

The Islamist Paradox in Iran

A study of Olivier Roy's thesis on 'the failure of political Islam'



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Preface

As a student of 'Peace and Conflict' I believe in combining academic disciplines in trying to extend our knowledge on subjects relevant for international relations. I have built this thesis within the dual field of religion and politics, and based it on theory developed by the French Sociologist Olivier Roy.

Political Islam has been – and continues to be – a crucial element of the political landscape in the Middle East. Studying the trajectories of Islamism in Iran for the past six months has been an inspiring experience, and I am thankful for the opportunity.

Thanks to my supervisor Kari Vogt for constructive and inspiring conversations, and to the coordinator of my master program, Anne Julie Semb, for help and support. I am grateful to my fellow students at Blindern, for the stimulating and social surroundings during this study. Special thanks to Åshild for her optimism and support, and to Børre for valuable patience and encouragement.

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The question of Islam as a political force is a vital question of our times, and will be for several years to come. The precondition for its treatment with a minimum of intelligence is probably not to start from a platform of hatred.

Michel Foucault, Dits et Ecrits III, 1996

1. Introduction

The rise of Islamist movements at the end of the 20th century was largely an unforeseen development. During the past decades the movement has been radically transformed, and it currently manifests itself with a number of different expressions. A political view in the West, and especially in the US since 9.11, tends to perceive Islamist movements as a global security threat. Moreover, Islamist actors are regularly referred to as major players in the coming ‘clash of civilizations’ announced by Samuel Huntington. The debate on how to conceive of Islamism today is characterized by conflicting views. Some claim that the Islamist threat is stronger and more pervasive than ever, while others hold that the Islamist trend peaked several years ago. Accordingly, disagreement ensues on the question of how the movement’s current manifestations should be understood and dealt with. Increased knowledge of the trajectories of Islamism is necessary in order to understand, and hopefully respond constructively to the Middle East in the future.

One way to increase our knowledge is to explore the validity and fruitfulness of central theories existing in the field, and their relevance in explaining internal dynamics of countries in the Middle East. In this thesis I will explore and examine aspects of Olivier Roy’s thesis on ‘the failure of political Islam’, and its fruitfulness in explaining developments in the religio-political sphere in post-revolutionary Iran.

The Islamist experience in Iran is special in many respects. Iran was the only country in which the Islamist movement managed to take power and establish what seems to be a durable ‘Islamic state’¹. In 1979 the Islamic Revolution led by

¹ The Islamist movement also achieved temporary power with the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan (1977-88), and with the military coup d’état under the aegis of Hassan al-Turabi in Sudan (1989). The Taliban in Afghanistan (mid-1990s till 2001) may also be mentioned in this respect. Neither of these managed to institutionalize a durable state with popular support.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini succeeded, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was institutionalized in the following years. This event was completely unanticipated by most observers, and it represented a lucid demonstration of the renewed political significance of religion in the region. Iran's Shia Islamic nature along with its Islamist political system has characterized the relationship between religion and politics in the country ever since the revolution.

Following the Islamist's consolidation of power, religion was meant to shape politics and influence all aspects of society. However, faced with socio-political realities, politics repeatedly came to prevail over religion in the Islamic Republic. This was evident in the 1979 Constitution, the constitutional reform in 1989, in general legislation, and political appointments. Even if religion is central, and highly visible in the political institutions in Iran, its role is increasingly marginalized. Recent developments indicate a move away from Islamism in the country that celebrated the success of the political vision of Islam only twenty-five years ago. How could this decline of political Islam be understood?

The French Sociologist Olivier Roy is professor at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris, and the director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. He is a central and prominent scholar in the field of Islamism, and his argument is regularly fielded in the current debate over the trajectories of Islamism and the Islamist future². His main thesis is presented in his controversial book; *The Failure of Political Islam*³ (1994), and it holds that political Islam has failed. He argues that Islamism does not pass the test of power, and that the failure of political Islam in Iran was unavoidable because of the inherent inconsistencies in the Islamist agenda. The

² Roy is the author of a number of books on Islam and Islamism. His main publications are: *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (1986), *The Failure of Political Islam* (1994), *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War* (1995), *The New Central Asia* (2000), *Généalogie de l'islamisme* (2001), *Les Illusions du 11 septembre* (2002), *Globalized Islam: the search for a new ummah* (2004), with Mariam Abou Zahab *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection* (2004), and *La laïcité face à l'islam* (2005).

³ This book was originally published in French in 1992 with the title; *L'échec de l'Islam politique*. It should be noted that the French word *échec* has connotations like 'defeat' and 'setback' in addition to 'failure'. In the following I will refer to the vocabulary established by Carol Volk in the English translation from 1994.

aim is political power and the establishment of a religious state to fight secularization, but political action will amount to creation of a secular space and the religious state will inevitably be secularized as a result of the unification of religion and politics. “Herein lies the limit of the politization of religion, of any religion” (Roy 1994:23). Further, Roy argues that the intermixing of religious and political spheres will lead to a contamination of religion and a delegitimation of religious leaders. “The (...) Islamist order is simply removing Islamic values” (Roy 2004:89).

Presentation of Research Question

In this study, I will explore the dynamic relationship between religion and politics through central theoretical claims made by Olivier Roy in his thesis on ‘the failure of political Islam’. The fruitfulness of Roy’s thesis in explaining the unique developments in post-revolutionary Iran will be the centre of attention. I will mainly seek to answer the following question:

To what extent is Olivier Roy’s thesis on ‘the failure of political Islam’ fruitful in explaining religio-political developments in post-revolutionary Iran?

My agenda is consequently to test theoretical arguments of Roy’s thesis by considering their relevance in explaining religio-political dynamics in the Islamic Republic. Based on the findings, comments will be given on the general productivity of Roy’s thesis, the relevance of the case of Iran, and the general debate on the trajectories of Islamism in the Middle East.

The task will be undertaken by a consideration of Roy’s core theoretical arguments, focused on the inherent characteristics of the Islamist ideology, and the nature of religio-political dynamics. Fundamentally, he claims that inherent in the Islamist project are the seeds of its own destruction. Based on the assessment of Roy’s thesis I will establish an analytical framework centered on the Islamist

paradox. The paradox amounts to the incompatibility of aiming at political power and the establishment of an Islamic state, and at the same time aspiring to oppose secularization and strengthen the standing of religion in society. The framework will subsequently be applied to developments in post-revolutionary Iran.

I will argue that Iran is not an Islamic state, and account for institutional arrangements and political events symptomatic of the relationship between religion and politics in the country. The dysfunctionality of the regime will be highlighted, and Roy's argument will be applied to uncover whether the current situation was an inevitable results of religio-political dynamics encouraged by the Islamist experiment.

The findings will enable me to discuss the fruitfulness of Roy's thesis, specifically with reference to Iran, and more generally with reference to the debate on Islamism. Roy's thesis is of a comparative nature and it concerns general dynamics. I will accordingly argue that the findings on the case of Iran may suggest general relevance for Roy's claims. However, the case of Iran has unique features, and I will emphasize the limits of my findings. The theoretical debate on Islamism will be invoked to account for central critique directed at Roy's conception of the phenomenon. The divergent views of Roy and Burgat will especially be considered, to underline Roy's agenda and show the productivity of his approach.

The current debate on Islamism is a multifaceted debate of great significance to the future of international relations, and I believe that Iran is of special interest for two reasons. Firstly, it is categorized by the US as a central country in the 'axis of evil', and a field of interest in American foreign policy. The US went to war in Iraq aiming at regime change and democracy, and they have lately showed a growing concern for developments in Iran. Thereby, questions related to Iran are of global interest as well. Knowledge of the trajectories of Islamism and the country's internal religio-political dynamics is important to avoid jumping to unconstructive 'solutions' for the country. Secondly, Iran is of

interest for the general prospect of democratization in the Middle East. The political situation in the country has generated a religio-political public discourse, unparalleled in most Muslim countries throughout the region. Khomeini's redefinition of the religious tradition, and the contradictory legacy he left, opened the door to a public debate on the proper role of religion in society – a public discourse more familiar to a Western than an Islamic tradition. Recent years have shown a significant move towards democracy in the country of the popular religious revolution. Reformist and democratic voices have evolved from within the country's religious establishment and cultural tradition. If Iran ever finds a true democratic arrangement that is compatible with Islam, this could prove important for other Muslim countries as well.

The Islamist heritage is a crucial element of today's democracy debate in Iran and the Middle East, and it continues to shape and influence developments in the region.

Presentation of Outline

Above I have presented my field of interest, my research question and its relevance. In the following I will account for concepts that will be central to the following presentation, and specify how I will apply them.

In the second part I will account for methodological considerations relevant to the study of historical events, the empirical material that will be used in the analysis, and the relevance of conceptual frameworks in this field.

The central features of Roy's thesis will mainly be outlined in part three. I will describe and discuss aspects of his theoretical argument, with focus on the inconsistencies in the Islamist project, and religio-political dynamics. I will account for critique from Francois Burgat directed at Roy's thesis, and discuss the divergent views of these central contributors in the field. Bjørn Olav Utvik will also be briefly mentioned in this respect. Strengths and weaknesses of Roy's

theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be considered – generally, and specifically when applied to Iran and Shia Islam. Finally, I will present the analytical framework centered on the Islamist paradox.

