

CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT

CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN

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This thesis aims to understand how civil society developed and evolved in the modern history of Iran and how it operates in the current day through the eyes of the actors of this realm. The fieldwork of the study was conducted in Tehran in 2006. This study, while questioning the liberal understanding of civil society, endeavours to contemplate a consistent framework in which the Iranian civil society activities could be located.

The Iranian case proved the existence of a vivid civil society despite a repressive political climate. However, instead of comprehending the Iranian civil society as constant or developing, this thesis showed that civil society is in fact evolving according to the power relations between the state and civil society. In this sense, Iranian civil society is neither weak or nor strong but rather its strength is changing vis-à-vis the relations with the Iranian state.

Keywords: Civil society, Iranian civil society, contemporary Iran, Iranian NGOs

ÖZ

İRAN'DA SİVİL TOPLUM

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Bu tez, İran sivil toplumunun modern İran tarihinde nasıl bir gelişim ve dönüşüm geçirdiğini ve güncel durumunu bu alanda yer alan aktörlerin perspektifinden kavramayı amaçlamaktadır. Tezin alan araştırması Tahran'da 2006 yılında yürütülmüştür. Bu çalışma, bir yandan sivil toplum literatüründeki liberal yaklaşımları sorgularken, diğer yandan İran'daki sivil toplumsal hareketleri inceleyebilmek için tutarlı bir çerçeve tasarlamaya çalışmaktadır.

İran örneğinde, baskıcı bir rejimin varlığına rağmen, dinamik bir sivil toplum alanı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu tez, İran sivil toplumunu sabit ya da gelişmekte olan bir alan olarak kavramak yerine, İran sivil toplumunun gerçekte devlet ve sivil toplum arasındaki güç ilişkileri ekseninde dönüşmekte olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu doğrultuda, İran sivil toplumunun zayıflığından ya da güçlülüğünden söz etmek yerine, İran devletiyle olan değişken ilişkilerinin belirleyiciliğine vurgu yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sivil toplum, İran sivil toplumu, modern İran, İran sivil toplum örgütleri

To my father

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Civil society debate is one of the liveliest debates in contemporary social sciences and is listed among the subjects of various disciplines. It also has many policy implications for the state as well as for the actors of civil society. The debate is influenced by the older discussions in social science, such as liberal theory versus critical theory, Orientalism, and the more recent discussions on political Islam. As a student of sociology, the implications of the concept for the Middle Eastern context were a theoretical and historical puzzle for me. The struggles of the Iranian civil society actors under the Islamic Republic provided a suitable setting for a deeper investigation of this puzzle.

This thesis focuses on the nature of civil societal action in contemporary Iran. While doing so, the aim is to understand the civil society in Iran through the eyes of the actors of this sphere. In other words, how they perceive the state of Iranian civil society rises as the key issue. The questions that it will ask are as follows: Which definition or conceptualization of the ‘civil society’ should one use while trying to make sense of the experiences of the Iranian civil society actors? How did ‘civil society’ develop historically and what are its main characteristics and problems in contemporary Iran? How do the Iranian actors interpret their own experiences and what can we learn from their own answers to this puzzle?

These questions necessitated firstly a theoretical discussion of what civil society is and should be. Accordingly, this thesis will try to highlight the main axis of the civil society debate in the literature and see which conceptualizations are available for the researcher attempting to understand a concrete civil society experience. Being aware of the old issue of theory-ladenness of social scientific research, this thesis will try to produce a theoretical self-reflection/self-consciousness and will be open about its theoretical commitments when they are formed. Because there are multiple frameworks of conceptualizing civil society and identifying who or what will be included in this realm, being explicit of one's theoretical choices seems to be vital and necessary, before one delves into the details of the case study at hand.

Although this thesis will touch upon these theoretical issues, its main focus will be the Iranian case. Hence the implications of the theoretical issues upon area studies will also be included in our investigation. How is the Middle Eastern context discussed in the literature? How does religion and culture play into the theoretical choices? As the civil society debate is generally informed by non-Middle Eastern cases, the puzzle that Iranian experience creates deepens.

In 1979 Iran underwent a social revolution, which turned out to be an Islamist one in 1980. Since then, Iran was in the agenda of social scientists. There was something strange in a revolution that seemed 'backwards' and happened against one of the strongest regimes in the region. Despite the repressiveness of the old and new regimes, and at the expense of their personal safety and comfort, Iranian civil society actors continued their activities. In 1997, President Khatami was elected with a

landslide victory and with an election campaign paying tribute to the civil society experience. Under his government, more and more NGOs were legally established, newspapers and periodicals mushroomed and students raised their voices. In 2006, when I visited Iran with the purpose of conducting fieldwork, all segments of society were in a waiting period, waiting to see what was going to happen under the new hard-liner President Ahmedinejad.

Iran experienced two revolutions in the 20th century, with many interval periods of social protest and with a high level of informal political participation. My concern was to grasp these social experiences and link them to the theoretical debate. With these intentions I went to Tehran for my fieldwork, the methodology of which will be explained in the following pages.

1.2 Methodology and Field Research

This section will try to shed some light on the fieldwork part of this thesis. In order to so, first, I will endeavour to show the aim of the field research. Then, I will give information about how the fieldwork conducted including the practical concerns and constraints.

The purpose of the field research was to understand the current civil societal action in Iran through the eyes of the actors of this sphere. Therefore, how they comprehend civil society, their expectations from a democratic government, their own experiences with the state were tried to be illuminated by the field research. Such information seems crucial in order to grasp the civil society debates in the Middle

Eastern context in general and in Iran in particular. Furthermore, it is also important for understanding the applicability of the term to the region. Thus, based on the data collected through the fieldwork, the peculiarities of the Iranian civil society were revealed. Hence, it became possible to locate the civil society debate in a non-western context and go beyond the Western framework of civil society thesis.

Before, starting to picture the fieldwork, it should be mentioned that the field research was funded by Middle East Technical University the Office of Scientific Research Projects Coordination (BAP).

I conducted my field research during the months of June and July 2006 in Tehran. Iran, being an Islamic republic, provided a good opportunity to study civil societal action to investigate the terms applicability to other regions and to overcome the general bias towards the Islamic countries. Although studying a country where there are few works on civil society was exciting, it was also challenging due to the state repression and possible interference. Such limitations of the research will be detailed in the proceeding parts of this section.

In this thesis, I aimed to reach civil society organizations that are active in their specific fields. Since the goal was to understand civil society in a rather broader sense, I have tried to include not only associations but also professional organizations such as syndicates. Before going to Iran, I have tried to arrange connections with the Resource Centre for Civil Society under the UNDP in order to get a list of civil society organizations that are based in Tehran. However, it did not become possible to reach even to an officer in this organization. Hence, I had to reach the

organizations via personal contacts. After arranging an appointment with an organization I have asked them for further names. Namely, I used mainly the snowball technique to data collection. In addition to this way, I have also endeavoured to reach people through my findings based on the preliminary research to prevent one-sided/biased sampling. The most challenging part of the research was to get appointments from the NGOs. The state repression did come to the fore during this procedure. Since level of suspicion and fear is high towards state monitoring, I had to convince people that I was doing this research merely for my MSc degree. Also, I had to explain how I reached their names and contact details. In some occasions, I had to use the names of previous interviewees or the name of a reliable friend of them to build the necessary trust. It should be mentioned that I also felt the state repression when conducting the research. While I was interviewing with the administrator of an NGO, a man also attended the interview. He said that he was working in an NGO but hesitated to give information on his NGO and himself. During the interview he took so many photographs of me and my translator. Afterwards, we learnt that he was from the government and monitoring my study. As a matter of fact, few days after this meeting, a prominent Iranian journalist who is also a close friend advised me to finish the study and leave the country. It was really disappointing since I have not completed the study yet. However, because I was scared, I listened to this advice and came back to Turkey. Although there were important limitations when achieving the sampling, I have conducted interviews with 13 administrators of civil society organizations from various fields: women, children, syndicates and some politically active periodicals.

The interviews were in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews. They took place in the corresponding organizations. Thus, I have also found chance to observe the members/volunteers, the material resources of the organization. Additionally, I have also sat in the meetings whenever it is possible. Before the interviews I explained my aim in detail and tried to eliminate their possible concerns. The interviews were carried out generally in English. However, also a translator was accompanying me in case of necessity. In total, 8 interviews were conducted in English and 5 interviews were conducted in Farsi. Apart from the case study sampling, there were 3 participants, one of whom was the vice-president of Mohammed Khatami, the former president of the Iranian state. This interview was very important to grasp the state's attitude towards civil society. The other 2 interviews (one prominent intellectual and one university professor studying on civil society and collective action), on the other hand, were fruitful for providing a deeper understanding to the civil society debate in Iran.

The interviews were composed of three sets of questions. The first set aimed to learn the demographic features of the respondents. The second set was about the characteristics of the NGO such as foundation years, aims and activities, and the degree of collaboration with other NGOs. Last set, on the other hand, were composed of the questions that aimed to reveal their perceptions on civil society, democracy including their diagnosis on the problems of Iranian context and their experiences vis-à-vis the Iranian state.

In this thesis, to protect all the interviewees, the names of the organizations and respondents will not be used. As I mentioned in the preceding parts of this chapter,

due to the state repression some participants requested that I omit their names. Hence, I found appropriate to not mention the names of the people who had no reservations that I use their names, as well.

1.3 Order of Presentation

The thesis will investigate the subject matter in three sections. Firstly, a brief summary of the theoretical debate will be presented. How the term ‘civil society’ emerged in the literature, which historical experiences had given rise to the wide use of the term will be our starting point. Then the many definitions of the civil society will be investigated. As a matter of fact, defining the concept is a huge part of the debate. Through this discussion, my hope is to identify major veins of approaching the subject and later to understand the alternative ways of debating civil society in the Middle Eastern context. Whether there is a civil society, whether its existence is pre-requisite for democratization in the region and lastly who will count as civil society actors; these questions seem to be the basics of the Middle Eastern civil society debate.

In the second part, a selective account of Iranian history in the 20th century will be provided. The highlights are the constitutional revolution, early modernization period until the end of the Reza Shah, the second world war years, the nationalization period of Mussaddiq and the coup that overthrew his government, the strengthening of the second Shah, Mohammed Reza and the White Revolution of the 1970s, the revolution of 1979, the Khomeini era, Rafsanjani’s attempts at limited liberalization and finally Khatami’s reformist period. Throughout the chapter the state-society

relations will be trace and I will try to identify major political actors. Lastly a very general picture of Iranian civil society will be presented.

In the following chapter, the findings of fieldwork will be shared and these will be linked to the theoretical and historical debates. Throughout the thesis, a general argument about how to understand civil society in Iran will be formed and the conclusion will hopefully crystallize this general argument and justify its merits.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2. 1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide reflections upon the concept of civil society and the debates surrounding it. In the first part of the chapter, definitions of the concept will be provided and the main debates related to the civil society will be assessed. The second part will focus on the nature of civil society in the Middle Eastern context and debates on Middle Eastern civil society will be discussed. In the third part of the chapter, the critique of theories on civil society in the context of the Middle East will be evaluated. Finally, in the last part, Charles Tilly's theory on collective action will be addressed to since it is thought be very useful for the analysis of civil society in Iran.

It should be also mentioned that this exploration of the concept will not engage in detail with the complex definitional debates about the meanings of civil society but instead this chapter aims to discuss selectively some of different versions of the concept, their utilization in relation to the Middle East and the applicability of the term to the Middle eastern context.

2.2 Mapping the Term “Civil Society”

2.2.1 Revival of the Concept

Civil society is generally defined as the realm of organized social life that is voluntary and autonomous from the state. Although there are many definitions, its base on voluntarism, independence from the state, contribution to democracy and interest representation are the most common features that are attributed to the term.

The concept of civil society has a long history dating back to 17th century. In the current politics, the attention of and debates on the concept have grown. This revival of the concept takes its roots from the resistance to totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America in 1970s and 1980s¹, and finally, the cycle has been completed by the return of the concept back to the West where there has been a process of “rediscovery of the home-grown but long-forgotten concept” of civil society.² As a result, it started be considered as a significant and important actor of democracy.

The reasons for the increase of interest in civil society in the world conjuncture, Galston³ argues, can be collected under four principles. First of all, events in the former Soviet-block nations of Central Europe displayed the ways in which civil

¹ see, Cohen&Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 1992; David Lewis, “Civil Society in non-Western Contexts: Reflections on the ‘Usefulness’ of a Concept”, 2001, Nancy Bermeo&Philip Nord, *Civil Society before Democracy*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

² Comaroff and Comaroff, *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*, University Press, p. 5, cited in Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin eds., *Exploring Civil Society*, Routledge, 2004, p. 3.

³ William Galston, “Civil Society and the Art of Association”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2000.

formations- labor unions, networks of dissident intellectuals, churches, and like- could serve as effective sources of resistance to oppressive governments. Secondly, non-governmental organizations emerged throughout the world as to give voice to previously unheard voices addressing issues that are subject to transnational interest such as environment, status of women and human rights. Thirdly, the concept of civil society provided a basis for criticizing the excess of both the state and the market. Lastly, the civil society responded to the anxiety that the traditional sources of socialization, solidarity, and active citizenship were becoming weak. This last principle of Galston analysis displays that the problem does not just refer to a democracy problem existing on the level of the state, but points out a democracy problem on the level of society, as well.

In the light of these developments, the idea of civil society gained a strategic position in current politics As Calhoun⁴ clearly points out ‘the term began to be invoked as a sort of panacea for all manner of social ills’. In the contemporary revival of the term, nevertheless, a great deal of ambiguities has arisen. What is civil society, what is the role of civil society, which activities or what kind of organizations fall in the realm of civil society seem to be the major questions around which the ambiguities has arisen. The next section will deal with these questions and try to give a general framework about the theories of civil society.

⁴ Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Civil Society”, review, *Social Forces*, Vol. 73, No. 3, 1995.

2.2.2 *What is civil society?*

‘What is civil society?’ has been one of the main issues that theorists of the contemporary social sciences have been focusing on. The dense attention to the concept, unsurprisingly, led to so many but different definitions of the term to be made on the basis of the different ideological positioning. In spite of the difficulty to define civil society with its all phases, in the broadest sense, it represents the space of facilities of individuals outside the control of the state apparatus. Obviously, such a broad definition has not much explanatory power, but shedding more light on the concept necessitates a discussion of different tints in the field. Therefore, rather than trying to give ‘a’ definition of civil society, analyzing the main school of thoughts in the literature seems more helpful for understanding the concept. These schools are first, the liberal position is directly relational with the liberal democratic theory and emphasizes the importance of civil associational life to balance the state power. Second vein is the radical version of civil society and it grasps the concept as a realm of resistance in the struggle with the totalitarian regimes. Other than these two camps, there are also scholars who either try to liberate the concept from the liberal version or widening boundaries of the concept in order to include the non-Western contexts.

The first vein is the liberal perspective, the dominant position in the current civil society discussion, which is inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville and the Scottish moralists including Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Francis Hutcheson.⁵ This

⁵ David Lewis, “Civil society in non-Western Contexts: Reflections on the ‘Usefulness’ of a Concept”, 2001; Nancy Bermeo&Philip Nord, *Civil Society before Democracy*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

version of civil society refers to a public space between household and the state, aside from the market, in which citizens may associate for the prosecution of private interests within a framework of law guaranteed by the state.

