State formation through totalitarianism: Understanding the Islamic Republic's resilience

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Abstract
An authoritarian system rife with intra-elite conflicts, civil discontent and economic problems, the longevity of the Islamic Republic of Iran appears an anomaly. The basic argument of this paper is that while the Republic's longevity is best understood by the way its institutions contributed to state formation, longevity does not automatically imply sustainability. Taking as my starting point Elias' insights on state formation, I argue that the 1979 revolution incarnated the final victory of the state as understood in Elias' monopoly mechanism. The revolution’s totalitarian aspects – personality cultism, ideology and mass mobilization – facilitated the state’s victory over formerly autonomous social units, like the clergy and the bazaar. Through the creation of parallel institutions, characteristic of totalitarianism, these former competitors to state power were absorbed into the state. This institutional arrangement enabled the Republic not only to secure its territorial borders and control the principal means of coercion, but also dramatically increase its infrastructural power. Reinforced by the Iraq-war, infrastructural power became both cause and consequence of the suppression of challenges to the regime and therefore key to regime survival. Nevertheless, successes in state formation implied not merely the defeat of old social units, but also the creation of new ones. Albeit an acquis of state formation, this may endanger the Republic's sustainability. For insofar as existing institutions are found to no longer correspond to powerful social units, they are likely to mutate or disappear.

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1. **Introduction**

An authoritarian system rife with intra-elite conflicts, civil discontent and economic problems, the longevity of the Islamic Republic of Iran appears to be an anomaly. It challenges transitology and scholarship on the Iranian revolution on at least two accounts. Firstly, most transitologists would argue that elite disunity is generally a major factor in regime instability. (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Higley & Burton, 1989) Since its outset, however, the Islamic Republic seems to prove the opposite, combining highly factionalized and divided elites with remarkable regime stability. (Akhavi, 1987).

Secondly, the continuation of the Republic's institutional order seems to contradict scholars of Iranian and Islamic studies who often reduced the revolution, and the republic it created, to an utter failure. Scholars of revolution labeled the Iranian revolution a “defeated social revolution” since it “failed to transform economic and class structures radically” (Foran & Goodwin, 1993:235). Others highlighted the discrepancy between the ideological-religious underpinnings of the revolution and post-revolutionary reality to speak of “the immediate failure of the Islamic Revolution” (Dabashi, 2006: xiv). Some even saw in the Iranian experience an illustration of the general failure of “political Islam” (Roy, 1994; Farkhondeh, 2008). Economically, a similar gap between ideological hopes for a ‘true Islamic economy’ and the laws of worldly economies has led scholars to speak of a lost utopia (Behdad, 1994:810). Others still went so far as to deny the very existence of an Iranian state: “if one uses Tilly's definition of a state (differentiation from other organizations in society, autonomy, centralization, and formal coordination of its parts) as a yardstick in Iran, one could argue that a state in its true sense does not exist in the Islamic Republic” (Moslem, 2002:42).

Failure remains very much in the eye of the beholder. Some authors have acknowledged that on state formation, the Iranian revolution did no worse than the social revolutions analyzed by Theda Skocpol (Skocpol, 1979; Farhi, 1990; Foran & Goodwin, 1993:234-235) This paper attempts to understand why the Republic succeeded where previous regimes failed. Taking as my starting point Elias’ insights on state formation, I argue that the 1979 revolution incarnated the final victory of the state as understood in Elias' monopoly mechanism (Elias, 1982). As Elias had observed in Europe, in Iran as well the competition between autonomous social units led to increased centralization around one major social unit and to a progressive increase in the infrastructural power of the latter (Mann, 1986:109-136).

The state's victory was due in no small amount to the revolution's totalitarian aspects. Personality cultism, ideology and mass mobilization all facilitated the state's victory over formerly autonomous social units, like the clergy and the bazaar. Unsurprisingly, these social units had throughout the twentieth century had a determinant influence
on regime stability. Through the creation of parallel institutions, characteristic of totalitarianism, these former competitors to state power were now absorbed into the state. An institutional arrangement that enabled the Republic to secure its territorial borders, control the principal means of coercion, and dramatically increase its infrastructural power. Reinforced by the Iraq-war, infrastructural power became both cause and consequence of the suppression of challenges to the regime and thus key to regime survival.

The basic argument of this paper is that the Republic's longevity and stability are best understood by the way its institutions contributed to state formation and defeated autonomous challenges to state rule. However, longevity does not automatically imply sustainability. Success in state formation implied not merely the defeat of old social units, but also the creation of new ones. Albeit an aquis of state formation, this may endanger the Republic's sustainability. For insofar as existing institutions are found to no longer correspond to powerful social units, they are likely to mutate or disappear.

2. Competition among Social Units

State formation, as seen through Elias' mechanism of monopoly, is in the first place the result of a competition for resources of social power: “If in a major social unit, a large number of the smaller social units which, through their interdependence, constitute the larger one, are of roughly equal social power and are thus able to compete freely (...) for the means to social power, i.e. primarily the means of subsistence and production, the probability is high that some will be victorious and others vanquished, and that gradually, as a result, fewer and fewer will control more and more opportunities, and more and more units will be eliminated from the competition, becoming directly or indirectly dependent on an ever-decreasing number” (Elias, 1982:106).

Social units involved in this process face a simple choice: to conquer or to be conquered. The evolution is by no means linear. A major social unit often succumbs to the centrifugal tendencies of its composing social units. The tendency of the predominant lord, or king, to divide his properties among relatives led, more often than not, to the fragmentation of a major social unit into different smaller social units. In other cases the central ruler’s increasing dependence on subjects for the control of a large territory made centrifugal tendencies inevitable.

The competition between different social units to increase their territorial possessions reflects the external dimension of the mechanism. The internal dimension regards the dynamics that confer upon a specific social unit predominance over the others within a given territory. These dynamics are summarized by Elias as
the ‘royal mechanism’. Even when different social units grouped around the ‘strongest’ social unit of a territory, they would time and again resist the development of the major unit’s infrastructural power, attempting to either replace the central social unit or at least maintain a certain degree of autonomy. Only when money rather than land became the principal form of property, the central ruler obtained, by means of his monopoly of taxation, the capacity to distribute the inflowing money as rents in the interest of his rule, increasing the dependence of other social units on his rule and destroying centrifugal tendencies.