In the fourth part I will briefly account for relevant background information on the religious tradition of Shia Islam and the case of Iran. This will be centered on the traditional relationship between religion and politics in Shia Islam, Khomeini's innovative doctrine of *velayat-e-faqi*, and the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamist experiment in Iran will be analyzed in part five. The task will be undertaken by using empirical sources documenting institutional arrangements and historical events in post-revolutionary Iran. The empirical part of the analysis will be centered on the nature of the Iranian state, the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic Republic, and the functionality of the regime. The empirical considerations and findings will be analyzed and summed up with reference to the analytical framework of the Islamist paradox, presented in part three. My aim is thus to establish a coherent picture of the dynamic relationship between religion and politics in Iran, and the failure of political Islam in the country.

In part six the findings, the method, and the theory used will be evaluated. I will discuss whether Roy's thesis is fruitful for understanding developments in Iran, and whether the failure of the Islamist experiment was inevitable. The unique features of 'the case of Iran' will be elaborated upon to highlight the limits and centrality of the findings. In considering how fruitful Roy's theories are in explaining developments in Iran, I will also comment upon the general productivity of his approach. The theoretical debate on the trajectories of Islamism will again be invoked, to emphasize the relevance of Roy's conception of the phenomenon, and the significance of conceptual frameworks in this field. The general importance of the case of Iran will also be highlighted.

Finally, some concluding remarks will be given on the general findings and characteristics of the study. This will be supplemented by comments on the

prospects for future democratization in Iran, and the significance of the Islamist heritage in the Middle Eastern context.

Concepts

No coherent conceptual framework exists that all implied researchers adhere to when writing on religion and politics in general, or Islamism in particular.

Consciousness on conceptual issues is vital for reaching constructive conclusions.

I will further elaborate on this in the methods part. Below I will shortly account for concepts central to the rest of the presentation.

Political Islam, Islamism and fundamentalism

Political Islam and Islamism are often used interchangeably in the research field, but they may be distinguished on degree of preciseness. *Political Islam* could be understood as “ideas and programmes of socio-political transformation based on Islam” (Zubaida 2000:62). *Islamism* more specifically denotes movements which have Islam as the main focus of their political activity, and aim at establishing an ‘Islamic state’ where *sharia*; the Islamic law, guides all political action, economic development and social arrangements (Vogt 1993:207). Political Islam could thus be understood as a wider concept, and can be applied to several phenomena mixing Islam and politics. In line with common practice in the field, represented by theoreticians like Roy, Kepel and Burgat, I will largely use Islamism and political Islam interchangeably. The terms will refer to that political vision of Islam originating early in the 20th century, but gaining momentum in the Muslim part of the world in the late 60’s and early 70’s.

Islamic Fundamentalism is often used synonymously with Islamism and political Islam, especially for comparative studies of fundamentalism across

different religions. Certain drawbacks are related to this concept, and I will not apply it in the following⁴.

Secularization and modernization

Secularization is a central concept for grasping the relationship between religion and politics in today's world. Along with the growing relevance of religio-political concerns, the nuances of such concepts become significant. Secularization should be distinguished from secularism, which denotes the world view and ideology of secularists. Roughly it could be said that "[S]ecularists suppose that during modern times, and especially during the past several generations, religious illusions have gradually disappeared" (Keane 2000:5). *Secularization*, on the other hand, should be understood to describe the relationship between religion and politics. It is a concept with several meanings, but it normally refers to a weakening of the role of religion in the public sphere. Secularization is taking place when religion becomes less significant in legitimating political power and legislation in society. Religion simply becomes less central to the functioning of the social system. This is not necessarily negatively perceived by theologians, because it will often free religion from practical worldly concerns, and thus from profanation (Furseth & Repstad 2003:101pp).

I will use secularization to denote intended or unintended separation of religion and politics in the public sphere, with the result that politics gradually prevail over religion. Secularization refers to a process whereas *secularized* refers to a state. *Secular* simply means 'outside of religion', and will be used to describe elements with separate autonomy independent of religion. In the Iranian context, the dynamics related to secularization operate in the relationship between religion

⁴ 'Fundamentalism' originated in a Protestant Christian context, and it is therefore problematic when applied to other religions. 'Political Islam', 'Islamic radicalism' and 'Islamism' has largely come to replace it in studies of religio-political movements in Islam (Vogt 1993:206p). Still, 'Islamic Fundamentalism' is used by scholars like Bruce Lawrence in comparative studies of religious movements in opposition to the modern age (1995).

and politics, but largely amount to the question of the proper relationship between religion and state.

In the following, *modernity* will refer to political and religious arrangements alien to traditional Islam, and *modernization* will denote the processes leading to such arrangements. Modernization does not necessarily imply secularization. However, in the Islamist vocabulary they are closely associated, and I will accordingly use modernization and secularization interchangeably as manifestations of the Western Enlightenment values that Islamists generally oppose.

Shia Islam and Shia Islamism

Ithna ashariyya, or Twelver Shiism, became state religion in Iran in 1501, and is the largest fraction within Shia Islam⁵. I will use the general term *Shia Islam* to refer to this sectarian variant of Islam dominating the religious picture in Iran.

Roy builds a general theory, and does not distinguish significantly between different forms of the Islamist phenomenon. There have been many different expressions of the meeting between Islam and politics, and Islamist movements have unfolded in diverse ways, dependent on historical conditions and cultural contexts. Thus various trajectories of the different fractions can naturally be observed. The tension between general trends and particularities will be a challenge that I will seek to balance throughout this paper. Generally, I will use *Islamism* to refer to common traits of the movement, and use *Shia Islamism* when writing on features unique to the Shia branch. Lebanon and Iraq also have significant Shia Islamic populations, but Iran is outstanding throughout history as the dominating Shia country, and in the following Shia Islamism will mainly refer to the movement shaping the developments in Iran.

⁵ A number of different Shia variants exist, and their differences are mainly related to disagreements on the right succession to the Imamate. The 'Iranian' type of Shiism has, however, come to dominate most Shia-Muslim groups in the Middle East.

Transliteration

Concepts related to religious traditions and functions will generally be referred to with traditional Arabic transliteration. When it comes to the term *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the jurist), I have decided to keep the Persian form, due to its close association with developments in Iran.

2. Method

This thesis will be placed within the dual field of religion and politics, and the approach will be theoretical, historical, and empirical. By applying Roy's thesis to historical developments in Iran, my aim is to test its central theoretical claims. The analysis will be centered on the state level of the Islamic Republic, and mainly concerned with aspects relevant for the relationship between religion and politics.

Historical Investigation

Dealing with religion and politics, the intention is to consider the development of religious doctrine and movements in their interaction with a variety of social and political conditions. Historical method "tries to trace recent developments to roots and causes in the past" (Keddie 1983:2). This past could be either distant or recent. Scholars like Keddie look for roots and causes of present conditions in Iran all the way back to pre-Islamic times. To test Roy's theoretical claims, I find it rational to limit my historical investigation to the most crucial post-revolutionary years, and events directly related to the dynamics and relations of religion and politics.

In this study, the context and period of interest is Iran in the years after the revolution in 1979. The empirical material needed for considering Roy's thesis and the case of Iran will be taken from summaries and analysis of historical events and institutional arrangements in the country. I will focus on specific incidents chosen from this period, specifically events around the death of Khomeini (1989), and the election of Khatami as president (1997). The historical and social conditions will naturally be simplified to draw attention to the relevant features of the developments.

Dealing with historical events always presents a number of challenges. Reconstruction of the past can never give an accurate and complete picture of the events and their contexts. And the task of reconstruction always takes place as interplay between the available information about the past, and the researcher's own preexisting knowledge and expectations (Kjeldstadli 1999:209). The research question I have raised, along with the theoretical framework I have chosen, necessarily influence my perception and judgment – and thereby the examples I choose and how I portray them. This bias can never be eliminated, but it can be reduced through careful selection of sources and consciousness in the way theories are applied.

Sources

The sources should be reliable, representative and sufficiently detailed for the purpose, and they should be established, or approved, by knowledgeable and reliable researchers in the field. The most reliable picture is established by sources that are independent of each other, and in agreement (Kjeldstadli 1999:210). I will generally use examples that appear in several sources on historical developments in Iran, and thereby could be understood as central and relatively unambiguous. Most writers have their agendas when writing about such events, but I will mostly draw upon material not intended to support or discredit Roy's theories, to avoid the most obvious biases. The examples will be chosen to highlight characteristics in the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Objectivity can neither be fully attained in the material I use, nor in the choices that I make. However, I believe that the key sources to my presentation exhibit extensive academic prudence, and as such will make up reliable sources. Central to my empirical presentation are the works of; Ali M. Ansari, Daniel Brumberg, David Menashri, Susan Siavoshi, and Sami Zubaida, all prominent scholars with valuable contributions on religion and politics in Iran.