It is determined as the space of uncoerced human association⁶ and represents the network of autonomous associations that rights-bearing and responsibility-laden citizens voluntarily create to address common problems, advance shared interest, and promote collective aspirations. As a legitimate public actor, civil society participates alongside- not replaces- state and market institutions in the making and implementing of public policies designed to resolve collective problems and advance the public good.⁷

Diamond⁸ conceives civil society as “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self generating, self supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or asset of shared values”. According to him, organizations which have relation with religious fundamentalists, ethnic chauvinist, revolutionary movement cannot be counted in the realm of civil society because it contradicts the pluralist and market oriented nature of civil society.

Rooted in the Western Enlightenment, the liberal version of civil society puts special emphasis on the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in

⁶ Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Civil Society”, *Dissent*, 1991, p. 7.

⁷ Kumi Naido & Rajesh Tandon, *Civil Society at the Millennium*, Kumarian Press, 1999, p. 6-7.

⁸ Larry Diamond, “Promoting Democracy in the 1990s: Actors and Instruments, Issues and Imperatives”, Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, December 1995.

particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity.⁹ The main characteristics coming to the fore can be given as associative freedom and promoting values linked to the protection of human rights and private property. The realization of these values in the realm of civil society, on the other hand, is pursued by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which are private, non-profit-distributing, self-governing and voluntary.

It is obvious that this tint of civil society is quite intertwined with liberal democratic theory that based on the idea of 'good governance'. According to liberal democratic theory, the state should provide accountable governance that is subject to free and fair elections, whereas the civil society should be able to enjoy civil and political rights and associational autonomy. Moreover, a strong and plural civil society is crucial to guard against the excesses of state power, but also to legitimate the authority of the state when it is based on the rule of law. The liberal democratic order should involve equilibrium between these three sets of factors: adequate government, a properly functioning market economy and a civil society that can balance the two other factors. In this conception, while the boundaries of the plurality and the strength of the civil society is determined by the liberal values, civil society is considered in quite relation with the capitalist society.

The Radical version of civil society is one of the strands opposing the dominant liberal version of civil society in the field. Especially influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci, the events in the former East bloc and Latin America nourished a different understanding of civil society embraced mainly by the New Left. According

⁹ David Lewis, 2001, p. 22.

to Gramsci¹⁰ human being, the individual is integral to social relations. He/she establishes relationships in different spheres voluntarily or involuntarily in civil and political society. But these are conscious activities of the individual. This is to say that it is the human being that makes the history. So, the individual can transform these social relations in a conscious way. Gramsci argues that struggle to transcend inequalities of class society can only proceed with an analysis of culture and ideology among masses of civil society. There have been many interpretations of Gramsci's thought especially in the 1970s when Euro-communism was at the agenda and the purpose was to strengthen and increase organizations in civil society in the period of struggle for socialism. In these perspectives, civil society is seen as a general opposition arena which has the potential for emancipation of the dominated groups in society. Crisis of communist states, weakened belief on the state's role of social recovery among social democrats and newly emerging social movements all served increasing popularity of civil society. Movements started to articulate their demands in this sphere by means of institutions and organizations of civil society. New social movements, based on different identities such as ethnic, sexual, ecological and women movements and against increasing state authority and centralism, are to be thought as mechanisms that are promising for pointing out the democratizing potential of civil society. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato's¹¹ work can be given as one of the most influential one in this vein. They define the concept as a sphere of social interaction between the state and the economy, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and the forms of public communication.

¹⁰ Norberto Bobbio, "Gramsci ve Sivil Toplum Kavramı" in Erhan Göksel eds., *Gramsci ve Sivil Toplum*, Savaş Yayınları, 1982.

¹¹ Cohen & Arato, 1992.

Additionally, they add that civil society not only helps to describe at least some of the transitions from soviet type system but provides a perspective from which an immanent critique can be and should be undertaken.

There are also other alternatives to the liberal paradigm in the literature that try to rescue the concept from the liberal domination or to extend the scope of the term to a degree that is able to cover the non-Western contexts with their peculiarities instead of being stuck in the limits of liberal conceptualization.

From the former vein, Beckman¹² endeavours to rescue civil society from the liberal agenda by stating that the liberal conception of civil society dominates contemporary scholarship and policy debate. According to him, “the lack of civil society was posed in terms of lack of social forces supportive of the liberal economic agenda and the prevailing usages tend to build a commitment to liberalism of one sort or the other into very definition of the concept. Besides, the prospects of the liberal democratization are explained in terms of the growth of civil society; but only features of associational life that are thought to be supportive of the liberal project are considered as civil society proper”. In this respect, he thinks that the concept of civil society should be widened in order to make it less subservient to the liberal agenda. Thus, it becomes possible to grasp more complex and illiberal social realities.

¹² Björn Beckman, “Explaining Democratization: Notes of the Concept of the Civil Society”, in E. Özdalga and S. Persson eds., *Civil Society, Democracy and the Muslim World*, Swedish Research Institute, 1997.

Linz and Stephan's¹³ description of civil society may well fit into the latter vein. According to them, civil society include all organized social forces of society, from political parties to business enterprises, or even coincide with the array of people that, from time to time, turn up on the streets to voice their concerns against abusive regimes.

As it can be easily seen in the above discussions, it is hard to reach an exact definition of civil society. In order to put it differently, in Kumar's¹⁴ words, 'contemporary theorists are evidently mining a rich but highly variegated vein'. However, it is still possible to claim that although there are important differences between these strands, they were common in attributing civil society a positive meaning. In all these versions autonomous civil society is grasped as the sine quo non of democratic governance. The disparities, on the other hand, gather around the role, aim and boundaries of civil society. In other words, the question of what kind of activities and institutions are in the scope of civil society raises as the key issue that these veins fall apart. When the liberal camp emphasizes the associational, pluralist and market oriented nature of civil society alongside the liberal democratic norms, others grasp civil society as a realm of struggle in a larger scale that includes nearly all collective actions against repressive actions of the states.

¹³ Linz J.& A. Stephan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Krishan Kumar, "Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term", *British Journal of Sociology*, No. 44, 1993.

2.3 Debating Civil Society in the Middle East

Since this thesis aims to understand the nature and characteristics of civil society in Iran, it seems necessary to understand the reflections of the civil society debate in the Middle Eastern context. Thus, as a country part of the region, an understanding of the Middle East would shed some light on the Iranian civil society. When we look to the Middle East, we see that the most important subject of the civil society discussions is its existence. In other words the question is whether there is civil society in the region and if so, how we can evaluate on its characteristics. Namely, what kind of civil society is present and/or under formation under authoritarian and Muslim context appear as an important debate. Another important point that comes to the fore is the boundaries and the nature of the civil societal activity. Scholars frequently discuss whether the activities in the region fit the model of the western liberal theoretical thinking. Even when the existence of civil society is acknowledged questions such as what makes this region's civil society different from the western model arise. Here the religion of the region is often referred to as the cause of the peculiarities and the difference from the west. Culture is sometimes used as a synonym for religion. In the pages below, I will look in to details of this debate.

In relation with the fact that civil societal elements vigorously contributed to regime changes and the transition from authoritarian rule in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of civil society, which became a new discourse of politics, is opened to discussions for the other regions of the world, as well. Influenced by the events in the former Soviet Block nations, civil society as a promoter of democracy, was appreciated for the other parts of the developing world

and, consequently, was introduced to the grammar of the Middle Eastern politics, as Bellin¹⁵ puts directly, ‘state officials in the Middle East use the term “civil society” to promote their projects of mobilization and modernization; Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty’. Not only Middle Eastern people but also Western scholars and development agencies embraced the term as the precondition for democratic transition in the Middle Eastern states. Furthermore, scholars such as Kazemi, Springborg and Goldberg tried to display the long history of civil society in the region in their studies by pointing the evidence and effectiveness of interest-based organizations and their role vis-à-vis the ruling authority. They state that even during medieval times, the Arab world was characterized by a rich associational life closely resembling civil society.

Only if we assume medieval Muslims were incredibly stupid or if we are willing ourselves to be exceptionally obtuse can we assert that there was no civil society in a world in which men.... Managed to assert claims to and defend their property from kings on a systematic basis.¹⁶

According to Jillian Schwedler¹⁷, who contemplates that growing number of scholars use the concept within the context of Middle East since 1980s, the debate of civil society in the region is being maintained by two different lines of thought on the basis of three questions. There are scholars who diagnose civil society as nonexistent

¹⁵ Eva Bellin, “Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East Politics?”, *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1994, p. 509-510.

¹⁶ Quoted from, Jillian Schwedler, *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18.

and those who view it as a probable driving force for political reform are the two axes of the debate; and the questions arising from the debate are, firstly, whether the civil society argumentations are relevant to the Middle East as a non-Western region. In other words, can we talk about the existence of civil society in the region? Secondly, will it be able to challenge the authority of the present governments, and lastly, which groups are considered as actors of civil society?

In the first axes of this tense debate, asking whether the existence of civil society could be possible in non-Western world comes to the fore as a particular question peculiar to the condition of Muslim societies. This situation arises from the very fact that as Carapico¹⁸ clearly states, they think that deep religiosity and culture are absolute impediments to the development of civic values and institutions.

As a much known figure in the Middle East studies, Elie Kedourie¹⁹ claims that because of Islamic tradition of the region, there are no forces that defy state power. According to him, in the West “citizens organize themselves according to their various social, economic, and political activities, in a multiplicity of groups and associations”.

In the same vein, Gellner²⁰ claims that Islam has a structure which is secularism-resistant. Since he considers secularism as a precondition of civil society, he makes a

¹⁸ Sheila Carapico, “Yemen between Civility and Civil War”, in *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Richard August Norton eds., Vol: 2, Brill, 1996.

¹⁹ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992.

²⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Civil Society and Its Rivals*, Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

diagnosis of Muslim societies and defines them as spheres in which civil society cannot develop.

According to Lewis²¹, on the other hand, 'Islamic history shows no councils or communes, no synods or parliaments, nor any kind of elected or representative assembly', instead the Middle East existed under an 'ancient tradition of autocracy and acquiescence'. In further discussions, although both Lewis and Kedourie accept the fact that there are independent social and political organizations, albeit limited, they perpetuate to claim that these groups do not create a network which is central to be counted as civil society.

Although the concept of civil society as a tool of political analysis in non-Western societies is approached by suspicion by scholars outlined above, on the other side of the debate, there are scholars thinking that it is possible to talk about the existence of civil society in the Middle East. Saad Eddin Ibrahim²² responds to researchers who claims that there is no civil society in the Middle East by stating that how often they forget how long, arduous, and even bloody their march was towards a civil society and democratization. The common point of these scholars is the idea of looking beyond cultural explanations. As Schwedler²³ notes, even though talking about the presence of a civil society in the region does not necessarily mean that the countries in the region are on the verge of democratization, it is still meaningful in the sense that it proves the power and willingness on the part of the citizens in shaping the

²¹ Bernard Lewis, "The Shaping of of the Modern Middle East", in Jillian Schwedler, *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

²² Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Populism, Islam, and Civil Society in the Arab World", in John Burbidge eds., *Beyond Prince and Merchant*, PACT Publications, 1998.

²³ Schwedler, 1995, p.25.

issues which affect their own lives. Furthermore, she reminds us that, ‘there are many paths to democracy, few of which are smooth’. More importantly, the idea of the presence of civil society in the Middle East is also valuable since it challenges those clichés that imply the continuous traditionalism, backwardness of the region and hence the conviction that the region is “destined to stay as it is”.

Bellin²⁴ claims that in all its diverse uses, the idea of civil society represents a challenge to despotism. Beckman²⁵, while picturing the term as empirical shorthand referring vaguely to associational life, holds the idea that the borders of the civil society should be broadened so that the concept can be more useful in analyzing a variety of political publics such as those of the market, the bazaar, the church and the mosque.

For O’Donnell and Schmitter²⁶, civil society emerges with the resurrection of the public sphere. When individuals and groups begin to challenge the boundaries of permissible behaviour such as by speaking out against the regime or demanding a government response to social needs civil society begins to take shape. It is obvious that this definition does not exclude the Middle East.

In order to transcend the essentialist approach in the study of civil society, Carapico²⁷ proposes that the civil society in the Middle East “may resemble what Jean Francois Bayart described as the process whereby society seeks to ‘breach’ or

²⁴ Bellin, 1994, p. 509.

²⁵ Beckman, 1997, p. 76.

²⁶ Guillermo O’Donnell & Philippe Schmitter, *Transition from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions*, John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

²⁷ Carapico, 1996, p. 288.

counteract ‘totalization’ by the state, or, in Lefebvre’s term ‘an autonomous space of mass expression,’ than formal organizations cooperating within legal guarantees conceded in advance.”

Norton²⁸, as one of the leading figure of the debate, defines civil society as the place where a *mélange* of groups, associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties, and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen. Then, he adds that analyzing the strength and nature of communal associations can give more accurate information about the Middle East than studies of authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. According to Norton, three features are *sine qua nons* of civil society: Civility, associability, and citizenship. When civility refers to tolerance of the other, associability refers to a spirit of cooperation and finally, citizenship represents the idea of being a part of the whole which is loaded with duties and rights. This definition of civility raises this very question: how can we differentiate the civil and uncivil behaviour? What is the use of this discussion of notion of civility? Norton²⁹’s reply to this critical question is that ‘the issue is behavioural and not psychological. What matters is not how people feel about others, but how they act toward them. Schwedler³⁰ offers a similar view,

The basic question is whether those organizations that may seek to one day replace the state should be counted as actors within civil society on the basis that their current behaviour is peaceful, tolerant, and within the rules of the game. The question should

²⁸ Augustus Richard Norton, “The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East”, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Brill, 1994.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.11.

³⁰ Schwedler, 1995, p. 14.

not be whether they seek reform or change the government, but whether they seek to do so by working within the system.

Critics of this understanding claim that although these groups act in the system, they can dismantle democratic institutions when they gain power. But, as Schwedler³¹ quotes from Diamond, ‘this problem, the old paradox of democracy, is not unique to the Middle East’.

In strong relation with the civility discussion, the question of the Islamic groups has specific importance in the civil society debate in the Middle East. Are the Islamist groups considered as one of the elements of civil society? With the help of the distinction between moderate and radical Islamists, Norton endeavours to overcome this problem. According to him, moderate Islamists reject violent and revolutionary tactics. Instead, they aim at reform with the use of existent political channels. Radical Islamists, on the other hand, endeavour to take the control of the state by force. Furthermore, he claims that when the groups participate in democratic political processes this is sufficient to be considered as a part of civil society. Thus, Norton prioritizes participation to legitimate political process.

On the contrary, Ibrahim³² draws a different picture. From his point of view, the civil society in the Middle East comprises the secular, nongovernmental organizations that are emerging as important political actors. With this comprehension, he excludes the Islamist groups that are very active in the region.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.12.

³² Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Crisis, Elites, and Democratization in the Arab World”, in Jillian Schwedler, *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995, p. 37-39.

