitation and oppression) is the defining feature of the laboring class in capitalist societies. In this case, we get an initial picture of a society whose composition consists of two main classes, the exploiters and the exploited, the capitalist and the laborer, respectively. But due to the complexities and the nuances of the real world, in addition to these two main classes, we see a diverse range of classes in social stratification: from the poor to the petty landlords, and from laborers to the bureaucrats and technocrats in a hierarchy of bureaucracies and organizational and structural authority—a pyramid of professional knowledge and skills. In real societies, in addition to the ownership of the means of production, knowledge and skills with exchange value in the labor market and organizational authority are other important components that shape the diversity of class composition.

In this essay, an attempt is made to consider class an objective reality in social stratification and it is assumed that in the final analysis it is the objective fact that defines the class position of individuals and, if equipped with class consciousness, determines their action. A great many people believe they are in a different social class than the one they belong to, a result of their mind sets and individual values and beliefs.

This paper also distinguishes the middle class from the petty bourgeoisie. The middle class is mostly defined as groups of wage earners who are differentiated from the working class due to their professional knowledge and their organizational position and authority resulting from this knowledge. Members of this social class, as experts, managers, or skilled employees, whether in the sphere of production or

in the sphere of circulation, on the one hand function as the working class because they lack the means of production and inevitably sell their labor-power for wages. On the other hand, they function as the capitalist class because in many cases they have taken over part of the regulatory role and the control over capital. Also, many people in this class have the ability to be self-employed due to their relatively rare skills.

Thus, wage earners and middleclass workers, although not owners of the means of production, have relative organizational authority as a result of their skills and professional knowledge or the function assigned to them by capitalists or other powers, unlike the members of the working class.

At the same time, the members of this class are distinguished from the capitalist class because they do not own the means of production. A large proportion of them make an indirect contribution to surplus value creation by improving the productivity and the necessary conditions for the reproduction of the workforce, themselves appropriating part of the value created by the working class too. At the same time, in the professional and organizational hierarchies, they are to some extent oppressed and find themselves in a position similar to that of the working class.

The middle class, in the form of broad social strata among the population, is itself the result of the evolution of capitalism at a specific point during its growth. The concentration of capital, the inevitable separation of ownership and management, and the necessity of a hierarchy of managers on the one hand forced capital to delegate part of its supervisory and control functions to a group of wage-earners due to the scale of the organizations under its control. On the other hand, revolutions in information technology and the need to use up-to-date technologies and new management methods as well as the necessity to deal with bureaucracies and increasingly complex and advanced bureaucratic, legal, and financial systems, strengthened the distinctive position of professionals in modern developed or developing capitalism. Thus engineers, technicians, experts in various fields of law, business and finance, physicians, middle-level managers and similar groups are the most prominent technocrats and bureaucrats who formed the “new” middle class during the evolution of capitalism.

Overall, the span of this class, its distinctive features that set it apart from both the working class and the capitalist class, and the role it has played in social change, make it necessary to focus on this class as a distinct part of social stratification.

In order to understand this class more clearly in capitalist societies, it is necessary to pay attention to the differences and similarities between the middle class and the petty bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeoisie, like the middle class, lies mainly in the stratum that occupies the ground between the working and capitalist classes, and at the same time enjoys the material benefits of repression and exploitation and is itself

oppressed by big capital owners. In many cases the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class fall into similar income and wealth deciles. But unlike the middle class, whose evolution is due to the evolution of capitalism, the petty bourgeoisie is rooted in the simple commodity production that is distinct from both advanced capitalist production and subsistence production. Although in many cases their positions in the social pyramid are quite close to each other, the pre-capitalist roots of the petty bourgeoisie have caused its social and political behavior to be different from that of the middle class.

The historical origins of simple commodity production and commercial self-employment go back to the pre-capitalist forms of production and circulation among occupational groups such as peasants, craftsmen, and shopkeepers. Thus, they seem to have a historically untimely presence in modern capitalism because the dynamics of capital concentration constantly threaten their social existence.

The evolution of capitalism has undermined the petty bourgeois via capitalist commodification, and the proletarianization of the labor force can never be completed in practice due to social resistance and historical opposing forces. However, we continue to witness, to varying degrees, the presence and influence of the petty bourgeoisie in contemporary capitalist societies.

The different origins of the formation and evolution of the middle class and the petty bourgeois are among the important factors that can explain their different political roles, especially in times of political crisis—so much so that even considering all the mediating factors, including position in class structure and the level of social class participation, we have witnessed many different and sometimes contradictory roles played by the two throughout history.

The Formation and Evolution of the Middle Class in Modern Iran

The formation of a new administrative system, access to security and a modern army, secular law and justice, literacy and education system, a new health system, new sciences, parliament and free press were some of the demands that were put forward during the Constitutional Revolution, the first revolution in modern Iran. At that time, such demands for modernization of Iran and overcoming its backwardness prevailed in the minds of progressive political activists in society. The ups and downs of social and political movements following the Constitutional Revolution eventually led to Reza Shah's rule, during which he fulfilled many of the abovementioned demands with an authoritarian approach.

The new middle class in Iran was born in the same period in social stratification. During this period, in parallel with the development of the modern army, the administrative system (new ministries and justice) began to grow so that at the end of Reza Shah's reign the

government had more than 20,000 employees. Accordingly, the growth of new industries and government infrastructure projects required the presence of technicians, engineers and managers. During Reza Shah's reign, the development of literacy and the education system was such that there was a total of 91,000 students, less than 12,000 of whom were public school students, with the majority studying in private schools, religious-minority schools, and missionary schools. By the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941, the number of governmental schools had reached 2,336 primary schools with 210,000 students and 241 high schools with 21,000 students.

Also, in 1934, the University of Tehran was established with five separate faculties and 886 students, and the number of students sent abroad was also increased. The number of students at the University of Tehran reached 3,330 by 1941, and during this period more than 500 graduates had returned to Iran from abroad.

The formation of these educational institutions, alongside the new bureaucratic and technocratic structures and new industries, led to the birth of the so-called technocrats and bureaucrats in charge of running these modern organizations, and thus, a new middle class as a distinct class was born in Iran.

From the beginning of the constitutional movement, progressive secular ideology in Iran was generally crystallized in either nationalist or socialist tendencies, as well as in mixtures of the two. Reza Shah's authoritarian approach to the modernization of Iran gradually led to the growing political divergence of many middleclass intellectual pioneers who favored the democratic demands of the constitution. It is worth noting that in contemporary Iran, progressivism and even various forms of political radicalism have been the dominant creed among a large number of middleclass activists in many periods of contemporary history.

Between 1941 and 1953, in the democratic political atmosphere resulting from the Allied occupation of Iran and the aftermath of Reza Shah's fall, the middle class played a crucial political role. Although this period saw an economic recession, and during World War II there were famines and economic crises, the political demands that had been repressed during the relatively long dictatorship were reasserted and taken back to the streets. Modern parties were formed on a large scale, with relatively non-patriarchal and modern structures based on organized communication in cities. The Tudeh Party of Iran, some of the parties that later formed the National Front, and Khalil Maleki's Third Force gradually emerged. Unions, organizations, and non-governmental organizations were formed, as well as various intellectual associations and the press, and the middle class, among other classes and social groups, found an opportunity to assert itself in the political scene. The emerging wave of nationalism created a social demand for national control over oil resources, which in turn led to a demand for access to oil export revenues in order to achieve development goals.

In this period, the idea of development was emerging globally in the

countries at the margins of the world capitalist system, and Iran, with its demands for nationalization of the oil industry, was somehow the pioneer of the idea of expropriating foreigners and taking control of mineral resources. The occupation of Iran in the early 1940s had severe ramifications on economic life due to international conditions. In conjunction with a series of political crises and short-lived successive governments, Iran's economic growth rate declined. But at the same time, legal and institutional grounds were laid for moving towards a "national development model," which included: the Nationalization of Fisheries and Shipping Act, the nationalization of Iran's oil industry (exploration, extraction and trade), the nationalization of telecommunications, the Export Promotion and Issuance of Trade Licenses Act, the bill of the Export Development Bank, the bill and the amendment to the act on non-tax receivables, the Bill for the abolition of Tolls and Taxes in Rural Areas, the act of National Construction Institution, and the bill for the establishment of the customs police and the establishment of a Planning Organization.

A set of acts were also passed for the development of civil institutions and social security in its modern sense; these include the Bar Association Independence Act, the Labor Law and Social Security Act, the National Pension Act, the Municipal Independence Act, the Provincial Associations Bill, the amendment to the Press Act, and the act for establishing Chambers of Commerce. These legal frameworks and institutionalizations essentially led to the rise of the middle class and other modern classes in social stratification. This period saw widespread political activism of the new middle class. In terms of class origins, the roots of the intellectuals and theorists that gave rise to new parties in this period could be traced back to the emerging middle class. Also, an important part of the organizational personnel in these parties belonged to the new middle class. Among both the leaders and the members of all the modern parties, the new middle class had a more prominent position than any other social class. For instance, 10 out of the 15 leaders of Iran Party, 14 out of the 20 founders of the National Front, and the majority of the leaders and nearly 60 percent of Tudeh Party members were of middleclass origin.

In 1953, following the coup d'état of August 18, many political activists were arrested and practically removed from the streets and the scene of public activism. At the same time, due to the end of the oil embargo and the conclusion of a consortium agreement, oil sales revenues that had flooded the country were used to stabilize the regime that emerged from the coup.

After the consortium agreement was concluded and the oil embargo lifted, oil revenues that were blocked entered the country alongside monetary aids offered by designers of the coup d'état who wished to stabilize the regime that had emerged from the coup. During the Cold War era and the implementation of Truman's Point Four Program, U.S. allies had relatively easy access to money to make all kinds of investments.

After a period of political repression, high economic growth occurred

in Iran between 1959 and 1971, and especially in the 1960s, when average economic growth rate was in the double digits and there was a significant increase in GDP. In 1962, the land reforms known as the "White Revolution" was carried out in Iran, which led to significant changes in class configuration. The unwritten alliance between the court, the traditional classes, the landowners and the majority of the clergy came to an end. They too had now joined the ranks of Shah's staunch critics and opponents.

During this period a new capitalist class was formed, which was strengthened in part by the easy credit it received from the government.

Iran's bureaucracy developed significantly, and the number of ministries increased from 12 to 20. New organizations such as Industrial Credit Bank (1956), Industrial and Civil Development Bank of Iran (1959), the Central Bank (1960), Iran's National Radio and Television (1967), Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents (1965) and many other new organizations such as financial and credit institutions were formed in this period.

From 1956 to 1976, the members of the salaried class doubled and increased from less than 310,000 people in 1956 to more than 630,000 people in 1976. More than 304,000 government employees, 208,000 teachers and educators, and 61,000 managers, engineers, and experts made up a major portion of occupations. According to official statistics, the number of students, those who would increase the number of middle class population in the following years, increased from 19,800 in 1960 to 59,000 in 1968. At the same time, the number of students that were sent abroad increased as well. In 1976, on the eve of the revolution, 233,000 students were waiting to join the middle class. There were also 741,000 high school students -- a significant number given the social structure of the time -- of whom a large portion were hoping to join the middle class.

The Fifth Development Plan (1972 to 1977) provided an estimate of the need for skilled and semi-skilled labor force. According to these estimates, the increase in demand for engineers was 80 percent, for medical labor 105 percent, for educational personnel 25 percent, and for technicians 55 percent. The middle class had very high bargaining power in the labor market and therefore, this group of employees enjoyed significant financial benefits.

Following the developments of land reform, many members of the traditional classes turned away from Shah's regime. As a result, the regime needed a new social base to help it carry out its plans. In a system with accelerated economic modernization programs, it was speculated that the main social class on which the regime could rely should be the middle class. Consequently, policies were constantly implemented to build up the middle class and improve its economic and social status until the end of the Pahlavi dynasty. In the meantime, what was being overlooked was the opening up of the country's political space which allowed the middle class to become politically active. As the new middle class expanded, rather than becoming a social base for the regime, it

became the center of opposition.

During all these years, universities were one of the permanent centers of opposition to the political regime, and abroad, the International Confederation of Iranian Students had formed one of the largest student organizations in contemporary history.

As previously mentioned, this period of growth and acceleration of modernization coincided with clerics and traditional classes and groups coming together to oppose the Shah. Nonetheless, the middle class not only did not become a stable base of social support for Shah's regime, but also the new left-wing guerrillas who waged violent attacks against the government were mainly from the middle class. The acceleration of modernization also led to a kind of revolt against modernization and a "return to self" among a section of the middle class.

The 1970s were a time of great oil price shocks. These shocks conditioned the biggest mistake in the economic policies during Shah's reign. The sharp increases in the development and current projects budget, the great increase in government spending, and the massive injection of money into society, led to a critical situation in the economy. It is now clear that Shah's regime made a strategic mistake in relying on the middle class as its social base as this class played a very important and decisive role in the revolution of February 1979 and was a powerful driving force in fostering the slogans of the revolution among the masses, as well as in leading many social protests, giving voice to revolutionary demands in the media, and advancing the democratic demands of the revolution.

Thus, the revolutionary period from 1977 to 1981 can be considered the years of new and manifest participation of the middle class in the political scene. Once again, as in the 1940s, a period of economic stagnation coincided with a boom in political activities and widespread presence of the middle class with their political and social demands in the form of poetry nights, the formation or reactivation of democratic civil rights organizations, and widespread presence in left-wing and democratic political parties.

But the short-lived "spring of liberty" did not last long and soon gave way to the most acute period of repression in the contemporary history of Iran. Meanwhile, a large part of the middle class, which itself had supported the revolution and in many cases, was the pioneer of revolutionary demands, was politically severely repressed and socially and economically weakened. The first decade after the revolution was a time of acute economic crisis which saw a sharp decline in capital accumulation, as well as the further weakening of the middle class. In terms of economic variables, the average economic growth rate from 1979 to 1989 was negative 2.1 percent and real GDP per capita decreased from 720,000 tomans in 1955 to 350,000 tomans in 1989.

The populist redistributive policies of the new government were also fundamentally focused on the social class that constituted the base for the new system and caused the middle class to shrink further. The

number of students, that is, the group that was supposed to form the future middle class, decreased from about 174,000 in the period before the Cultural Revolution to about 100,000 in 1982. It was also said that the number of the academic staff of the universities plummeted from more than 16,000 to about 8,000 during this period. Extensive purges of experts and specialists in the administrative, educational, academic, and cultural systems severely damaged the social status of the middle class. The ideological values of the new system were in stark contrast to the middle class lifestyle which was a pioneer in the acceptance of the cultural values of modernity.

During this period and for the first time, migration as a pervasive social act started among the middle class, and at that time there was a wave of widespread migration from Iran which, despite lack of statistical evidence, seemed to have occurred mainly among the middle class. We do not have definitive statistics on the number of emigrants, and the statistics presented vary widely, in some cases "magnifying" and in others "minimizing" the numbers. But certainly since 1981 and the beginning of the middle class retreat from the political scene until today, a more or less continuous wave of emigration has been ongoing.

At the end of the Eight-Year War, after a period of negative average economic growth during which the economy had virtually collapsed, it became clear that it was no longer possible to continue economic management as before. The engine of capital accumulation had to be turned on again. Gradually, there was a turnaround in the country's economic policies. Economic growth was once again on the agenda and alongside the emerging new capitalist class, sections of the middle class also benefited from the financial gains of this growth, which, of course, was not comparable to the growth of the years before the revolution. During this period, the average economic growth rate from 1990 to 2012 was 5.2 percent, with ebbs and flows that were mainly due to fluctuations in oil prices.

Along with these developments, the number of universities and students increased significantly. The number of students increased from 344,000 in 1992 to more than 4.8 million in the early 2010s, an increase of almost 14 times. In other words, if the country's population doubled during this period, the number of students increased 14-fold.

During the same period, new publications were published, some civic institutions were formed, and in parallel with the revolution in information technology, Iran's news began to be covered in different forms of media. The development of internet network gradually abolished the monopoly of information.

The civil and political demands of the middle class started to reemerge gradually. Especially in the aftermath of the presidential elections of May 23, 1997, two important social movements took form, both of which had the middle class at its core: one in 2000 and another, much larger one in 2010. The demands expressed by these two movements put more emphasis on what were basically the civic identity demands of the modern classes of society, namely demands related to lifestyle, civil and

democratic freedoms, and the like.

Since 2012 and after the failure of the Green Movement, the middle class retreated once again from the political scene. But against the background of demographic structural changes of the 1980s and insufficient economic growth in subsequent decades, policies such as the temporary employment contracts used by the majority of employees, the reduced scope of social security coverage, alongside the continuation of ideological selection in the administrative and educational system, the economic situation of a large portion of the middle class - the class that by definition has achieved its economic position through job specialization and skills - has deteriorated. More importantly, the long-term horizons of the economic situation of this class have become very dark. The best evidence for this claim is the rising unemployment rate among Iranians with higher education (undergraduate and higher) over the past two decades, which clearly shows the impossibility of improving the financial situation of those who were hoping to become part of the middle class. In 2002, the unemployment rate among those with higher education was 10.3 percent, which was quite lower than the unemployment rate in other educational groups. In 2007, this rate reached 20.9 percent, which means it had more than doubled within five years. Five years later, in 2012, the unemployment rate among those with higher education degrees reached 31.3 percent, which was the highest unemployment rate among all educational groups, from illiterates to holders of various secondary education degrees. This record-breaking rate has reached more alarming proportions since and has increased from 36.6 percent to 41.8 percent in the period between 2013 to 2017.

These critical rates reflect the very high rate of population growth in the 1980s, the quantitative development of the higher education system in the following decades, and the inadequate economic growth over the last few decades. Those born in the 1980s and 1990s are among the most economically active populations of the country and have the highest unemployment rate among different age groups.

Naturally enough, excess supply of labor has led to a reduction in the bargaining power of the labor force and consequently, real wages have declined in recent years. At a time when 1.3 million new workers are entering the labor market every year and there are millions of unemployed people, the high unemployment rate among professionals, rising living costs, changing lifestyles, collapse of traditional support mechanisms for individuals and families, and inadequate support by social security and pension institutions have severely eroded the middle class. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the salaries of holders of professional jobs would be close to minimum wages and the growing gap between the minimum wage and the poverty line has caused discontent among large portions of this occupational group, forcing them to either seek new jobs or emigrate.

In addition to factors such as changes in the population age pyramid, increasing number of highly educated individuals, recession, prolonged high rates of inflation, implementation of neoliberal economic policies,

continuation of the ideological admittance procedures in universities and administrative section, and the increasing relative share of security costs and ideologically based expenditures of the regime from the total expenditures, we also need to pay attention to the important changes in today's globalized capitalism. The increasing organic composition of capital (OCC), which is the inherent tendency of capital, has created a new phenomenon in late capitalism in the last wave of information technology revolution. Whereas in the previous waves the increase in OCC caused the blue-collar workers to be replaced by machines, nowadays the new waves of revolution in information technology are replacing specialized careers with computer hardware and software programs, leading to the so-called deskilling of the intellectual and specialized work force. Under such circumstances, without pressure from social movements and widespread government intervention in the economy, the prospect of an improving financial situation seems highly unlikely for the majority of middleclass workers, a global trend.

A Statistical Picture of the Middle Class in present day Iran

Class as a social relationship has no place in the statistical and census data system of Iran. In these systems, the economic situation of individuals is measured according to occupation. Still, occupations can, indirectly and through mediating factors, provide a general and approximate picture of the concrete reality of social classes. However, differences in individual and family backgrounds, as well as different degrees of authority enjoyed due to rents and privileges of closeness to the centers of power, cause incomes to vary among workers with similar abilities, and in the hierarchy of social classes and wealth deciles gives different positions to those with similar jobs. Nevertheless, occupations can provide a general and approximate picture of the class situation. In any case, empirical studies are inevitably dependent on statistical data, but the use of this data should be controlled, as much as possible, with other statistical and empirical data and evidence, and based on theoretical coherence.

To provide a picture of the position and share of the middle class in present-day Iran, this section will utilize statistics of major occupational groups. According to a 1397 Iranian fiscal year (March 2018 to March 2019) report by the Statistical Center of Iran, out of a total of more than 23,813,000 employees, nearly 11 percent have specialized occupations. These employees form the core and more stable portion of the middle class in Iran (Table 1). This group includes more than 2,506,000 people. Other occupational groups such as technicians, assistants, office workers, and clerical staff are other groups that mostly identify as part of the middle class. These two groups include more than 2,225,000 people. Most of the individuals in managerial occupations -- over 759,000, or 3.19 percent of the total employed population -- can also be considered middle class. Therefore, the scope of the middle class starts from about 2.225 million simple employees who make the lower most strata of the middle class. Next comes the middle strata of the middle class including 2.609 trillion specialized workers, and finally the

upper most strata of 759,000 individuals in managerial positions. Based on the occupational groups that roughly form the middle class and the average number of working individuals in each household, we can give an approximate estimation of the population of the middle class in Iran (Table 1). The middle class population in Iran today, including those retired and the unemployed, is estimated at 21,535,933, which is more than a quarter of the total population. Also, in terms of intra-class stratification based on occupational groups, about 13 percent of the total population (about 2,800,000 people) form the upper strata, while about 47 percent (10 million people) form the middle strata, and about 40 percent (8,600,000) fall into the lower strata.

Table 1 - Major occupational groups and their share of the total working population and the share of households covered

Occupational Group	Number of workers	Number of Families in Each Occupational Group
Total	23,813,045	-
Legislators, High Ranking Authorities and Managers	759,505	2,506,367
Specialized Workers	2,609,678	8,611,937
Technicians and Assistants	1,340,919	4,425,033
Clerical and Office Workers	884,839	2,919,969
Service workers and Salespersons	3,669,512	12,109,390
Skilled workers in agriculture, forestry and fishing	3,316,962	10,945,975
Craftsmen and related occupations	4,495,344	14,834,635
Machine operators, assemblers and montage workers	3,034,551	10,014,018
Simple workers	3,214,173	10,606,771
Other/Not stated jobs	487,558	1,608,941

Source of the data: The Statistical Center of Iran, Published on 7 December 2018 with title "Economic Activities of the Employed aged 10 and older". The data is from the second column of the report that divides citizens with jobs in terms of major groups of economic activity. The data is also divided by gender and major occupational groups. The data became available in the Iranian fiscal year 1397 (March 2018 to March 2019). The data was published by the Statistical Center of Iran on 7 December 2019 (The third column in the table above has been calculated based on household number of 3.3 in present day Iran).

All the calculations above are based on the latest published statistics, focusing on the mid-2010s. Over the past few years, U.S. sanctions on Iran's economy in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the recession, increased inflation rates, and reduced real household income. Thus, the share of the middle class in the total population decreased. In the inner stratifications of the middle class, shifts to the lower strata of this class as well as from the middle class to the lower classes of society are evident, but sufficient statistical evidence regarding these later changes are not available yet and therefore, these

changes cannot be taken into account in the calculations of the present paper.

It is important to note that in the present study, the middle class is separated from other middle-income groups, although it is part of these groups. A large part of the occupational groups called craftsmen and service workers in shops and markets constitute the petty bourgeoisie of today's Iran, which have a very diverse range of income; some are closer to the urban poor and others to the bourgeoisie. This group makes up more than 34 percent of the total working population. Thus, despite a century of development of capitalist relations in Iran and a sharp weakening of the petty bourgeoisie due to capital concentration in recent years, especially in the retail sector, the relative share of this social class is still higher than that of the middle class.

Another point worth noting is the share of public sector employees in the middle class. Public sector employees are generally divided into two groups: "political employees" and "non-commodity government services" or "social services" (based on the job descriptions of government ministries and agencies). Government employees generally fall in part under the working class and in part under the middle class. By using the education criterion and placing the holders of undergraduate and higher university degrees employed by the government in the middle class (mainly in charge of specialized positions and above), we will find that 1,289,000 government employees fall into the middle class. Some of them are high ranking authorities and managers, though the majority are specialized workers. Accordingly, about 38 percent of middleclass employees work in the public sector. Considering the employment procedures in the administrative system in Iran and the behavioral conservatism of public sector employees, these workers can be said to cover a very diverse range, including those who are less active or passive, and in case of ministries and political and ideological institutions they can be considered part of the political repression apparatus.

Hence, in general, today the middle class has a smaller share in the class configuration of Iran than the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. However, this class has a much louder voice than other social classes in Iran today due to its educational privileges, centralized presence in metropolitan areas, access to the media, and more active presence in social networks.

Table 2- Employees with higher education degrees in the ministries

Presidential Offices	14,118
Ministry of Education	677,662
Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance	65,882
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2,345
Ministry of Health and Medical Education	219,576
Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare	24,040
Ministry of Agriculture Jihad	48,729
Ministry of Justice	54,903
Iran Ministry of Roads & Urban Development	22,038
Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade	13,690
Ministry of Science, Research and Technology	56,414
Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance	6,605
Ministry of Interior	19,080
Ministry of Petroleum	44,986
Ministry of Energy	16,962
Ministry of Sport and Youth	2,950
Total:	1,289,955

Source: Iran Statistical Yearbook, 2016

An average economic growth rate close to zero in the 2010s is an indicator of the deterioration of the middle class (as well as the lower classes of the society) and its continued decline, which has led to increasing demands for emigration among this class.

In recent years, an important reaction by the middle class to the disappointing economic and social prospects has been to seek individual ways out of the current crisis and, in particular, to migrate. According to a survey conducted in 2018, Iranian students and graduates have named eight reasons for migration, including three important political factors, namely disappointment with the possibility of reform, law and public order, and meritocracy, and three important economic factors, namely the level of income which is disproportionate to expenses, the possibility of finding a job and the possibility of career advancement among other reasons. More importantly, the survey found that only 16 percent of those who emigrated were willing to return.

Afterword

With the exception of a ten-year period of economic, social and political contraction in the first decade after the February 1979 revolution, Iran's middle class has mostly expanded. But from the beginning of the 2010s, a new diminution process of the middle class has begun in which longer-term structural changes have played an important role. The following factors have paved the way for middle class contraction in Iran: demographic changes after the revolution, the growing number of highly educated individuals, implementation of neoliberal policies in the labor market, the reduction in the bargaining power of those in search of a job, the ideological admittance system in higher education institutions and many specialized professions such as judicial affairs, managerial jobs and sometimes even specialized careers in government

institutions, the more or less continuous relative recession, and finally, the expansion of the information technology revolution to skilled and specialized jobs which has practically led to deskilling of these jobs.

After a period of post-revolutionary irresolution, sections of the middle class actively re-entered the civil and political scene in the early 1990s. But whether in the student movement of the last two decades or at its peak in the Green Movement, the government's only reaction to the demands of this class was almost exclusively repression, and we saw almost no civil or political concessions to this class. The failure of the Green Movement and the more or less simultaneous structural economic restrictions since the early 2010s, has created a wave of despair among this class, a large part of which at the same time experienced a decline in its financial and living conditions. This frustration reduced this class's participation in single protests as well as the important uprisings of December 2017 and November 2019. In terms of urban space distribution, in these uprisings the protesters mainly belonged to the marginal neighborhoods around metropolitan areas.

Today's middle class in Iran is under pressure from two sides. First, the more structural trends in the global capitalist economy and the information technology revolution, which have de-skilled many of the activities previously specialized and in the hands of specialized work force and experts, have blurred the distinctions between this group and the working-class wage earners. And second, the structural restrictions in the economic and political spheres have put a lot of pressure on this class as well as other classes of the society.

Under the current circumstances, we witness a marked political passivity among the middle class and a tendency to seek individual ways out by taking advantage of their class privileges (education and specialized skills). Thus, the present era can be claimed to be a long-term contraction period of the middle class in modern-day Iran which can only be overcome by the intervention of social movements.

In the Middle | **on the Edge**

The Middle Class of Iran and its Poor: Background and Necessary Points for Discussion

By: Mohammad Reza Nikfar

Abstract

This article aims to address the poor strata of the middle class in Iran, particularly focusing on its youth. Iran has a population of about 85 million. The middle class is estimated to comprise around 35 percent, or close to 30 million people, about half of whom live in poverty. While these numbers are imprecise, they generally capture the population that is the subject of this article: the Middle Class Poor (MCP) of Iran.

The context of the MCP in Iran is best explained by a layered approach to class analysis. This article first explains the combined view in class analysis and connects it to the current social milieu in Iran. Next, it hones in on the middle class. The final section, analysis of the poorer layers of the middle class in Iran takes on a tangible form. Throughout the piece, the article approaches the issue of the MCP through the lens of social movements.

This article seeks to introduce a combined view of class analysis using the example of the poor strata of the middle class in Iran. It simultaneously advances the three key approaches to class as proposed by Eric Olin Wright as well as a phenomenological view of Iran's MCP from the angles of global and interpretative sociology (Verstehende Soziologie).

Approaching the Subject of the Middle Class Poor

Compared to other members of the middle class, those in the Middle Class Poor:

Stand at a lower position, feel class inferiority and inequality, experience more exploitation, and can gradually move to lower strata of this class group, to the point of approaching the near or below the poverty line.

Their use of opportunities for vertical social mobility in the vertical axis of social classification has qualitatively been reduced and as such it is harder for them to move upward from lower strata.

Are less able to pursue their desired lifestyles and to develop their talents and abilities as individuals.

One can understand these three characteristics as the result of three types of articulations that Eric Olin Wright introduces as the Marxist, Weberian, and Bourdieusian approaches to class, respectively (Wright 2015: 1ff).

Approaches to the representation of reality of an issue must be fundamentally rooted in the phenomenon itself. When Wright says that class is the answer to a problem, what is that problem? He invites us to look at the problem itself; the problem is a representation of the phenomenon itself, and every phenomenon has a phenomenological context.

The context of class creation and reproduction in today's world differs significantly from the period marked by the growth of capitalism, imperialism, and the subsequent deepening of systemic separation. This difference goes back to globalization, which affects economics, politics, and culture, as well as transition mobility – from one point to another – including acceleration, sense of time and place, and status.

Therefore, we must add to the above three perspectives a fourth view which borrows from Ulrich Beck's groundbreaking studies of globalization (1997). We must include a global perspective in the study of class. For example, we see how the living and working conditions of a social group are a function of the exchange value of currencies (such as the exchange value of Iranian riyal to US dollars). We must consider the global middle class as represented on social media networks in order to determine class mentality and culture because they set the standards of "normal" living conditions and offer a measuring stick for their surroundings.

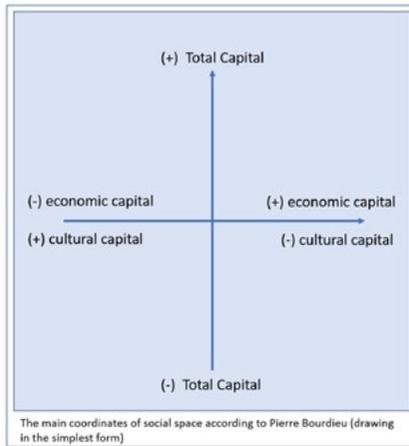
The above perspectives all require a supplementary possibility as well: supplementary to that of the internal class self-perspective or rather approaching such perspective. How do members of the MCP regard themselves? How do they understand the world? Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann's phenomenological sociology in *Strukturen der Lebenswelt* helps answer these questions (2003).

The Idea of a Social Space

Society, in this case, modern society, is an emerging horizon of the obstacle of class. We align with Pierre Bourdieu's idea that class in its detached and structured form is a social space in which a set of connections take place. What Eric Olin Wright calls a Bourdieusian approach also relates to social space. Disregarding social space, in which a set of connections takes place, imagines and reduces social strata such as the poor of the middle class to only an aspect of this category characterized by income status and ranking. This ranking is the result of a position, not an explanation of that position. Each status and position finds its explanation in relation to a network of statuses and positions; social space is that network.

Pierre Bourdieu was inspired to engineer the concept of social space in order to overcome the perception of society only as a hierarchical order. Every point and position in social space is regulated and determined by both economic and non-economic factors. Bourdieu used the example of French society in the 1960s and 1970s to outline this concept (1984). This does not mean that it is impossible to transfer the idea of social class as a framework of analysis to other social contexts. One can make such transfer without sabotaging the core idea of social space. The idea of "social space" can be supported for sociological analysis in a country like Iran without major issues.¹

The symbolic meaning behind differences in lifestyle, preferences, and taste is at the focal point of Bourdieu's research on social space. He looks at these differences in relation to differences in social positions and calls the connections between them social space. This space is not one-dimensional, and so it cannot be described only as "high" and "low" or "upper" and "lower." There is also the notion of difference in the horizontal dimension, a difference that can be explained in the simplest terms with the example of culture. Adjacent class members, or those in the same hierarchical position, do not necessarily think and act alike. In social analysis, one must take these differences into account in order to understand the reality of society. Bourdieu explains the differences in the horizontal dimension with differences in the structure of capital (economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital) and in the vertical dimension with the amount of capital. The amount of capital is variable. Given the rate of change in the amount of capital, Bourdieu also considers a time dimension in his formulation of social space to explain the dynamic motion of moving upward or downward. This dynamic motion is dependent on the horizontal dimension and therefore is not a linear movement



Iranian Social Space

When examining the horizontal dimension of social space, Bourdieu focuses on general differences in character, taste, and culture. If we are to take culture as a starting point in the class analysis of Iran, we immediately discover issues related to hardline differences that foster discrimination. One might only refer to aspects of these stark differences as cultural in its soft sense; in this case, culture means everything an individual perceives about their environment, upbringing, and conduct since birth.

In the context of Iran, a primary cultural difference is the one between traditional and modern, and, relatedly, religious and secular. Tradition and modernity are second-order concepts in historical analysis, meaning they have emerged from observing social and cultural developments in the transition to the contemporary age as well as the subsequent tensions. In Iran, traditional and modern, in their direct and apparent aspects, directly epitomize cultural differences more. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, political Islam has given notable political significance to the concept of modern and traditional.

Today, there is a theocratic state in power in Iran this type of state differentiates and discriminates between religious and non-religious citizens when making selections. If the process of selection is of strategic quality, this differentiation or discrimination is even more consequential. For example, there are fields in which a non-religious citizen is not allowed. However, it is not sufficient to say that the Iranian state is religious. More specifically, Iran is a Shiite state with a particular interpretation of Shiite political theology characterized by “Velayat-e-Faqih,” or the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. This characterization makes it necessary to distinguish beyond just religious or non-religious binaries. More specifically, we see that discrimination is not limited to those who do not believe in religion or consider religion a private matter and oppose the intervention of religion in politics. To understand the discrimination processes of the Islamic Republic of Iran, we must first separate the multi-faceted nature of religiosity: Muslims, believers in religions other than Islam; the Shiites, the Sunnis; and the Shiites that

are pro-state ideology, the Shiite dissidents who oppose state ideology.

The space of the Shiite-Sunni binary is not only limited to the realm of religion. Sunnis in Iran are ethnic minorities belonging to different linguistic and cultural groups. The Shiites are predominantly Persian Turkic-speaking with the exception of Turkmens and some Shiite Kurds. However, ethnic group differences in Iran are not categorically and solely cultural. They can also take on a center-periphery dimension. The center-periphery relationship, which refers to the spatial distribution of ethnic groups in the geographical peripheries of Iran, also takes on an emblematic discriminatory aspect. Those living in peripheral spaces are more marginalized and discriminated against – a process that has its own history which has formed the reciprocal views that these groups hold towards both each other and the center. These types of ethnic and center-periphery discrimination have economic and social consequences. For example, the chances of economic mobility and ascending the vertical axis to overcome inequalities are not the same for those in the periphery as they are for those in the center.

Now we will return to the traditional-modern binary. One indication of this difference is the way in which class members regard women. However, the gender divide does not overshadow the traditional-modern divide. The patriarchal-gender equality divide overlaps somewhat with the traditional-modern divide, as women continue to face discrimination even in modern parts of the society.

The configuration of social space in Iran is clearly influenced by political power. In Iran, political positions, such as views on various issues of the society, domestic issues and relations, as well as perceptions on the state of world affairs – are mostly expressed in terms of views about the ruling power. In other words, individuals take a stance towards the ruling power, which determines their position on the vertical or horizontal Bourdieusian axes of social space. This position on the Bourdieusian axes is not merely ideological. Individual’s position relative to the vertical axis as well as the horizontal axis, which includes relationships, functionalities occupations, and cultural factors, factor into the stance an individual takes towards the ruling power. What is conventionally defined as social capital in another circumstance is also political capital. Political capital can also be a negative factor when moving up the social ladder; anything that differs from the ruling ideology or confronts the ruling class, its influential personalities, or powerful circles can be a negative factor, adversely affecting an individual’s possibility of mobility along the vertical axis.

The customary distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders” is another way in which the political rentier system in Iran is communicated and expressed. Insiders have privileged connections with the state and therefore are more likely to be promoted along the vertical axis. The rentier system operates and has a place at all levels of the Iranian society. For example, high school students can join the Revolutionary Guards’ Basij to gain privileges.² In neighborhoods, going to the mosque and participating in collective religious activities connects the individual to those who can grant privileges, which will

eventually give the individual enough power to grant privileges. The higher along the vertical axis, the more important the political rent becomes. If we assume that the number of points required for a move up the first step is (m) and the number of points required for the move up the second step is (n), n is always greater than m. The difference in points required moving up the ladder increases with each step, meaning that it becomes harder and harder to move up.

The rentier system is particularly important to the middle class in Iran. Members below the middle class who are deprived of privileges do not necessarily need to seek rentier privileges to move up to the next steps. However, middle class members who desire to attain success must either seek rentier privileges, invest in personal efforts, or attain non-rentier privileges. As we move along the vertical axis, the number of necessary rentier points that are required by the rentier system for a move up the ladder increases. As each person moves up the ladder, they may reach a point in which they realize that the chances of promotion are no longer dependent on the points that are related to their own merits and possessions. In order to ascend the social ladder at that point, they need a certain amount of rentier points that we can call (r). Those who move up the ladder may not have r, but instead, they might have individual merit points that we can call (i). There may be a chance to move up to the next step of the ladder when i is greater than r, like in the case of an individual who has education or inherited economic assets. However, the value of attaining r increases in the following step, and i may no longer be able to match it in order to grant the individual a progression to the next step. The step in which i no longer has the necessary force is called the threshold step; it is where upward movement based on merits stops. The social milieu of Iran, especially for those who are in the greater range of the middle class, is the space of experiencing this threshold step – the space that moving up the ladder stops. Reaching the brink of this threshold step is one of the most important experiences in the individual lives of middle class members in Iran.

I have established that the Bourdieusian time and social space axis as a system for vertical social mobility is a direct function of the number of rentier points required for promotion. This dependency on rentier points, about which the Iranian public is fully aware, makes the issue of class mobility highly political. It is therefore reasonable to expect an extreme politicization of the middle class in Iran. Even a religious person who ideologically aligns with the state and has some degree of social capital and political rentier points will eventually reach a point at which those with stronger associations to the ruling system will get ahead instead. In this case, this individual may also start to become critical of the situation that has caused him or her to fall behind.

Given the above, we should expect that the time component of social mobility is an indicator of politicization, or a transition to an opposition to the political system. An observation of social media networks, where Iranian middle class youth have a strong presence, can confirm an impression that social space is over-politicized. This impression, if considered unilaterally, may lead to a misunderstanding of the Iranian society. In order to avoid this, we must have a more complex

understanding of the temporality of social space, which we should not limit to the time dimension of class mobility up the social ladder. Social temporality manifests itself primarily in everyday life and its time and place which must be considered in primary social analysis. Whenever theoretical analysis, despite its logical attachments, is incompatible with reality on the ground, we must first seek to observe everyday life.

Everyday life is particularly an important category of analysis when studying the middle class. The daily life of the working class and concerns of the workers and the poor within the middle class are different from those of other strata of the middle class. For instance, there is a difference between worrying about going hungry versus having the opportunity to think about what to eat.

The subject of this type of analysis is an ordinary, everyday individual. Humans live mostly and perhaps completely on a daily basis. It takes extraordinary circumstances to remove the subject from the rhythms of everyday life and may make them think of a fundamental change.

Everyday life makes today and here the dominant perception of one's position. The past and the future lose their relevance under the pressure of here and now, and each plan becomes subject to the demands of day-to-day life. In this sense, everyday life reduces the intensity of being political and deprives being political of the political planning for change. Overpoliticization is then reduced to everyday political rants that are part of everyday life – habitual, ordinary, and unremarkable. This all happens while everyday life is the main arena of conflicts and the perception of contradictions in their particular forms. Everyday life in Iran is full of contradictions.

A consideration of everyday life helps to better understand why economic misery does not necessarily lead to social uprisings. Everyday life is full of livelihood struggles, which limits the time horizon. Individuals may be engrossed in their own affairs and remain in the same sweep for a long time, which could limit opportunities to plan for change on the horizon of a collective future.

The entire social and everyday space is affected by the systemic separation that is characteristic of all modern societies. Iran is a modern society, despite being ruled by a religious regime with a strong, traditional culture – especially with regard to relations between the sexes and the authority of patriarchal figures. Disregarding Iranian society's modernity can confound the analysis. Traditional is meant to differentiate from the modern, and it is in that differentiation that traditional defines and reproduces itself. The institution of religion, by identifying itself and trying to maintain and expand its authority, further deepens the separation of the system and distinguishes it from culture. The religious state is based on the coupling of the two subsystems of politics and religion. Despite the constant effort of the religious state to produce “the political that is the same as the religious and the religious that is the same as the political,” it is regularly exposed to contradictions that result from imposed unity. The theocratic government, no matter how hard it tries, cannot manage and

regulate the economic subsystem at its will. Regardless of the important role that state and religious institutions play in regulating the economy, the economic subsystem acts independently. Iran's middle class has survived and even grown by relying on the relative autonomy of the economic subsystem. Due to the development of the separation of the subsystems in Iran, the religious state cannot fully dominate the culture and lifestyle domains either.

The idea of social space and the theory of social systems are based on the premise of the state and nation. They are designed with society in mind as a national unit. An individual is a citizen of a country, and with respect to this citizenry, occupies a place in the social space, which puts them under various subsystems. One's place in this national unit is influenced by the global position of that unit and its connections with the world, which in turn is influenced by global patterns and trends. The previous statement is true, but as it we move to more recent years, its explanatory power diminishes. Because of the current extent of globalization, we must more seriously consider the global dimension of social existence. The world is not just an external environment in which a system can exist; the external global is inside the system too, and not just as an external reflection that is inside. Each subsystem is both a subsystem of a country system and a subsystem of a global subsystem, and through this super-subsystem, a subsystem of the global system. Every national issue has a global dimension and there is a channel or multiple channels with external factors that can influence it by factors beyond the national system. National culture does not exist as a specific culture of a country; it also depends on the outside world. Insulating oneself from the outside world is also sign of an outside influence and a reaction to that influence. At present, in particular, one cannot explain the current modes of action, speech, and consumption of the middle class in Iran without taking global patterns and currents into account.

There is a global middle class that exemplifies the behavior and consumption of the middle class in Iran in the national context. It is true that the emergence and aspirations of this class are the wealthy western countries- primarily the United States (U.S.) - and are therefore related to white and English-speaking whose conduct and inclinations are constructed in "global" cities like London, Paris, New York, and Los Angeles. However, this global middle class is not entirely home-grown or native to the U.S. or these metropolitan western cities. Rather, it is a global product that is being constructed as it constructs.³ The Iranian middle class is affected by this global middle class and have a sense of belonging to it; the individuals in the Iranian middle class spectrum consider themselves a member of this global middle class and are exposed to and influenced by trends associated with the global middle class.

The middle class is the predominant class involved in the construction of the culture of consumption, behavior, speech, and patterns of daily life. It is also the class that is most influenced by the modern middle class construct than any other social group in the modern Iranian age, which has gradually and step by step renounced and rejected the traditionalists. The youth from traditional families in Iran are also

influenced by modern middle class culture.

In the past, it was the modern middle class of Tehran, the capital city of Iran that determined the patterns of behavior, speech, inclinations, and taste. Now, everyone is in a more direct relationship with the global middle class, mainly through new media platforms. This relationship has strengthened the sense of envy, especially among the youth in Iran.

A Focus on the Situation of the Middle Class

So far, this article has described the necessary context in which we must analyze the general situation of social classes in Iran, including the middle class and its poor.

We have approached the situation of each class from four perspectives:

- In terms of their position in the hierarchy of dominance and exploitation,
- In terms of their position on the vertical axis of social classification,
- In terms of lifestyle, inclinations, and taste, and
- In terms of being in a globalized world.

These factors are intertwined components that form a whole, albeit this whole may be shaky; separating them from each other has only an analytical value. Any of these factors can show its true meaning and relevance when one considers the context introduced as social space and the way life accelerates in its temporality.

In order to have a complete account we must make an effort to shift from an external perspective to an internal one. For example, in the case of the middle class poor, we need to understand how members of the MCP perceive themselves and how they observe the world. To do this, we need to supplement empirical research with qualitative research tools that are needed to understand the meaning and interpretation of the signs, and that which is heard and read.

There are a variety of categories that fall between the bottom of the social space and the middle of it. In the case of workers, the relationship to the means of production is clear, that is the place of workers in relation to the means of production and the degree of domination and exploitation wherein is clear. The situation is clearer in the case of the ruling class compared to the middle class. The various types of members within the ruling class are characterized by the shape and size of their possessions, their role in servitude and domination, their character and perception of the world, and how they are situated in the world. In the case of the middle class, however, we need a particular typology so that we do not fail to understand its reality and resort to accepting general

statements about this class. For example, we might come across general statements about the Iranian MCP, mainly in the form of exaggerations of the political nature of this class, its inherent tendency towards democracy, its pro-west nature, and an assumed natural opposition of the modernists with the religious establishment. Types do not specify nature. Rather, they are about roles, ways of life, and courses of action and therefore are about distinct human beings. In assessing typologies, one must also consider the internal perspective.⁴

The typical typology of Iran's middle class is its division into traditional and modern. These traditional and modern divisions have been prevalent since the emergence of the new system of virtue.⁵ Professions that were not rooted in new knowledge and expertise were categorized as traditional. Traditional trades, guilds, and workshops focused on traditional consumption patterns. The traditional professions and trades, the lords and peasants, and the tribal agricultural methods of farming and animal husbandry formed the pillars of the traditional economy. Stemming from this traditional way of life and the production and distribution of its means, a religious culture emerged that found its educational and orthodox forms in the religious centers. The religious educated promoted this culture. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the turn of the twentieth century, Iran's population was about 12 million, about 20 percent of whom lived in cities. Part of this urban population, who were ordinary lords of the surrounding villages, engaged in trade, owned traditional workshops, worked as government agents and officials, or formed the body of the mullahs; we can consider this collective class group the pre-capitalist, urban middle class category. Some businessmen, government officials, prominent bureaucrats, administrators, and writers within this category became modernists. They were mainly located in cities such as Tehran and Tabriz and were exposed to the effects of globalization sooner than others. New goods, weapons, administration, medicine, and ways of speech became increasingly interconnected components of the environment that eventually became one of the two parts of the Iranian world: the modern part versus the traditional part. There were both competition and exchanges between the two.

One might consider traditional and modern as two different ways to frame the division of the world, time and place, the order of objects, and the order of speech. The history of this framing includes the reflection of each side on the other as well as on itself. At first, it might seem easy to distinguish between what is traditional and what is modern. For example, in the traditional frame, we can include traditional medicine in the realm of health and traditional seminaries and schools (maktabkhaneh) in the realm of religious education. These examples can be juxtaposed to modern medicine and the modern school and university. This case is one of simple framing. However, when a traditional merchant begins importing new goods and a traditional cleric goes to a modern-educated physician and sends his child to a new school, the two seemingly different framings do not necessarily lose their meaning. Rather, it merges into another type of framing, which formulates and introduces itself by referring to a principle and original framing which itself is explained in a framing format. This is repeated

over and over again; each time a layer is applied to the previous layer of the framing. The problem with working with the traditional and modern as concepts of framing originates with this process of reproducing and reframing. Traditional is not simply that which has been existing for a long time; it is constructed and it constructs itself, it becomes modern and always borders that which is modern.

Traditional and modern are part of two coherent and integrated wholes. The social groups that fall under these designations have their own internal divisions. The underlying layer of the traditional undergoes constant internal decomposition and collapses as society becomes more modern. The modern part is also layered, and the government has a key role in disassembling it. The government supports a sector that specializes in new techniques and administration, employs this sector, and opens the doors of the system to employment and its advancement. Alternatively, the government also rejects the parts of modernity that promote new thinking and criticize tyranny and the old order. This situation, which began in the late Qajar period in Iran, continued in both the Pahlavi and the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Islamic Republic of Iran, IRI) periods. It is with this framing in mind that we can add to traditional and modern, with a state framing: the way in which the world is organized in the vision of central power. Naser al-Din Shah of the Qajar Dynasty established a frame of government to modernize society, strengthen the state, defend against modern anti-authoritarian thought, and utilize the tools of tradition; this frame was completed by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Islamic Republic is also equipped with an advancement plan. A commonality in the Pahlavi and IRI's advancement plans is government-centeredness, meaning that they adjust their plans and programs according to the will of the ruling power. The goal of this effort was to establish the state's position in Iran and the world. The uneven growth that is inherent in a capitalist system is influenced and proliferated by government-centeredness. Various regions and sectors of the economy, culture, health, and social security do not all develop equally. Society is fragmented like a chain of islands, and the government believes it can strengthen national cohesion by promoting the state's ideology.

Disproportionate growth leads to bankruptcy and poverty within the lower middle class. In the pre-1979 revolutionary period in Iran, this phenomenon was not significant. In the last period of the Pahlavi state, however, the per capita income was high, economic growth accelerated, and there was more social mobility. During this period, the market expanded and did not constrict the sale of traditional goods like Persian carpets, artifacts, and food products. Modern techniques and new methods of supply and distribution also entered the market to some extent.

The traditional petty bourgeoisie, or the middle layer involved with the production and distribution of traditional goods, is closely linked to the traditional market or bazaar. The bazaar is a type;⁶ this type is closely associated with the rohaniyat, or the Islamic clergies.⁷ If power had not transferred to the mullahs, the bazaar would have probably been marginalized. Chain stores, boutiques, shopping malls, and the

dominance of new goods and mechanisms for retailing and distributing goods, would have left little room for the traditional bazaar. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, some bazaar leaders took on important responsibilities like administrative seats at ministries or entered other economic institutions of the newly formed Islamic state. It is widely believed that the Islamic state in Iran has three pillars: the mullahs, the bazaaris, and the jaahils – that is the thugs and the lumpens of the squares, bazaars, and traditional neighborhoods. The role that the bazaaris found within the power and economic structure is not comparable to that of Muslim engineers, who were religious engineering students that organized the Islamic state structure of IRI in the administrative, security, and military sectors.⁸

Specialists and representatives from traditional families organized the IRI state post-1979 revolution, and formed the core of the post-revolutionary middle class. Part of the ruling class emerged from among them: top directors of military and administrative institutions, managers of state-owned and extra-governmental enterprises, and heads of state-favored private companies. These leaders made the strategic choice to climb up the ladder of power⁹ through individual and familial relationships, ideological alignments, and preferential promotions that a certain group received in the security and military apparatus,¹⁰ which were accompanied by upward class mobility. In this respect, part of the middle and upper classes in the Islamic Republic are the product of the state-provided rentier advantages. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, chances of advancement for the modern middle class formed in the pre-revolutionary Iran decreased or even disappeared, while for a particular typology all the doors were simultaneously opened. Iranians use the terms *hezbollahis*, *insiders*, or “those better than us” to describe this type of person whose habitus is identifiable by their behavior, acts of speech, and characteristics that they employ to demonstrate closeness to the state.