Theoretical framework

Historical periods are characterized by a number of events with complex connections. A critical examination and analysis are necessary to break the subject into smaller parts that can be investigated isolated, and later combined to construct a reliable picture in which overall patterns in the development can be discerned (Kjeldstadli 1999:223). I will interpret the historical developments by applying aspects of Olivier Roy's thesis on the failure of political Islam, as laid out in the book *The Failure of Political Islam* (1994) and further developed in *Globalized Islam. The Search for a new Umma* (2004). The isolated events and the combined picture created by them will be seen in light of an analytical framework based on Roy's theoretical arguments. The theoretical framework will be applied as a tool to uncover patterns and connections in the material. The approach will mainly be inductive – I will use the isolated observations to generate a broad picture of the situation (Kjeldstadli 1999:214).

Roy does not distinguish between hypotheses and theories in building his thesis. Following from the nature of his study, I will use interchangeably terms like: 'Roy's thesis', 'Roy's theories', and 'Roy's arguments'.

Conceptual Frameworks

Studies concerning Islamism, political Islam and fundamentalism tend to apply concepts differently, and as a consequence the overall picture often becomes blurred. The concepts chosen and employed by each researcher necessarily influence and shape findings and conclusions. Thereby divergence in understanding could be explained by differences in the conceptual frameworks used. The importance of being conscious in making conceptual choices can hardly be overestimated. The theoretical debate on how to understand the trajectories of Islamism is characterized by conceptual confusion and argumentation with different focuses. This debate will be considered in more detail below.

The aim of commenting upon the fruitfulness of central concepts in this field is built into the overall aim of theory-testing. Generally, the conceptual framework created and used by Roy is useful and productive, even if some weaknesses should be noted. Roy's thesis and the concepts he applies, will be presented and further examined in the following part.

3. Theory

The Debate on the Trajectories of Political Islam

Along with Olivier Roy, the French scholars Gilles Kepel and Francois Burgat are also central to the theoretical debate on how to understand and respond to political Islam. Roughly it could be stated that Roy and Kepel agree on the understanding that political Islam as a broad ideological movement has peaked, and lost its place as the key motivating force in Middle Eastern politics (Roy 1994, Kepel 2002). This view has been repeatedly criticized, and especially after the 9.11 attacks on the US, because the attacks left the impression that the ‘Islamist threat’ was more potent than ever⁶. Such criticism is, however, based on a misunderstanding of Roy and Kepel’s theses. Their agenda is not to argue that radical elements⁷ from the Islamist movement are irrelevant for today’s world, rather that political Islam as a broad movement with wide appeal and influence in Muslim countries belongs to the past – a fact that hardly can be denied.

Both Roy and Kepel relate the ‘failure’ or ‘decline’ to the nature of the ideological Islamist movement, but Roy more carefully develops the theoretical framework explaining how the dynamics in the relationship between religion and politics produce the failure. My impression is also that Roy is more theoretical, less focused on conflict, and less populist in his expressions than Kepel. Roy’s theoretical focus, and his explicit handling of religio-political dynamics, makes his thesis very appropriate for considering the fate of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

⁶ Conservative American writers like Daniel Pipes, have especially been critical of this view. Pipes is the editor of the radical ‘Middle East Forum’, and generally believes that American interests should guide discussions and approaches to the Middle East. To him, Islamism constitutes a powerful threat to US interests.

⁷ Both Roy and Kepel consider such radical elements to be the last, desperate expressions of an ideology that has failed. Those kinds of reactions are known from other failed ideological movements like Marxism and Communism in Europe.

In the theoretical debate on the subject, the notion of ‘failure’ of the Islamist movement has been severely criticized by Burgat. He argues that political Islam in its current form, for instance as political parties, is continuing to play an important role in Middle Eastern politics – in some instances even as modernizing and democratizing forces. From a theoretical point of view I find that these views are not necessarily in opposition. I will return to the divergent views of Roy and Burgat shortly.

Olivier Roy’s Thesis

Olivier Roy is one of the most central theoreticians writing on the trajectories of Islamism, and he is repeatedly renewing and developing his views. The main characteristics of Roy’s thesis on Islamism are laid out in the controversial book *The Failure of Political Islam*, first published in French in 1992 and in English in 1994. Here he argues that political Islam does not pass the test of power, and that the Islamist movements were unable to provide an effective blueprint for an Islamic state. He relates this failure to the inherent inconsistencies in the Islamist project. In *Globalized Islam. The Search for a New Ummah* (2004) he further develops this thesis, and explores the new realities confronting today’s Muslims all over the world. From this book I will use the concept of ‘post-Islamism’ to denote societies like present-day Iran, that has been altered as a consequence of Islamism in power.

Roy’s project is to build a comprehensive and general theory on the trajectories of political Islam from North Africa to the Indian subcontinent. Based on comparative material he seeks to find common characteristics in the different fractions of the Islamist movement. The material substantiates developments within different cultural and political traditions, including the origin, development and culmination of the Islamist movement, with reference to both Sunni and Shia Islam.

It should be noted that there are slight modifications in the works presented by Roy, from 1994 to 2004. In *Failure of Political Islam* he argues that the Islamist movement has failed, that its proponents drift towards neofundamentalism, and that its remnants will disappear, except for some extreme, radical elements. In *Globalized Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*, he sticks to his notion of failure, but acknowledges that the Islamist experience is still relevant in Middle Eastern politics. The parts of Roy's thesis dealing with the fractions that failed to reach power, or the drift towards neo-fundamentalism are not relevant for the case of Iran, and they will only briefly be touched upon in relation to the wider debate on the trajectories of Islamism.

Roy's comprehensive work is widely valued as an important contribution to understanding political Islam; however, he has been criticized on his conception of the phenomenon, and methodological choices. Relevant critique will be accounted for to highlight the validity of Roy's thesis. In the following I will review the aspects of his general thesis that I find most relevant for understanding Shia Islamism and the case of Iran. My focus will be on the arguments directly concerned with how and why the relationship between religion and politics will be altered as a consequence of the Islamist agenda.

Roy's conceptual framework – and how I will use it

It should be noted that Roy does not put much effort into defining his conceptual framework, or discussing nuances and difficulties related to central concepts. Analytical categories relevant to the study of modern Islam, needs to be adjusted and specified according to purpose. And as previously suggested, conceptual clarification is crucial for reaching constructive conclusions in this field.

Roy largely uses 'Islamism' and 'political Islam' as synonymous in building his thesis, but he specifies the meaning of 'Islamism' by stating that it; "is the brand of modern political Islamic fundamentalism that claims to re-create a

true Islamic society (...) by establishing first an Islamic state through political action” (Roy 2004:58). *Islamism* thus specifically denotes an ideology explicitly aiming at political power and the establishment of an Islamic state. As previously suggested, *political Islam* could be used more generally to denote programs with a political agenda for Islam. I will use the terms interchangeably, as practiced by Roy, however, communicate their differences in evaluating my findings. I will suggest that some distinction may be productive for conceptual clarification.

Roy invents the concepts of ‘neo-fundamentalism’ and ‘post-Islamism’ to describe current trends. Most fractions of the Islamist movement failed to gain significant political power, and Roy argues that the movement underwent a drift towards *neofundamentalism*. Neofundamentalists reject the Islamic revolution as a means of establishing an Islamic state, and rather encourage re-Islamization from below – based on individual return to the practices of Islam. Even if they in theory consider that Muslims should live under an Islamic state, they reject the political struggle as a means (Roy 1994:75, 2004:247). Central aims of the Islamist ideology are thereby left behind. The concept of neofundamentalism is not central to the case of Iran, and I will not employ it further. The phenomenon described as *post-Islamism* merits some attention though. The concept denotes societies influenced by a failed Islamist experiment, and means that religion is suppressed from the public sphere – the “privatization of religion” (Roy 2004:97). I find it to be useful as a descriptive category to draw attention to the present situation after the ‘failure’ in a country like Iran. But as an analytical category it is rather unproductive because it is imprecise and impossible to test. In the following, post-Islamism will be used to depict a society where the relationship between religion and politics has been profoundly altered as a consequence of the Islamist experiment.

In Roy’s vocabulary, “the invention of modernity lies in the emergence of an autonomous political space, separate from both the religious and private spheres” (Roy 1994:8). I will adhere to this definition in order to signify that

modernity and *modernization* represent arrangements and developments alien to the original Islamist ideology.

Roy notes that Iran is a special case, but he does not distinguish significantly between Sunni and Shia Islamism in his theoretical considerations. Some difficulties ensue in trying to balance the general traits of the Islamist movement and the particular characteristics of Islamism in Iran. The theory is general, but the case is unique. I will comment further on this tension in considering the fruitfulness of Roy's thesis.

Islamist political thought

The Islamist political imagination is dominated by the idealized paradigm of the first community of believers at the time of the Prophet. From this paradigm follows a number of central themes in Islamist political thought. There should be no separation of the religious, legal, and political spheres, and thus no distinction between the religious and the political orders. The sole source of law, as well as the norm for individual behavior should be the *sharia*, and the definition of an autonomous political space, with its own rules, positive laws, and values, is prohibited. The ideal is to have power to rule over the entirety of the *ummah*; the community of the faithful, and therefore the state is never considered in terms of a territorialized nation-state (Roy 1994:12p).