Elias used the feudal reality of medieval Europe to identify relevant social units. In Europe these were generally feudal lords, whose transformation from a feudal nobility into a courtly nobility signified the end of their social autonomy. However any central social unit, aspiring to become ‘state’ within a given territory, is confronted with a variety of concentrations of social power opposing its action in a variety of domains. This is as true in Iran as it was in Europe. The legendary account of Sir John Malcolm offers a very visual illustration of how three social units in particular (merchants, clergy and tribes) limited the central state’s power (Malcolm, 1976: Ch.13). Admittedly, speaking of the clergy as an institution was problematic at the time, since only modern means of communication, developed in the second half of the 19th century, permitted it to organize properly. Nonetheless, Malcolm’s account illustrates that the absence of ‘true’ feudalism did not mean the absence of competing social units resisting monopolization. The tribes incarnated centrifugal tendencies not unlike some of the noble houses of warriors in feudal Europe. Tribal units often aspired to replace central authority in a given region. They contested the central social unit’s territorial integrity and violently opposed any attempts to establish a monopoly of violence on behalf of the state.

The challenge posed by clergy and bazaar is of a different nature. Both first and foremost oppose the development of the state’s infrastructural power, a direct threat to their autonomous foundations of social power. The foundations of the clergy’s social power were numerous, but all directly or indirectly limited the state’s development. Religious taxes, landownership and an extensive network of schools were reinforced by its strong presence in villages from which state bureaucracy was notably absent. The development of a fiscal administration, the centralization of landownership, campaigns to extend the state’s role in education and the development of bureaucracy would logically face the clergy’s opposition. Not because these reforms hurt the ‘conservative outlook’ of the clerical institution, but because they upset its material interests and autonomy. The bazaar’s opposition to centralization was above all linked to economic imperatives, but maintaining internal cohesion and the inherent ability to act as a single unit revealed just as important.

If any regime were to be stable, it would have to deal decisively with these groups. Forced to “run an empire instead of just an army” (Floor, 1998:443), the Qajar
dynasty tried to levy taxes directly touching the merchants (Ansari Ranani & Kermani, 2001:415-418). However, by the end of the 19th century tax collection had become an increasingly complicated task: “because the bulk of the central government’s expenditures were financed through local government transfers, the financial and military basis of the center would remain weak as long as the government’s hold on the provinces remained precarious” (Floor, 1998:251).

Internal opposition also impeded the establishment of a monopoly of coercion. Notwithstanding military reforms, including the appointment of a commander of the armed forces under direct command of the Shah, limiting the strength of provincial units and commanders, the armed forces remained weak and divided, unable to resist tribal forces and regional insurrections (Mostofi, 1997:76-99). While the somewhat centralized cavalry of 80,000 men was entirely organized according to tribal loyalties, most well organized forces stayed under foreign control. The 8,000 men strong Cossack brigade was under Russian; the 8,400 gendarmerie force under Swedish (Ineichen, 2002); and the 6,000 troops of the South Persian Rifles under British influence (Sadri, 1996:208). The French and the German equally contributed to both the army’s development and its dependency (Qa’em Haqami, 1947:88-89; Abrahamian, 1982:50-59).

With financial resources worth approximately half of state income by the end of the century, the clergy enjoyed a rather comfortable position. Clerics enjoyed “virtual immunity from prosecution by the state” (Martin, 1989:35-39). An immunity facilitated by the location of its main centers of power in contemporary Iraq, outside the reach of imperial Persia (Keddie, 1969:31-53).

The Qajar shahs were confronted with a society rapidly transforming under the influence of imperialism, which pressed, moderately, for the development of an internal market. While threatening the bazaar’s monopoly, this evolution coalesced it as a middle class economic actor (Abrahamian, 1982:50). The Qajar state therefore lost ground to centrifugal forces even when compared to the Safavid dynasty (Floor, 2001). Bakhash describes the process as follows: “The last years of the reign of Naser ad-Din Shah witnessed a serious deterioration in the already indifferent standards of Qajar administration. (...) The finances of the State, never very strong, began to break down. The hold of the government over the provinces weakened; and the tendency (..), towards a fragmentation of power, reasserted itself” (Bakhash, 1978:261).

A despot relies on the ambivalence of interests among competing social units, which explains why the Qajar dynasty survived the opposition against the Reuter concession, which stirred revolt among clergy and parts of the court, but was welcomed by the merchants (Bayat, 1991:46-47). The concession attracted foreign investment and promised to realize necessary infrastructural works for which the
merchants lacked sufficient capital (Bayat, 1991:46-47). Additionally, the agreement explicitly ruled out national industrialization. The emergence of a national industrial class forming a potential threat to the merchants, who dominated the economy as ‘middlemen’, they had little reason to oppose the concession. The merchants joined the national movement only when continuing trade concessions started undermining their position. And the Constitutional Revolution would illustrate the central ruler’s powerlessness when the “whole society, or even considerable part of it, stood together against him” (Elias, 1982:173).

The Constitutional Revolution being a “multi-class, popular or populist social movements, involving loose coalitions of aggrieved social forces” (Foran, 2001:795-796), autonomous social units played a big role in it and predictably tried to benefit from it. A guaranteed quorum of tribal representation was refused, but electoral laws guaranteed guilds’ representation as the Constitution guaranteed clerical influence in politics (Afary, 1996:64). This could have constituted a centralizing measure, incorporating social units into the state. State power seemed to increase with the extension of municipal, departmental and provincial councils with impressive executive and judicial powers (Afari, 1996:74). Nevertheless, during the entire period Bakhtiar tribes and regionalist movements in Azerbaijan continued to challenge central authority militarily (Khoury & Kostiner, 1990). Bakhtiari even succeeded in taking over key government positions in 1909 (Keddie, 1971:9). With social units focusing on their corporatist interests, “the door was opened for the political disintegration of the country in World War I, followed by the rise to the throne of an untutored cavalry commander named Reza Khan Pahlavi” (Foran, 1991:795).