A person who is the end-goal of “Islamic civilization” according to current leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is an example of this type of insider.¹¹ The inception of this type mainly originated in Tehran and large cities in provinces with a strong traditional stratum like Isfahan, Kerman, Yazd, and Khorasan. The areas and regions from which this type came from gained more influence in the center. A kind of regionalism formed in the Islamic Republic, which later had consequences in the division of water and other resources. Regionalism exacerbated ethnic discrimination, and strategic selection was more apparent in places like Kurdistan, Sistan, and Baluchestan. In the first few years after the revolution, there were opportunities in the lower part of the social matrix for promotion. Rural society was stratified, government-sponsored peasant production grew, and many villages started gaining access to adequate resources such as running water, electricity, gas, telephone, and paved roads. The number of students and high school graduates among Iranian village inhabitants increased, and some of those students were able to enroll in universities. The overall number of students and graduates grew steadily. The Islamic Azad University, a private university, increased its branches in smaller cities and towns which affected the atmosphere of these cities. Even the

eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) affected the social dynamism and social mobility and became a channel through which people moved up and down along the social matrix.

During the 1980s and by the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, the situation of the middle class had (except for the petty bourgeoisie involved in production and distribution as a whole) deteriorated, but things gradually improved after the war and during the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. However, the middle class situation worsened with new changes in government bureaucracy and the simultaneous development and influx of capital in the retail sector during the 1380s (2001–2011), along with the intensification of the economic crisis in the 1390s (2011–2021). When assessing the middle class’ situation, which was relatively stable until the revolution, we must consider both the class typology as well as the developments of the aforementioned periods. In this way, we may arrive at two-sided or multi-sided conclusions. For example, while we may find that the economic situation of the modern middle class in the 1370s (1991–2001) was not so bad, we also note that individuals in the middle class felt that they were more restricted in terms of cultural milieu and individual and social freedoms during this period. The opportunities brought on by Mohammad Khatami’s reform era increased the middle class sensitivities and sensibilities to their own cultural and social situation.

Representing everything within a dynamic matrix allows us to avoid generalized judgments. We must also bear in mind that from a point forward in society, based on the vertical axis of possessions and advantages, more individuals will be able to compare their status with that of their peers of equal or higher standing. This understanding of class promotion refers back to a mindset belonging to those who have possessions and holdings: the mindset that states you can have more.

The post-revolutionary social space is significantly different in terms of the envy resulting from comparing one’s life to the other. Before the revolution, these comparisons were not as important and middle class individuals did not feel that someone else had taken their place. The average middle class Iranian believed that he or she could achieve their goals as far as the ordinary routine of life was concerned. For example, these goals included a relatively good income, housing, personal vehicle, an understandable level of goods consumption, and the possibility of purchasing some lavish indulgences – albeit all at its average level for the period. After the revolution, this sentiment builds up and gets shifted so that these individuals felt that the arena of life tightened and there was more intense competition. Entering the middle class from the lower level of society transformed after the 1979 revolution. The *hezbollahi* type (one who was close to the state ideology) not only wanted more of the available societal shares but also held an aggressive attitude toward the rest of society – especially toward the type called *taquti*, a term used to describe those considered to be affiliated with the ousted monarchy. The general sensitivities of the modern middle class were transformed by the newly-formed state’s ideological vetting, the disruption of the value system that evaluated individuals based on merits, social

assets, and capital, the mainstreaming of the so-called idea of having a “party” (which in Persian indicated having connections to an insider), the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the continuing climate of war in culture, and a growing concern for the future.

The middle class youth expressed most of the resistance against the post-revolutionary state until at least the middle of the 1390s (mid-2000s). The IRI regime responded to this resistance by launching a bloody crackdown, killing many, imprisoning many more for long periods of time, depriving the dissidents of education and employment, and forcing a large group into exile. The Cultural Revolution (1980–1983) in Iran was a confrontation against the middle class, which had long considered the acquisition of cultural capital through university education as a guarantee for advancement and progress. By dominating the universities and filtering access to higher education through ideological vetting, the new regime stood firm that the ruler had changed and demanded full compliance.

The combination of repression, war, and the pervasiveness of strategic vetting by the state dampened the modern families’ spirit and led to a decline in morale. The families closed themselves from the outside world. Modern families started to restrict their socialization, only to spend time with limited groups and to start living in separated interior spaces with a pattern that looked like island groupings. They increased their attention on their children, and a main. What became the become a concern for many middle-class families, especially cultural families whose families had a cultural background, was their children’s education; they increased their focus on the children’s studies to ensure that they could attend universities, study a foreign language, and therefore have a way to study abroad. In Iranian families, “patriarchy was replaced by filiarchy.” The above common phrase in Iranian families indicates a real change: that the children are now ruling the family and emphasizes the increased attention to the children.

The role of the father and the patriarchy in general has weakened in middle class families in Iran. This change began before the revolution and continued after despite the rise of a new form patriarchy (Sharabi, 1988). The position of the child has changed in all Iranian middle class and working class families. Parents pay more attention to their children’s wishes and interests, and corporal punishment is much less frequent. A child who has not been beaten and considers it to be an unusual assault can question authority and express his or her opinions. As the product of this type of childhood enters society, they are prepared not to submit to tyranny and despotism; assault on the body, mind, and sensibilities is one of the enduring characteristics of totalitarianism.

The modern Iranian middle class initially formed as a social group receptive to the world and its new developments. This cosmopolitanism is intertwined with nationalism and an anti-colonialism that sometimes goes as far as becoming anti-Western. It is also mixed with all kinds of tendencies to self-reflect, including an empathetic re-reading of Islam. This class is constructive in building culture. It has surpassed the ruling clergy in terms of culture-making, though it

might seem that the clergies have attained absolute power in this field by adding state-driven possibilities to former possibilities. The Cultural Revolution’s attempt to seize the universities did not achieve its goals. The universities revealed their resilience and defiance shortly after the period of the Cultural Revolution ended and universities that were closed for three years reopened. Societal resistance to the compulsory hijab emerged from the very beginning of the Islamic government. Personal video devices in the 1980s and access to satellite television and dishes in the 1990s became symbols of cultural resistance. The modern middle class in Iran has been at the forefront of this cultural resistance.

From the early 1380s (2001–2011) in Iran, the internet gradually became an arena of class self-expression, and it is now the center of expression and boasting for the global middle class. For Iranians, the internet allowed for direct communication with the global middle class subject. Movies, books, magazines, and stories about travel to the West, which used to be the mediating tool to connect Iranians with the global middle class, do not bear the same significance. Tehran’s middle class was previously a model for consumption, speech, and action. Everyone in Iran can now contact the global subject via the internet, though this subject is also not a definite being; it is constantly being constructed. Everyone is involved in constructing this subject, including Iranians living abroad. This is how the global subject is becoming a familiar subject to Iranians inside the country. Now Iranians in Iran can better compare their situation with the ever-constructed, global subject. Both the middle class in Iran and the state are addressing the global subject. The same is true of the IRI as a state. The two groups – the Iranian middle class and the state – are competing with each other, and the religious state has lost this contest.

The Iranian middle class in the pre-revolutionary period was generally hopeful. It collectively participated in the revolution with this hope to improve the affairs of the country and its own situation. They also hoped to have the possibility of political participation, which became a possibility only for the traditional stratum within the society after the revolution. The modern middle class, as in the time of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was only allowed to contribute to the system with political agents at the lower and upper-middle levels, but was not allowed to seek political positions or participation beyond that. The middle class became fragmented, and different types came out of it. Given the weight of the political factor in social processes in Iran, one must consider the relationship of various types of the middle class with the state to be able to classify them. However, taking into account the relationship with the state as a factor of analysis will draw the wrong picture if it is only based on the trio of complicity with the state, opposition to it, and the middle ground position. Reality is always more complicated. For example, it is not the case that those who oppose the Islamic state are more so from the modern strata of Iranian society. The younger Iranians who stood in opposition to the Islamic Republic in the first few years after its establishment were from newly modernized or even relatively traditional families.

Political decision-making is usually not straightforward. Culture, relationships, interests, and the internal dynamics of social subsystems, convey in a way in which each communication and in the process and message or command finds meaning in the destination different from the intended purpose. Today in Iran, the semantic transformation in the relationships between social subsystems is much more intense than typical. One must consider systemic disorderliness and miscommunications when analyzing the effect of the pillar of power on the determination of social status. In this vein, we must also pay attention to the limitations of the exercise of power and influence by the political subsystem, given that it is in a society of 84 million relatively modern individuals who have a strong tradition of defiance against the government while simultaneously remaining silent and obedient. These points are important in order to avoid exaggeration in explaining any social phenomenon by referring it to state-centered decisions or actions in the governing system. In the case of the middle class, this means that its typology should not be limited to its gaze towards the state and we can assume that its ups and downs are determined by its degree of dependence on the state.

The impact of state policies on the economy and classes occurs at the macro level. Macro-politics influences the stratification of the middle class more than the selective and preferential vetting systems in place to elevate or prevent individuals from climbing the ladder. With this in mind, for the middle class typology, one should consider a set of factors and not just the middle class' relationship with the state. In terms of the status of the entire middle class, we must prioritize analyzing the general state of the economy and the macroeconomic policies of the government.

The Poor Layers of the Middle Class

Economic studies based on statistics and qualitative descriptions all indicate that since the 1380s (2001-2011), the middle class' situation has deteriorated. This deterioration, especially in the later years of the decade, is due to the weakened economic condition because of structural problems, mismanagement, corruption, international sanctions as a consequence of Iran's nuclear program, and increased spending of the armed forces and security apparatus, including for regional interventions. As might be expected, the pressure of these circumstances fell on the lower layers of the middle class.

The basis of the state's plan to contend with the budget's deficiency was a policy of "give less, get more." The policy includes a devaluation economic strategy that hinges on keeping Iran's currency at a lower exchange rate compared to its actual value against the U.S. dollar. Payments to pensioners were reduced as riyal values plunged and inflation increased. On the other hand, the state deregulated the economy. Government-owned agricultural enterprises purchased products that the farmers had produced above market consumption needs at a lesser value in order to compensate for inflation. Government

agencies employed fewer people and met their needs by awarding temporary contracts or by hiring private contracting companies. The government did not raise the minimum wage following the rising inflation and living basket costs. They did not advance development projects in accordance with of the regions, instead considering the monetary and security returns of the projects.

When the government bases its programs and policies on the capitalist principle of "give less and get more," the use of this capitalist policy is excessively amplified throughout the entire social system.¹² In this context, the labor code of the country was discarded, labor contracts rendered meaningless, and employment left to private contractors. Islands called "free zones," outside the jurisdiction of the labor code and state laws, were created. The exploitation rate in Iran has risen, and has increased steadily, especially in the last 15 years. The lower strata must work harder to offset or stabilize the power and wealth of the upper strata.

The direct impact of the "give less, get more" policy in the midst of a structural economic crisis is the impoverishment of the lower middle class. The class coordinates of the MCP can be defined as follows:

The spectrum of the poor has expanded as a direct result of the implementation of the capitalist principle of "give less, take more." A layer of the middle class is now objectively in the same position as the workers and the laborer class; an individual from this layer has no choice but to submit to full exploitation. Their university degrees, specializations, cultures, and the fact that they are of middle class descent do not change this actual objective situation. Young people from the MCP may lose the chance to find work if they insist that they have different abilities than the workers. Any degree above a high school diploma used to give a person the opportunity for higher-level job positions in the service sector. Now, however, university degrees are inflated and devalued, and as such, the desire to seek higher education has diminished.¹³ The poor layers of the middle class have the smallest chance of promotions or having subordinates.

When we talk about the poor of the middle class, we are usually referring to the impoverished strata, not the group of people who move upward from the bottom so that they are on the verge of entering the middle of society in terms of acquiring possessions. In Iran, before the last two decades, the issue of poverty related to those who were poor. The last two decades, however, have seen a shift in this discussion from those who are poor to those who are becoming poorer; this has become the subject of discussion in everyday life in Iran.

Statistical surveys by Iranian media and government institutions over the past twenty years divide Iranian society based on income deciles, splitting the population into ten equal sections based on the distribution of income. The average statistics in recent years are roughly as follows: In the mid-2010s, the bottom six deciles reached a total of 30 percent of the national income. The share of the bottom two deciles was about 5.5 percent. The richest decile in recent years has earned about 14 times

the income of the poorest decile.¹⁴ During the fiscal years 1396 to 1398 (March 2017 to March 2019), the absolute poverty line index reached 30 percent. According to the same study, from 1392 to 1396 (March 2013 to March 2017), the population below the absolute poverty line reached 15 percent but then increased to 30 percent from 1396 to 1398 (March 2017 to March 2019).¹⁵

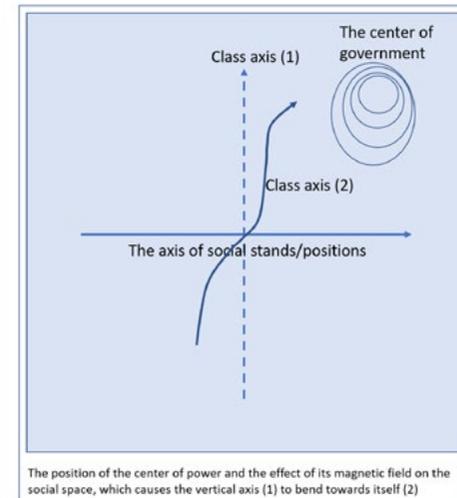
In a study on the relative poverty line in the fiscal year 1397 (2018), the number of households falling below the line was 24 percent; the relative poverty line is defined as the line separating a group from the rest of the population because their income is less than one-half of the national average. This situation has worsened in the following years. A report published by the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare in the summer of fiscal year 1400 (2021), "Poverty Watch," indicated that in 1399 (2020), the per capita poverty line reached 1,254,000 tomans, representing an average increase of 38 percent compared to the previous year. Expenditure and income data in that report show that in 1398 (2019), one third of Iranian households were living below the poverty line.¹⁶ Based on these statistical data it appears that the trend of getting poorer is occurring in the lower six income deciles. However, this phenomenon has also been observed in the third to sixth income deciles in more recent years. If it is true that the middle class comprises about 35 percent of Iran's population, the locus point at which people get poor is within the fifth and sixth deciles. The locus of the impoverishment and the poor getting poorer - that is the transition from bad to worse - is in the fourth decile. The situation in the first to third deciles is quite bad.

One way to measure poverty in Iran is to calculate purchasing power. The goods that one has the power to purchase and to the extent to which one can purchase those goods determine an individual's position on the axis of access and possessions. This allows for multiple statistics and the class element of purchasing power and its relevance to the overall structure of the system can be overlooked. If we measure the ability of an individual to provide for their basic livelihood needs, we will get a more accurate picture.¹⁷ A minimum list of these basic needs are: adequate housing; access to health, retirement, disability insurance; access to general and specialized education; possibility of finding employment, pensions, disability payments, or government assistance that can meet basic needs; the ability to state demands, and the ability to organize to pursue these demands. Therefore, becoming poor is related to the limitations in stating one's problems and exercising the will to pursue these basic needs. It is also related to the weakness of the social security system, unemployment, undersupply, inflation, and high prices.

Ultimately, poverty comes down to a dual deprivation: political and economic. We can get a clear idea of this dual deprivation by looking at the social matrix. There are four noteworthy factors of deprivation:

1) It is clear that deprivation is a class-based measure of destitution. The vertical axis of class ranks reaches the point at which deprivation begins, and beyond that there is absolute deprivation.

2) The vertical axis does not go straight up; it slopes towards the center of power, which we depicted in the upper right part of the matrix. The tendency towards the center of power increases along the axis, meaning that an increasingly limited number of people can achieve their will through the mechanism of power. People's influence on political processes shrinks in this section, and the consequence of this decreased impact is greater poverty.



3) Deprivation has a gender. Unemployment primarily affects women. Women are poor even if they are forced to live as dependents in families that can get by. The pressure of political exclusion is far greater on women than on men.

4) Deprivation has a geographical and ethnic distribution.¹⁸ It is also dependent on the ideological, cultural and secretarial proximity to the system of power. The greater the distance is from the values of the political system, the greater the likelihood of deprivation. Part of this deprivation is historical as it is a continuation of the discrimination that existed in the Pahlavi period. This ethnic discrimination originated with a development plan based on the commands of the central power and the demands of the ruling class. This authoritarian, class-based development plan has led to the marginalization of some areas, which have become significant only in a paradigm of security for the center.

Combining these concepts allows us to perceive poverty as the product of a class system in which the center of power acts in the interests of the ruling class; a feature of this authority is a need for the establishment and consolidation of a gendered-ideological-ethnic discrimination.

We noted that the basis of the government's economic policy was to "give less and get more." A key component of this policy was to increase liquidity, or in other words to foster inflation. Wage earners receive payments in Iranian rials and must purchase goods in USD. Foreign

currencies, especially the dollar and the euro, are the main measures of commodity-oriented pricing in a commoditized culture. Iran has never been as “Americanized” as it is today; the USD is the first and last point of all calculations and planning, not on a macro level, but on a micro level, on a daily basis. This trend is not happening in banks and stock exchanges, but rather in the villages. The city of Marivan is not only a place distant from the center in the heart of Kurdistan, it is also one of the centers of buying and selling USD. Tehranis do not ask about the exchange value of USD in Marivan. The Marivanis have intermediaries in Sulaymaniyah (Iraqi Kurdistan) and in Baghdad, and those intermediaries deal with Dubai, London, and New York. This is also a representation of globalization.

The fate of Iranian society has been tethered to global trends since at least the nineteenth century. Since the second half of the twentieth century, a confrontation of us versus them gradually emerged from foreign policy, foreign trade, and foreign intervention in Iran. The relationship with the “other” world is not the kind of relationship that in system theory is considered a system-environment relationship. Autopoiesis (self-creation, self-centeredness, self-organization) is meaningful to the extent that the prefix auto is. Iranian society can no longer be closed off and its trends cannot be explained by the sociological perspective that it is a closed space.¹⁹ Poverty is a global issue. However, what aspects of poverty reach a country like Iran, and to what extent some parts of its population become impoverished, is largely an internal matter.

Since the global oil crisis, Iran’s former systemic spontaneity and auto-dynamism to the extent that it once made sense, has become obsolete. The wheels accelerated so quickly that the bolts and nuts could not withstand the pressure and it finally fell apart. The Iranian revolution took place within a larger global context. The driving force behind this revolution was the call for a return to “self,” but at the same time, this “self” was defined globally in terms of the Islamic global. The need for self-survival and an increase its power led the Iranian state to pursue a nuclear and missile program and expands its influence in the region. The Iranian state’s policy of self-survival has become a global issue, and the new accelerated stage of globalization has become a special issue for Iranian society. Political tensions had damaging consequences. Uranium enrichment led to poverty. The threshold for the poverty line continued to rise, drawing more sections of the middle class under it. At the same time, the global environmental issue became more apparent while the state pursued a development plan that added to domestic water tensions. The process of impoverishment found a new impetus. Water shortages are disrupting rural communities in some areas. The middle class farmers are also in danger of a burndown. The rate of internal and external migration is intensifying.

In this phase of globalization, migration no longer bears the same meaning as in the past of moving from one place to another. We must now broaden this definition to include being in a different time and space, including in the virtual form. Over five million Iranians live abroad. Many, especially among the youth, including the poor of the

middle class, aspire to leave Iran. Iran is where we will migrate from; when we leave Iran, we will return virtually via the internet. If we do not leave Iran, we will turn to the virtual world to find out about the world around us. In this way, a local Iran is part of a broader global context. Iran is simultaneously a global place. Iran is poor and bound by authoritarianism and tradition and religious Iran, and simultaneously a progressive and successful world. The former is bound to place; the latter is connected to time. That former has stopped, and the latter is moving.²⁰ The global Iranian citizen has adapted to the patterns of the global middle class, which does not conflict with their nationalism and interest in idealized aspects of Iranian life. The local Iranian middle class faces a global middle class who speaks their own language, which was not the case until about three decades ago. Both the centralization of the USD and the globalized Iranian rhetoric have transformed the local-global context. This middle class subject is not the same one we knew before the revolution.

In order to show the characteristics of this middle class subject, we must traverse the social space of local Iran and reach global Iran somewhere along the way. In doing so, we must also pay attention to the strata of the middle class that have become poor or even impoverished. We move through the social space of local Iran and reach global Iran somewhere along the way.

The above is a Marxist-Weberian analysis, which we conducted with the social matrix in mind. From there, we attempted to distance ourselves from the sociology that perceives society as a “national” closed space, Iran as transnational. Now we will examine the worlds of this local-global Iran (both within and outside its borders) using a phenomenological approach.

Lifeworld Analysis

This article has assessed that the local subject (i.e., cognitive subject) has transformed and is no longer the same subject as before the 1979 revolution. Of course, there is no single subject in this analysis, as there are different subject-position types. It is more fitting to say that the logic of subjectivity has changed. A knowing-acting subject cannot be without a world.” It is always the subject of a “world.”²¹ The world is a network, a “for” network: everything is for something. The “for” order in Iran was disrupted before the revolution. The villager who left the village and took refuge in the city’s outskirts left a world in which he knew what everything was “for” and entered a world marked by other connections. Here, a semantic rupture or a rift in meaning arose with a “relevancy” change.²² In the field of cultural analysis, what we call traditionalism is associated with semantic nostalgia. Nostalgia is a sense of insecurity in the world and a desire to return to what it was previously. A truly meaningful return is not possible, but a stable and meaningful place is sought amid the turmoil that is disruption to the “for” network. Nostalgia has always existed and is soothing.²³ This concept creates unrest when applied to politics, as it can evoke

the illusion that, with the force of will to power, everything can be as in the past – a continued “for” network – and thus make the world meaningful again. With this political nostalgia, “myth” enters the realm of government. The tragedy of state-centered traditionalism was that it resorted to the system to save the traditional life without an awareness of the system’s destructive role.

Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the world was orderly even as there was a crisis of transition from one social formation to another (land-owning to capitalism). Fears, threats, and failures also had a specific semantic framework. The “why / because” link retained its meaning; both the “why” and the “because” had definite rules, and those rules made actions meaningful. One could connect “why” to “because” with a mental map, which in turn extended its meaning to interactions. The established system had a clear plan, while its opponents had another plan.

The “why / because” link enabled specific opportunities for individuals within the Iranian middle class. Maintaining class status and achieving social advancement was tied to acquiring cultural assets, a degree, and a specialization. In other words, most members of this class thought that the condition for success was to study. As a class value, having a place under the sun could be planned, and it was not very complicated. “Why did you do that? Because now the situation is like this, and I want the situation to be like that.” The three factors of earning a good income, owning a home, and owning a car — goals that are a sign of belonging to the middle class everywhere in the world — were all relatively accessible. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, factors beyond individuals’ control did not significantly deter them from achieving these goals. There was a general feeling that things could get better. The 1979 revolution was an act of hope for all participating classes, not a rebellion of despair.

After the revolution, everything fell apart. People lost their social freedoms. The post-revolutionary regime’s social dynamics and protectionist policies added new layers to the middle class. The general situation was not all bad in terms of risk of collapse – at least until the mid-2000s – but the logic of social ascent became more complex. During the pre-revolution “why / because” era, the middle class did not have to constantly be mindful of the ruling power everywhere. There were occasionally cases in which the answer to “why” was something like “I had to be a member of the Resurrection Party to get that job,” “I must pretend to be devoted to the Shah,” or “I had no choice but to work with SAVAK, the secret police.” The political regime was less of a concern in the context of life planning, except for the extreme sides of the political spectrum. The left was in radical conflict with the government, and the right was in a position of active support. Part of the middle class expressed dissatisfaction only in the field of culture and the desire for political participation.

After the 1979 revolution, this situation changed. The value of positions on the horizontal axis in the social matrix shifted. The closer an individual fell to the right (to the center of power), the better chance there was of advancing on the vertical axis. Cooperation with the regime

was not a precondition for taking office before the revolution. After the revolution, the logic of “why / because” became closely intertwined with the government and its Islamist ideology, which even informed how people dressed, spoke, and behaved. The sense of the world and the order of relations and relevancies changed drastically. Factors that were previously irrelevant to getting a position, like wearing hijab or having a beard, took on a vital relevancy with motivational value in the why/ because chain. Concerning the upper middle class and the ruling class, this opening sentence of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* was generally true: “Happy families are all alike, but every unhappy family is miserable in its own way.” Class happiness became interlinked with obedience to the regime, complicity with it, or at least clever adaptation to its promotional requirements.

“Every unhappy family is miserable in its own way.” Despite this, the types of “misery” can be categorized. The cumulative distribution of “misery” is not just a function of position on the vertical axis of wealth and status in the social matrix. The share of “happiness” and “misery” also depends on gender, religion, belief, ethnicity, and area of residence. For example, a certain amount of financial wealth or cultural capital, like a college degree, brings a very different degree of “happiness” to a woman, a Baha’i, a Sunni, a leftist, and a dissident intellectual versus a Shiite, male, resident of the capital, and supporter of Velayat-e-Faqih.

The issue of status inconsistency among the middle class became urgent at the outset of the establishment of the Velayat-e-Faqih regime. In the case of women, status inconsistency is severe: a woman with a high degree of education and specialization is deprived of a suitable job or rank just because she is a woman. A person with a university degree and management courses, cannot get the position of a high school principal because he or she is Kurdish, Baluch, or Arab. In these cases, a person’s gender, religious, or ethnic identity conflicts with their employment qualifications: “I would get a job if I was not a woman, if I was not a Baha’i, if I was not a Kurd, and so on.”

The “normal” life of the middle class is characterized by a kind of stability: education, employment, income, home, car, children’s education, retirement, children graduating and entering the labor market, and so on. At least two generations of the Iranian middle class followed this path, as it was possible to plan a course of life in that pre-revolutionary “normal” period. The plan connected the past, present, and future, and these connections made everything relevant or meaningful. The world was comprised of complete relevancies, the components of which complemented each other. As far as politics were concerned, the king only had a place to certain people and the upper-middle class in this perfect world. It was possible to remove the sultan, and people thought that the world would be complete if that happened. The king’s removal would allow for the possibility of political participation, more freedom, and law governing stability and progress. The cultural section of the middle class, that is, the section of the middle class that relied on cultural capital could realize its value in a well-ordered society. The prerequisites for that society were social justice and public enlightenment. After the revolution, the Iranian world was

destroyed. The middle class gradually faced more chaos and disorder. Since poverty crossed the qualitative threshold in the mid-2000s, it has transformed the quality of life, especially in the lower strata. Life plans fell apart. A plan could no longer be drawn.

So long as everything is in order, resistance and obstruction in the world are not felt. We encounter a type of unfolding of the world when the normal order of things is disturbed, and we find that something is out of order or wrong. In a network of subjective reasoning, or a network of for's, breakdowns occur. For example, we want something for a reason, and that desire does not have the function it should in a chain of relations; the problem is not limited to that one thing. In a social space during seemingly normal life, everyone may encounter disorder at some point, but now in this new space, there is a different perception that something does not fit. At the middle of this space is the normal order and "normal" world in the normal state is in the middle of this space. As we go down, coercion prevails. One cannot solely abide by a typical plan for a normal life. The established plans of middle class life in Iran and the lives of traditional families were disrupted as the network of for's ("for this, one does that") changed. Systemic tensions also plagued these families. Some of these families moved from the margins to the center of the events. A large group of system agents was chosen from these families, or rather a strategic selection gave them a greater opportunity to become important. As these members became more important, their world also transformed, and so their children were born into a different world from that of their mothers and fathers. It is challenging to adhere to tradition in an environment that is no longer traditional, but traditional symbolism and behavior is the only factor that weighs into power calculations. The problems of the middle class differed from the problems of the modern sector, especially the large group of wage earners that was made up of families whose breadwinners were government or private sector employees or pensioners. They became relatively poor, and some of them are estimated to have fallen below the poverty line since the late 2000s, meaning they became destitute by popular definition. As inflation soared and they continued to become poorer each month, some started to think about trading with their savings. They accepted promises from some financial institutions that they would make huge profits on deposits. Some people even sold their homes and spent the money in the coffers of these institutions. However, they did not make a profit and lost their original capital when those institutions declared bankruptcy. This group became known as "malbakhtegan" (those who lost their investment). The early 2010s saw the bankruptcy of financial institutions that had religious names and some connection to the government and religious figures and institutions. Shortly thereafter, the protest movement of the "malbakhtegan" began. During the general uprising of December 2017 - January 2018, the news reported on the protest demonstrations and its victims in Mashhad, Tehran, and other cities every day. Another subset of the lower middle class that turned to street activism to protest their situation despite the growing threat of poverty was the group of retirees. Many of these retirees did not only consider their or their spouses' condition, but also the fact that their children relied on their parents' wages because they could not find a job

despite having a college degree. They were also marginalized, living on the edge of the family table; they could not be independent.

These young people have acted according to the general plan of the middle class: they earned higher education degrees in order to secure positions for themselves, only to discover that they could not do so. This disruption of the typical life plan represents a chaotic world with which we are now acquainted with manifestations of its phenomena through the explanations that these young people provide. We get these explanations through social media. The way in which this social group sees the world is somewhat generalizable to all the lower and poor middle classes.

We penetrate their world when we consider the "themes" of their world; we pay attention to how they are thematized. To this end, we look for which aspect of reality they highlight, how they interpret this aspect, any motivational relevance, and what is essential for them as the "for."

It is possible to apply this lifeworld phenomenology to all classes and types within them.²⁴ A simultaneous and comparative study of the working class, the poor, and the relatively stable and affluent middle class sheds light on the general situation of each sector. The issues being addressed in the world of workers are mainly unemployment, job contracts, low wages, layoffs, work accidents, housing, insurance, job instability, and temporary employment. On the other hand, privatization, deregulation, corruption, and increasing poverty, are constantly in the spotlight. Justice is the basic desire of workers and has a motivational relevance; the realization of justice motivates action. "For" the situation to be settled, justice must prevail, and "in order" to achieve this goal, people must rally, organize, protest, and strike. In the case of the relatively stable and affluent strata of the middle class, the disorder of the world refers to the degree to which it now deviates from a "normal" state, which is a state in which everyone would be in the right place, have a law-abiding system, include tangible assets such as knowledge, education, and expertise, and have sufficient consumption to avoid shortages and prohibitions. To achieve a "normal" life, one can either leave Iran, stay and try to reform the system, or consider replacing IRI with another government that enters a "normal" relationship with the world. Justice as redistribution was not to the detriment of the Iranian middle class on the eve of the 1979 revolution. The middle class benefited from the redistribution of wealth and did not think it had anything to lose. That is no longer the case today. The relatively stable and prosperous part of this class accepts redistribution only in a controlled manner, in which the wealth is taken only from the ruling class that has unjustly amassed it. This could be achieved either by reform or an overthrow of the system, which the middle class regards as different from revolution. The concept of revolution is now a strange notion for the affluent Iranian middle class.

The poor of the middle class do not believe that redistributive justice conflicts with their interests.²⁵ While the relatively stable and affluent sector worries about becoming poor, the impoverished sector longs to emerge from destitution. These two components have two different

views of the world. The poor are protesting more and reaching the level of insurgency, and the youth of this sector believe that they have nothing to lose. The poor want justice for themselves because they think that they have been wronged.

Concluding Remarks

Iranian society is complex, and it is now much more complicated than it was on the eve of the 1979 revolution. It is difficult to predict what will happen. Observers wonder why things do not fall apart when the public is depressed. The economy is in disarray, poverty has spread, and the corrupt, repressive government is steeped in a management crisis, all while a generational ruling transition, which has gripped the upper strata of the system, is taking place.

This situation is made more complex by the unpredictability of actions and reactions, which supports the precarity of the middle class. A large segment of the staff of public and private institutions hail from the middle class. The middle class in Iran is also culturally significant, as it plays a crucial role in culture-building, receiving, creating, and multiplying information - both in the traditional and modern sections. The preferred lifestyle is also determined by the middle class, whether it is by the domestic middle class or the hegemonic global middle class.

Before the 1979 revolution, the Iranian middle class was hopeful, even in the traditional sector. The traditional groups that were dissatisfied with the collapse of their value system might have felt that they were losing their base, but they were less likely to think that they were becoming poorer. Poverty was an experience in which the individual was usually blamed instead of the system. This situation is now the opposite. A small layer is indebted and grateful to the system because it is elevated and privileged. Even in the lower echelons, that same layer believes that the government belongs to them, and that they have secured their fate if the system remains and becomes stronger. Most people are dissatisfied, and most of the discontented belong to the middle class. The unhappy majority is, at the same time, the frightened majority.

There are different strata in every section of society, but we can divide those who are concerned into two broad categories: 1) those who have become poor and are worried that the situation will worsen, and 2) those who are worried about losing their base and even falling below the poverty line. The pragmatic position of this second category is influenced by a strong tendency to maintain the status quo until a promising outlook for change emerges. They say, "let's wait and see what happens," or "let's not make it worse." This is a conservative position, but its inconsistency is that it does not usually see itself as maintaining the existing regime. The poor of the middle class are less inclined to this conservatism.

Society is depressed. During the coronavirus period, general depression deepened. The severity of social depression manifested itself among

the poor of the middle class. Suicide rates have risen in the country. Through official reports and generalizations from case studies, one can claim that the majority of those who commit suicide are part of the MCP.

The severity of depression is high among the youth of this sector. Young people with a college degree or special technical knowledge who do not have a job are prone to depression. These young people hit the same ceiling, which we called the "stop threshold," much earlier than their parents. Early experience acquaints them with the harsh reality of class society and the various forms of discrimination. Their spirit is open to the world. They spend much of their time in the virtual world, addressed by the global middle class. They are angry with everyone and everything, especially the previous generations, because they see the current situation as the result of the misguidance of the earlier generations. While most cannot become independent enough to leave their paternal home, they aspire to emigrate. The suffering of girls and the social pressure on them is greater than that of boys, especially in smaller cities. They are expected to marry when the conditions are not quite right. Marriage is the beginning of other problems, mainly related to poverty. The percentage of broken marriages between young couples is constantly increasing.

Two waves of mass protests took place in Iran in December 2017 and November 2019. Based on a study of photographs and videos of the protests, their geography, and an examination of the identities of those killed and arrested, we can conclude that the main force behind these protests was poor people, among whom the middle class youth are prominent.

The youth of the MCP have a rebellious spirit. Despite the coherence and common language in virtual social networks, they do not tend to be connected and organized. One criterion for measuring the activism of social classes in Iran today is the quantity and quality of working-class achievements. We see that labor strikes and protests have continually occurred since December 2017. Intra-class linkages have strengthened to some extent, and despite security pressures, workers have been able to adapt to the situation. They have selected figures as spokespeople and have defended them when they were fired and arrested. The workers' demands have gained clarity during this period. Teachers, retirees, and nurses have had similar experiences and accomplishments. Whether this organized and experienced section of the poor can gather the whole of the downtrodden behind them depends on various factors, including the extent to which the tendency for justice is at the center of public movements.

In general, it is fair to assess that the poor segment of the middle class plays a vital role in social movements in terms of its relationship with the deprived masses, the working class, and the middle class itself. There is a populist tendency in the government to attract the poor. This tendency is characterized by the rhetorical tricks of seeking justice, loving the weak, and giving opportunities to poor young believers. We observed those practices during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Ibrahim Raisi uses the same tricks. Populism, however, can be relevant

in a crisis that creates a severe rift among the rulers. Populism becomes serious when it is somewhat beyond government control and, while joining the top, introduces itself as an alternative to the official line and program of the upper classes.

In terms of a power struggle, there is still a balance between the government and the disaffected community in Iran; in this case, the government is in control but society tends to be turbulent, occasionally hitting the regime locally. Class behavior is one part of this case, but it will be another issue entirely if the balance is upset. In the current situation, the middle class is waiting, worried, and, as described, conservative. The poorer part of the middle wants to express dissatisfaction, and if it has the opportunity, will revolt. The imbalance between society and the state is likely to happen when the cracks within the state become apparent. In such a case, the role of the poor middle class becomes critical. The real change will come if this section stands side by side with the working classes against the totality of the upper classes, and this strong force weakens the proclivity of the middle class to side with the government.

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Endnotes

1- This article critiques the generalizability of the Bourdieu idea of social space:

Boike Rehbein. 2007. "Globalisierung, Soziokulturen und Sozialstruktur. Einige Konsequenzen aus der Anwendung von Bourdieus Sozialtheorie in Südostasien". *Soziale Welt*, 58. Jahrg., H. 2, 187-202.

According to the author, homogeneity and originality of relations between social groups is all areas, make uniform social structure possible, which is the basis of social space. But such a basis does not exist everywhere. The issue is not existing or not existing in a dualistic evaluation. The debate can be centered on the degree of homogeneity and homology. In the case of Iran, the growth of capitalism, the rate of urbanization and social stratification is such that we see diversity, homogeneity and originality as decisive.

Regarding ethnic and linguistic diversity in Iran, this article rightly explains that the way to understand it is not to base in on the categories of identity, but on sociological categories.

2- "The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed" known by its Persian abbreviate as the Basij is one of the five forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which recruits many students when they are still in high school. The minimum age requirement to join the Basij is 15.

3- A description of this global middle class based on the consumption factor, specifically personal vehicles, can be found in the 2012 article by Dadush and Ali.

4- Please see Alfred Schutz's discussions of type and typology, including in this reference:

Schütz, Alfred, Thomas Luckmann. 2003. *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*. Konstanz: UTB 116ff.

5- Shokhunia, Reza. "The Virtue of intellectuals." *Negah-e Now*, 2017, No. 116, 70-57. (Persian Source). Persian citation:

شکوہ‌نیا، رضا. ۱۳۹۶. "فضل روشنفکران." نگاه نو، شماره ۱۱۶، ۵۷-۷۰.

6- The bazaar as a whole is not a field in the Bourdieusian meaning of the word "field". We may be able to identify a bazaar field in Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, or elsewhere, in the sense that there is a relatively closed space for the production, exchange, and acquisition of goods, services, skills, information, and social status. However, what connects the bazaari categories in various traditional markets in Iran is not the existence of an all-encompassing guild class, but the resemblance in type. This type is historical; It existed before the modern era and its carrier is a tradition that is tied to the name of bazaar. A consistent attribute of this type is conservatism in a system of values. The upper ranks of the bazaaris are tied to the ruling power, but the opportunistic obeisance to the ruling power is not a general feature of the bazaaris who often pay special attention to their credibility among the general public and consider this credibility a guarantee of its survival.

7- Much of what the Islamic clergies learn and teach is about business. Makaseb is the title of a very important book that the mullahs need to study in order to become a mujtahid – an Islamic jurist. The main theme of this book is market jurisprudence.

8- The phenomenon of the Muslim engineer and his collaboration with religious authoritarians is not limited to Iran. We also encounter this phenomenon among the organizers of the Muslim Brotherhood, the agents of the 9/11 attack, members of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (former ISIS), and the like of them. The Islamic willpower is evidently strongly combined with the technical will to destroy and to build.

9- For the strategic selection, see:

Jessop, Bob. 1990. *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place*. UK, Cambridge: Polity Press. 9ff.

10- For the strategic selection, see:

Jessop, Bob. 1990. *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place*. UK, Cambridge: Polity Press. 9ff.

11- This research is a mapping of institutions and individuals who have become strategically selected and reproduce the Islamic system with their own choices and selections:

Boroujerdi, Mehrzad & Kourosh Rahimkhani. 2018. *Post-revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*. Syracuse University Press.

12- The same was true in the past as Sadi of Shiraz (1210-1292), the Persian poet said: "If the peasant takes an apple from the garden of his master, his slaves will uproot the tree."

13- Hamshahri newspaper on the 3rd of August 2021 that on the eve of the beginning of the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi, based on information from the Statistics Center of Iran writes: "based on stats, in the spring of this year, the unemployment rate of those with higher education and those with university degrees in 13.4 percent which is 0.1 percent less than the spring of last year, but it still indicates that 924,394 graduates, despite being willing to engage in economic activity, have not been able to find work and have inevitably joined the ranks of the unemployed." In the same report, Hamshahri writes "40.3% of the total unemployed in the country are university graduates and 9.8% of the employed are underemployed despite being ready for more work." See:

"The Face of the Labor market at the End of Rouhani's Government." Hamshahri Online. August 3, 2021. <https://is.gd/KUWi0R>

The website of the same newspaper reported on Saturday, 28 August 2021 under the headline "Going to University Fell from Value" that "while the general and prevailing perception of society is that there is fierce competition for university seats in Iran and most candidates are in line to enter higher education institutes. The country's Education Evaluation Organization announced that 52% of the candidates for the 2021 university entrance exam, who were allowed to choose a major, gave up this chance even though they were given the opportunity to enter the university." See:

"Why did Half of the Eligible Candidates Not Choose a Major? Going to University Fell from Value." Hamshahri Online, August 28, 2021. <https://is.gd/OOljsw>

14- For two examples of quantitative surveys of income distribution based on official statistics, see:

Nazari, Mojtaba 2021. "What is the gap between rich and poor in Iran and in the world?" Bursan. <https://bourseon.com/VkMn>

Sadeghi, Shahriar. 2020. "Three Perceptions of Inequality in Iran". Eghtesad Online. Link: <https://www.eghtesadnews.com/fa/tiny/news-390924>

15- "The report on the situation of poverty and inequality in the country in the last two decades will be unveiled." ILNA News Agency. 2021. <https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-1085068>

16- See a copy of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare report on the situation of poverty in the Persian fiscal year 1399 (2020):

"Report No. 89. Collection of Poverty Monitoring Reports. Poverty Monitoring in 1399." Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare. <https://is.gd/XjqKud>

And also see an article about this report published in Donya-e Eqtesad:

"A close look at the poverty line," Donya-e Eqtesad, 2021, <https://is.gd/RhvjRB>

17- Sen, Amartya. 1983. "Poor, Relatively Speaking" *Oxford Economic Papers*, New Series, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Jul. 1983), pp. 153-169.

18- Official statistics confirm this. See "Poverty Monitoring Report in 1399" from the

Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare. According to the report, Sistan and Baluchestan is the most deprived and underserved province in Iran. The poverty rate is 62 percent. According to the tables presented in this report, this figure is three times the poverty rate in the provinces of Isfahan, Semnan, Alborz, Tehran and Yazd. See:

“Report No. 89. Collection of Poverty Monitoring Reports. Poverty Monitoring in 1399.” Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare. <https://is.gd/XjqKud>

19- According to Ulrich Beck, with the help of a “container-theory of society,” see:

Beck, Ulrich. 1997. *Was ist Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp. 49.

20- I took this picture of time and place from Zygmunt Baumann:

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1997. “Schwache Staaten, Globalisierung und die Spaltung der Weltgesellschaft”, in: U. Beck (Hg.), *Kinder der Freiheit*, Frankfurt/M, S. 323-331.

21- See Martin Heidegger’s descriptions of the world in:

Heidegger, Martin. 1986. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. Drittes Kapitel §§ 14–24.

22- For a relationship between meaning and relevance, see:

Nikfar, Mohammad Reza, 2006, “The Meaning of Meaning,” *Negah-e-No* journal. No. 71, pp. 16-19.

23- See its role and place in literature:

Sandberg, Eric. 2018. “The Past is a Foreign Country’: On the Nostalgia of Literature”. *History, Memory, and Nostalgia: Literary and Cultural Representations*. Ed. Regina Rudaitytė. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholar’s Press, 25-37.

24- This is qualitative research that can be obtained through interviews, media content reviews, and social media data. One can start with a handful of these materials, interpret them in the style of objective hermeneutics, arrive at a hypothesis, re-evaluate the hypothesis with another handful of materials, and do so again over a period. The points made here from the point of view of lifeworld analysis are interpreted in this way. They are still crude, and their more accurate interpretation requires more extensive and focused research.

25- This article ignores this issue and sees a conflict of interest as a problem for the entire middle class:

Baizidi, Rahim. 2019. “Paradoxical Class: Paradox of Interest in Middle Class and Political Conservatism”. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 27, 2019 – Issue 3, 272-285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1642772>

In the Middle on the Edge

More Consumption, Less Satisfaction: Middle Class Discontent with the Improved Standard of Living in Iran

By Mohammad Maljoo

Abstract:

In a family conversation, the grandmother addressed the young girl after seeing her granddaughter's dowry. "What more do you want from God? You will have the best life. You should be grateful to your mother." It was the mid-2000s, and the young girl's dowry referred to by her grandmother included all kinds of modern means of middle class life in Iran. The grandmother explained to her granddaughter that she had a meager dowry at the time of her humble marriage, about sixty years ago, which was just the minimum of a very ordinary life for a young couple. These were the early years of the second king of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. The grandmother added that when she sent her only daughter to her husband's house in the mid-1970s, the bride's new dowry was far better than her own. The grandmother proudly said that, by the standards of the middle class at the end of the reign of the second Pahlavi king, her daughter's dowry was not small. The grandmother was delighted with her own meager dowry sixty years ago. Her daughter, however, was showing somewhat less satisfaction, and the granddaughter was the least satisfied. One could see that the quality and quantity of the dowry of these three women had improved over the three generations. But the level of satisfaction of each had decreased from the previous one. The subject of this article is the decline in the relative happiness of the middle class while its economic situation has improved in recent decades.

Problematization

“What more could you have possibly wanted? All the best has been provided for you! You have to thank your mother for it!” said the grandmother to her granddaughter after seeing her dowry, which included all the stylish and state-of-the-art household appliances of the mid-2000s. She then told her granddaughter about her own simple dowry when she got married about sixty years prior, in the mid-1940s. Compared to her granddaughter’s, the grandmother’s dowry was just a bunch of junk, the most basic necessities of a very ordinary life for a young couple in the early second Pahlavi dynasty. She added that when her only daughter wanted to get married in the mid-1970s, she gave her a dowry that was far superior to her own. She proudly boasted that it lacked nothing that upper middle class couples would have had to begin their lives at the time. It seems from this private family conversation that the grandmother was completely satisfied with the dowry she had received. So was the mother, although not as much as the grandmother. The granddaughter also showed signs of content, but only to ingratiate herself with her parents. Although the dowry that each of these generations received was quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the former, each bride’s level of content seems to have decreased with every generation.

If we measure the standards of living of each of these three consecutive generations based on the dowry they received as newlyweds in the mid-1940s, mid-1970s and mid-2000s, it is obvious that the grandmother’s living standards were much lower than that of the mother, and the mothers were significantly lower than those of her daughter. Nevertheless, the grandmother was much happier than her daughter when she got married, and the mother was happier than her daughter.

This micro-narrative about these three women and the two divergent trends of growing dowries and declining satisfaction to a certain degree represents the core life experiences of large sections of the middle class in Iran today. This trend is the discrepancy between living standards objectively improving and satisfaction with these living standards psychologically declining. All signs indicate that the middle class’ satisfaction with living standards has been declining, despite the fact that the actual standards of living consistently improved during the period following the Iran-Iraq War. Logically, as the standards of living rise, levels of satisfaction should also rise. The question is, then: Why is it that the standards of living and level of satisfaction with life have diverged during the post-war period?

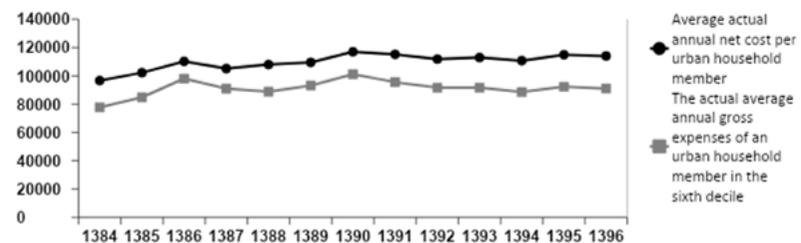
This article is an attempt to provide a provisional answer to this question. Using empirical data, I will first assess the facts about the relationship between the standard of living and satisfaction among the middle class in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War. I will then show that these two variables displayed paradoxically divergent trends for most of the postwar years. Next, I will explain why these contradictory trends have emerged and how the middle class is dissatisfied in three spheres - economic life, communication technology, and civil rights - despite

these improving standards of living. Finally, I will attempt to forecast this class’ dissatisfaction with its standard of living in the near future. Based on the data and the empirical analysis presented, I will argue that the cessation of neoliberal policies and international economic sanctions alongside the abandonment of authoritarian approaches is necessary to prevent middle class discontent from continuing to heighten.

Revealed facts

The official data production system in Iran often does not allow for an analysis based on the conceptual categorization of the classes. This system also does not allow for a statistical examination of the middle class standards of living. In an attempt to get a more accurate representation of the standard of living of the middle class, I will use a special statistical measure: the average annual net expense per urban household member. I have devised this measure based on Central Bank of Iran data contained in the “Results of the Household Budget Survey in Urban Areas of Iran” for a 26-year period (1992-2017). In order to do this, I first deflated the nominal values to real values using the consumer price index (base year: 2016) and calculated actual purchasing power. Then I converted average household expenses to the average expenses of a household member, accounting for changes in household size over the aforementioned 26-year period. This measure represents the average annual expenses for all urban classes, not just the middle class. A more appropriate measure to represent the average cost of living for middle class members is the actual average annual gross expenses of an urban household member in the sixth decile, which I have extracted from the same set of data, but albeit only for the 13-year period between 2005 and 2017 based on availability. Figure 1 shows that despite the difference in their absolute value, changes in these two measures in the period from 2005 to 2017 have been similar. Since we are focusing on the rate of change and not the absolute value, the close similarity between the rates of change in these two measures logically allows for generalization of the results.

