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# ORDER AND DISORDER: THE POLITICS OF SEMINARIES IN IRAN

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On November 9, 2022, a group of clerics in Qom, Iran's most prominent religious learning center for Shi'a Muslims, issued a statement condemning the government's violent crackdown on "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests.<sup>1</sup> Sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini while in police custody for "improper" veiling on September 16, 2022, protests engulfed the country over the following months and led to the arrest of tens of thousands of protesters and the death of hundreds more, including several executions.

The statement, from a reformist/activist faction known as the Qom Seminary Lecturers and Scholars Assembly (*Majma'e Moddaresin-e va Mohaqiqin-e Howzeh Elmiye-ye Qom*), challenged the government's efforts to portray the clerical establishment as united behind Iran's leadership. Though many clerics have offered their support for the government's actions or simply remained silent during the political upheavals, several top and middle-ranking clerics have openly or indirectly condemned the government's suppression of the protests. So, although many associate the clerical establishment with unified support for the Islamic Republic, these developments reveal a more complex relationship between the clergy and state in Iran.

Eradicating dissent among clerics and extending state control over Shi'i seminaries has been pursued vigorously during the past three decades. Under the banner of ending "disorder" within the seminaries—a characteristic that many clerics value as a means of preserving their autonomy—the government has sought to align the seminaries with the Islamic Republic's policies through reform of their management, teaching methods, and curriculum. Why has achieving this objective remained elusive for the Islamic Republic? How can the politics of the control of seminaries help us better understand clerical divisions in Iran and the varied reactions of clerics to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests?

To answer these questions, this Brief first identifies three main trends within the clergy under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979–89) and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989–), in order to identify the main factions and dissenting voices within the clerical establishment. Next, it highlights the historical formation and consolidation of the Shi'i jurists' status and its implications for the clergy-state relationship under the Islamic Republic. It then proceeds to examine the Islamic Republic's ongoing efforts to centralize control

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over seminaries across the country, and concludes by exploring the reactions of clerics in Iran to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests.

The Brief argues that the Islamic Republic’s attempt to introduce “order” has been hindered by the multiple sources of authority within the Shi‘i seminaries as well as ongoing resistance from clerics. Rather than subduing the clergy and bringing seminaries under its control, the state’s efforts have had the opposite effect, exacerbating divisions within the clerical establishment and bolstering the resolve, on the part of not only reformist/activist clerics but also conservative ones, to voice their opposition to the state’s interference.

## CLERICAL FACTIONALISM SINCE 1979

The history of the Islamic Republic has been marked by many challenges from within the clerical establishment. The clerics played a leading role in the 1978–79 mass mobilization against the Shah, and their support has been central to state legitimacy. Following the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the doctrine of *vilayat-i faqih* (governance by the Islamic jurist<sup>2</sup>), which was enshrined in the country’s constitution as justification for clerical rule over the state, became the subject of both theological and political debate. Some prominent ayatollahs, such as Hassan Tabatabaei Qomi, Mohammad al-Shirazi, and Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, criticized different aspects of the doctrine, which led to their house arrest, and to unrest among their followers. With the consolidation of power on the part of pro-Khomeini clerics after 1981, clerical factionalism became a significant characteristic of Iranian politics.

During the 1980s, issues such as land reform, workers councils, and the nationalization of foreign trade created divisions within the Islamic Republic, causing a deep rift within the clerical establishment. These divisions were so pronounced that by the late 1980s, the most important political clergy body in Iran, known as the Tehran Combatant Clergy Association (*Jameh-ye Ruhaniyat-e Mobarez-e Tehran*), split into two rival blocs. They sharply disagreed over the state’s economic policies—such as the labor law proposed by the leftist cabinet of Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi (1981–89) and rejected by many conservative clerics associated with the Combatant Clergy Association. The radicals amongst the clergy, known as the “traditional left,” defected and established a separate entity known as the Combatant Clergy Assembly (*Majma‘e Ruhanyun-e Mobarez*), which became the genesis of the reformist movement in the post-Khomeini era. Under Khamenei’s leadership, clerical factionalism continued to evolve, creating rifts within the seminaries and between the ayatollahs over a range of political and cultural issues.