3. **Pahlavi Centralization**

Aware of the limits of state power Reza Khan first appeased the clergy by abandoning his republican project and establishing a monarchy (Faghfoory, 1987:413-432). The new dynasty then initiated the centralization of military force. With British support, Reza Khan's 1921 coup brought a developing national army to the center of the Iranian state: “by late January 1922 (..) Reza Khan had issued decrees eliminating the terms 'Gendarmes' and ‘Cossacks’: the two forces would henceforth be members of a single armed force. The [South Persian Rifles] had already been disbanded in late December” (Ghani, 1982:242).

The coup marked the beginning of the unification of armed forces and the country. Between 1926 and 1941 the defense budget increased fivefold (Abrahamian, 1982:136). Generalized military conscription was central to military reform and predictably opposed by both tribes and clergy. The former feared a decrease in their potential of military mobilization, the latter did not favor seeing all youngsters spend two years in a secular institution. Landlords in turn regretted losing...
cheap labor to a public institution (Abrahamian, 1982:131).

The task of developing a modern and unified army came with the urgent need of establishing control over the peripheral regions. Gilan, Kurdistan, Khorasan and different regions of the South all witnessed strong regional uprisings. The most challenging were the tribal uprisings. As in the Qajar army, tribal divisions continued to form ‘the most significant fighting element’ of Reza Khan’s military (Cronin, 2003a:39). Whereas the military might of certain tribes was coupled with practical fighting experience, Reza Khan’s armed forces were badly equipped and lacked motivation (Cronin, 1997:171). Reza Khan therefore often preferred political maneuvering to armed confrontation. By 1925 Reza Khan had completed the territorial unification of Iran and become the unquestioned leader of the unified military, although it would take the 1929 Bakhtiari defeat to end their autonomous power center (Cronin, 2003b:261).

The establishment of a unified army at the center of the new was but a first step: “to exist as an independent nation, Iran needed a civil service, army, and efficient tax system” (Keddie & Richard, 2003:87). In charge of the Court Ministry, Teymoortash broke with Persian monarchical tradition and organized the Court along modern functional lines, making it the core of developing bureaucracy. The Court often functioned as an unelected parliament, and bureaucracy helped the King extend his dominance over state and society (Reza Sheikholeslami, 1993). A ministerial bureaucratic structure strengthened the state’s infrastructural power (Farazmand, 1994:675-686). The results were unquestionable. Possessing no more than 2,400 km of roads at the beginning of Reza Khan’s rule, Iran had 24,000 km towards the end of it (Issawi, 1978:131; Ansari, 2003:53). The most impressive achievement was arguably the Trans-Iranian Railway totaling 1,394 km and connecting the north and the south of the country (Issawi, 1978:131). Railroads did not only favor trade, but also, and perhaps foremost, state control over peripheral areas.

In a second phase, the clergy and the bazaar came under fire. The merchants had looked favorably on more state protection after WWI, but now resented state monopoly over foreign trade and sectors of domestic trade (Katouzian, 2003:29). While increasing state involvement in the economy and trade, Reza Shah equally developed infrastructural power through literacy and state education programs. Rural literacy committees (Matthee, 2003:128), were paralleled by so-called vocational schools, directly linked to the Ministries. The Tehran school of law instituted a Faculty of Theology, explicitly challenging religious education (Eilers, 1978:303-332).

The development of public state education caused a relative decline in the number of students frequenting traditional (maktab) and religious (tullab) educational institutes both dominated by the clergy. David Menashri calculated that between 1929-1930 to 1940-1941 public elementary and secondary schools increased from...
127,546 to 314,173 units, a 2.5 time increase. Maktab also increased but only 1.4 times, while tullab schools decreased impressively from the number of 5532 to 1341, a fourfold decrease (Menashri, 1992:102-103). However, while the educational expenses of the state rose from 100,000 dollar in 1925 to 12 or 13 million dollar in 1940, still less than 10% of the population received elementary education (Keddie & Richard, 2003:99). Targeted by educational reforms, the clergy was equally hit by state control established over part of their traditional vaqf lands (Mahrdad, 1976:96-97). The clergy was progressively removed from the judiciary and the Shah even ended up abolishing their sharia courts altogether (Keddie & Richard, 2003:89).

The Shah touched the clergy in its social foundations. Its monopoly over education and the judicial system came to an end and its religious endowments were taken over. The media harshly attacked clerics objecting to state policy, while the police harassed clerics and religious students pushing them to accept modern dress. The Shah cut financial support to much of the lower clergy, yet attempted to develop ties with part of the higher clergy (Reza Sheikholeslami, 1993). The state also tried to incorporate ‘secularized’ clerics into the state apparatus, “a process of transformation and professionalization of the ulama from a traditional elite to a modern one and their absorption into the government structure” (Faghfoory, 1993:306-307). On the one hand the clergy was attacked as an institution, on the other hand individual clerics were offered the chance to integrate the royal state in exchange for abandoning the turban.