However, it is a fact that, as Schwedler clearly points out; Islamist groups have been among the most effective means of challenging government authority and responding to citizens' needs and concerns. Thereby, she proposes to focus on the function instead of structures and pictures the sphere as 'familial, professional, tribal, religious or clan-based'. It should be mentioned that, since the religious sphere is the main realm where the impact and control of the authoritarian state is relatively low, the religious institutions have become the main channel that the struggles against the state have been carried on. Moreover, in order to understand the dynamics of the civil society in the Middle East, it is hard to ignore the Islamist groups. Keeping the idea that, if one of the most important features of civil society is characterized as plurality, like churches of the Western world, we cannot leave the Islamists groups aside and we cannot comprehend civil society as homogenous in goals and principles.

In conclusion, I argue that we should define civil society with the people's will to organization. Hence, we have to take the inner dynamics, peculiarities of societies into consideration, as Hefner³³ notes, though such ideals may have been influenced by the West, they are ideals that are not merely 'Western', and at times may need 'reelaboration' in their own contexts. Like Hefner, Schwedler suggests a similar view: 'how do citizens and communities address their interests or grievances vis-à-vis government policies? When the question is framed in this way, the idea of civil society may highlight a wide range of social interactions that might otherwise be dismissed as irrelevant. In this sense civil society indeed exists throughout the Middle East.

³³ Robert W. Hefner, *Democratic Civility: The History and Cross-Cultural Possibility of a Modern Political Ideal*, Transactions, 1998, p. 25.

After having laid down the main debates in the civil society literature in general and their reflections to the Middle Eastern context, now it seems useful to assess these debates. Therefore, I will try to provide some critical thinking to analyze the concept of civil society with special reference to the Middle East and more importantly how the civil society should be studied in order to make sense of the already existing civil society activities in the Middle East. Just like many political concepts civil society requires an analytic comprehension that scrutinizes the diverse determinants on international, regional and national levels alongside the altering political dynamics. So, in this part of the chapter I will try to discuss the main problems of the civil society usage especially the dominant version of the concept, namely the liberal vein in the light of the Middle East. Then I will suggest Robert Cox's critical theory to overcome issues of methodology regarding the study of this region. Here, my inspiration will be the holistic characteristic of critical theory so that the studies on the region can use the insights of this theory to establish relations between the general politics of the region and the civil societal activities that are sometimes mistakenly studied as a separate part.

When we look to the major themes that are addressed in the literature for the Middle East, it is possible to group these discuss some basic camps that are prevailing. The first group may be named as the 'orientalist approach', as mentioned above, claiming that the concept of civil society is alien to the Middle East due to the region-specific conditions. Opposed to this orientalist approach, there are scholars who endeavour to demonstrate the existence of civil society or at least civil societal forces in the region as Norton and Ibrahim. In other words, the first discussion is maintained

around the questions of can there be a civil society in the Middle East, if yes, is there a civil society in the Middle East. However, this discussion of civil society is pregnant with some structural problems. Beyond the problem of the cultural explanations that are already criticised and falsified, the core problem in this debate is the ways in which the existence of civil society is tried to be proved, namely the methodological problem. The scholars, when employing the term, indeed based their study on Western-liberal model of civil society and measure the degree of civil society in the region in the light of this model.

As, Shirazi³⁴ noticeably postulates, in the authoritarian states the existence of civil society cannot be measured with routine parameters which are used in the contexts of democratic states. In other words, in an authoritarian state, the lack of civil societal manifestations such as associations, parties, and syndicates does not necessarily translate to the lack of civil society by definition. In this context, it is important to be aware of a potential civil societal action which is devoid of manifesting and developing solely due to impediments of an authoritarian state.

Another and more important problem that is strictly relational with the first one is the tendency to take the world as given. The reflection of civil society studies in the Middle East is to take the Western model as an ideal type in Weberian terms and compare the country specific activities, movements and NGOs according to this ideal type. However, it should be remembered that the values, roles and boundaries of Western civil society model is not ahistorical nor given. The democracy model that necessitates such a civil society is not the ultimate, ideal version of democracy,

³⁴ Asgar Shirazi, "İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Sivil Toplumun İfadesi Olarak Karşı Kültür", in Ferhad İbrahim & Heidi Wedel eds., *Ortadoğu'da Sivil Toplumun Sorunları*, İletişim Yayınları, 1997, p.67.

either. Therefore, comparing the Middle Eastern civil society according to these parameters and coming to conclusion that, for instance, yes there are civil societal forces in the region is in fact an ideologically sided standpoint since it is the very example of maintaining the discussion in the very same paradigm. However, social scientific effort, rather than taking the social realities as given, needs to scrutinize the very dynamics and causations that generate the contemporary situations in the world, hence needs to go beyond the drawn lines. The general discourse on civil society seems not to involve any political propositions as to how the world came to a stage where it needs the liberal civil society view. These are indeed questions which require a critical thinking as opposed to the problem-solving theory; a famous distinction in IR theory by Robert Cox.³⁵ ‘It [Problem solving theory] takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework of action. The general aim of problem-solving theory is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble’. The NGO-laden civil society understanding, namely the liberal version, is indeed one typical example of such thinking. Freizer³⁶, in her study on Central Asia, portrays neo-liberal NGOs as such:

They are fundamentally different from early organizations because they do not mobilize supporters; rather than being advocacy based, they become heavily engaged in social service delivery.

³⁵ Robert Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Millennium: Journal of International Relations* Vol. 10, No. 2, 1981, p. 128.

³⁶ Sabine Freizer, “Central Asian Fragmented Civil Society”, in Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin eds., *Exploring Civil Society*, Routledge, 2004, p. 134.

Those modern associational NGOs that are acting in the non-Western context and mostly funded by the developed countries are in need of localized solutions. They emphasize the political benefits of an apolitical civil society and seek social rather than political activities. Although it is impossible to ignore their positive impacts on social services, they are indeed a very important part of an agenda in the hands of development policy makers in order to promote a liberal type of democracy with its *mission civilisatrice* of Europe. They do never question ‘the sources of trouble,’ hence there is no vision of a general emancipation. As Lipschutz³⁷ claims “they are less interested in how power is exercised and the results of that exercise. The focus on efficiency and instrumentalities is a type of theorizing aptly suited to a liberal worldview, which eschews foundational questions of politics and power and deals with distribution rather than constitution. Such a focus accepts the deployment of a power as given and begs for dispensation from the powerful”. However, a very important problem arises at this point: how is it possible to re-structure an authoritarian state system with activities that are not political? Is it plausible to expect any democratic transition when insisting on liberal form of civil society to a country ignoring all the history, struggles and dynamics of that country? As the main question, is the concept of civil society really needed?

In order to overcome this very problem one should look at the concept through the lenses of critical theory instead of withering away the term that has an emancipatory potential which gives crucial role to the agency in politics and is widely accepted. As

³⁷ Ronnie D. Lipschutz, “Global Civil Society and Global Governmentality”, in Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin eds., *Exploring Civil Society*, Routledge, 2004, p. 205.

Glasius³⁸ mentioned, there is plenty of evidence that shows links between civil society and political radicalization. “Critical theory is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts”.³⁹ That holistic approach seems to be the only way to rescue the term from the liberal understanding and to re-theorise it to create an understanding that is able to provide the necessary ground for a democratic transition in a country. In order to do so, what is needed is, as Lipshutz already claims, ‘bringing politics back in’. According to him, such politics are not only about the pursuit of shared interest or the mobilization of resources. They are also about productive power, about means as well as ends. On this basis, I argue that civil society should be conceptualized as an arena that contains uncivility as well as civility, an arena not solely composed of free and democratic institutions but the place where power relations are experienced. It is ‘the site of struggle, multivocality, and paradox’⁴⁰, the ground of political contestation.

It is a different space. Its role is to deepen the democratic process in response to the state that has not only ditched the poor and the oppressed but has turned oppressive and violent. It is to highlight dimensions that were not hitherto considered political and make them part of the political process.⁴¹

³⁸Marlies Glasius, “Introduction” to Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin eds., *Exploring Civil Society*, Routledge, 2004, p. 10.

³⁹ Cox, 1981, p. 129.

⁴⁰ Glasius, 2004, p.10.

⁴¹ David Chandler, “Building Global Civil Society ‘From Below?’”, *Millennium*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2004, p. 314.

2.4 The Iranian Context

As it was discussed in the previous section, there is a debate as to whether there is a civil society in the Middle East, and if so whether it is strong or weak. After decades of assuming that it is absent, it was partly the Iranian Revolution that awakened some Western scholars to the idea that the Middle Eastern state, as despotic as it is, may not be that omnipotent after all and the society may be stronger than it was originally thought. The discussion went on to suggest that there might be a proper balance between the state and society to allow civil society to consolidate and to facilitate the process of democratization. “The traditionalists claim that society must not be too weak; the neo-Orientalists claim that it must not be too strong. Perhaps there is a narrow range where society is neither too strong nor too weak but ‘just right’.”⁴² Yahya Sadowski wittingly criticizes this ideal of achieving the ‘just right’ balance. And continues to ask how one measures such a balance. The question remains how to approach the very dynamic Iranian history from the civil society perspective. One alternative might have been to count and measure the strength of relatively liberal associations and groups outside the state realm. However, that would only give us a list of associations, not necessarily the state-society relations. In this thesis, it will be argued that when civil society is understood not as a site of civility, but as it was quoted earlier as ‘the site of struggle, multivocality, and paradox’⁴³, as a site of politics and power relations, then the only way to approach it historically would be to observe the availability of resources and freedoms to the political actors in general. The question of resources and freedoms in historical and in the contemporary

⁴² Yahya Sadowski, “The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate”, *Middle East Report*, July-August, 1993, p. 20.

⁴³ Glasius, 2004, p.10.

contexts (the findings of the fieldwork support this) is the ultimate determinant of the civil societal action in any form in Iran. We will observe in the following chapter that historically, state-society relations are the main axis of the availability of resources and freedoms.

Here, the model developed by Charles Tilly and others to analyze collective action can be very helpful, though it is not necessarily a model for civil society (It is sometimes called as resource mobilization and sometimes as the contentious politics). This model approaches collective action as a competition between different contenders for political power. As such, the method of analysis is to look to the tools, resources and capabilities available to these contenders. So it is not only the state that one should examine, but also the alternative claims to state power or the claims for more political participation. It is unique in the sense that, it creates a separate realm of analysis, separate from the motives or morals of the contenders. It merely focuses on the actual politics of the political competition and cares especially for the changing alliances among the contenders as alliance formation is one of tools that can make a difference in this competition. Hence, they show us that there is more than measuring the despotism of the Oriental state that one can explain in the Iranian history. As Parsa clearly points out, analyzing the structure of the state cannot cover the whole picture, “it is also necessary to specify conditions that generate collective action. To be able to act upon their conditions of oppression, victimized classes or collectivities must mobilize their resources, develop solidarity structures, and overcome the impression that suffering and injustice are inevitable.”⁴⁴ In the theoretization of Parsa, this is where resource mobilization theory appears. This

⁴⁴ Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 22.

theory proposes that the passage from condition to action is contingent upon the availability of resources and changes in the opportunities for collective action.⁴⁵ The approach (or structural-organizational- strategic paradigm) is associated with, amongst others, the work of Zald and McCarthy, and Tilly. It focuses upon the goals, organization and leadership of movements, the resources and opportunities available to them, and the strategies movements employ.

According to Parsa⁴⁶, these theorists such as Tilly and Zald demonstrate that mobilization process is facilitated by social solidarity whereas solidarity is determined by the social structures. These structures have great deal of effect on mobilization process.

One factor that affects mobilization favourably is availability of independent organizations. These organizations provide not only leadership but also an independent financial base, meeting places, etc. Moreover, they act as the main source for networks and channels of communication. Another factor is the structure of opportunities, or balance of power, among contenders.⁴⁷ When the balance of power alters on behalf of upset groups, such groups can initiate conflicts more easily. For instance, if a weakly organized group is able to form alliances with more powerful groups such as a segment of the dominant class, the possibility of insurgency becomes high. Repression appears as the other factor that affects opportunities. When the level of repression is high, the options for mobilization decreases.

⁴⁵ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Longman, 1978, p. 99.

⁴⁶ Parsa, 1989, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Tilly, 1978, p. 98.

Indeed, this model will be the angle by which the history of Iran in the 20th century and the current state of affairs in the civil society – state relations will be examined in the subsequent chapters.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the main axis of the civil society debate was provided with some critical remarks. The aim was not to delve into the civil society literature in depth but rather to use the literature to understand the basic problematique and to make sense of it in the Middle Eastern context. Here I would like to follow upon the last theoretical remarks and see their relevance for the case study of this thesis, namely Iran.

If we remember the warning of Robert Cox that we should endeavour to analyze the whole rather than the parts to avoid presenting a problem solving study, and if we remember Charles Tilly's emphasis on the political competition and resources and capabilities available to the competing actors, it should be clear that the analysis of the civil society in Iran should begin by looking at the main political actors and the dynamics of change in modern Iranian politics. This will indeed be the focus of the following chapter. There it will not be hard to observe that civil society in Iran developed through the efforts of actors towards emancipation and critique rather than small scale associational organizations working for the interests of its members. In the years leading to the 1979 revolution, even those organizations which may fit the

liberal understanding of civil society association behaved in a manner that transcended the narrow interests of the members and became highly politicized.

Additionally, there were those who did not have a formal organization but still moved and worked within the political realm and outside the state (mostly in opposition to the state) such as the writers, the students, and masses of women. If this political radicalization is to be discarded due to the extraordinary nature of the revolutionary times, the fieldwork of this thesis and the subsequent analysis of the contemporary Iranian society would show that even in ordinary times, civil society actors behaved outside the limitations of the liberal conceptualization outlined above. In both periods, there was an authoritarian state which allowed only constrained rights to civil society actors. Hence, only if we step out of the liberal paradigm and comprehend civil society in a more broadened fashion as outlined above we can begin to ‘observe’ the creative ways of organization and mobilization that the Iranians have performed against their state. The participants of our fieldwork which consisted of in-depth interviews consistently linked the specific efforts of their organizations to the wider contemporary political context, national and international and to the modern Iranian history. Their own perceptions of their work should count when we are trying to refine our theoretical concepts as to how and who to abstract as ‘civil society’ in Iran.

CHAPTER III

BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF IRAN

In this chapter, I will examine the political history of Iran, beginning with the early modernization of the Reza Shah in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by the brief yet important Musaddiq period and the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of modernization under Mohammed Reza Shah, the Islamic Revolution and finally ending with the post-revolutionary period of the 1980s and 1990s. The special focus of this chapter will be the state – society relations and the enhancement or narrowing down the political space available to the actors of civil society.

3.1 Early Modernization and Reza Shah

The dynasty that came to an end with the Reza Shah's coming to power was Qajar dynasty whose reign had started in the 18th century and lasted until early 20th century. When the Qajar dynasty came to power, the Iranian society was a territory of turmoil, so it followed a trend of centralization. However, Qajars were late comers to modernization. Although they united the country to some extent their reforms were limited in scope and in efficiency. During the Qajar Dynasty the main groups in the society were:⁴⁸

- the royal family

⁴⁸ Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925*, Mazda Publishers, 1999, p. 15-16.

- tribal khans
- non-tribal members of powerful families
- high-ranking ulama
- the bazaar classes
- nomads

Nikki Keddie, argues that “the Qajars had not state, since tribes, city factions, local governors, and even members of the ulama class, had private armies and engaged in battles without the central government’s being able to intervene.”⁴⁹ Qajars were still the most powerful group; it just was not enough to dominate but was enough to survive.