The Islamist movement is a sociopolitical movement, founded on an Islam defined as much in terms of a political ideology as in terms of a religion (Roy 1994:39). The movement's principal aim when it resurfaced in the 60's was to stop and reverse the process of secularization. Islamists generally believe that the society will be Islamized only through social and political action; it is necessary to intervene directly in political life and attempt to gain power. Khomeini even held that it was a religious obligation to revolt against a corrupt state.

Islamists reject secularization and other expressions of Western values, but even if the movement explicitly opposes modernization, it incorporates several elements of modernity. According to Lawrence, Khomeini and his followers enjoyed a measure of success precisely because they came to terms with the modern world even while opposing it. They were ‘anti-modernist moderns’, and could both be seen as a product of – and a reaction to – the modern age. (Lawrence 1995:xiv). Lawrence states that; “they accept implicitly the benefits of modernity, often thriving through their use of technology, while explicitly rejecting modernism as a holistic ideological framework” (Lawrence 1995:17). But even if the Islamists draw upon the instrumental benefits of modernity, like communication-networks and other technology, they believe that Islam is a complete and universal system that does not have to modernize or adapt. They demand a religious government and an Islamic society guided by the *sharia* in all aspects (Roy 1994:37pp). “The essential premise of the Islamist movement is that the political model it proposes presupposes the virtue of individuals, but that this virtue can be acquired only if the society is truly Islamic” (Roy 1994:27). This circularity of thought eventually makes the goals unattainable.

Roy argues that the Islamists’ means have worked against their ends in such a way that they have ended up strengthening the processes they originally opposed. Religion is occupying a central place in the political discourse in countries like Iran, but its factual influence and legitimacy is severely diminished. The Iranian people increasingly view the regime as illegitimate and incoherent with the values of Islam. According to Roy, these trends could be explained by contradictions in the Islamist ideology.

Inconsistencies in the Islamist project

Roy argues that Islamist thought has failed to fulfill its program because it tried to integrate modernity, but met up with the ‘Islamic political imagination’ of the

tradition, which essential premise is: politics can be founded only on individual virtue (Roy 1994:21). Thus, the Islamist theoretical model has broken down. The Islamic society only exists through politics, and the political institutions only function as a result of the virtue of those who run them – a virtue that presupposes an Islamic society. The circle is complete, and the goal seems unachievable. The Islamic revolution in Iran, along with other Islamist movements, failed to provide a model for what an Islamic society should be like and how it should be brought about (Roy 1994:60). According to Roy:

There is no concrete political, let alone economic, model inherent in Islamism. Islamism in power will systematize the policies of Islamization ‘from the top’ already evident in officially secular or moderate regimes. (...) As we have seen, such a model in and of itself does not generate institutions capable of functioning on their own: the dream of justice and social redistribution can be based only on the virtue of those who implement it. But the transformation of Islamist parties into mass movements and the test of power will produce the same results that it has with all other ideologies: the ‘pure’ will be corrupted or will abandon politics to climbers, careerists, and unscrupulous businessmen. Any Islamist victory will be a mirage (Roy 1994:195).

The Islamic society is an illusion that can never be fulfilled, because Islamism cannot withstand the exercise of power without undermining the original goal. The central aims of countering secularization and strengthening the standing of religion in society will inevitably be diluted because political action will lead to the creation of a secular political space and the primacy of politics over religion. Additionally, the logical outcome of state power is a desacralization and devaluation of religion from its connection with worldly, fallible concerns. The religion’s authenticity in society will be lost, and its sacred space eliminated. By bringing religion into the political arena, Islamism becomes an agent in the secularization and delegitimation of religion in Muslim societies.

Roy’s thesis is centered on the Islamist paradox. If power is reached, the Islamist’s actions will systematically undermine their goals. He highlights the Iranian revolution to exemplify that the Islamists will use more political tools to bring religion under their control the closer they are to power (Roy 2004:83). “The pervasive importance of politics has undermined the pristine ideals and values of

Islamic ideology. The means may have jeopardized the end” (Roy 2004:88). In Iran, the rulers’ obvious corruption and compromise in meeting with socio-political realities, contributed to a loss of religious authority, because the religious leaders were associated with the corrupt political system. The *de facto* secularization currently taking place in Iran is brought about not only by the hegemony of politics over religion, but also as a result of both conservative and reformist religious forces trying to ‘save’ religion from contamination and profanation through political authority (Roy 2004:90p).

The Islamists’ aspiration to protect religion fails because the true functioning of politics and society are not taken into consideration:

The autonomous functioning of the political and social arenas wins out, but only after the religious sphere has been emptied of its value as a place of transcendence, refuge, and protest, since it is now identified with the new power (Roy 1994:199).

Finally, the Islamist project is not able to generate viable institutions capable of dealing with social and economic problems. A dysfunctional state will ensue. When the ideology is based on a flaw – “when virtue doesn’t function, it’s opposite emerges: the abuse of power, speculation, and corruption” (Roy 1994:145) – the system necessarily fails.

Post-Islamism

At the core of the Islamist myth was the unification of religion and politics. In a society characterized by post-Islamism, both spheres are autonomous, despite the wishes of relevant actors. Roy claims that:

A post-Islamist society is one in which the Islamist parenthesis (in the sense of a temporary experiment) has profoundly altered relationships between Islam and politics by giving the political precedence over the religious in the name of religion itself (Roy 2004:3).

“Post-Islamism does not imply the emergence of a secular society as such” (Roy 2004:4). It expresses the crisis of the relationship between religion and politics, and is a reaffirmation of the autonomy of the political, and of the precedence of

politics over religion. The role and status of religion are decided by the political even in an 'Islamic' state like Iran. The conditions for secularization are set by the endeavor to build an autonomous sphere for religion, by way of a pervasive politicization of the religious sphere. Contrary to the claim that a reluctance to separate religion and politics strengthens the standing of religion in society, it strengthens the prevalence of politics over religion (Roy 2004:3p).

In the era of post-Islamism, the proponents of political Islam are forced to relate to modernity in a different way. Even if elements of modernity were evident in the movement from the start, these were explicitly denied and suppressed by the Islamists. With the apparent failure of religion to guide and control politics, today's Islamists more openly adhere to the realities of modernization and secularization taking place in the society – because they could not fight such trends. To Roy, this redefinition of doctrine indicates the failure of the original ideology.

To sum up, the failure of political Islam can be attributed to the inherent incompatibilities in the Islamist project. The Islamists aim at political power and the establishment of an Islamic society based on non-separation of religion and politics. However, mixing of religion and politics tends to deprive religion and religious leaders in the society of their sacred positions. And the inevitable consequence of political action is the establishment of an autonomous, secular political space. Islamists in power will thereby contribute to a delegitimation of religion and a secularization of society – the opposite of their goal. Thus, once the aim of political power is achieved, the Islamist political vision of Islam will fail. The basic premise of individual virtue of every Muslim – a precondition for an Islamic society – is dependent on the existence of such a society. This circularity of thought ensures that the goal can never be achieved. In a post-Islamist society the relationship between religion and politics will be altered as a consequence of the Islamist experiment, because it gives precedence to politics in the name of religion. Finally, the Islamist project is likely to generate a state and a regime

incapable of functioning satisfactorily. These are central theoretical arguments in Roy's thesis on the failure of political Islam.

Critique from Francois Burgat

Francois Burgat is a Political Scientist and Arabist. Writing on Islamism, he emphasizes the cultural, national and identity-based aspects of the movement, and seeks to highlight the particularity of the different fractions. His agenda is to denounce; "its [the movements] supposed antipathy to the dynamics of social modernisation and political liberalization" (Burgat 2003:178). Thereby he seeks to show that Islamism can contribute to modernization and democratization in the Middle East.

He is explicit in his support of Roy's role at the forefront of the thought of Islamist movements, but he is generally critical of Roy's thesis on the failure of political Islam. He argues that the processes are not yet completed and that it is too early to speak about the Islamist movement in the past tense, simply because it has not yet been able to deliver its promises. Burgat accepts Roy's claim that Islamism has lost its 'original impetus' and evolved to become mundane and 'social democratic' – that it no longer offers a different kind of society and a brighter future. He also agrees that Islamism will be regenerated as a result of this. It is Roy's conclusion that he will not accept; that the Islamists have already lost, and failed even before they reached their goal (Burgat 2003:159pp). Both Roy and Burgat acknowledge that the goals originally set by the Islamists are impossible to reach through the prescribed ways. But Burgat's main position is that if today's proponents of political Islam prove to have a political impact in the future, the conclusion of the movements failure is too hasty (Burgat 2003:163p). He argues that it is evident "that, one day, there will be room for an expression of 'post-Islamism'. That day has not yet arrived" (Burgat 2003:183).

If proponents of political Islam display political relevance in the future, will that be enough to disprove the claim that the original broad Islamist movement failed to reach its original goals and fulfill its promises – and that this failure was inevitable? Burgat seems to think so.

Further, he attacks the concept of ‘post-Islamism’ and its use. According to Burgat, adherents of the post-Islamism thesis claim the ‘irrelevance’ of Islamism. Accusingly he writes;

Now that they [the Islamists] keep their activity within the framework of the nation-state, and reconcile the vocabulary of Islam with the values of modernity, Islamism no longer merit consideration as a religious group. This is what the promoters of the theory of post-Islamism are telling us, each in their own way (Burgat 2003:180).