Apparently impressive, the successes lacked permanence. The 1941 defeat of an army specialized foremost in internal policing signified the collapse of much of the centralization: regionalist tendencies rose again among Azeris and Kurds, and the clergy reaffirmed its role in society and politics. Between 1941-1942 and 1946-1947 the number of tullab students increased from 784 to 3057, a multiplication by 3.75. In early 1956, it reached 5,000 which came close to the number of tullab students before the Reza Shah reforms (Akhavi, 1980:72; Menashri,1992:102-103). Arguably the clergy even gained in political weight. During the Reza Shah period an important part of it left Iraq for Qom. This ‘nationalization’ permitted it to further develop its national power base and become a more powerful political competitor (Keddie & Richard, 2003:103; Mahrdad, 1976:96-97)

The 1941 collapse demonstrated all the weaknesses of Pahlavi state formation. Asked by Reza Shah to rationalize the finances of the Ministry of War, Arthur Millsbaugh noted that the Shah considered “his own personal account and the army account as being a joint one” (Banani, 1961:117; Cronin, 2003a:39). Internally, officers owed their promotion to nepotism and not to meritocracy. Bureaucracy was still far from becoming ‘the public affair of the state’. It was ‘private’ and designed to remain so. The regime failed to address the foundations of social power of the units it fought. Thinking the incorporation of individual clerics would lead the clergy, as an
institution, to join a state that made secularization a priority was delusional. Louis XIV would never have been able to transform the feudal nobility into a courtly nobility without offering them the now infamous privileges. For a time the clergy had to bend in the cities, but thanks to its undisputed social power in the countryside, it did not break. Reza Shah’s modernization actually encouraged the clergy’s institutionalization: “Many among the clergy concluded that they were defeated by the state because of their lack of organization and unity of action. This conclusion made them determined to regain the privileges they had lost under Reza Shah by resorting to organizational activities” (Faghfoory, 1993:311). With the 1941 defeat of the armed forces the only foundation of the monarchy’s social power disappeared, the state’s competitors regained their previous status.

Mohammed Reza would face similar challenges his father had done. The 1960’s White Revolution and its agricultural and educational modernization programs directly targeted the clergy both as a landowner and an educator. The new Shah also openly advocated the bazaar’s destruction: “I wanted a modern country. Moving against the bazaars was typical of the political and social risks I had to take” (Pahlavi, 1980:156; Keshavarzian, 2007:1). Bazaar merchants feared that if the Shah were to get his way, the bazaar would be flattened (Smith, 2004:196). In reality the quantitative decrease in importance of the bazaar was marginal, going from 16.09% of the urban workforce in 1966 to 13.13% in 1976. (Parsa, 1989:107) The bazaar “continued to control as much as half of the country’s handicraft production, two-thirds of its retail trade, and three-quarters of its wholesale trade”, while the clergy “was big enough to send preachers regularly into shanty towns and distant villages” (Abrahamian, 1982:433). Paradoxically, the so-called ‘modernization’ of the state reinforced both traditional groups. Shared interests and a shared enemy would make clergy and bazaar act once again in close alliance.

As to guarantee his downfall, Mohammed Reza undermined the only social power base his father had possessed: the military. US envoy General Huyser observed how: “the military had been conditioned for years by the Shah to expect and rely upon this type of [central] direction from him” (Huyser, 1986:289). In combination with the military’s ‘Americanization’ this made the armed forces “ill suited for all but one of their intended tasks: political symbolism” (Canby, 1981:100). The armed forces would prove institutionally inferior to the clergy: during the two major crises of the royal regime in 1953 and 1979, they functioned neither autonomously, nor coherently. Without foreign support, the Shah was doomed to fall.

At the time of the Islamic Revolution, after almost 6 decades of Pahlavi rule, results on state formation offered little reason for enthusiasm. Some kind of bureaucracy had been established as had a centralized, although dysfunctional, military. Territorial integrity was safer than ever before and the state was very much present in the countryside. However, of the major social units competing with the state, only the
tribes had been defeated, others reinforced. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of the Iranian state from Qajars to Pahlavis in respect to the three social units under consideration.

![Fig 1 Diagram](image)

4. **Enter Totalitarianism**

While the heuristic value of the concept “totalitarianism” to describe regimes might be shaky (Kershaw & Lewin, 2000; Zizek, 2002; Cassese, 2010), there is little doubt that the Islamic Revolution possessed what have frequently been identified as characteristics of totalitarianism, such as ideology, personality cultism, and mass mobilization. While the Republic ultimately failed to develop the Islamic Republican Party into a ruling single party, religious institutions and related organizations with mass membership copied the “participatory mobilizational dimension” of a totalitarian party and its mass organizations (Linz, 2000, 73).

Khomeini was no uncontested religious leader when he took political power and much of the higher clergy had demonstrated unwillingness to take over state power (Chehabi, 1991:78). Qom’s religious establishment never totally accepted Khomeini’s guardianship (Digard, Hourcade & Richard, 1996:200). To overcome clerical dissent, personal cultism was useful, but not sufficient. Khomeini thus actively encouraged a process Chehabi describes as “church building”: the installation of an Assembly of Experts and an elected Leader aimed at forging a formal state-sanctioned Shiite church, able to overcome the Shiite clergy’s hierarchical disorder (Chehabi, 1991:69-91). At the top, the Office of the Supreme Leader, an institutionalization of the totalitarian leader, was designed to replace monarchy.
Through a process of mobilization and sociopolitical action, the clergy-bazaar alliance was restructured into a new and functioning power structure, parallel to the democratic one. Next to Parliament appeared a Guardian Council, parallel institutions were adjoined to major ministries and to the military a new actor, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was added. Figure 2 offers a succinct illustration of the institutional innovations of the revolution, similar to the “political pluralism” of totalitarian systems (Linz, 2000, 68).

These institutional innovations, including related organizations as the Basij, were a necessary condition for (post-)revolutionary mobilization. In combination with the subsequent Iraq-war, they allowed the state to extend its reach into society in an unseen way. Throughout the war, Iran chose to rely on revolutionary networks of mobilization and resource extraction: “Iran is rich in sons, so rich that the lives of young men can be poured out in costly infantry attacks on prepared Iraqi positions” (Townsend, 1984:57). What was asked from the people were not merely ‘fiscal’ resources, but their sons. The most valuable asset of Iranian war-making turned out to be ordinary people prepared to die in service of the state, many without receiving any financial retribution for their services.

With different armed groups still disputing central authority, general mobilization was risky. The enforcement of conscription, on the other hand, forced the state to enter rural areas to control the recruitment process. In this undertaking the religious ideology of the revolution proved crucial (Ramazani, 1986:19). The local clergymen “became active recruiting agents for the Pasdaran which had reached a strength of about 70,000 urging young men to volunteer” (O’Balance, 1998:50). While the clergy
was transformed into a state recruiter, the state was introduced in regions, like the Kurdish northwest, where it had until then had great difficulties to penetrate (Brown, 1990:10). The war guaranteed a huge increase in military personnel and state dependents.  