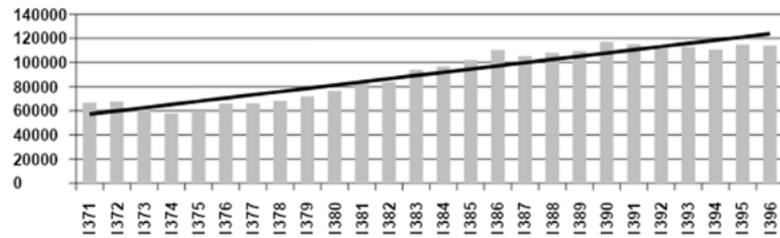
Figure 1: Actual average annual net expenses per member of an urban household and actual average gross expenses of an urban household member belonging to the sixth decile from 2005 and 2017 (thousand Rials)



Because the second measure- the actual average annual gross expenses per urban household member in the sixth decile- is only available for the 13-year period from 2005 to 2017, I will rely on the actual average annual net expenses per urban household member, which covers a longer period of time.

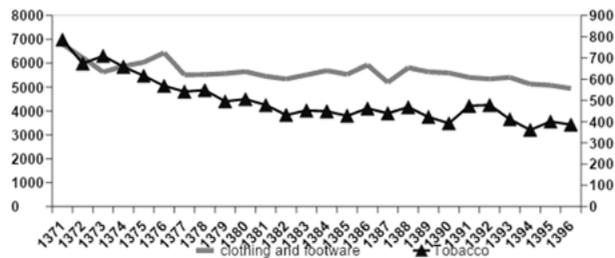
Figure 2 shows changes in the actual average annual net expenses per member of an urban household from 2005 to 2017. Despite a decline in the measure in the first half of the 2010s mainly due to international sanctions on Iran's economy, the overall trend has increased during the period under review.

Figure 2: Actual average annual net expenses per urban household member from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)



Actual annual net expenses are comprised of different cost groups with different rates of change. Figure 3 shows the only two cost groups with downward rates: tobacco and clothing/footwear. The scale of the tobacco cost group is shown in the right vertical axis and the scale of the clothing and footwear cost group is shown in the left vertical axis.

Figure 3: Actual average annual expenses per member of the urban household for tobacco as well as clothing and footwear from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)



Other cost groups have had increasing rates without exception. Figure 4 shows the increasing rates of two cost groups: food/beverages and healthcare. The scale of the food and beverage group with slower growth is shown in the right vertical axis, and the scale of the healthcare group with a faster growth is shown in the left vertical axis.

Figure 4: Actual average annual expenses per urban household member for food and beverages as well as health care from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)

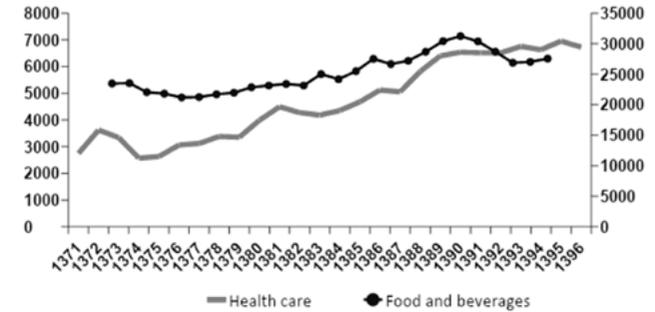
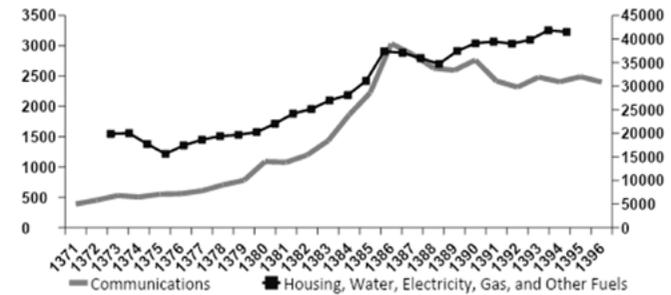


Figure 5 shows the increasing rates of two cost groups: the first group includes housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels, and the second is communication. The scale of the first cost group is shown in the right vertical axis and the scale of the second cost group is in the left vertical axis.

Figure 5: Actual average annual expenses per member of the urban household for housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels as well as communications from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)



I will first look at some causes of the improving living standards in a specific part of the first group: housing. As far as the cost of housing is concerned, some of the reasons for the better standards of living are due to the improvement of the quality of construction materials, the increase in livable space, and the number of housing facilities. Figure 6 shows the change in the percentage of distribution of households in terms of the three main types of construction materials used (reinforced concrete, brick with girder, brick with beams) from 2005 to 2017. During this period the use of lower quality materials such as brick with beams and girder drastically decreased in favor of higher quality materials such as reinforced concrete in urban residential buildings. An unknown portion of this improvement in housing material, leading to an improvement in the overall building quality, is related to the location of middle class neighborhoods.

Figure 6: Percentage of household distribution in terms of three main types of materials used in buildings from 1992 to 2017

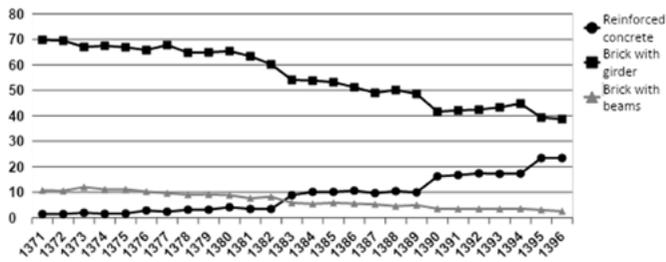


Figure 7 shows the percentage change distribution of households in terms of the number of rooms used the home from 2005 to 2017. The percentage of households with two or three rooms has increased sharply compared to the percentage of households with one room. While this change has occurred among households in all urban areas, an unknown portion of it is most likely in part related to households that have moved from the lower to the upper strata of the middle class, and also to households that have climbed from the lower classes to the middle class.

Figure 7: Percentage of household distribution by number of rooms used by households from 1992 to 2017

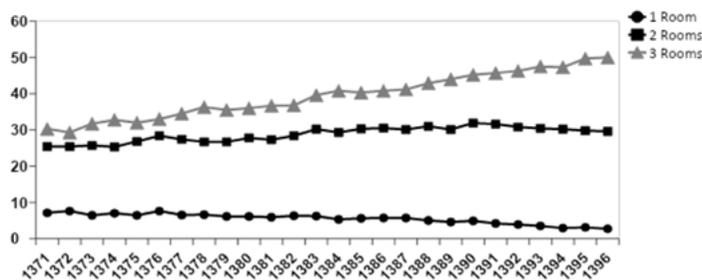
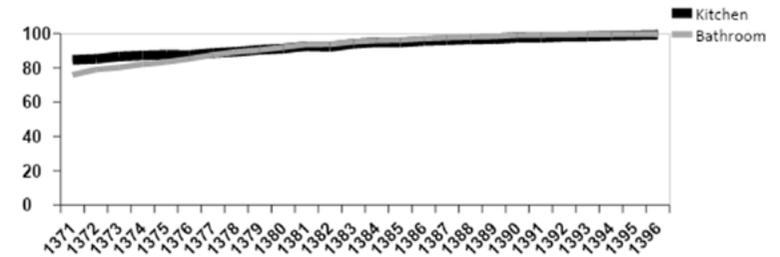


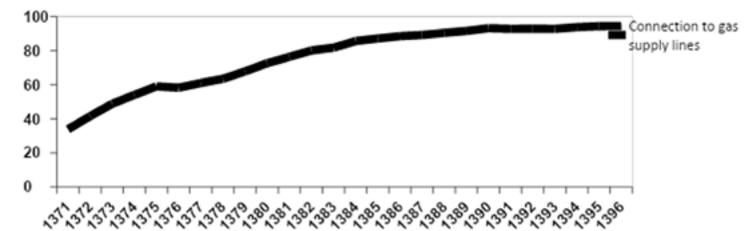
Figure 8 shows the percentage change in households with access to a kitchen and a bathroom from 2005 to 2017. As shown, the percentage of households with kitchens and bathrooms increased during this period of time. This change applies to households in all urban areas, but an undetermined portion most likely relates to households that moved from the lower classes to the middle class.

Figure 8: Percentage of households using kitchen and bathrooms from 1992 to 2017



Now we will address gas in the first cost group. Figure 9 shows changes in the percentage of households that were connected to gas supply lines during the period under review. This change occurred among households in all urban areas, but an unknown portion of it is most likely related in part to households that have moved from the lower to the upper strata of the middle class, and also to households that have moved from lower classes to the middle class.

Figure 9: Percentage of households that were connected to gas supply lines from 1992 to 2017



As shown in Figure 10, part of the improvement in living standards in the communication cost group is due to new items being added to the household consumption basket and the increased use of items that are already included. Figure 10 specifically shows the percentage of households using personal computers (from 1997 onward), the Internet (from 2010 onward), and mobile phones (from 2001 onward). This change occurred among households in all urban areas, but an unknown portion of it is most likely related in part to households that have moved from the lower to the upper strata of the middle class, and also to households that have climbed from the lower classes to the middle class.

Figure 10: Percentage of households using personal computers, internet and mobiles phones from 1992 to 2017

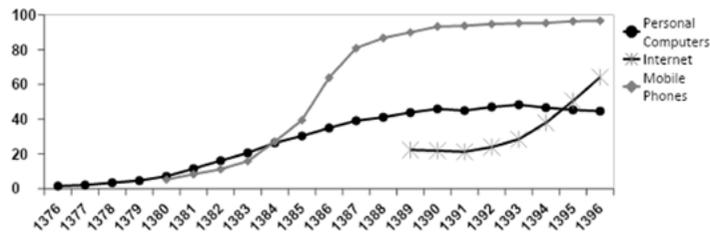
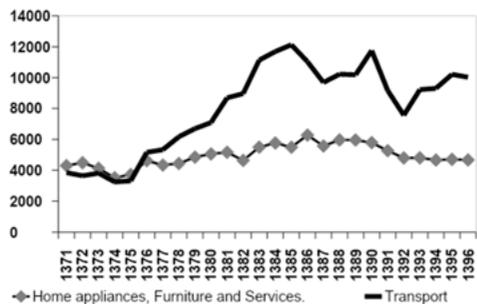


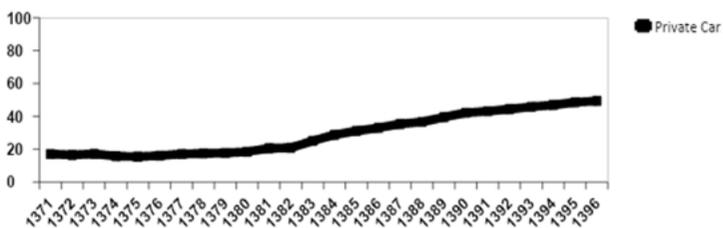
Figure 11 shows the increasing rates of two cost groups: transportation and home appliances, furniture, and services. Scales of both groups are in the left vertical axis in Figure 11 and both have overall increased.

Figure 11: Actual average annual expenses per member of the urban household for transportation and home appliances, furniture and services from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)



The improvement in living standards with regard to the transportation cost group, which includes purchasing/mending/fueling personal vehicles and travel costs, could be due to the increasing use of personal vehicles, as shown in Figure 12. This change applies to all households in urban areas, but much of it is most likely related to middle class households.

Figure 12: Percentage of households using private cars from 1992 to 2017



The increase in living standards in the cost group of home appliances and services (Figure 11) could be due to the addition of new items to the household consumption basket and the increase in use of already-existing items. Figure 13 specifically shows the percentage of households using vacuum cleaners and washing machines as an example. This change applies to all households in urban areas, but an undetermined portion of the change is most likely related to middle class households.

Figure 13: Percentage of households using vacuum cleaners and washing machines from 1992 to 2017

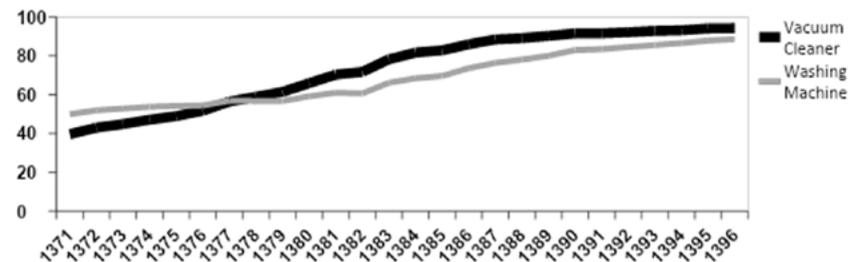


Figure 14 shows the increasing rates of two cost groups, education and recreational/cultural affairs from 2005 to 2017. Both of these groups, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, probably decreased due to international sanctions against Iran's economy. However, their rates are still much higher than in the mid-1990s.

Figure 14: Actual average annual expenses per member of an urban household for education, recreation and cultural affairs from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)

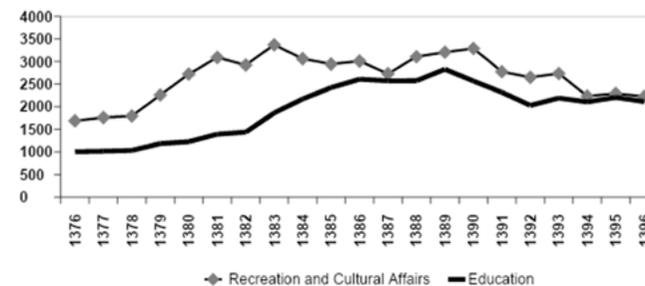
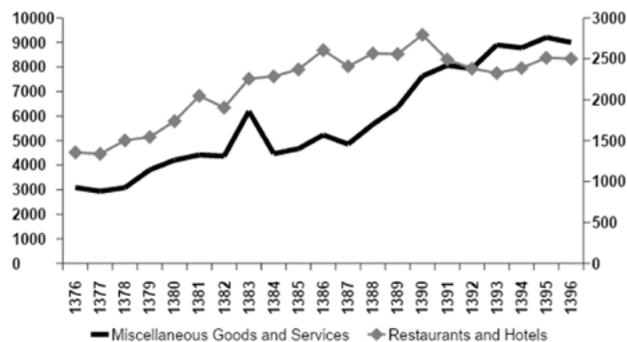


Figure 15 also shows the increasing rates of two cost groups, restaurants/hotels and miscellaneous goods and services from 2005 to 2017; the first of these two groups has probably decreased since the early 2010s due to countrywide sanctions.

Despite the fact that during the first half of 2010s the middle class standard of living declined to some extent (mainly due to sanctions), the overall standard of living for middle class members has generally improved during the period under review based on this statistical evidence.

Moving from the sphere of living standards to the sphere of satisfaction

Figure 15: Actual average annual expenses per member of the urban household for miscellaneous goods and services as well as restaurants and hotels from 1992 to 2017 (thousand Rials)



with those standards, we shift from the realm of quantitative measures to the realm of quality evaluation, and from largely-objective data to purely subjective evaluations.

Several surveys have provided a great deal of information about levels of satisfaction since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. These surveys, however, do not provide a solid basis for comparing levels of satisfaction over time. Therefore, the possibility of examining changes in the level of satisfaction with life in Iran over time is largely ruled out. At the same time, other surveys show a high level of discontent with various aspects of life among members of the middle class.

Most of these surveys report the data in terms of contextual and social variables: place of residence, gender, age, job status, marital status, and literacy. Relying on the literacy variable, for example, reflects the answers of highly educated professionals rather than middle class members. Not all highly educated professionals belong to the middle class, but middle class members are often highly educated. According to a national survey conducted in 2016, 74 percent of those with higher education degrees identified themselves as belonging to the middle class.¹

If we consider the level of satisfaction with the economic situation rather than the level of satisfaction with the standard of living, statistical data from the middle class is inconclusive. However, it is possible that the level of dissatisfaction is high. Table 1 shows the percentage distribution responses to the question about satisfaction with the economic situation among those holding higher education degrees in 2003.²

Table 1: Level of satisfaction of highly educated participants with the economic situation of the country in 2003

Satisfaction with the economic situation	Low	Medium	high
Percentage of participants with higher education degrees	79.1	19.6	1.3

Table 2 differently shows the percentage distribution of the responses to the question of satisfaction with the economic situation among

holders of higher education degrees in 2015.³

Table 2: Level of satisfaction of highly educated participants with the economic situation of the country in 2015

Satisfaction with the economic situation	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high
Percentage of participants with higher education degrees	31.9	31.6	31.5	4.7	0.3

There is evidence suggesting that the middle class is increasingly dissatisfied with the economic situation. According to a national survey conducted in 2016, nearly half of the highly educated participants agreed with the statement “those who lived in the past were happier than us,” while only a quarter of the sample size was opposed⁴. In the same survey, 62 percent of those with higher education degrees also said that the economic situation had worsened whereas only 23 percent said that it had improved.⁵

If we consider the presented data as revealed facts, the basic question is: if the middle class standard of living has been rising steadily in the period after the Iran-Iraq War, why has a vast majority of this class reported discontent with these improving standards?

Explanation

In order to pinpoint the underlying reasons of the middle class' dissatisfaction with its improved standard of living in the years following the Iran-Iraq War, we must assess the factors weighing into the dissatisfaction separately. The three spheres of the economic situation, communication technology, and civil rights have likely been the main sources of middle class discontent in the post-war period.

First we will assess the economic situation. Large sections of the middle class somehow felt that their quality of life was compromised in different ways as their standard of living increased after the Iran-Iraq War. We can point to four main types of compromises. First, there is the compromise caused by the macroeconomic environment leading to an improvement in the standard of living. Second is the compromise caused by the temporary nature of crucial social contracts; the main aspect of such contracts that guarantee a sense of security is their solid, permanent nature. The third compromise results from a shift in the type of exchange relationship that transforms the traders themselves. Finally, the fourth compromise results from environmental degradation that alters the quality of social life. These four types of compromises are among the main causes of the decline in the satisfaction of the middle class despite the improved standards of living. This piece will further analyze each of these qualitative compromises in the middle class lifestyle.

Despite rising living standards, the macroeconomic environment in which the improvement in living standards took place has always been marked by the insecurity and instability of the postwar period. The persistence of high inflation rates over long periods of time has clearly

contributed to this sense of instability and insecurity. Approximately 70 percent of those with higher education degrees mentioned “high fluctuation in prices” as a main social risk in 2016.⁶ Inflation has deprived some sections of the middle class of ownership to varying degrees in four roles. First, as wage earners, they have faced a decline in the purchasing power of their Rial wages and salaries. Second, as owners of Rial cash assets, they have faced a decline in the purchasing power of these cash assets. Third, as buyers of goods in stock, they have suffered from the increase in the price of the goods. Fourth, as recipients of government pensions, they have faced a reduction in the purchasing power of cash grants and pensions received from the government.⁷ Chronic inflation with a concurrent process of increasing commodification of the middle class labor force affected its members. In other words, due to high inflation rates parts of the middle class experienced the improvement in their standards of living simultaneously with increasing commodification of their labor force and have, therefore, been exposed to a qualitative compromise in their way of life.

Another factor contributing to the compromise in the quality of life among sections of the middle class is the persistence of high unemployment rates. Since the revolution, this rate has invariably been in the double digits.⁸ Approximately 26 percent of the participants in a 2016 national survey considered unemployment as the most important concern in a person’s life, making it one of the top options on the list of worries and concerns.⁹ The unemployment problem has disproportionately affected sections of the middle class. Of course, the unemployment rate in the middle class has always been higher among women, lower age groups of the able-bodied population, and the lower strata of the middle class. Undetermined portions of the middle class have faced the issue of unemployment to varying degrees. The middle class unemployed have maintained their standards of living, mainly with the help of their families and at the expense of their self-esteem. We can trace some of the roots of the increased dissatisfaction with the improved standards of living among middle class members to this concept. Reliance on the assistance of the family institution to maintain or improve the living standards of the unemployed members of the middle class also indicates a qualitative compromise in lifestyle. This type of dysfunctional relationship in the context of human solidarity and empathy within the family has damaged unemployed middle class members’ self-esteem. Therefore, an unknown portion of the middle class that has experienced a compromise in the quality of life due to chronic unemployment is dissatisfied despite the improving living standards.

Despite improving standards of living, the type of employment contracts that allow the enjoyment of some of the key aspects of social life underwent profound changes during the period under review. These changes compromised the quality of life for the less powerful party to these employment contracts. The temporary nature of employment contracts has clearly contributed to the compromised quality of life. In 2016, about 65 percent of those with higher education degrees considered the “risk of losing a job and becoming unemployed” to

be “high.”¹⁰ One of the reasons for this perceived risk has been the temporary nature of employment contracts. According to the 2016 National Labor Force Survey, the main reason that those who are currently unemployed left a job was the temporary nature of their job contracts, accounting for one-fourth of all reasons provided.¹¹

The most important consequence of this has been a sharp decline in the job security of the middle class workforce. Middle class workers who previously had permanent employment contracts enjoyed more bargaining power with their employers, but the new temporary contracts lessened their bargaining power in the labor market. This undetermined portion of the middle class experienced an improvement in their standard of living along with a reduction in their bargaining power and has, therefore, experienced a qualitative compromise in their way of life.

Another type of temporary contract contributing to the compromised standard of living is the housing contract. When asked, “What would you do if you received 100 million tomans?” about 19 percent of participants in a 2016 national survey chose the option to buy a house, making it the top priority on the list.¹² This prioritization took place in a period when the percentage of urban homeowners decreased from 76 percent in 1992 to 65 percent in 2017. At the same time, the percentage of households renting units increased from 14 percent in 1992 to 26 percent in 2017.¹³ While this statistic encompasses all social classes in all urban areas, it also represents the situation of a portion of the middle class. Renting has always been associated with instabilities in the rhythm of daily life in Iran, creating a source of dissatisfaction.

The third type of compromise for the middle class lifestyle involves the profound changes in the exchange relationship with regard to accessing social services. In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War. These changes have been somewhat disruptive to their way of life. The quality and quantity of some social services offered to middle class members based on redistribution rose during the postwar era in the framework of market exchange. Redistributive exchange depends on a two-way relationship between the government and citizens, including members of the middle class. This involves the accumulation of taxes and oil revenues in the state treasury, and the redistribution of these financial resources collected by the government among citizens, including members of the middle class in the form of social services. Market exchange, however, depends on another type of two-way relationship: one between two or more economic actors who freely buy and sell services for profit at prices that are determined to varying degrees by the free-market interaction between supply and demand. With the withdrawal of the government from its role as the provider of social services to citizens in the context of redistributive exchange during the postwar period, many of these social services were gradually offered in the context of market exchange. Two key examples of social services that have undergone a transformation in exchange relationships during the postwar period and have therefore been subjected to varying degrees of commodification are health care and higher education.

In terms of health care services, the average household's share in the costs of medical care and ancillary services increased from 2002 to 2007, indicating that the burden of medical expenses falls more on the households. The household's share in healthcare costs increased from 56 percent in 2002 to 59 percent in 2007, and the share in ancillary medical care services costs increased from 68 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2007.¹⁴ These changes affected all social classes, but reflect the experience of a large portion of the middle class as well. Almost 42 percent of highly-educated participants in the 2016 survey assessed the "risk of medical services and medicine costs" as "high."¹⁵

In the field of higher education services, the ratio of students enrolled in free education to students paying tuition for higher education decreased from 44 percent in 1997 to 19 percent in 2014,¹⁶ indicating a greater burden of higher education costs on households. These changes affected all social classes, but reflect the experience of a large portion of the middle class as well. In 2016, about 94 percent of those with higher education degrees wanted their children to study in one of the higher education institutions;¹⁷ we can assume that when the time came, they were forced to bear the costs of their children's higher education services themselves.

The change in the pattern of exchange and commodification of various social services, such as public higher education and health care services, is a reflection of the sharp decline in the social wages of the middle class. Social wages refer to invisible sums - households either do not pay for services at all or pay less than the market price because the government is responsible for financing specific social services. When the government fails to fulfill its responsibilities in the field of social services and allows their commodification, these costs become tangible and fall on households. On this basis, the decline in the social wages of the middle class in the postwar period has increased households' expenses and created a qualitative disturbance in their way of life.

Finally, the fourth and last type of compromise in the quality of middle class lifestyle. The increase in the standard of living for the middle class has occurred concurrently with environmental degradation, which has overshadowed the satisfaction of such an improvement in living standards due to the compromises it creates. For example, about 46 percent of highly-educated participants in the 2016 survey considered the "risk of air pollution"¹⁸ and about 65 percent rated the "risk of water shortage and drought"¹⁹ as "high."

Let's move on to the sphere of communication technologies. Aside from the widespread qualitative compromises in middle class lifestyles that have led to declining satisfaction with the standard of living, the middle class' elevated awareness over the past few decades of better living standards in other parts of the world is a key factor in their dissatisfaction with Iran's situation. This is due to the psychological tendency that prefers longing for what you lack over being pleased with what you have. In recent decades, the middle class' awareness of higher living standards in other parts of the world has elevated mainly because of four main channels.

First, increasing number of trips abroad directly expose Iranian travelers to the living standards in other parts of the world. If we consider only air transport, the number of outgoing passengers from Iranian airports has increased from 943,000 in 1996²⁰ to 4,898,000 in 2018.²¹ Middle class members presumably took a significant number of these trips. Direct observation of higher living standards in other parts of the world could, in turn, shape new criteria for assessing the improved living standards of middle class life upon travelers' arrivals home.

Second, cyberspace provides users with extensive information about living standards in other parts of the world. In 2008 only about 23 percent of urban households had access to the internet at their place of residence, while in 2017 this number increased to approximately 78 percent²². These figures encompass all social classes, not just the middle class. However, they also reflect the status of middle class members to a great extent, as approximately 82 percent of those with higher education degrees had access to the internet in 2016.²³ Urban households' access to devices with internet connectivity has also increased proportionately. In 2010, about 33 percent of the population ages six and older in urban areas used computers; in 2017, this figure reached 53 percent.²⁴ In 2016, about 49 percent of those with higher education degrees had access to the internet at home²⁵ and about 12 percent had the possibility to connect to the internet at their places of work or study.²⁶ Additionally, about 60 percent of the population ages six and older in urban areas used mobile phones in 2010, while that figure jumped to 83 percent in 2017.²⁷ In 2016, about 51 percent of those with higher education degrees were connected to the Internet via smartphones.²⁸ Cyberspace has exposed users to a wide range of higher living standards both in the country and in other parts of the world, defining unprecedented criteria for the middle class to re-evaluating its improved living standards.

The third avenue for increasing awareness of better living standards involves satellite television channels. These channels provide their viewers with the opportunity to learn about various lifestyles in other countries. In 2014, about 21 percent of people ages 15 and older watched satellite channels.²⁹ This figure represents all social classes and not just the middle class. In 2016, 39 percent of highly-educated people watched satellite television channels in their spare time.³⁰ Like other modern communication technologies, satellite programs constantly plant the idea for new needs and desires in the minds of many viewers, negatively affecting the perception of the already-improving living standards of middle class members.

The fourth channel includes the relations between Iranians and Iranian diaspora outside Iran. According to an official estimate conducted in 2020, the population of Iranian immigrants abroad has more than doubled over the last three decades.³¹ The image that the Iranian immigrant population provided of their own higher standard of living outside of Iran for their associates living in Iran via a variety of means of communication has become an effective source for comparing living standards in Iran and abroad. This comparison has often been to the detriment of satisfaction with the normal standard of living of the middle class in Iran.

The middle class' elevated awareness of higher living standards in other parts of the world through various technologies and means of communication over the past decades has led to an increase in what they perceive as lacking materially in their lives. The growth rate of material possessions of the middle class resulting from the improvement of their standard of living has been much lower than the growth rate of what they perceive lacking in their lives due to their heightened awareness of higher living standards in other parts of the world. This situation has led to the development of psychological tendencies among large sections of the middle class, whose pleasures have been overshadowed by yearnings for what they lack. The dominance of this psychological impact is one of the main causes of declining satisfaction with the improving standard of living during the postwar period.

In addition to the standard of living itself, the level of satisfaction with the standard of living is also linked to the level of satisfaction with the degree to which citizens enjoy political and civil rights. The lethargy that the government has created toward social movements because of undesirable political and social environment has, in turn, diminished the psychological impact of increased material pleasures. There is ample evidence of the dissatisfaction of large sections of the middle class with the degree to which they enjoy political and civil rights in the years following the Iran-Iraq War.

About 96% percent of the participants in a 2016 national survey were not members of any political organization, party, or group.³² This figure reflects all social classes, but the middle class' situation in this regard is reflected in their rate of participation in solving important social issues. In 2016, about 80 percent of the highly-educated ruled out the possibility of their participation in solving social problems.³³ This figure largely reveals the difficulties middle class members face in exercising their political rights, both in terms of having the capability to vote for preferred candidates and the possibility of running in a variety of elections for a position in the country's political body.

Middle class members' dissatisfaction with the degree of civil rights enjoyment is also very high. About 45 percent of those with higher education degrees in 2016 considered the level of "support for freedom of expression and the press" to be "low."³⁴ In another 2016 survey, about 49 percent of those with higher education degrees said that "people are afraid to criticize the government."³⁵ Additionally, about 61 percent of the families who had a member serving prison time were dissatisfied with the ways in which the trials were conducted.³⁶ Also, while wearing hijab is mandatory for women in Iran, my interpretation of one of the national surveys of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance suggests that approximately 83 percent of those with higher education agreed wearing hijab should be optional in 2015.³⁷

These avenues are all examples of the high-level of dissatisfaction of the middle class with their degree of political and civil rights in the years following the Iran-Iraq War. The low degree to which middle class members enjoy civil rights has, in fact, created an unfavorable political and social environment that has diminished the pleasures that these

increased material possessions should have created in the postwar years.

The increase in the standard of living of the middle class in the years following the Iran-Iraq War until the early 2010s has been accompanied by a decline in the middle class' satisfaction with its improved standard of living through impacts by the three spheres of economic life, communication technologies and civil rights. The streams of middle class discontent that emerged in these three spheres in the postwar years leading up to the 2010s led to a wave of dissatisfaction among a large section of the middle class despite its rising standard of living. However, the decline in the standard of living of the middle class in the first half of the 2010s has directly caused the increase of middle class dissatisfaction with standards of living. Compared to the earlier years of this decade, which experienced the outlying factor of international economic sanctions, there have been various quantitative and qualitative compromises in the middle class lifestyle.

Conclusion

Considering the facts and empirical framework revealed on the divergence of living standards and satisfaction with the standard of living of the middle class in the years after the Iran-Iraq War, and providing that all other contributing factors remain unchanged, what are the perspectives of the middle class dissatisfaction with its standard of living in the near future? The answer depends largely on the decisions of policymakers in the three areas of national economy, foreign diplomacy, and domestic policy in the near future and whether they will decide to continue their former policies or make changes.

The neoliberal tendencies in national economic policies during the postwar period has compromised middle class lifestyles in three different ways: compromises in the enjoyment of some key areas of social rights resulting from the temporary nature of contracts (employment and housing), compromises resulting from a change in the provision of numerous social services (health care and higher education), and compromises resulting from environmental degradation. Additionally, the imposition of international economic sanctions on Iran in the field of foreign diplomacy, which has mediated much higher rates of unemployment and inflation in the first half of the 2010s, has severely exacerbated the compromises that had already developed in the middle class lifestyle due to macroeconomic policies. Moreover, the tendency towards authoritarianism in the domestic politics of the Islamic Republic has always created an unfavorable political environment by widely violating political and civil rights of citizens - and has thus diminished the satisfaction of the middle class with its improving standards of living.

Assuming that communication technologies continue to inevitably develop, the neoliberal policies in the field of national economy are maintained, international economic sanctions in the field of foreign

diplomacy are not lifted, and the government continues with its authoritarian approach in the field of domestic politics, the middle class' dissatisfaction will certainly continue to rise. The cessation of neoliberal policies, putting an end to international economic sanctions and abandoning authoritarianism are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions to prevent the rise of middle class discontent to higher levels, either within the established political system or in an attempt to transcend it.

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In the Middle | **on the Edge**

The Effects of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Dreams on the Country's Middle Class

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Abstract:

The Islamic Republic of Iran initiated its nuclear program during the war with Iraq in the 1980s and seemingly continues its nuclear activities today as a bargaining chip in negotiations with western powers. The Islamic Republic must shut down its uranium enrichment facilities, or risk always being regarded as a threat by global powers.

Iran strives for recognition as an established government in the international political sphere, but uses unconventional methods to secure that position due to its lack of domestic legitimacy and ideological and geopolitical conflicts with neighboring countries and western powers. So far, it seems that the government's way to demand this global acknowledgment is to pursue nuclear weapons, or at least to appear to be on the verge of producing them. This choice has exposed the Islamic Republic to varying degrees of economic sanctions over time, and will continue to do so in the future. These sanctions put the middle classes of Iran under increasing economic pressure and harms their welfare, including by prohibiting supplies of basic necessities. This study will prove that the current reality will disrupt the decades-long process of reshaping Iran's class structure and will analyze the consequences of that interruption.

The government's concurrent advancement of its nuclear program and insistence that Iranians tolerate the sanctions imposed by the United States has excluded many of Iran's middle-class youth from the patronage system, which was designed by the regime to control the middle classes. Even if the U.S. returns to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, the massive expenses from Iran's regional interventions and purchase of surveillance and military equipment will quickly exhaust any released resources. Therefore, the dissident middle class youth will remain frustrated, and that frustration may be the basis of an alliance with the working-class youth, or even the organized working class.

Structural characteristics of Iran's ruling system

The dominant social and economic system in Iran is broadly capitalistic, though it diverges from conventional capitalist modes of production. This peripheral capitalism in Iran, formed as a rentier economy based on petrodollars, is best categorized as "political capitalism." The economist Mehrdad Vahabi defines the nature of political capitalism and the most important difference between the capitalism in Iran and other conventional capitalist societies in this quote: "In the political economy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, money is not the regulating agent in the distribution of resources – it is rather the coercive force that replaces money as the regulating agent."¹

The primary source of money in Iran's economy comes from the petrodollars earned by selling crude oil. Vahabi described the effect of this economic structure on the class system: "Concentration of revenues from petroleum exports in the hand of the state has awarded this institution with an exceptional independence from social classes, so far that ever since the second Pahlavi, it has been the capitalist class who has been dependent on the state."²

Iran has developed specific features of its political capitalism, all of which consequently led to deeply-rooted, chronic inflation. According to Vahabi, these features are as follows:³

The existence of parallel institutions: those that exist under the command of the supreme leader and those beyond the control of state. These para-governmental organizations, or bonyads, benefit from the direct support of the Islamic Republic's coercive force.

Cronyism for oil fields and revenues among these bonyads under the command of the supreme leader

Capital flight as one of the major forms of the political economy of predation and failure of the accumulation of capital

The coalition of the ruling clergy with the merchant bourgeoisie (bazaar) in an exclusive state form, particularly with respect to international trades

The use of inflation as means to decrease state debt

Iranian society is therefore stuck in a vicious cycle: These features are the result of existent crises in the Islamic Republic while they also play a significant role in creating these recurring crises.

One can view the history of the Islamic Republic as a history of consecutive crises. Vahabi refuses to categorize this history by presidential office terms, as he views Iran's political economy since this government's establishment as hallmarked by persisting and chronic events, which accompany "its structural and institutional features that have remained since the first day of its creation." Vahabi suggests a rather different timeline for the Islamic Republic, as summarized below:

- A significant revolution in 1979
- Vast confiscations and the establishment of the bonyad, Mostazafan Foundation
- A devastating eight-year war with Iraq
- Civil wars in different regions, including Turkman Sahra and Kurdistan
- Imprisonments, executions, and tortures in the 1980s
- Unprecedented immigrations in the history of Iran, or successive human capital flight from Iran
- Physical and psychological torture of intellectuals and dissidents
- Economic sanctions beginning in December 2006
- Social movements, the most recent of which were the brutally-suppressed post-election protests in 2009

Vahabi argues that these consecutive crises have rendered politics and the economy inseparable and have resulted in an interwoven formation which he calls "political capitalism."⁴

To better understand the series of crises in Iran, one could also add the following events to Vahabi's list:

- The takeover of the U.S. embassy by the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line as a means to keep power exclusively in the hands of Islamist forces
- Regional and international crises as a result of the insistence on exporting "political Islam" to other countries; for example, the 1987 Mecca incident that led to the deaths of over 400 people
- Direct military engagement with U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf
- Subalterns' revolts in Mashhad, Arak, and Islamshahr in the 1990s
- Disintegration of relations with European and Arab countries during the Rafsanjani Administration
- Reformists' rise to power, which amplified the government's internal contradictions as well as social and political conflicts within society

- Student protests of July 1999 (also known as 18 Tir or Kuye Daneshgah protests)
- Deadlock of reforms during the Khatami's second presidential term
- Crisis of illegal financial institutions and Qard al-Hasan banks
- Uprisings and nationwide protests in 2017-18
- U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA during the Trump Administration
- November 2019 national protests
- Insistence on Israel's destruction within the next 25 years
- Attack and occupation of Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran
- Severing of all diplomatic relationships with some Islamic and Arab countries
- Reestablishment of many U.S. sanctions
- Succession crisis for the next leader of the Islamic Republic
- Repression of women's rights and ongoing conflicts over the issue of compulsory hijab
- Housing crisis
- Rial devaluation crisis during the first and second periods of nuclear sanctions
- Youth crisis as a result of the 1980s policies to encourage births (Iran's boomers)
- Nutrition crisis and lack of available fruit, meat, and poultry, over the last three years
- COVID-19 and the controversial ban on the import of American and British vaccines
- Election crisis and unprecedented attempts to further consolidate the power structure

Economic and social conditions of Iran's middle classes during the new wave of nuclear sanctions

In addition to weathering the aforementioned crises, the middle classes of Iran experienced the most severe changes in their economic and living conditions between 2018 and 2020. During this period, the price of foreign currencies increased sevenfold and the Iranian rial lost more than 85% of its value. The importance and necessity of this study lies in the fact that, as a result of the course of events in this period, the middle class has become increasingly smaller and is perhaps vanishing all together, consequently transforming Iranian society.

According to Mahmoudi, a professor at the University of Tehran, this transformation is such that "in policymaking, if the conditions of the middle class are considered as a top priority, the overall socioeconomic status of Iranian society will improve accordingly."⁵ In other words, the growth of the middle class will benefit all of Iranian society. Otherwise, the middle class will fall to the bottom three deciles of society, which "will result in a deep social divide that threatens the capacity of future economic and political developments, as well as national security." It is on this basis that Mahmoudi claims that "not all the protesters of November 2019 were affiliated with organized opposition groups.

In fact, there are certain statistics and information which prove that most of the people involved in the November riots were from the urban slums, the subaltern, and the unemployed."

In October 2020, the deputy chairman of the Monetary and Capital Commission of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce said that the parliament's decision to provide commodity aid for basic necessities to 60 million Iranians, or more than 73% of the total population, reflects the deprivation of these groups and the expansion of poverty throughout society. A significant portion of Iranian society is made up of the middle class, whose declining incomes are highly disproportionate to the sharp rise in expenses. "Until two years ago, a person with a salary of four million tomans per month was in fact earning a thousand dollars. Now, even considering the 20% increase in salaries, if his or her salary has reached five million tomans, this figure is worth around \$250 per month. This means that in the last two years, people's purchasing power has been reduced to nearly a quarter of what it once was."⁶

Mohammad Javad Salehi Esfahani, a professor of economics, examines the shocking impact of economic sanctions in an article and explains that since 2010, about eight million Iranians who had been formerly classified as "middle class" have moved to "lower middle class." He also notes that the share of the middle classes "in the end of 2019 has returned to what it was back in 2002, which means that we have gone back about 17 years."⁷ In other words, the middle class' share of society has almost returned to the end of the first period of the Khatami Administration.

According to a sociologist and university professor, Iranian society is comprised of "50% middle class, up to 40% lower class, and less than 10% upper class, of which the higher 2% holds a much more privileged position." The difference between the new middle class and other social classes, including the traditional middle class, is in their manner of consumption, leisure, and the qualities of their occupations. According to Farasatkah, the new middle class "has the privilege of 'leisure time' [...] has its own distinct lifestyle and consumption patterns [...] is more closely engaged with knowledge and technology [...] and performs specialized or skilled jobs in universities and bureaucratic administrations".⁸

The conditions of Iran's middle class

Compared to the 19th century, it is not easy to propose a single definition for the contemporary middle class due to significant changes in socioeconomic circumstances on a global scale. In Iran, this complexity comes with different layers. The characteristics of the pre-capitalist period in Iran are not compatible with those of the feudal system in continental Europe. This reality has led to numerous disputes over whether it is valid to apply the concept of "Asian mode of production" to Iranian society. The capitalist system and the way it has developed in Iran is a confusing phenomenon in itself. After the 1979 revolution,

the regime's ideological approach to ruling, which included the cultural revolution as well as the cleansing and Islamization of universities, doubled the problem. This ideological system renders many social and economic issues and statistics as inaccessible because they are deemed confidential. Even approved professors in the Islamized humanities colleges have no access to this information. "Today, about 35 years after the revolution, we still do not know what our society is like in terms of class structure and formation."⁹ However, one must not overlook the efforts that have been made to present a fair model of Iran's class formation with the available information.

The Iranian Green Movement was widely attributed to the middle class by various media outlets, including domestic reformist and fundamentalist outlets as well as Persian-language outlets abroad. In October 2009, a few months after the outbreak of protests, a Persian-language media outlet reached out to sociology professors to ask what they thought about the qualities of Iran's middle class. Some noteworthy answers are listed below.

Rasoul Nafisi, a university professor and political analyst in Washington, DC said: "In the examination of the sociology of Iranian classes, we must be mindful that... the government plays the most dominant economic role in Iran, and that the middle classes are formed on the margins of the army and state bureaucracy. Ultimately, Iran's middle class does not have the characteristics of the middle classes of other countries due to the fact that they grew up under an undemocratic state, either in the Pahlavi period or in the Islamic period. Hence, they do not manifest the characteristics that are expected from the middle class. Still, those who are deeply rooted in these middle classes have certain characteristics that are worth examining."¹⁰

Abdul Hussein Sasan, a professor of economics at the University of Isfahan, opined that "cultural and academic figures and workers, judges, public sector employees in general, as well as a number of self-employed vendors and shopkeepers can be categorized as middle-class."¹¹

Economist Mohsen Renani said that there are no fixed social indicators to define the middle class "even on a global scale." He went on to say, "The concept of the middle class is a qualitative concept, but we need to quantify it somehow in order to identify its most important attributes. Broadly speaking, to examine the middle class, one must evaluate the set of changes that occur in the mindset, behavior and behavioral habits, expectations, discourse, consumption patterns, and lifestyle patterns of individuals... By some definitions, 'those who own a car, or people in developing countries with a daily income of between \$10 and \$50 or around \$80 to \$100 in developed countries' - are in the middle class. If we want to measure the size of the middle class, for instance, to say that 60% or 40% of a given society is comprised of middle classes, we still need to divide this part of the society into two sections: upper middle class and lower middle class. The lower middle class' income is close to that of the poor, but their lifestyle is not like that of the poor and underprivileged. The upper middle class does not have an income

like the rich, but their lifestyle is very much similar to the upper classes of the society. In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish these two separate components of the middle classes."¹²

Hamidreza Jalaeipour further suggested that the upper middle class includes those who "permanently have an income of more than 20 million tomans per month." He believed that "in today's Iranian society, we have a body of about 60 to 65% of the middle classes ... In our country, about 6 to 7% of the population is in the upper class and about 30% is in the lower class. Of course, these are rough and experimental estimations."¹³

According to Taghi Azad Armaki, when we use the term the middle class, "different strata are placed within it. For instance, it includes intellectuals, public sector employees, teachers, and at the same time small businesses in Iranian society." He believes that "about 80% of Iranians claim that they are middle class, while they in fact do not fall within the middle class. It is only in terms of needs, values and desires that they fall into this category."¹⁴

One must also consider cultural factors alongside economic components in explaining the status quo of a given society. In most of the views expressed about the concept of class, cultural, political and social factors are indispensable from economic ones. The point is: "need," "value," and "desire" cost money. If the cost of these items can be provided elsewhere, the individual, community, or class, may give them priority over material and economic benefits. However, if living standards and conditions are disrupted, is there still a place to address "need," "value," and "desire?"

Another point to consider in a discussion of culture is that it must be clearly defined and quantifiable in order to be measured. As mentioned above, some sociologists use the "leisure" factor to introduce the element of culture, as it is something that can be measured by time, cost, and other factors. In other words, having leisure time is closely tied to having the financial ability to enjoy leisure time. This discussion will focus on the economic and living conditions in Iran between 2017 and 2020.

According to Mizan News Agency, 37% of Iranian households are tenants, with the percentage of renters in Tehran reaching as high as 43.6% of households.¹⁵ Renters comprise between 30 to 40% of the population in Iran, with the exception of six provinces in which the rental rate is below 30% of the population. If the middle class of Iran comprises 50 to 60% of the society, then some tenants, especially in the capital and major cities must be members of the middle class. Two-thirds of every household's income goes toward rent and the rate of increase in housing prices by far exceeds the rate of increase in wages.¹⁶

There is sufficient data to compare the increase in minimum wage, the

official inflation rate, and housing prices. A comparison of the inflation rate and the rate of increase of the minimum wage from 2010 to 2020 shows that while the minimum wage increased by 199.3%, the total inflation rate reached 231.6% during the same time.¹⁷ Meanwhile, from 2013 to 2020, housing prices increased by 700%, or in other words, the cost of rent increased sevenfold.¹⁸ Moreover, from 2017 to 2020, the rent increased from 54 to 97 percent in different cities. These statistics illustrate the severity of the housing crisis after 2017. This period was also marked by the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and subsequent reinstatement of nuclear sanctions. According to the Central Bank of Iran, the inflation rate was 9.6% in 2017, but jumped to 31.2% and 41.2% in 2019 and 2020 respectively. These figures indicate a decrease in the level of real wages and purchasing power of the working class and the middle classes because the rate of increase in wages was substantially less than the rate of the skyrocketing inflation during this period. While this statistic indicates the economic pressure on Iranian working and middle classes since 2017, it also factors in to measuring the housing crisis, which consumes 75% of the income of the 37% of Iranian households who are tenants.

In addition to tenants, one must consider the renting and buying power of the younger generation seeking independence from their families, as well as all individuals who had to change their housing situation during this period for any given reason. In the past, a mortgage in Iran could reportedly provide a quarter of the price of a house. There are now various mortgages for married and single people. Regardless of the variety of these loans, it can be said that mortgages in Iran provide the maximum purchase price of 5 to 10 square meters of an average house.¹⁹

This situation is not only valid for the issue of housing. It also applies to the automobile market, clothing, food, and all other expenses. The value of the U.S. dollar has increased by sevenfold, significantly devaluing the Iranian rial. Similarly, Iranians have experienced an increase in all prices, with the exception of some basic commodities with government subsidies. For example, the price of the cheapest car in Iran has increased from 20 million tomans at the beginning of 2018 (during the first stage of the rial's devaluation) to about 120 million tomans today.²⁰

Given the situation described above, it seems that what is important in defining the middle class is the factor of power, and the role that power plays in economic and class relations in Iran. One must be mindful to not overestimate cultural components due to the difficulty in quantifying them as well as their dependency on a lifestyle issue that is itself a factor of economic status.

History of the Middle Class in Iran

In their book *Class and Labor in Iran*, Nomani and Behdad identify and suggest four distinct categories of classes based on three attributes: "Property relations, having skills, and organizational authority and independence." The four resulting classes are as follows:

Capitalists: The owners of material and financial means of economic

activity who employ wage laborers and employees

Petty bourgeoisie: Independent, self-employed workers who do not hire any workforce but may rely on unpaid family workers

Middle class: Public- or private-sector employees who hold executive-managerial and professional-technical positions and enjoy partial authority and independence. Public employees engaged in economic activities and social services fall within this category. However, the employees in the government's political apparatus hold an ambiguous class position; Nomani and Behdad call them "political agents" and exclude them from the middle class.

The working class: workers who lack the tools of economic activity and the partial authority and independence of the members of the "middle class." This class consists of wage laborers and employees of both the public and private sectors, but "those employees in the political apparatus of the government who have little independence and skills and constitute the ordinary members among political agents are not considered in this study as members of the working class."²¹

According to this definition, middle class members in Iran have grown from 5.4% in 1976 to 10.2% in 1996, and in the same period, the middle class members who work in the private sector have fallen from 21.3% to 14.6% of the broader middle class. Meanwhile, those who are employed by the public sector increased from 78.8% to 85.4% of the middle class. (Behdad and Nomani, 2008, 143)

In 1976, only 477,000 members of the Iranian work force were among the middle class.²² During that year the global price of oil increased sharply, resulting in a sudden increase in Iran's income. Following this unexpected rise in income from oil exports, both the public and the private sectors sought more employees, with significant demands for truck drivers, nurse assistants, and machine operators. The extent to which Iran's economy was dependent on oil sales as well as imports is clearly demonstrated in the course of events that year. In terms of distribution and transportation of imports, it was necessary to build new ports, acquire trucks, and hire truck drivers to correspond to the increase in imports. The need for nurses and nurse assistants reflected the rise of urbanization, which is a direct result of the growth in industry, both in the private sector and among those with close ties to the core of power (aristocracy, courtiers, government affiliates, and later the members of the Revolutionary Guards and the new regime affiliates).

After the 1979 revolution and the rise of Islamists in Iran a considerable number of educated individuals, managers in various industries, and even public sector employees left the country due to widespread insecurity, fear, and terror. This trend continued in the following years due to the war with Iraq, numerous executions, and brutal repressions of the 1980s and 1990s. In 2001 alone, 200,000 people emigrated from Iran. The official news agency of the Islamic Republic announced on March 13, 2002, that out of 100,000 Iranians living in New York, 19.5%

held doctoral degrees, 9% were medical doctors, and 8% held master's degrees.

Population growth in Iran required an increase in the number of workers in education and healthcare, which, in turn, contributed to the increase in the number of middle class members. According to calculations based on statistics provided by Nomani and Behdad, middle class members grew by a rate of 62% from 1976 to 1986; this figure accounted only for the labor force, and not the other members of their households.

During that same decade, the number of political agents increased by 1.12 million, which represented a 152% increase. This number includes the 811,000 members of Basij, the Revolutionary Guards, military forces, and police forces, of which more than 89% are unskilled understrappers while 10.4% hold managerial and executive positions. Another noteworthy event that took place in the following decade, from 1986 and 1996, was the growth in the numbers of those in the capitalist and working classes, according to the national census and official statistics of the class composition of the Iranian labor force. At the same time, however, the proportion of middle class members (the percentage, not the number) in the whole of society and their share in the composition of the labor force in Iran decreased slightly. It should be noted that during the same period, the percentage of political agents also decreased in both demographic composition and the class composition of Iran's society.²³

In 1996, 20% of the capitalist class were illiterate and 20.7% were high school graduates, while the majority of government employees had higher education degrees.²⁴ Academic education in Iran during this period was considered crucial as it was the only way that most upper and middle working class families could secure a career for their children in public institutions. Much of the pressure on children to pursue university-level education was due to the positive societal outlook toward the benefits of public jobs and government employment. However, this fact does not overshadow other reasons, such as the debate over social prestige, job or even life security, and other political and cultural factors. This trend continued through the first decade of the new millennium. After the 2009 protests, the Islamic Republic intensified its monopolistic qualities and some of its repressive approaches. In short, the government structure in Iran became more closed off and the government ramped up its efforts to manipulate Iran's middle class into aligning with the government.