I believe that this statement is based on a misunderstanding of Roy’s position. As Burgat himself has acknowledged, Roy does not seem to imply that Islamism in its current form is irrelevant, rather that it has lost its original impetus, and is now appearing in another form. The current elements of the movement have other aims and ambitions, and significantly – they relate to modernity and modernization in a different way. Burgat himself states that they even ‘reconcile the vocabulary of Islam with the values of modernity’. This development contradicts the original Islamist ideology, and could easily be seen as a logical response to the failure of their original intention to fight modernization and its inherent values.

Islamism and modernization

Burgat’s critique is thus related to the relationship between Islamism and modernization. He argues that; “the ‘new’ findings that are supposed to illustrate the transition to ‘post-Islamism’ have even been previously designated as part of the very essence of the old Islamism” (Burgat 2003:180p). He rightly observes that modernity was present in Islamism from its very beginning, and he uses this fact to state that their current involvement with such modernity cannot be used to claim the failure of the movement:

If the modernity of the Islamist movement was really inherent at its very inception, as numerous authors have long shown, the sudden retreat of the 'Islamist' label as applied to its representatives in the current generation would seem to be no more than the simple reconciliation of an academic construction with a social reality that, for many years, refused to conform to the vision that social scientists had of it (Burgat 2003:181).

According to Burgat, the crucial elements of analysis are the 'reformist' or 'modernist' dynamics of Islamism, which he claims have been underestimated because they contradict the dominant perception of the phenomenon (Burgat 2003:62). He argues that political Islam, even with its anti-Western attitudes, can contribute to more democracy and greater tolerance, and that parts of the movement still enjoys considerable support. He states that he wants to show that the processes of Islamization and modernization are far from being mutually exclusive, and that the modernity has long been evident, even if it was not recognized by the political actors concerned (Burgat 2003:180). Similar ideas have been voiced by Bjørn Olav Utvik (2002) in a book edited by Burgat. Utvik has also more specifically noted that some groups in Iran presently aspire to separate the religious and political institutions. And he argues that this does not necessarily mean that the Islamist ideology is left behind (Utvik 2003:15). Would not a fundamentally new way of relating to modernity – even encouraging the emergence of an autonomous political space – represent a break with the original Islamist ideology? Non-separation of religion and politics was at the core of Islamist political thought. A changed attitude towards modernity and modernization implies a new world view and strategy.

Roy, Burgat and Utvik largely use the same evidence, but interpret it in different ways. Burgat's association between Islamism and modernization are harmonious with Roy's claim that Islamization entails secularization. The question is consequently how this association between Islamism and modernization should be interpreted. Should Islamist contribution to such developments be regarded as 'failure' or 'success' on the part of the Islamists?

As previously stated, the Islamists were ‘anti-modernist moderns’. They did benefit from modernity, but explicitly rejected modernization and secularization in their discourse. Today’s proponents of political Islam have largely been forced to accept and act according to the rules of modernity, and even if they exert influence in the political life of their respective countries, this can not disprove the claim that political Islam did fail according to the original intentions. The central objectives of political power and the establishment of an Islamic state, only remain as distant visions. They have been replaced by an objective to Islamize society through morals, culture and behavior (Burgat 2003:54).

Burgat further argues that: “The Iranian experience seems in many respects to be an awkward interruption to the seamless notion of ‘secular’ political modernity” (Burgat 2003:171). Thereby he ignores that the present modernizing developments in Iran seem to go hand in hand with a profound secularization of society. If the Islamists in power in Iran contributed to this secularization, it is reasonable to assume that it was unintended because their aim was rather to fight such trends. What is relevant is not mere existence of elements of modernity, but rather attitudes towards it, and the intentions behind actions related to it. Seen in this way, there are real and important differences between the ‘old’ Islamism and the present situation of post-Islamism.

Failure versus success

Roy holds that the Islamist movement changed in its meeting with socio-political realities due to its paradoxical objectives. Whether one decides to call this success or failure is a matter of conceptualization rather than of substance. In the Islamist project is the seeds of secularization. Islamism in power can not reverse, and are likely to strengthen the *de facto* separation of religion and state. In Iran the developments have seemed to lead to more democracy. However, the fact that the processes they instigate could be seen as positive does not mean that the Islamists

have succeeded. Roy holds that achievements must be measured against stated aims and promises, and not based on capacity to adapt and willingness to give up original goals. Success of today's Islamist elements can thus be taken to support the notion of 'failure', if it follows from detachment from original goals, or if the changes were unintended. Unintended effects are also effects.

It could thus be argued that Roy and Burgat are more in disagreement on how to depict and interpret the subject, than on the central features of it.

Does Burgat's critique affect the theoretical argument of Roy's thesis?

Roy and Burgat are both concerned with the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East, and more specifically the trajectories of Islamism in the region. But there the similarities stop. They are approaching the phenomenon in different ways and with different focuses. Roy's point of departure is the ideological mass movement originating in the 60's, and the failure of the different fractions to either reach power or to pass the test of power. Whereas Burgat – without acknowledging the failure demonstrated by Roy – is focusing on the current position of the remnants of the same movement, and their potential role as a modernizing force in society. His critique of Roy's notion of 'failure' is based on his observation that political Islam continues to be a central political force throughout the Middle East.

Roy focuses on the inconsistencies of the theoretical Islamist model, and the failure of Islamism to be true to its ideology in practice. Their current ideological shift and redefinition of doctrine are seen as a consequence of their unavoidable ideological failure. However, Roy does not imply that political parties propagating political Islam in the Middle East today are irrelevant or unimportant. He emphasizes that even if the Islamists have failed:

This does not mean that the Islamist movements did little to shape the political and strategic landscape of the Middle East, or that they are out of the game. They played a very important role, albeit not one congruent with their ideology (Roy 2004: 61).

Most fractions of the Islamist movement failed to gain significant political power, and this necessarily resulted in a modification of the original aims and ambitions. Today's Islamist expressions in the Middle East could be described as either radical and violent, or as moderate and adapted. And both these trends could be understood as expressions of a failed project; the first as a desperate expression, and the second as an adaptive realization of the political realities confronting them, and new prospects for exerting influence. Burgat mainly focuses on the latter, and the characteristics and trends that he emphasizes, could largely be seen as indications of the failure that Roy wants to demonstrate.

This leads us back to the significance of conceptual frameworks. The debate seems to be blurred because its central participants talk about different things, using the same words. My agenda is not to deny the fact that there are differences in the views presented by Roy and Burgat, but rather to suggest that their differences are not that much related to substance. Their divergent views might be explained by different focuses and conceptual frameworks. 'Islamism' is used by Roy to denote the ideology aiming at establishing an Islamic state through political action. And he uses the concepts of 'neo-fundamentalism' and 'post-Islamism' to describe the present situation. Burgat, on the other hand, does not recognize the culmination of the Islamist project, and conceives of present groups and political parties thriving on its legacy as a continuation of the original movement. To him, the notion of 'failure' is premature because he still awaits the impact today's proponents of political Islam may have in future Middle Eastern politics. Both approaches are likely to be productive – albeit for different purposes.

Burgat's observations are as important as they are interesting, but they are not that relevant for Roy's theoretical argument on how the inherent incompatibilities in the Islamist project brought about the failure of political Islam. When evaluating my findings, I will further comment upon these different conceptions of the phenomenon.

The Fruitfulness of Roy's Thesis

Roy has also been criticized for the general nature of his study, and the methodological choices underpinning his thesis. More specifically he has been accused of seeking to fit everything into his framework by imposing the material onto the theory. This critique is mainly directed at the way he quite selectively uses material selected across time and space to support a current phenomenon of relatively limited scope. Utvik argues that Roy reaches his conclusions “by bringing a strange agglomeration of evidence apparently selected with no other principle than supporting the hypothesis” (Utvik 2000:39). I find this critique to be rather superficial. Roy's empirical material is comprehensive and gently handled with academic prudence. Through in-depth case studies of phenomena and fractions relevant for understanding Islamism on a general basis, he carefully develops his theoretical framework. More generally referring to comparative studies, Utvik has also stated that “comparison probably always has some value, but the desire to find common traits between the objects observed easily gains the upper hand” (Utvik 2002:45). This is the nature of comparative research; some nuance will necessarily be lost in the search for general trends. In dealing with general phenomena with a variety of local expressions, there will always be questions on whether to give priority to generalities or particularities.

The comparative nature of Roy's study necessarily weakens the level of specificity in his overall findings. Still, the core of his theoretical argument, focused on the nature of ideological movements and religio-political dynamics, is not severely influenced by these methodological choices. Thus, potential weaknesses following from lack of specification and attention to particularities, will not limit the productivity of applying his general theoretical framework to a specific case. It is the essential theoretical argument I find most illuminating, and its general nature makes it fruitful for comparative studies, as well as studies of individual cases.