War mobilization was hardly the only way the state extended its reach into society. The “aides sur le fait de la guerre” had signed the beginning of organized tax collection in Europe and so too did the Iranian state use war to extend its fiscal reach. The new-born Islamic Republic pressured companies to continue paying their workers when the latter joined the front. A system of ‘voluntary contributions’, including trade guilds and newly established foundations, was set up. Trade associations and distribution cooperatives were among the most systematic sources of finance. Membership of these conferred significant economic benefits. In return, the state asked for a more significant contribution to the war effort. (Nowshirvani & Clawson, 1994:240-243) More strictly economic measures, like rationing, voucher-systems, ration stamps and the Economic Mobilization Booklet given to every household, were used to increase the state’s war resources (Nowshirvani & Clawson, 1994:257-258). This combination of compulsion, control and incentives were not without parallel with the tactics of Stalinist industrialization (Moore, 1954:32-71).

The *Jehad-e Sazandegi*, the Reconstruction Crusade, took care of the infrastructural part of the war effort in the countryside by expanding civilian infrastructure. After two years the *Jehad* claimed to have constructed 8000 miles of roads, 1700 schools, 1600 public baths and 110 health centers, almost exclusively in rural areas (Ferdows, 1983:12). Between 1982 and 1984 1,1 billion dollar, around 30% of the total amount spent on ‘reconstruction’, came from popular mobilization efforts (Amirahmadi,1988:144-145). Through government organized mobilization, like ‘War Week’, popular self-help organizations were incorporated into the state apparatus.

Though revolutionary leaders officially despised bureaucracy, the continuing growth of the state was impressive (Kuklan, 1981:220): from 145 government employees per 1000 households in 1972, state bureaucracy grew to 211 employees for the same number of households in 1983. (Arjomand, 1988:216) Over 70,000 of government employees were employed by newly established revolutionary organizations and associations. The state’s infrastructural power increased exponentially. The Reconstruction Crusade was responsible for over 37,000 ideology classes and 28,000 classes for teaching Arabic in rural areas. The same organization was in charge of the construction of 30,000 km roads; 12,000 bridges, electricity for over 5,000 and water for over 6,000 villages; not to mention 67,000 medical groups sent to villages by

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2 The active ground forces of the regular military increased from respectively 150,000 in 1980 to 305,000 in 1988. The active and reserve forces of the parallel IRGC went from nothing to respectively 250,000 and 400,000. The *Basij*-forces grew even more spectacularly to 350,000 active personnel and 2,650,000 reservists. (Hiro, 1990, Appendix II)

The state went further. Birth-control programs caused the average number of children of an Iranian woman to decrease from 6.2 in 1986 to 2.1 in 2003. Alphabetization campaigns increased literacy from 59% (1976) to 81% (1996) for boys and from 35% to 74.5% for girls (Coville, 2007:130-132). Ten years after the revolution the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education announced that Iran now possessed over 100 institutions for higher education of which 30 universities, opposing this figure with the only 16 pre-revolutionary universities (Higher Education Advisory). To guarantee that this evolution would benefit state power directly, and to ensure loyalty “40 percent of university slots were set aside for families of martyrs, Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and basij (war veterans and volunteer militia members). Most of these students came from lower class backgrounds and lacked the criteria conventionally required by highly competitive university entrance examinations” (Kian-Thiebaut, 1999:13).

5. **Destroying Autonomous Foundations of Social Power**

The construction of the new order allowed for the development of the state's infrastructural power by incorporating “the traditional power groups [that] had consistently impeded modernization and circumscribed power to the center” (Menahshri, 1992:160). Figure 3 illustrates the difference with the kind of “incorporation” of the tribes. The latter were destroyed, clergy and bazaar incorporated.
In a first phase the incorporated social units logically dominated state institutions, which – wrongly – created the impression that they had taken over the state. The clergy accounted for respectively 49.5% and 55% of total representatives in the first and second Parliament (Azghandi, 2006:169-173; Majles, 2008). When the conservative cleric Khamenei became president in 1981 the clerical takeover seemed complete.

Appearances are often deceiving however. Since clergymen, religious associations and Islamic ideology now managed state affairs, resistance to the takeover of traditional clerical assets by the state was broken. The Republic's Islamic ideology allowed for religious education and religious lands to be linked to the state, something the Pahlavi's had long dreamed of. The clergy no longer competed with the state in education or the economy, but started to defend its interests within the state. Those clerics still opposing the clergy's incorporation would now face state power and terror in their own name. Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari, allegedly involved in a coup plot, was defrocked by a religiously inferior Khomeini (Ansari, 2000:87). Other influential religious leaders, like Khu’y or Golpayegani, were permitted to continue their activities in silence (Digard, Hourcade & Richard, 1996:209). During the first ten years of their existence, Special Clerical Courts executed over 600 clerics and theological students from the Seminaries and stripped around 2,000 of them stripped of their religious qualifications. Another 4,000 clerics saw themselves condemned to beatings, fines and/or prison sentences (Buchta, 2001:97).

Yet it was not just clerics that remained outside the “state-built church” that fell victim to the state's power. Even the position of Supreme Leader would incarnate the incorporation of clerical structures by the state. Article five of the post-revolutionary Constitution originally stated that the Leader would be a just, pious and courageous Jurist of Islamic Law (faqih) who enjoyed the support of the majority of the people. Article 107 and 109 added that the concerned Islamic Jurist (faqih) should also be recognized as a marja', the highest position in religious hierarchy. During Khomeini’s lifetime, only one person, the monarch himself, could satisfy these exigencies.