In political capitalism, economic interests are determined by the relationship with the state and power structure. In this sense, government employment comes with a set of material and immaterial privileges. Some of the material economic benefits of government employees and their family members include: fixed and secure salaries, relative welfare, loan qualification, the credit of public employment in the market and banks, ability to buy a car or house, the possibility of saving, establishing shops or small commercial production facilities, participation in economic activities in sectors like real estate, currency, gold, cars, and finally providing the next generation of the family

with higher education (which later turned into a widespread attempt by government employees to obtain a university degree in order to increase their salary). As for immaterial and psychological benefits, one can mention: a secure future, security in various aspects of life, the privilege of certain connections (referred to in Iranian culture as having a "party" or have someone "partying for you"), enjoying small to huge information tips, ability to take risks, and the possibility of intellectual and cultural growth as a result of access to education and facilities.

During the so-called reform period from 1997 to 2005 in Iran, educated individuals and the middle class in general enjoyed a relatively good material and financial situation and became acquainted with political, cultural, and social demands. In a 16-year period that included two presidential administrations, this class encountered an improvement in foreign relations under Mohammad Khatami, followed by an unprecedented leap in oil revenues under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During Ahmadinejad's administration, an injection of subsidies into large households and the recruitment to create a loyal class of public employees escalated the manipulation of Iran's class structure.

"We currently have between 50,000 and 60,000 surplus workers," said the minister of Petroleum of Hassan Rouhani, referring to recruitment during Ahmadinejad's administration.²⁵ He described Ahmadinejad's presidential term as the time of "take what you can." The Vice President for Management and Human Resources Development of Hassan Rouhani's administration said, "Unfortunately, there are no accurate statistics on how many people have been recruited in the last eight years, because it has been done so irregularly and illegally that the statistics have not been recorded anywhere." He added: "One of the ministries in the last months of the tenth administration has illegally employed about 76,000 individuals. We told them that if you were going to employ workers illegally, at least you could hire individuals with higher education, instead of the illiterate or people who haven't even finished high school."²⁶

"There are 10,000 surplus workers in Tehran Municipality, which means that for every six people leaving municipal services, only one person should be recruited," said the Tehran Municipality's Deputy for Human Resources Development.²⁷ The deputy minister of Municipalities in Cities and Villages of the Country said, "Currently, 500,000 people are working in the municipalities of the country, of which 350,000 are surplus workforce."²⁸

A member of the Tehran City Council said on this issue: "In 2012 and 2013, about 3,000 people in the Tehran subway had a change in their vocation, and 1,200 new employees were recruited, of whom more than half were over 40 years old... Half of them had not finished high school and some could not even write or read, while the law prohibits the employment of illiterate Iranians in public and government institutions."²⁹

A Homegrown Middle Class: A Tamed Class

The common view among reformists is that the middle class is the “engine of development” of society, which leads the growth of society on the basis of “altruism.” When sociologists and reformist political figures examine different layers of the middle classes, however, they find that “civility and altruism are rather scarce qualities among the middle classes.”³⁰ The reason for this scarcity is that the core of power in Iran has no genuine concern for the life and wellbeing of the middle classes, but rather tries to manipulate this class because the “thorny sections” of it pursue civil demands. The government’s solution to remove these “thorns” of the middle class has been to try to create and expand a layer in the middle class that has a role in “rent distribution.” Hamidreza Jalaeipour named this layer the “tamed middle class,” which refers to the part of the middle class that Iran’s ruling system creates out of a need for a popular base within the middle classes.³¹ The tamed middle class fits in the approved framework of the ruling system and does not pursue democratic and civil rights demands.

Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), law enforcement, security officials, government retirees who participate in economic activities, government affiliates and, most importantly, employees and managers of economic cartels, fall under the supervision of the supreme leader and benefit from privileges and the special attention paid to them in order to “create an insider middle class.” The government has sought to build a loyal support block for itself, by implementing discriminatory economic policies that empower certain public employees and military agents, various security institutions, and economic institutions under the leadership of the Islamic Republic. However, this practice has instead resulted in widespread corruption within the ruling structure, most notably seen in the emergence of a new generation that benefits from the privileges of their position while no longer believing in religious laws and the official ideology of the government. This generation does not meet the government’s expectations, and as a result the government cannot trust them as much as it would hope. The members of this homegrown middle class and their children first and foremost seek personal gain. The apparent or real obedience of the children of the tamed middle class is solely as a result of perceived prospective material gains. They have no desire to participate in civil society and democratic activities, but at the same time do not subscribe to the principles of martyrdom and self-sacrifice for the sake of the government’s beliefs and interests.

Another layer of the middle class that seems integrated with the tamed middle class at first glance can be referred to as the “administrative middle class.” An examination of the composition of Iranian middle classes reveals the massive size of this societal layer, which confirms the existence of political capitalism and an economic structure based on the proximity to the core of power.³²

Between 2011 and 2016, Iran’s population increased by 1.24% from 75,149,669 to 79,262,700. ³³ In 2014, a news agency affiliated with the Islamic Republic published a relatively-unprecedented statistic

indicating that “including the executive body’s working and retired employees, the government has a total of 8.5 million people on its payroll.” The announcement detailed that there were “2,034,000 employees in ministries and state institutions, 600,000 law enforcement and military personnel, 436,488 employees in public companies, 603,000 employees in public and non-governmental institutions, 312,000 veterans or parental pensioners. In total, 3,985,488 employees of the executive apparatus were announced. Moreover, 247,000 people in state pension funds, 658,000 people in the Armed Forces Pension Fund, 2,386,000 people in the Social Security Fund, and 200,000 people in other pension funds will be added to the employees of the executive apparatus. The figure is 4,491,000, which is added to 3,985,488 employees of the executive branch.”³⁴

In addition to these statistics, it is enlightening to take note of the number of managers at different level, including managers at the level of deputy minister: 874 people; number of staff and provincial managers up to the level of head of department: 145,199 people; and number of managers of operational units: 296,336 people. Furthermore, government employees can be characterized based on their educational degrees: 3.1% doctoral degree; 5.2% master’s degree; 41.7% bachelor’s degree; 20.3% associate’s degree; 20.2% high school diploma; and 9.5% have not finished high school.³⁵

The Iranian state employs about 2.3 million employees either under contract (temporary and permanent) or as wage laborers. This number, along with the 600,000 armed forces, 1.2 million national retirees, and 600,000 military retirees, adds up to about 4,704,000 people on the payroll every month. One-third of the employees of state-owned companies receive staggering paychecks, with the monthly income of more than 20 million tomans. Furthermore, the subsidies in the medical departments are usually several hundred million tomans. Municipalities, banks and the Ministry of Petroleum also receive staggering paychecks, placing the employees among middle or higher layers of the middle class. These figures only cover the legal paychecks, while it is widely believed that illegal incomes and paychecks due to the structural corruption within the ruling system exceed the legal ones by far.

According to the statistics published in the newspaper named Haft Sobh (meaning Seven in the Morning) on July 17, 2016, about 22 million people are employed in Iran, and about 25% of Iran’s working population works in the public sector. The minimum salary of this group at the time of publication of this statistic was about one million tomans. This ratio of one to four employees working for the government is a high number compared to other countries.

The Youth: A Mass of Dissent

A. According to statistics, a relatively large proportion of the Iranian population is on the government’s payroll, either as workers or as

pensioners.

B. The next point is about the birth rate. According to the Statistics Center of Iran, which derived its data from the national population and housing censuses, the birth rate was 3.91% in 1986, 2.46% in 1991, 1.47% in 1996, 1.62% in 2006, 1.29% in 2011, and 1.24% in 2016. The average birth rate over this period of time was 1.985%, which this study rounds up to the nearest whole number (2).

C. One of the conditions of employment in most government agencies is being married, and even where there is no such rule, the Islamic ideology of the ruling system prioritizes married people over single applicants. Religious and Islamist forces usually marry at a young age, to the extent that child marriages are common among them. Therefore, we can infer that the majority of government employees are married individuals. According to the Statistics Center of Iran's census of population and housing, the average number of Iranian households in 2011 was equal to 3.5 and in 2016 it was equal to 3.3. The same census showed that the average age of Iranians was 24.7 years in 2006, 29.8 years in 2011, and 31.1 years in 2016.

There are no exact statistics available regarding the marital status of public employees, and it is not possible to discuss the average number of household members of public employees without more robust information. In order to reach a transparent and useful statistic, we must determine the proportion of public employees who have married other public employees. However, we can approximate that in Iran, between 8.5 to 9.5 million people are government employees. Considering the minimum amount of household members including the married couple, and the birth rate of children for each household (almost two), we can estimate that the average size of a public employees' household is four members. By this rough estimation, between 34 to 38 million people in Iran, or about 41 to 45% of the total population are dependent or somehow related to government paychecks, and therefore depend on the functioning of the government itself. (It is worth noting that the government is not the same as the executive branch). Based on this figure, about 16 to 19 million people are likely to be the children of public employees.

D. The statistics regarding the labor market of university graduates from 2011 to 2019 shows that "during this period, 489,130 people, or an average of 61,141 people per year, have been added to the total number of educated unemployed."³⁶

"Iran's youth unemployment rate is twice the world average," the Farhikhtegan newspaper reported in October 2020.

According to a report published by the Parliamentary Research Center, the real unemployment rate in the spring of 2020 was 2.5 times more than the official figure announced by the state.³⁷ Since the unemployment rate announced by the state was 9.8%, the real unemployment rate in

Iran would be 24.5% of the population. "The Statistics Center of Iran also reported in September [2020] that the employed population aged 15 and older was 2.4 million this summer, which suggest a decrease by 1.21 million people compared to the same period last year." Another important statistic complements the previously-mentioned one: The Statistics Center of Iran stated in the fall of 2020 that 40% of the unemployed in the country were university graduates.

After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guards' (IRGC) huge organization became a problem for the political and economic structure of the country. This institution had weapons, equipment, intelligence capabilities, and its own economic, political, and power structure; after the end of the war, it focused on domestic goals rather than foreign enemies. Hashemi Rafsanjani and the Islamic Republic's core of power decided to give the IRGC a share of the Iranian economy, and so it began participating in various economic activities. The IRGC has become so omnipresent and monopolistic in the national economy that it has provoked protests from all post-Hashemi Rafsanjani presidents. However, Ali Khamenei's decree on a new interpretation of Article 44 of the constitution allowed for large amounts of public property to transfer to individuals affiliated with the regime and shareholders in the power structure. "The privatization of Ahmadinejad's government has been 50 times more than the reformist government."³⁸ These companies' job opportunities vanished after privatization because the purchase prices of these firms were so low that their new owners preferred to shut them down and sell the land and machinery. This practice has been a blow to overall public employment capacity.

The Victims of a Declining Public Employment Capacity in a Rentier-Ideological Structure

Over time, higher education lost its function as a requisite for people to gain public employment. As nepotism and structural corruption led to the employment of poorly educated and even illiterate people, the criterion for government employment shifted from education and expertise to proximity to the power structure. This trend has existed since the Islamic Republic came to power in Iran, but it gained momentum after the 2009 protests and the consequent skepticism of the supreme leader and the core of power toward reformists. As a result, the ruling system became more adherent to the concept of employing a workforce that was both loyal to its ideology and subordinate. At the same time, the number of public jobs decreased significantly due to the privatization of various parts of the public sector.

It is worth noting that the government increased universities' capacities in order to postpone the young labor force's entry into the labor market, as there was already no place for the 1980s boomers' generation in the labor market. Policies incentivizing population growth in the 1980s created a population mass that has affected all strata of Iranian society

to this day. When this generation reached school-age, Iranian schools began working in two or even three shifts per day. By the time they neared college, a large industry appeared solely to prepare this generation for the competition to gain acceptance to the top universities. When they were supposed to enter the labor market, the government that had made no practical plans to create sufficient job opportunities for them responded by increasing the capacity of higher education admissions and therefore transferring a part of this population to universities to reduce the market pressure caused by increasing job demands. This response eventually resulted in a significant mass of educated unemployed individuals who mainly belong to the middle class youth. Young people in the lower classes have to find work to survive, whether they have a university degree or not. Many of these young people work as drivers for Snap and Tapsi (Iranian versions of Uber), in unrelated fields, or as unskilled workers. The economic conditions of the working class and the lower classes do afford them the opportunity to wait until they find a suitable job. Those who have a degree and can refuse to work in unskilled or unrelated vocations tend to belong to higher strata of the middle classes.

The middle class youth in Iran faced under overwhelming pressure between 2009 and 2020. While middle class youth will take the place of their parents in the middle classes in the years to come, they will realize sooner or later that they do not share the same economic and social stability that their parents did. In 2009, the Islamic Republic decided to pursue its nuclear activity project and kept the administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power in an allegedly rigged election. This action incited the Green Movement protests in Iran, which were largely comprised of middle class youth. Just as the regime suppressed the movement, Iran was subjected to UN nuclear sanctions. During the next presidential term, the sanctions lifted for a period of time due to the Iran nuclear deal (or BARJAM in Persian). This period did not last long, however, as the U.S. left the agreement after the election of Trump, which restored sanctions and destroyed Iran's economy and the lives of Iran's middle and working classes more devastatingly than ever before.

Conclusion

1. The frustration resulting from the violent suppression of the Green Movement, whose major agents were from Iran's middle class, is still a predominant attribute of the collective memory of this movement's social body.
2. International and U.S. sanctions have brought Iran's economy to the point of fiscal collapse or perhaps even a complete economic meltdown. The regime's obstinate decision not to negotiate with the U.S., as expressed through the supreme leader's declared years-long prohibition on direct negotiations, has severely undermined the economic foundations of Iran's middle class. As a result, they have grown increasingly more dependent on government paychecks and rents of power. Meanwhile, considering the high cost of the regime's

military, regional and international activities, it seems unlikely that the economic situation of the working class and middle classes in Iran will improve dramatically even after a new agreement with the U.S.

3. Many young people from the middle classes are now unemployed.
4. Many middle class youths are not married.
5. As a result of cultural changes and changes in public opinion in Iranian society, the desire to live in a one-member household has increased sharply. Even if Iranians do not formally recognize this desire, one cannot overlook the fact that there has been a significant increase in one-member households. On the other hand, many young people have lost the opportunity to live independently and are bound to stay with their families because of escalating housing prices and costs of living.
6. The uprising of January 2018 and the widespread protests of November 2019 have shaken or even destroyed the political horizons of the middle class and its youth. The weight of political agency has shifted from the middle class and its reformist activities to the lower classes, the underprivileged youth, women, and slum dwellers, resulting in a desire for subversive and revolutionary activities. This change of circumstances has led the government to pay more attention to lower classes, desperately hoping to keep them satisfied with distributional and protectionist policies. This process has also contributed to further undermining the parts of the middle classes that are independent from the government.
7. Young people raised in the middle classes associate their upbringing with a certain standard of well-being, and this well-being has shaped their lifestyle, expectations, and consumption patterns. These people are likely to consider living below this level as very unpleasant and undesirable. Thus, the current situation will probably cause them to enter the realm of political and social activity against the existing structures and conditions. Middle-class youth may align with marginalized youth and engage in joint or aligned political and social action.
8. The dependency of increasing parts of the middle-class youth on government rents and paychecks – whether it includes the working members among these youth, or the unemployed members whose parents or other family members are employed by the government – has uniquely complicated the social, cultural, and political issues in Iran. On one hand, these young people have had the opportunity to become educated on global issues, which manifests itself in their demand for freedom, a certain level of well-being, and other cultural expectations. On the other hand, they are extremely cautious in the face of an authoritarian and totalitarian government. Reforms and reformists have controlled and contained the middle-class youth under their hegemonic ideas thus far, but the circumstances have evidently changed.
9. The discontented middle-class youth could leave Iran in the



near future if they desired to do so. However, the tripling of the currency exchange rate in Ahmadinejad's administration and the further sevenfold increase of the dollar against the rial in Rouhani's administration severely limited the possibility for middle-class youth to emigrate. The consequences of COVID-19 have contributed to this situation, as Iran's borders have essentially become an unescapable cage for middle-class youth.

10. The number of births in Iran from 2015 to 2020 have consistently decreased each year. The rate of population growth in Iran now falls below one percent. If the low birth rate continues, the Islamic Republic will be forced to expand the use of women's labor to support Iran's economic structure. The employment rate among educated female citizens in Iran is 14.5%, and any increase in this rate will result in women's economic empowerment and independence, which will be followed by social, cultural and political changes.

The Islamic Republic must either amend its ideologically-based laws oppressing women and youth, or accept the inevitable further decrease in its population growth rate. In both cases, the ruling system must recognize the value of human beings as the only available source of labor, which will increase the bargaining power of youth, women, the middle class, and Iranian society against the ruling class. Hundreds of Iranian protesters, mostly young people, were killed by government security forces during the November 2019 protests. If we consider the widely-accepted number of 1,500 deaths during these protests along with the average number of household members, then 6,000 people were directly affected by these deaths. In many countries, this population is the size of an average city, but in Iran, the government eliminated the potential of that group within four days. As the birth rate continues to decline, the value given to human lives by the government will increase, and slaughter at this scale will become ever more costly.

11. Along with objective issues, subjective conditions also play a role in personal and social behaviors. Subjective and objective conditions are in a dialectical relationship with each other and are influenced by each other. One way to study subjective conditions is to research changes in objective conditions. We must consider these subjective conditions because they will have an impact on the social and political future of Iran in a two-way relationship between the individual and society, as well as between the object and the subject.

12. The average age of the Iranian population according to the last national census of Iran is 31.1 years, with the average age of men as 30.9 years and the average age of women as 31.3 years. The average age of men and women in urban areas is 31.3 and 31.6 years, respectively, and in rural areas is 29.7 and 30.5 years.³⁹

Based on these statistics, changes that Iran's middle class faced between 2017 and 2020 predominantly affected the situation of the youth. This issue can play a significant role in future social and political outlets in Iran. Researchers and the media are paying attention to this issue and

are working on it, but it seems that a clear and inclusive framework for these social changes is yet to be seen. It is possible that discontent among the youth of Iran will act as a means for an interclass coalition between the working class and part of the middle classes. So far, major protests in Iran have been single-class events, with other classes acting as mere spectators. Examples of this phenomenon include the 2009 protests, in which the middle-class members were the protagonists, and the 2018 and 2019 protests of the lower classes with little contribution from the middle classes. However, it seems that the time has come for a new form of protest in which neither the middle classes nor the working class will be mere bystanders. The dissatisfaction in Iranian society broadly referred to as the issue of "discontented youth" may create a huge social potential which may lead to an alliance between the two classes with members that make up the majority of Iranian society. Furthermore, since oil prices have fallen dramatically, competition between factions in power has also increased sharply. Considering the aforementioned costs of the Islamic Republic's cross-border conflicts, even after a possible agreement with the U.S., the released resources will most likely go toward military reconstruction and proxy wars, with little room to address domestic issues.

What is particularly important is that discontented youth advocate for economic and livelihood demands as well as libertarian and civil rights demands. If social movements or political protests are centered on discontented youth, this fusion of economic demands and civil rights demands can be widely embraced by the majority of the Iranian society. The entanglement of the two types of demands will put an end to the false dichotomy in the Iranian political and intellectual space, where the economic and cultural demands are seen as opposing each other and being promoted by separate social entities. The simultaneous advocacy that economic and cultural or civil rights demands are interdependent demands will forge a path out of Iranian society's current dilemmas.

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- 18- Eqtesad News, "Housing price growth of more than 700% in the last 7 years".
- 19- Eqtesad Online, "How many meters of a house can be bought with a mortgage?"
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In the Middle | **on the Edge**

Lost Time: Higher Education and the Unemployment of its Graduates in Iran

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Abstract:

The unemployment crisis of higher education graduates has its roots in various political, economic, social and cultural factors. Unlimited growth of the number of higher education institutes, lack of effective and regularized admission procedures, and the banality of holding a university degree are among the factors that have greatly contributed to the deepening of this crisis.

The present article aims to take a critical look at the inefficient education system which adds fuel to the fire of the unemployment crisis by allowing the number of universities and tertiary institutions to grow heedless of the quality of education, and by unplanned admission of students without considering the demands of the labor market. To this end, the present discussion will focus on issues such as: poor skills and low efficiency resulting from inadequate curricula, lack of balance between fields of higher education and labor market capacities, uncontrolled growth of the number of universities while neglecting the quality of the education offered to students, focusing too much attention on theoretical aspects instead of the real skillsets needed, luring students into majors that don't promise any real opportunities in the job market, provoking credentialism fever and thus wasting the potentials of secondary school graduates by thrusting them towards applying to universities, etc.

The present article will also focus on the social and psychological consequences the unemployed graduates suffer; an issue which has often been overlooked in research done on the unemployment issue of higher education graduates. We will focus on the groups that are especially vulnerable in this crisis, namely lower and middle class unemployed graduates. It is right that the lower social classes are the hardest-hit strata in this crisis. Nevertheless, the psychological and social impacts of the crisis on the middle classes are also unignorable. It could be claimed that all social strata, in proportion to the expectations of their class, are to some extent affected by this crisis.

Corruption and Banality

Over the past few decades, corruption in Iran's higher education system has shown its many faces, and by commodifying science it has turned Iranian universities into profitable enterprises for buying and selling degrees, articles, dissertations, academic rankings and chairs.¹ This situation has heightened the credentialism fever, and by diminishing higher education to the sole aim of obtaining a degree, has opened the way for the rise of numerous tuition-driven institutions with low quality education who have absorbed an enormous number of students and produced as many graduates over the past three decades.

This destructive phenomenon, which rapidly reduces the quality of universities and graduates while increasing them in number, has raised doubts as to whether any real benefit can be drawn from higher education and accumulation of knowledge. It has turned university degrees into a banality and by encouraging scientific and skills poverty, has pushed multitudes of unskilled university graduates into the chaos of the labor market. This market, in turn, thrusts graduates to frustration and forces them to accept non degree-demanding jobs that are unappealing to these "overqualified" graduates.

Apparent and hidden hands that derive benefit from the banalization of higher education degrees not only send students' money down the drain, they smash their dreams for a better future, and by wasting the time and energy that could have been put to use to realize their potentials and build their futures, leave them to face an uncertain future that lies at the end of a bumpy road, penniless and empty-handed.

In the following sections, I will focus on the problem of the banalization of higher education degrees in Iran, one of the outcomes of a corrupt, commodified education system, and will draw a detailed picture of those empty hands that, with the fear of an unknown and unforeseeable future in their hearts, set foot in a path that leads them nowhere but to despair and frustration. The ever increasing dominance of quantity over quality multiplies the number of those lost in this path every year, with more hopes, dashed, and more time, lost.

The fact is, macro-planners and policymakers do not pay heed to the factors leading to this problem, nor do they take steps to resolve the

crisis. In this situation, where the crisis has been left unbound, the profiteers take advantage of the mismanagement to fish in troubled waters. The real aggrieved party are the youth who have invested their money and their life in this race for degrees through "education businesses and agencies" operating in the guise of entrance exam preparation institutions, educational counseling centers, tuition-based universities and non-governmental higher education institutions. With the dream of a brighter future in their heads, they have set foot on this road in which no keys are to be found to unlock doors to a better future in a chaotic labor market.

In the present article, the phenomenon of credentialism, which has reduced education to a degree, is considered one of the most important factors in the quantitative development of low-quality, tuition-driven universities as well as the unrestricted admission of applicants: a dilemma that opens only one path for high school graduates and requires them to receive a university degree at any cost, by any means and from whatever university.

Numerous social and cultural factors work together to convince high school graduates that the only way to succeed is to get a degree at any cost and even in corrupt ways. Although they see the others who have joined the public race before them empty-handed, they still insist on following in their footsteps. The reason for this insistence is the cultural and social pressures imposed on them by the society in the form of quiet structural violence that forces them to resort to obtaining a degree in order to gain approval and credit in the society. For many, it does not even matter in what field, from which university and in what way they obtain this degree. What is important is to get a degree; even if they have to pay a fortune for it.

The aim of the present article is not to criticize the pursuit of higher education so common in Iran in general. The importance of education, especially higher education, is undisputable. In addition to raising knowledge and awareness, education also paves the way for social, cultural and economic progress and development. But if it becomes a public race for obtaining a degree at any cost and by any means, including educational corruption, not only will it not have the desired constructive results, it will threaten the future of young people who have poor skills and are scientifically inefficient at the end of their university education, when they are supposed to take over and hold the future of this land in their hands. This process, which has already had far-reaching social, economic and cultural consequences to date, will become an irreparable catastrophe in the long run and will cast a shadow over the future of this land. Education policymakers and their executive arms, instead of responsibly considering the potentials and capabilities of the younger generation and using these valuable resources for the development of this land, push them towards obtaining degrees that are useless from an economic and personal growth point of view, while no one can hold them accountable for the wasted time, money and energy that could have been turned into human capital by constructive education. Its force could have been used for growth, development and making of a better society. But in reality, the profits of this waste of

time, money, and energy go to the pockets of educational firms, while its smoke blinds the eyes of job-seeking graduates who waste whatever they might have left on a fear of an unknown future and a dead-end of despair.

A Gain Not Worth the Pain

A significant part of the unemployed population in Iran is made up of higher education graduates. According to the statistics, over 4.5 million individuals among the unemployed population are university graduates. Statistics show a 14-fold increase in the number of university graduates after the 1979 revolution (with the population of male graduates showing a 10-fold, and the female graduates showing a 23-fold increase). However, during these four decades the capacity of the labor market has not grown commensurate with this amount of increase in job demand: not only has it not experienced any growth to be able to accommodate the new graduates flooding the market, it has actually fallen away from its previous status.²The flood of jobseekers in these four decades, instead of joining into a flowing river, has poured into a humble pool, and every year with the graduation of a large number of unskilled students from a variety of low-quality tuition-driven universities, these humble possibilities become even sleeker, confronting the society with the economic, social, and psychological consequences of an uncontrollable crisis.

The higher education system, however, seems to be indifferent to this fatal crisis, and unrestricted number of students continue to be admitted in different fields of higher education, even those with absolutely zero employment possibilities. The authorities seem to be totally ignorant of the role they play in this disaster with a devastating force. Planners and managers at the top decision-making levels have also taken a passive stance in the face of this crisis, which is the source of undeniable social and psychological harm. The result of such mismanagement is the accumulation of demand faced with an ever-increasing shortage of employment opportunities supply; an accumulation that has exposed society to an impending explosion.

This mismanagement harms the younger generations who waste their golden energy and time- which could have been spent on skills training and realizing their potential- on obtaining a worthless degree through educational enterprises who reign freely and take advantage of this country's culture, and trade younger generations' capacities for their own profits.

Universities, as the executive arms of the higher education system, were supposed to provide opportunities for increasing graduates' scientific abilities and knowledge, pave the way for initiative and innovation in science, educate a specialized and creative work force needed by the society, and thus, pave the way for social, economic, cultural and political development. Instead, university education has now become a hole in which the lives, abilities and money of those seeking to obtain

a degree are decaying. Degrees that lose their validity more and more every year and make their holders look more incompetent than those without a degree. In fact, if they didn't have a degree, they might have had more future opportunities. Data shows that the unemployment rate among higher education graduates is twice as high as the general unemployment rate.³

Higher education applicants, meanwhile, have been vying for material (stable job position and satisfactory income) and spiritual (promoting social status) competitive advantages through the competition for a degree. As a result, they have higher expectations career-wise and this is despite the fact that they would have had more opportunities had they not wasted their time seeking a degree. Not only did the degree not bring them social status or economic prosperity, it threw them into the pool of menial jobs in the social hierarchy, jobs they would have felt more satisfied with had they not obtained a degree.⁴ This no-win deal has left them both economically and socially vulnerable and psychologically frustrated. What they have lost in the deal is not worth what they have gained. The realization that their efforts to promote social and economic status have yielded virtually nothing leads to an irreparable bitterness, and this bitter confrontation with reality is one of the problems that is often neglected in the reflections and researches on the issue of unemployment of highly educated graduates.

What the university does to its graduates is raising their expectations through a thoroughly useless degree and what the job market does is bringing down that house of cards in the most frustrating manner possible. Between the erection of this house of cards and its collapse on the heads of the degree seekers, what is lost is a constructive force backed by hope, motivation, and intellectual freshness that could have brought about change for the better. But instead, through the imprudence and mismanagement in decision-making at a macro level, it leads to a dead-end of failure and harmful frustration and gives rise to the crisis of social and psychological insecurity among the youth.

Today, universities have nothing to do with the employment market; each have their own worries and go their own way. The gap between the university and the job market has reached the point where some disciplines have virtually no place in the job market and have an exclusively aesthetic function whereas some other disciplines are fully saturated.⁵ Still, the higher education system, heedless of this problem, issues licenses for these courses to be run in a variety of tuition-driven universities with unsatisfactory quality. These universities admit students in these fields every year and after some years, send away graduates towards an unknown future with a scientific and talent reserve close to nothing. Educational policymakers and their implementers do not feel any need to assess the demands for such disciplines in the labor market or carry out academic planning based on such assessments. Examining the employment potentials for various fields of study is not important for policymakers, planners and educational administrators. The only thing they care about is how lucrative a course could turn out to be admission-wise. They care little what the outcome of this eroding process will be and what economic, social, or cultural returns

this output will bring. Applicants, too, choose fields with no future employment prospect without research and reflection, and it is only after completing their studies and when the doors of the employment market are shut in their faces that they become aware of the futility of their education. Some disciplines have also gradually become saturated in the employment market with the accumulation of graduates. But applicants, regardless of this fact, continue to choose these fields, which no longer offer any opportunities for employment.

When education is not serving the demands of the employment market but the business of educational firms, it will ultimately lead to a turmoil of supply and demand in the labor market. The result will be the damaging crisis of graduate unemployment; what we are witnessing on a pervasive level in society today. Since the very beginning, candidates' money has been more important to the founders of the enterprises and educational institutes than the quality of their education, and most graduates have not reached a level of academic competence and efficiency that enables them to find a smooth path to the employment market once graduating from the university. This problem, known as "structural unemployment", will be discussed below. The lack of skills and insufficient scientific knowledge graduates feel at the end of their education leaves them with a sense that their time has been lost. When they finally see the real demands in the job market, they are faced with the bitter reality that their precious degree can only be used to decorate the walls of their homes. Even the time when a degree hung on the wall of a home had a real value-add in the social hierarchy has long passed. Recently, Mohsen Azimi Etemadi, a doctoral graduate from the University of Tehran, tore up the original master's and doctoral degree diplomas to protest the banality and inefficiency of his degrees, while sharing a video of this act of protest.⁶

This disappointing, time-consuming and costly achievement has dire psychological consequences for the youth and adds to the bitterness and frustration they feel. Unfortunately, the relationship between the increase in psychological problems such as depression, increasing suicide rates, etc. and social harms such as addiction, forced celibacy, tendency to crime, etc.⁷ on the one hand, and general unemployment statistics and graduate unemployment rates on the other has rarely been the subject of reflections and research, or any research or debate that might have been done in this area has remained behind closed doors.

Alireza Hatamzadeh, deputy director of education at the Technical and Vocational Education Organization of Iran, believes 40 percent of unemployed graduates, including doctoral students, turn to this organization for help because they need upskilling and reskilling.⁸ According to him, at least 70% of job vacancies in the employment market need no degree. Criticizing the phenomenon of credentialism in Iran, he argues that had the graduates' time been spent on learning a skill instead of earning a degree, they would have entered the employment market more easily. He reports graduates' employment in occupations such as cab driving, brokerage, supermarket worker, continuing family jobs, and the like, but ignores jobs such as being

a porter, construction worker, service and cleaning worker, courier, peddler, and the like, which are now considered opportunities for university graduates.⁹

Ali Sadeghi, deputy director of social support for the Tehran Municipality's Welfare, Services and Social Partnerships Organization, reports a significant percentage of university graduates being shunned by their families and communities for reasons such as addiction or poverty, and choosing to live on the streets.¹⁰ Which research has ever taken a closer look at these social ills and exposed the bitterness of the educated unemployment crisis from a social and psychological perspective?

What do the Researchers Say?

Numerous studies have been conducted on the employment status of higher education graduates in Iran. In the following, I will focus only on those that are aligned with the issues raised in this article.

Farahnaz Saboohi, in a study conducted in the form of an interview with academics, business executives and university graduates, has investigated the causes of graduate unemployment.¹¹ Among the factors that cause the graduate unemployment rate to increase, she points to the expansion of universities such as Payam-e-Noor, non-governmental higher education institutions, applied sciences universities and the like. In her study, the quantitative development of universities regardless of their quality level, has been considered as the most impactful factor contributing to educated unemployment rates. The results of her research indicate that the quantitative expansion of higher education has not led to an increase in production efficiency, and the performance of the higher education system has not been commensurate with the needs of the national development. Other factors discussed in her research include prevalence of credentialism in society, lack of synchrony between trends in academic disciplines and the required knowledge in the employment market, lack of scientific competence among the teaching staff of universities, institutionalization of the concept of achieving results effortlessly, favoritism, and nepotism.

Ali Souri and Reza Hekmat have also examined the employment market of university graduates in their research.¹² While they consider education a basic ingredient for development, they point out that education can only be a factor for development if it is regulated in relation to development needs. But in reality, after years of trying to get into university and spending their time and money on education, our young generations face the problem of graduate unemployment after graduation, and instead of contributing to development, they wage a new fight against this situation or give up and increase the inactive population of the society.

In a rapidly growing population whose growth shows a considerable gender imbalance, women's share in the increasing passive educated population has been higher than that of men, with their level of economic participation declining over time as the population of highly educated housewives has been in increase. Limited job opportunities for women in the employment market has made them more prone to unemployment. While women's share in university admissions has been growing over time, the mismatch of demand with female job supply market has made educated women more vulnerable to unemployment than men, and made the employment market even more unfavorable for them. Several studies have focused on the role of gender differences in employment market including the research by Mohammad Shiri and Zohreh Mohsenkhani.¹³ These researchers have investigated gender equality in access to facilities, including the capacities and opportunities of the labor market, as one of the factors affecting the growth and development of a country. They point out that, although men and women's share in access to higher education facilities in Iran is relatively equal, women are discriminated against in the labor market after graduation. They cannot fully enjoy the existing opportunities in the employment market as their role in economic growth is not deemed important.

The findings of this study indicate that educated women have a smaller share of the employment market than men, with their economic participation rate lower, and their unemployment rate higher than men. Researchers have also found that educated women are more vulnerable than men to employment market barriers and are more likely to be frustrated and discouraged from finding a job, thus opting for permanent unemployment and joining the inactive population.

Another study has been conducted in the field of women's employment by Shahla Pourghasem.¹⁴ She examines employment barriers and problems highly educated women face when seeking work in Tehran. In her research, she used data provided by employment service centers under the auspices of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs on women who have registered at these centers to get help to find a job. Analyzing the requirements of the labor market, the researcher believes that women are judged prejudicially based on their gender rather than their ability, intelligence and efficiency. Although women today have a relatively equal share of higher education facilities and are studying alongside men in universities, their access to the employment market greets many obstacles. In other words, women are discriminated against in the employment market.

Pourghasem sees the model of women's economic participation as more influenced by the values and norms institutionalized in patriarchal societies than the economic mechanisms and rules governing the labor market; norms that do not consider women's participation in economic and social spheres to be very important. In referring to the opinions of the community researched, she tries to analyze the factors affecting the unemployment of educated women. The most common answer given by women in this survey as to the factors contributing to the perpetuation of unemployment problem is the discriminatory confrontation of

patriarchal society with their capabilities. Another reason often mentioned by women is the lack of rent privileges to gain employment in the labor market. According to them, nepotism and favoritism are among the most important factors that prevent certain people without relations to get a job. The researcher hopes that cultural and social changes will lead to changes in the prevailing values and norms in the society and that ultimately, the conditions for women's employment in the future will be smoothed, while believing that the long-standing cultural traditions and the slow pace of change in Iran will delay this change.¹⁵

Suri and Hekmat also maintain the prevalence of credentialism in society to be a factor in increasing numbers of graduates, especially in fields that are not aligned with the needs of the employment market, which, in a growing trend, increases the number of unemployed graduates. This is because applicants are looking for a degree more than anything else when it comes to fields that do not have a market for employment. Other factors that these two researchers consider to affect the increasing graduate unemployment rate are inattention to skills development as well as to students' creativity and initiative, and not preparing students to face the problems and needs of the society before graduating.¹⁶

One of the most frequent factors considered in researches on the issue of graduate unemployment in Iran is the mismatch between education and the needs of the labor market, specifically when it comes to fields that lack any real opportunity in the employment market. The higher education system abounds with useless disciplines that deprive graduates of the opportunity to put their academic learnings to use.

Mojgan Bigdeli et al have shown a significant relationship between the two variables, namely the field of study and employment market capacities, and have shown that there is no commensurability between academic disciplines and employment market opportunities.¹⁷ Their findings show the employment rate to be the lowest among the graduates of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences from the University of Tehran. They urge educational policymakers to focus on the real needs of the job market and adapt their educational planning to these needs, rather than accepting students indiscriminately in different fields. This can be achieved by evaluating the career destiny of graduates beforehand and using the results of this evaluation for educational policymaking and planning.

Numerous other studies have discussed the growing trend of applicants' admission into a variety of disciplines followed by their subsequent entry into an employment market that offers them no real opportunity, showing that over time, the employment situation for graduates of these fields has become more difficult.

In another study, Sadegh Bakhtiari found that increasing the capacity of higher education with the establishment of universities and higher education institutions in all parts of Iran has led to an increase in the supply of job-seeking graduates.¹⁸ The discord between the capacities

of the employment market and this amount of labor supply has been considered an important factor influencing the growth of the educated unemployment rate on a large scale. This dilemma has robbed the investments in human capital of any actual return and by preventing large portions of the educated population from taking up social roles and contributing to development, has caused irreparable social and economic losses.

Maryam Mollai et al have done one of the best researches on the graduate unemployment crisis.¹⁹ In this study, while researchers confirm the role of higher education in development, they ask education policymakers what would the point of higher education be without aligning education with the employment opportunities available for educated workers? When educated human capital shifts to careers that are not even aligned with their education, we will see nothing but a waste of money spent on their training. This issue has become a serious problem today and needs attention and reflection by policymakers and educational planners. Young and educated human capital in any society is one of the driving forces of that society towards development and we should think of necessary measures to put this capital to use.

They also add that although education is an influential factor in the development of human capital, employment of this specialized and trained human capital is as much important when it comes to development: To determine the level of development of a country, we must consider both education and the employment of educated work force. Because education and employment are two sides of the same coin and no development would happen unless they grow hand in hand. In other words, if development and progress mean to move forward, the employment crisis is one of the main obstacles, and education, a facilitator. In order to move forward, these two have to be coordinated. Although the importance of education, especially higher education, is undeniable, we cannot simply and solely focus on the increase in the number of graduates of higher education levels and ignore the issue of their employment. In addition, attention should be paid to the social harms that the higher education graduates suffer due to unemployment.

These researchers emphasize that a country that seeks to achieve development will pay attention to training specialized work force and will put this force to use. But statistics show that in Iran the employment market is more favorable to applicants with a secondary school diploma and lower education levels than university graduates. Even though higher level of education surely means more specialty and thus, those with higher education can be considered more educated than those who have a secondary school diploma or lower levels of education. Nevertheless, the statistics analyzed in the research show a growing trend of unemployment rate among university graduates and a declining trend of unemployment rate among those with secondary school diploma and lower education levels.

On the one hand, this indicates that the education and expertise learned in Iranian universities are not being put to use in the labor market and on the other, it means that higher education cannot guarantee a future

career and higher income for graduates. This is an absolute waste of time put into gaining expertise and a university degree; a dilemma that leads to irreparable damage in the social, cultural and economic spheres that has become an observable reality in the society today.

These researchers criticize the lack of proper mechanisms for directing expertise to the labor market by education policymakers and planners, and ask why, despite the increase in education levels, employment opportunities for university graduates do not increase.

Another factor influencing the unemployment rate among university graduates in the study by Mollai et al, which has also been considered in another research by Yadollah Mehr Alizadeh, is lack of job-readiness and poor skills among graduates.²⁰ This skills gap is understandable in the context of structural unemployment, namely inability to take advantage of available employment opportunities due to choosing a field of study, which does not produce marketable job skills. In other words, in this type of unemployment, there is a mismatch between labor market's needs and what available workers offer. Even though jobs are available, job seekers don't have the necessary skills to be able to enjoy the available opportunities.

In this type of unemployment, the educated labor force is not considered suitable for absorption in the existing capacities in the labor market for reasons such as mere emphasis on theoretical training in the universities or poor set of skills. Jahangir Biyabani is another researcher who attributes high graduate unemployment rates to structural unemployment.²¹ Also, in a study that examined the effect of skills mismatch on the unemployment rate in Iran, Saeed Issazadeh et al saw structural unemployment as one of the most important factors influencing the growing rate and persistence of graduate unemployment in Iran.²² Nematullah Azizi has also dealt with the issue of mismatch between the output of the higher education system and the needs of the employment market and has found that graduates lack the necessary skills and competences to take advantage of job opportunities in the employment market.²³ Findings of another study by Safdar Akbaripour also confirm the mismatch between supply and demand in Iran's labor market.²⁴

Another factor that Mollai et al. see as contributing to the deepening unemployment crisis is the scientific and knowledge inadequacy among university graduates. According to them, most universities and institutions of higher education tend to prefer increasing their admissions capacity to increasing the quality of education they offer, and this has caused the graduates to be under-educated and not able to meet the demands of the labor market. Therefore, improving the quality of education can help decrease graduate unemployment rates. Through proper planning, universities can improve the quality of their education, increase the capabilities and skills of graduates, match academic disciplines to the needs of the employment market, and can thus take a step towards reducing graduate unemployment rate. Findings show a mismatch between admission capacity of the universities and the needs of the employment market, and this is one of the factors that has

deepened the graduate unemployment crisis.

In another study, Alireza Sanatkah examined the relationship between student admission capacities in universities and the needs of the employment market. He shows that there is no proportionality between student admission capacities and the needs of the employment market, and this disproportion is more evident in the fields that have the highest unemployment rate in the employment market. The researcher considers this incompatibility a sign of educational planners and policymakers' negligence.²⁵

Social and psychological consequences of unemployment

The growing number of job-seeking graduates has led to the formation of a population that I have previously referred to as the inactive population. Ghasempour's study looked at a group of job-seeking graduates who, discouraged from finding a job, eventually gave up looking and joined the inactive population of the society. His study shows that it is mostly women who, in the face of gender barriers in patriarchal societies – barriers that make the small pool of employment opportunities even smaller – become discouraged from finding work and join the passive educated population. Of course, this population is often purely economically inactive and may be able to engage in social and cultural activities without economic return, while economically dependent on other members of their family like a spouse, parents, etc. Among these passive educated women, housewives holding a Ph.D. degree abound. These housewives with useless degrees – that can't even be used to decorate the wall of the house anymore – are quite dissatisfied with their situation and feel like they have wasted their time on a quest that was supposed to bring them social status and economic prosperity. This dissatisfaction and sense of failure has psychological consequences for this economically and sometimes socially inactive population, and every year it adds to the rates of depression and other psychological disorders. But all the while, the authorities who can take action to improve employment opportunities for job-seeking graduates, especially women, or prevent the mass production of worthless university degrees, seem to be completely deaf to the sound of this alarm.

In addition, women's economic dependence on their husbands or parents exposes them to the social and cultural constraints of patriarchal thinking and keeps the doors they dreamt of opening fast shut. Of course, the patriarchal society, and at the top of it, the top decision makers, prefer to keep women isolated behind the walls of the house, even if through education they have reached a level of scientific ability and skill that enables them to accept social, economic and cultural responsibilities alongside men.

Although the greater share of the inactive population is made up of

women, there are many men who, in the face of labor market barriers, prefer economic dependence on the family to pursuing low-paying, arduous jobs. We just need to look around; it is not difficult to spot them in society. Most of those who, discouraged from finding a suitable job, choose permanent unemployment and live in economically dissatisfying situations and dependence, belong to the upper and middle social and economic classes. Instead, those who come from low-income families are forced to take up low-paying, laborious jobs because they don't have the option of being financially dependent on the family. They must either accept the poverty caused by unemployment and its social consequences, or accept employment in any job and under any circumstances. Most often, they choose the second option.²⁶ Reflecting graduate unemployment crisis among lower classes should not prevent us from appreciating the gravity of the problem in the middle and upper social strata. An educated person from upper classes who has loaded up with expectations over the years of study, and has to succumb to permanent unemployment or economic dependence afterwards, does not feel less despair in comparison to their lower middle class fellows. On the contrary, this could be even more difficult for them as they probably expected to gain more social-status wise. In fact, both those who live in economic dependence on family members and those who are forced to operate on a shoestring to make ends meet experience despair, frustration, and a sense of failure that exposes them to psychological trauma. Thus, the population of young people who are psychologically withered, dissatisfied with the present and disappointed about their futures, increases every year. Just a glance at the statistics of psychological disorders such as depression and suicide tendencies reveals the increasing rate of these disorders among the younger generations.²⁷ Although research has not yet been conducted on the relationship between the increasing rate of psychological disorders and graduate unemployment crisis (or if any research has been done, its results have not been made public), there is no denying the fact that there is a significant link between unemployment resulting from futile graduation and the many psychological problems that exist today in a withered society devoid of the passion for life. Proving this connection requires a closer look at an interdisciplinary level.

In addition to the psychological consequences of the pervasive dilemma that forces one group of unemployed graduates to live off their families, and another, to work in low-paying, arduous jobs, graduate unemployment crisis has other social consequences as well, namely the inability to form a family and have children, addiction, tendency to commit crimes, etc. Although we lack research-based data in this area as well, the evidence of these consequences in society can be abundantly observed.

In a survey, Shabestan asked students and university graduates about the issue of post-graduate unemployment. Respondents saw unemployment and the consequent lack of hope for the future as a factor in increasing social harm. Some have mentioned psychological consequences such as despair, depression, fear of the future, aggressive behaviors, etc. Massoud, a 22-year-old psychology student, said that unemployment affects all aspects of a young person's life: they

are forced to marry later, their social lives are disrupted, and most importantly, they are prone to psychological disorders. An unemployed young graduate suffering from poverty cannot have dreams, and a young person without a dream is barely alive.²⁸

Last year, ISNA news agency quoted Gholamreza Latifi, a student deputy at Allameh Tabatabai University, saying that a “suicide committee” has been set up at the university to prevent high-risk student behaviors. He refers to drug and tobacco use as instances of high-risk behavior. If the authorities have felt the need to set up such a committee, this can tell us how pervasive and worrisome this problem actually is. ISNA reports that the rate of academic dropout, depression, drugs and psychedelics abuse, and suicide attempts among Iranian students is increasing in a worrying way. Sociologists attribute this to the lack of vivacity and happiness, too much anxiety, financial hardships, and uncertainty about future that plagues today’s youth.²⁹

Conclusion

On the one hand, higher education and skills obtained in Iranian universities are not put to use in the labor market and on the other hand, they cannot guarantee future careers and higher incomes for graduates. This is an apparent misapplication of graduates’ time, energy and expertise and brings about irreparable damages in the social, cultural and economic spheres. The uncertain, frightening future that lies ahead of young graduates is the future of this land that was supposed to be built by this very generation. If this future looks bleak in the eyes of its youth, its negative consequences will plague the same land that does not offer a promising future to its human capital. We have to open our eyes and deal with this problem head on while there is still time. Using educated, skilled individuals is a significant indicator of development, and we must consider developing education and application of graduates’ potential simultaneously.

Endnotes

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In the Middle | **on the Edge**

Slums and the “Invisible” Populations of Neoliberalism

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Abstract

The coronavirus outbreak has clearly shown that governments, in the past and present, make choices between different population groups when managing crises and providing relief. They discriminate against some and grant privileges to others. Groups that have been marginalized for decades are now being pushed to the margins. As a class grouping of all genders and ethnicities, slum-dwellers symbolize this marginalization.

The current outbreak of COVID-19 has made it clear that governments have always prioritized the provision of services and assistance to certain population groups over others. As a result, the marginalized status of those overlooked for decades is now even more discernible. People living in shack settlements and slums, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, or nationality are the emblem of this marginalization.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the risk of contagion to a billion people in slums all over the world more than others elsewhere. However, when it comes to groups of people that governments systematically ignore and overlook, this serious risk takes on an entirely new meaning.

South African slum-dwellers in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and Cape Town are clear examples of this grave risk. A high-ranking member of the slum-dwellers’ movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, has said: “The poor have always been shunned... the president advises that we

should stay home, maintain social distance, and wash our hands. This approach presupposes that everyone has access to safe housing and services. What should the poor who have no access to clean water and sanitation do?" As a female leader of the movement also put it: "We are being treated like animals, not human beings. In the slums you will find many families living in a shack that is three meters by three meters, and in that there will be four or six or even eight people. How can there be distancing in such a situation? Whole communities can be wiped out if coronavirus comes here."¹

However, risk of contracting COVID-19 is not the only thing that worries slum-dwellers. At the same time, they have to resist government forces who try to forcefully evict them from their settlements. According to Abahlali baseMjondolo reports, on 10 April armed government forces raided two settlements and arrested 29 female members of the movement who were protesting to accuse them of not complying with social distancing rules for the prevention of COVID-19.²

Slums and the Margins

As products of rapid and haphazard urbanization, slums fully portray the two sides of the word "margin." Slums are often located in the geographical margins: on the outskirts of big cities like Mumbai, Nairobi, and Cairo, as well as in marginal lands close to the frontiers of a country like Iran that usually house minorities.

On the other hand, even when situated in city centers, slums are symbols of social class and economic marginalization often exacerbated by ethnic, national, gender, and religious cleavages. The dual dynamism of slums does not end there.

On the one hand, slums are globalized phenomena resulting from a universal capitalist economy. Overall, slums are more prominent amid the margins of the global economic system – countries that, according to contemporary standards, are either developing countries (a less offensive term for "Third World" countries) or the Global South. According to the latest UN figures, more than one billion people worldwide live in slums.³ Eighty percent of these slum-dwellers belong to three regions: East and Southeast Asia (370 million people), Sub-Saharan Africa (238 million people), and Central and South Asia (227 million people).

On the other hand, each particular country has its own margins and, consequently, its own slums, and marginalization processes are different in each local context. Regardless of location, these slums are home to the so-called "urban poor."