Roy's thesis and the case of Iran

The general picture of Islamism is complex because the trajectories of the different fractions of the movement have not been identical, and developments have occurred at different paces. The case of Iran is special because the Islamists reached power and the Islamic Republic was institutionalized. As the country represents an unambiguous example of Islamism in power, it constitutes a good case for testing the theoretical claims made by Roy. Other countries have not had the same experiences. Iran might be the clearest example of the failure of the Islamist experiment, and the experiences from the Islamic Republic are very central to Roy's thesis. Burgat's focus on current political parties makes him less concerned with the case of Iran. This disparity in the appreciation of the case of Iran may also contribute to explain their different conclusions. Iran is a unique case, but I also believe that it is central for understanding religio-political dynamics related to the Islamist project. I therefore find Roy's focus and approach to be fruitful.

It should be noted however, that Roy makes certain associations that deserve critical attention. In his theory-building, the differences and relations between Sunni and Shia Islam are not properly specified. This is unproblematic when focusing on religio-political dynamics from a theoretical point of view, but in testing his theory he continues not to be explicit on the differences; he uses evidence from the very special case of Shia Islamism in Iran to support his general theory on how Islamism will never pass the test of power. The experiences from the Islamic Republic are highly relevant for other cases, but they should also be treated with reference to their unique nature. Based on my findings, I will further comment on the case of Iran relative to the general theoretical framework presented by Roy.

Roy's thesis is largely compatible with existing knowledge in the field. It addresses an important social phenomenon, and seeks to explain it by consistent, specific theoretical arguments. By examining associations between religion and

politics in Iran, I wish to explore whether the thesis explains the developments satisfactory, and generates new insight about the topic under question. Roy's thesis is general and comparative, but I believe that its core theoretical argument can form the basis for a coherent analytical framework to be applied to developments in post-revolutionary Iran.

The Islamist Paradox – an Analytical Framework

Above I have, quite selectively, described Roy's thesis on 'the failure of political Islam'. I have chosen to focus on what I understand to be the core of his theoretical argument, centered on the nature of ideological movements and religio-political dynamics. I have also discussed Burgat and Utvik's insightful comments and critique directed at Roy's thesis, however, argued that the issues they note do not significantly alter the value of using Roy's framework for analyzing developments in Iran.

In my analysis I will seek to uncover whether it in fact is reasonable to talk of a failure of political Islam in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and if it is, whether this failure was instigated by the Islamist experiment in the country. This background will enable me to consider the fruitfulness of Roy's thesis in explaining religio-political developments in post-revolutionary Iran.

The Islamists wanted to establish an Islamic state, and counter secularization through political action. Central to their ideology were non-separation of religion and politics, and the ambition to Islamize all aspects of society. According to Roy, the failure is mainly evident through the altered relationship between religion and politics, amounting to secularization of society and delegitimation of religion. Eventually, the inconsistencies in the Islamist project generate a dysfunctional state.

Fundamentally then, Roy argues that once the Islamists achieved power in Iran, their failure was inevitable. In trying to implement the Islamist ideology,

certain religio-political dynamics would ensue – systematically undermining their goals and the legitimacy of their project. The emerging dysfunctional state will contribute to underline the infeasibility of the Islamist agenda. This is the Islamist paradox. Inherent are the following factors and processes:

Secularization:

Political action is necessarily followed by the emergence of an autonomous secular, political space. Politics prevail over religion, and a *de facto* separation of religion and politics will be apparent in state institutions, general legislation, and the daily functioning of the state. Secularization will unfold, and might even be encouraged by religious leaders trying to save religion from profanation.

Delegitimation of religion:

Mixing of religion and politics will inevitably deprive religion and religious leaders of their sacred positions. Unavoidable declericalization of state institutions and overt suppression of religious concerns will marginalize and contaminate religion.

A dysfunctional state:

Failure to solve the tensions between religion and politics – between theory and practice, are likely to amount to a dysfunctional state. Evidence of such collapse will be a regime incapable of dealing with social and economic challenges, depending on violence and corruption to stay in power, and increasingly disapproved upon by its own population.

These factors are manifestations of the failure of Islamism to fulfill its promises and pass the test of power. If the inconsistencies in the Islamist project contribute to explain developments in Iran, this will support Roy's notion of 'failure of the

Islamist experiment' in the country. The failure will also be evident in the altered relationship between religion and politics, depicted by Roy as 'post-Islamism'.

With reference to historical events and institutional arrangements in post-revolutionary Iran, the analysis in part five will evolve around the following questions:

- Is Iran an Islamic state?
- What is the relationship between religion and politics?
- Does the regime in Iran function satisfactorily?

The answers to these questions will be evaluated with reference to the Islamist paradox summarized above, and the findings will be used to establish a coherent picture of the failure of political Islam in Iran.

The next part will give a brief account of the historical background to the relevant developments. This will provide a context in which to consider the events analyzed in part five.

4. Background

Shia Islam and Iran

In order to understand changes and developments in Iran, and appreciate the radical transformations issued by the Islamist experiment, some historical background is needed. I will briefly account for key features of traditional Shia Islam, and central aspects of the Iranian revolution.

Shia Islam – the religious tradition

The principal factor separating Sunni Islam from Shia Islam is the question of the succession to the Prophet Muhammad. After Muhammad's death the majority of the Islamic community held that Abu Bakr should be his successor, and the first rightly guided Caliph. The fraction later to be called Shia Islam argued that Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, should occupy the leading position. They thought that Ali should not just be a temporal head, or a Caliph, but also a spiritual head, or an Imam (Momen 1985:11). In 1501 the Safavide rulers made Shia Islam state religion in Iran. This was done to strengthen the position of the rulers, but it also laid the ground for the special standing of the religious leaders, the ulama, in the Shia community (Vogt 1993:181p). Whereas the ulama in the Sunni tradition have been involved in or controlled by the political elite throughout the history, the religious leaders in Shia Islam have retained a large degree of autonomy and independence from the ruling elites. This fact proved decisive in the development of Shia Islamism.

The key feature of Shia Islam is the tradition of the Hidden Imam, and the most central doctrine is the doctrine of the Occultation.

In its simplest form, the doctrine of the Occultation (*Ghayba*) declares that Muhammad ibn Hasan, the Twelfth Imam, did not die but has been concealed by God from the eyes

of men. His life has been miraculously prolonged until the day when he will manifest himself again by God's permission (Momen 1985:165).

The Occultation occurred in the 9th century. Because the Imam was both the spiritual and political head of the Shia community, his occultation left a considerable gap in Shia theory. The Imam was the one interpreting the law, and he was theoretically responsible for its execution. When Shia states arose in later centuries, a tension occurred between the theoretical consequence of the Occultation and political realities. In theory, there could be no justification for taking the Imam's place since he – though hidden – still lives and is the leader of the community. However, the political reality was that the heads of the arising Shia states gradually filled some of the functions of the Hidden Imam. This divergence between theoretical considerations and political realities has caused tensions between religion and politics throughout the ages (Momen 1985:170). As early as the 11th century the doctrine was reinterpreted to delegate some of the Imam's judicial authority to those who had studied *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Across the following centuries, the theoretical reinterpretation continued, and eventually left the ulama with authority to execute most of the functions of the Hidden Imam. However, political changes were needed before the ulama were able to bring most of these theoretical functions into practice (Momen 1985:189p).

The traditional relationship between religion and politics

During some nine centuries, the ulama were able to effect a very considerable theoretical consolidation of their authority, through a process of exegesis and innovative interpretation of the central dogmas. This process left the religious establishment with considerable autonomy and power separated from the state. In Sunni Islam the constitutional theory was developed in the presence of a Sunni state. Thus politics and religion were integrated; religion became a key supporter of the state, and obedience to the ruler became a religious obligation. In Shia Islam the development mostly took place with the Shia Muslims as a prosecuted

minority in a Sunni state. As a result, religion and politics largely developed in two separate spheres. Throughout history a minority of the ulama have cooperated with the state or actively engaged in politics to enforce implementation of *sharia* (Islamic law). But the majority of the ulama have traditionally held an attitude of ‘political aloofness’, distancing themselves from all political matters and concentrating on furthering the *sharia* through their positions as religious leaders (Momen 1985:191pp). Still, there has been some tradition for opposition to the state on the part of the ulama in Iran. Some of them were even central in the constitutional revolution in 1905 (Algar 1972:236p).

A number of different factors have contributed to strengthening the ulama in Shia Islam throughout history. One such event, occurring in the 19th century, was the development of the institution of the *marja al-taqlid* (source of imitation). Following from this was that every believer who was not a *mujtahid* (a prominent expert on Islamic law) should choose a trained *mujtahid* to follow in law and doctrine. Historically, the ulama had no hierarchical structure, but this development led to a system with clear hierarchical structure and ulama of different ranking (Keddie 1983:9, Momen 1985:204). There could be several religious leaders with the title *marja-al-taqlid* at the same time, if they all had large crowds of followers. The fact that every Muslim could choose which leader to follow, and that several different authorities could interpret religious dogmas and give rulings, almost gave the religion a pluralistic and democratic character (Siavoshi 2002:130p). The practice of *taqlid* (imitation) eventually had important political consequences. Prior to the revolution Algar wrote that the *marja* was “liable to dispense guidance on political matters in a sense opposed to the will of the state and ipso facto to become a leader of opposition” (Alagar 1972:235). This should prove to be right.