This clerical factionalism is also evident among *mujtahids* (Shi‘i jurists) and within Iranian seminaries, as *mujtahids* who vocally

endorse hardliners represent just one faction among them. Prominent ayatollahs in this faction, which openly endorses the Islamic Republic's policies, are Hossein Noori-Hamedani, Naser Makarem-Shirazi, Jafar Subhani, and Abdullah Javadi-Amuli: They have been steadfast in their support for Ayatollah Khamenei during political upheavals. Following the disputed 2009 presidential election, for example, all these *mujtahids* made statements in support of Ayatollah Khamenei and condemned the continuation of the protests. During the more recent "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests, they have likewise expressed steadfast support for the Supreme Leader.

A second faction comprises *mujtahids* who tend to avoid taking a stance for or against the state and are commonly referred to as "the silent." Among them are Ayatollahs Hossein Vahid-Khorasani, Mousa Shubayri-Zanjani, Javad 'Alavi-Borujerdi, and Mostafa Mohaqiq-Damad. In the wake of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests, however, the latter two ayatollahs have expressed disapproval of some government policies related to women's rights, including the enforcement of veiling. 'Alavi-Borujerdi, whose popularity and influence in Iran have recently increased, has suggested his disapproval of state intervention in the affairs of the seminaries by observing that "some people in the seminary want everyone to think like themselves."<sup>3</sup> He has also expressed concern regarding the gap between people and clerics resulting from the government's suppression of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests.

Given the transnational nature of the clerical network, it is important to note that Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who is based in Najaf, Iraq, has a prominent influence within this second faction. He has developed a large following among Iranians who see him as a clerical model of "leading from behind" or providing influence and guidance while allowing others to rise to the forefront. Although Sistani never makes a public remark for or against the Iranian leadership, it is noticeable how he tries to maintain distance from the Islamic Republic and uphold his Najaf-oriented seminary tradition.<sup>4</sup> For example, when President Ebrahim Raisi, who is considered a hardliner, visited Iraq in 2021, Sistani declined to receive him—and for many in Iran, that decision was taken as signaling that Sistani was conveying his disapproval of the hardline clerical faction in Tehran. But Sistani did receive the then Iranian president and reformist-leaning Hassan Rouhani when he visited Najaf in 2019.

The third group of *mujtahids*, which includes Ayatollahs Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi and Asadollah Bayat-Zanjani, have openly criticized the state. Sadiq al-Shirazi, who

is based in Qom, has faced restrictions owing to his differing view on the issue of *vilayat-i faqih* (governance by the Islamic jurist). In 2018, his son was detained after the ayatollah made an analogy between the status of the Supreme Leader and the Pharaohs of Egypt. Bayat-Zanjani, a middle-rank *mujtahid*, has opposed human rights abuses in Iran and questioned enforcing the hijab. He belongs to a reformist/activist bloc of clerics, many of them students of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who came to openly oppose Khamenei as Supreme Leader and spoke out against what Montazeri called the state's interference in matters of *marj'iyat* (religious authority) as well as in the governance of seminaries. Since Montazeri's death in 2009, his students and acolytes have continued collective activities, both to preserve his theological legacy and to provide a dissenting voice within the seminaries through pulpit speeches and writings. Such activities have been met with government bans—and in some cases have resulted in the arrests and imprisonment of Montazeri's students and family members.

The reformist/activist bloc has organized its activities within two clerical entities in Qom and Isfahan. One is the aforementioned Qom Seminary Lecturers and Scholars Assembly, which includes several top- and middle-ranking clerics with reformist tendencies, and which has been a bastion of dissenting clerics since 1998. Bayat-Zanjani, Mohammad Taghi Fazel-Maybudi, and Serajeddin Musavi are among the founders and members of this clerical body. As with the bifurcation of the Tehran Combatant Clergy Association in the late 1980s and the emergence of the radical Combatant Clergy Assembly, this reformist assembly emerged from disagreements within the established and dominant Assembly of Seminary Teachers of Qom (*Jame'eh Moddaresin-e Howzeh Elmiye-ye Qom*), which includes conservative *mujtahids* such as Ahmad Jannati and the aforementioned Javadi-Amuli.

The Qom Seminary Lecturers and Scholars Assembly has pursued a reformist agenda and has been targeted by the conservative media for criticizing the crackdown on internal dissent and the house arrest or imprisonment of activists and political figures. These activist clerics have also founded the Seminary Scholars and Lecturers Association (*Anjoman-e Mohaqiqan-e va Moddaresan-e Ruhani*) in Isfahan, a city renowned for centuries-old seminaries divided among conservative, reformist, and pro-state factions.<sup>5</sup> This reformist association includes many students of Montazeri and views itself as carrying on the legacy of reformist *mujtahids* in Isfahan. The multiple sources of authority and diversity of perspectives among clerics and within the seminaries is not simply a product of the Islamic

Republic, however. It is an integral part of the historical and doctrinal development and consolidation of Shi'i jurists in Iran.