Saskia Sassen, a Dutch-American critical sociologist, sees slums as the products of the expulsion of populations "at the systemic edges" In defining marginalization, she writes: "I use the term "expelled" to describe a diversity of conditions. They include the growing numbers

of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized and persecuted in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age, of able-bodied surplus populations warehoused in ghettos and slums".⁴

Planet of the Slums

According to a UN definition, slum-dwellers are people with no access to adequate housing, clean water, or sanitation who live in overcrowded settlements mostly built on marginal, dangerous terrain without access to basic services. Lack of services to the slums causes dwellers to pay exorbitant prices for clean water, while their garbage is spread around them rather than collected. This practice affects their activities and health, especially those of their children.

This definition is from a 2003 comprehensive UN report on slum-dwellers and the urban poor around the world.⁵ More than one hundred researchers participated in this study, which claimed its findings to be true for more than 90 percent of the world's population. At the time, roughly one third of the world's urban population lived in slums, while slightly more than half of the world's population was still rural.

According to the latest UN figures, more than half of the world's population of 7.8 billion became urban by 2007. In 2018, global human population growth rate was 1.1 percent. The UN estimates that by 2030, 60 percent of the world population – around 5.1 billion people – will be urbanized.⁶ That means if the percentage of those in slums is the same as it is today, 1.7 billion people will be slum-dwellers. The UN estimates, however, that the number of slum-dwellers will increase to more than 2 billion people.⁷

In the 2019 edition of its annual World Water Development Report, UNESCO reported that 2.1 billion people around the world had no easy access to clean drinking water – one of the typical characteristics of slums as defined by the UN.⁸

The spread of slums in the Global South has its roots in two global dynamics:

The first dynamic is the globalization of governance models based on capitalist development around the world, thanks to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, along with the consequent development of the political form of the modern nation-state into the general, naturalized political model. The number of UN member states has increased from 51 in October 1945 to 193 in April 2020. However, slums have existed ever since the dawn of urbanization and the formation of the modern states and Global North countries have always grappled with this phenomenon. We all remember Charles Dickens's novels depicting the state of slums in industrializing England. During

the age of colonialism, the colonized countries of the twentieth century were also confined to slums.

The second dynamic is the ever-increasing deindustrialization of developed countries and the consequent increase in the industrial production of the Global South. This resulted in the exportation of what Slavoj Žižek has described as “the dark side of production” – poor working conditions, environmental pollution, and increasing numbers of people residing in slums and shack settlements – to the developing countries.

These global structural dynamics are not all or even an important part of the whole story. One should also not assume that other global trends, such as the considerable population increase in Global South countries due to medical advances or widespread industrialization combined with lack of sufficient resources, constitute the main problem.

The first report by the Club of Rome, whose members include current and former heads of state and government, UN administrators, high-level politicians and government officials, diplomats, scientists, economists, and business leaders from around the globe, “The Limits to Growth” had such an outlook.⁹ A group of Club of Rome members who had gathered around an Italian industrial tycoon were allegedly worried about the future of mankind. Using the “system dynamics analysis” methodology, which was in vogue at the time, they estimated the exponential growth of the population and the amount of food, industrialization, urbanization, and land needed for such population, and described population growth as a risk factor to the future of mankind.¹⁰

The chapter entitled “The Nature of Exponential Growth” in this report began with a quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi: “People at present think that five sons are not too many, and each son has five sons also, and before the death of the grandfather there are already 25 descendants. Therefore, people are more and wealth is less; they work hard and receive little.”

This is the dangerous view of the Malthusians, who believe population growth hinders significant social improvement. This idea of referring to a group of people as a “surplus population” leads to divisiveness. Malthus himself was an opponent of pro-poor laws in Britain, and those who were later influenced by him turned to the idea of social evolution (modeled on the idea of Darwin’s theory of natural evolution – one influenced by Malthus), as well as eugenics and marginalizing policies.¹¹

Marx and Engels were both staunch opponents of Malthusian ideas and rightly argued that what Malthus had understood as the pressure of the population on the means of production was in fact the pressure of the means of production and its monopoly on the population. Thus, the abovementioned quote from Han Fei Zi has only one function: to mystify the labor and production process linking the lower income of the workers to their higher numbers. This practice has historically left the employer free to abuse the potential industrial army.

National Governments’ Responsibility

Governments, as the owners of a significant portion of the means of production who have historically collaborated with other important stakeholders (capitalists) are the main culprits in the increasing rate of slum dwellings in any particular national territory.

In fact, a 2003 UN global report on human habitats refers to the failure of governance: “Slums must be seen as the result of a failure of housing policies, laws, and delivery systems, as well as of national and urban policies.”

Mike Davis, an American Marxist thinker who begins his book *Planet of the Slums*¹² with a reference to this 2003 UN report, in one chapter deals with the issue of “governments’ betrayal”. “The slum was not the inevitable urban future”, writes Davis, referring to the initiatives of socialist and nationalist governments after the anti-colonial movements of independence to solve the problem of slum dwellings – states that failed for various reasons. A good example is Cuba, that has been unable to continue its public housing program commensurate with its population since the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Apart from these few historical examples, there have been few efforts for providing public housing in the Global South. Although exploitation is at the heart of any modern government, differences in the degree of looting have left some governments completely unconcerned with the housing issue of the growing urban poor. However, according to a historical study by Mike Davis, most of the processes leading to the formation of slums in the Global South in the second half of the twentieth century were the result of civil and intergovernmental wars and sectarian tensions, not economic development of which the essential byproduct is the emergence of slums.

Another reason behind the emergence of slums in those countries was the dependence of many of these countries on foreign states and their integration into globalized capitalism. Structural reform programs imposed by the World Bank and IMF from the 1970s on served as guarantees in exchange for “development” loans, which have always been in favor of minimizing government intervention and privatization of housing projects.

Governments gradually moved on to alternative policies for dealing with the slums: making them invisible.

The most important practical policies were to demolish the slums in “valuable” areas like city centers, to forcibly relocate the slums’ populations, to break their resistance, and to send them to the suburbs.

To this day, even amid a global pandemic, marginalization of slums and their inhabitants and making them socially invisible is the main political approach in many parts of the world.

Population density in the slums is sometimes up to ten times more than

that of their adjacent metropolises and epidemics can quickly spread through them. Due to the lack of sanitary facilities and equipment, many slum-dwellers already suffer from underlying conditions, and so symptoms like coughs, headaches, and high temperatures are not taken as seriously as they are among higher social classes who enjoy better health conditions.

As the writers at the New York Times have said:

“The most important factor in enabling the spread of pandemics in slums is the neglect of these marginalized populations by governing elites. There is little previous effort to prevent the spread of diseases. Access to tests for the coronavirus, for example, is extremely limited.”¹³

The Islamic Republic and the Slums

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s governmental policy in relation to slums is to make them invisible. Different governments have implemented this policy to deal with slum-dwellers living beside Chamran Highway in Tehran. In Khatami’s first government and during the 8th Islamic Conference Summit in Tehran, these settlements in the central parts of the city were hidden behind blue tarpaulins. In Ahmadinejad’s second egalitarian government a similar policy was implemented during the 16th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, which took place a year after the Arab Spring urban poor uprising.¹⁴

It is unclear exactly what is going on in Iran’s slums with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is always less news about the slums in the marginal provinces, and what has reached us from the slums in Tehran and the more central provinces is alarming.

At the very beginning of the widespread of COVID-19 outbreak, six nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which protect working children in Tehran’s twelfth district (which includes Tehran Bazaar and Shoush Square) wrote a joint letter to the Minister of Health urging him to pay attention to the vulnerable residents of this densely populated area to prevent the outbreak of the virus. These organizations argued that high population density in the region, poor economic conditions, lack of access to health facilities due to high prices, limited access to reliable information resources, nutritional problems and physical weakness, and high child labor rates (dumpster diving, peddling, working in underground workshops) makes these neighborhoods highly susceptible to the spread of coronavirus on a larger scale.¹⁵

The conditions these NGOs describe are symptoms of an old structural problem that the COVID-19 pandemic helped to shed new light on. This structural problem is a governance problem.

Slums in Iran: Statistics and Definition

According to statistics compiled by Mike Davis in his study, in 2003, 44.2 percent of Iran’s urban population, or 20.4 million people, lived in slums. Iran was ranked eighth in the list of countries with the largest slum populations. According to another ranking by the World Bank in 2005, 30.3% of Iran’s urban population lived in slums.¹⁶

According to official statistics from Iranian organizations, which are announced every so often, at least one-third of the urban population of Iran (about 30 percent) are slum-dwellers.¹⁷

These statistics, however, are inaccurate and are estimated between 11 and 19 million people.¹⁸ On 19 July 2009, Deputy Minister of Rural Affairs of the Organization of Municipalities and Rural Affairs Saeed Reza Jandaghian announced the actual number of slum-dwellers in Iran to be 16 million people – about one-fifth of the country’s overall population.¹⁹

Iran’s official definition divides slums into two categories:

I. Decrepit urban areas (distressed fabric) with one or more of these three general characteristics:

- More than 50% of the land in the area is divided into plots smaller than 200 m²
- More than 50% of the streets are less than 6 meters in width and make access difficult (impenetrability)
- More than 50% of the structures in the area are structurally weak

II. Informal settlements, which according to National Strategy for Empowering and Regularizing Informal settlements (2003) are characterized by:²⁰

- Rapid construction by its eventual users, which due to lack of legal permits and compliance with official urban planning rules, create a highly disorganized complex.
- Functional links with the main city and physical separation from it with a population of mostly low-income and poor residents.
- An environment with low quality of life and a severe shortage of urban services and infrastructures and high population density.

The national document on “Strategies for Empowering and Regularizing Informal Settlements” of 2003 admits that no specific policy had been implemented for addressing the problem of slums until that point and that the preparation of this document was out of a necessity to address the issue. However, no government has actually pursued the free-market based policies from this document either.

Class and Discrimination

While slum dwelling began to increase during the 1979 revolution and in its aftermath, this increase must be understood as an attempt by the urban poor to gain “the right to the city.” Asef Bayat writes in this regard: “When the revolutionaries were protesting in the streets of the big cities, the poorest were busy expanding their control over their communities and (over)developing the urban lands as much as possible.”²¹ Over the next few years these poor people were pushed back.

In spite of its market-based solutions, the 2003 national document on “Strategies for Empowering and Regularizing Informal Settlements” implicitly refers to the class nature of the slum political economy in an accurate statement: “Such settlements, although a manifestation of poverty, clearly reflect the shortcomings and inadequacies of government policies and the official market.”

Slum populations are pushed back to the margins of social classes. As temporary and seasonal workers with no job security, they have no access to many basic urban and governmental services, including health care and education. Although they are unable to afford housing in the expensive metropolitan area, they also cannot afford to distance themselves from metropolitan centers where they work due to high transportation costs.

Class difference is not the sole factor, and various forms of discrimination play a catalytic role in exacerbating these class differences.

A rare government report by the Islamic Republic of Iran published in English attributes the problem of marginalization in Iran not only to urbanization and development policies but also rightly to “excessive government centralization.”²² The authors of the report write: “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, urban design is highly concentrated and has poor inter-sectoral and cross-sectoral coordination. In this centralized decision-making structure, vulnerable groups - especially the urban poor - are completely excluded from the decision-making process and thus, their special needs are not addressed.”

According to the same report, internal migrants from marginal areas, “illegal” (undocumented) migrants, low-income groups, and informal workers are the main population groups in the slums.

A highly-centralized government, more holistically, means a lack of real democracy and a refusal to recognize the right to self-determination for national minorities and local ethnicities.

The dynamics of discrimination can be discerned through the demographics and distribution of slums throughout Iran. Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, and Khuzestan, respectively, have the largest slum populations in the country.

Although Tehran is the capital, its slums are mostly made up of

undocumented immigrants, marginalized internal immigrants, and non-permanent workers. Nearly 900,000 people in the neighboring province, Alborz, are also slum-dwellers, while according to the 1995 census the total population of Alborz province was 2.7 million people.²³

In Khorasan Razavi, Mashhad alone has a marginal population of 1.5 million people.²⁴ According to the Islamic Council of Mashhad, by 2015 informal settlements or suburban areas (covering 13% of the total area of Mashhad) accommodated about 32 percent of the population of this metropolis. These slum-dwellers were gathered in eight dense slums encompassing a total of 4,073 hectares of Mashhad.²⁵ Many of the inhabitants of these slums are Afghan immigrants from Afghanistan, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, and other parts of Northern and Southern Khorasan.

Khuzestan is the province with the third-largest slum population in Iran. One million slum-dwellers live in different parts of the province and about half of them live in Ahvaz.

The predominant marginal population in Khuzestan Province and the city of Ahvaz consists of Arabs, who, over the past few years, have repeatedly protested against structural discrimination.²⁶

During the November 2019 Protests in Mahshahr, many Arab citizens comprising the urban poor and marginalized in a “thriving” industrial area were killed.²⁷

While there is a tendency for informal settlements to appear in suburban areas all over the country, the situation is particularly catastrophic in Sistan and Baluchestan. The marginalization rate in this province is at least 10 to 15 percent higher than the average marginalization rate in Iran, and the problems that the slum-dwellers are facing in this province are quite fundamental. For instance, 50,000 slum-dwellers in Zahedan, which amounts to half the slum population, do not have IDs.

Chabahar is a typical example of structural discrimination and a neoliberal view of economic development. According to the chairman of Chabahar City Council, 50,000 people living in informal settlements are completely deprived of an adequate water supply:

“Access to water is in the worst possible condition here. Each person has a daily share of 15 liters, and with the old decrepit storage tanks it decreases to 10 liters per day, which is to be used for washing and drinking for both people and their cattle.”²⁸

The gravity of the water situation in Chabahar can be fully appreciated when we consider that the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends per capita consumption of 100 liters of water per day as the minimum appropriate amount. In the dire situation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the per capita water consumption in the cities of Jenin and Tubas is 44 and 37 liters per day respectively.²⁹

As the chairman of Chabahar City Council presented these statistics,

Hassan Rouhani was taking part in the official opening ceremony of the Port of Chabahar with representatives from 17 countries present. The government intends for this port to become one of the largest ports in the world for unloading goods and claims it to be an opportunity for the development of Chabahar and Sistan and Baluchestan. The port's development is also the age-old story of the exploitation of contracted workers and the prioritization of non-indigenous "expert forces" over the indigenous work force.

A major problem for slums everywhere is access to sanitary facilities. For instance, according to a March 2014 article published in the Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, a group of researchers examined slum-dwellers' access to health and medical services in Shiraz and concluded that the access of these urban poor is far less than that of the rural population (about four times less).³⁰ This structural problem is fatal in light of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Despite this fact, slum populations, the margins of the economic system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, are still being ignored when it comes to dealing with the pandemic crisis. Farnoush Hamidpour, head of the Bani Hashem Neighborhood Facilitation Office, criticized the lack of screening and testing for residents, saying: "Health officials should screen at least part of the population of the area and take a number of tests at random to find out what the COVID-19 situation is like here."³¹

Hamidpour's description of the "sensitivity" of the inhabitants of this neighborhood is a testament to the fact that suffering is a social class issue. Slum-dwellers do not care enough about coughs and fevers to go see a doctor. One resident, whose leg had to be amputated due to severe infection, had just been putting a temporary bandage on it. Decades of discriminatory policies and placing a price tag on the lives of different population groups has raised their pain tolerances.

Slums and the Middle Classes

From a social class point of view, we can consider the metropolitan space in two different ways.

First, there is the perspective of space as a marker of position in the hierarchy of social classes constructed directly by the state's representational system. In other words, every person's space (i.e. status) is determined by their social class. Space is divided materially and immaterially in a way that certain groups, identities, and individuals would be placed in certain predetermined spaces.

Second is the idea of space as boundary. Seventeenth-century England was an embryonic bourgeois state. During this period of "primitive accumulation," the government seized communal lands and turned them into public property. In the process, bars and fences were erected around common areas, turning them into enclosed areas. Herds of sheep were left inside these fences as a sign of a kind of ownership different

from joint ownership. From the point of view of this genealogy, modern societies and consequently cities are divided into different concrete spaces with different property rights: private or public (governmental). Each space has its own rules, characteristics, and inhabitants.

The combination of these two modes in contemporary metropolises determines their class spatiality. Space is a key factor in regime survival and maintaining the authority of a particular form of government. Henry Lefebvre argued on this basis: Capitalism produces and arranges space in a way that the system of reproduction and accumulation of surplus value is maintained.³² Citizens of different classes with specific social statuses (i.e. social spaces) have access to specific urban locations for living.

Thus the various classes are somehow at war over occupying the best possible metropolitan areas, and the share of the lower classes is what the 2016 UN report calls "slum settlements" and "inadequate housing." According to this report, one-quarter of Iran's urban population are inadequately housed and one-seventh are slum-dwellers.³³

Research and policymaking literature associates slums with the marginalized. In other words, the slum is in a sense the spatial boundary between the middle and very poor lower classes. During the 2021 election campaigns in the Islamic Republic of Iran, an expert in the state media reported that 19 million people in the cities and villages of present-day Iran would not be able to make ends meet without the help of public and private charities. A large number of slum-dwellers are among this population.

In addition, the slum is the worst fear of the middle class. In the words of Indian sociologist and psychologist, Ashis Nandi, slums are "the only connection the urban middle class has with some of the grim realities of society."³⁴ That, of course, is why according to Sanjay K Roy, another Indian sociologist, "the upper and middle class people generally tend to attribute almost all problems- communicable diseases, congestion, overcrowding of public transport, forceful occupation of city pavements for petty trades, pickpocketing and other crimes- to the slums and the slum-dwellers."³⁵

Evidence shows, however, that slum-dwellers will have a hard time making their way into middle class neighborhoods even if their incomes increase.³⁶ From other perspectives these social class boundaries are not as solid and impenetrable. There are signs of mixing between the two from the perspective of class composition and coalition for resistance.

Such a mixing leads to a tension between social space / status (dignity) and urban living space (boundaries). Asif Bayat notices this trend in the "emerging lower middle class" in Arab countries as well as in Iran. According to Bayat, modern, urbanized, educated, young people expect a middle-class life, but unemployment and instability marginalize them, and thus, tensions arise between their social status and their living space and facilities.³⁷

Before Bayat, Indian professor of sociology Sanjay K. Roy wrote of observing middle class slum-dwellers in Calcutta in 1993: “Those who have a middle class past in the non-slum areas of the city and settle down in the slums after going through economic degeneration find it very difficult to cope with the tension that is generated out of their middle class values and the reality of slum living.”³⁸

In his article “Belonging, Not Belonging”, Mohammad Reza Nikfar sees this difference between social status and place of residence at the intersection between the vector of class and the vector of the status: “The vertical vector of the social matrix shows the concept of class and the horizontal vector, the concept of status. It is an expression of dignity in a system of inequality. The further we go left, the less dignity we have.”³⁹

Although the concept of a “poor middle class” is not theoretically clear, it might be useful to explore the relationship between the middle class and the slum as a class boundary with the marginalized. During the 1979 anti-monarchist revolution, the slum-dwellers and marginalized populations were part of the revolutionary coalition alongside the traditional and modern middle classes. The Iranian Revolution was therefore an inter-class movement and the result of a strong coalition. The marginalized population and the urban poor were able to build informal settlements in metropolitan areas in the early years but were increasingly targeted by “urban renewal” policies beginning in the late 1980s. At the same time, the population of the middle classes of Iran increased from 15 to 32 percent between the 1979 revolution and 2000.⁴⁰

But with the escalation of the economic crisis and the consequent growing class divide, the former boundaries of class composition between middle and lower classes have faded. On the one hand, according to New World Wealth, the number of millionaires in Iran (with a fortune of more than \$1 billion) increased by 170 percent between 2000 and 2016 and will probably reach 55,000 by 2025.⁴¹ In 2016, multimillionaires with a fortune of more than \$10 million amounted to one in every 1300 people, and there were also four billionaires in Iran.

According to statistics, both the urban and the marginalized population increased during the same period. In 2015, the World Economic Forum announced that Iran’s middle class population was shrinking. In April 2021, Javad Salehi Esfahani, a pro-market economist, also mentioned in his study the significant shrinkage of the middle class and the descent of the middle classes to a lower class status.⁴² According to him, the share of the middle classes in the population increased from 28 percent to 58.4 percent in the 15-year period ending in 2011, but it has decreased by eight million since then, and especially under the influence of the sanctions regime in 2021.

Esfahani considers the poor to be the population requiring government assistance to make a living, the lower middle classes to be close to the poverty line and unable to maintain the dignity of the middle class in times of crisis, and the middle classes to be people with a safe distance from the poverty line. According to his research, the share of the middle

classes in the population has now reached 48 percent in 2021, which shows a 10 percent decline.

On the other hand, due to a staggering increase in rents, the children of middle class parents, and especially those in more precarious economic situations, have been pushed to more marginalized areas in recent years. Among them are a number of colleagues and friends of the author of the present article who are still living in Iran, working in the press and publishing as cultural workers, who have moved from central areas of Tehran such as Jomhoury Street to the cheap neighborhoods of Karaj, villages near Tehran, or have even moved back to their paternal houses during the last eight years. Graduate students and other young people with unstable jobs have faced a similar fate. And, of course, every time students and young cultural and service workers migrate to the margins, it creates a vicious cycle of gentrification and further marginalization.

In October 2020, at a time when the novel coronavirus was claiming tens of thousands of lives, the Expediency Council’s Strategic Research Institute confirmed the flow of lower middle classes moving towards more “southern” metropolitan areas, causing their ever-more marginalization. The institute uses the term “marginalization of the marginalized” to depict the situation in its article. Mohammad Rahimian, the author of the article, uses a virus metaphor for the increasingly marginalized slum-dwellers, a choice of words that confirms the same policy of invisibility mentioned above:

“The marginalized have been called the appendix of the city by some, but others believe this phenomenon to be like a deadly social virus that starts in low-income areas and among people who are unskilled and illiterate. Then, gradually, the virus spreads through the city and to all urban areas, damaging and destroying the whole society.”⁴³

Phenomena like the shrinking of middle classes, marginalization of lower middle classes, and their movement towards the slums is not exclusive to Iran and have occurred in many countries (including the United States⁴⁴, Brazil⁴⁵, Bangladesh⁴⁶, and others) over the past few decades. No accurate demographic statistics are available on the class composition of slums and informal settlements in Iran, but considering the abovementioned processes, it is not hard to imagine that the marginalization of the lower middle classes would push them towards settling in slums and inadequate accommodations.

Another side of this mixing could be the collective action of the slums and the middle classes. Lalitha Kamath and M. Vijayabaskar, two Indian scholars, claim in their article “Middle-Class and Slum-Based Collective Action in Bangalore” that “by identifying some important convergences between actions of middle class and slum-based associations” one can oppose the “dualistic reading of collective action.”⁴⁷

The best example of such collective action in recent years was the joint action of the Student Left Movement and part of the Labor Movement with the slum-dwellers of Deh-e-Vanak in Tehran to defend their human right to shelter. Deh-e-Vanak is a slum or informal settlement in

the heart of uptown Tehran – a disruption of urban space in both senses – and its residents are children of former factory workers who have to defend their rights against the Al-Zahra governmental institution.⁴⁸

Joint actions between the marginalized and middle classes were also seen during the December 2017 and November 2019 uprisings. Even though a significant portion of the upper middle classes were pessimistic about the uprisings and did not participate in them, the lower and crisis-stricken middle classes (teachers, nurses, drivers, industrial workers) were part of the movement and often supported the protesters.

The Neoliberal Government and Its Housing Policy

In recent years, some analysts have found the use of the term “neoliberalism” to analyze the situation in Iran reductionist, incorrect, and a sign of “left-wing prejudice.” However, their argument does not seem to be very convincing. These analysts see Iran as a rent system based on theocracy and religious dictatorship, not a neoliberal economic system. There is no doubt that religious dictatorship is one of the problems of governance and one of the main sources of structural violence, brutal repression, and the formation of the rent system. But if these critics are not satisfied with “Morsi leaving and el-Sisi coming,”⁴⁹ they should take a closer look at the definition of profit and rent as well as the distinction between the real and formal inclusion of the production system.⁵⁰

A high-ranking official acquiring large sums of money to invest is not the only form of rent. Rent also means obtaining surplus value without interfering in the production process: whether it is land leases or the extraction of surplus value through looting and systematic expropriation, or value-added through the conquest of intangible and emotional production whose main means of production – the human creative forces – are in the hands of its workers. Contemporary capitalism is moving towards gaining surplus value through rent on a global scale.

The real inclusion of global capitalism does not violate its formal inclusion in any particular local context. Formal inclusion means the integration of seemingly pre-capitalist processes into capitalist production and surplus value – and this is where theocracy comes into play.

While power relations and neoliberal governance processes are global phenomena, their operating mechanisms can differ from place to place. In other words, the idea is the same, but its government dramatization and fictionalization varies depending on context. Attention to housing policy and availability for the urban poor can be quite revealing when it comes to neoliberal rule.

In the introduction to their findings, a group of researchers from the

Azad Universities of Islamshahr and Arak who studied the Arak slum-dwellers point to this general global policy as a criterion for dealing with this problem in Iran:

“In the late 1980s, liberalization and economic stabilization policies in general and housing policies in particular were reconsidered, and the policy of empowerment became the ‘Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter’ with the approval of the United Nations General Assembly (1987). Empowerment and enabling are strategies that rely on the cooperation and participation of the people. The importance of these strategies has become increasingly apparent with the need for government’s economic and political downsizing on the one hand, and the development of civil society organizations on the other.”

In Hassan Rouhani’s two terms of government, a special budget line was dedicated to empowerment, although its actual outcome has been nothing but increased marginalization and slum-dwelling. “Empowerment” has been a recurring term in all national deeds regarding housing since 2003.

The Economics Research Institute of Sharif University of Technology, of which the Department of Economics and Management hosts some influential figures in Iran’s economic policy, addressed the solution to Iran’s housing problem in a 2009 report, referring to the experience of the developed countries: “A common policy in all developed countries is for the government to withdraw from the housing sector, allowing market forces to play their role.”

These researchers’ proposals for “the development of the housing finance system” are nothing more than the recommendations of the IMF: liberalization of the housing finance market, including financial deregulation and privatization of state financial institutions and development of micro-mortgage markets such as private banks.

The irony of history lies in the fact that this report was published in 2008, at a time when the de-regularized mortgage and financial markets in the housing sector were fueling the first major economic crisis of the twenty-first century.

Hassan Rouhani basically followed the same discourse in his speeches and the same policy in his government. In the speech he gave while delivering the budget to the parliament, the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran once again attacked the Mehr Housing Project in order to defend his privatization and deregulation policy in this regard:

“We have to manage the housing situation properly. We do not need the central bank to finance housing projects. We will provide the land and all we need is an investor who can double the housing units in an area. The investors will deliver the units to their eventual users and take the remainders as their own profit... The government is not a constructor, but the supervisor. It is the people and the companies that undertake the construction.”

In a 2000 report on the Middle East, the IMF stated that housing shortages have been aggravated since the 1970s and have had a “disproportionate effect on young people and the poor.” According to the report, a group of seven countries – Iran, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Tunisia – need six million new housing units per year, but only one million new units are built annually. However, IMF experts were looking for the answer to this shortage in the market: “Implementing housing savings plans and developing mortgage markets is the answer to the housing shortage in these countries, not the provision of public and state housing.”

These countries pursued the IMF policies, slums spread, and the urban poor revolted.

Maskan Mehr Manufactured Controversy

The increase of housing prices in recent governments has proven that government policies to address the issue of housing have failed. If we consider Tehran, the largest metropolitan area and therefore the largest slum area, this growth trend is astonishing.

The average price per square meter of a house in Tehran was 155,000 tomans in 1998. By the end of the first term of President Mohammad Khatami, this price reached 308,000 tomans in 2001. At the beginning of 2002, there was a 65 percent increase in housing prices, and the price per square meter reached 600,000 tomans in 2004. The last year in which the average price per square meter for a house in Tehran was below one million tomans was in 2006 and it was 842,000 tomans.

In 2007, the year when the Mehr Housing Law passed, the average price per square meter of housing in Tehran reached 1.5 million tomans. There was an upward price trend during Ahmadinejad’s governments and this eventually led to a recession as the housing bubble burst. The government, which had started with a price of 648,000 tomans per square meter, ended its term with a price equivalent to 2,926,000 tomans.

The free market policies of the Rouhani government led to a stagnation in the housing market and a decrease in demand between 2013 and 2016, but housing prices continued to rise to an average of 5.9 million tomans per square meter in Tehran by 2016. In 2018, another exponential jump occurred and the price of each square meter of a residential unit in Tehran increased to 6,898,000 tomans.⁵¹

Why did Ahmadinejad’s Mehr Housing Project not pay off? According to Rouhani and the IMF, the policy was fundamentally wrong and led to inflation. They believe that housing projects should be handed over to the private sector.

According to IMF statistics, when the Mehr Housing Project began in 2007 Iran had a shortage of 1.5 million housing units, and each year this

number increased by 800,000 units.

Statistics from the same institution show that until 2011 – six years after the Mehr Housing Project began – Iran had 21 million housing units, of which 17 million were usable (equipped with the minimum necessities of life).

On 3 April 2014, the IMF Executive Board stated in its proposal to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran that it welcomed the fiscal contraction policy and the exclusion of the Mehr Housing Project from the central bank’s expenditures while also acknowledging that the project’s funding sources were still unclear.

The IMF said in its analysis related to the Mehr Housing Project that the project “had complicated the implementation of the fiscal policy,” meaning the reform of subsidies that was underway at the time. According to the IMF, the government reformed subsidies but the central bank remained responsible for financing the housing program. The IMF suggested that Iran should include the Mehr Housing Project’s budget in its budget plan.

The IMF report repeatedly suggests that in order to reduce inflation, Iran’s fiscal policies must be “reformed” – this means that the government and central bank should be less involved in financing public projects such as housing.

In a similar assessment in August 2011, the same executive board backed the reform of subsidies and fiscal contraction policies while they keeping their comments about central bank’s credit line for Mehr Housing to a simple warning. At the same time, they stated that the outlook for growth was propitious due to contraction policies.⁵²

However, the bright outlook promised by privatization and fiscal contraction has never been realized – not in the military dictatorships of Indonesia and Chile after military coups, in Europe before or after the 2008 financial crisis, in the post-colonial Arab republics, or even in the Islamic Republic of Iran governments’ economic restructuring after the war.

“[The] Mehr Housing Project caused the monetary base to spike and created a 45 percent inflation. So, one can claim that this project was built with funds taken out of the pockets of the poor,” said Hassan Rouhani, echoing the IMF executive board’s report. The fact is, however, that the underlying idea of the project – providing social housing for the urban poor – did not create the problems.

The first problem was Ahmadinejad’s inconsistent economic policy: a policy that pursued the liberalization of gas prices, the removal of subsidies, and the privatization of state-owned factories and companies (policies encouraged by the IMF) while also allotted basic cash aids and social housing as a populist far-right government within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second problem was structural corruption in the government and the multiplication of brokers in the housing market. Mortgage markets and financial institutions grew like mushrooms to provide loans and credit facilities for housing projects, but most of them later went bankrupt, thereby depriving citizens of their investments.

While this fact is buried in the IMF's statistics, it is subject to interpretation. Instead of tracing the problem back to the structural corruption in the systemic privilege that has given rise to the "private" sector of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it attributes the problem to the "inability of private banks' managers to assess investment risks." An example can be found in the statistics of a 2011 report, which shows that non-performing loans of private institutions and banks in the field of housing investment accounted for 25 percent of the total debts, which is five times more than the average non-performing loans for public and private banks.

While no market in Iran is working properly, Hassan Rouhani's government is still pursuing its housing policy: the policy of not doing anything.⁵³

The real share of housing in the 2018 budget was less than it was in the 2017 budget. In 2019, its share was still shrinking, and the 2020 budget was basically the same as that of 2019 with regard to the amount of funds allocated. However, there was a significant change in the objectives defined for this allocation.

In 2019 the housing program was "focusing on the completion and delivery of the remaining housing units in decrepit urban areas, new cities, and social housing." However in 2020 the focus changed to "completion and delivery of the remaining housing units in the Mehr Housing Project, decrepit urban areas, reconstruction plan and national housing plan."⁵⁴ New cities, generally built on the outskirts of metropolitan areas hosting slums, did not fall within government's range of focus. Nonetheless, these changes should not be taken to mean more than they actually do: its only sign is the failure of this government's policies just like every other government before it.

The Rouhani government, however, has eliminated the only defensible aspect of the Mehr Housing Project by following the IMF recommendations to include the project's costs in the budget.

The Mehr Housing Project was supposed to be a social housing project, meaning that the ownership of the units remained with the government (the parent company of New Cities Development and the National Land and Housing Organization). This was the case so that, for example, rental prices could be controlled and homeowners have a 99-year housing tenure. But in the budgets of 2019 and 2020, the government made it possible to transfer land ownership to owners.

Funding resources for the housing program and its subsidies, which benefitted capitalist mass builders, were also the sale and barter of land. In the 2019 and 2020 budgets, the government allowed the Ministry

of Roads and Urban Development to earn "up to 1500 billion tomans from the sale or barter of the lands of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development in order to finance the projects defined in the housing sector." Some of these lands are located in new cities, which can now be transferred to large landowners.

This approach to the housing issue has even been reflected in the comments of Mohsen Hashemi, the chairman of Tehran City Council: "The budget line allocated to the housing and civil projects in next year's budget is only 2000 tomans per resident in Tehran... Therefore, we shouldn't expect any serious action to be taken next year."⁵⁵

"Let them die" versus Life

In the *The Birth of Biopolitics and Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault clarified two points regarding the genealogy of biopolitics and neoliberal rule.

The first point is that in the aftermath of World War II, neoliberalism was defined by a West German model in which free market powers were formed first and government powers related to it came afterwards. The discourse of this neoliberalism, which is presently found in popular political literature and adorned with terms such as empowerment, improvement, and participation, actually manages populations in a way that they remain above a minimum economic baseline. This baseline guarantees their economic participation in the markets and, in fact, their contribution to creating capitalist surplus value.

Following the UN and World Bank initiatives to empower slums, Western NGOs went to the slums to teach the people there that they had to drown themselves in debts through "micro-businesses" and "microfinance" to escape poverty. This was in fact a way to turn these populations into economically-active agents.

The second point is that biopolitical governance is the link between the elaboration of the principle of modern economic sovereignty – "build life and let them die" – and the principle of pre-modern monarchical sovereignty – "build death and let them live," with the former transcending the latter, dissolving it in itself.

Together, these two lead to a form of globalized neoliberal power relations: it is the ruling authority that evaluates the lives of different population groups, and this eventually leads to the common attitude of the state towards the slums: let them die.

The term "empowerment" in Rouhani government's housing program is merely this approach. The COVID-19 crisis, however, has shed new light on the phrase "let them die." As Shahram Khosravi wrote in a report from Iran: "People's lives have no value whatsoever. This was a sentence I heard numerous times from Iranians in villages and cities."⁵⁶

Slums are not only a manifestation of victimization and repression. They are also important points of resistance against the most violent processes of state deprivation and looting; they are campaigns that claim life in the face of “let them die.” Although the harsh conditions create a dark side in the slums in which residents must fight for survival, refraining from romanticizing slums can allow for the liberating potential of them to be seen in the politics of autonomous resistance.⁵⁷

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon describes the slums on the outskirts of big cities of colonized countries as the settlement of a population that “circles tirelessly around the different towns, hoping that one day or another they will be allowed inside.” He immediately adds: “It is within this mass of humanity, these people of the shanty towns, at the core of the lumpen proletariat, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the lumpen proletariat, that horde of starving men... constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people.”⁵⁸

The South African slum movement with which this article began is an example of an initiative in self-organization that emerged from the heart of resistance. The action that led to the organization and preservation of a movement was similar to that of the November 2019 protests and the blocking of roads to Durban in 2005. One of the slogans of Abahlali baseMjondolo is “The Ethics of Living Communism,” and it has always rejected party policy based on representation.

The slum population is a heterogeneous one consisting of different groups that have been the target of the most severe structural marginalization mechanisms. These heterogeneities and differences make the doctrine of the African slum movement more contemporary:

“Drawing from the diverse worlds that come together to make the settlements and the movement requires a hybrid new to be woven from the strands of the old. Formal meetings are necessary to enable the careful collective reflection on experience that produces and develops the movement’s ideas and principles. The music and meals and games and prayers and stories and funerals that weave togetherness are essential to sustain both a collective commitment to the movement’s principles and a will to fight. The Abahlali have also found that even if there is a growing will to fight, no collective militancy is possible when settlements are not run democratically and autonomously. If they are dominated by party loyalists, the ragged remnants of a defeated aristocracy, slum lords, or some combination thereof, this will have to be challenged. Often lives will be at risk during the early moments of this challenge but the power of local tyrants simply has to be broken. The best tactic is to use the strength of nearby democratic settlements to ensure protection for the few courageous people who take the initiative to organize some sort of open display of a mass demand for democratization.”⁵⁹

During the COVID-19 crisis, many governments showed that they assign more importance to economic value added than to the lives of their citizens. Local and popular initiatives and demands formed to

counter this attitude.

Immediate solutions to the housing problem can be found in the plans and reports of Islamic Republic officials. One of these solutions is managing vacant apartments and allowing them to be used by the homeless and the urban poor. According to the Deputy Minister of Housing, 10 percent of Iranian housing units are vacant. The owners of these vacant units, however, have always been exempted from paying taxes because individuals like the former housing minister argued that taxing vacant units would scare investors into leaving the housing market; this is justifying corruption to further reproduce it.⁶⁰ It is not yet clear whether the vacant housing tax program, which was re-discussed in 2019, will proceed any further or not.

A major issue slum-dwellers face is the legal problem. Some of them are undocumented and therefore, do not have access to municipal and government services. Many others do not have proper documentation for their land or housing unit. Instead of recognizing the property rights of the urban poor, the government recognizes other owners for those lands and occasionally conducts forced evictions and destruction of slums, as in the case of Tehran’s Deh-e-Vanak.⁶¹

On the one hand, the form of government and politics based on representation and its integration into global capitalism constitute a part of the problem. On the other, discrimination and marginalization of national and religious minorities are among the foundations of the system based on Iranian Shiite nationalism. No hope can be put in the government of the Islamic Republic.

Establishing a future through a strong centralized government with socialist plans is also senseless. Additionally, the historical experiences of the socialist and nationalist governments of the Global South in the war against marginalization and slum-dwelling (Nasser in Egypt, Nehru in India, Castro in Cuba, Sukarno in Indonesia, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania) failed for a variety of reasons, including tyranny and structural discrimination based on identity.

As we have established, the slums themselves provide a vision for future politics after the COVID-19 pandemic: decentralization of power, transfer of management, allocation and supervision of resources to communities, self-government through autonomous organizations, equality while maintaining differences, and transcendence of the political, social, and economic habits of neoliberalism. (More on that here). Of course, the State, despite its “compassionate” remarks about the urban poor, is, above all, “the coldest of all cold monsters. It even lies coldly and this lies crawls out of its mouth.”⁶²

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In the Middle on the Edge

A Brand New “Dangerous Class?”: A Brief Examination of Some Attributes of the Middle Class Poor in Iran

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Abstract:

The nationwide protests that took place from December 2017 to January 2018 have irreversibly changed the national political discourse in Iran. Asef Bayat uses the term “Middle Class Poor” to explain one of the most important emerging trends in Iran’s political sphere. This concept builds upon his previous theories about the Arab revolutions and the incited youth of the Middle East. This essay strives to examine Bayat’s definition of the concept of the Middle Class Poor in detail since its emergence in the mid-1990s. In order to understand the implications of this concept, one first has to consider persisting qualities in Iran’s class structure, such as the malfunctioning formation, or compradorism. It is also necessary to examine the impact of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, coined by Farhad No’mani and Sohrab Behdad as periods of involution and de-involution. The root of the Middle Class Poor lies in what is broadly referred to as the enforcement of neoliberal policies in Iran. Although the application of this concept to the Iranian case is controversial, some of the main attributes of neoliberalism are crucial to understanding the Middle Class Poor: notably, privatization of public property and social services, deregulation of working conditions, and precarization of the workforce. Still, the vast dispossession of the working class in the last three decades has not resulted in economic growth. Many conceive this dispossession as a mechanism to revive class power and send wealth out of Iran, rather than using it to circulate capital. With this context in mind, this article sets forth the question: What will be the exact role of the Middle Class Poor in the radical politics of Iran?

On November 29, 1997, Iran's national football team paved its way to the 1998 FIFA World Cup in a two-legged tie against Australia. Iran had not qualified for the World Cup since 1978, one year before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This victory became known as "The Epic of November 19" (Hasht-e-Azar) and millions of citizens took to the streets to celebrate. For the first time since the Revolution people across the country had reclaimed the streets for a few hours. Moreover, they had done so to celebrate a joyful event and were not repressed violently by the police and security forces. Contrary to the official images of the Hezbollah Ummat and the state-run marches of 22 Bahman (i.e. the Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution), the streets belonged to the people who were chanting and dancing to Los Angeles Persian pop music played from car stereos. For a short while, the dominant paranoia and distrust was replaced by a sense of integrity and common destiny. Even the deep-seated xenophobia among various classes seemed to vanish, as people were honoring Afghan immigrants because of the common belief that Khodadad Azizi, who scored the decisive goal against Australia, was of Afghan origin. This unusual image of solidarity and social belonging, and the spontaneous and transient joy that overtook the streets for several hours without major conflict was not solely the result of a play-off match. Less than six months earlier, on May 23, Mohammad Khatami's unexpected victory in the presidential election fostered a public belief that people could gain control over their own destiny without having to pay the cost with their lives. It seemed that the gap between nation and state was about to shrink. On the international stage, the new reformist administration promoted Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" doctrine. What a coincidence that the presidential election of 1997 was labelled "The Epic of May 23" (Dovom-e-Khordad); as though the 1997 calendar intended to forge epics from various events; one cannot help but notice that Qasem Soleimani was appointed as the chief commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Forces in the same year.

Two decades later, in December 2017, an epic of a different kind imprinted itself onto Iranian collective memory with another spontaneous and nationwide reclaiming of the streets, "the ten days that shook Iran." Almost all independent analysts agree that the December 2017-January 2018 protests (also called "Day 96" for the Persian month and year - 1396 - in which they occurred) has irreversibly changed Iranian political perspective.

These leaderless mass protests broke out in over 100 cities across Iran. They addressed a range of issues including inflation and high costs of living, systematic and unbridled corruption among government officials, religious and political despotism, and the Iranian government's imperialist intervention in neighboring countries like Syria and Iraq. One of the slogans in the Day 96 protests was: "Reformists and Fundamentalists, the show is over for both of you." Many Iranians embraced this slogan as representing the last nail in the coffin of the political discourse that had begun with the 1997 presidential election.

Alongside the Day 96 protests, a woman named Vida Movahed led a symbolic protest against compulsory hijab by placing her scarf on a stick

and standing on a high platform in one of the most important streets of Tehran called Enghelab (or "revolution"). Many other women adopted Movahed's symbolic gesture and they became known as "daughters of the revolution."

Unlike many other scholars, Asef Bayat does not depict Day 96 as a prelude to a revolution in Iran in his analysis of this network of protests. Rather, he refers to it as an extraordinary popular revolt primarily comprised by the Middle Class Poor:

"What transpired in Iran recently was an extraordinary popular revolt. At its core: The "Middle Class Poor," the rising angry class produced by a neoliberal age in which people's welfare is left to the mercy of the market. With the opening of Iran's economy, this class has benefited from educational opportunities, but failed in the job market; their expectations are high, but their livelihood less certain. With a disposition distinct from both the middle class and the poor, this disenchanting and restless class is poised to haunt indifferent authorities... There's something paradoxical about this class. It holds college degrees; it is versed in social media, possesses knowledge of the world, and dreams of a middle-class life. But it is pushed by economic deprivation to live the life of the traditional poor in slums and squatter settlements, and subsist on family support or on largely precarious and low-status jobs— as cab drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or salespeople... Its members are acutely aware of what is available in the world and what they painfully lack; their precarity and limbo are supposed to be temporary conditions, but in reality become permanent. Feeling neither fully young nor adult, and filled with a profound moral outrage, this class is becoming a critical player in radical politics."

For the members of the Iranian Baby Boomer generation of the 1980s, who call themselves the "Burnt Generation," Asef Bayat's description is entirely consistent with their lived experience. Bayat's notion of the emergence of a "new dangerous class" in Iran's political sphere coexists with the concept he assigns to this generation as a permanent limbo; we are witnessing a popular revolt, which is by no means an extension of routine protests, but also not a prologue to an upcoming radical change or revolution in Iran. The end of the aforementioned quote maintains this suspense: this new class is about to become a critical player in radical politics, but what role will it play? The slogan "The Show is Over" suggests a negative approach, similar to the slogan of the 1979 revolution "Death to the Shah." But what is a positive conception of the Middle Class Poor when it comes to their desired means of governance? Day 96 protesters shouted contradictory slogans: Some demanded the return of the overthrown monarchy and the son of the previous Shah of Iran, and some tried to separate the political apparatus from the clergy and religious authorities. Others only held the president's administration responsible for the widespread problems and tried to whitewash the government, namely the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, while others believed that any change to the economic situation requires a radical change in the political structure as a whole.

This essay aims to find possible answers or at least identify the necessary conditions to the following questions: In analyzing these two “epic” moments, what major economic, social, and political trends will unfold in the contemporary history of Iran? What can we learn from the intersection of these spheres? How does the development of these trends relate to the November 2019 national protests? How does the concept of Middle Class Poor relate to these events, and how can we understand these trends so that we can anticipate Iranian society’s unclear future?

With these guiding questions in mind, we should define the concept of the Middle Class Poor by relating it to other concepts developed by Asef Bayat, such as the “urban poor” or “quiet encroachment.” We may also refer to related concepts set forth by other scholars, like Farhad Khosrokhavar’s “would-be middle class.”

The major endeavor of this essay will include questions outside Bayat’s framework, however. For example: What are the implications of defining this emerging actor in Iran’s political sphere as a “class” and what can we learn about the changes in Iranian class structure by doing so? What will the existing class analysis, particularly with a politico-economic approach, reveal about the potential of the “Middle Class Poor?” What does it mean when we say something is “the product of neoliberalism?” Can the concept of neoliberalism be limited to the social and economic consequences of applying the International Monetary Fund’s guidelines and instructions in the Iranian society? If so, are these consequences universal like the instructions, or do they only affect Iran’s class structure? Is the Middle Class Poor considered a homogenous class? If not, how can various tensions among other classes generate a stable condition defined as a class? If so, how far back should one go to trace the origins of this class? How should we interpret the “middle” part of this concept, considering the characteristics of Iranian society and the Global South where the middle classes are not the direct outcome of production and dominant economic relations, but rather a byproduct of unequal privileges and hence dependent on the ruling political forces? In order to understand Khosrokhavar’s descriptive concept analytically, we must study both the themes and crucial issues underlying the transformations in the social class structure in Iran (or the Middle East). Can we claim that the Middle Class Poor links the Day 96 protests to the November 2019 uprising? If so, what origins beyond those mentioned by Asef Bayat are worthy of consideration, and what characteristics will define this emerging actor? This essay will dissect Asef Bayat’s above-mentioned quote and will try to examine the economic, social, and political implications of each portion with regard to other studies and the historic turning point of these two decades.

Class Formation and Transformation of Iran’s Society

Despite the fact that the Middle Class Poor is an unprecedented, emerging phenomenon in Iran’s political sphere that does not align with the existing definitions of social classes, it still embodies some characteristics of a class, as evident in the social relations dominating

this new emerging class. Without class consciousness, one cannot expect the Middle Class Poor to play a progressive role in Iranian radical politics. Rather than reviewing the unrelenting history of the concept of class, this article will briefly comment on a few divergent characteristics of the structure of social classes in Iran. This study seeks to create a profile of certain qualities that can help to understand the conditions contributing to the emergence of this new class. It attempts to do so while avoiding macro-narratives and broad generalizations about the class composition of Iranian society.

There is much research about the formation and transformation of social classes in Iran. Due to the lack of reliable statistics and figures in this field, most of this research takes qualitative and conceptual approaches. These studies addressing class and labor in Iran, as well as another scholar, Ervand Abrahamian’s numerous studies on this topic, do not define the class characteristics in Iran solely according to the mode of production. Rather, they have “conceptualized it in the historical context and with regard to the social tensions between classes.”

Borrowing the terms of Erik Olin Wright, these studies examine the synthesis of three intertwined processes in Iranian society. The first process is the distribution of cultural resources and social connections, with access to education as the most decisive factor because it fosters a shared worldview and self-conception among certain parts of the society with regard to their material conditions (stratification approach). The second process is the distribution of exclusive privileges and rents which results in unequal social positions. Unsurprisingly, the government plays a decisive role in this process as it strives to create a privileged elite and privileged sub-classes, such as the members of the working class employed in the public sector. The last process involves the dominating power relations in a society that are enforced and sustained through the exploitation of the workforce or dispossession of the masses.

The table in Figure 1, extracted from *Class and Labor in Iran* provides a general picture of the social class composition in Iran in the years 1976, 1986, and 1996. This table categorizes classes according to their share of resources and the means of production, rent, distance from the core of political power, and the skillfulness of the workforce. Both the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie classes are divided into two sub-classes: modern and traditional. Similarly, the middle class and the working class are divided into two sub-categories: public sector and the private sector employment. The political executives (whether or not they are recruited by the army) comprise a separate category as their unique position of power provides certain characteristics that distinguish them from all other classes. This table does not include the details of the subcategories because this article does not closely examine the history of class formations in Iran.

	1976 Iranian Fiscal Year 1355		1986 Iranian Fiscal Year 1365		1996 Iranian Fiscal Year 1375	
	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent
Bourgeoisie	182	2.1	341	3.1	528	3.6
Middle-class	477	5.4	774	7.0	1493	10.2
Petit- bourgeoisie	2810	31.9	4390	39.9	5199	35.7
Working Class	3536	40.2	2702	24.6	4533	31.1
Political executives	731	8.3	1851	16.8	1560	10.7
Unpaid family workers and undetermined	1061	12.1	942	8.6	1260	8.7
Total	8799	100	11002	100	14572	100

Figure 1: Breakdown of the working classes in 1976, 1986, and 1996

The last column shows the class compositions in the Iranian fiscal year 1375 (1996) which is the starting point of our study. Despite the figures, the criteria presented in this table cannot provide a framework to understand the origins of the Middle Class Poor. However, the changes in class composition between these selected years relate to two major turning points: The Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the beginning of the postwar and post-Khomeini era (Asef Bayat's "neoliberal age"). These moments in Iranian history underlie some issues regarding the origins of the Middle Class Poor.