Following the discussion about the strength of the state, the Qajar state might look like the Oriental despotic state or it might look like a weak state unable to actually penetrate to society. According to Kazemi, “while the power of the state loomed large, its distance and remoteness provided groups and associations the needed minimum space for operation.”⁵⁰

The constitutional revolution in 1906 destroyed the Qajar authority but could not replace it with another central authority. The Iranian political scene in the beginning of the twentieth century was dominated by foreigners as well as locals. The breaking out of the First World War triggered this very situation. During and after the War,

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Farhad Kazemi, “Civil Society and Iranian Politics” in Augustus Richard Norton eds., *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Brill, 2005, p. 120.

Persia was under the control of Russia and Britain. Moreover, there were autonomous power centres that led to virtual disintegration of the country. In such an atmosphere, with the help of a British-backed coup Reza Shah did come to power as the Minister of War in 1921 which brought an end to internal power struggles. Finally in 1925, the Qajar Dynasty was abolished and Reza Shah established his Pahlavi Dynasty and became the monarch.⁵¹

As a nationalist, Reza Shah believed a centralized and westernized state which could not be abused by foreign powers.⁵² In the ruling years of Reza Shah (1925-1941), Iran witnessed a massive modernization programme. First of all, he believed the urgency of a strong and modern army and established it. He reformed the education system along with Western lines, imposed dress code and banned the veil in public places. He tried to reduce the impact of religion on the society and replaced the old law with the modern one. Inspired by Ataturk, he reformed the language and Arabic words were replaced. With the economic reforms, he aimed to reach a modern economy. Through a modern taxation system also created a middle class and working classes.⁵³ The modernization programme of Reza Shah altered “the socioeconomic and cultural landscape in Iran, and created new social groups with new political and cultural orientations.”⁵⁴

The striking difference between Qajars and the Reza Shah that followed them is exactly the issue of strengthening the state mechanism, developing the state

⁵¹ Keddie, 1999, p. 150.

⁵² Masoud Kamali, *Multiple Modernities, Civil Society and Islam*, Liverpool University Press, 2006, p. 166.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 166-174.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 206.

apparatuses and expanding state's domination over the society. This was "a major shift in power groups: a centralized and relatively modernized army and bureaucracy was created for the first time under Reza Shah and, with these new forces under his control, the ruler was able to subdue two of his chief rivals for power, the ulama and the tribes."⁵⁵ Indeed, the nomadic tribes were forcefully settled, the dissidents in the north were subjugated and the country was united. Additionally, one of the most important segments of the society, the ulama was also affected by the modernization efforts of the Shah. As the state took over social functions from the ulama such as education, it destroyed their social base to a great extent. The rapid modernization also diminished the autonomy of anjumans (associations) and other autonomous groups that were active in the society. However, as Kamali⁵⁶ points out his [Reza Shah] model of modernization were coupled with political dictatorship. As a strong nationalist, he aimed to establish a unified country without any social or political diversity. Reza Shah considered democracy and the participation of civil society in the political decision-making as obstacles to the creation of a modern and powerful state.

However, the state was not omnipotent as it did not have control over the most precious resource in the country, namely the oil. Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had the sole authority over the production and the sale of the oil, with varying shares then given to the Iranian state. The company symbolized the Iranian grievances over foreigner's control over Iran and this control was to mark both the Second World War years and its immediate aftermath.

⁵⁵ Nikki Keddie, "The Iranian Power Structure and Social Change 1800-1969: An Overview", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, No.1, 1971, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Kamali, 2006, p. 176.

The Second World War had tremendous impact on the Iranian society. The Britain and the Soviet Union invaded Iran in 1941 using a group of German residing there. Their very excuse was to protect the Iranian oil from being used by Germans.⁵⁷ It was again an outside force that destroyed the Reza Shah's rule due to Reza Shah's opposition to help the Allied Forces in the War. Allies abdicated Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Shah owned his throne. The turmoil brought by the war also damaged the state apparatuses and hence gave rise to a democratic political atmosphere which lasted more than ten years (1941-1953). This new era "was characterized by greater openness in domestic politics and new possibilities for the relations between state and society."⁵⁸ "Trade unions, a free press, rival political parties all thrived. (...) At the end of the war two autonomous administrations were set up – in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan."⁵⁹ During the War years, the political groups that were suppressed under the Reza Shah founded a place in the new political space of Iran. Chief among these political parties was Tudeh, the communist party of Iran, which had achieved a power unknown to communist parties in the Middle East.

The Second World War years are a good indicator of the complex relationship between the state and society and about the conducive atmosphere for civil society. If civil society is understood within the framework outlined in the theory chapter, then it is easy to observe that it is state and the international influences that have an influence on the availability and accessibility of the resources necessary for conducting politics. Though the centralized state of Reza Shah seemed to be limiting

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 220.

⁵⁸ Ali Ghessari & Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 45.

⁵⁹ Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, Penguin, 1979, p. 24.

the political realm and dominating the society, other factors had helped the left and the right of the Iranian society to raise their voices once again and they were going to repeat this in the 1950s and of course most famously in the late 1970s.

3.2 1950s and the National Front

The late 1940s had ushered the establishment of various associations and organizations. “Weakening of the political centre opened the political process and created possibilities for alternative trajectories of development.”⁶⁰ National Front of Iran (NFI), with Muhammad Mosaddiq as the leader, was the most important party and political organization in this era. The organization was established in October, 1949.⁶¹ The National Front was an umbrella organization. The main political bodies contributing to it were: Iran party (its leader was Mehdi Bazargan), the Toiler’s party (its leader was Dr. Baqai) and the Nationalist Party of Iran (its leader was Dariush Foruhar). Also supporting the organization were Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani (the leader of the Society of Moslem Warriors), and Hossein Fatemi.⁶² Hence, these parties possessed different social bases. While the Iran party and the Toiler’s party had more a more urban, modern social base, Ayatollah Kashani, a religious leader, was reflecting the view of those who saw the solutions in Islam and Shari’ a. The fact that the Shah was viewed as controlled by the British was a factor in the unity of the organization, which was mainly anti-British in character.⁶³ However, there were diversities among the groups. In fact, the National Front can hardly be called as a

⁶⁰ Ghessari & Nasr, 2006, p. 46.

⁶¹ Maziar Behrooz, “Factionalism in Iran under Khomeini”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1991, p. 168.

⁶² Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power and Principle*, Syracuse University Press, 1992, p. 95; Sussan Siavoshi, *Liberal Nationalism in Iran: The Failure of a Movement*, Westview Press, 1990, p. 59.

⁶³ Siavoshi, 1990, p. 59-60.

political party. This affected the National Front's capabilities to organize and mobilize the masses, when some of the support was withdrawn.

In 1951 the leader of the NFI, Muhammed Mosaddiq was elected as the Prime Minister of Iran.⁶⁴ Mosaddiq had two main ideas to which he advocated throughout his whole life, according to which he ruled the country during his term as prime minister. These were mainly the constitutionalism and anti-imperialism. As Moaddel mentions: "The Front's democratic objective was to check the arbitrary power of the monarch by demanding that he reign but not rule. Its nationalist objective was to eliminate British control of the Iranian oil industry."⁶⁵ Indeed Musaddiq devoted his years in power to the nationalization of the Iranian oil (1951) and at the same time provided a relaxed political atmosphere for other political groups. Although nationalization of oil was embraced by the Iranian people, it also created many foreign enemies. Additionally, his economic policies decreased the level of unity in the NFI. In such a climate, with a military coup, Musaddiq's government was replaced in 1953.

The coup that toppled down the prime minister was the result of the cooperation among MI6, CIA, and Iranian figures Zahedi and Rashidian brothers. The loose character of the National Front provided a basis for these and the cooperation "exploited the differences between Mossadiq and his supporters."⁶⁶ While, they were trying to weaken Mosaddiq and change his image in the society through propaganda,

⁶⁴ Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran*, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 124.

⁶⁵ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics and Ideology in Iranian Revolution*, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 34.

⁶⁶ Elm, 1992, p. 294.

they were also attempting to persuade Shah for Zahedi's appointment. The coup day experienced the hired crowd, imitating the Tudeh members, insulting the religion and the Shah. By this, they were both portraying the Mosaddiq as someone tolerating this action, and spreading fears of a communist takeover. Eventually, Zahedi declared himself as the prime minister and Musaddiq and ministers were arrested.⁶⁷

3.3 Mohammed Reza Shah and the Path to Revolution: late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

The period of 1954-1963 was one of gradual consolidation of state power under the monarchy.⁶⁸ During this period, the goal was to provide order and development in the country. However, this development was grasped merely as an economic one. The atmosphere of the Cold War also strengthened the Shah since he received help from the US in order to prevent the Soviet influence. This era witnessed massive support of the US to Iran in terms of economic aid and training of military and intelligence agencies. In these years "democracy and development came to be viewed as mutually exclusive goals."⁶⁹

In this sense, the coup of 1953 resulted in another wave of state expansion at the expense of the civil political realm. "Since the 1953 the Shah has been able to strengthen the state's power through and within a few months the main centres of

⁶⁷ Elm, 1992, p. 294-296.

⁶⁸ Ghessari & Nasr, 2006, p. 55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 55-56.

opposition had been crushed. For seven years after 1953 the regime concentrated on restoring its position.”⁷⁰

If 1950s were the era for regime consolidation, 1960s and 1970s were going to be a further expansion of the state’s power and a social change in the fabric of Iranian society. The Shah went further than just restoring state power but attempted to change the social mode of production in the country by aiming at the capitalist development of the country. In order to do so, the Shah employed important reforms in 1963 what was to be called ‘White Revolution’, a package of extensive reforms, including the status of women, provision of greater rights, the land reform and an attempt to pacify industrial labour by promising them a share of the industry. The White Revolution “expedited the pace of urbanization; the first major shift in the balance between rural and urban populations occurred in the 1960s.”⁷¹ It should be mentioned that the very reason behind the White revolution is the increasing US impact on Iran. “The Kennedy administration viewed some form of reform in Iran as necessary to limit communist influence in the country”⁷² and the Pahlavi state began to see development as integral to socio-political reform.

With the help of the increase in oil revenues especially after the reform, state prolonged its intervention in capital accumulation. Since the centralization of state increased, it became the major owner of oil, minerals, most of banking, transport, and important number of farms and agribusiness. Therefore, it turned out to be the largest capitalist, banker, and industrialist of the nation.

⁷⁰ Halliday, 1979, p. 26

⁷¹ Gheissari, Nasr, 2006, p. 58.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 58.

In contrast, the entire private sector accounted for less than 20 percent of the national income by the end of Pahlavi rule.⁷³ The policies that limit and replace market forces weakened impersonal market forces, thereby; the high level of state intervention politicized the accumulation process. Because Iran was an undifferentiated society in economic sense, state confronted all major social classes. Hence, this very position of the state “rendered the state vulnerable to challenge and attack.”⁷⁴ Another significant result of state policies that fed the conditions for revolution is its unequal policies were applied to the different segments of society. Since multinational corporations had crucial importance for the domestic economy, state favoured big capital that had links to these corporations. When small/medium capital, industrial workers, and peasantry were severely repressed, the big capital did not encounter any problems. In other words, state intervention in capital accumulation in Iran led to increasing disparities among social classes, between urban and rural areas, and among regions. As a result, due to these uneven policies, it was revealed that the state served particular interests instead of general interests and hence, it lost its neutrality.

In the period of the Second Shah, this centralization was expanded to other realms of economy and politics and led to a state power over ‘its citizens’. Kazemi⁷⁵, also resting on the arguments of rentier economy, calls this consequence ‘the hyper-autonomous’ Iranian state.

⁷³ Katouzian, 1980, in Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 61.

⁷⁴ Parsa, 1989, p. 61.

⁷⁵ Kazemi, 2005, p. 121.

This modernization and consequent dislocations in the society was a fertile ground for various groups and associations to emerge. Yet, even when they did, they did so in a clandestine fashion, since they did not have the resources and the freedoms to do so. It was not as the Shah claimed that they did not exist but when they raised their voices it was crushed with a force they could not match.

In many aspects, Iran is much more democratic than Europe ...

The opposition is so negligible that it cannot get even one seat in Parliament (M.R.Pahlavi, 1973).

Indeed, this arrogance of the Shah was one of the psychological factors that led to a grand coalition against him despite the high level of state pressure. It must be admitted though, the Carter administration's insistence on human right issues had facilitated the relative relaxation in state pressure and the students, the writer's guild and alike had jumped on this little window of opportunity in the late 1970s.

For the purposes of establishing a framework of understanding civil society in Iran, I argue that whenever the state monopolized the social space called politics, the civil society in Iran had to withdraw to a state of inertia. For the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter, this point is important because it proves that there is nothing inherent in the Iranian society to produce an ultimately passive or for that matter, ultimately active civil society. It is the changing positions of the state (and changing not only according to the arbitrariness of the state power but also according to international context) that have been the most important determinant in providing or preventing the access to a political space wherein actors could develop or new actors

could emerge. Before looking into the brief summary of the revolution itself, it is necessary to note that nothing explains this oscillation in state-society relations other than the contentious nature of politics itself. In this sense, seeing Islam either as the reason of the absence of civil society or as the facilitator of civil society in Iran is refutable. From the latter vein, Ali Paya claims that:

The Shi'ite religion, (...) with its emphasis on individualism, elitism, abstract and theoretical thinking and sense of mission and its endorsement of the spirit of free enterprise in the realm of economic activities, creates a favourable environment for active participation of the people.⁷⁶

The favourable environment only emerges out of the political relations themselves, to emphasize once again. And the environment was far from being favourable throughout the last two decades of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign. He, in fact, abolished the possibilities for the formation of associations and locked the political debates around economic development and modernization

3.4 The Revolution

As it is mentioned above, in the late 1970s, there was rising grievances towards the Shah's regime in the all segments of the society. The economic policies of the era affected all groups in the society. In January 1978, the massacre of clerical students in Qum provided the opportunity for bazaaris to mobilize through the mosque.

⁷⁶ Ali Paya, "Civil Society in Iran", in David Lewis & Hakan Seckinelgin eds., *Exploring Civil Society*, Routledge, 2004, p. 171.

According to Parsa⁷⁷, the very reason behind this was that mosque was the only institution that had maintained its autonomy from the state:

A safer place was needed, and thereafter bazaaris increasingly turned to mosques for mobilization. They had to borrow this preexisting organization to be able to broaden and sustain their mobilization and launch larger attacks against the government.⁷⁸

The government was compelled to retreat from its policy of repression and promised liberalization because of the bazaari mobilization, and shop closures. The promise of liberalization in combination with bazaari mobilization, on the other hand, became an important opportunity for other social classes to mobilize. “Within a few days of the proclamation of liberalization and the reduction of repression, industrial workers, followed by white-collar employees, used their informal networks in workplaces and began to strike.”⁷⁹ The Shah’s response to the rising mobilization was to resort to military repression. In turn, long-lasting strikes began in major streets of the country by the bazaaris. Parsa states that oil workers’ strikes guaranteed the collapse of the regime. However, departing from the pattern of bazaari mobilization, workers had no national network of communication to coordinate their activities and most importantly, they had no economic independence. As a result, they not only entered the scene later than others, but they also accepted the hegemony of others despite their crucial role in the dismantling of the old regime.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Parsa, 1989, p. 306.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 307.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 308.