## A CITY WITHOUT A GATE

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"The Qom seminary is like a city without a gate . . . open to different people," lamented the Grand Ayatollah Hossein Borujerdi (d. 1961), the supreme cleric in Qom at the time. "Righteous and unrighteous people are not distinguished from each other. I wish there was order and a plan."<sup>6</sup> Borujerdi was referring to the disorganized approach of the seminaries with respect to both student recruitment and training in the 1950s—but addressing disorder within the seminaries, particularly in the city of Qom, Iran's most prominent center for religious learning, continues to be a topic of debate among high-ranking Shi'i jurists to this day. And since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, an added layer of complexity has emerged as the Islamic Republic has made efforts to exert state dominance over the seminaries, create its own clerics, and establish control over high-ranking *mujtahids*. Nonetheless, these centers of learning continue to maintain a degree of independence from the state.<sup>7</sup>

The explanation for this relative independence is the historical formation and consolidation of the *mujtahid* status in accordance with Shi'i jurisprudence. The Shi'i *mujtahids* have the sole authority to exercise *ijtihad* or independent reasoning based on sources of Islamic law. Through the study of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), they become experts qualified to interpret Islamic law and issue legal opinions (*fatwas*). The most qualified *mujtahids* ascend to the highest status of a *marja' taqlid* (source of emulation), who is recognized by having followers, known as emulators. *Ijtihad* provides the doctrinal justification for followers to seek the legal opinions of a specific *marja' taqlid* of their choosing.

This system creates a hierarchy of legal authority, with the most qualified *mujtahids* at the top. Currently, Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf and Ayatollah Vahid-Khorasani in Qom are examples of *marja' taqlids* with large numbers of followers in Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere. These *mujtahids*, who rely on the financial contributions of wealthy individuals (such as bazaar merchants) as well as on support from their followers, decide how to manage seminary affairs, set the monthly stipend amount for their students, and determine the curriculum in the seminaries under their control.

Since 1979, the relationship between the leader of the Islamic Republic, though he is himself a *mujtahid*, and other Shi'i *mujtahids* has been fraught. This partly stems

from the differing legal opinions that Shi'i jurists may hold on issues such as the date of the end of Ramadan celebrations, or their variant positions on human rights or the foreign relations of Iran.

An ongoing source of tension is the question whether the office of Iran's Supreme Leader can override the legal opinion of another *mujtahid*. At the core of this debate is the question of "the independence of the seminary and the clergy."<sup>8</sup> Over the course of recent years, this dispute has come to light in relation to a number of state-backed initiatives, known collectively as "seminaries' educational system reform plan."<sup>9</sup> Though *mujtahids* have themselves long advocated for reform, many are skeptical of state plans to bring "order" to seminaries, fearing that they are a means of imposing control over various aspects of their teaching, over their relationship with their pupils and followers, and over their revenue sources. During a meeting with Ayatollah Alireza 'Arafi, the government-appointed head of seminaries in Iran, Ayatollah Shubayri-Zanjani emphasized the need for clerical independence by remarking that "the seminary should not beg for money from others."<sup>10</sup> His fellow "silent" cleric, Ayatollah 'Alavi-Borujerdi, has similarly stated that "it is essential to preserve the independence of religious authority (*marjaya*) and seminaries."<sup>11</sup> Both fear losing their long-standing independence from the state, which they view as an "honor" that sets them apart from the clerical establishment in the Sunni world.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic has been persistent in asserting its authority as both gatekeeper and overseer with respect to the seminaries.

## THE MANAGEMENT COUNCIL OF THE SEMINARY

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Since 1990, there has been a heightened effort to centralize seminaries across Iran and bring them under state control. As part of this initiative, the Management Council of the Seminary (*Shuray-e Mudiryat-e Howzeh*) underwent reorganization, and loyal clerics were appointed to its leadership. Ayatollah Khamenei elevated the Council to "the center of managing the seminaries," and ordered that "it should be given help and assistance from all sides."<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the Council has undergone an extensive restructuring and expansion resulting in a huge increase in its staff, from twelve members to approximately a thousand. Moreover, its supervisory purview has expanded from its initial limited oversight of seminaries in Qom to encompass all cities throughout the nation. The Council has also progressively seeded seminaries across the country with clerics who share the state's perspective.