Defective Formation

The bourgeoisie and middle class demonstrate a continuous increase in membership. While the possessions of the previous bourgeois class were confiscated during the Iranian Revolution, this class still increased by one percent between 1976 and 1986. This growth demonstrates the possibility of quick membership replacement because of the new system of distributing privileges. Moreover, the post-revolutionary structural crisis not only diminished production, but also destabilized the relations of capitalist production. In this sense, the middle class, whose growth is fundamentally dependent on the economic growth and stability of society, should have shrunk in size. The increase in these two classes reveal specific qualities in class composition and the social tensions between them in Iran, or "defective formation" of the class structure. In other words, the Iranian bourgeoisie did not develop out of long-term economic trends, but rather was a product of dependent capitalism or compradorism.

Bizhan Jazani developed these concepts to depict the specific characteristics of Iranian class structure as part of the Global South. He argued, "When colonizers took over the colonies, the most advanced established social formation in these lands was feudalism."

The feudal class in Iran has always been dependent on colonizing forces, and the emergence of a capitalist class is not the result of social and historical transformations. Jazani stated that the so-called land reforms of the 1960s were due to neocolonial pressure to industrialize Iran's society as a prerequisite for its peripheral participation in the global capitalist order. He concluded that land reform was a programmed transition from a feudal-comprador system to a capitalist-comprador one.

The life and growth of this new class depends on exclusive privileges and rents, which are only sustained by a big and powerful government which in turn satisfies the demands of the neocolonial powers. Some studies extend this argument to explain how the process of dispossession in Iran does not result in the accumulation of capital to circulate in capitalist production.

The defective formation of this dependent class structure is one the reasons behind of the vicious cycle in which the larger share of accumulated wealth goes overseas, rather than the promised trickle-down. The third sector (services) grow much faster than the second sector (industrial production) due to the nature of the dominant relations in comprador capitalism. These circumstances create large middle classes which partially benefit from maintaining these relations while also holding bourgeois democracy as their political choice.

This contradiction is crucial because defective formation cannot coincide with bourgeois democracy due to its exclusive nature; this is why the national bourgeoisie has never become a decisive agent in the political sphere throughout Iran's modern history. After the 1953 Iranian coup d'état and the overthrow of the Mosaddegh administration, the comprador trade bourgeoisie developed instead of the national bourgeoisie, which was then erased from the political sphere as an undesired byproduct of the previous order after the land reforms. There have been no significant deviations in the course of events with regard to this issue, despite the fact that the 1979 Revolution and death of Khomeini had temporary effects.

Thus far we have established that the growth of the bourgeoisie and the middle class cannot be attributed to the capitalist norms of production. On one hand, the inefficiency of production has made the government the sole agent of development (note that the vast majority of the middle class worked in the public sector in all three periods). On the other hand, due to the intrinsic characteristics of comprador capitalism, the government can only guarantee its survival through mandated policies and political dictatorship. It is therefore unsurprising that bourgeois democracy has been historically ineffective in Iranian society. Some scholars, like Mehrdad Vahabi, argue that defective formation runs as deep as the question of sovereignty and property itself, suggesting that the distinction between the two is yet to be realized in Iran.

One can conclude from these arguments that any study of the social formation in Iran must consider the question of dictatorship and the repressive role of the government - not as a byproduct, but as the essential condition for dominant social formation.

The concept of compradorism shows that one cannot understand the social formation in Iran without referring to international relations and the decisive role that imperialism and global capitalism play in sustaining this social formation. In fact, the slogans about becoming friends with the world and normalizing foreign relations, regardless of honesty and the determination of its advocates, face structural dilemmas. The adoption of this concept would imply a significant change in the distribution of privileges which benefit the ruling classes inside Iran, as well as international powers.

The Petit Bourgeoisie

Small-scale industry or petty commodity production is one of the persistent factors in Iranian capitalism. The major distinction is based on the possession of the means of production and selling of labor power. Defining the middle classes according to their access to knowledge, skill, and rents should be modified to note the decisive role of non-capitalist owners of the means of production, or the traditional and modern petit-bourgeoisie.

This class is particularly important because it experienced the largest growth after the 1979 Revolution, to the extent that in 1986 it replaced the working class as the largest class in the Iranian social composition. In the subsequent decade this class experienced a relative decline, but nearly half of the work force in Iran still consisted of small-scale producers in 1996.

This class plays a significant role in the qualities of the later “Middle Class Poor,” and so we can trace certain attributes of this class back to its origin in the complex destiny of the petite-bourgeoisie. Firstly, this class has experienced many more fluctuations than what is generally expected in long-term class studies; it is directly influenced by political reforms, revolution, war, and shifts in the distribution of rents. Moreover, the petit bourgeoisie in Iran does not conform to categorizations on the basis of income (some may present a similar argument about Iran’s bourgeoisie). In other words, even when the classes are not delineated according to income, there is still a relative accordance between social classes and their average income. But the petit bourgeoisie in Iran spans all income brackets and displays contradictory interests and expectations. Finally, one should note that much of the unproductive labor in Iran belongs to this class, particularly if we include unpaid family workers; this is another reason why it is too difficult to clearly determine the boundaries of this class.

A major part of the Middle Class Poor are the children of the petit-bourgeoisie. By the above-mentioned criteria, the wide majority of the Middle Class Poor falls under petit-bourgeois categorization. Therefore, the Middle Class Poor include many characteristics of the petit-bourgeoisie in Iran, some of which were mentioned earlier.

Involution and De-Involution

Figure 1 demonstrates two opposing trends throughout these three decades. First, after the 1979 Revolution the petit bourgeoisie increased by 8 percent while the working class shrunk substantially (from 40.2 percent in 1976 to 24.6 percent in 1986). The opposite process occurred immediately after the end of the war and death of Khomeini; in the ten-year period between 1986 to 1996, the petit bourgeoisie declined by 4 percent, while the working class increased by more than six percent. Farhad Numani and Sohrab Behdad explain these two opposing processes in their book *Class and Labor in Iran* by setting forth the concepts of structural involution and de-Involution.

The 1979 Revolution did not include a plan for social and economic reconstruction. As mentioned before, the post-revolutionary economic crisis cannot be reduced to a sudden decrease in production due to extreme and sudden changes in the political structure. In fact, some argue that Iran’s economy is still dealing with the post-revolutionary crisis.

As shown in Figure 1, the first decade after the revolution (which continues up until the end of Iran-Iraq War), was a time of vast de-proletarianization of the workforce along with an increase in petty commodity production and a sectoral shift to services. This period is marked by populist economic policies; the term “structural involution” determines the dominant policies and their consequences during the first period after the Revolution.

After the war, the dominant discourse revolved around normalizing international relations and establishing social relations that conformed to economic liberalism. This period is called the “structural de-Involution” of the Iranian economy and is mainly associated with proletarianization of the workforce along with de-peasantization of agriculture.

Figure 1 demonstrates the dominant trends of each period. Regardless of the policies supporting each trend, the Middle Class Poor has emerged from the conflict between the two trends rather than the direct product of either. In 1997 Khatami was successful in bringing the two sides of the so-called modern left and right of the Islamic Republic together in his cabinet, and his claims about national integrity and reconciling with the world relied on the presence of both trends in his administration. The modern right advocated for a free market, while the modern left was the state-oriented populist trend in the government. These sides are called “modern” only because they express relatively less persistence on enforcing traditional Islamic values in society compared to the “traditional” left and right. Aside from the super structural differences, from an economic perspective, the price and volume of the oil sold during various periods has been a significant external factor in defining the dominant economic policies. For instance, by the beginning of Khatami administration the price of oil had decreased substantially. So, despite all of the economic liberalization mottos, in 1998 more than 400 factories ceased to operate, and the cost of all consumer goods

underwent a dramatic increase. Khatami's cabinet could not make a coherent decision in face of these problems because it was a mixture of the trends; it advocated for the necessity to secure foreign investments while also insisting on social equality and fair distribution of wealth. It was mainly because of the increase in the price of oil the following year that the Khatami administration could experience some economic stability. In fact, neoliberal policies have advanced in this oscillating manner since the first postwar cabinet. Therefore, even though the terms structural involution and de-involution describe the dominant policies in the two periods following the 1979 Revolution, there has been a consecutive shift between the two. The origin of the Middle Class Poor is rooted in these fluctuations, rather than one side of the policies.

So far, we have speculated about the origins of the middle class poor Iran. Certain concepts have proven helpful in conceptualizing the middle class poor as an emerging class – a new dangerous class. The middle class poor in Iran is a product of a malfunctioning formation, a defective formation that perpetually is situated in inefficient productive relations. Therefore, the conventional liberal relations are but a mirage both in the theory and lived experience of this class. We also saw that the relations dominating the lives of this class are a result of external factors, which could be established solely through dictatorship and a repressive state. Moreover, this class is the result of an ambivalence in economic policies; the early revolutionary slogans supporting the poor on the one hand, and the striving for liberalization and pragmatic distribution of income to increase the share of capital accumulation on the other. It is impossible to define the exact share each class had as a predecessor to the Middle Class Poor (partly due to lack of statistics, and partly because this concept is still in the process of unfolding). However, it is clear that the petit bourgeoisie as the beneficiary of the first decade after the revolution plays a significant role in determining the situation of the Baby Boom generation of the 1980s.

Asef Bayat refers to this class as a product of the neoliberal age, a term that also explains the revolutionary forces in Egypt and Tunisia. With this introduction in mind, we can now examine the characteristics of neoliberalism in Iran.

Neoliberalism in Iran

Neoliberalism is a familiar concept in recent economic studies about Iran. Some scholars identify the instructions and mandated policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the source of Iran's economic problems, at least in the postwar era. These instructions mainly impose a shrinkage of state, eradicate social services, facilitate conditions for the circulation and accumulation of capital, destroy all independent workers' organizations and unions, and deregulate labor relations to gain a precarious and cheap labor force.

Some scholars have argued that neoliberalism exceeds beyond economic policies and is the contemporary expression of social relations in the

capitalist social formation; hence they speak of the "neoliberal subject."

One could trace this subject back to the famous quote by Margaret Thatcher when she declared that there is only the individual, not even the family. According to this quote, there is only the isolated and paranoid individual who must survive alone; it implies that the whole society is nothing but a potential external threat to the individual, and that all individuals will find their equilibrium by the mutual fear and paranoia they hold against each other.

Some scholars also insist on the temporality and the spatiality of neoliberalism, concluding that it would be misleading to merely use the term neoliberalism to describe the dominant economic and social relations in Iran considering the absent features of neoliberalism. From this point of view, the presumed characteristics of the neoliberal era of the last three decades are in fact persistent characteristics of capitalist relations: the fabrication of the individual as the natural and meta-historic unit of human society, dispossession of the masses, precarization of the workforce, and facilitation of the conditions for capital circulation. Conversely, welfare state policies should be considered a result of external factors such as revolutions, wars, and the struggle of an organized working class. In other words, these policies should be considered a divergence from conventional social relations under capitalist formation. This view will have further significations when it is applied to defective formation in Iran. For instance, if we refer to the postwar era as the "neoliberal age" in Iran, then why is the state still the biggest agent in economic relations after three decades? How can we explain the five big institutes beyond the state and even the laws of taxation, the institutes that state officials claim to hold more than 60 percent of the whole economy? Moreover, why has neoliberalism never resulted in a temporary control over inflation? Finally, why hasn't neoliberalism in Iran resulted in accumulation of capital, but rather the inverse; has it always been accompanied by the exportation of wealth, just as was expected by comprador capitalism? If neoliberalism does not stand up for these basic characteristics of the term, then what is the use of applying this term to dominant relations in Iran's society?

This essay does not aim to solve the controversial question of whether to call Iran neoliberal or not. Much of this debate could be applied to many different parts of the global economy, each with its own modifications; this dispute goes to the extent that that Kean Birch in *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* says that this concept has lost its analytical ability.

Rather than examining the descriptive and analytic aspects of the concept of neoliberalism, we shall refer to Asef Bayat's definition which looks at the Middle Class Poor as the product of certain relations in Middle East countries during the last three decades. With regard to what was mentioned about the class structure in Iran, we can identify certain processes that could act as the midwife for the birth of this new dangerous class.

In particular, three features have always been present in the economic policies of postwar Iran. These features advanced in an oscillating manner due to popular protests and national and international

circumstances. The first is the so-called “liberalization” of prices, or the eradication of all public subsidies of energy costs and other essential public needs. This policy faced serious popular resistance from the first years of the de-involution era, especially among the urban poor who suffered directly from it. The consequences of this policy, however, have little to do with the proletarianization of the middle classes, and more so with widespread distribution of poverty and deepening of the class gap. That is why the resistance against these policies do not take the form of an organized class struggle, but rather popular uprisings which are by definition temporary. Since this policy does not have a direct result in determining the characteristics of the Middle Class Poor, we will go on to examine the two other features: privatization and deregulation.

Privatization

This essay does not seek to categorize whether deregulation, the surrendering of public companies and properties to the private sector, and the widespread government refusal to accept responsibility towards public services and social reproduction, are signs of neoliberalism. Rather, the interaction between these intertwined processes and the specific characteristics of Iran plays the most decisive role in determining the qualities of the Middle Class Poor. The new interpretation of Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution by the supreme leader in June 2005 introduced privatization into the national debate.

According to Article 44, the Iranian economy is to consist of three sectors - public, cooperative, and private - and should be based on systematic and sound planning:

“The state sector is to include all large-scale and major industries, foreign trade, major minerals, banking, insurance, power generation, dams, and large-scale irrigation networks, radio and television, post, telegraph and telephone services, aviation, shipping, roads, railroads and the like; all these will be publicly owned and administered by the state.

The cooperative sector is to include cooperative companies and enterprises concerned with production and distribution in urban and rural areas, in accordance with Islamic criteria.

The private sector will consist of activities related to agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, trade, and services that supplement the economic activities of the state and cooperative sectors.”

The constitution explicitly defines the realm of the private sector as supplemental to the economic activities of the public sector and the cooperatives. Still, the Law on Implementation of General Policies in Article 44 of the constitution, passed at the instruction of the supreme leader, not only gave away 80 percent of public companies and properties, but also eliminated the cooperatives as an alternative for the public sector. This action left only the private sector as the

beneficiary of the new interpretation of Article 44. Moreover, the aim of this new implementation was declared as “accelerating the growth of national economy,” “expanding the possibility of property for the general public,” “increasing the efficiency of economic companies,” and “advancing competitiveness.” The 15 years following the implementation of Article 44 have been a long trial period to show the aims of privatization. Privatization has so far affected all aspects of individual and social lives in Iranian society, and all of these have had the reverse effect of the declared goals. The concrete results of this policy leave little room for discussion about the effects of privatization, although state propaganda still claims that the problem is not with privatization itself, but in the manner in which it happened in Iran. Figure 2, borrowed from Hamed Saidi’s comprehensive study on the three decades of neoliberalism in Iran, provides a clear illustration of the general process of privatization:

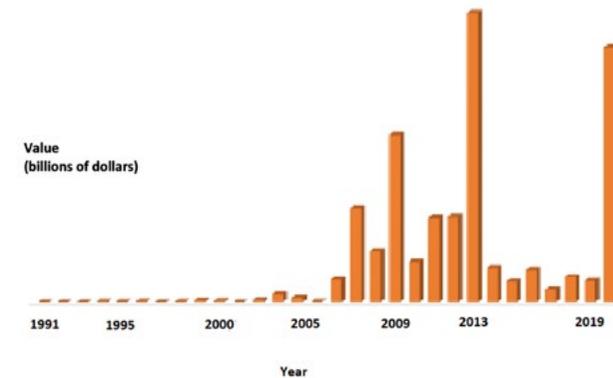


Figure 2: The value of privatized companies in billions of dollars (1991-2019)

There has been much debate about the beneficiary groups and the how the transferred shares between the public and private sectors have created what is called the pubvate (a combination of public and private) sector. The Middle Class Poor has been the most affected by the effects of this policy. The most significant of these consequences involves the working contracts and relations which will be discussed later in this article.

Aside from causing widespread corruption and inefficiency, the surrender of public property to individuals and groups closes the core of the power structure in Iran also widens the class gap in an unprecedented way. If we agree with David Harvey in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* that neoliberalism has never been a measure to bring economic growth, but rather a project to reconstruct class power, then privatization in Iran has been very successful in achieving its goal as a redistribution of wealth in favor of the economic and political elite. Unfortunately, opacity in dealings in the Iranian economy hinders the ability to draw conclusions from official state statistics. Moreover, external factors such as war, international sanctions, oil

price oscillation, and populist policies like cash distribution among citizens are not represented in economic criteria such as the Gini coefficient. However, one can draw a general picture from the official statistics of the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic. In the six-year period ending in 2017, the expenditure ratio of the richest and poorest decile of Iranian society has increased from 12 to 14, while the average expenditure of the poorest decile has become 2.5 times bigger during the same period. Figure 3, extracted from the Farhikhtegan newspaper, indicates that in 2017 the richest decile spent 8 times more money on food than the poorest decile. The ratio of the expenditure between the richest and poorest deciles is 23 for health and 57 for education.

Comparison of the Expenses of the Richest and Poorest Decile in 2011 and 2017

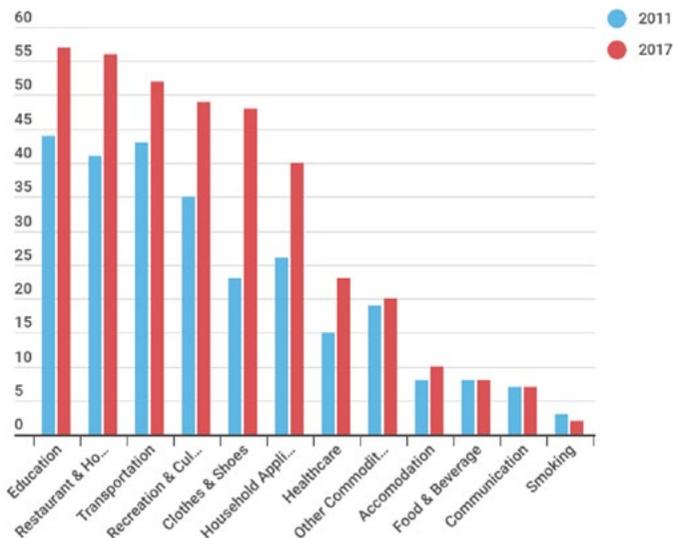


Figure 3: Comparison of the expenses of the richest and poorest deciles (2011 and 2017)

A dramatic increase in the class gap accompanied the emergence of the Middle Class Poor in Iranian social life – all while there was no sign of economic growth. Figure 4 is extracted from the official website of the Central Bank of Iran, which is widely believed to deliberately publish false figures. Even according to these rigged figures, the unemployment rate during the two decades has been above 10 percent.

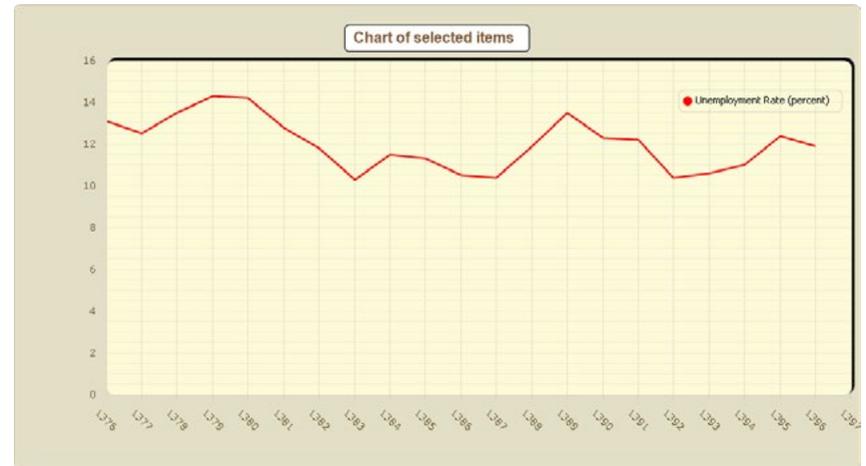


Figure 4: Unemployment rate (1997–2017)

Precarious means of subsistence, persistent frustration in the labor market, deprivation from the societal benefits, and an acute awareness of what is lacking are all elements that Asef Bayat attribute to the Middle Class Poor as the product of the neoliberal age. Bayat goes on to describe the neoliberal age as a time in which “people’s welfare is left to the mercy of the market.”

During these two decades, the privatization of welfare and social services (like education and healthcare) advanced to the point of “commercialization” or “monetarization” of public services. Placing the burden of reproductive responsibilities on the shoulders of the weakest sector in the social hierarchy has been a common element in neoliberalism of the Global South. This process has different characteristics depending on geography, historical contexts, and the dynamism of civil institutions and communities. In Iran, privatization of education has pioneered this process, despite the fact that the education system has always been subject to ideology of the government. Additionally, the privatization of education in Iran is associated with an unimaginable increase in inequality of access to learning facilities between the richest and poorest parts of society, which in turn gradually fosters exclusive privilege in future job opportunities for the richest classes.

Reza Omid, a researcher in the field of social policies, explains that Iran has taken the opposite direction from most countries, where the educational system stands at the end of the privatization queue. In fact, many considered the educational system to be the prototype for privatization, to the point that the first postwar president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, demanded the privatization of education with the goal of broader access to higher quality education. Of course, Rafsanjani did not see any reason to hide his administration’s incentive to cut its education budget at the beginning of the de-involution period.

Ironically, the first private schools were called “non-profits.” While becoming nongovernmental does not necessarily imply a

commercialization of education (just as many social nongovernmental institutions are funded through taxes or other resources), the non-profit schools in Iran advanced the process of commercialization and monetarization of education while also abiding by the ideological instructions and control of the government. The transformation of schools into business enterprises advanced further despite the 2005 implementation of the privatization law which explicitly declared that schools were not subject to this law.

Returning to the concept of the Middle Class Poor, Asef Bayat remarked that the 1980s generation could still have benefitted from educational opportunities in the 1990s and early 2000s. The privatization of education in Iran, which indisputably contradicted Article 30 of the constitution which declared that the government was responsible for providing free universal education, not only resulted in commodification of education, but also advanced the precarization and dispossession of teachers and other workers in the education sector. By the time the Middle Class Poor appeared in the social sphere, educational privileges had already become an impenetrable wall between social classes.

Before moving to the next chapter about the transformations in the working conditions and relations, it is important to note that these processes have deeper roots before the de-involution period, but also before the Islamic Republic itself. As for the class gap, the official statistics show that in 1976 the Gini coefficient was as high as 0.5 – higher than all the official statistics of the last four decades. Moreover, the first private schools were established after the 1953 coup. So, understanding the critiques neoliberalism as the source for such policies, one could see that the last three decades have not comprised a new, unprecedented age in Iranian history. Rather, Iranian class formation has long been on this path, and the first decade after the revolution made certain temporary divergences from this process, some of which are still present in our social relations three decades after de-involution.

Precarization and deregulation

In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing determines an indicator of the emergence of a new class in post-industrial countries: the working class, after witnessing the transference of factories and means of production to East Asia, find themselves increasingly losing job security and other facilities to which they have been accustomed to over the previous decades. The term precariat is a combination of precarious and proletariat, representing the insecurity of this new emerging class and its position as the potential new proletariat at the same time.

Precarity is not a new phenomenon for the vast majority of the world's workforce. The conditions for survival and subsistence, especially at the intersection of multilayered discrimination against racial and gender minorities, have always been precarious. In this sense, the term precariat

refers to a former privileged working class in developed countries who enjoyed decades of relative stability, and hence their demands may be limited to the revival of previous conditions of exploitation. As Standing argues in his book, however, the precariat contains significations which transcend the position of the working class in post-industrial countries and could unfold as aspects of contemporary life. Looking at the transition of factories to East Asia from a global perspective, it is clear that such transference could not take place without neoliberal instructions such as deregulation and facilitation of the circulation of capital. Moreover, precarization of the labor force entails a thorough suppression of all independent workers' organizations that could advocate for the working people's interests. Note that the recent trend towards unskilled labor and flexible work times and job descriptions has also played its part in diminishing the negotiating power of the working class. The global neoliberal instructions include all of these items, and we will follow their particular implications in the recent history of Iran.

The Iranian Labor Code is one of the few remnants of the revolutionary aspiration from 1979. For a decade, this law was a topic of controversial debate within the new religious ruling class. After the end of war and death of Khomeini, this law finally passed in the de-involution period. This code partially attempts to take the side of the workers; for instance, an employer cannot easily terminate a worker if a signed contract is in place.

In the de-involution period, the labor code was considered a serious obstacle for the policies advanced by the political and economic elite. At first, these elite tried to find various ways to bypass the labor law. Leftist scholar Mohammad Maljoo conducted a survey about the contracts of petroleum industry workers, which explains one of the first attempts to skirt the labor law. At first, the workers were encouraged by incentives to change their contract status from worker to employee (these incentives included the benefit of very modest gains in their income and promotion in social status from employee to worker). The new contracts would have no effect on their job descriptions and working conditions. The true difference would be in the event of a dispute, whereby the legitimate authority would change; a worker would be referred to the worker-friendly Ministry of Labor, whereas an employee would legally be considered as a representative of the employer and thus would be referred to the Social Security Organization. This organization is administered by groups close to the center of power, which would ensure that the complaint would be revoked. Hence, the 1990s saw a sudden increase in mediation companies who supplied the workforce for other companies. These mediators were actually middlemen with ties with authorities in the Social Security Organization and their only job was to handle discord in favor of the employer.

In 2002 Khatami's administration passed a law that exempted workshops, and companies, with less than ten workers from following on the requirement of the Labor Code. This law was supposed to be enforced temporarily as a trial but has been extended by all cabinets ever since. It has made the labor code officially ineffective; many companies

with hundreds of workers kept their official contract workers to less than ten so that the vast majority of the working and middle classes in Iran have no legal support to defend themselves against their employers.

This legal dilemma becomes even more critical when we consider that all workers' organizations have been considered illegal since the 1979 Revolution (with the exception of the Islamic Councils, which follow the interests of the ruling class and are called "yellow" organizations). Therefore, if workers or employees suffer any detriment to their living and working conditions, they can neither take legal action nor organize and negotiate with the employer collectively. However, the lack of legal recognition and support as well as the continuous persecution, imprisonment, and suppression of workers' activists and their advocates could not thoroughly eliminate independent workers' organizations. At the turn of the millennium, teachers, Tehran and suburban bus drivers, and workers of Haft-Tappeh sugarcane company were successful in establishing independent unions and syndicates, which have put forth demands that exceed their immediate needs. For instance, the teachers' union advocated for free, universal, and non-ideological education, which was supported by public opinion. Still, the economic and political elite have been successful in preventing the extension of these organization into other sectors, especially among the precarious workers in the third sector.

The baby boomers of the 1980s were forced to enter and compete in the labor market under these circumstances. They had to fight over jobs that were irrelevant to their education and required little or no skill, and their wages covered an ever-decreasing portion of their expenses. This occurred while the economy as a whole depended increasingly on rent and corruption, which contributed to the widening class gap. The expenses of education, healthcare, and other reproductive responsibilities were put on their already over-burdened shoulders. In fact, what Asef Bayat describes as the "high expectations" of this generation is mainly due to the increasing gap between their income and the minimum living expenses. In order to gain a tangible understanding of the gap between minimum wage and the living wage, we can take the minimum wage in 1981 as the living standard (which is itself far below affording a decent life) and add the official inflation rate of each year (which is itself below the real inflation). According to these calculations, the minimum wage at the end of the Persian century (2021) would cover less than 20 percent of the expenses that the minimum wage of 1981 covered.

The Green Movement: A Prologue for the Middle Class Poor

The Green Movement is widely considered a nonviolent civil rights movement against the rigged presidential elections of 2009. In examining this movement retrospectively, considering the 2011 Arab Spring movement and the 2019 popular uprising in Iran, we can identify important factors that we have addressed thus far among the

participants of the Green Movement. Moreover, the Green Movement fell in the middle of the two-decade period that this paper considers as the period of evolution of the Middle Class Poor in Iran. The Green Movement protests were more visible primarily in urban areas, and there is no doubt that a considerable number of the movement's participants would later be categorized as the Middle Class Poor.

Figure 1, which addresses privatizations, displays that the majority of this process took place during the second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Thus, aside from the political disputes between the two power blocks, the 2009 election was also a struggle to determine which block would oversee the privatization of about 80 percent of public entities. The insistence of Sepah (Army of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution) on keeping Ahmadinejad for a second term is better understood in this light. In addition to the mass privatization, the cash subsidy policy associated with the liberalization of prices and the currency rate advanced significantly during Ahmadinejad's second term. It is not surprising that Ahmadinejad's administration promoted populist economic policies which imitated early involution period policies during this time. In fact, the administration intended to harvest all the structural adjustment policies that were persistently pushed for since the beginning of the postwar era. Therefore, we can also interpret the fight between the two blocks one over who would make decisions about the outcome of the previous two decades.

The dispute over the 2009 election provided a chance for the 1980s generation to develop their dissent from the status quo into a nationwide protest, despite the fact that they were likely still unaware of the roots of and cure to their dissent. At the same time, this generation tried to forge a common identity for itself called "the Sixties" (Dah-e-Shasty). After the postelection protests of 2009, the 1980s generation spanned different layers of society while realizing that they were bound together through their common lived experience. In 2011, a bestselling book named after this generation (Dah-e-Shasty-ha) presented a nostalgic image of TV programs and details of the lives overwhelmed by war and the problems of the first decade after the revolution. Of course, this was a false image of the generation, as their shared destiny was the permanent sense of suspense without any prospects for change (as Asef Bayat noted). The 1980s generation had already experienced the rise and fall of the reformist movement and were partly disillusioned about the possibilities of a political change within the current structure; they had no promising prospects in the labor market and were experiencing the ever-increasing precarization of their living conditions. Moreover, this generation suffered from the consequences of risky policies such as the nuclear program, which stood to benefit the political and the new emerging super-rich class, and there was no way of questioning these policies. In other words, even though the nexus of politics and economics was not yet the top priority of many members of this generation, but it had already become clear for them that they will never obtain the position of a citizen in this structure.

The 2009 unrest was first and foremost a chance for this generation to gain a sense of self and regard its members actual position in society

realistically. This unfolding worldview was not entirely pessimistic because it also suggested a new path for change by going into the streets and directly challenging the government. Although this movement was destined for defeat at the time and could not achieve any of its goals, it did shape the generation's understanding of who would be deprived of any position in the social and economic spheres of society. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the young generation which supposed to enter the social sphere did not experience the above-mentioned issues as a new phenomenon or a lost hope, but rather as part of their everyday lived experience. Just as the Internet and partial sexual freedoms in personal relationships had turned from unprecedented experiences to parts of everyday life, precarity, the widening class gap, a universal sense of abandonment, and the lack of any sensible future had also become an enduring part of the social life of the angry Iranian youth. Escalating economic problems, subsistence, and survival became the first priority of the emerging Middle Class Poor, and they were well aware that it would be impossible to solve these problems without a radical change in the distribution of privileges in the political structure.

Conclusion

This essay sought to examine various aspects of Asef Bayat's definition of the concept of the Middle Class Poor. It analyzed the differences between economic prosperity of the de-involution period and the conventional notion of neoliberalism. The book *Class and Labor in Iran* defines the Iranian situation: "Iran's experience with conventional liberal economic policies is similar to 'sweating out a fever' after a patient takes a prescribed drug. If the illness is too extreme, a high dosage of drugs could result in convulsions or possible death of the patient. One has to lower the dosage of the drugs which otherwise would inevitably result in escalating the illness itself."

This seemingly-contradictory process makes sense when we consider the coexistence of two different views to the general policies within the ruling class. Many attributes of the Middle Class Poor originated in the frictions between the two, and the dominance of the second view in the de-involution period extends to this day. In examining the characteristics of the class structure in Iran, we realize that the 1980s generation was influenced by transformations in the social formation which occurred much more quickly than conventional changes in the class structure of a given society. Following the roots of these sudden changes, it is clear that one cannot determine the dominant economic relations in Iran without considering political despotism. The specific distribution of privileges and the defective formation of capitalism requires a certain relation to global powers; this relation was primarily formulated under the structural adjustment policies broadly referred to as neoliberal policies and their consequences in the Global South. This particular enforcement of neoliberal policies does not result in the accumulation of capital or have a controlling effect on the ever-increasing inflation - it is not even associated with a shrinkage of the state. Still, the uninterrupted procedures such as deregulation,

privatization, and precarization, which have been present since the end of war, have caused a reorganization in all social relations. This is the context from which the Middle Class Poor has emerged.

Having examined all these aspects, one still cannot define the position of Middle Class Poor among the standard social classes. The question remains whether we should consider this class as distinct or as describing the general trend of proletarianization and dispossession of the middle classes? Should we define the middle classes by their income or in the relation to the means of production (in a way that does not include the *petit-bourgeoisie*)? Is the Middle Class Poor identical to the 1980s generation, or does it set forth conditions that will also include later generations? Can we consider common attributes such as the precarization of life and work, placing the burden of reproductive responsibilities on the shoulders of individuals, and as Bayat describes, "their precarity and limbo" that "are supposed to be temporary conditions, but in reality become permanent" as the determining characteristics of the Middle Class Poor? If so, how can this concept include the older generations which are now suffering from the same procedures? It is still too soon to give a final answer to these questions because we will have to wait for this new emerging class to define itself in practice. Still, we can make the following speculations about the quality of this new entity's emergence:

First, if we situate the Middle Class Poor as a new component among the middle classes, then it would inevitably have a transient nature because it is a byproduct of a historical dislocation in the class structure of Iran. This class has benefited from the skills and education of a conventional middle class that distinguishes its members from the working class, yet its members are deprived of any opportunity to translate their knowledge and skills into class privilege. Moreover, a large number of the Middle Class Poor are already involved in self-employed vocations which would define them as *petit-bourgeois*.

On the other hand, if we reduce the Middle Class Poor to a generational category, then it would not be possible to see the numerous inner fractions and heterogeneity of the 1980s generation. Moreover, we would lose sight of the significant implications that this concept bears for other parts of the society who do not belong to this specific generation but share the most important traits of the Middle Class Poor. One should notice that the descriptive aspects of the Middle Class Poor began with the 1980s generation, and they could experience these apparently different procedures as a totality. However, this process takes other forms in previous and next generations, and a generational approach would miss these implications.

If we take the Middle Class Poor as a concept describing a general process that affects the whole social structure (the precarization of life, work, and education as well as a redistribution of wealth for the benefit of the super-rich elite), rather than an objective entity in Iran's society then we could determine and anticipate essential qualities in the social relations and make speculations about transformations within other classes, especially among the middle classes which are experiencing a

rapid process of proletarianization and precarization. However, it would then become impossible to define the Middle Class Poor as a material agent in the radical politics of Iran.

The Middle Class Poor is more elusive than it seems. It can partly inform us about the divergences of the generation born during the post-revolutionary structural involution period, and how the same attributes will take new forms among the next generation. At the same time, it describes the general procedures dominating all aspects of social life in Iran. In this sense, one can understand the position of the Middle Class Poor better only when they are put alongside other agents in the radical politics of Iran. In this way, they will mutually reveal the potential and borders of each class and concept. For instance, if we look back at the December 2017 protests, we will see that the Middle Class Poor were not the only agents, since some of the most substantial uprisings occurred in rural areas over protests for water rights. The protesters in this context undermined the common belief that rural areas only supported the established political structure. The water crisis, like all other crises in Iranian society today, cannot be solved within the established structure - hence the summer 2021 witnessed another uprising for the right to water, this time starting from Khuzestan. In other words, the rural residents who can see that their survival poses a challenge with the political structure that will only rely on force and repression will inevitably become another important agent (if not the protagonist) in the radical politics of Iran. For example, the post-2017 period has been filled with unprecedented organized labor protests and strikes. Although the organized working class was considered the first target of the so-called neoliberal policies, today we witness the most powerful class struggle after the 1979 Revolution. In the summer of 2021, the precarious workers of the oil industry started a general strike that continues today. It can go without saying that the role of the organized working class through their power of refusal to work, along with the rural protesters fighting a political system to obtain their basic needs, and the Middle Class Poor and the urban poor, will be three important agents in the radical politics of Iran. But how they will forge a way of self-mediating among themselves and creating a new path to the future is still a matter of dispute.

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In the Middle on the Edge

Affective Acts of Speech in the Online and Offline Campaigns against Honor Killing, Sexual Assault, and Compulsory Hijab

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Abstract:

The organized fight of Iranian women against gender discriminatory laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran starts from the onset of the 1979 revolution with the anti-compulsory hijab protests of March and April 1979. The fight has been ongoing on many fronts – especially against discriminatory laws and policies. Since 2006, with the gradual imposition of more economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program, the country has been facing an economic decline and middle class women who have been at the forefront of campaigning for their rights, have also been affected by the political and economic consequences. The state's control apparatus has been pressuring Iranian women's rights activists and suppressing many of them, more so after 2009, and this coupled with Iranian women's share of the economy declining, has changed the shape of participation in demand-based campaigns for women's rights on the ground. This paper looks at three women's rights campaigns that have had a pronounced online presence since 2017 and have led to offline platforms for women's rights – either through the state, or public responses, or through acts of dissent performed offline and on the ground. I will look at the online acts of speech and affective networks of communications as well as the offline consequences of the anti-compulsory hijab campaigns, the outrage campaign against gender-based killing of women and girls, and the Iranian #MeTooMovement.

These campaigns have all been led or amplified by Iranian middle class women and feminists, who have become poorer compared to 2006 but still have the social capital of education, access to the internet, and connections with transnational women's networks and the media.

Introduction

Since 2006, as the effects of economic sanctions intensified with domestic economic mismanagement, the pool of professional middle class women with a university education who had jobs and employment, were pushed back out of the economic sphere and the State welcomed and encouraged women to go back to their traditional roles of being mothers and housewives using propaganda campaigns. In this milieu, Iranian women's rights activists faced more repression for street and offline activism and started having better chances of conducting or amplifying low-risk campaigns online.

One strategy that has been successful in forwarding demand-based campaigns surrounding women's rights has been to employ outrage campaigns on social media networks (SMN) to engage ordinary citizens in both acts of speech and also affective responses. These ordinary citizens might not necessarily be feminists, civil society activists or informed of such discourses. But the SMN campaigns have enabled simple, affective messages that are intelligible by all and as such have broadened the horizon of horizontal activism for women's rights activists. Another strategy has been to, directly and indirectly, engage with women's rights apparatuses within the structure of the state to open up legal spaces for women. Another strategy has been to perform acts of dissent against the state and its laws to engage with citizens who are critical of the state and recruit them or their support for women's rights initiatives. In mainstreaming all the above strategies, one cannot forget the role mass media play in disseminating the messages and demands of women's rights campaigns on social media. If it was not for many media organizations outside of Iran which echo the voices of these campaigns, the response from the state and the general public to these campaigns would have been less.

This paper looks at three of such women's rights campaigns against discriminatory laws- the anti-compulsory hijab campaigns, the fight to legally address femicide and honor killing, and the Iranian #MeToo campaign. All three campaigns started online and have had consequences offline. All three to some degree challenge existing laws and shortcomings, and employ the above strategies. The paper will also discuss the state's responses to these campaigns and the challenges that these campaigns face offline and online in gaining support.

Contextual Background: The Middle Class Women of Iran are becoming Poor

On 27 March 2021, Azadeh Moaveni and Sussan Tahmasebi published an article in the New York Times titled "The Middle-Class Women of Iran Are Disappearing, and the United States is partly to blame". In this article they argued the imposition of economic sanctions against Iran following the Donald Trump administration's decision to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has pushed Iran's economy into a crisis and as a result, the Iranian middle class is shrinking and the women in this class grouping who were "working for reform and liberalization" are as a result suffering. They used narratives of women living in the current economic conditions of Iran and wrote:

"Iranian women have been agitating for more rights and democracy for decades, and their triumphs against the establishment's most doctrinaire restrictions have been led by middle-class activists."¹

From November 2019, when protests over gas prices turned into nationwide demonstrations and massive repression of protestors, there was an article published almost every week by in-country media warning that the Iranian middle class is becoming poorer. In one such article Sadjad Behzadi, a sociologist in Iran, writes:

"Economic problems are so severe that the middle class no longer cries out its main concern, such as gaining civil rights, social justice, equality of opportunity, the dignity of citizens, and freedom, in the form of peaceful social participation. The middle class is now in an unwanted alliance with the poor."²

There is some truth to the gradual poverty of the middle class brought about by the economic conditions of the country, which were the result of the economic isolation but also neoliberal policies, corruption, privatization, and the mismanagement of Iran's economy. It was not only the women's rights activists that were pushed back from public activities. Middle class women's involvement in the public sphere changed after the 2009 disputed election in which the state's surveillance activities not only closely monitored any gatherings but also imposed policies to limit women's involvement in the workforce. UN Economic sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program started in 2006 and intensified after 2009 (including United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, 1929, 1984, and 2094), contributing to regression in areas concerning inflation rate, USD-Rial exchange value, living costs, the national minimum wage, as well as women unemployment. Women's economic participation in Iran fell from 17% in 2005 by the end of which sanctions were first introduced, to 14.9% in 2015 when sanctions were lifted.³

From 2005 to 2015, women's economic participation increased when looking at age groups 10 to 29.⁴ However, after age 30, economic participation of women decreases mainly due to barriers working married women and mothers. The passing of the Law on Retirement of Employed Women With 20 Years of Service adopted in January 2017, which Iran describes as a legal means to protect women's employment,⁵ is in fact a discriminatory process of early elimination of women from the labor market, linked to the idea of opening up the market for more

male workers and protecting the sanctity of motherhood and wifehood. Women are less likely to participate in economic activities in the public sphere due to Iran's policies supporting mainly informal jobs for women in the form of micro-loans and low-interest loans specific to home-based domestic jobs.⁶ This means more non-contractual jobs and fewer labor benefits for women working from home.

The Statistics and Strategic Information Center of the Ministry of Labor reports that the number of unemployed women in Iran has increased by 25% over the past seven years.⁷ The unemployed population in Iran has had an annual growth of 1.8% in the last seven years. The unemployment rate for women has an average annual growth rate of 3.8%, reaching 32.3% in 2017. The actual unemployment numbers are far greater however, since the Ministry of Labor in Iran considers anyone who works even one hour a week as employed. The economic conditions and increasing poverty has dramatically decreased the salaries of women and with the high cost of living, working does not even pay off the living expenses.

Feminist Agency, Acts of Speech and Affective Relations Online

The expression of outrage on social media about living conditions in Iran have increased in the period marked by economic decline, more sanctions and the maximum pressure campaigns of Western powers against Iran's nuclear program. Campaigns such as "a normal life" is one such example of the expression of outrage online in which Iranian citizens outside and inside of Iran compare their lives through photos, grocery shopping receipts, shopping baskets, internet speed, cars, health care access, and COVID-19 vaccine administration. The Normal Life Campaign later moved to become an NGO.⁸ These outrage campaigns are magnified by the use of hashtags, simple messages, and multiplier users who get frequently invited to exiled media organized by dissident journalists.

Iranian women's rights activists after 2009 systematically lost the arena for on-the-ground offline activism. As a result of the suppression and closing of opportunities that the foreign and domestic investments in NGOs and civil society had brought in the reform period, women's rights activists started to move behind their computers and mobile phones. This move transformed politics of feminist activism as prominent women rights activists lost the advantages of offline publicness in a matter of ten years.

By being pushed out of the on-the-ground sphere of grassroots activism and with the economic hardships that increased, the now poverty-driven Iranian middle class women used whatever they had left – the social capital they had with their university degrees, their knowledge and the access to the internet – to choose "act of speech," to contest the patriarchal constructs around them including the discriminatory laws.

I use "public sphere" and "act of speech" here using Habermas' coffeehouse model first introduced in the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. The idea has resurfaced in studying SMN particularly for those scholars who see a liberal democratic value to use of SMN for social movements. As Katharine Dommett and Peter J. Verovšek argue, Habermas' conceptualization of deliberative democracy can be adapted to the digital public sphere where informed discussion and reasoned agreement contribute to "informal public opinion mediated through civil society". The "act of speech" is central to this model in which "sphere of private people come together as a public", debate each other and this debate is facilitated by "people's public use of their reason" (öffentliches Rasonnement).⁹ The idea that through deliberations the members of the public will use common reason and can reach a certain agreement on a common good might seem overly simplified in spaces like social media where outrage campaigns also lead to cyberbullying and hate. However, in the case of the campaigns directed at the policies and conducts of the IRI towards women, debate and speech shift to not just state policies but also the patriarchal conjugal family and discrimination women face there – this becomes a source of subjectivity for women and women's rights activists who debate other users in the digital public sphere.

However, there is an additional layer of complexity when dealing with outrage campaigns about women's issues online – that is the affective component that makes the messages of the campaigns emotionally relatable to ordinary users. The acts of speech in Habermas' articulation is logocentric, it assigns value to reason. However, the component of reason to reach common good is not all that is at play in SMN campaigns related to Iranian women's issues. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari depart from this logocentric understanding of reciprocal relations and point to the importance of affects in the formation of subjectivity and agency. As Brian Massumi writes in his forward to "A Thousand Plateaus," for Deleuze and Guattari "affect/affection" is not a personal feeling but the "ability to affect and be affected" in reciprocal manner that is "an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies)."¹⁰

Responses of Iranian women to their conditions of life shift the locus of relations – it is not just reason at work but also affective response and relatable emotions and affects in relation to an oppressive state. This shift transcends the liberal structural construct that Habermas originally articulated in his Salon and Coffeehouse model that locates relation and communications in the knowable, the reasonable and the comprehensible. This affective layer is particularly useful if one is to look at women's subjectivity in these SMN as a rhizome network – again borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of rhizome as a model of subjectivity in which connections with others take the shape of "heterogeneity" and any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other.¹¹ This rhizome model of studying intersubjective connections on SMN allows for studying multiplicities of connections with various qualities. This includes affective connection of Iranian feminists online expanding rhizomically, with ordinary citizens,

transnational networks of feminists, women's rights activists and actors and institutions within the state.

Cyber activism of feminists online has opened up a space for more ordinary citizens to join in campaigns that are about women's rights, and I would argue it has also helped cyber feminists to use acts of speech online to raise consciousness and build affects surrounding the rights of women. In relation to one of the anti-compulsory hijab campaigns that was formed online Batmanghelichi writes:

"...online activism in the form of My Stealthy Freedom has opened a different path for ordinary people who are not necessarily versed in post-revolutionary discourses on feminism and political activism, nor are they familiar with the names and past achievements of Iranian women's activist pioneers over the four decades of the Islamic Republic's existence."¹²

Online activism has also allowed feminists to use the cyberspace as a politically-mobilizing platform and in the process, "mobilizing ordinary women around online campaigns for women's rights in Iran, as well as enabling interaction and negotiations with other women in the region."¹³

The reach of online women's rights campaigns to lower strata of middle class women has increased partly due to changing patterns of internet penetration in Iran. Women from lower socioeconomic classes face more challenges with access to the internet and social media, however, access patterns for these groups of women are quickly changing in Iran in part because of access to cheaper smartphones. For example, a 2020 study asked 280 pregnant Afghan women living in southeast Tehran Province (Iran) where they get the information they need about pregnancy and 32% cited the internet.¹⁴ Southeast Tehran Province and Afghan migrant populations living there are practically living in slums, making this rate of internet usage significant. Another 2020 study on internet use among women in the city of Ardabil, northwestern Iran, with a population of around half a million people, randomly selected 150 women who were over 25 years old and asked them about their internet use. Most of the population of this city are Turkish ethnic minorities, and are middle class and lower middleclass women. In this study, 94.7% of women used social media, and Telegram was the most popular followed by Instagram.¹⁵

The Legacy of the One Million Signature Campaign and the move Online

The One Million Signature Campaign to end Discriminatory Laws in Iran (2006–2009) was a short-lived campaign that was mostly led by middle class Iranian feminists, university students, lawyers, journalists, and NGO activists who managed to grow a grassroots and online presence through various weblogs as well as the campaign's official website. The campaign started on the ground when prominent feminists, including

Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, Parvin Ardalan, Rezvan Moghadam, Asiyeh Amini and Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi planned to start a grassroots campaign to collect one million signatures to petition and demand abolition of discriminatory laws against women in Iran.¹⁶

The campaign faced brutal suppression from its start in 2006. Many of the key members of the One Million Signature Campaign (OMSC) were called in by security forces, summoned for interrogation, arrested, charged, and sentenced to prison including corporal punishment like lashes. On 4 March 2007, OMSC activists had gathered in front of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran to protest the persecution and prosecution of the campaign's members on the occasion of International Women's Day. In this gathering, 33 women's rights activists were arrested and transferred to Evin prison. In the following years, many of them were charged and received prison sentences including corporal punishment like lashes.¹⁷

With increasing suppression, more members of the campaign were forced to leave Iran and to move into exile. As K. Soraya Batmanghelichi and Leila Mouri argue, after the 2009 disputed election, many Iranian women's rights activists were forced to leave and became "scattered" around the world. However, they were successful in continuing the discussion on women's rights and feminism as individuals and as groups, including via online platforms like Bidarzani, Women's Watch, Everyday Feminism, My Stealthy Freedom, and ZananTV.¹⁸

The OMSC campaign was criticized for being a middle class women's campaign that engaged with the discriminatory laws and did not take into account how class dynamics were making those discriminations more pronounced for women of lower classes.¹⁹ The legacy of the OMSC becomes more meaningful as this move to online platforms happens. The legacy of OMSC was not only the collecting of signatures to end discriminatory laws but in the crucial role it played in building networks of women grassroots domestically but also transnationally, and transforming the conversation on practices of democracy and women's rights.

This legacy continues even as many founding members of the campaign had to flee Iran. Shirin Ebadi, Parvin Ardalan, Manousreh Shojayi, Maryam Hossienkhah, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, Shadi Sadr, and many more Iranian feminists involved with various offline campaigns in-country, once forced to leave the country have become feminists active in the cybersphere and regular contributors to media content outside of Iran. They are the ones who reflect on the women's rights campaigns, facilitating acts of speech but also affective connections both online and in media outlets. They have become the multipliers of demand-based activism for women's rights that is shaping the conversation, helping construct feminist subjectivities and agencies, empowering young girls, and raising awareness on women's issues.