The decades prior to the Islamic Revolution were marked by secularizing policies applied by the late Shah. With British and American support the Shah became increasingly dictatorial, and religious sources in the society were

systematically attacked and suppressed. This forced secularization and exclusion of religious leaders, were important elements in the renewed political activism developing in the 60's among some of the ulama. In 1963 Ayathollah Rohollah Khomeini (1902-89) came into prominence as the most outspoken of the ulama in his criticism of the regime (Momen 1985:252pp).

Generally it could be stated that Islamism all over the Muslim world was a response to the modernizing and secularizing developments encouraged by secular governments, and alienating religion. These trends unquestionably laid the ground for the dramatic developments in Iran.

Velayat-e faqih

Since the Safavid and Qajar periods, the ulama had claimed to be the *Na'ib al-Amm* (general representative) of the Hidden Imam, but for a long time they refrained from the obvious next step of claiming political authority and temporal rule. The ideas were not new, however, when Khomeini developed and introduced the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the jurist) in his famous book *Hukumat-i Islami* (Islamic Government). The book was published in 1971 and was a collection of lectures he held to the religious students at Najaf after he was exiled in 1963 following his opposition to the Shah's reforms. In line with Islamist ideology Khomeini argues that Islam has all the laws and principles necessary to guide a government and social administration, and that the Qur'an and the Traditions should be its constitution. The Islamic ruler needs an extensive knowledge of the *sharia* in order to be just and rule in accordance with it; these are conditions filled only by the *faqih* (the expert in Islamic jurisprudence). Therefore the most learned *faqih* should rule an Islamic society. This idea of governance by the jurisprudent is the basic theory behind the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. (Momen 1985:195p). Traditionally, the most respected ulama in Shia Islam have been those refraining from political activity. Khomeini challenged this tradition by claiming

that it was a religious duty for the clerical establishment to actively engage in politics.

The foundation for this apparently radical change in political doctrine was already laid in the 17th century. Two rival Shia law-schools had opposing views in the question of political power. The Akhbari-school claimed that all political power was illegitimate as long as the Imam was in Occultation. The Usuli-school also held that no political power was possible without the Imam, however argued that the illegitimacy of the state could be reduced by letting the *fuqha* (plural of *faqih*) operate as counselors to the rulers. They could thus act as representatives of the Imam by giving political advices that were in accordance with Islamic law. In other words, they wanted to open the door to *ijtihad*; individual interpretation of the Qur'an and the Traditions, for the *mujtahids* (the most prominent *fuqha*). The moderate view of the Usulis won the dispute, and further developments of these ideas culminated much later in Khomeini and his doctrine *velayat-e faqih* (Vogt 1993:194). The direct claim to political power by ulama in Shia Islam is consequently a quite new invention, alien to the traditional separation of religious and political spheres. "Fearing for the very survival of Iran's Islamic identity, Khomeini now concluded that the clerics should make the transition from moral guides to executive rulers" (Brumberg 2001:82).

The Islamic Revolution

Khomeini argued that the religious clerics had a duty to involve themselves in social and political affairs. He pushed the idea of the 'representatives of the Imam' to its outmost conclusion, and claimed that the *faqih* was the only legitimate leader in an Islamic state. The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* gives all power – political and religious to the just and knowledgeable ruler with the highest knowledge in Islamic law (Momen 1985:196).

Prior to the revolution, the Shia Islamic clerical establishment was subject to a hierarchical organization under ayatollahs with religious authority. The most respected ones; the *marja al-taqlid*, received religious taxes, *zakat*, from their followers – an institution originally directed at the Imam – and thereby achieved great economical independence. Whereas Islamism in Sunni Islam first and foremost was a lay movement in opposition to the ulama, the revolution in Iran started as an intellectual movement headed by religious leaders both financially and politically independent of the state (Kepel 2002:109).

The successful revolution in 1979 was a result of a number of different factors and forces, and Khomeini's most important achievement may have been that he managed to unite them in a powerful opposition to the Shah. One of the most central ideologues behind the revolution, Ali Shariati, propagated a religiously defined nationalism, appealing to young Marxists and secular nationalists, providing a broad social basis for the movement. Khomeini and his followers offered a solution to the social and economic problems in society. The disillusionment and despair experienced by many Iranians, along with their deep identification with Islam, made them receptive to the proposed solution. Khomeini's charismatic personality and unique leadership qualifications, coupled with his religious credentials and courageous struggle against the oppressive Shah, secured him support well beyond his traditional followers (Menashri 2001:5). In order to mobilize the masses he used central Shia symbolism – like the death of Imam Husseyn, at the hands of the Sunni Umayyad Caliph – as an analogy of the Iranian people's modern oppression by the Shah. The revolution succeeded because Khomeini managed to mobilize the different classes, unite religious and secular components, and form a coalition including all interested parties (Kepel 2002:108pp).

In 1979 the Islamic Republic was institutionalized with an extensive support in the Iranian population. The next task was thus to show that Islamism could fulfill its promises, by strengthening the standing of religion and provide a

well-functioning state and society, securing freedom and civil rights for its inhabitants. An assembly of religious specialists wrote the new constitution. They decided to implement the institution of *velayat-e faqih*, introduced by Khomeini. The new institutional arrangements gave the religious authorities an overwhelming control over politics, and the Shia Islamic tradition of separation of religion and politics was thereby left behind. The new constitution embodied tensions between religion and politics, and compromises resulting from the difficult task of turning Islamist ideology into practical arrangements. Khomeini's presence partly legitimated the revolutionary ideology, but after his death in 1989 the underlying tensions became very difficult to suppress (Siavoshi 2002:129pp).

The fundamental changes in Shia doctrine, following the revolution, would prove decisive for the future legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and religious leaders in Iran. Moreover, religio-political dynamics unfolding the following years would make it evident that the Islamist system did not pass the test of power.

5. Analysis: The Islamist Experiment in Iran

The Islamic Republic was declared with the support of a sweeping majority of the Iranian people. Both religious and secular forces were united in a common opposition to the Shah, and in the belief that Islam could be the solution to all problems in the society. However, in the first post-revolutionary years, the secular liberals and moderate reformers were mostly locked out and demoralized. Gradually power was consolidated by the conservative religious Islamists. After the death of Khomeini, theocratic and authoritarian forces controlled most power-positions in Iran.

Later developments in the country reveal that there is a new dominant understanding of what is the best relationship between religion and politics. Since the end of the 90's a strong reform movement has evolved from within the country, headed by both religious and secular intellectuals. The movement opposes the regime and the nature of the Islamic Republic, and is increasingly gaining support in the Iranian population. It may seem as if political Islam reached its peak with the revolution and the support of the new Republic in 1979.

In the following, the analytical framework laid out in part three will be applied to developments and features characteristic of the relationship between religion and politics in post-revolutionary Iran. The questions centered on the nature of the Iranian state, the relationship between religion and politics, and the functionality of the regime, will guide the presentation, and the findings will be summarized with reference to the Islamist paradox.

Tensions between religion and politics were present from the beginning of the Republic. The difficulties were strengthened, however, as religio-political dynamics gradually unfolded, and revealed the weaknesses of the new arrangements.

Is Iran an Islamic State?

Apart from the aim of gaining political power, the most explicitly stated aim of the Islamist movement was the establishment of an Islamic state. In Iran the revolution brought the Islamists to power, and the logical next step was thereby the institutionalization of an Islamic state to secure an Islamic society in which social justice could be fulfilled. The sole source of law, as well as the norm for individual behavior should be the *sharia*, and the Islamic society should spread to the entirety of the *ummah*; the community of the faithful. In other words; the task was to convert the Islamist ideology into practice.

The Iranian constitution and the place of sharia

Did the Islamists in power in Iran manage to institutionalize an Islamic state? If an Islamic state should be guided by Islamic principles and the *sharia*, the answer is ‘no’. Sami Zubaida has carefully considered whether the Islamic Republic in Iran managed to establish an Islamic state as something different from the traditional nation-state. She notes that the Iranian constitution embodies a contradictory duality of sovereignties; written into it is “the sovereignty of the popular will (...), in line with democratic nation-state constitutions, and the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, giving sweeping, almost arbitrary powers to the ruling *faqih*” (Zubaida 1988:4). The legal system is thereby a mixture of modern bureaucratic and traditional Islamic elements, with the institution of *velayat-e faqih* as the most central of the Islamic elements. The arrangement gives the ruling *faqih*, or Supreme Leader, absolute authority on direct legislation of general policy, and on interpretation of sacred texts and Shia traditions (Zubaida 1988:5). However, beyond this principle there is little constitutionally Islamic about the Iranian state. According to Zubaida:

There are no systematic Islamic principles, such as constitutional or public law, to apply to the system of administration or to the organization of government departments. Islam

does not significantly alter the constitution or the administration of the state as such (Zubaida 1988:6).

The question of taxation is an interesting example of how the state functions in this respect. The traditional religious tax in Shia Islam, the *khoms*, were paid by the believer to his chosen *mujtahid*, which would use it for administration and charity. With the Islamic state in power, the official ruling is that there is a duty to pay state taxes, and the *khoms* is largely left as a matter between the individual believers and their chosen *mujtahid*. Thereby, in spite of opposition from some conservative clerics who remain opposed to direct involvement of religious leaders in government, state requirements are not compromised or subordinated to religious practice (Zubaida 1988:6).