The Islamic Republic has cast the reorganization of the Management Council of the Seminary and the government's related objectives as an effort to bring "order" to the seminary system. They have tried to set uniform standards for the seminaries that address the education, research, preaching, and services in seminaries, including the welfare of students. The Council has focused on:

- introducing "courses on the history of Islam and nations and . . . modern philosophical schools";
- going beyond classical jurisprudence to address "the growing needs of the Islamic Republic of Iran in various dimensions";
- conducting standardized exams;
- creating "rules and regulations for accepting and enrolling students"; and
- "monitoring [students'] moral and behavior status."<sup>14</sup>

Another of the Council's interventions that has drawn criticism from some ayatollahs, including Shubayri-Zanjani and Mohammad Surush-Mahalati, has been changing course materials with the aim of simplifying traditional texts on the principles of Islamic jurisprudence.

Currently, the Council is enrolling seminary students from across Iran with the intention of providing health coverage and paying them a monthly stipend on behalf of Ayatollah Khamenei (who has assumed *marja* status). A monthly stipend (*shahriyah*) is typically paid by a *mujtahid* to his students. Currently, Ayatollahs Sistani, Makarem-Shirazi, and Vahid-Khorasani offer stipends to seminary students in Qom, none of which exceeds \$10. Khamenei provides a monthly stipend of over \$40 to married students and \$20 to unmarried students.<sup>15</sup>

Among the prominent *mujtahids* who have criticized the state-sponsored plans of the Management Council of the Seminary and its efforts to control religious schools in Iran is Ayatollah Mohammad Javad Fazel-Lankarani, who is heading a seminary and research center that was established by his father in Qom. According to Fazel-Lankarani, his father, a *mujtahid* close to Khamenei, spoke to the Supreme Leader about his objections to the state's efforts to control the financial affairs of religious scholars and the injection of state money into the seminaries. Fazel-Lankarani has criticized the Council for interfering in every aspect of the religious schools' affairs, citing the example of a seminary school in Qazvin where the manager needed permission from the Council even to move a wall.<sup>16</sup> He has boasted that his facilities are operated with the financial backing of devoted supporters and that the small group of students

who receive training there outshine numerous students who are trained with government funding. What makes such a criticism important is that it comes from a cleric who is known for being both politically conservative and close to the leader of Iran.

Similar criticism regarding the state's interference in the affairs of the seminaries has been voiced by a number of *mujtahids* of varying ranks, including Montazeri, Yousef San'ei (d. 2020), and Mostafa Muhaqiq-Damad. Montazeri and San'ei were prominent political opponents of Khamenei within the clerical establishment. For years, pro-state clerical bodies like the Assembly of Seminary Teachers of Qom attempted to disqualify them as sources of emulation. Their criticism of the state's efforts to control the affairs of the seminaries and their support for various protest movements in Iran, like the 2009 Green Movement, turned them into the most prominent oppositional voices within the clergy.

Today, their absence is notable in the current political landscape of Iran, as there are no other voices among the most high-ranking *mujtahids* in Qom openly critical of the state. Yet, despite their absence, the transformation of the seminaries desired by the Islamic Republic is still a distant goal. The response of clerics to "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests further reveals the limits of the Islamic Republic's dominance over seminaries.

## **CLERICAL REACTIONS TO "WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM" PROTESTS**

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During the widespread "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests that unfolded in Iran after September 2022, several influential clerics, including the Grand Ayatollahs Vahid-Khorasani and Shubayri-Zanjani, refrained from condemning the demonstrations, despite demands from hardliners for a public statement to that effect.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, a few *mujtahids*, known for their less outspoken positions, have voiced criticism of the government's crackdown on the protests. Ayatollah 'Alavi-Borujerdi has urged adopting a "fatherly" approach rather than resorting to violence, while Ayatollah Muhaqiq-Damad has denounced the imposition of harsh sentences, including capital punishment, on those detained in the aftermath of the protests.