Outrage against the Gender-Based Killings of Women and Girls

Within less than thirty days in May and June 2020, three young women were murdered in Iran by their fathers and husbands who claimed they acted in defense of their family honor. Romina Ashrafi was 14 years old when her father killed her for having a relationship with an adult man.²⁰ Fatemeh Borhi, 19, was decapitated by her husband who accused her of adultery.²¹ Reyhaneh Ameri, 22, was killed by her father.²²

Gender-related killings and honor killings in Iran are not limited to the three incidents above. These three incidents were, however, among lower middle class families. Immediately after the news was published, campaigns of outrage were formed on social media. The three young women's names became hashtags in both Persian and English. Users wrote across social media platforms including Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook. Feminist users were also quick to start shaping the campaign by introducing concepts such as Gender-Based Killing and Femicide. The hashtag ZanKoshi (#زن_کشی) equivalent to femicide and the Persian hashtag equivalent for honor killing were popularized by feminist users including by Bidarzani – a feminist network on Twitter. The hashtags have remained in use since 2020. Whenever there is news of a gender-based killing of women and girls the hashtags popularized by feminist individuals and groups re-emerge.

As K. Soraya Batmanghelichi and Leila Mouri indicate, “trend toward advancing feminist causes through forging online networks among communities separated by political circumstance and geographic distance has been evident among women's activists in Iran.”²³ This is evident in the influence that social media accounts such as Bidarzani's have had in formulating a campaign, for example one related to honor killing, in feminist terms. As expressed by Parvin Ardalan, a prominent feminist with the One Million Signature Campaign, here quoted by Mouri and Batmanghelichi:

“Every print magazine for women we had was closed. So we created a new world for ourselves in cyberspace.”²⁴

By being present in the flow of acts of speech and affect networks in the online campaigns, Iranian women's rights activists have been able to engage with a flood of users who are following the hashtags and news. However, the strategies of using acts of speech and affect-driven modes of communication are much different on SMN compared to traditional mediums used by feminists – like panels, street activism, newspaper articles, and print mediums. In SMN, simple messages that can have a powerful affective element elicit more responses from other users.

As Gwen Bouvier and David Machin argue, the outrage campaigns online have a tendency to be carried with simple narratives, and “clear opposite forces of good and evil.”²⁵ They also work on the level of affect and create an affective community amplified by use of hashtags “which creates engagement and the moral intensity that can bind an affective community.”²⁶ In these campaigns, it is hard to engage in deep

reasoning on the subject. In short, easily comprehensible lines are often used to elicit an affective commonality – for example anger and disgust towards the act of killing a female member of your family – which can be a powerful force.

In the case of the campaign against gender-based killing of women in Iran, the campaign successfully moved to offline gatherings – something that is always welcomed by organizers of online campaigns in Iran. Amjad Hossein Panahi wrote on 29 May 2020 that women in the city of Sanandaj in Kurdistan gathered twice holding photos of Romina Ashrafi with the slogan of “women are no one's honor.”²⁷ On 2 June 2020, Bidarzani and other rights groups published another form of offline activism. Graffiti appeared on the streets of Tehran focusing on the murder of Romina Ashrafi, honor killings and domestic violence.²⁸

Women and sexual minorities in Iran are especially vulnerable because gender-based violence and murder at the hands of fathers and husbands are condoned by the country's official laws and judiciary system. Article 630 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code (IPC) allows a man who witnesses his wife having sexual relations with another person to kill both of them. Article 301 of the IPC exempts a father or paternal grandfather (and by extension any paternal ancestor) from the death penalty by Qisas (the Islamic retributive eye for an eye, life for a life system) if they kill their (grand)child. Article 612 stipulates that if the murderer is pardoned by the victim's heirs or guardians then they will not be punished by Qisas. The exception of paternal filicide from Qisas punishment in the legal structure of the IPC puts women and sexual minorities at greater risk of domestic homicide.

Under the current IPC laws, not only is violence against women committed by men easily accepted, but when a man murders a female family member, it is also anticipated that he will escape severe punishment. In the case of the honor killing of Romina Ashrafi, her father planned the murder and consulted an attorney in advance to confirm that he would only go to jail for 10 years for killing his daughter. Dr. Ibrahim Moghaddam, the attorney for Romina Ashrafi's mother in the murder trial against Romina's father, stated that an attorney had advised the father of the potential sentences he could receive if he chose to kill his daughter.²⁹ Mr. Ashrafi was ultimately sentenced to nine years in prison and required to pay blood money to Romina's mother for the murder of their daughter.³⁰

The idea that the legal system is failing Romina intensified the outrage campaign on social media. Faeze Abasi wrote:

“This was the decisive stand against Romina Ashrafis' father who was eventually sentenced to 9 years in prison. Now, a spokesman for the judiciary said that this sentence could be appealed. In short, killing your child in the most heinous way possible gets you a sentence less than taking part in a protest about the conditions of life [in Iran].”³¹

Asiyeh Amini, an Iranian journalist and women's rights expert, explained in an interview with Zamaneh Media on 20 June 2020 that a major challenge for women's rights activists in Iran has always been their calls for the criminalization of paternal filicide and honor killings, while also advocating against Qisas and the death penalty.³²

The women's rights experts on SMN and media outside of Iran successfully used acts of speech and affective strategies to show the general public that IRI discriminatory laws are facilitating honor killings. This awareness about the shortcomings of laws moved from the SMN platforms to the media platforms, to news and analysis and it shook the legitimacy of these laws to an extent that apparatuses within the state that deal with women's issues had to come forward with a solution.

In August 2020, after much public outrage in SMN campaigning by civil society, Masoumeh Ebtekar, the Vice President of Iran for Women and Family Affairs, announced that her office had initiated a bill to increase the punishment for men who commit filicide.³³ Ebtekar's office announced that the bill will be prepared by their office in collaboration with the Iranian Judiciary.³⁴ The bill will then be sent to Parliament for deliberation.³⁵

On 24 September 2020, Shahnaz Saddjadi, a legal adviser working on the bill on filicide as the Citizen Rights Deputy for Ebtekar's office, told Hamshahri Daily that they are leaving the jurisprudence part of the filicide bill to the jurists at Judiciary and that debates surrounding the Qisas of fathers and paternal grandfathers who commit filicide will be left out of the bill.³⁶ She explained that their office focused primarily on Article 612 of the Islamic Penal Code. Article 612 deals with filicide and states that fathers who kill their children should be sentenced to 3 to 10 years in prison. Saddjadi states that their office's intervention is to work on the law to increase the sentencing and to introduce more severe punishments for fathers, grandfathers and paternal ancestors who murder their children and grandchildren.³⁷ According to Saddjadi, the proposed bill will require "at least 25 years of imprisonment, a fine of more than one billion rials and confiscation of all property."³⁸

The bill has been initiated by Ebtekar at the Government Bills Commission and has been reviewed by the government's Main Bills Commission. The Office of the President has sent it to Judiciary for consideration due to the judicial nature of the bill. The bill will then be ready to go to Parliament for further discussion and voting. This bill might make it to a vote in Parliament faster than another bill titled "the Provision of Women's Security against Violence" that has been held at Judiciary for nearly a decade.

Women's Initiatives against Compulsory Hijab

Protests against the compulsory hijab in Iran started from the moment that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of IRI, reportedly said

that all women should wear veil in public on 7 March 1979. On March 10, the New York Times reported that 15,000 "women left their jobs and university classrooms and thousands of girls left their schools" to protest "the oppression they feel Islamic rule has brought them."³⁹

IRI laws criminalizing offenses related to the hijab evolved and they became more restrictive as the IRI solidified power after the 1979 revolution.⁴⁰ The first law about women's clothing to be approved and adopted by Parliament was Article 102 of the 1985 penal code (an earlier version of the IPC). Article 102 stated that: "Anyone who publicly pretends to commit a haram act in public ... in addition to the punishment of the act, will be sentenced to 74 lashes." A note accompanying Article 102 states that "Women who appear in public without a religious veil will be sentenced to up to 74 lashes."⁴¹ In 1991, IPC was updated with monetary fines, including a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 rials for that same violation. According to Article 22 of the IPC, a judge can decide to change a punishment from imprisonment and flogging to the payment of fines. Despite the increasing fines over the years, Iranian women however have not stayed passive. They constantly challenge the norms established by the state and the boundaries of what attire and makeup choices are considered acceptable.

In recent years, anti-compulsory hijab initiatives have gained momentum in Iran, in particular with the popularity of the My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) campaign (Azadi-yeYavashaki-ye Zanan dar Iran) which is active in almost all social media networks, including Twitter and Facebook. In the MSF campaign women publish multimedia content about themselves in public without the officially accepted veil. The campaign has been able to reach out to lower strata of middle class women, particularly in urban centers, and as Victoria Tahmasebi Birgani argues, MSF has made "low-risk" online activism possible for women at a time when pressure on women's rights groups had been increasing exponentially.⁴²

As internet penetration for lower strata of middle class women has increased, online women's rights campaigns have also gained more momentum. Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist, started the MSF campaign initially in 2014 on Facebook. Alinejad, who is active in media outside of Iran and has a show that broadcasts from VOA Persian, which has given the anti-compulsory hijab movement substantial media exposure in Iranian and International media outside of Iran. Alinejad has become the face of the campaign in Western media, solidifying transnational support, and as a result she has been the subject of numerous attacks by the Iranian regime and critics who argue association of a campaign with a poster person is at the cost of horizontal grassroots being formed.⁴³

The demands of the My Stealthy Freedom campaign for the abolition of the compulsory hijab laws have since 2014 been repeated and voiced not just by women who send photos and videos to the online campaign, but by groups who have started the initiative offline and on the ground. One example of these offline anti-compulsory hijab initiatives is the Girls of Revolution Street (GRS), a network of non-connected anonymous

women who took to public arenas, took their veil out and waved it out on a stick in protest.

Hashtag #Girls_of_Enghelab_Street appeared both in Persian and English on Twitter and other social media in December 2017 when 31-year-old Vida Movahedi stood on top of an electric box on Revolution street in Tehran with her veil removed and tied up on a stick and waved.^{44, 45} The gesture was repeated by more women and overall 32 women were arrested in association with the GRS and four were persecuted and sentenced to prison time, including Movahedi who ended up repeating her protest in 2018.⁴⁶

The initiative taken by GRS became the first offline manifestation of dissent that took the shape of a non-violent resistance and it gained much support in the online sphere of social media networks. The performative act of GRS was repeated by many women who were not caught or arrested but ended up staging their protest and their resistance in various locations and cities in Iran. The initiative and the act became a performative signifier and women who chose to repeat the act adopted this performative element: appearing in a public arena, taking off their headscarf, holding it in one's hand or putting it on a stick, and waving it. This performative element is important because it does work in the realm of language as in words or act of speech as known in the Habermasian coffeehouse model. It is an act based on not words but performance and the affective element of this performance gets manifested in influx of emotions about the GRS initiative in social media and especially gaining the support of many dissident civil activist men from a spectrum of political beliefs.⁴⁷

The outrage campaign against the gender-based killing of women and girls and the GRS campaign were both able to recruit the support of many male dissidents because they were shaped vis-à-vis the discriminatory laws of the state. The act of dissent against the IRI as a state and its laws plays a key factor here. As we will see in the next section, the #MeToo campaign is not able to mobilize as much support from male users in social media – partly because it targets male privileges in society but also because it does not have a clear anti-state stance.

The consequences of offline anti-compulsory hijab initiatives were severe for women who took part in this performative act of dissent. The initiative has been repeated since 2017; on 8 March 2019, Monireh Arabshahi, along with her daughter, Yasaman Aryani, and Mojgan Keshavarz went to Tehran Metro without wearing veil and gave flowers to women riding the subway. The three women were arrested in April 2019 after a video of this protest went viral and sentenced to a combined 55 years in prison which was reduced to a combined 31 years and seven months in court of appeals.⁴⁸

Comparing the GRS to the One Million Signature campaign, Priya Rahimi relates the initiative to the rise in cyber feminism and the space it is creating online to support horizontal dissent. Rahimi thinks of it as “civil disobedience” initiatives and underlines that “although they were individuals, it should not be reduced to an individualistic

initiative.” Using Asef Bayat’s views on horizontal movements and non-movements, she writes that the movement of the GRS is related to horizontal networks of feminist communication that are formed in cyberspace and move from “virtual platforms to reach metro platforms and electric boxes” in the cities.⁴⁹

The women and girls of revolution street are bearers of a resistance feminist agency and I agree with Rahimi when she says that they “built their strongholds of resistance outside the hierarchical framework of parties and bargaining with official institutions” of the state. This is central to the affective support they receive on social networking sites. Aside from the performative act of display of dissent towards the compulsory Hijab, grassroots movements were also formed around the same demand at universities and campuses in between 2017–2021. For example in May 2019, there was a campus gathering against compulsory hijab organized at Tehran University with hundreds of students joining the event.^{50 51}

This time the state apparatus behaves differently. Aside from the obvious suppression of women’s rights activists who took part in GRS, the state also allows for extrajudicial actors affiliated with the state ideology to take violent action against women who are standing against hijab. On 2 October 2020, six years after acid attacks on multiple women in Isfahan which were mediated by Isfahan’s Friday Prayer Imam Yousef Tabatabaei-Nejad, inciting violence against women, that same religious leader gave a speech encouraging his followers to make cities unsafe for women who do not observe hijab norms.⁵² Directly in reference to women’s hijab and “bad-hijabs” he said: “Society should be made insecure for these people, who are also few in numbers, and they should not be allowed to easily break the norms in the streets and parks.” Tabatabaei-Nejad demanded the establishment of “special branches” in the judiciary to exclusively investigate cases related to “bad-hijabs.” He called them “moral abnormality cases” and stated that judges should support those who are practicing “enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” or, in Islamic legal discourse, Amir-e be Marouf va Nahay-e Az Monkar.⁵³ Six years ago, the words of Tabatabaei-Nejad against women who do not observe hijab norms that the IRI idealizes started a chain of acid attacks in which at least four women were attacked, and one died as a result.⁵⁴

Unlike the campaigns against honor killing, the GRS does not get any response from the office of the Vice President of Iran for Women and Family Affairs. The Islamists in power in Iran are resisting demands for a change in hijab laws because it strategically targets the very character of the Islamist nature and the Shiite jurisprudence laws of the IRI. These laws impose numerous regulatory mechanisms on women, their involvement in the public sphere, their share of the economy, and their bodies. The state continues to justify violence against the anti-compulsory hijab activists by relating it to neo-imperial agendas and the geopolitical demands of Western powers. The state media regularly highlight relations of Masih Alinejad with Western politicians and media.⁵⁵

As I will explain in the next section, the state is not just warranting the suppression of anti-hijab women but also taking disciplinary measures against middleclass women who do not necessarily take part in protests but defy the hijab norms of the state through their fashion choices.

Hijab Surveillance Targeting Middle Class Women

In the summer of 2020, Iran's Law Enforcement Force (NAJA) introduced a surveillance program to control women's hijabs called Tarh-e Nazer, or the Observer Plan.⁵⁶ In this program NAJA used surveillance cameras through urban centers to detect women who do not observe hijab norms. The police would then send SMS text messages to the phone number associated with the plate number of the car, summoning the owner to their offices for violations of hijab rules.

Some people have also reported that the program is summoning people who have never had a female passenger in their car.⁵⁷ Individuals and vehicles are mainly identified through traffic cameras operated by NAJA which in this case operate as surveillance tools.⁵⁸ The vehicle can then be confiscated in legal proceedings and; be subjected to fines.⁵⁹ Since the launch of the Observer Plan, many citizens have voiced concerns over errors.⁶⁰ The penalty for violating hijab norms is that the vehicle is confiscated and must remain in the designated parking lot for two to three weeks, and the owner must pay a fine and a car clearance fee.^{61 62} In urban centers in Iran it is common for privately owned vehicles to work as taxis and many women depend on these unofficial taxis for commute and this potentially turns the drivers against women who do not observe state standards for hijab.

The Observer Plan does not only target women who remove the headscarf. Most of the women who are being punished for "bad-hijab" through the Observer Plan have not removed their veil but instead have only been wearing their veil loosely or have choices of attire that defy the existing norms. The Observer Plan violates the rights of Iranian citizens on multiple levels including using traffic cameras for surveillance inside private vehicles. Owning a vehicle in Iran is increasingly a marker of being middle class or belonging to the lower strata of middle class. In December 2019, as the Iranian rial was plunging and the inflation rate was rising, an IranJib published a report saying that the first five income deciles in Iran can hardly afford to own the most affordable vehicle in the Iranian market (Pride by Sipa). The report said that the average Iranian family can save around 9 million tomans a year and the price of a Pride in December 2019 was 50 million tomans.⁶³

As such, the Observer Plan targets female passengers and drivers in cars belonging to a range of middle class families. This turns the car into a de facto disciplining vehicle and allows male policing of female passengers – both in privately owned cars and in taxis. The monetary fine also puts a price on transgressing the hijab norms and the state profits out

of women who choose to wear "bad-hijabs". For the women who own cars, this means that they have to deal with morality police and the legal proceedings after they get a violation notice from the police.

The Observer Plan, however, has not yet been the subject of an outrage campaign. Citizens have posted text messages, fines, and paperwork related to the program online. The fashion choices of Iranian women – who have for years affirmed their subjectivity by challenging the attire norms imposed by the Islamists in power, is not attributed to an act of dissent against the state. As such, the Observer Plan is subject to sporadic mentions – one angry tweet or two – but not a campaign.

Iran's #MeToo

In August 2020, some Iranian women took to social media (mostly Twitter and Instagram) to publish accounts of sexual harassment and rape. Among the alleged perpetrators were artists, celebrities, famous startup entrepreneurs, serial rapists using date rape drugs, university professors, and male academics. Hashtags #tajavoz (rape), #tarozjensi (sexual assault), #azarjensi (sexual misconduct) and #revayat-e-Azar (the story of sexual abuse) in Persian were used along with #manham (me too).

One story, the story of Sara Omatali that she first published on 22 August 2020 on her Twitter account,⁶⁴ made it to the media outside of Iran when she appeared on a London-based Iran International TV accusing Aydin Aghdashloo – a famous and popular visual Iranian artist – of sexual assault when she visited him as a journalist for an interview.⁶⁵ More women came forward with more accusations against Aghdashloo and on 22 October 2020, the New York Times published a comprehensive interview with some of these women writing:

"Thirteen women, in interviews with The New York Times, accused the artist, Aydin Aghdashloo, of sexual misconduct over a 30-year span."⁶⁶

The emergence of an Iranian #MeToo moment was met with overexcitement and celebratory remarks from media professionals calling it the "tip of iceberg."⁶⁷ However, those participating in the outrage campaign against the alleged perpetrators and the legal shortcomings were no longer a massive group of ordinary users. For example, the original tweet that Omatali wrote and accused Aghdashloo of sexual assault received over 12 k in likes of support and hundreds of comments. However, when feminists like Mina Khani tried to write about myths about sexual assault to raise more awareness on the subject, it did not receive nearly the same attention – over 200 likes and several comments.⁶⁸

As with the #MeToo movement in the English-speaking world, many men did not participate as allies of the new Iranian "Me Too campaign".⁶⁹ Anxieties of men about this new way of expression, this new act of speech in which narratives of sexual assault were being published were

numerous on Iranian Twitter as well. There were also men who were joining as allies and supporting the movement. However, the outrage campaign did not elicit the same collective affective response that was witnessed during the outrage against the murder of women by their male family members.

Many intellectual men, journalists, academics, writers, did display some form of passive or active support or empathy with the first round of stories of Iranian women that were published under the #MeToo.⁷⁰ However, there was a substantial amount of misogynist response as well.⁷¹ The support that women and particularly feminists were receiving was not as substantial as the outrage campaigns against honor killings or the anti-compulsory hijab activists.

The popularization of ideas of feminism in affect orientated social media networks such as Twitter has also led to backlashes – particularly misogynist backlashes. Other scholars have talked about the English speaking #MeToo movement and how there was a period in this movement that popular feminism and popular misogyny coexisted and interacted online.⁷² This form of misogynistic response which lacked empathy, questioned the narrators' story, blamed the victim and or tried to troll the narrative online was a backlash that Iranian women experienced in the first round of the #MeToo movement. This was amplified by the fact that two of the men who were accused by women of sexual misconduct included famous Iranian visual artist Aydin Aghdashloo and musician Mohsen Namjoo, who both received substantial support from their fan base.

There were also men who came forward with stories of sexual abuse in which they accused women. Interestingly, very similar to the backlash that the English #MeToo received, the hashtag that was used by male Iranian users who would write about the stories of sexual misconduct by women was also #HimToo (in English and not in Persian).⁷³ This #HimToo movement in Persian was also a response to the anonymity of many of the women who came forward. The Persian #HimToo was a mockery of this anonymity.

The choice to tell one's #MeToo story with an alias name or through a verified user or a verified group was partly because Iran is fraught with peril for victims who decide to tell their stories. The Islamic Penal Code (IPC) criminalizes false statements that accuse someone of a crime that has a sexual nature, such as sodomy, adultery, and same-sex relations. Article 255 is about the concept of Qazf in jurisprudence, which means accusing a person of adultery, sodomy, or same-sex relations. A person accused of these crimes, under Article 255 of the IPC, can countersue the victim. In this scenario, it is the victim's responsibility to prove that they were sexually assaulted. If the victim does not provide enough evidence – such as videos or photographs, statements from the medical examiner, or statements from four male witnesses – then the victim can be charged based on Qazf and subsequently punished. Based on the level of offense as determined by the judge, the accused may face up to 80 lashes for Qazf. If the crime of Qazf is repeated more than three times, the victim could face the death penalty on their fourth conviction (For

more information on Qazf, read Articles 245–261 of the IPC).⁷⁴

Despite this legal obstacle, the problem of narrating stories of sexual assault without their own names has raised a concern even among women journalists. Maryam Vahidian, a social justice and labor journalist, wrote in response to some feminist groups writing stories on behalf of survivors:

“The harassment reporting body, must at least itself establish the identity of the victim directly or indirectly...If everything is anonymous, it can be a venue for act group vengeance.”⁷⁵

It soon became apparent that years of suppression of women's rights activists, feminist lawyers, and networks of safe-houses in Iran has had catastrophic consequences. Women were willing to come forward and talk about their experiences of sexual assault, misconduct, exploitation, and abuse, but intermediary civil society actors and groups did not have enough resources or were not visible enough in the waves of stories being published to help the victims access legal help and support.

Two civil society groups active inside Iran that work to reduce street sexual harassment (Harass Watch) and sexual misconduct in the workplace (Bidarzani) have both used their online platforms to raise awareness of the women's accounts and potential legal responses. The Iranian Sociological Association also took a firm stance when accusations were made against one of its members. The Association also published a booklet in September 2021 about sexual harassment, reporting crimes and resources for victims, which became one of the first initiatives taken by intermediary organizations to support this movement.⁷⁶

Within the Rouhani government, Masoumeh Ebtekar responded conservatively to the Iranian #MeToo; there was no immediate allocation of budget or the creation of programs to help women who were coming forward to tell their #MeToo stories. On 29 August 2020, Ebtekar published a statement saying that she had prepared a report on the subject of sexual assault and aggression and had presented the report to the Bills Commission of the government.⁷⁷ It was unclear from her statement if she anticipated that the government would issue a separate bill on the topic of sexual assault. Ebtekar reiterated that the subject of sexual violence against women had been covered in the Provision of Women's Security Against Violence bill, which has been undergoing revisions by Judiciary for the past decade and has yet to become law.

With women coming forward with accounts of sexual harassment and assault, Ebtekar appealed to Judiciary to take a stance and help these women. In her statement, given the criminal nature of some of the allegations the women were publishing, Ebtekar asked the Judiciary to become involved and to prosecute these crimes: “Judiciary should also get involved. The Judiciary must deal severely with the aggressors.”⁷⁸

Dealing severely with sexual crimes, however, is in itself a problem

that victims face when coming forward with their stories. Among those being accused was Keyvan Emamverdi, an artist and bookstore owner in Tehran, who was later on arrested. Tehran Police Chief General Hossein Rahimi announced that he confessed to raping 300 women, after 30 went to police to press charges. Mr. Emamverdi was charged with “corruption on earth” – a charge that if convicted will lead to his execution.⁷⁹⁸⁰ This proved to be a difficult case for the feminist movement as the only available punishment in the Iranian legal system for rape is capital punishment which progressive Iranians have been opposing for years.

While Ebtekar talks about severe punishments for rape as a deterrence factor, legal professionals, including Hossein Raeesi, a human rights lawyer who spoke with Zamaneh Media about the subject, explain that the death penalty as a punishment for rape does not help victims of sexual assault in Iran.⁸¹ According to Raeesi, by assigning the death penalty to forced penetration, Note 2 of Article 224 of the IPC creates major limitations. Pegah BaniHashemi, a human rights lawyer who has worked on the issue of sexual crimes within the IPC, explained to Zamaneh Media that the use of capital punishment in the IPC to punish rape is a deterrence for victims to come forward. This is especially true when the perpetrator of the rape and sexual assault is a family member of the victim.⁸² According to BaniHashemi, the law also has no grounds to criminalize sexual assault and rape within an intimate relationship, domestic partnership, or marriage. Based on her experience working as a lawyer in Iranian family courts, a substantial number of women attest in court to sexual assault and/or rape by their partner during divorce cases.

The issue of intimate partner rape in Iran occurs in both temporary marriages as well as permanent marriages. According to Article 1108 of the Iranian Civil Code (ICC), in both forms of marriage, it is the wife’s duty to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband at all times. The concept of women’s tamkin (submission) causes a jurisprudence deadlock and not even Ebtekar’s office can create a bill to change the interpretation of tamkin. The law follows Shiite jurisprudence requiring that a woman always fulfills the requests of her husband for sex. As such, the criminalization of intimate partner rape is impossible in the context of Iran’s civil and penal codes.⁸³

The law does not address an array of sexual crimes including harassment, abuse, assault, and misconduct; it only addresses penetrative rape. In a separate article for Independent Persian, BaniHashemi addressed some of the legal limitations of the IPC when it comes to sexual assault, rape and harassment.⁸⁴ Narrowing the definition of rape and sexual assault to only penetration limits the scope of the law in criminalizing a spectrum of sexual violence against women and sexual minorities in Iran, including sexual misconduct in the workplace, at universities, and in schools.

Conclusion:

From its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran married its Islamicness to hijab Law and family laws derived from Shiite jurisprudence. The laws became regulatory mechanisms for IRI to control women participation in the public sphere, including through the imposition of attire norms on women’s bodies. In the past twenty years, the repression of women’s rights organizations, networks and campaigns took shape after the One Million Signatures Campaign to change discriminatory laws formed. In the post-nuclear sanction era, as the Iranian economy was declining, IRI faced the threat of grassroots campaigns such as the One Million Signature Campaign and decided to suppress it, forcing representatives and elites of this short lived women’s movement to exile (either exile from the country or exile from the ecosystem of existing movements).⁸⁵

The legacy of the OMSC however continued as more Iranian feminists moved online to engage in low-risk cyber activism. They were able to use acts of speech and affective communities to engage with other users and with transnational feminist networks in a rhizomic model of communication in SMN. The use of mass media outside of Iran by these feminists also helped them to be able to amplify these SMN campaigns and make the messages reach more Iranians within the country.

As far as the egalitarian and democratic demands of women are concerned, Iranian feminist groups and individuals have used the incidents of outrage against the gender-based killing of women and girls to make room for introduction of rights-based and demand-based concepts and deliberations with the general public. They have also used the opportunity to voice their concerns about discriminatory laws that facilitate this gender-based violence. This has gained support even among male political elites, as long as the campaign challenges the legitimacy of the state. This legitimacy for example successfully challenges when campaigns are formed around the anti-compulsory hijab or gender-based violence against women and girls. In the case of honor killings, the state apparatuses for women’s issues responded to the outrage campaigns online and created an alternative bill to shape the demands of the campaign against the laws of jurisprudence with regards to Qisas laws of filicide. The introduction of a bill to increase the punishment for fathers and paternal grandfathers who kill their children is certainly a positive initiative. The bill does not, however, address the complications that the Shiite jurisprudence laws of Qisas cause in furthering cycles of violence. In the case of the anti-compulsory hijab initiatives however, the state responded with more repression as the movement targeted the core Islamicness of the state.

Recruiting support – especially from the male dissident elites, however, proved more difficult when the Iranian #MeToo campaign started. The campaign targeted male privileges, and did not have an explicit anti-state stance. This made it difficult for the victims who are coming forward to tell their stories. The affective element of stories – which required some form of empathy on the part of the audience – did not necessarily lead to empathetic responses. Years of IRI systematically oppressing women’s rights defenders in Iran also showed that without

intermediary organizations to help victims with legal and psychological support, the victims and survivors of rape and sexual assault face many challenges. This includes laws that require the victims rather than the persecutor to prove their story with evidence, such as four male witnesses who can testify to the accuracy of the accusation, or a report from the medical examiner, or other acceptable evidence.⁸⁶

Even as Iranian women continue to talk about their own traumas related to sexual assault, and as the Iranian #MeToo continues, more has to be written about challenges women face when dealing with street harassment, stalking, the pressure to perform sexual activities, sexual discrimination, online sexual harassment, unsolicited texts, emails, or images with sexual content, indecent exposure, sex with a minor, child pornography, sexual exploitation, voyeurism, sexual harassment.

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In the Middle | **on the Edge**

Kurdish Identity and Class Degradation: A Study of the Middle Class of Sanandaj who Work in the Service Sector

Author: Media Khanlari

Abstract:

The main question in this research is the relationship between instability in class position, and tendencies to identity semantics (or identifying identity). This question is specifically dealt with the middle class in the city of Sanandaj who work in the service sector and regarding Kurdish identity. "Identity" in this text has a political aspect to it, and it is not just a cultural phenomenon. The analysis unit is social class, the field and level of study are the Kurdish speaking people of Kurdistan, because the data accessible about this subject is pertinent to the cities of this province, not the Kurdish speaking people of other provinces. The study sample is the middle class people of Sanandaj working in the service sector. This is a field study, its data includes qualitative interviews and the findings of previous research, and is done by thematic analysis and secondary analysis. Economic and social phenomena are two mediating conditions to study the issue at hand. One is the status of economic indicators related to the quality of life in Kurdistan, and the other is Kurdish identity semantics or "Kurdiety." In the analysis part, the focus is on the relation of these two, and the data has been gathered according to the need of this sort of analysis.

Problem Statement

The social and political agency of the middle class after the 1977 revolution, has always been a controversial issue in Iran. A spectrum of issues is often put for debate when it comes to the middle class including: the role of the lower classes in social protests of the early 1990s; the street protests of millions in 2009; the theoretical and practical issues regarding the role and place of “Girls of Enghelab Street”; the political place of the middle class women in protesting the compulsory hijab and the unity of the college students and teachers in the protests of 2017 onwards. Stating one’s political position toward the above mentioned movements of the middle class in Iran, has become a marker for differentiating and distinguishing social and political groups and political waves. Some of the theoretical disputes around this issue are related to different approaches, positions and methods of the analysts in this area. But this plurality indicates another issue as well; it is the issue of heterogeneity and instability in class position in Iran, which has a critical socio political effect in political equations.

Inside this class, there are other divisions based on one’s position in the production structure and distribution system, the nature of one’s relationship with the government and the political system, gender, education, politico-geographical identity, etc. These multiple divisions prevent us from considering the middle class of Iran as a uniform and homogeneous class with similar perspectives and advantages.

Identity and spatial distinctions are one of the most crucial variables that create the multi-stratum of the Iranian middle class. This issue has been explained in Marxist theoretical literature by various concepts such as “ethnicising the workforce”, and in developmental approaches as “cultural allocation of development benefits.” Meaning, in a center/periphery relationship inside the borders of a country based on the logic of accumulation, the result would be “unbalanced development.” Accordingly, the concentration of industry, production and services in some parts of the country (the center) would result in deprivation and underdevelopment of other parts (peripheral). The repercussions of this underdevelopment in the peripheral parts would be diverse, based on social forces and historical context.

Sanandaj is an interesting case study here. This city is the center of the Kurdistan province. Identity-wise, this city is unlike the center; Sanandaj is a “peripheral” area according to evidence and statistics and its emerging middle class is often employed in government or service jobs and has many different sorts of lifestyles within. Regarding the middle class, studying Sanandaj familiarizes us with aspects of the issue that are not visible in studies focused on “central” areas.

Based on the results of a research in urban poverty in Kurdistan, from 2008 to 2011 and based on the average inflation growth rate of 6.9%, and 32% increase in food basket price, the urban monthly poverty line in Kurdistan has increased by 35.3%, its relative poverty by 20.5%, and its absolute monthly poverty line by 18%.

This statistic is from the previous decade and according to new statistics the situation has worsened.

According to the statistics released in 2016 by the Ministry of Cooperative Labor and Social Welfare, Sanandaj has the second highest unemployment rate of 18.8% among the 32 province centers in Iran, following Kermanshah. Sanandaj also averages on the lower middle part in social and cultural living quality.

Among the province centers with the highest unemployment rate, Sanandaj is the second worst city in economic indicators of “structural violence” and has an undesirable position among province centers in economic competitiveness; this city is one of the most impoverished province centers. Regarding the social indicators of structural violence, this city ranks 25th in health development indicator, which shows a high level of structural violence in Sanandaj.

The situation in Sanandaj has consequences in terms of the perception of class status and social justice, as well as identity related sentiments strengthening intra-group cohesion. Based on a survey conducted by by Shahid Beheshti University and ordered by Kurdistan Management and Planning Department in 2018 in the province of Kurdistan, 5.2% of the participants regarded themselves as upper class, 70.6% as middle class and 24.3% as lower class. The towns of Baneh with 2.4, Sanandaj with 2.36 and Marivan with 2.24 (on a scale of 1 to 5) are the towns where most people regarded themselves as lower class. This data regarding the perception of social class is relatively consistent with indicators of social status, which are dependent on job value and educational value, based on the data of General Population and Housing Census of 2011.

The general sense of underdevelopment, discrimination and deprivation in Kurdistan, especially issue. Deprivation is implanted in the minds of the residents of this city and can turn to a visible dissatisfaction of the performance of governmental institutions. This dissatisfaction is especially palpable in Sanandaj in intensifying the issue of identity; meaning, there are identity-based responses to issues that are not intrinsically identity-based. A particular manifestation of this issue is in the rallies that are held regularly in Kurdish cities of Iran, especially in the last ten years, to condemn the Turkish attacks on Kurdish cities and P.K.K locations and to declare solidarity with Kurds outside of Iran.

This declaration of solidarity was especially discernable on 25 September 2017, which is the day of independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan Region. On this day, an unprecedented population of Sanandaji people gathered in the Eghbal (Azadi) square and stayed out late cheering and supporting the referendum. Also, the status of national kinship in Kurdistan is related to this issue. According to the latest polls in this regard, the average index of national sacrifice and patriotism in Kurdistan (which is a combination of three components of doing anything in case of foreign enemy aggression, having pride in being an Iranian, and doing volunteer work for the prosperity and progress of the country), Kurdistan has a 3.1 out of 5 mark, which is considered low.

Meanwhile, in some towns of the province like Marivan, Dehgolan and Bijar, this index is lower and in the city of Sanandaj the index is lower than medium. Accordingly, the aspiration for Kurdish autonomy and identity-seeking have shifted from rural areas to cities.

Reza Shah's government was based on an idea of Iran as a homogenous population. Shi'ism was also considered to be a component of a culture that they saw as uniform. This government would have a security perspective to any narrative that contradicted their vision of a completely homogeneous people, with a similar and constant cultural and historical story. The confrontations had always been violent and vindictive too. Reza Shah Pahlavi's project of modernization and identity formation used "nationalizing development" to mend the myths of underdevelopment and Iranian frustrated nationalism. Along with developing a modern absolute state in the era of the first Pahlavi, this project invigorated the discourse of particular nationalism among the Kurds of Iran.

Exile and forced migration, massacres, military invasion, executions, various forms of suppression and elimination and forced integration were the most adopted devices to bury the reality of national oppression in Kurdistan. Individuals who talked about and accentuated this issue and wanted a fair solution were from the educated middle class.

The security perspective on the Kurds' issue remained the same in the Islamic Republic era; this is evident in the high-profile documents of the state. One of the latest texts produced by the government reads: "The subject of Akrad independence in West Asia has been a major source of security crises, in addition to ethnic, racial, political and economic challenges."

The same document regarding the referendum on independence of Kurdistan states:

"After the downfall of Saddam Hussein and Iraq's occupation by the American forces, the absence of a powerful central government in Iraq, and the conflicts between Iraqi Arab groups, the emergence of the ISIS, and opportunism of the Akrad in post-Saddam Hussein upheavals brought the independence of Kurdistan region's crisis to a new level. But the strategic coalition of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and Iraq, the growing dominance of Hashad al-Shaabi forces in Iraq, fractures and fragmentation among the governmental elite of Akrad, putting their trust in America and Barzani's rash and ill-advised calculations of Iraq's situation after ISIS decreased the crisis of Iraq's Kurdistan."

The use of words like "Akrad," "independence crisis," "security crisis" and "ethnic challenges" in these sorts of texts, displays the abovementioned security perspective and approach. However, one cannot recognize the various aspects of this issue through these sorts of texts and concepts, as these texts are only a manifestation of the government's desire to control. It is imperative to assess the topic with more authentic vocabulary; a vocabulary that creates an appropriate

and "scientific" understanding for the oppressed group and stands against these fabricated concepts.

No matter what the historical roots, the oppression and discrimination mechanisms, and the appropriate solution for Kurdistan are, the response has been an identity-seeking movement; no movement in this region can be accepted without working this issue out. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss and address some questions on this matter. Going back to our main topic on Sanandaj, the following questions come to mind:

- What is the current life experience of the lower middle class of Sanandaj? This is a class with the most fragile position in the social and class hierarchy of the neoliberalism that has been the dominant social political order in the last decades in Iran and the Kurdistan province.
- How do they face discrimination, oppression and injustice?
- How is awareness of these topics related to the issues of "legitimacy crisis" of the government and "Kurdiety" in Sanandaj?

In this essay, we are looking to answer these questions.

Theoretical Concepts

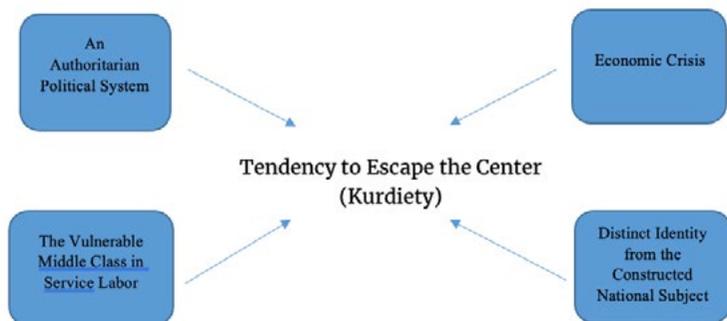
According to the ethnicisation of the workforce theory, inequality in social work division and striving to maintain the system's totality, have an ideological function for a classed society as well. According to Etienne Balibar, capitalist globalism is not just after global capital expansion, but it is also an ideology responding to a more deep-seated need in society for greater unifying forces. Meaning, capitalist globalism needs to develop a kind of invented and imaginary society that encompasses the oppressors and the oppressed on a global and national level, despite their real clashes and conflicts.

Perry Anderson perceives this as an "imaginary political fantasy". Cultivating this idea strives to erase and remove all differences and conflicts in favor of a fabricated national unity by nationalization projects, especially in lands with conflicting classes and diverse identities.

Therefore, the systematic reproduction of the workforce, which is one of the most crucial functions of the capitalist government, accommodates the function of subsystems such as the education and justice system, to build national subjects. Education in such a society contains punishment mechanisms, control, surveillance and imposing restrictions on abilities, as well as selective growth of the abilities of

only part of the society, based on their position in the class, ethnic and gender hierarchy in the capitalist society. Accordingly, the ethnicity and othering construction in right winged class-based governments can be included in class analysis.

As a theoretical basis for this research and the modality of its relation to the issue at hand, one can consider four phenomena as an intersection that in the researcher's theoretical model has resulted in the "legitimacy crisis" and the emergence of "Kurdiety": Iranian/religious/national government and its homogenizing ideology, the crisis of Iranian capitalism economics and its uneven development, distinctive identity from the constructed Iranian national subject, and the biosocial status of the vulnerable middle class service workers of Sanandaj.



Research Methodology

This research uses two common methods of analysis and interview: thematic analysis and secondary analysis. Secondary analysis is a kind of analysis in which existing collected data on the matter are gathered and are reanalyzed according to the questions of the research at hand. In this method, we do not analyze the data from various projects statistically, but their findings are combined, blended and compared to answer the questions of the research.

However, we use thematic analysis to examine and analyze the interviews and answer the main questions of the research. Usually, to micro-analyze the texts and inductively draw categories, thematic analysis is an efficient method. In qualitative researches, the researchers need a bilateral knowledge about the semantic world of the actors and the study group, as well as the concepts and research guide theories; by this, the researchers can discover the concepts and meanings related to the theory that exist in everyday language.¹

Analysis here means conceptualizing and identifying our central themes to discover the meaning behind the data.² In thematic analysis, which is one of the most used methods in analyzing qualitative data using inductive analysis, the interview data is classified in relation to their dominant conceptualized meanings. The thematic analysis is a textual analysis based on induction, in which the researcher reaches a typology and analytical understanding by classifying the data and input-output

modeling.

Our choosing method was based on the method known as "available sample" and "snowball sampling." First, based on the researcher's understanding and the underlying characteristic, some people who have been exposed to the situation at hand are chosen; secondly, each of them are asked to introduce similar people to be interviewed.

Results of Secondary Analysis of the Past Data

Regarding the legitimacy crisis theory and the relationship between capitalism's social formation with the issue of identity in Iran, specifically the Kurdish identity, we empirically studied the issue considering unbalanced development and its consequences. We first studied the consequences of unbalanced capitalism in relation to development indexes in the province of Kurdistan. In the next part of the analysis, the result of this situation is linked to the studied group, by merging the field of study with the issue of identity. In this part, we briefly review the most crucial results of the secondary analysis of socioeconomic indexes in Kurdistan. The statistics and evidence studied so far indicate that:

- The province of Kurdistan and the city of Sanandaj, are on a low-level concerning resources and welfare infrastructures, compared to other cities and provinces of Iran.
- Discrimination is present in Kurdistan in various forms related to social and economic life indicators.
- Living in discrimination has an impact on the sense of national belonging in Kurdistan; the polls indicate that national belonging in Kurdistan is lower than country average.
- Most of Kurdistan's population are now city dwellers compared to the last decades, and the ruling economic and political management has a greater effect on them.
- There is a general dissatisfaction in Kurdistan which is the result of the government's conduct in socioeconomic areas.

Analysis of Field Findings

We did a semi-structured in-depth interview as a model, with 20 people who had the required characteristics. The general characteristics of these interviewees are illustrated in the following table.

Row	Gender	Job Title	Education
1	Male	University Student (Unemployed)	Bachelor's Degree
2	Male	Hospital Staff	High School Diploma
3	Male	Nurse	Bachelor's Degree
4	Male	Hydro and Electricity line workers	Bachelor's Degree
5	Male	Taxi Driver	Bachelor's Degree
6	Female	Salesperson	Bachelor's Degree
7	Female	Contractual Nurse	Bachelor's Degree
8	Male	Salesperson in the Entertainment Sector	Master's Degree
9	Female	Contractual Employee	Bachelor's Degree
10	Male	Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
11	Male	Accountant	Master's Degree
12	Male	Dairy Salesperson	High School Diploma
13	Female	Homemaker	High School Diploma
14	Female	Company Employee	Master's Degree
15	Female	Kindergarten Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
16	Female	Clothes Salesperson	High School Diploma
17	Male	Peddler	College Diploma
18	Male	Pharmacy Salesperson	Bachelor's Degree
19	Female	Consultant	Bachelor's Degree
20	Male	University Student	Bachelor's Degree

The Interviewees' General Characteristics

The interview cases are chosen to cover various strata in the social circle. The main common feature among them concerning their economic labor is their dependency to daily wage in governmental and private sectors in the lower-middle level. In terms of identity, they are all citizens of Sanandaj and Kurdish speaking.

Furthermore, none of them has an education lower than a high school diploma. Accordingly, it can be stated that the job position of the interviewees and their relative high education level are two main features that separates them from the traditional working class, at least in terms of "awareness," in spite of their dependency on wage labor. The interviews are done in Kurdish and colloquial tones. The endeavor has been that this colloquial tone and the real dialogues are kept in the Farsi translation. We approach the interviews via thematic analysis to understand the insight and experience within the study field.

The Intersection of Economy and Identity: Legitimacy Crisis and the Sense of "Distinction"

"Honestly, my money situation from when I started working in 2007 got worse. My situation is worse however I look at it. It is not just me though. My whole family is like this. This poverty is rooted in our region. I used to think that because we only do physical work we don't improve. But now that I know better, I see it's like this whatever I do." (Man, 37)

"What I'm saying is that our situation is because of how the state sees our problems. There were uprisings in this region and the central state still sees us like that." (Woman, 28)

"I'm just talking about medicine. A few days ago, this deputy of the medicine ministry came here (Sanandaj) for Corona. His tone with us was a fascist tone. He was sayin in his interviews that I heard the

"Kurds" have secret weddings in car washes. First, saying "Kurds" is fascistic. He doesn't see our nationality. Can't say "Kurdish people" instead of "Kurds." He said we promised the Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences to send them medical supplies as much as possible; like it's a charity job." (Man, 32)

Looking at the meaning and the words of the interviews, we can see that there is a distinction between "them" and "us." The analysis and explanations by the interviewees on inequality, discrimination and neglect have a "sense of distinction" that is tightly related to the actions of the government towards Kurdistan's social issues. The interviewees do not regard their livelihood hardships separated from the "otherness" imposed on them by the central political state. This challenges the idea of a unified "nation." In other words, the analysis of a simple employee in Sanandaj of his economic situation, is based on the position of his city in the country's labor division system.

"I can say somehow that all my being is imbued with Kurdiety. It's not like I distance myself from this and go to a global thing. Because the global powers see me the same way Iran's state sees me. I see no difference. Because the actions of the same global powers put us in this position." (Man, 44)

Phrases, sentences and words, the main themes of which are the unique situation of Kurdistan can be seen in the following table; these sentences explain the link between the interviewees' personal lives and this situation. There is also an analytical logic behind these words which is ultimately the main theme of each classification.

Concepts and Expressions	Analytical Logic	Pivotal Theme
I don't see myself as them, a Kurd would be ashamed to bang his head for a dead person. They don't see our nationality.	Differentiating One's Identity from That of the Center	Identity Distinction
This poverty has roots in our region. Anything happens like this Corona, some of us get poorer but we see others get richer. These rich Tehrani people.	Connecting their Livelihood Situation to the Central/Peripheral Issue	Discrimination against the Periphery
They see us as nothing. If I say I'm Kurd it has more honor in it than I say I'm Iranian. Our situation is because of how the state sees us.	Dissatisfaction with Belonging to the State/Nation of Iran as a Result of Neglect	Dissatisfaction with Disfranchisement

The feeling of "victimhood" on a global scale has intensified identity-seeking within the borders of the country, as well as creating a sort of national solidarity with the Kurdish people of other countries which are believed to suffer from a common fate. This is different from ethnic fanaticism within the state/nation framework of Iran. Taking refugee to Kurdiety and reviving Kurdish ideals and a dream of autonomy are considered a collective solution to the problems which are directly caused by the economic crises of the Iranian capitalism of the last decades.

"I still have goose bumps when I hear "EyReqîb" (Kurdish national anthem)." (Man, 47)

"I really think it's a dishonor for a Kurd to bang his head for a dead

person (referring to Shiite religious mourning). I never see myself as them. These rich Tehranis who couldn't even make food if they don't have a servant to clean and cook for them." (Woman, 30)

"Rethinking Identity" in comparing the non-prosperous self to the prosperous other, which seems to be a uniform adversary foreign body against the kin ethnic group, is another ubiquitous theme in this study field. Especially when the Shiite and Sunni religious distinctions are added to the conceptual matrix of Kurd vs non-Kurd. The politicized Shiite religion in Iran has created a situation in Sanandaj where there is no understanding of the identity distinction among the non-Kurds in Iran; all others, despite their different identities, are seen as a potential other close to the government, only because their religion is the official religion of the country.

"We are in Iran but even in other countries we say we are Kurds; they look at us differently. If I say I am Kurd, I am more accepted than saying I am Iranian. Maybe it would be different if I was from another country or a different situation. But now I really don't wanna say I am Iranian, just to spite them." (Man, 27)

"If anything happens like this Corona, some of us get poorer. But we see others are getting richer. There was a time that I could buy 7 kg of meat with the wage of one day of work. But now I barely can buy one. It's depressing. Of course I hate being an Iranian in this situation. Especially us who will always have a national (Kurdish) feeling, even if we are not sectarian." (Man, 36)

The sense of "disfranchisement" is also among the concepts found in the life experience of the individuals in this study. In addition to having historical context, this is more often than not a response to the laws and legislations such as not having the legal right to be a presidential candidate or having macro political or managerial positions in the country. Also, not being able to educate in their mother tongue as well as other cultural demands make the framework for this sense of "disfranchisement."

"They treat us as nothing. I know that Kurdistan is dependent on Iran economically, and I even like their culture, but I prefer Kurdistan to them. My main problem is the leaders. my problem is they are abusing us." (Woman, 42)

"How can I be proud of this country when I can't have any participation in it? And when I can't participate, I think of other stuff; I should find out how I can be useful." (Woman, 29)

According to the findings of this research, it can be claimed that in the experience of the new and urban middle class of Sanandaj, there is an awareness of their different position compared to others on a national level; this was discussed in the introduction and problem statement, on the intersection of religious/ethnic identity with socio-economic conditions. In the theoretical framework of this research, the result of this conceptualization and the sense of distinction and discrimination

are political legitimacy crisis and its consequences, rediscovery of a socio-historical context and identity seeking of "Kurdiety." The results of the thematic analysis of these interviews are as follows.

Theme	Mechanism and Context	Consequences
Disfranchisement	The Mode of Being Constructed in the Formal and Institutional Laws	Sense of Distinction and Inferiority
Rethinking Identity	Marginalization and Neglect	Emergence of a New Identity-Seeking
Sense of Victimhood	A Common Fate of Inferiority with Others with the Same Identity in Other Countries	A sense of Sympathy and Empathy with the Kurdish People of other Countries
Othering	Different Culture and Lifestyle from the Center	Redefining Identity

The Result of the Thematic Interviews: Mechanisms and Consequences of the Main Themes:

Conclusion and Summary

Based on the composition of the issue of identity among the vulnerable parts of the urban middle class service labor of Sanandaj, related to the structural actions of the political system in the areas of identity and economic, we dealt with this main question that how the experience of the study group can be explained in the context of the legitimacy crisis and connected it to identity seeking.