In less than four weeks, oppositional forces, defied the government and the Shah had to leave the country in 1979. Oppositional forces declared their support to Khomeini. The very reason behind this was his consistent political stance against the regime, rather than his place in religious hierarchy.

Ayatollah Khomeini, head of this faction of the clergy, became the supreme leader of the revolution because he had taken an uncompromising stand against the Shah's regime since March 1963, when he called for the overthrow of the government.⁸¹

As a result of the massive uprising in the country the Second Shah had to live the country in January 1979.

It should be mentioned that, in addition to these groups secular forces also played a major role in this process. However, they failed to attain leadership in the revolution because, according to Parsa⁸², "their narrow position did not incorporate the demands made by all the major actors in the revolutionary conflict".

As such, the revolution against the Shah was derived from the opposition of distinct groups, each with its own motives and constituency:

A revolutionary situation was generated by the mobilization and disruption of the social structure by bazaaris, industrial workers, and white-collar employees in response to the government's adverse development and accumulation policies.⁸³

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 311.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 167.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 299.

Iranian Revolution is a paradox in many aspects to the scholars studying revolutions. The revolution defeated one of the biggest armies in the Middle East without much bloodshed and without a previous defeat in the war that weakened the state – a common characteristic of previous revolutions. It was a revolution in an unexpected region of the world and perhaps most puzzling of all it was an Islamic revolution. Many arguments have been put forward to suggest that it was a revolution hijacked by the mullahs but started as a modern, urban revolution by secular oriented classes. Theda Skocpol⁸⁴ claimed that Islam, as ‘woven into the fabric’ of Iran had an important role. However, Parsa and others showed that the clergy was far from being a united class and some were, moreover, pro-Shah. If the paradox is the fact that clergy was neither as influential nor as united as Skocpol thinks yet the outcome is a theocracy nonetheless, Keddie replies as follows:

The answer to this apparent paradox lies not only in the recent better organization of the ulama, but also in the growing need felt to differentiate oppositional ideology from that of the westernizing shah and his presumed Western masters.⁸⁵

The only means of differentiation was the Shi’a tradition, as the secular nationalism was adopted by Shah himself and an anti-monarchist nationalism had already been defeated by the 1953 coup which overthrew Mosaddiq and his National Front. Though the nationalists were not absent in the Iranian Revolution, they were far from being a major threat, just like the radical left, which contributed greatly to the revolutionary process, nevertheless failed to take the leadership of the revolution.

⁸⁴ Theda Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 11, 1982, p. 265-283.

⁸⁵ Nikki Keddie, *The Roots of Revolution*, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 290.

The tyranny of the monarchy had severely damaged the capabilities of these actors in terms of organizational abilities.

Consequently, at a time when a clear vacuum of legitimacy existed-the imperial regime certainly failed to establish its claim to it - Marxists were effectively prevented from reaching the people and addressing their constituency while radical Islamists had a ready-made network at their disposal.⁸⁶ Hence, mosque was not a place to gather, but the only place to gather. The main difference between Keddie and Parsa may lie here. For Parsa, the role of religion was limited to its being the only viable resource. However Keddie adds to this her claim that identity had more meaning due to the Westoxification observed in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s. In the words of Bayat, “Nikkie Keddie regards the Islamic revival as the popular assertion of “Muslim identity” against Western political and cultural penetration.”⁸⁷

Even then, even with the unique place that religion was playing, it was not until the end of the semi-civil war Iran experienced between 1979 and 1981 that theocracy became the ultimate outcome of the revolution.

In February 1979, Khomeini did come back to Iran and appointed Mehdi Bazargan as the new Prime Minister of the provisional government. Thus, the Pahlavi dynasty came to an end. In November 1979, the Islamic Republic was proclaimed with a referendum. The establishment of the Islamic republic indeed was the result of a

⁸⁶ Behrooz, 2000, p. 137.

⁸⁷ Asaf Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movement in Iran*, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 137.

compromise with the liberals that were active in the revolution⁸⁸. In this sense, it “was based on the support of widest possible social spectrum—from leftist to liberals—which the Islamic leadership had gained during the revolutionary movement.”⁸⁹ Then in December 1979, the Islamic Constitution was declared although there was resistance against it. This Constitution introduced the new political regime of Iran namely Velayet-e faqih⁹⁰ (the Governance of Islamic Jurisprudents) and opened up a new era for Iran. According to Velayet- faqih, the state was based on Islamic law and ruled by interpreters namely the ulama which are mandated by God. The republican character of the regime is the existence of a parliament which its members are appointed by an election. Above the prime minister, however, there is the supreme leader who can limit the power and authority of the government.⁹¹ With this system, Khomeini became the faqih (supreme leader) and gained a divine role that cannot be questioned.

3.5 1980s and 1990s

The years after the revolution witnessed, this time, the new regime’s consolidation. Although the Islamic republic was based on the support of nearly all segments of the society, it was soon seen that Khomeini and the radical clergy started to forget their promises that were given during the revolutionary struggle. This, of course, had

⁸⁸ Keddie, 2003, p. 241.

⁸⁹ Kamali, 2006, p. 222.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 223.

⁹¹ Although the Velayet-e faqih system has continued, some features of the system was changed in 1989 before the death of Khomeini. Likewise the presidency system was introduced instead of prime ministry.

great impact on the society. “Many groups of the Iranian civil society were struggling with the new religious pressure.”⁹²

According to Keddie⁹³, “the decade of Khomeini’s rule was marked by the ever-growing power of his followers and elimination often by violence and despite resistance, of opposition groups, and by increasing enforcement of ideological and behavioural controls on the population”.

However, it was not easy to rein supreme in the aftermath of revolution. Even when the Islamists gained the upper hand over revolutionary councils, there was a serious factionalism among them that intensified despite the presence of Khomeini. The three factions were the ‘pragmatists’, ‘conservatives’ and the ‘radicals’. The pragmatists favoured ‘a relaxation of revolutionary vigilance’, the conservatives favoured ‘a mercantile economy with Islamist ideology’ and the radicals favoured ‘a strong anti-Western policy, export of the revolution’.⁹⁴

Khomeini’s declaration on the role of the state vis-à-vis Islam can be understood as an intervention to this factionalism. He justified the primacy of the Islamic state as a principle over other Islamic principles, such as prayer. Kazemi interprets this move by Khomeini as such: “The conflict [between the various contenders for power] was resolved formally in June 1988 with Ayatollah Khomeini’s dramatic declaration in favour of state paramouncy in society’s affairs (...) [It] gave the Islamic state the

⁹² Kamali, 2006, p. 223.

⁹³ Keddie, 2003, p. 241.

⁹⁴ Gheissari, Nasr, 2006, p. 101.

authority to even ‘destroy a mosque’”.⁹⁵ Indeed, the contested status of the various institutions within the state was resolved within this declaration and perhaps the state, just like the Pahlavi state became hyper-autonomous and this time over rules of religion as well. This was to be a major obstacle for the various opposition groups under the Islamic republic and contributed extensively to the arbitrariness of state policies. It is summarized by Kazemi as follows: “The theological justification and rationalization for state power added a new and potentially significant dimension to the scope of state power.”⁹⁶ Moreover, the Iran-Iraq war that started in 1980 and lasted 8 years gave the Islamist elite the opportunity to consolidate their power and an excuse to declare any opposition as the traitors of the motherland.

After the death of Khomeini in 1989, Rafsanjani became the new president and Khamanei became the new faqih. During the two terms presidency, Rafsanjani stayed loyal to the ideological foundations of the revolution. However, different from the previous era, he followed developmentalist policies. This was the result of the need of post-war reconstruction. “The turn to the development sought to address socioeconomic demands, but also to interpret the meaning of the revolution and its promise: it would achieve ‘true’ progress.”⁹⁷ In the Rafsanjani era, the state repression towards any opening in the political realm continued. Rafsanjani “opted for a two-tier programme of free-enterprise and political closure. (...) Clandestine semi-official armed groups from the Ministry of Information embarked on a project of physical elimination of those intellectuals deemed ‘undesirable elements’. Some

⁹⁵ Kazemi, 2005, p. 123.

⁹⁶ Kazemi, 2005, p. 124.

⁹⁷ Gheissari, Nasr, 2006, p. 58.

of these intellectuals were actively campaigning for the restoration of the institutions of civil society.”⁹⁸

The quotation that Kamrava uses from Iranian writer, Majid Muhammadi, to reveal the state-society understanding in the civil society discourse in Iran, backs up the argument presented in this paper. Kamrava identifies the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the passing away of Khomeini as a turning point, since it led to “a diffusion of social and political power into multiple centres.”⁹⁹ Or as Muhammadi states: “Power is no longer the monopoly of any one group.”¹⁰⁰

The second turning point is the election of Khatami with ‘civil society’ (Jame ‘h Madani) as an integral part of his election campaign in 1997. He used especially the rule of law and enhancing political participation as key concepts. Though, he could not succeed in completing the reforms that he intended because of the state structure which has manifold decision-making mechanisms. Indeed, the Conservatives and the Radicals opposed the change fiercely. He nonetheless started the process of indigenization of civil society discourse in Iran. “Khatami’s discourse of civil society, democracy, transparency, rule of law, and all these – which were quite absent in the 1980s – became dominant concepts, so that even certain segments of the conservatives tried to speak a similar language.”¹⁰¹

Kamrava underlines the central role of the concept of ‘rule of law’ in the civil society discourse in Iran. This, as we can see, is not referring to the normative aspect

⁹⁸ Paya, 2004. p. 169.

⁹⁹ Kamrava, “The Civil Society Discourse in Iran”, BJMES 28, No.2, 2001, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 169.

¹⁰¹ Bayat, 6 June 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

to the civil society discourse but emphasizes its organizational role in the political contestation. The demand for the 'rule of law' is exactly because in the absence of it, it becomes impossible to reach the tools for politics. When new publications emerged under the hopeful presidency of Khatami, the "judiciary has banned a number of new publications, many of whose offices have also been ransacked."¹⁰². Ideological dissemination and the possibility of establishing a counter-culture is one of the fundamental means of conducting any politics. Here the 'rule of law' is not necessarily embraced because it is a liberal concept but because it provides any oppositional force (liberal or otherwise) a space in which to move, recruit and develop. The coercion by the state is not a passing note but a reality for those who try to move within the space of civil society. Even those who just stay within the limits of verbal activity may get punished. "Even more consequential for publishing and other intellectual activities were the mysterious killings of five renowned intellectual figures and political activists in November and December 1998, later blamed on a group of rogue intelligence officers within the police force."¹⁰³.

Thus even with a reformist leader as the president, Iranian politics suffered from the lack of basic resources and freedoms. Hence the efforts of various actors in the civil society focused on establishing a legal-political framework in which they could act safely. "In the context of Iran, the rule of law means an end to arbitrary arrests and to intimidation of women and the young by the security forces, an end to censorship and nepotism, the existence of a politically independent judiciary, the ability to participate in various associations without fear of government reprisals."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Kamrava, 2001, p. 171.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 172.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 173.

Kamrava indeed provides a picture of the Iranian intellectuals and activists who were part of this indigenization of the civil society process. Though they are not a homogenous group and some lean towards the liberal conception of civil society whereas others focus on the contentious nature of politics and are closer to the argument presented here, their perceptions of Iranian civil society should be as important as the Western definitions and categorizations, as it was emphasized in the previous chapter.

While discussing the different versions of civil society and their validity for the Iranian context, the Iranian writers go back to history and analyze the state-society relations in the past. Majid Muhammadi's conclusion is that "Iranian States have historically been 'maximalist' and have prevented the emergence of political parties and other independent groups" (...) "In Iran everything in the public arena, whether objective realities or subjective beliefs, is considered the domain of the state."¹⁰⁵

Indeed in this interpretation, the civil society seems to be the realm to do politics outside the state and no normative principles attached to it, perhaps except the formal ones that demarcate these realms and secure the freedoms for each, such as the rule of law. What they observe in their country though is not the absence of multiple contenders for either state power or non-state politics, but rather a chaotic state and legal structure. The theoretical conclusion that Iranian writers inferred from

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 178.

this conflicting nature of national politics in Iran is that “there is a need to revise and refine the nature of state-society relations.”¹⁰⁶.

Let us look to the differences among these intellectuals. Some have internalized the liberal discourse on the primacy of voluntary associations working for specifically designated aims in an atmosphere of civic culture, whereas other emphasize the political aspects of civil society and its relation with state power. Though Kamrava identifies three trends, indeed the last two are symbiotically related to each other. “Iranian intellectuals tend to see civil society either predominantly in terms of political democracy, or cultural modernity, or more frequently in terms of social organizations and structures.”¹⁰⁷

Cultural modernity argument is based on the primacy of a civic culture as a precondition of civil society. In this framework of understanding the civil society, the patrimonial nature of social relations in Iran is underlined as an obstacle for progress. Labelled as ‘social ignorance’, Iran is seen as essentially a ‘backward’ country, where the formation of an active civil society is yet to happen. “Instead of seeking protection in bosses, the powerful, or in coercive agencies, the individual seeks protection in social formations.”¹⁰⁸

Retrospectively, this interpretation would not see the presence of civil society in Iranian history and would have difficulties in explaining some of the periods mentioned in this chapter. Namely the constitutional revolution, the Second World

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 172.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 175-176.

War years and the Islamic revolution, as these three periods are indeed where we observe an active political realm outside the state with multiple and various actors. However, if the criteria is set as the individuals' independent presence from social formations, not only the history but even the future would look bleak. On the current presence of associations and autonomous institutions, it is claimed that they exist but in a patrimonial network and in a patron-client relationship and that with the Islamic Republic the relevancy of these relationships increased.

3.6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the arguments based on religion, or civic culture was rejected. Instead a political model of understanding civil society was proposed through a concise analysis of political history of Iran. Hence, as a conclusion and before going into the details of the fieldwork, a few words are necessary whether civil society is a remedy for the alleged ills of the society. As Kamrava claims, “in essence, the ‘cure-all’ political Islam of the 1970s appears to have been replaced by the civil society of the 1990s.”¹⁰⁹ However, if civil society is detangled from its normative attachments, then we can safely argue that civil politics was present in all the major turning points of the Iranian society. Indeed, Iranians were the most politically active people in the whole region with two revolutions and various protests in the 20th century, despite the state pressure. If part and parcel of civil society is as Chandler argues, namely “it is to highlight dimensions that were not

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 178.

hitherto considered political and make them part of the political process”¹¹⁰, then one has to admit from Tobacco boycott in the 19th century to the 1950s oil nationalization, from the Islamic revolution itself to the continuing struggle of women on the dress codes, Iranians were creative and original in the politicization of different aspects of life, and in doing so in opposition to the political ideology of the state, whether the Pahlavi or the Islamic version. The Islamist state perhaps widened some of the political realm by the introduction of elections but also narrowed it down from other aspects and equating Shi’ite politics with an instinctively democratic ideology is misleading. Kazemi opposes the liberal characteristic attributed to the religion in the state-society relations but rather focuses on the role that the religion gives to the citizen. In the emergent Islamic Republic of Iran, “citizenship is a conditional entitlement that is defined by the level of support to the theocratic state and its definition of Islamic community.”¹¹¹

Now we will turn to those citizens who have in various ways fought for a different understanding of what a citizen is entitled to, have fought to expand the political realm and have been active parts in the state-society relationship.

