A Sociological Account of Iran Under Khomeinism
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Since the rise of Khomeini to power in 1979, Iran has undergone a number of devastating transformations. At the political level, the dictatorship of the previous regime was replaced by the lawless rule of the mullahs. While apparently Iran has a constitution, the judiciary with courts of law, and the legislature, according to Khomeinism, the interests of the establishment (maslahat-e nezam) trump all rules and regulations. If we accept that certain norms and rules are at the core of the concept of “political”, then there is no doubt that Iran under Khomeinism has regressed to a “pre-political” state of affairs. At the social level, and deprived of all forms of human freedom, Iranians in fact live under a social condition comparable to slavery. At the regional and international level, and because of almost four decades of the regime’s support for terrorist groups across the globe and fueling regional conflicts, Iran is viewed as a threat to international peace and security. In a nutshell, in all aspects of social and political life, the rise of Khomeini and his followers to power has led Iran into a downhill course. In what follows, and using the concept of “social capital”, I present the sketch of a sociological account to explain the dynamics of social, political, and international transformations caused by Khomeinism.

Khomeinism and the social capital

According to Robert Putnam, the core idea in social capital theory is the value of social networks and their function as “social superglues”. In other words, social connections based on shared values and the fundamental element of trust help both the individual and the society to prosper. Social connections take various forms: membership in social, political, or ethnic groups, or affiliation with national, class, or professional ideas and organizations. In all the various forms of social capital, there are common elements: membership in or affiliation with a group; a set of shared values and norms;
mutual trust; cooperation for achieving common goals; prominence of civic virtues; and a sense of reciprocal obligations among the members.

Iranian revolution in 1979 indicates a society full of social capital. During the revolution, Iranians with various political, religious, cultural, and ethnic affiliations were motivated by certain shared values—most importantly freedom of speech—came together and fought for the cause of freedom. However, the regime that ruled Iran after the revolution, started to annihilate the “social capital” and disintegrate the Iranian society from the day one. Khomeini considered all forms of social connections among Iranians as a potential threat for the survival of the regime—whose establishment needed to reduce all its citizens to slaves deprived of rights, organization, and power—and actively tried to destroy them. Khomeini and his followers needed to destroy the huge mass of social capital—consisted of the elements of widespread social networks, large number of political groups with many members, shared values of freedom and democracy, strong sense of trust among the people, and the sense of mutual social obligations—which in fact was the main element that made the Iranian revolution possible, to guarantee survival of the regime. In other words, Khomeini needed to shatter into pieces huge masses of social capital and transform Iranian society—which at the time consisted of various social groups with strong cohesive bonds—into atomized, disintegrated individuals who cannot trust each other to form any group or perform any collective action.

Iranian nationalism was a strong source of connection and social capital in the Iranian society and Mosaddeq was its symbol. That was the reason why Khomeini started attacking Mosaddeq and the idea of nationalism days after rising to power in 1979. Regarding the cultural movement of taking pride in ancient Iranian history and culture as a source of national identity that started during the Pahlavi era, all the cultural elements of ancient Iran were attacked by Khomeini and his followers as anti-Islamic and belonging to the era of “ignorance”. Political affiliations were another source of social capital targeted by Khomeini immediately after gaining power in 1979. First, Marxist and communist groups were suppressed. Then in a period of about two years, all political organizations were labeled as illegal, and support for any of them would cost an
individual’s life. Massive crackdown on all sources of resistance against the regime that started in 1981 intended to deprive Iranians of all political organizations which could act as a platform for organized collective actions against the regime. The political organization with the largest number of members and followers suppressed by the regime is Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK).

There was no limits in Khomeini’s efforts for the destruction of social capital. Any kind of social cause or organization that could bring Iranians together was targeted as a threat for the regime. Ethnic groups were among the first victims of the regime. Suppression of Kurds and Turkmens in 1979 was only the beginning of a long-lasting policy. Religious minorities were another group adversely impacted by the regime’s policy. Many religious groups, including Baha’is, were deprived of all their rights, even the right to practice their own religion. Shi’ites were not immune to the disintegration policy of the regime. In fact, since most Iranians were Shi’ite, regime exercised special brutality against Shi’ite groups. As an example, Ayatollah Shariatmadari, one of the highest-ranking Shi’ite clerics with millions of followers, was arrested, interrogated, deposed from his position, and underwent house arrest until his death.

Various kinds of professional organizations were also targeted by the regime. In all cases, independent professional organizations were first dissolved by the regime. Then, regime-appointed individuals took control of the organizations to make sure its congruence with the regime. Most importantly, professional organizations could no longer act as the voice of professionals with shared norms and values. Instead, the interests of the regime determined the policies of the professional organizations. The story of Iran Medical Council, its initial resistance against the regime’s policies, its dissolution and appointment of new Council members by the regime during the first few years of the mullahs’ rule is a classic example of the metamorphosis of all professional organizations to a branch of “government” under Khomeini.

Family, the smallest and the most basic social unit, was not immune to the disintegration policy of Khomeini. To deprive Iranians of all sources of social capital that could ruin the regime’s totalitarian plan for an atomized society, Khomeini repeatedly
urged Iranians to report on their family members’ beliefs and activities. In addition, teachers were expected to ask their students about their parents’ political beliefs. In fact, there were many reports of parents or siblings acting against other family members, sometimes with lethal consequences.

Deprived of significant, reliable domestic source of loyalty, the regime has sought to find/make friends among the like-minded Islamists abroad. Creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon and support for terrorist groups across the Middle East can be explained as the regime’s response to its strategic loneliness at home. It means that, the regime suffers from a strategic deficit of social capital which, paradoxically, is the reason for its survival and, at the same time, its main vulnerability. One can portray the regime tilted to one side and collapsing at home, but is still upright because of leaning on its “canes” (e.g., Hezbollah, Hamas, Assad, and Houthis, among others) to keep its balance.

In summary, Khomeini considered all forms of social capital as a potential threat for its regime and tried to destroy them. In addition to the active measures taken by the regime to dissolve the social bonds, the lawless rule of the mullahs has itself significantly contributed to the erosion of social connections, bonds of trust, and civic virtues, which are necessary for collective actions. As a result of the disintegration policy of the regime, Iranian society suffers from a severe lack of social capital. In fact, the most striking feature of contemporary Iranian society is its disintegration and lack of social cohesion.

**A Therapeutic Policy Alternative**

Based on the sociological account of Iran under Khomeinism, any U.S. Iran policy should consider ways to increase social capital as an antidote of Khomeinism. If the regime’s main vulnerability is its lack of social capital at home, any measure that empowers Iranians and increases their ability for collective action can bring the mullahs on their knees. The fact is that Iranians have an organized resistance movement which has survived all the regime’s oppressive policies. With members committed to the shared values of freedom and democracy, having the necessary civic virtues of altruism and courage and ready to pay the highest price for the cause, and united with the strongest
bonds of social cohesion and mutual responsibility, MEK--the main Iranian resistance
group--provides the paradigm example of an organization full of social capital.

In a sharp contrast, the regime destroys all forms of social capital and
disintegrates the society to survive, and the main Iranian resistance group is a great
source of social capital and provides the “social glue” that binds Iranians together. That is
the reason why the group can inspire the younger generation of Iranian activists who fight
for the cause of freedom and democracy. It also explains why the regime fears MEK the
most and considers the organization as its main threat. It means that, engaging with the
Iranian people and recognition of their organized resistance group as their representative,
in addition to be a novel diplomatic tool which has never been tried before, has the
advantage of being a therapeutic measure for the collapse of social capital as the main
social pathology underlying the problems facing Iran.