Towards the end of Khomeini’s life however, the incorporation of clerical hierarchy in the state caused trouble. Not only had many senior clerics refuted Khomeinist doctrine, when Grand Ayatollah Montazeri was politically sidelined, none of the “politically acceptable hopefuls” fulfilled the religious conditions to accede to the position. The solution was found in amending the Constitution. The Leader no longer had to be a marja'. The highest state-sanctioned religious position was opened to any person that, except for some (not extraordinary) religious qualities, possessed sociopolitical insight and held popularity among the majority of the people. The change allowed Khamenei, a mid-rank cleric who became ayatollah almost overnight, to become Supreme Leader. His political capabilities, shown throughout his
presidency, and the close links with political militant groups proved decisive (Sabahi, 2006:191-192). Politicizing the highest religious position was clearly highly significant (Roy, 1999).

Khamenei’s religious weakness forced him to prioritize the submission of possible sources of clerical resistance against the state. One of the foundations of the clergy’s autonomous social power remained its extensive system of clerical education including about 230 seminaries (howzé), dominated by the Qom seminaries and its central council (Shahrvand-e Emrouz, 2008a). The Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom therefore proved a useful centralized organ for the government to influence the seminaries. Understandably, discussions on the takeover of it by a more centralized state structure have been going on for about 25 years. Asghar Schirazi remarks: “Criticism of the decentralized organization and administration of the academies comes chiefly from the ranks of the ruling clergy who advocate control over these institutions as a means of stopping their enemies from gaining greater power” (Schirazi, 1998:260).

Under Khomeini only some of the seminaries surrendered to the Republic’s Supreme Council (Buchta, 2001:94). Khamenei increased the budget allocated to the clergy to about 72 million dollar; he offered specific jobs for seminary graduates in different government institutions and in schools and enterprises. In 2008 President Ahmadinejad launched a campaign to limit the autonomy of the seminaries. The president offered extra funding and the installation of extra seminaries throughout the country. The government made clever use of the old argument that the independence of the clergy, essential to guarantee just government under worldly rule, loses meaning in an Islamic Republic. It also claimed that its help “did not mean intermeddling”, but many clerics remained skeptical (Parsania, 2008:69; Shahrvand-e Emrouz, 2008b).

Under almost constant attack, the clergy, so predominant during the revolution, gradually lost prominence in the state democratic pillar. Mohammad Khatami’s 1997 victory in the presidential election was a victory of civil society, and a crushing defeat for traditional networks and Khamenei, who had openly supported the alternative candidate, Nateq-Noori. Clerical networks no longer dominated the state (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006:668). Table 1 illustrates how between the first and the fifth Islamic Parliament (Majles) the presence of clerics collapsed in an impressive manner. Comparing the 2000 Majles, where reformists took 65% of the seats, with the 2004 and 2008 Majles, both with a conservative majority, no significant rise in clerical representation is observed. The percentage of clerical representatives increased only minimally from 12,77%, that is 35 out of 290 representatives in 2000, to 14,82%, or 43 out of 290 representatives (Azghandi, 2006:169-173; Zimmt, 2008).

A similar evolution hit the positions of Speaker of Parliament and President of the
Republic. Both in 2004 and 2008 the position of Speaker went to non-clerics. In 2005, Ahmadinejad became the first non-cleric since 1981 to reach the highest secular position within the Islamic Republic and significantly called his non-clerical predecessor Mohammad Ali Rajai a role model. In the 2009 presidential campaign neither of the two main contenders were clerics.

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In combination with the decreasing prestige of the Office of the Supreme Leader, the clergy’s decline in the elected state institutions, made Rafsanjani warn for ‘currents’ that wished to abolish the clergy (Etemaad, 2008). The ‘nationalization’ of the Iranian clergy now facilitated national control over it (Keddie & Richard, 2003:103; Mahrdad, 1976:96-97).

As shown in Table 1, the bazaar did not escape state expansion. Three decades after the revolution, a scholar visiting the Tehran bazaar was told: “This bazaar doesn’t need any analysis. It doesn’t even exist any more; it’s dead” (Keshavarzian, 2007:2). Between 1359 (1980) and 1375 (1996) the population of the twelfth district of Tehran declined from 301,701 to 189,625 individuals. Over the same period housing units also declined, although less spectacularly, from 43,453 to 39,245 units (Khatam, 2005:129).

Tactics used against the bazaar closely resembled those used to address the clergy. The bazaar “exhibited loyalty to the Imam and the revolutionary cause by initially disbanding their independent organizations and joining the Islamic Republican Party. They were rewarded handsomely for their vigilance and fidelity with positions in government ministries, the newly formed foundations (bonyads) and the Chamber of Commerce – they became part of the new ruling elite” (Keshavarzian, 2007:102). By accepting their inclusion, the bazaaris also signed the beginning of their demise as an independent socioeconomic group.

The state now offered effective social promotion to those linked in some way to it. The order of the Islamic Republic started to form “the precondition for the restriction to economic, non-violent means, of the free competition in which they are engaged with each other for certain economic opportunities” (Elias, 1982:113-114). Favoritism, corruption and nepotism illustrated how bazaaris absorbed by the state system started to provide in their personal needs rather than in the collective needs of the bazaar (Rahnema & Nomani, 1990:250). It was through their bazaar-
connections that both Mohsen Rafiqdust and Mohsen Rezai became Commander-in-Chief of the Sepah. Rafiqdust even rose to the top of the Bonyad-e Mostazafan, one the most important economic entities in the region (Keshavarzian, 2007:102). The political organizations of the bazaar, as the Society of Islamic Coalition (Motalefe), gradually transformed into a court-dependent nobility: “Rather than cultivating, incorporating, and addressing the demands of social groups, SIC has depended on direct relations with regime officials for political power” (Keshavarzian, 2009:236).

The post-revolutionary nationalization of foreign trade undermined one of the traditional sections of the bazaar’s activities, sanctioning an ever greater role of the state (Ashraf & Abrahamian, 1983:17). The increasing role of the state in bazaar activities became obvious when export was regulated and a licensing system introduced, thus favoring government-linked associations. A symbolic shift was the establishment of government control on the Chamber of Guilds and the Islamic associations of the bazaar (Rashidi, 1994:47).