¹¹⁰ Chandler, 2004, p. 314.

¹¹¹ Kazemi, 2005, p. 125.

CHAPTER IV

IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: CASE STUDY

4.1 Introduction: The Nature of Civil Society in Iran

Civil society organizations in Iran are engaged in number of activities. These include women issues, youth and children, environment protection, professional organizations, reproduction and health and science and technology. In all these activities Iranian citizens are eager to form associations or informal networks to discuss the issues, to give training to those around them and put their discussions to practice when and if resources are accessible.

The first and at the same time the last survey on the number of non-governmental organizations is the report prepared by UNDP in 2000. According to this report¹¹², there are 752 NGOs in Iran and the distribution of NGOs according to the activities as follows:

¹¹² “Non-governmental Organizations in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Situational Analysis”, UNDP, 2000, p. 25.

Field of Activity	Number
Environment Protection	145
Population and Health	417
Women and Development	137
Children and Youth	51
Science and Technology	2
Total	752

However, as the report already mentions, this data is not a comprehensive one, rather a first step to improve the studies on Iranian NGOs. The constraint that comes to the fore in the report is the absence of a reliable NGO databank in the Ministry of Interior which is the central body for registration of NGOs. Additionally, the national NGOs do not keep information on the number of NGOs, as well. The administrator of one of the civil society organizations in the field research declared the number as 365. Namely, the total number of civil society organizations in Iran is difficult to estimate due to the scarcity and oldness of the data. Another and more important problem regarding the issue is that some of the most active groups are not registered as NGO. This situation is directly related to the state's attitude towards the NGOs. Although the Constitution of the Islamic Republic contains laws that allow for the establishment of civil society organizations, there is no clear law for the civil society organizations that governing the registration of organizations. Additionally, an organization has to obtain permissions from multiple decision-making centres that have different procedures and restrictions. Since the law of associations is not clear and there is a great deal of suspicion in the state level towards the civil societal

activities, registration as a NGO becomes an exhaustive task and it can take several years to complete. Moreover, none of the laws allows pursuing political activities. If an NGO succeeds to complete the highly bureaucratic procedures and obtained the license, it becomes impossible to work independent from the government. For instance, the organization has to report every change and/or activity to the Ministry of Interior and obtain clearance.”¹¹³ As a result, most of the NGOs have to and sometimes prefer to operate without being registered due to the procedures that are highly vague, cumbersome and most importantly restrict their activities. This situation definitely harms the state-civil society relations. Most of the NGOs experience great difficulties because they are not recognized officially. These obstacles will be detailed and exemplified in the proceeding parts of this chapter.

4.2 The Nature of the Sample

The civil society organizations that included in the sample can be differentiated roughly in two categories. First of all there are organizations like associations, guild and foundations. The other category, on the other hand, is composed of one publication house and two periodicals. The reason of the inclusion of the second vein is the role that the newspapers, periodicals, publication houses play in Iran. As Gheissari (1998: 82) pointed out, the media, in the absence of political parties in Iran, became the only forum for people to express their oppositions and actively participate in political debates. In this vein, one of the important women periodicals, *Zenan*, and a political, historical periodical *Goft-e Gun* and the publication house, *Neshr-e Tareh*, was included in this field research.

¹¹³ UNDP, 2000, p. 22; Namazi, B, “Civil Society Action for Good Association Law: The Case of Iran”, *MDF3*, Cairo, Egypt, 2000, p. 5-11.

Questions were asked about the nature and functions of their respective NGOs as well as their perceptions of Iranian civil society, state-society relations, the existing legal framework for associations and Iranian politics in general. The issues such as the ‘rule of law’, the Iranian culture, the absence or presence of civil society in Iran, the indigenization or Westernization of the concept of civil society in Iran, the contested role of the state in relation to the civil society were asked to the interviewees.

4.2.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

In this part of the chapter, my aim is to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample such as the distribution of age and sex, educational levels, occupation. Also, in order to learn their social background, it was asked whether they lived most of their life in the city/capital or else. The demographic variables not only give the picture of the sample but also are meaningful for further discussions.

When we look at the distribution of sex among the administrators/representatives of the NGOs that are included in this study, we see that the majority is composed of female chairs. When there are only 4 male administrators, there are 9 females administrators. The mean age of respondents, on the other hand, is 46. The oldest respondent is 62 years old whereas the youngest interviewee is 24 years old.

When we come to the educational level, it is possible to observe that the civil society actors of this study have high educational level. All the respondents were at least

university graduates. Furthermore, three of them had master degrees, one of which has two master degrees, and two interviewees had PhD degrees. The occupations of the participants, on the other hand, are manifold. The examples can be given as health officer, lawyer, journalist, university professor and sociologist.

With regards to the social background, it is seen that our respondents had spent most of their life in the capital. So, it is possible to state that the civil society actors in Iran have urban roots and belong to the middle class. Moreover, if we take into account that apart from professional organizations, most of the NGOs do not have branches in the other cities of Iran, the civil society activity in Iran seems urban and especially Tehran-based. This is also mentioned by the UNDP report on Iranian civil society.¹¹⁴ This is, perhaps, the result of availability of resources and capacities that are open to the organizations and the freer atmosphere in Tehran as the capital of Iran.

These demographic features of the sample are important since they give us clues to understand the Iranian civil society. On the basis of findings of the fieldwork, it is possible to state that in Iran the civil society activity is mainly headed by middle classes that have high educational levels. This, for sure, affects the nature of Iranian civil society. However, this does not mean that civil society activity in Iran is merely a middle class activity. With their various activities in Tehran and other cities and diverse membership profiles from workers to professors, from housewives to journalist, these NGOs, in fact, have the potential to mobilize different segments of the society.

¹¹⁴ See, UNDP, 2000, p. 13.

4.2.2 Aims and Activities

It is possible to categorize the civil society organizations according to their field of activities. The organizations included in the sample are as follows: environmental NGOs, gender and women organizations, professional organizations, NGOs working on youth and children, and lastly one periodical and one publishing house. When we look at the general characteristics of these organizations, it is seen that they are working in their specific fields for a relatively long time. Although the number of the members of the organizations differentiates from 30 to 2 million, it is possible to state that most of the NGOs have a critical mass to mobilize. Especially, the number of members is high in the professional organization. Moreover, voluntarism seems an important feature of the organizations. Additionally, they have connections to various national and international organizations. Not only they organize activities in collaboration with other national and international NGOs but also receive and give help when it is needed. These characteristics of the NGOs also reveals the fact that although they experience problems with the Iranian state, they can manage these difficulties and create the resources that are necessary to continue civil societal action such as financial and human resources, solidarity, networking and collaboration and other material resources. In terms of decision making mechanisms we see that there are organizations that are governed from above, there are also organization which have collective decision-making procedures. In terms of ideology, we also see a large spectrum. When there are NGOs that are closer to the Islamic state or that have strong Islamic tendencies, there are also organizations that are strictly oppositional to the Iranian state. It is not surprising that the organizations

closer to the state's ideology experience fewer difficulties with the Iranian state. As a conclusion, all of these civil society organizations may not well fit the western type of NGOs in terms of ideology, membership or decision-making mechanisms. However, these organizations reflect the variety of actors present in the civil society realm in Iran.

A descriptive analysis on each sphere within Iranian civil society is as follows.

There are two NGOs that work on **environmental issues** in the field research. One of these two organization's aim is to struggle with drought and the diminishing water sources. They try to attract public's attention to the issue and mostly work with children to educate them on this matter. The second environmental organization was a strange case in the sense that although they were willing to be part of the field work, they refused to reveal their specific aims in the environmental field. Both of these organizations are based on voluntary membership, though both stress that they require the members to be 'serious' about their work. They do not have offices outside Tehran, though they indicated that they do occasional visits to the rest of the country. One of the environmental NGOs was founded 8 years ago and the other one 10 years ago. These organizations did not mention any difficulty with the state. One of them has a decision mechanism from below, where the subgroups working on specific sub-issues on the drought are self-governing and the central body is only supportive. On the other hand, the second one is strictly governed from above and apparently does not even question the existence of other methods in this regard. As such, and as we will observe in the following participants of the fieldwork, there is neither uniform pattern, nor one 'civil' pattern of decision making in the Iranian civil society.

There are four organizations that focus on **women's issues** in the sample. Their aims are to improve the cultural as well as legal rights and quality of life of the Iranian women. Their activities can be summarized as the efforts to widen the space for women in the Iranian public life. They are part of a huge network of NGOs which concentrate on women's issues, periodicals, and various organizations, state-dependent or autonomous working in this realm. One of them is a periodical, the other one is an Institute, and the third one is an organization founded to provide legal counselling services to women by women lawyers. The fourth one is an informal network of women. The first three of them expressed their desire to include men and some have male members. The foundation of two of them date back to the immediate aftermath of the revolution, so they have a history of more than 20 years, whereas the organization working in the legal realm only became a formal association after the Beijing conference and hence dates back to 1995. The Institute working in the realm of women studies has for some subgroups the requirement of being a professional in the relevant field but also accepts volunteers. They have 11 full time and 20 part time employees and more than 100 volunteers in various subfields. They have a decision making mechanism from above. For the organization that provides legal counselling, there is no requirement but they are already a specialized group and their 9 members consist of lawyers with MSc degrees, and only one man. They have a collective decision making process. The periodical, although as it was mentioned goes back to the aftermath of the revolution, was formally established in 1991. They have 15 full time employees. They also have occasional volunteers, in the form of writing articles or helping with the publishing. All employers are university graduates. Like the other groups, they have few male members as well. They have a preference for women in

the selection of full time employers as women have less chances of finding employment. They have a collective decision mechanism where everybody is gathered together and asked their opinion about the content of the periodical. All have central offices in Tehran with no local branches in the rest of the country.

The informal network was established as one if its members called it in the ‘dark, dark days’ of the post revolutionary era, in the late 1980s. It consists of women from various professions and house wives. They are not necessarily university graduates. The main goal of the network is to find ways to empower its members. They mention an adaptation problem to the Islamic Republic and they stress that this process was harder for women. They fought for their members’ right to free themselves from their family whenever they want to; here freedom is referring to basic actions such as the freedom to travel. They also helped them in the depression that caught women after the revolution. They pursue financial activities such as managing a small cooperative, where the members contribute and then can take small amounts loan in difficult or urgent times, to be paid back with no interest. They also tried to empower their members by encouraging them to use their talents for establishing a small business. They do not have a large membership profile since they only have around 30 members. Yet, they expressed the fact that their network is one of many informal women networks established after the revolution.

In this group we observe two camps regarding the women’s rights in the civil society structure in Iran. One of them, represented in our sample by the Institute for Women Studies, although working for the improvement of women’s status in the society, is more prone to stay within the limits of Islamic state, is to some extent supported or at

least not harmed by state and by the so called ‘pressure groups’- radicals in semi-government or non-government organizations. They stay loyal to Khomeini and they attribute the problems of women to the temporary governments that come and go. The periodical on the other hand, and to some extent, the organization working in the legal field and the informal network, see a problem for women in the Islamic state framework and in different ways their activities concentrate on widening the political, legal, cultural freedoms of women. Their activities are sometimes hampered by the state or those radical – hardliner groups.

There are three **professional organizations**. One of them is a general trade union for workers, another one is the Chamber of Commerce and the last one is specific organization for the journalists in Iran. Their main aims are to foster and support their relevant profession and their members. Unlike the previous groups they all have branches in various cities outside Tehran and the quantity of their membership is much bigger. The workers’ trade union has 2 million members. They accept workers from various sectors. Their history dates back to pre-revolution years but as the interviewee had stated, the trade union was restructured after the revolution, since they saw the pre-revolution organization as controlled by the regime. They hold a Congress every 4 years to elect an executive council to run the affairs of the trade union and then there are various subgroups formed by the Congress. Apart from the traditional activities of a trade union, they have established a university, a newspaper and a news agency. The university is to increase the qualifications of young workers and the news agency is the second biggest news agency in Iran after the government agency. The General Secretary of the trade union is also an MP in the parliament

from Tehran. Although they have some difficulties set upon them by the state, they have the means and the channels to negotiate with the state.

The Chamber of Commerce is also an old organization, established in pre-revolution era. Its aim is to support the private commerce companies, especially in their dealings with the government. They engage in negotiations with the government over legal, economic, environmental matters. They have branches in almost every big city in Iran, as every city has its own Chamber of Commerce which then joins Chamber of Commerce of Iran. All those who are engaged in import or export business or in any internal trade have to be members of the Chamber since the Chamber of Commerce enjoys the monopoly of issuing trade licences to companies. They have 5-6 subgroups which investigate the interest of the Chamber in various matters and are open to any member. After the committee work in these groups, the recommendations are submitted to the general meetings and then a decision is taken. It can be called semi-collective. They are in a constant dialogue with the state over commercial activities.

The journalists association actually works as a trade union but because this etiquette was found scary, they chose the name *anjuman* – association for themselves, which shows how political even the labels are in the civil society field in Iran. They were founded – as they state – the year President Khatami elected, namely 1997. They have the official permission of the Ministry of Labour and their main activities are directed towards journalists, ranging from salary issues to legal rights. They have 3500 members from various cities in Iran with the requirement that every member should have been working in the media sector for at least 7 years. With regards to

their decision making mechanism, they elect representatives and form a council. They also elect the President of the association.

The first two groups seem to be *cooperative* with the government, in the sense they are part of the negotiations, or at least willing to be a part of the process that determine policy outcomes in the labour and trade issues. The journalist association on the other hand *struggles against* the government and is trying to expand the freedoms of media employees *at the expense of the government*. Hence, their activities are seriously repressed by the state.

The number of NGOs in this study which works on **children and youth** is two. One of them is as they call themselves a ‘support NGO’, supporting other NGOs working with the young and children. Established 8 years ago with the initiative of an English woman married to an Iranian man, the NGO provides training to other NGOs. They run courses such as Good Policy Practice for NGOs, small group democracy, Training for Trainers, etc. They have a small membership mainly consisting of specialists, due to the nature of their activities. Every one who joins, because of the small size, can participate in the Board meetings, which generally consist of 10 people. All are professionals with university degrees. They have a participatory decision making process and all major decisions are voted in the Board meetings.

The other youth NGO provides support to schools especially in terms of establishing a network of schools, where schools who are less fortunate are given either material help or programmes for art, for blind, etc are provided. It was established in 1994 and was especially active during the Bam earthquake. Aside from Tehran, they have

branches in Isfahan and Bam. Their members are schools and there are around a 1000 of them in the network. Especially students and teachers are very active. They have a collective decision making procedure within the network. It seems that the working issue of the organizations determines their relation with the state. They encounter the most general problems with the state over resources and permissions.

The study also includes **one periodical and one publishing house**. The periodical is publishing articles on the social history of Iran, its international environment and on current politics. As such they have various volunteers, giving their writings to the periodical. They have participatory decision making process, where the content of each periodical is determined collectively. None of them is paid worker and it is a non-profit periodical. It was founded approximately 10 years ago. Its central office is in Tehran and does not have any branches. Its aim is to some extent academic and to some extent political, especially it tries to provide another reading of Iranian history. It encounters problems with the state especially some issues of the periodical where sensitive issues are discussed.