It is not possible to connect the preliminary data of this research to the concepts raised individually by the interviewees objectively. This would only be possible by putting the data in the theoretical framework of this research; it is the only way to make sense of the data. The Iranian state's legitimacy crisis is a pervasive issue and in various forms among the study group. But it is not something that was discovered in this study. We instinctively could anticipate it by looking at cases like the electoral turnouts of the latest elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This research attempted to address the legitimacy crisis in relation with the issues of discrimination, underdevelopment, and its political equivalent in the lower middle class of Sanandaj, meaning modern identity-seeking.

Ultimately, concepts of "disfranchisement," "rethinking identity," "sense of victimhood," "sense of otherness" were among the most critical themes seen in this study related to the main question of the research; in the end, it is essential to bring up a few points.

A New and Different Identity-Seeking in Kurdistan

The identity-seeking discussed in this research is different from its historical meaning, pioneered by traditional waves and some Kurdish parties.

The general effect of the solutions suggested by the main parties of Kurdistan, Kumale and Kurdistan Democratic Party, at the end of Pahlavi's rule in the 1970s and 1980s have currently waned.

Especially the general solution of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, whose main motto was "democracy for Iran, autonomy for Kurdistan," has lost its place in Kurdistan's collective consciousness and identity. Although the life experience stated in the interviews reflect that some still identify as "Iranian" Kurd, even for them being Iranian is more of a geographical affiliation as a result of a coercive companionship, rather than a political or identity affiliation that makes them a part of Iranian State/nation. It should be noted that the general trend of demands or even street demonstration slogans in Kurdistan have been demanding "four part Kurdistan." For instance, in the demonstrations in 2018 in solidarity with the Kurds of "Rojava," the main chant was "east of Kurdistan is the west of Kurdistan and Kurdistan is one land."

Although this issue is historically rooted in the teachings of the Kurdish parties, in the current identitarian movement of Kurdistan, there is a tendency to cross off and maintain this historic experience with the political parties. The social basis of this issue is no longer a pre-modern institution like tribes, kinsmen, clans, armed militia based on a sense of traditional loyalty to an individual, but it is "city" and the modern contradictions resulted from social labor distribution following the unbalanced development and their political equivalent. In other words, realizing they have common circumstances and fate, is not an Ibn Khaldunian "Asabiyyah," a clannist/tribal social solidarity. Meaning, it is not based on a pre-modern sense of social prejudice and belonging, but it is a modern understanding and endeavor to self-protect and flee from one's inferior position.

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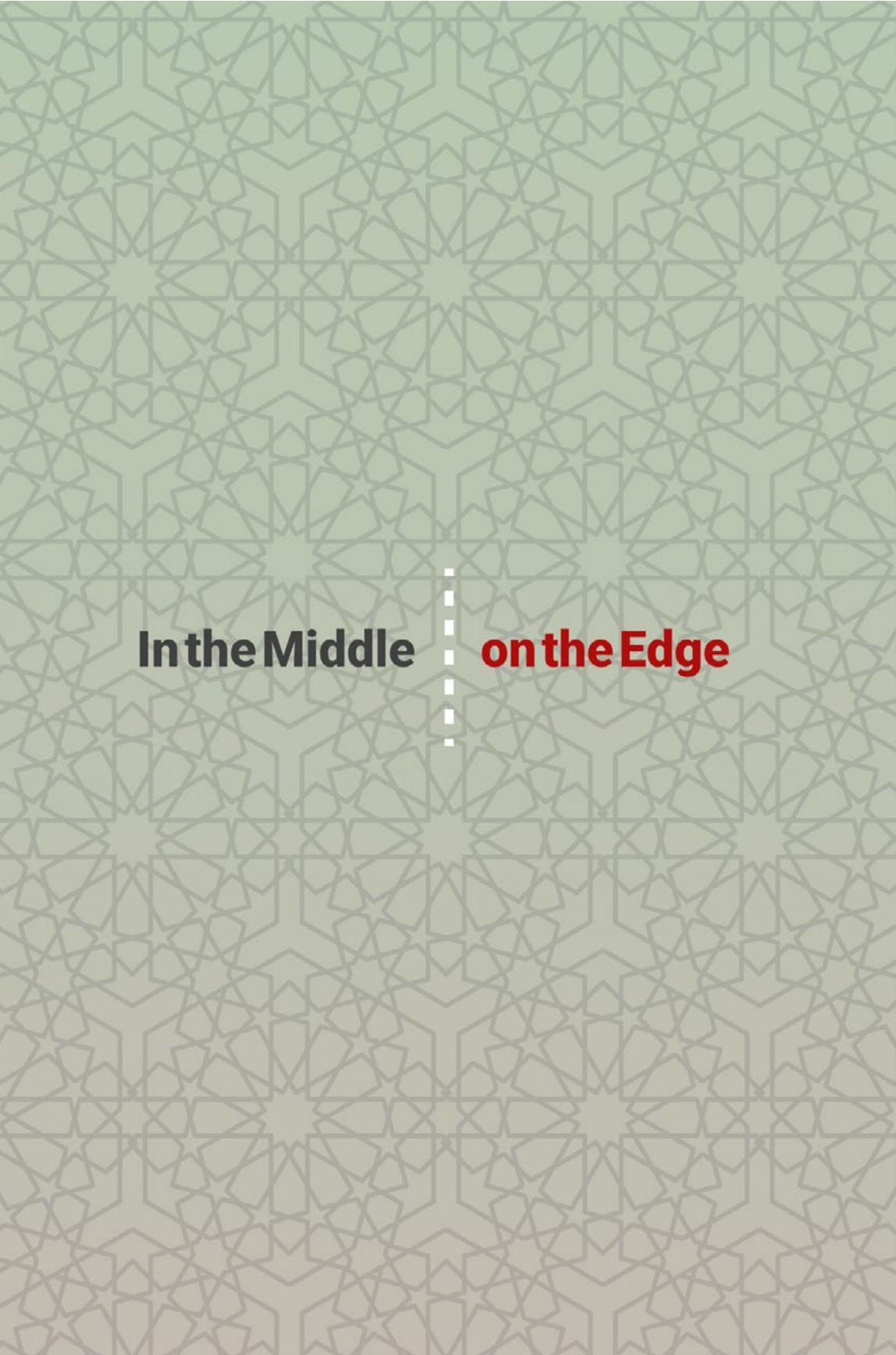
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In the Middle **on the Edge**

Open Images of a Closure: Notes on the Iranian Cinema of the Last Decade

By: Omid Mehrgan

Abstract:

How do middle class Iranians see themselves as facing a series of problems in need of solutions? This chapter addresses this question by looking at four Iranian movies made during the last decade. It offers interpretations of these movies in terms of how they present conflicts and how they fail to resolve them. As inaugurating the decade, I assess two events, one in politics and the other in cinema: the 2009–10 Green Movement, which brought millions to the streets following the presidential elections, and the release of Asghar Farhadi's 'A Separation' in the months following the movement's brutal end. These political and aesthetic events heralded a new era in Iranian social and cinematic history. For the first time in post-revolutionary Iran, Farhadi's work presented a series of crises— a betrayal, an accident, a business project, a fatal illness, the desire to migrate for a better life—that established the familial sphere as the concentration of the most intense, unresolved tensions. This decade's cinema stands apart from previous waves of realistic or social-issue movies because of the way in which it treats class conflicts and the increasing pauperization of the population — especially under country-wide economic sanctions: these movies result in dramatic non-resolutions to the problems put forward. By analyzing the four movies, this chapter argues that the impoverished middle classes in Iran are learning how to talk about their anxieties while also losing their ability to solve problems with symbolic means. Meanwhile, this cinematic change is occurring against the backdrop of an impasse in terms of actual political change.

The cinema of the last decade in Iran represents the state of the Iranian middle classes in a strange way. This different representation does not lie in the films' themes, but rather in the cinematic way they fail to respond to the questions they pose. This failure indicates how the society itself lacks the means to articulate satisfying resolutions to its own problems, from broken marriages to rampant betrayal and poverty.

The 2009-10 post-presidential election Green Movement and the release of Asghar Farhadi's 'A Separation' shortly thereafter heralded a new era in Iranian social and cinematic history. Farhadi's movies inspired a series of works by peers and young filmmakers that also took up similar problems, which created a series of crises both inside and outside of the family; some of these problems included interpersonal issues, legal conflicts, and questions of ethics. Three issues in particular came to the forefront in the cinema of the 2010s: betrayal/cheating, migration/leaving the country, and poverty. The decade's more serious if not "mainstream" cinema stands out compared to previous waves of poetic-realistic and social-issue movies because of how class conflicts and the increasing pauperization of the population - especially under the sign of countrywide economic sanctions - finds expression in the dramatic non-resolutions to the problems put forth.¹

The four movies this chapter looks at were created beginning in 2010. As I will show, the increasingly shrinking Iranian middle class determines the cinematic conflicts and their resolutions in these films.² This middle class has constantly lost its power of autonomy while also learning how to raise its own issues in more artistically-mediated ways. The middle class in Iran is both learning how to talk about its anxieties - from sexuality and sexual relationships to the very concept of a happy life - while also losing its ability to solve those problems through a symbolic, cinematic narrative. The nature of questions in this era's films differs from those in previous decades. They depart from the pre-Farhadi era in film-making by emulating the glamorous upper-middleclass life in Tehran and by intensifying relationship issues and social conflicts. This artistry occurs against the backdrop of an impasse in actual political change.

How does this chapter define the very concept of the middle class? As I will explain when detailing my approach in section three, there is not reliably objective criteria for adequately defining what the middle class is and how its members self-identify as belonging to it as opposed to the working class and upper strata of wealthy and well-connected Iranians. The subjective, aspirational, and ultimately political nature of any claim of belonging to, or desiring to become part of, the middle classes comprises the social ontology of a middle class. This is a constant, failure-ridden, multi-faceted striving that is best-expressed in visual culture: the cinema. The more insecure members of the middle classes feel in their conditions of existence and survival, the more intensely they focus on a moment of downfall. Expression of this insecurity takes form in its inability to find a way out of its debilitating conflicts.

1.

Writing about recent, lesser-known works from Iranian cinema is difficult because the scholarly or critical literature on it remains meager. The main body of scholarship and more popular books tend to focus exclusively on familiar names from the past decades with the exception of Asghar Farhadi: Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, and others.³ A change of perspective could, however, help see the current, more serious films in a new light, both in terms of their social sensitivities and their aesthetic efforts to address them. These movies offer fresh insights into the contemporary Iranian society by way of incorporating new conflicts and failures or partial-failures in resolving them: cheating, damaged relationships, sexuality, business, the very notion of the unconscious in the form of using or referring to psychoanalytical themes.⁴ They have open-endings, an open image, like previous works that are admired both nationally and internationally. The nature of their open image, their lack of real resolutions to their conflicts, or, in the last movie discussed, the partial resolution, departs considerably from the common practice of poetic, non-conclusive endings in well-known Iranian cinema.⁵

The main difference from the previous films lies in the way some of the recent movies drive towards a resolution that is indicative, politically, of obstacles to reaching any solutions in real life. This technique imposes a form of abruptness to these movies that is unsatisfying if not unconvincing, which differs from the picturesque, mystical endings in Kiarostami cinema - most at work in his *Taste of Cherry* (Ta'm-e gilās, 1997). After all, there is no real way to answer either the question of suicide and of whether one is responsible for one's own body after death, or the ending in which it becomes apparent whether or the protagonist dies. Instead, since Farhadi's *A Separation*, open endings are used to avoid taking a position vis-à-vis difficult issues in human relationships within a concrete social situation. Endings are no longer poetic or suggestive of a mystery one ought not to question. If the ending offers anything conclusive, then each choice would amount to taking a position on a real social, ethical, emotional, or even political issue. For example, if it was clear which of her divorced parents Termeh decided to join in the final scene of *A Separation*, the audience would not be easily convinced. The film-maker understands this concept well, and that is part of the film's aesthetic consciousness. This consciousness relates to actual, credible possibilities to solve society's daunting problems. *A Separation* first set the stage thematically and cinematically for the opening of what could be best described as an Iranian Pandora's box.

A Separation unfolds its narrative with the scene of an imminent divorce. Set on leaving the country to live abroad, Simin (Leyla Hatami) faces her husband, Nader's (Payman Maadi), decision to stay and take care of his ailing father. Despite this, she leaves him and her daughter and moves back to her parents' home and Nader hires a nurse to attend to his father. On the suspicion that she mistreats his father and steals his money, Nader has an altercation with the nurse, Razieh (Sareh Bayat), and pushes her out of his apartment. She falls down the stairs and, as we discover later, has a miscarriage, though it is unclear if Nader

caused it. The rest of the movie revolves around whether or not Nader knew about the nurse's pregnancy. With many scenes at the family court, the movie plays out a number of disparities between the two families while laying out their various attempts to resolve the conflict. Razieh and her husband, Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini), demand restitution for the loss of their child, but an outraged Nader insists that he did not know the nurse was pregnant. As the drama unfolds, the secrecy of the plot lies with Nader who had indeed heard about and therefore knew that the nurse was pregnant. Admitting this knowledge would put him in jail for involuntarily killing an unborn child. He lies to avoid prison, but fails to stick to his lie before his daughter, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi). The moment of recognition or discovery in the drama occurs when he realizes that his daughter knows about his lie. Moreover, the nurse also confesses to Simin that she may have lost her child because of an accident hours before her argument with Nader. How does the movie respond to this conflict and how does it resolve the characters' ethical tensions?

With all of the facts known, the end of the movie depicts a scene of traditional arbitrage far from the modern court room or the self-reflection of the middle-class protagonists: no real solution is offered. The two families convene at the nurse's house in the company of the family's debtors to put an end to the case. Nader and Simin agree to write a check for Razieh and Hodjat to compensate for their loss. The resolution is thwarted, however, because the already-estranged family members go home with a large hole in their car's windshield from a stone, potentially representing the impossibility of restoring the unity of family.⁶ As the condition for paying the settlement, Nader demands the nurse to swear on the Quran that she knows for sure he caused her miscarriage, which she refuses to do. Not receiving the money means the nurse's family will not be able to pay their many debtors present in the meeting. Her ethical-religious belief prevents any settlement.

A Separation was released months after the brutal end that the government put to the 2009 post-election movement, which brought millions to the streets. The unresolved conflict of that year carried on through the following decade, and this concept resurfaced in some of the movies that were made throughout that time.

2.

On a lower key, *Duet* (2016) tells the story of an encounter between two individuals who were lovers in their college years and are now both married. A mutual friend arranged that they meet with reticence and discretion in a bookstore. When Hamed (Morteza Farshbaf) chooses a foreign movie DVD to recall their past time together - a film he says they had seen ten times - she simply does not remember it, and she does not have a bad memory. The ensuing dialogue clearly implies that Hamed sees her as having abandoned her artistic passions. He is himself a musician who has spent some time abroad. Sepideh's memory of a college love is tied to a cultural memory, given the major role movies played in the imagination of the generations in post-revolutionary

Iran.⁷ Yet, her immersion into a life devoid of higher passions, as Hamed says: "I wouldn't be surprised if you said you had two children, too," makes it even harder for her to find connection through culture. From the perspective of this movie, a shared past and a lost love must resort to a cultural product for its brief revival. The scene is set in one of many popular "book cities" (Shahr-e ketab) that popped up in Tehran since the early 2000s: big bookstores set up by the municipality that also carry a range of cultural products and other middle-class commodities.

In a second attempt to conjure up ghosts of their bygone love, the movie provides Sepideh (Negar Javaherian) with a CD copy of Hamed's own musical compositions. It is only after listening to Hamed's work that the actual rekindling between the two begins to take shape. This is not only an encounter between the former lovers but also, more dramatically, one involving their respective marriage partners, who will endure emotional insecurity and will be forced to reflect on their own lives. Sepideh grows cold and brooding to the point that her husband, a calm and self-reserved man, starts noticing and revolting.

The female character at the center of the drama resists telling her insistent, albeit thus far withdrawn, husband (Ali Mosaffa) why she has changed and become distant. He genuinely looks for ways to improve their failing marriage, but he simply does not possess the means or language to persuade her to open up. Sepideh's refusal to speak her mind permeates the entire movie. She shuts herself out from him, non-responsive to his obvious longing to know, as he puts it, "What are you thinking about right now?" Her response? "What are you thinking about?" Of course, he thinks about the man who has emerged from her past, haunting their young marriage. His jealousy coupled with frustration over her lack of communication takes the awkward form of a more fundamental question: "I'm looking to find what it is in your head that you've been hiding from me from the beginning of our marriage." The very posing of this difficult question before a woman touches what is the most sensitive aspect of Iranian visual culture: What does a woman want? Does she want to leave him and embrace the chance of reviving a more authentic life of passion with Hamed? What is to become of two separate marriages accidentally but deeply touched by the apparent rekindling of an old love? *Duet* fails to answer these questions.

Hamed assures his wife, Nikoo (Hadieh Tehrani), and Sepideh that he has moved beyond the memory of the past relationship, and Sepideh implies the same. But this assurance leaves neither of the couples any happier as, in effect, an abyss has opened up in their lives. The movie ends with Hamed and Nikoo's house, which was to undergo renovations in the opening scene. In this final scene, the house has leaks in its ceilings and walls, which is a visual metaphor to suggest that the new life beyond the bygone love of the prime years has not sustained itself.

Like many others of the past decade depicting scenes of crisis among the middleclass, this film uses an open ending to make up for its failure to resolve the conflict presented. This decision is not simply a stylistic cinematic choice. It is rooted in the real loss of language capable of articulating the characters' desires and their intentions to resolve them.

Jahan, *dance with me* (Jahan ba man beraghs, 2018) presents a similar theme, though with starkly different scenery and figures. While among longtime, close friends who have gathered in his charming villa outside the city to celebrate his birthday, the film establishes that the protagonist, Jahan (Ali Mosaffa), has been diagnosed with a terminal cancer and is awaiting his imminent death. The existential brooding of his last days in contrast with the pastoral world that comprises the setting of the film. This scenery is all too familiar to the Iranian audience: the north (Shomal) is a place in which the middle class has taken refuge since 1979 revolution, both in real life and on the screen, to find respite from the oppressive urban life in the big cities.

The joyful convening of old friends, including couples and would-be lovers, soon reveals tensions, conflicts, misunderstandings, and unhealed wounds from the past. One female character in particular sums up many of the standard traits of a happy-go-lucky Tehrani middle class, as she is married to a wealthy man and fascinated with Korean and Turkish soap operas. She has a notebook to write down “insightful words” from the romantic series she obsessively watches. A naïve figure obsessed with Instagram, Nahid (Hanieh Tavassoli) happens to be the only guest who has no qualms speaking her mind about others and thus spontaneously says the hard truths to them. She inadvertently spurs a series of self-reflective scenes which bring up topics like friendship, betrayal, marriage, cheating, and love, usually in one-on-one dialogues. At the heart of all these issues lies the threat of death with which Jahan grapples.

How does the movie represent death? There are no moments of weakness, sickness, or frailty. Jahan, in a melancholic mood throughout the movie, remains a healthy-looking man surrounded by friends he realizes he cherishes as the most important part of his life. We do not see his death, but only the funeral of an elderly neighbor, and the drama ends with everyone circling a bonfire against the backdrop of a picturesque landscape, singing and dancing. The resolution the movie offers to its conflict is a model of symbiosis in friendship, where the fear of death is easily overcome and drowned in music. We see the characters grappling with hard feelings and emotional knots— between two lovers, two friends, a daughter and a father (Jahan himself), the newlyweds. Patience, listening, and sympathy modestly contribute to untying those knots, but they nevertheless occur thanks only to death hovering on the horizon. However, this idea of death as a presence forcing characters to appreciate all moments of life is not present in the movie except in an intense suicide attempt scene and the following satirical dream scene where Jahan, hung from the tree, is accompanied with three musicians sitting on the branch of the same tree, playing a traditional farcical tune. The lyrics make fun of the injunction to do exercise in order to have a healthy life, which Jahan has obeyed his entire life, and yet he still faces a premature death. What work does this disturbing scene of self-strangulation, and then the ridicule of death in a picturesque and charming landscape, perform in the movie?

The scene subjects the movie itself, punctuated by unrelated instances of a string quartet playing, to a parody. The postal-card depiction

of the string quartet playing along, if not for, Jahan’s looming death, correspond to the branch musicians playing for the hung Jahan. This parodic doubling in this moment endows the film with an awareness of the futility of any attempt to resolve the question of death in its felicitous affirmation of life. The middle class has learned to consider this affirmation as the last refuge from the oppressive forces governing its life in the city.⁸

A visually disintegrating home – as in *A Separation*, Farhadi’s *The Salesman* (2018), and Abdolreza Kahani’s *Useless and Pointless* (*Bikhodvabijehat* 2012)– and nature as a haven of retreat– reminiscent of Kiarostami’s main poetic achievement in his earlier movies – constitute elements of a restless, economically weakened, politically stunned society’s self-understanding.

3.

The middle class has been characterized by a number of traits, including its cultural tendencies, among other criteria.⁹For many, “Class is a state of mind. Rather than through bank account balances or résumés, class is revealed through a combination of aspirations and attitudes, self-perception, or behavioral norms, preferences, and tastes.”¹⁰The middle class is a class aware of its own appearances, organizing its needs in such a way as to find both material and spiritual nourishment. It seeks to find its image in society and rejoices at its own representations. It demands freedom– at least freedom of choice.

The middle class is not just an objective category or a category of objective reality. That is, the description it promises to give of the ways individuals, groups, companies, parties, and associations relate to each other to establish and reproduce their social being is not free from subjective elements. The vast theoretical disarray in defining the middle class in both scholarly and political discourse shows that unlike the other two poles of class formations (the working class and the owners the means of production), subjectivity constitutes a key element in the concept of the middle class.¹¹ The reason behind this lies not least in the cultural mission historically assigned to this class, real or semi-fictional. As essentially professional-managerial bonds among individuals in virtue of their knowledge and technical skills, the middle class is naturally prone to better grasp words, images, media, and irony.

Iranian cinema in the past decade shows dramatic individual efforts to become middle class or to preserve their perceived or promised middle-class status. If we accept this idea as a real tendency in Iranian cinema, then impoverishment and pauperization introduce dominant themes or obstacles. The overcoming of these barriers then emerges as the protagonists’ biggest pathos. Tala (2019) offers a good example of turning the core of bourgeois initiative in civil society. The premise of the movie is simple, all-too-contemporary, and in full accord with the entrepreneurial injunctions of the preceding decade: four Tehranians in their twenties and thirties decide to establish a business in downtown Tehran: a modest restaurant which sells soups. All of them belong to a struggling lower middle class, or rather petty-bourgeoisie, except for

one whose father owns a currency exchange office.

The film follows the group's steps towards realizing their idea: negotiating to rent a place, consulting with a designer friend to renovate it, purchasing cooking and serving appliances, talking with a chef, and convincing the city health inspector to issue the restaurant license (probably by bribing him). What they desperately need, however, is capital. Despite their efforts to take out bank loans, how the they manage to raise money put them on a path of conflict with their families, creditors, the police, and among themselves.

This film is particularly concerned with two of characters. One of the them, Darya (Negar Javaherian), suggests to her partner that they can take the foreign currency (dollars) that her father acquired illegally as a result of shady dealings in his small store and kept in his safe. Ethically, this idea seems more or less justified, as she says it is "her money" too. She proposes that her lover Mansoor (Human Seyyedi) executes the plan.

The movie's film noir turn starts here. We do not see what happens in the basement of the exchange store where the safe is located, but it proves consequential for the fate of everyone involved. Darya's father is said to have had a fatal stroke in there and later we find that Mansoor has taken far more money from the safe than Darya had suggested to pay off their debts and share with their friends for their nascent business. Why does Mansoor do this and try to keep it from his lover? He does so to pay for the medical operation his young but seriously ill niece, Tala (Fatemeh Mortazi), requires. (The proper name, Tala, though not very common, means 'gold' in Farsi). The police get involved, but a betrayed, grieving, and scared Darya allows Mansoor, his brother, and Tala to keep the money, and helps them in leaving the country illegally. It was only in the car, minutes before Mansoor sets on his trip with Tala, that she discovers this betrayal by looking into his bag and seeing that he has stolen all of her father's money. Stunned and heartbroken, she nevertheless gives him everything and lets him go. The final scenes narrate the familiar heart-wrenching fate of illegal migrants finding their way through unforgiving terra into reach Turkey and then Europe. Faced by two evil smugglers, Mansoor sacrifices himself to help Tala and his father to escape successfully. In a point-of-view shot, we see the bushes in front of his face while his eyes gently close. The short final scene shows us the success of the business, with three friends running a crowded soup shop. The movie ends with Darya turning her eyes to the camera, perhaps in a response to her lover's closing eyes from the camera's view.

Is this a completed ending, departing from the three other movies we discussed? It may seem so, but there remains one element in the movie that is left unresolved: Darya's dead father, grieving mother, and grandfather. To see the family, we need to consider what prevents the moment of truth in Darya's relationship with them.

Economic failure- a refusal of the idea that entrepreneurial spirit and the trickle-down economy will save everyone- constitutes the central

theme of the movie.¹² The dealings with the judges and the police to solve familial and contractual conflicts are unsuccessful, just as the law failed both families in *A Separation*. Friendship also proves too troublesome to be a genuine foundation for survival. Moreover, although Darya's love for Mansoor is real and effective, the fact that it was her many faulty suggestions that put everyone on a road to perdition introduces a problematic aspect to her love. Why did she not listen to Mansoor's recurrent warnings about what her plans would entail? Was she not equally involved in the delusion that they could run a successful business without enough capital and connections?

Her love for Mansoor and her final act of generosity, although tainted by doubt, ultimately offers a basis for a conclusive ending: a redeeming act. This drama allows two opposing forces, business and love, to coalesce into an extremely fragile state of being. Darya's love, though problematic, manages to salvage the whole situation. Although she had created this situation by transgressing ethical and familial norms, she saves it by transgressing the legal ones. She even reconciles with her friends and business partners by using her father's money to pay for the business.

The highest price she has to pay, however, is losing her family because of her participation in the downfall of her father. The movie says nothing of what will become of her mother, or her grandfather who had suspected his son had been a victim to a conspiracy. The dream restaurant does open in the end, beyond Mansoor and Tala, and yet Tala leaves the conflict at the heart of one key element of Iranian society: that is, family, clearly unresolved, perhaps turning into an open image, or rather an open non-image. We know from earlier in the movie that Darya became pregnant and decided not to have the baby. She kept this a secret, letting only one friend know of it. The final scene, therefore, does not include any metaphor of a new beginning by depicting a toddler, perhaps her and Mansoor's daughter, lighting up their world. Rather, the movie simply avoids going down that path while showing that Tala and Mansoor's father, his main concern throughout the movie, will probably spend their lives overseas. We do not know of their fate. We only know how treacherous and devastating it was for Mansoor to save them. Perhaps this is the movie's nod to a ground for solidarity beyond everyone's passion for an entrepreneurial project. In contemporary Iran, however, there is little room for it.

What is truly and completely resolved in Tala is the soup shop itself, a modest business with good taste and culture. Is this not the triumph of entrepreneurial spirit beyond that of family and patriarchy? If so, then Tala sees family as a powerful institution to dissolve in business, an uncommon concept in Iranian films. When this idea does appear, as in countless depictions of capitalist greed usually defeated by ethical will, the movies tend to either save or mourn it when it is tragically lost to money and materialism.

Is family the destined price for the weakened middle-class prosperity? In a recent article in *The Guardian*, the dominant ethos or lack thereof in the main body of cinematic works of the 2010s has been described as:

“The rich men in these films quickly find out that they can buy anything – people, honor, family, and especially love. The beautiful women learn the same, and also that they can trade their beauty for money.”¹³ Few people living in Iran would deny that this ethos rules the civil society and many would see this unfold on the screen. The problem with this view, in light of the movies I discussed, is not that it offers a dark, pessimistic view of the middle-class life in Iran. On the contrary, this view is not pessimistic enough to see how the disintegration of family and home presents itself, unconsciously, as a necessary, affirmative, condition for becoming middle class.

If there is any flicker of light at the end of this tunnel, it is the avoidance of resolutions that have historically and aesthetically been offered to resolve old problems and new dead-ends. Whether expanding or contracting, the middle class of the present, gloomy decade is yet to produce images in which true endings can be suggested. The rest will have to take place beyond the realm of aesthetic semblances.

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culture/

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In the Middle | **on the Edge**

The Middle Class and the Drug Crisis in Iran

By: Yekta Sarkhosh

Abstract:

The following article will present a short history of drugs and their consumption in Iran and a critical analysis of the development of the penal laws regarding drug use and trade. We will argue that in the last four decades there has been a significant change in the drugs of choice, consumption patterns, and the users' socio-economic status. We attempt to explain this change in terms of its effects on middleclass users through several published scientific studies, statistical data, and related inquiries. Consequently, we will look at the conditions of the current rehabilitation facilities in Iran. Using Agamben's terminology in *Homo Sacer*, we consider the juridical concept of the 'apparent addict' or the 'patient criminal' as an exception within the current paradigm of bio-politics in Iran. Finally, we will take a critical view of the relationship between drugs and the increasingly impoverishing middle class.

Introduction

There is a long history of drug use in Iran, whether recreational or medical, in one form or another, as an occasional pleasure, or as an addiction. One finds various historical and literary texts with references to, at least, opium and cannabis. From classical masterpieces such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* or Asadi Toosi's *Garshasnameh* to modern works like Sadiq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, Persian literature contains numerous allusions to drugs and their use.

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Middle, on
the Edge:

Essays
on Iran's
Middle Class
Poor

In his *Drugs Politics: Managing Disorder in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Maziyar Ghiabi argues that the working class' use of opium reached its maximum during the seizure of Iran by the Allies in 1941-1946.¹ According to him, the middle and working classes' turn to opium was their reaction to a policy ordered and executed by the Allies, particularly by the Soviet Union, according to which production of opium was declared forbidden within 22 regions of Iran - a policy which turned out to be a total failure. Poppy producers decreased the price of opium firmly, knowing the State would face difficulties in filling the national reservoir of opium and therefore would require to order more cultivation. With opium being then so cheap, many Iranians of the working and middle classes began to use it, so that opium and its derivatives became popular drugs among this class.²

According to a recent article by Shogh Alshoara, published in *Aftab Yazd* newspaper, drug use is still very common among workers in Iran. Based on the statistics published by this paper, almost 22.3 percent of Iranian workers use drugs constantly.³

But the problem of drug use by the working and middle classes in Iran, particularly in the last century, involves at the same time a policy of preventing the working men from using opium in order to optimize their performance. Such policies were implemented as the opium use peaked among workers, office agents, and their wives. An opium addict was portrayed as a weak man without any willpower who damaged society and its development and hence had to be cured.

Current Statistics of Drug Use in Iran

During the last decades, there have been two different approaches trying to resolve the 'crisis of drugs' in Iran, none of them having any significant success: extreme criminalization of drug use on one hand, and a medical and pathological approach on the other. One saw addicts as criminals while the other regarded them as patients. More than four decades of fighting against drug use, drug addiction, and drug trade, through all kinds of punishment measures including extended prison sentences and in some cases even the death penalty, collecting 'apparent addicts' from streets and incarcerating them in compulsory rehabilitation facilities (which have, according to reports and eye-witnesses, horrible inhuman conditions), could not solve the problem at all. Far from being resolved, the drug crisis in Iran has worsened.⁴

As drugs became increasingly widespread among various people of different standings, today drug users in Iran are not only homeless poor junkies as illustrated by both the State and the middle class, but rather a spectrum of different people of all classes with their preferences. Saeed Madani, an Iranian sociologist who has written on the problem of drugs in Iran, stated in an interview:

"According to a study, almost 20 percent of Iranian workers (ab)use drugs. So it's not like addicts are only those homeless junkies you see on the streets. There are also a lot of workers and professionals among them. So when those responsible for our country's development are addicted to drugs, that means we are in a critical state."⁵

The most recent official statistics on drug users in Iran by the Committee against Drugs is from 2019. According to this Committee's chairman, there are over 2.8 million constant users in Iran, that is 4.5 percent of the whole population, with 22.3% of them being workers, 7.4% students, and 6% women.⁶

However, even these figures are not accurate. Based on a study by Factnameh, this official percentage of female addicts could not be confirmed by various inquiries. The accurate percentage was around 12% after the 1979 revolution and then declined to 10 % between 1360-1394, as reported by most independent studies.⁷

On the other hand, the aforementioned number of 7 percent of Iranian students as constant users of drugs is significant because the policy of privatization of education in Iran has practically made universities a place for students coming from middleclass families. Studies show that higher education is becoming a privilege only certain classes could afford. Based on these studies, one could indirectly conclude that the 7 percent of students who are drug addicts mostly belong to the urban middle class.⁸

In Iran, accurate figures and statistics regarding drugs are not made available to the public. These published numbers, although official, are therefore estimated to be inaccurate, ambiguous, and diminished compared to reality.⁹

According to the annual world report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Iran still has the highest rate of drug tendency and also the highest amount of opium consumption worldwide.¹⁰

A History of Drugs in Iran from Safavi to Pahlavi

According to Rudi Matthee, historian and author of several books on Iranian history, in *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, the oldest allusion to opium use in Iran is in a text dating back to the era of the Sasani dynasty. For Matthee, it appears to exist a straight line linking Safavi's to the Islamic Republic, Majlesi to Khomeini.¹¹ Interestingly, it was at this point during Safavi's rule that, apparently for the first time in Iran's history, addiction to drugs was considered a serious 'issue' or a pathological 'problem' - not only for the addict as an individual but also for the society as a whole. Consequently, first punitive laws against drug consumption and trade emerged then, including a death penalty issued by order of King Abbas II.¹²

Poppy cultivation in Iran dates back to the late 11th or 12th century, but according to Fereydoon Adamiyat, “the production and consumption of opium were rare up until mid-19th century”.¹³ According to Matthee, based on existing historical records, opium was common during Ghajar’s as well as Safavi’s, although its mode of consumption changed from eating it to smoking it with a pipe. He argues that this change caused opium addiction to become a widespread problem in Iran which was not socially acceptable anymore.¹⁴

On the other hand, it was during Ghajar’s rule that poppy cultivation and opium production became widely popular to a great extent. It was so profitable to cultivate poppies that it grew to replace other crops as well. Some historians believe that this extreme cultivation of poppies played a role in the great famine back then which annihilated almost one-tenth of the whole population. According to Tarikh Montazem Naseri, it was first during Amir Kabir’s ministry in 1267 that the preplanned massive cultivation of poppies began in the suburbs of Tehran. After that opium became a valuable item for export. Exporting opium abroad was at the time a source of income for the State.¹⁵

Rudi Matthee writes:

“Unlike alcohol, opium and cannabis did not carry a religious stigma in premodern Iran; indeed, both qualified as legitimate substitutes for wine. Long eaten rather than smoked, opium especially was well integrated into society, so well in fact that French observers of Safavid society likened its use to that of wine in their home country, arguing that Iranians knew how to deal with it and generally did not succumb to its addictive qualities.”¹⁶

Travelers visiting Iran during those times mentioned the production and consumption of opium and hashish in their writings. Jacob Eduard Polak, a Jewish Austrian doctor who had a crucial role in the foundation of modern medicine in Iran, described Iranians and their lifestyle in his book from an anthropological view. He mentions opium and hashish and describes different kinds of opium produced in Iran: “Opium is consumed commonly and it is not forbidden nor considered an embarrassment like smoking hashish, it is accepted among people. Almost any Iranian who can afford it eats at least a bit of opium every day...”¹⁷

In 1945, with the increasing growth of drug addiction and smuggling, the State issued a law forbidding both poppy cultivation and opium consumption. However, as opium production continued in neighboring countries like Afghanistan and then smuggled into Iran, the State began a new policy regarding opium production and consumption in 1968. The addicts were divided into two groups: those above 60 years old who were registered as permitted users of opium for whom limited poppy cultivation was allowed, and the rest being illegal users. According to this plan, the whole process of opium production was exclusively operated under State’s supervision, while addicts who were working for

the government had 6 months to get clean or were otherwise fired.

This rather permissive approach towards older addicts did not last long. Although there seems to be no studies available on the effect of this plan on the addiction rate, other countries’ similar methods and experiences with decriminalization of drug use have been quite efficient.

As Maziar Ghiabi argues, Reza Shah’s State had a dual policy towards opium: On one hand, he wanted to restrain opium and its use as part of his modernist view, while on the other hand, his newly established State needed the revenue of opium production. From 1925 onwards, Iran produced 30 percent of the world’s opium with revenues as high as 9 percent of total gross domestic product.¹⁸

After the coup of 1953, Pahlavi’s State was concerned with the creation of a moral public, whether in political terms (anti-communism, westernized), or in social terms (productive, healthy, and law-abiding). Iran, in a special program inaugurated in November 1955, established treatment centers to provide withdrawal and short-term rehabilitation for addicts.¹⁹

The Society for the Fight against Alcohol and Opium, which was established in 1943, in its campaign against addiction, targeted Iranian workers. Opium was depicted as the source of all evils, a great threat to workers’ families and an impediment to labor and production. Coincidentally, the government issued a ban on the fifteen-minute work break for opium smokers. The employment of officials had to be based on their avoidance of opium use, a behavior that could have cost them their place at work.²⁰

Drug Politics in Iran after the 1979 Revolution

After the 1979 revolution, the new regime started a large-scale campaign against drugs, addicts, and dealers. Not only bars and liquor stores were shut down in the whole country due to the Islamic ban on alcohol, but a serious effort to solve the problem of drugs started, although after more than four decades the problem still exists today, even more severe and widespread than before. From the extreme measures and severe punishments of the radical approach to erase addicts altogether advocated by Sadegh Khalkhali to an approach trying to ‘manage the disorders’ and ‘control the crisis’, drug users have been the experimental guinea pigs of all different kinds of plans and programs by the State.

The first change in regards to the penal code concerning drug-related crimes dates back as early as a few months after the revolution. According to the new administration, the ‘revolutionary court’, not the civil court, had to deal with the crimes of production, distribution, and consumption of drugs. The civil courts which had tried these crimes mostly gave mild and sometimes different sentences. These sentences did not fit the revolutionary atmosphere, and therefore all those cases

were referred to the new revolutionary courts.

It was not surprising that Khalkhali was chosen by President Banisadr as the director of the organization against drugs. He was already known as a cruel and determined judge who was notably responsible for massive hasty executions in the early days after the revolution. Khalkhali had promised to eradicate all drugs and drug dealers in Iran so that no addicts would be left in the country. Harshly cruel actions such as the execution of addicts, long imprisonment sentences, and banishment to faraway locations are part of Khalkhali's dark resume. He resigned in 1981. His illusion of permanently solving the entire problem through the physical elimination of those responsible for the production and distribution of drugs was influenced by the radical political atmosphere in Iran in those days.²¹ The Committee against Drugs was founded in 1988 with the President at its head. That same year was established the first comprehensive set of laws against drugs, which was revised in 1997.

The foundation of the 'Islamic society' was made possible through massive executions of those who supposedly belonged or advocated the Pahlavi regime, the oppression and the destruction of politically dissenting groups (leftists, Mujaheds, etc.), and probably the least important from the majority's viewpoint, the elimination of "junkies" and "potheads". Therefore, a monotone and clean image of an Islamic society was depicted with healthy believers as its members. It was this image that the new regime needed to promote, one in which there could be no drug user or addict. The same way the ban on alcohol was enforced based on Islamic law, the consumption of drugs was seen as an 'immoral' act not justified by the new ideology. This was the beginning of a total criminalization of drug use in Iran after the revolution.

Saeed Madani writes in his *Drug Addiction in Iran*: "For post-revolution authorities, addiction was a counter-revolutionary behavior supported by imperialist powers to destroy Islam and the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, harsh juridical and penal measures had to be applied to solve this problem once and for all."²²

All kinds of anti-drug propaganda in various forms in films and TV have been targeting addicts, representing them in contemptuously negative ways. Consequently, there has often been a predominant general view against drugs that regarded addicts as radical evil. Drug addicts were not only considered as "parasites" in society, but they were also the first usual suspects whenever a heinous crime like murder or rape was committed.

However, the other pathological, medical, or psychiatric views on addicts as patients have grown dominant in the last decades in Iran as the middle class became conscious of the fact that many of these addicts - criminals before and patients now - do belong to families of the same class. Those who wished for a society without addicts and drugs found out that the imprisonment and execution of addicts could not be the solution. The Iranian State's approach to the problem of drugs has been a mixture of both penal and medical ones, as numerous rehabilitation

facilities, addiction-therapy clinics, methadone substitute programs, and NA sessions arose.

Nonetheless, there has never been a total change of approach towards drug users as the criminality of consumption still exists along with severe punishments such as long imprisonment and in some cases even the death penalty. There are also inequalities among addicts based on their socio-economic status. It is not surprising that the majority of drug-related crimes are committed by poor people of lower classes, although addiction is very much common among people of the upper classes too.

Today, there are numerous clinics for addiction treatment and rehabilitation in every city in Iran. Methadone programs are widely available as well, particularly in upper middle class neighborhoods in Tehran, along with NGO rehabilitation centers in other regions for lower middle class patients.

In 2007, a group of researchers conducted a study on the risk of HIV infection among addicts who injected heroin in Tehran. They found out that addicts who lived in southern Tehran and belonged to the lower classes mostly smoked opium. According to one of their participants who supposedly used to have a good income yet moved to a lower economic status at the time of the study due to his addiction, injecting seems to be more common among addicts from the upper middle class.²³ He told the researchers: "Those who inject are from well-to-do educated families because they are afraid that the others might find out about their drug use."²⁴

Morad Farhadpour, a prominent Iranian intellectual, reflects on the dialectics of drugs and politics in his short essay titled "The Inside and Outside of Drug Addiction". Remembering the 1980s Iran, he writes:

"In those days [the 1980s], the problem of drug addiction was one for which the society approved any measures to be taken, and the urban middle classes supported the State in doing so. Addiction was the dark truth behind the simple lifestyle of the 80s in which, even in that bare space without any temptations, a certain desire existed to go to the extremes, to have an intensive experience that could transform one's entire life. In this sense, this was the other hidden side of the social facts of the 80s in which one witnessed a kind of social complexity, violence, and psychological tensions while the body connected to this social reality through a chemical substance. The violence imposed upon addicts at that time in addition to the massive executions and the special rehab camps were all other aspects of the relationship between the Power and the addiction as a phenomenon, and this violence functioned as a mechanism of reconstruction for the authoritarian centralized State that controlled everything. The early executions after the 1979 revolution transformed the structure of drug dealers and then the drug consumption itself. During that time, the initial violence destroyed the traditional forms of distribution and consumption as well as the social norms and relations they required. After that, the scene was then open and ready for the drug enterprise to develop through consumerism

and world market capitalism the same way it did everywhere else. The breaking of traditional structures of provider-consumer opened the way for globalization as well. The whole thing somehow spread like a virus and it also transformed the consumption. There were now no more age or gender limits. The extreme violence against the addicts in the 80s was approved explicitly or implicitly by the middle class to a great extent. It was like a trigger that made the space empty for the whole story to begin once again on a bigger scale. Therefore, the drug economy was somehow merged with the process of Iran being incorporated in the global capitalism, with consumerism, with the growth of population, etc.”²⁵

In other words, the decentralization of drug trade through the destruction of known hotspots of dealers and their dissemination to the entire society took place at the same time as the change in the substances and the prevalence of stronger chemical drugs. The middle class has considered the State policies against addicts as vital steps towards urban modernization. This class was hand-in-hand with the State in the oppressive and violent acts against -mostly poor homeless - addicts in the last decades through various plans and programs promoted as ‘beautification of the city’, ‘arresting thugs’, etc.

Amir Kianpour points out this cooperation between the middle class and the State against the addicts in his text titled “The Islamic Republic of Camps”:

“Since the beginning of the Revolution until now, the problem of drug addiction, in contrast to the issues of compulsory hijab, freedom of speech, or the economic crisis, has been a point upon which both State and society - particularly the middle class - have been in consensus. This consensus and cooperation between society and State on the problem of drugs, particularly since the 1990s, as the ‘normalization’ of the status quo, became even more apparent and concrete. One could see the same logic in the private rehabilitation camps which are as horrible as the State-funded ones. Today, hundreds of these private camps are imposing society’s violence on one of its most rejected parts, addicts, and in doing so, they are no different than the notorious State camps like Shoorabad.”²⁶

In the last four decades, the modes and paradigms of drug consumption have changed in Iran, as new chemical substances such as methamphetamine became increasingly popular. Although opium and other opioids are still more popular, there seems to be a shift of interest towards these industrial drugs among Iranian users. But the consumers themselves have changed too: the popularity of such substances among workers, office-goers, and also the educated does not match the traditional image of an addict as an idle unemployed person who lives like a parasite.

The typical meth addict today is not idle but works overtime. With the economic crisis and the high rate of unemployment, some use these uppers so that they could work more hours and need less food and sleep. If the workers used opium in the past to rest a bit, today they use meth

to work even more.

Maziar Ghiabi addresses the epidemic of meth in Iran in a chapter of his book:

“As such, shisheh [Farsi slang term for methamphetamine] was initially the drug of choice among professionals in Tehran, who in the words of a recovered shisheh user, was used ‘to work more, to make more money’. Yet after its price decreased substantially, shisheh became popular among all social strata, including students and women, as well as the rural population. By 2010, it was claimed that 70 per cent of drug users were (also) using shisheh and that the price of it had dropped by roughly 400 per cent compared to its first appearance in the domestic market.”²⁷

On the other hand, a new generation of drug users has emerged in Iran who is nothing like the cliché of the ‘junkies’ depicted in films and TV series. These are often young educated middleclass boys and girls who turn to drugs with a knowledge of their effects, and their drug of choice is not the traditional opium but cannabis or psychedelics. One should not ignore the abuse of pharmaceutical drugs or so-called smart drugs among students too. It is quite common for them to abuse certain drugs like Ritalin expecting deeper concentration and better cognitive efficiency.”²⁸

Bare Life of Homeless Addicts and Camp Politics

Farhadpour, in his critical reflection on the concept of “Oriental Despotism”, provides his account of the dialectics of drugs and the political throughout Iranian history. For him, in pre-modern Iran, the ‘outside’ was a space of permanent fright and terror, where the sovereign could do whatever he wished to anyone without any reason. In contrast, the ‘inside’ was the safe and secure marginal place in which individuals could find some rest and pleasure. However, this duality of interior and exterior disintegrates under modernity:

“In modernity, the interior and the exterior merge into each other in many ways, and therefore, the experience and function of drugs become dialectical as well. Strong opioids like heroin drive the individual into an abstract inner world, in a way that the extreme loneliness of the individual leads to his total isolation from the society.”²⁹

Jacques Derrida says in an interview titled “The Rhetoric of Drugs”:

“What do we hold against the drug addict? Something we never, at least never to the same degree, hold against the alcoholic or the smoker: that he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction. We disapprove of his taste for something like hallucinations. No doubt, we should have to make some distinction between so-called hallucinogens and other

drugs, but the distinction is wiped out in the rhetoric of fantasy that is at the root of any prohibition of drugs: drugs make us lose any sense of true reality. In the end, it is always, I think, under this charge that the prohibition is declared. We do not object to the drug user's pleasure per se, but we cannot abide the fact that his is a pleasure taken in an experience without truth. Pleasure and play (now still as with Plato) are not in themselves condemned unless they are inauthentic and void of truth... [...] The drug addict, in our common conception, the drug addict as such produces nothing, nothing true or real. He is legitimate only in certain cases, secretly and inadmissibly, for certain portions of society, and only in as much as he participates, at least indirectly, in the production and consumption of goods..."³⁰

The addict, because they do not actively participate in the process of the capital's production and reproduction, is problematic in the capitalist society and the middle class. They do not follow the consumerist logic of modern society and reduces all commodities to one - the substance to which they are addicted. In this way, the addict's lifestyle is a reverse bleak shadow of the militant revolutionary's. If the latter signifies the ultimate activity against the existing order, the former rejects it by their pure inactivity.

The addict, as an individual member of modern society, must participate in the production and reproduction, yet due to their lifestyle is unable to do so. The cliché perception of addicts as parasites of society derives from this notion. The drug user is not excluded from social relations immediately. An addict loses their symbolic status as an individual more or less entirely and, from the outside, is reduced to mere biological existence, as such deprived of any human dignity - a bare body. This description of a homeless addict seems to be very similar to how Giorgio Agamben defines Homo Sacer.³¹ To provide an example, in his Remnants of Auschwitz, Agamben describes a group of Jews in Nazi concentration camps who had lost all their will to live.³² They were called 'Muselmanns' in the jargon of the camps. One may compare their condition in some ways to that of the homeless addicts in Iran today. They are deprived of social support even from the NGOs and since their whole existence is reduced to their addiction, the only possible help offered to them is sending them to the so-called 'p. 16' compulsory rehabilitation facilities (Shafaq was only one of these notorious camps which got closed temporarily due to several reported fatal incidents yet reopened after a while again).

The 'p. 16' compulsory rehabilitation facilities are meant for the so-called 'apparent' addicts who are collected off the streets and taken there without their consent. The current Iranian penal laws against drugs (paragraph. 15, 16) make a distinction between the 'apparent addicts' and 'voluntary withdrawing addicts': only addicts who will sign up voluntarily in a rehabilitation facility or an alternative withdrawal treatment are exempt from criminal charges, otherwise they are charged as criminals: "Based on paragraph 16 of the criminal law against drugs, apparent drug addicts have to be treated in authorized establishments by juridical order for a duration of one to three months which could prolong when necessary."

Ghiabi, also using Agamben's terminology, sees the space between these two laws as a gray zone of State control/oppression that enables the paradigm of 'managing the disorder'. He, in turn, points out the similarity of the concept of 'patient criminal' to that of Homo Sacer:

"The legal status of the addict, within the current regime of drug control, is one of naked life, whose civil/political dimension is questioned and relegated to a grey area. Naked life is life stripped of rights. The denouement of the addicts' rights produces political control over their life, making them a subject at the mercy of politico-juridical control, and an element in the political economy of treatment (e.g. State-run camps)."³³

Far from being resolved, the problem of drug consumption and addiction in Iran is today even more severe. Both predominant approaches towards this issue, i.e. the criminal and the pathological, have justified the juridical-penal measures against drug users/addicts regardless of their substance and mode of consumption. A certain cliché perception of addicts appears to be prevalent among the middle class, although a great number of those addicts in fact belong to the same class. On the other hand, the increasing economic crisis in Iranian society, in the last decades, has caused the impoverishing of the middle class to the extent of degrading it to an impoverished lower middle class. A section of this class, on the verge of bankruptcy and a financial breakdown, turned to commit drug-related crimes to earn their living. Consequently, the relationship between the middle class and the problem of drugs is a complex and multidimensional one that requires further studies in the future.

Endnotes

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Essays on
Iran's Middle
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