Threatened by falling purchasing power, international sanctions, nationalizations and other economic adversities, many left the bazaar, or decided to invest in real estate and other more secure commodities. Unemployment in the industrial sector, made parts of the urban sub-proletariat turn to the bazaar for jobs. New people entered the bazaar and familiar traders left, which dislocated the bazaar’s social structure. The rise of a strong black market challenged the bazaar’s role, while the extension of the bazaar’s activities to the black market, and the secrecy accompanying it, undermined interpersonal trust, already under pressure by the renewal of bazaar personnel (Keshavarzian, 2007:102-109). The “alternative network of sociopolitical relations and communication” started to crumble (Mobasser, 1991:131-150).

State expansion was the result of a balanced policy. On the one hand the bazaaris were offered incentives to find sociopolitical and socioeconomic resources outside the bazaar, on the other hand the role of the bazaar was reevaluated on special occasions, like religious holidays, to make it appear as if it was still the center of political and economic action it had been (Digard, Hourcade & Richard, 2007:330-331). Although a September 2008 strike against a tax on added value demonstrated that it remains a powerful economic actor, the contemporary bazaar is no longer a competitor to the state, nor the unique social base of the regime, “but rather a group collaborating with the regime” (Ashraf, 1989:13).

6. **New Competitors**

A central feature of the monopoly mechanism is the gradual transformation of a constructed private monopoly into a public monopoly. Elias argues that in feudal Europe the governmental apparatus grew out of the differentiating court and
dominial administration. Differentiation leads to an increasing dependence of the central ruler on composing units, as for example bureaucracy and those social groups dominating it. As such the administration starts to emancipate from the central ruler's will. While on the one hand centralization creates social units depending on the state and its monopolies, on the other differentiation gradually transforms what formerly was the private domain of the central ruler in a public monopoly: “when this governmental apparatus has finally became the public affair of the state, the household of the central ruler is at most one organ among others and finally hardly even that” (Elias, 1982:110).

Neither the Qajar, nor the Pahlavi court resembled the court of the French kings. Pahlavi bureaucracy grew out of a complex intertwining between court and army. Under Mohammed Reza the latter was organized as the king's private property. The fundamental resemblances between the Iranian situation and the process described by Elias are to be found in the underlying dynamics. There is no doubt that the revolution, through the incorporation of new social units, increased the public character of monopolies. Moreover, the gradual destruction of autonomous power foundations, increasing differentiation, and the rise of new actors are progressively transforming the central ruler's office in “an organ among others.”

For a decade right of entry to “Khomeini’s court” had been synonymous to access to power. With no successor available after his death, it was the relative degree of differentiation that made a smooth transition of power possible. The arbitrating role of Khomeini was divided between his successor and the new Expediency Council. Politically the monarch’s successor, now elected, had to share power with an influential president, while religiously most of Khomeini's authority went to ayatollah Araki (Chehabi, 1991:85). The position of the Leader shifted from an absolute superior position to some kind of politically chosen primus inter pares. With the governmental apparatus coming one step closer to becoming “the public affair of the state”, the household of the central ruler gradually evolved towards “an organ among others” (Elias, 1982:110). Trying to compensate for his weaknesses, the new Leader Khamenei institutionalized a number of procedures and personal interventions and representatives in existent institutions, increasing both institutionalization and bureaucratization (Schirazi, 2008; Buchta, 2001).

After the absolutist monarch's death, the clerical diarchy Rafsanjani-Khamenei took over. Both however had the Republic, not the clergy, to thank for their rise. This simple fact was a great success in state formation of the first post-revolutionary decade. President Rafsanjani's technocratic faction actively centralized and rationalized state institutions. Administrations, split or doubled after the revolution, were reunified, revolutionary courts integrated the Judiciary, some of the parastatal organs like the Reconstruction Crusade, obtained the rank of full-fledged state institutions. Forces as different as the national police, the gendarmerie and Islamic
committees were merged, and the Minister of the Interior was allowed to personally lead all police forces. (Milani, 1993:372)

The takeover by state-made actors had repercussions on legitimacy and ideology. That the Supreme Leader was now elected politically was but the tip of the iceberg. Recruitment of public servants was based less on Islamic ideology: specialists and executives replaced soldiers of faith (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006:114-115). Faced with an increasingly young population, the president developed the Free Islamic University (Azad), which permitted a considerable increase of students in higher education. A prominent Iranian analyst emphasized how “some two million administrators and managers run the machinery of the state. Thousands of individuals work hard to advance Iranian national interest irrespective of what the top elites may wish or direct” (Sariolghalam, 2003:74).

The consolidation of the state’s monopolies and the destruction of most centrifugal tendencies were a necessary condition for the development of civil society. The social definition of subjects was ever less considered in terms of ‘estates of the realm’ (Anderson, 1974:45), but in terms of citizens, state and connections between both political parties, interest groups and the emancipation of civil society (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995; Flora, Kuhnle & Uwin, 1999). Women magazines were one notable example of such development. Magazines as Farzaneh and Zanan were established, others, like Payam-e Hajar, greatly gained in popularity. The blossom of this ‘female civil society’ did not remain without political consequences. Women played a relatively important role in the 1996 parliamentary elections in cities ranging from Tehran to Shiraz and from Isfahan to Mashhad. Moreover, female candidates diversified their political preferences, illustrating potential pluralism (Adelkhah, 2006:138).

Rafsanjani’s policy did not go undisputed however. Traditional clerics felt their predominance came under fire because of the sociocultural openings and sacked the ‘liberal’ Minister of Culture Mohamed Khatami. The bazaar as well was all but satisfied. Karbaschi, an ally of Rafsanjani and then mayor of Tehran, used central urbanization projects to undermine the bazaar’s role (Adelkhah, 1996:5). The electoral victory of Khatami and the decreasing effectiveness of clerical networks made traditionalists turn to the parallel military structure of the IRGC. Khatami had relied on civil society as a force, on the “educated society of students, intellectuals, and artists (.). But throughout those years, civil society had obscured real society – that is, the majority of Iranians, who suffered most from the economic crisis and who were consistently ignored by those in power” (Tellier, 2007:27). The IRGC would prove able to enroll many of the latter in an ‘alternative to civil society’.