The second organization in this group is a publishing house. Its main aim is to publish documents, archival materials, and analytical books on Iranian history. It was founded in 1985. The founder noted the rising interest in the post-revolutionary years of the general public in Iranian history. They tried to contribute to this realm by publishing actual documents of the Iranian history. She also noted the fading away of this interest in the recent years. They have 6 employees in the office and no volunteers. They also have a collective decision making regarding the programme of the publishing house. The founder of the publishing house especially emphasized the

issue of censorship, and not only the presence of it but the fact that it is inconsistent, vague and changing from year to year in content and in form. Both the periodical and the publishing house also mentioned the issue of licences and the renewal of licenses as potential problematic areas between them and the government.

4.3 Civil Society and Democracy

4.3.1 Evaluations of Civil Society

This section aims to examine how the interviewees understand and interpret the concept of civil society as well as how they see their roles as civil society organizations. Regarding the definition of the civil society, the results of the fieldwork identified two major tendencies. One is a group of activist who see civil society as a political space and the organizations as political actors. The second trend was to perceive civil society as a realm of charity, as actions of good will by responsible citizens. Whereas the former group, as more critical towards the current situation in Iran, emphasised the insufficiencies of the Iranian politics and explained the concept in the light of these insufficiencies, the latter group was in harmony with the state ideologically. Hence, their definitions were narrower than the first group's.

One of the participants of the fieldwork was Mullah Mohammad Ali Aptahi – the Vice-President under Khatami until the last years of his government. He gave us a very enlightening interview, revealing how the reformist, pro-civil society government of Khatami understood civil society and the functions that they

attributed to this realm. About the efforts of Khatami government to strengthen civil society Mohammad Ali Aptahi commented as follows:

In Iran, there are no political parties. Our state does not allow their existence. There are not many political parties in the history of Iran as well. We decided to strengthen civil society, to make it fulfil the place of political parties. We thought of that as a method, as a way for politics.¹¹⁵

This statement summarizes the reformist government attitudes towards the civil society and perhaps also hints at why they faced resistance from the hardliners, radicals and conservatives. In this statement, we see that civil society is filling the vacuum left by political parties. In this sense, the state attributes another role to civil society. It is seen as a direct tool of politics and gains a broader meaning than the ‘network of autonomous associations’ as liberal theory claims. If civil society is defined as a political realm, a space to do politics outside the state, then of course this has implications for the state as well. Indeed many participants, though never as clear as Aptahi’s words, gave a broad definition of civil society, based on political participation, civil activities on any sorts, and a space to foster civil rights. Here, we can also see that the respondents put special emphasis on democratic rights when defining civil society. When their interpretations of the concept are evaluated in the light of my observations in the field research, I see that they were referring to the insufficiencies of the Iranian political system in terms of democratic rights and practises. They were grasping civil society as an arena where the struggle to realize their basic rights take place. Going back to theoretical discussion on the definition of civil society, we observe that majority of the participants are closer to the alternative

¹¹⁵ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

vein in the discussion. Instead of the narrower, association based understanding of the liberal tradition; they approach Glasius's¹¹⁶ description of civil society, where civil society is seen as the ground of political contestation in a broader fashion.

The founder of the publishing house, specialized in books on history of Iran stated that she sees civil society as a political space:

[Civil society is] a society where people's rights are important, where people's rights are taken, given attention to, you don't expect government to do everything, you encourage society to participate in politics, to participate in activities.¹¹⁷

Another interviewee from an NGO working on women issues addresses to the same issue:

Civil society for me is to work on special concepts, concepts of being a citizen, the concept of the equality between citizens, especially between men and women and the right to participate in politics.¹¹⁸

When we come to the role of civil society organizations, we see that they interpreted civil society organizations as the self-organization of the society as a direct result of state's failure or neglect. In this understanding, the important point that comes to the fore is to consider civil society and civil society organizations as a way to put

¹¹⁶ Glasius, 2004, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹¹⁸ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

pressure on the state, to negotiate with the state to fulfil what the state does not want to do. This characteristic is exemplified by the respondents as such:

We see the problems because we live with these problems. But the state does not see it or want to see it. Our aim is to first diagnose the problems and then make the state see and solve them.¹¹⁹

I understand civil society as all NGOs coming to the force and they have a good power to negotiate with government.¹²⁰

However, there are also those participants who see civil society more like a place where well-intended citizens do actions of good will, in a more charity fashion. One of the environmental NGOs stated this as follows: “What comes from one genuine heart surely goes to another heart.”¹²¹ And, he defined civil society as “the realm of voluntary organizations that try to solve the problems of the society.”¹²² Another respondent said that civil society is “helping of people to people”.¹²³ They also mentioned that their role as an NGO is only to help to the state rather than being in opposition with the state. Here, we see an apolitical, service rendering understanding of civil society different from the general tendency of civil society actors mentioned above. However, when we continue to the interview the respondent from the environmental NGO mentioned that the Islamic revolution was done by Iranian civil society. Here we can see a great contradiction in his interpretations of civil society. This contradiction is in quite relation with the ideology of the NGO. Since the NGO has strong Islamist tendencies and it has close ties with the Iranian state, the respondent did not want to criticise the political system of Iran. According to him,

¹¹⁹ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹²⁰ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹²¹ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006

¹²² Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹²³ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

Iranian civil society had done what it should be done with the revolution, and now, the role of the civil society is to assist the Islamic state. Hence, although this interpretation seems apolitical at first, it gives clues that civil society is about politics indeed.

As it is seen in the above discussion, the actors of civil society in Iran embrace the concepts of civil society and civil society organization/non-governmental organization. It was also interesting that even when the interview was conducted in Persian they used the word as NGO instead of the Persian translation. However, rather than taking the liberal definitions of the concept, they redefine it according to their experiences especially with the Iranian state and the very conditions of their country. According to the interviewees civil society represents the arena where the democratic rights and practises can be realized. Since the current Iranian political system does not give the necessary space to realize these democratic rights and practises efficiently to its citizens, this arena becomes automatically the space in which the struggle to reach the rights and practises take place. And the sides in this struggle are the state and the people. In this sense, it symbolizes a realm of politics where power relations are present, and moreover, it symbolizes a realm despite the state not alongside the state in the Iranian context.

4.3.2 Civil Society in Iran

Apart from the general discussion on the definition of civil society, the interviews also included questions regarding the nature of civil society in Iran in the past and

present. Namely, how they evaluate the past and current situation of Iranian civil society is the main theme that this section deals with. When we look in the answers of the respondents, it is possible to identify three trends: The first group indicated that a strong civil society does not exist in Iran and thought it is a new 'trend' for Iran and a yet to be adopted one. The second claim was that the civil society in Iran showed changing characteristics, strong at times, weak in other periods. The third group, on the other hand stated that it was strong at all times. Such a differentiation between the answers of respondents shows that how they define civil society, their experiences with the state and their perceptions on Iranian civil society are quite relational. Also, it is seen that the working issues of the organizations are among the important determinants of their evaluations. When evaluating the weakness and strength of civil society in Iran, the main criterion appears as two relational dynamics. These are the relations with the state and the degree of realization of the aims. It is called as strong if they can realize, though relatively, their correspondent aims with the minimum state intervention or when the civil society has enough power to put pressure on the state. Civil society in Iran is called weak, on the other hand, when there is not an appropriate atmosphere to realize the aim of the organization. Namely, if the state repression is high and preventing acting freely it is called as weak.

The first and the most common evaluation of the Iranian civil society is composed of activist who do not observe a strong civil society in Iran and conceive the recent history under the Islamic Republic as new. These participants had the tendency to interpret civil society in close relation with democracy. These activists think that a

democratic culture is a requirement for a proper civil society. One participant reflected on this matter as follows:

Being a citizen means that you accept your rights, and you are conscious of your rights and you accept your responsibilities. And you can synthesize between your own interest and social interest. But, I think it is very weak between Iranian citizens.¹²⁴

On the other hand, some of the women organizations, such as the informal women network, have also a pessimist view about the civil society in Iran due to their experiences in the field. When they wanted to register themselves as a formal NGO, they were not allowed to because they had been seen in a certain political demonstration the year before. The authorities were very blunt in stating the reason as such. Hence, their experience confirms Mullah Aptahi's comment, stating that the role of civil society is to fulfil the place of political parties and civil society is a way for politics, to some extent. Because the state sees civil society as a political space, it acts towards the NGOs as political actors that the state competes with and by depriving them from the label of NGO; the state prevents them from having access to certain resources and capabilities.

The second group indicated that they saw oscillations and/or improvements in the strength of civil society throughout the Iranian history. These were more prone towards political understandings of civil society that saw it as a space for political actors with varying resources and capabilities. One of the participants of this group is from an organization that works on women issues commented as follows:

¹²⁴ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

It's going to be changed to a better one. We had civil society, but it's caught in many different times of the history. I believe that through 27 years we had a lot of improvement in it. Because of it I am sure that we cannot go back. Before revolution we had it, but as I believe it was like a marsh with beautiful lotus flowers on it, but it was marsh, full of mud. But the surface was very beautiful. But the revolution happened and everything became muddy. Now the flowers are coming again, but it's the true flowers.¹²⁵

The respondents who stated that they see a strong civil society tradition in Iran were those participants that saw civil society as a charity action. For example, an administrator from an environmental NGO, who follows the charity definition of civil society, thinks that these NGOs are very strong in achieving their aims and focus less on the limitations of civil society in Iran. He commented as follows: "The Iranian history is full of civil societal action. This is our tradition, our culture."¹²⁶ In the same vein, there are NGOs working on children also think that the civil society in Iran is strong and has always been so.

Evaluations of the Iranian civil society made by the interviewees have reflections of their working issues. We see that when the issues they work on are less politicised such as children and environment, the respondents have more optimistic views on Iranian civil society. However, when the issue is more politicised and sensitive like the rights of women or the journalist, they experience difficulties with the state. This

¹²⁵ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

¹²⁶ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

in turn determines their evaluations of the situation in Iran. In fact, the quotation of the administrator of an environmental NGO explains the situation very well: “Before this NGO, I was in the board of a student union. In that organization, the state was really hard on us. But, here, we do not have problems with the state.”¹²⁷

As a general comment, almost all the respondents believed that the state saw the civil society organizations as a threat and the civil space as a space to be penetrated and invaded. This was the case for the former Vice President as well as small NGOs, so we can identify this as a general trend confirming our findings from the historical background chapter where we identified civil society throughout the history of Iran as the amalgamation of the efforts to expand the political realm. With the findings of the fieldwork we can add the observation that this expansion almost always is understood to be *at the expense* of the state. As simplified by one respondent: “I think, the government is opposed to the people and the people are opposed to the government.”¹²⁸ In such a climate, not surprisingly, civil society gains the meaning of being in opposition with the state and power and consequently, the NGOs became the very mechanisms of this opposition in Iran. This situation will be more visible when we come to the section that analyzes the state-civil society relations in this chapter.

4.3.3 Democracy and Civil Society

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, civil society is seen as one of the most important components of democracy. Although the different schools of thoughts in

¹²⁷ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹²⁸ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

the literature give different roles to civil society, there is a consensus that it is vital for democracy. On this basis, the fieldwork included questions to evaluate how the participants perceived democracy – civil society relationship and what parts of the democratization process they prioritize in the current context of Iranian politics. There was only one vein present in assessing the democracy – civil society relationship. All participants understand civil society as a sine qua non of democracy and vice versa. Democracy, in turn, was understood as a procedure, as formal rules rather than loaded with heavy normative attachments.

The elements of democratization process that was presented to the participants were ‘rule of law’, ‘free and fair elections’, ‘freedom of speech’, ‘separation of powers’, and ‘accountability’. Here there were two distinct veins. One group immediately commented on the ‘rule of law’ and prioritized that element especially in the context of Iran and keeping in mind the realities of civil society activities. The second group could not make a selection among these elements and stated that all of the above are necessary and vital for democratization. Those participants who associated civil society with the political realm and identified their activities as enhancing the political sphere, argued for the primacy of rule of law as rule of law is indispensable for their vision.

We did vote for a lot of things which haven't realized, and when there's some objection, they are put in prison. And even lawyers of lawyers are put in prison, you know. So... so democracy doesn't function, really. It... It's a strange case.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

These are the words of one respondent answering the following question: how do you see a democratic society? Most of the respondents answered the general questions on democracy by referring to the current politics in Iran. Their reactions to the concept were mostly based on state-society dichotomy and focused on rights and freedoms and they gave concrete examples about how the system in Iran violates those rights and freedoms. Again in the words of a respondent from a youth NGO, democracy means “to have a space for everybody.”¹³⁰ Iranian activists prioritized the formal rules that come with democracy rather than the normative liberal content that is commonly attributed to it. They emphasized what was underlined already in the historical background chapter that civil societal action is about enhancing the political space. They established a strong association between democracy and civil society. Generally the expression was one does not exist without the other. Here of course the contradiction lies between the presence of civil society in Iran and the undemocratic practices of the regime. This, indeed, justifies the wording in the initial quote: “Iran is a strange case of democracy.” The fundamental organs of a functioning democracy are there, at least nominally: a parliament, regular and free elections, a judiciary. But there are also undemocratic organs such as Velayet-i faqih and the para-military organizations. Also there are arbitrary actions by the regime, such as arbitrary censorship, arrests, taking away licenses, and arbitrary violence and harassment. It is not very difficult to claim that Iranian regime lacks the basic elements of a functioning democracy. Yet, there is an active civil society.

The activists who took part in the fieldwork were asked which issue (s) they consider most important in the process of democratization (free and fair elections,

¹³⁰ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

accountability, freedom of speech, separation of powers, rule of law etc.). Rule of law was the most popular answer. Rule of law represents in Iran the right and actual ability to be able to pursue a public life in any way. Ranging from pure charity work to simple media activity, every sphere of the public life is visibly politicized because there is no rule of law, because the law is applied in a vague and inconsistent manner and according to needs of the regime. In the absence of the rule of law, it becomes even more difficult to obtain the tools for politics. So, when looked from the political model of understanding civil society, it is no surprise that civil society is equated with democracy which is then equated with the rule of law.

However, there is a second vein of defining democracy and approaching the issues important for democracy as asked in our question. Some of the respondents to the question chose to answer as 'all of the above'. Namely, they did not differentiate between rule of law, and free and fair elections and freedom of speech. Kamrava had also identified this trend in his examination of the Iranian intellectuals' attitude towards civil society. He argues that there is 'a populist and somewhat naïve perception of civil society'. The fieldwork gave us the impression that among some of the activists there is the same attitude towards democracy when they replied that democracy encompasses all of the above. These respondents were also those whose understanding of civil society was based on the a priori existence of a civic culture and liberal norms.

When discussing the issue of democracy, one of the respondents from a women's NGO drew our attention to the 'rentier state argument'. After describing the biggest problem of Iran as the existence of oil, she said that the state does not need the

people. And she continued: “When you don’t need them there is no democracy.”¹³¹

This brings us back to state – civil society relations and how the participants told their experiences with state while conducting their activities.