A more vocal criticism has come from mid-level clerics with activist and reformist backgrounds, including those affiliated with the Seminary Scholars and Lecturers Association in Isfahan and the Seminary Lecturers and



Scholars Assembly of Qom. Following the eruption of protests, the two entities issued a joint statement in support of the protests that drew an angry reaction from pro-government clerics. It called for the Islamic Republic to uphold the “human dignity” of all Iranians, regardless of whether they were bound by Islamic law or not, and to respect their “lifestyle freedom.”<sup>18</sup> The statement also demanded the unconditional release of all political prisoners. The backlash from the pro-government clerical bodies was swift: They condemned the statement and dismissed the authors as representing a minority of “fake clerics.” They also accused the reformist organizations of upholding “criminal positions” and threatened to use all legal and popular powers to have them outlawed.<sup>19</sup>

The persistence, at varying levels, of critical voices within seminaries against the government’s crackdown on “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests indicates that the Islamic Republic’s “reform” programs have not been able to eradicate dissent among clerics or establish a compliant seminary system in Iran. It also reveals that the state’s attempts to expand its control over the seminaries have had the opposite effect, exacerbating divisions within the clerical establishment and bolstering the resolve of not only reformist/activist clerics but also conservative ones like ‘Alavi-Borujerdi, who have typically refrained from voicing their opposition.

## CONCLUSION

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The Islamic Republic has sought to quell dissent in seminaries and align seminaries’ activities with its policies, framing its efforts as part of an ongoing discourse on order and disorder. This Brief has argued that such efforts have been hindered both by multiple sources of authority within the Shi’i seminaries and by opposition from, and concern expressed by, “conservative” as well as reformist/activist clerics. Since 1990, the Management Council of the Seminary has undergone an extensive restructuring and expansion so as to consolidate the state’s grip over seminaries in various cities of Iran. But *mujtahids* who endorse the Council’s plans represent only one faction within Iranian seminaries; others resist, owing to varying political or theological perspectives. Some *mujtahids* also express mistrust in the state’s overseeing the affairs of the seminaries, fearing that it may compromise their long-standing independence.

Although often overlooked, the role of “silent” ayatollahs is also significant when it comes to resisting the state’s control over seminaries. In response to the

“Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, some of these ayatollahs have raised their voices to signal their distance from the state’s approach to suppressing the protests. Such public criticism from clerical elites who have otherwise avoided taking a stance on the government’s behavior indicates an important shift in the seminary-state relationship. Moreover, their dissent, especially when joined with that of the reformist/activist clerics, extends beyond challenging the Islamic Republic’s hold over the seminaries to potentially reshaping the balance of power between the state and clergy in Iran.

## ENDNOTES

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1. <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1149502> (in Persian).
2. The leader of Iran holds the position of the Guardianship of Jurisprudent and derives his legitimacy from the doctrine of *vilayat-i faqih*, which was Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory supporting the establishment of an Islamic government.
3. <http://tinyurl.com/4yhf9p9u> (in Persian).
4. Ayatollah Sistani was a student of Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim Khoei (d. 1992), who, as the head of the Najaf seminary, did not endorse Ayatollah Khomeini’s view of *vilayat-i faqih*.
5. Though not discussed in this Brief, other Iranian cities besides Qom and Isfahan have important seminary schools and *mujtahids*, most notably Mashhad and Tehran.
6. <https://hawzah.Net/fa/magazine/view/4518/4546/32765> (in Persian).
7. The modern education system in Iran was created by the state in the nineteenth century, but the Shi’i seminaries and their “disorder” have roots in the classical Islamic education which began over a millennium earlier. By the eleventh century, the seminaries had become the primary form of learning in the Middle East. Qom, Isfahan, and Mashhad in Iran as well as Najaf and Karbala in Iraq and Jabal ‘Amil in Lebanon continue to be among the most important sites of religious learning, hosting seminaries that are under the control of Shi’i jurists. See Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 78–92.
8. <http://tinyurl.com/369k6xe6> (in Persian).
9. <https://www.hawzahnews.com/news/460297/> (in Persian).
10. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4793070/> (in Persian).

11. <http://www.ensafnews.com/147372/> (in Persian).
12. Even Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi changed his mind about addressing the “disorder” and rebuked his acolytes, who had drafted a reform plan, by stating that “you want to strip me of my authority.” See <https://rasanews.ir/fa/news/107188> (in Persian).
13. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?Id=16837> (in Persian).
14. <http://tinyurl.com/2sw7jh6x> (in Persian).
15. These figures are based on the author’s interviews with clerics in Qom and Isfahan.
16. <https://www.aparat.com/v/e9cdj> (in Persian).
17. <http://tinyurl.com/26xfad72> (in Persian).
18. <http://tinyurl.com/75rn5wms> (in Persian).
19. <https://rasanews.ir/fa/news/723534> (in Persian).

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