The 1999 student unrest proved that the IRGC mobilization against civil society was often violent. The 2004 parliamentary elections were won by the Coalition of
Constructionists, an alliance of traditionalists and part of the IRGC. The traditionalists mobilized the military component of the parallel pillar, but were to pay a price: they could no longer do without the IRGC’s infantry. They were to understand that Ahmadinejad was not just ‘one of them’. The new president was neither a cleric, nor directly linked to the bazaar. As so many of the revolutionary youth he had made his way up through the post-revolutionary parallel organizations of the Islamic Republic (Tait, 2005).

The president’s loyalty would lie with the IRGC, not with Khamenei. The traditionalist clergy was especially shaken by the cabinet the new president proposed. Not only were there only two clerics in it; nominees for the Foreign, the Justice and the Agricultural 

*Jihad* Ministry came from the ranks of these ministries; the ministries of Petroleum, Welfare, Education and Cooperatives were offered to executives the president had relied on earlier in his career. At least seven other Ministers came directly from the IRGC or law enforcement organizations (ICG, 2007). One of Ahmadinejad’s most frontal attacks on the clergy went through revelations made by Abbas Palizdar, who offered a detailed act of accusation, including charges of corruption and mafia-practices, against high-rank clerics (Khalaji, 2008).

The 2009 presidential campaign showed a new Iran. Neither Ahmadinejad nor Mousavi were linked to the former autonomous social units. Both main candidates wooed the electorate and public opinion. Ahmadinejad looked for support via networks linked to the IRGC, while Mousavi relied on civil society, promising to abolish one of the main police forces guarding public morality (Etemaad, 2009). Clerical support was relegated to second or third division: not wholly irrelevant, but surely no priority.

The IRGC immediately extended its hold on national territory. In October 2007, IRGC Navy commander Morteza Safari announced the installation of 31 extra sections in different regions, with defense functions that closely resembled those of the 

*Basij*, now a militia guaranteeing domestic morality and order (Hamandishi, 2008). Through its construction company Khatam-ol-Anbiya, the IRGC is involved in the oil and nuclear industry and general infrastructural networks (Alfoneh, 2007). State and national development now go through the IRGC’s network. When in June 2007 Mohammad Nahavandian, closer to Ahmadinejad, replaced Khamooshi, a representative with bazaar connections, at the head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, the relegation of the bazaar’s political role was underlined once more (Keshavarzian, 2009:240).

It was no coincidence that Ahmadinejad used the national flag as the symbol of his 2009 campaign. The incumbent focused on the nation, not religion. After three decades of Islamic republic, the military was now ready to take over (part of) the clergy's role. And the only actor that was likely to put up a fight was civil society.
7. **Conclusion**

This article started from the assumption that state formation is above all the result of a competition between different social units. A competition for sources of social power that inevitably leads to the emergence of one dominant social unit. I argued that the monopoly mechanism functioned no differently in Iran than in some European countries. What differed was the nature of competing social units and their foundations of social power. If the tribes presented a challenge comparable to the one posed by some feudal houses of warriors in Europe, clergy and bazaar offered very distinct challenges. The twentieth century showed that all three presented centrifugal tendencies opposing centralization, circumscribing state power and, repeatedly, endangering regime stability.

It required the monopolization of means of coercion and taxation, but also the extension of its infrastructural reach to break these tendencies. Difficult to say if totalitarianism was necessary to achieve such, but it was undeniably instrumental. Although military tactics permitted the Pahlavis to destroy tribal units, only the revolution, through its Leader, mobilization, and totalitarian ideology permitted the state to decisively defeat challenging social units. A common enemy in wartime often permits some kind of centralization around what is perceived as the ‘strongest’ social unit, but it was not just the war that permitted the state to incorporate competing social units and subsequently ruin them. Incorporation went through a double system which paralleled state institutions with a totalitarian government of control dominated by the newly incorporated social units. This, in turn, engendered a double movement. On the one hand, the incorporation mined the autonomy of competing social units and extended state control over their sources of social power. On the other hand, what had to an important extent been a private monopoly gradually transformed into a more or less public monopoly. The destruction of traditional foundations of social power, the consolidation of the central state and increasing differentiation created the conditions for the emergence of civil society.

If some state institutions were doubled after the revolution, the legitimacy of these pillars was progressively unified. From a state democratic pillar, founded on civil or popular legitimacy, and a parallel pillar, based on numinous or religious legitimacy, the system evolved to a binary system in which all institutions, civilian and military, rely on popular legitimacy. The process is not over and institutional unification remains an important challenge in contemporary Iran. Nevertheless, the clash between IRGC and civil society is no sign of state disintegration. Rather on the contrary, the present standoff is an *acquis* of successful state formation.

If the Islamic Revolution's successes, at least partially, explain its longevity, it is obvious that they do not guarantee sustainability. As the Islamic Republic defeated centrifugal tendencies, its stability depended highly on the parallel between powerful
social units and post-revolutionary institutions. The decline of those social units and
the emergence of new ones is likely to endanger this equilibrium. The matter is
pretty straightforward: what future have institutions designed to represent power
bases that are no longer predominant? As much as the IRGC and civil society have
an interest in maintaining a unified state, freed from centrifugal tendencies, in the
long run there appears to be little reason for them to be attached to the existing
institutional order of the Islamic Republic, built to represent others. Both actors have
already and repeatedly indicated their intentions to change Iran either formally or
under the surface. In the competition for who is to define the future of the Republic,
the failure of the 2009 mobilization, carried mostly by civil society, appears to have
given the edge to the IRGC. The IRGC seems, perhaps more than civil society, able
to promote the integration of political institutions and create a modern and rational
polity. No more than civil society, however, does it feel linked to or limited by the
current regime. With a weakened clerical leadership no longer able to reign it in and
religious legitimacy being replaced by popular or national legitimacy, the IRGC seems
just as well as civil society able to take over a state in which “any person and group,
including the army, which succeeds in mustering a mere semblance of popular
support can claim to be the lawful government” (Finer, 1962:208).
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