4.3.4 Relations with the Iranian State

The state – civil society relations constituted the main bulk of the fieldwork and the participants had many examples and anecdotes to tell on the subject. There is no doubt that this relation is a difficult and asymmetric one. The relation consists of enmity and threat, especially from the part of the state. The NGOs have to struggle with the state for every little action, for any rights and freedoms. The state has a complicated set of tools to hinder NGO activities, ranging from censorship, to arbitrary arrests. It is this state of affairs and the nature of this relationship that politicizes even the most apolitical NGOs and gives the Iranian civil society its contending character. Below we will examine what difficulties the NGOs encountered, their ways of combating these difficulties and their general views on state-civil society relations.

Because everything is in the political space, whatever activity you do as an NGO becomes a problem, a problem for the state.¹³²

This quotation is from the interview conducted by an NGO representative working with women and who is relatively at ease with state policies. They were one of the

¹³¹ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹³² Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

biggest NGOs, with a lot of resources in terms of volunteers, permissions, material sources, etc. Yet, even they located themselves and their activities within this power relationship that they see as ever present in the civil societal realm in Iran. Indeed, the relation between the state and the civil society in contemporary Iran fits the model designed by Charles Tilly to understand social movements.

Actually, in Iran it's like that, if you are even actually non-governmental organization, or doing different kinds of even intellectual activities, you have to wait for some difficulties with the government. It's not even that you are political. At any time when I wanted to go outside I am waiting for, to have a difficulty at the airport, for example, with my passport. It never happened, but it can be.¹³³

As it should be very clear by now the relation between the state and the civil society is a case of mutually perceived threat. The state is monopolizing all the space and tools of politics and the actors of civil society, intentionally or unintentionally are perceived as an intervention to state's monopoly. Yet this does not prevent the continuation of civil societal action. If we turn back to our theory chapter and remember Parsa's quotation "collectivities must overcome the impression that suffering and injustice are inevitable"¹³⁴, it is seen that this is what civil society actors try to do Iran indeed. The repressive government only makes civil societal action difficult, a challenge but cannot really diminish it. One clear example is the huge quantity of publishing houses in Iran despite the censorship.

¹³³ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹³⁴ Parsa, 1989, p. 22.

There's censorship. I mean, it's overt, it's not something you don't talk about it, and it's the fact. We have had problems. It depends on the period. At one time, they controlled the price of the book, at one time they stopped. They never tell you what to publish or what you can't publish, but at one time you publish a book, to be read by the authorities, and then they say "no, you have to go and burn that". But now what they do, they read the manuscript before it is actually published, printed. So, if there is something in it objectionable, they tell you and you can (?) remove it. But still you are not 100% sure. Still you can have their OK, and then after the book is published, even distributed, then there is... It does happen. At one time we asked them, the authorities, to give us a list of what is not possible to publish – they don't want to do that. So it's a matter of trial and error.¹³⁵

This is not the place to document all the misdoings by the regime towards the civil society. That would be a long list, but not necessarily productive for our purposes. In the chapters above, we argued that an alternative to counting the numbers of liberal type associations in Iran while analyzing civil society is to measure the freedoms and resources available to the activists. In that as it was frequently mentioned the inspiration came from the political model of understanding social movements.

It was also argued that state-society relations are the main axis of the availability of resources and freedoms. That relation is how one can measure the oscillations in the civil sphere throughout history and in the contemporary context. Rejecting the culturalist and essentialist explanations as well as the from above liberal attitude towards associations, it was argued that the nature of civil society lies in the political

¹³⁵ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

sphere and in there, the crucial determinant is the balance between the state and the civil society. One respondent described this relation as follows:

We don't trust them. And they don't trust us. You know, they are always wondering what we are up to.¹³⁶

There can be no better explanation of the general state-society relations in Iran. However, one should still be careful towards changes in time. Khatami's election and the fact that he held civil society discourse integral to his campaign were perceived at the time as a signal of change. Khatami promised a stronger civil society and the rule of law to protect that sphere.

With Khatami, this culture of civil society arrived and grew gradually. Although we had been conducting the same activities for 20 years, we did not know what we were. After the Beijing conference and after Khatami, we finally grasped who we were.¹³⁷

The number of registered NGOs grew rapidly under Khatami government. As one respondent stated there were 76 NGOs before Khatami and during his era, the number rose rapidly to 365. The government became more cooperative towards NGOs. It actually started to engage with NGOs over collective projects. They established a special unit inside the Ministry of Interior only dealing with the NGOs. They also for the first time brought legal regulations to the NGO sector which was fiercely resisted by the hard liners. It is not in the full force of law but it is the only legal framework available for NGO activities. However, the participants we talked

¹³⁶ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹³⁷ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

to, though thankful to the Khatami government, were complaining about the absence of a full fledged law on civil society organizations. Many said that the lack of certainty is to the benefit of those who want to hinder their activities. The vague law does not give more freedom, but on the contrary takes away even the existing ones. One specifically complained about the inconsistency in the attitudes of the governments that come and go. The lack of certainty allows the state to pursue its arbitrary harassment against NGOs even further.

The questions also included what the participants thought about the new government under the Presidency of Ahmedinejad. Most of them refrained from commenting much on the subject. I had the impression this was due to the fact that when I was conducting the fieldwork, the government was relatively new and had not necessarily pursued policies with regards to the civil society. However, a group of lawyers who followed the issue very closely stated that the government's attitude so far had not been clear. "We think they will pick a few NGOs who would be close to the government and work only with them. We are suspicious what they will do to the rest of the NGOs."¹³⁸ Some of them also shared the opinion that it will become more difficult to stay independent from the state under the new government. They expressed their fears that they would be deprived from some of the resources provided by the Khatami government, the material resources being the primary ones. Nonetheless, despite the general pessimism about the starting era, there was a general atmosphere of what can be described as 'there is no going back'. Although no one was expecting new advances in the realm of freedoms and rights, especially for civil

¹³⁸ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

society activists, no one also feared a total regress. In the words of the Vice-President of the Khatami government:

This government created a new definition of NGO. For example they see Basij (paramilitary organization) as an NGO. Basij works for the government and tries to win them votes. It is financed by the government. Nevertheless, they cannot stop the process of reform that has already started.¹³⁹

The analysis of the changes in state-society relations under the new government of Ahmedinejad is beyond the scope of the fieldwork and of the thesis. The experiences of our participants were mainly from the Khatami era, which is even more indicative of the political competition between the state and civil society actors as these challenges that they described occurred under the reformist government. The final words for this sections hinting at the future of events comes again from one of the respondents. When asked what she thinks about the future of the country, she replied as follows: “In Iran, you’re never sure of tomorrow. This is what I can say.”¹⁴⁰

4.4 Conclusion

The realm called civil society should be understood as a political site and that only this approach would help us to understand how civil society developed and evolved in the modern history of Iran and how it operates in the current day. The findings of the fieldwork justified the utilization of this approach. If we take civil society to be the space where individuals pursue their private interests through forming

¹³⁹ Interview of the author, Tehran, June 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Interview of the author, Tehran, July 2006.

associations with specific aims, it is easy to see that this definition does not fit the Iranian context. In Iran, people pursue their public activities at the expense of their private interests rather than for them. The liberal model renders the Iranian experience unexplainable or at best marginal. The advocates of this model refer from time to time to religion to find an explanation for the situation. However, as we have seen above, not the religion, but repressive state activities are the focus of the activists. The respondents had the attitude of political contenders rather than individual interest seekers. Even seemingly irrelevant institutions such as a publishing house become a tool for these contenders. And furthermore, even though they do not have the intention to become political contenders, the attitudes of the state turn them into being one, due to the simple fact the state perceives them as such. The alliances they form within themselves, the high level of cooperation among various NGOs, the fact that many women we interviewed are members of multiple NGOs, are indicative of a political model. The respondents also expressed a high level cooperation with international NGOs and organizations such as UN. When looked from this perspective, there is clearly no need to wait for the diminishing of the patriarchal culture or the rise of secularism to announce the presence of an active civil society in Iran. The high level of state repression does not refute this finding, but on the contrary confirms. At the end, there is a high level of activity that the state feels the need to repress. And if one pursues the theoretical vein that holds a broad and political definition of civil society, than surely the question whether civil society exists in Iran becomes redundant. The concluding chapter will try to infer the results of these theoretical and historical debates in the light of the findings of the fieldwork.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has focused on the civil society in contemporary Iran. It aimed at contemplating a consistent framework in which the Iranian civil society activities could be located. While doing so, it took its inspirations from the alternative vein in civil society debates that is literature of social movements, while referring to the peculiarities of civil societal actors in Iran.

The brief theoretical discussion in the beginning of this thesis looked at the main axis of the theoretical literature. Important questions here were how one defines the civil society sphere, and the normative attachments associated with civil society. Another crucially important question was on civil society in the Middle East, whether one should treat it any differently than other parts of the world and the relative impact of religion on the civil society. The main findings of the investigation into these questions were leaning towards an alternative conceptualization of civil society, the orthodox version that is the liberal one where civil society is understood to be a sphere of voluntary and autonomous associations of citizens seeking their interest in a pluralist and market oriented fashion. In this understanding, civil society is a crucial actor alongside the state and market in a liberal democratic order and it is crucial to find the ‘balance’ between these spheres. The alternative conceptualization on the other hand has many variations within it. The general principle of distinguishing civil society here is to perceive it as a site of politics. Here there is no

one manner in which citizens are expected to move and even non-liberal activities can be counted as civil society activities. The normative attachments are minimal, though generally these scholars locate the possibility of emancipation in this political site called civil society. The debate on the existence of civil society in the Middle East is actually connected to the debate on the definition of civil society. If one perceives this sphere as an autonomous space of political action rather than narrowing it to a certain type of associations, one can clearly see that despite its non-Western culture and religion, Middle East as a region had witnessed the will of political participation of the citizens in all political colours and in various themes.

When examined from this perspective, the history of Iran in the 20th century becomes a plethora of civil society activities. However, acknowledging the existence of civil society activities is only one part of the story. The other aspect of the need to look into the historical background was to observe the development and changing characteristics of these activities and essentially understanding the state-society relations in Iran. In order to develop a method that is able to understand the civil society action in Iran, this thesis was inspired by the contentious politics model from the social movements literature and decided to look at the resources, capabilities and freedoms that the contenders in the civil society field could access. In the presentation of the brief history of Iran, attention was paid especially to these aspects and the creative ways of Iranian citizens in their struggle for more political space and political freedoms were noted. Moreover a non-linear development of civil society sphere with oscillations of power between the state and this sphere is also examined. In other words, instead of comprehending the Iranian civil society as constant or developing, it is tried to show that it is in fact evolving according to the power

relations between the state and civil society. In this sense, it is not weak or strong rather the strength of civil society is changing vis-à-vis the relations with the Iranian state.

The informants themselves perceived the civil society realm as a realm of politics though some had certainly more liberal understanding of the issue. Their main concerns were generally about the aspects that this thesis was focusing on, namely the freedoms and resources available to the civil society actors. Within democratization process, they valued 'rule of law' most as it was providing the legal framework of their activities, a necessity for safety against a repressive state with arbitrary policies. They all expressed the need for a solid law of associations for Iran. Although they were thankful to some extent to the reform policies of President Khatami, majority of them stated that the civil society perspective of Khatami only gave a name to a sphere of activity that was already there, which is supportive of the criticisms towards those theories that only focus on formal associations. None had observed a structural change within the state but the relative accessibility of some resources under Khatami government had structured the civil society in a more solid way. The level of cooperation among the various NGOs in Iran can be likened to an alliance formation in social movements and as such it supports the conclusion of this thesis that civil society in Iran should be understood as the politics outside of state realm.

Overall this thesis concludes that there is civil society in Iran and religion only figures in the picture when relevant to the freedoms, resources and capabilities of the actors in civil society. In the same vein, the civil society in the broader picture of

Middle East should only view culture and religion in terms of their increasing or decreasing influences on the capabilities of these actors. In the Iranian Revolution religion provided the much needed autonomous space, under the Islamic Republic, it was instrumentalised by a regime that declared that the laws of religion can be changed according to the needs of the Islamic state. Religion rarely came up in the in-depth interviews with the participants of the fieldwork. Culturalist views on civil society would hinder rather than facilitate our understanding of civil society in Iran and in the broader region.

Instead of the liberal reading of civil society which tends to fall into the traps of culturalist arguments when analyzing the Middle East, this thesis has demonstrated that a looser understanding of the field, with a less rigid criteria of inclusion will produce a deeper historical and field research in the countries of the region. The Iranian case proved the existence of a vivid civil society despite a repressive political climate. The observation of this fact is easy when civil society is understood as a political sphere. Iranian participants to the fieldwork expressed their commitment to their activities though also noted the difficulties they encounter with the state. Throughout the chapters on Iran, this thesis argued that there is an oscillation in state – civil society relationship depending on the political climate of the period. The capabilities of civil society actors show significant changes in history as well as in contemporary Iran with the changing governments. However, the will of Iranian citizens to engage in civil societal activities in order to realize and enhance their democratic rights is constant.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

I. Demographic Characteristics

1. Age
2. Sex a)Female b)Male
3. Educational Level
 - a) Primary School
 - b) Secondary School
 - c) High School
 - d) University
 - e) Graduate
4. Occupation
5. In which type of residence you have lived for the most time?
 - a) City
 - b) Town
 - c) Village

II. NGO Characteristics

6. Name of the NGO
7. When is your organization established?
8. Could you please state your activities since your establishment?
9. What is the aim of foundation of your NGO?
10. Do you have previous experience in NGO sector?

11. Are you a member of any other NGO?
12. Which city is the center of your NGO?
13. Does your organization have branches?
14. How many members does your NGO have?
15. What are the conditions of membership in your NGO?
16. What do you think about the membership profile of your NGO?
17. Can you briefly explain the decision making procedures of your NGO?
18. Do you collaborate with other NGOs? If yes, in which topics?
19. Does your NGO have any relations with international organizations? If yes, could you please state the nature of your relationship?
20. Do you think your NGO contribute to the sphere where it operates? In what respect?
21. How is your relationship with media?

III. Civil Society, Democracy and the State

22. In your opinion how civil society could be defined?
23. Do you think there is strong civil society in Iran?
24. In your opinion is there a civil society tradition in Iran?
25. What are the major problems of civil society in Iran?
26. In your opinion how democratization could be defined?
27. How do you see a democratic society?
28. Which issue (s) do you consider most important in the process of democratization? (free and fair elections, accountability, freedom of speech, separation of powers, rule of law etc.)
29. What do you think about the relationship between democratization and civil society?
30. How is your relationship with the state?

31. Do you think the governments support NGO development? In which ways?
32. Can you explain the state's attitude toward civil society in Iran?
33. Have your NGO ever experienced any problems with the state? If any, what kind?
34. How do you evaluate on the existing legal framework for civil society activity in Iran?
35. What are the most important problems of Iran today?
36. How do you see the future of the country?

APPENDIX B

TABLE: DEMOGRAPHY OF THE SAMPLE

Respondent	Sex	Age	Educational Level	Occupation
1	Female	57	PhD	Retired Academician
2	Female	30	M.S.	Journalist
3	Male	53	B.S.	Self-employed
4	Male	48	B.S.	Health and Disease Specialist
5	Female	45	M.A.	Consultant
6	Female	62	M.S.	Sociologist
7	Female	46	PhD	Academician
8	Female	53	B.S.	Lawyer
9	Female	49	B.S.	Journalist
10	Female	43	B.S.	Journalist
11	Male	24	B.S.	Administrator
12	Male	51	B.S.	Engineer
13	Female	51	B.S.	Biologist