This suggests that Iran is not an Islamic state guided by Islamic principles and that the ruling elite is only paying lip service to the religion it claims as the foundation of its legitimacy. According to Roy, the framework for a secular political space was provided by the constitution written in 1979. The constitution sets the place of the *sharia* – not vice versa. It could be seen as a modern configuration in which the state is both the source of law and the source of its own legitimacy. “The new Islamic state developed a positive law that became ‘Islamic’ by virtue of the sole fact that the state was Islamic: it thus marked the end of the *sharia* as the sole foundation for the judicial norm” (Roy 1994:177). Zubaida finally states that “[t]he Iranian case indicates that the Islamic elements of the Republic fit in very well with the nation-state model, both in terms of state organization and of the structure of the political arena and its discourses” (Zubaida 1988:7). This view is compatible with Roy’s claim that: “The Iranian model is in fact a ‘secular’ model, in the sense that it is the state that defines the place of the clergy and not the clergy who define the place of politics” (Roy 1994:177). A despairing gap between ideals and reality are clearly evident in the Islamic Republic. “The paradox of the Iranian Islamic Revolution is that it has contributed

to giving roots to the nation-state, by giving it a religious legitimacy at the expense of the transnational solidarities” (Roy 1999:211).

From this line of reasoning it becomes clear that the Islamic Republic is not an Islamic state. The Islamists in power did not manage to create the Islamic society they were aiming at, but rather laid the ground for the development of a system approaching the model of secular nation-states. According to Roy this failure was inevitable. The Islamic society was dependent on an individual virtue, tautologically defined to be the result of such a state. It can also be understood as the failure of the Islamist ideology to relate to religio-political and socio-political realities. A closer examination of the dynamic relationship between religion and politics in Iran is necessary to understand the developments in the country and the failure of the Islamist experiment.

What is the Relationship between Religion and Politics?

The Islamists aimed at building an Islamic society in which there should be no separation of religious and political spheres. The definition or creation of an autonomous political space was inconceivable in Islamist political thought at this time. Measured against the central aims of the Islamists prior to, and during, the revolution, the developments in post-revolutionary Iran indicate a failure to fulfill the Islamist agenda. According to Roy; “The failure of political Islam means that politics prevail over religion” (Roy 2004:40), a situation that has been evident in Iran for a long time.

General legislation

In the same way that the constitution decides the place of the *sharia*, the legislation is no more Islamic than the state. The Islamist logic implied that religion should lay the premises for political practice. The reality proved to be

different. Time and again religious concerns had to yield in the meeting with political, social and economic needs. Family law is one good example of this. Khomeini denounced that the existing Family Protection Laws were un-Islamic and decided to implement classic *sharia* provisions giving husbands and fathers wide powers over women and children. He also ruled that family planning and birth control were imperialist conspiracies against Islam and therefore forbidden to all Muslims. However, as a result of political pressure from influential Muslim women groups, one soon returned to the old laws giving greater rights and protection to women. And faced with one of the highest fertility rates in the world, Khomeini and the Republic made a complete turnabout on the question of family planning. Contraception programs were re-started, and followed by a public campaign with posters showing happy families with only two children (Zubaida 2000:65). These kinds of episodes clearly showed the ideological impasse confronting the Islamic Republic. The regime's obvious deployment of double standards probably contributed to a growing frustration and suspicion among the Iranian people – directed at the Islamist regime.

The political precedence over religion became gradually evident, but was made very explicit with the constitutional reform in 1989, encouraged by Khomeini's contradictory legacy.

The Constitutional reform in 1989

The Constitution from 1979 specifies that the ruling *faqih*, in addition to being a man of justice and superior judgment, should be the leading *marja-al taqlid*; religious 'source of imitation'. After Khomeini, no Iranian cleric could fulfill both the religious and political qualifications necessary to be his successor. In such a situation the constitution held that a 'Leadership Council' consisting of three to five Grand Ayatollahs should be created to take the leading position. This also proved impossible, because not one high-ranking cleric accepted Khomeini's

concept of *velayat-e faqih*. The only solution to the question of succession was therefore to amend the Constitution so that the charismatic basis of the *faqih*'s authority was diminished (Brumberg 2001:142p). The new Constitution, ratified by national referendum in July 1989, separated the position of *marja* from that of *faqih*. The demand that the Supreme Leader should be a *marja* is dropped, while it is stressed that the *faqih* possessing the better political qualifications should be given precedence. This favoring of political qualifications laid the ground for de-clericalization of state institutions. The Supreme Leaders's powers were enhanced by the new arrangements, but his position as religious guide was weakened through the removal of its charismatic-popular base. The Supreme Leader should hereby be selected by indirect election by the experts elected by the people. Further, the new Constitution affirms that the presidency is the next highest official position, after that of the Supreme Leader. This reinforced the president's authority. Because the new arrangements broke the direct relation between the people and the *faqih*; the president became the sole elected representative of the entire nation. Consequently, this opened the possibility that the president could acquire a charismatic authority unavailable to the indirectly elected *faqih* (Brumberg 2001:147pp).

The constitutional reform was a direct response to a pressing question of succession to Khomeini, and the ideological impasse facing the Islamist regime. It led to a peculiar arrangement of power, trying to respond to socio-political realities and at the same time preserve some key aspects of the revolutionary, Islamist ideology. The amendment of the Constitution clearly altered the relationship between religion and politics, and it went one step further away from the traditional hierarchical arrangement of Shia ulama. The highest religious authority – previously chosen by the people on the basis of religious qualifications – was now elected as part of a political play. “[T]he reform of the Constitution set Iran on a path from which there was no turning back” (Brumberg 2001:150). These particular challenges of leadership facing the Shia Islamists in Iran were

directly related to the institution of *velayat-e faqih*. Khomeini, as the popular, charismatic leader of the revolution, was the only one who could properly fill the position as Supreme Leader. But the problems were also related to the general Islamist agenda of creating a religious state, ruled by religious leaders. It is not possible to reconcile the tasks of political and religious leadership in a modern society. Fulfillment of one of the roles will compromise the functioning of the other. Eventually this will undermine both religious and political legitimacy.

Khomeini himself played a direct role in the Constitutional reform, with its radical alteration in the balance of religion and politics, turning the selection of Supreme Leader into an overtly political choice. Repeatedly he gave priority to politics in responding to political and social challenges.

Khomeini's contradictory legacy

As the 'father of the revolution', Khomeini obviously endorsed the Islamist ideology and the institutionalization of Islamic government. However, because he was the first to directly deal with the tension between religion and politics, he was also central in the process of establishing political precedence over religion. Thus he left a contradictory legacy, and his actions and statements are used by both conservatives and liberals to legitimate their positions in the current debate in Iran.

Khomeini's most clear and explicit announcements on the proper relationship between religion and politics were given shortly before he died. On January 1st 1988 he declared that the Government was a 'divine injunction', and that the *faqih* had the authority to define the interests of Islam and the country, and to take any action to defend those interests. This statement was a response to a speech by President Khamenei, implying that the Government's actions was constrained by Islamic law (Brumberg 2001:135p) Later the same year Khamenei announced the primacy of the *sharia* over other laws. Khomeini responded by giving his famous edict on January 7th 1989, clearly affirming the preeminence of

the Islamic state's laws over the *sharia* (Roy 1994:177) – unmistakably giving priority to politics. Again, such incidents could be seen as responses to socio-political realities that were never acknowledged in the Islamist ideology, but becoming evidently real when the Islamists came to power. Khomeini tried to bridge the incompatibilities of the Islamist agenda, and his contradictory legacy illustrates the flaws of the Islamist project. Ironically, religious principles had to be suppressed to secure the survival of the 'Islamic' state.

Khomeini's death and his successor

The revolutionary, Islamist logic was put to an end with the death of Khomeini in June 1989, because the highest religious authority and the highest state authority could no longer be vested in the same person. After Khomeini there were no candidates available with satisfactory religious and political skills. Put in Menashri's words;

[T]he most prominent theologians were not politically suited for the succession, and the religio-politicians lacked the proper religious credentials. In fact, the leading theologians of the rank of (...) (grand Ayatollah) did not fully identify with Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine, and none of Khomeini's loyal followers had the prominent religious standing (not to mention the charisma and political authority) of Khomeini himself to qualify for the succession (Menashri 2001:15).

The election of Seyyid Ali Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader was first and foremost a political choice. The first intended heir to Khomeini was Ayatollah Montazeri. He had significant religious credentials, and had been central in the revolutionary movement. However, "Montazeri's subsequent criticisms of the government and its revolutionary politics led to his disqualification in March 1989, an event which provided another example of the supremacy of political considerations over doctrinal ones" (Menashri 2001:16p). The selection of the lower-ranking cleric Khamenei as Supreme Leader was a direct consequence of the constitutional amendment lowering the required level of religious scholarship

and giving greater weight to political experience and skills⁸. These steps were additional evidence of retreat from the original Islamist dogma, and the supremacy of political concerns (Menashri 2001:17).

Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* constituted a radical break with traditional Shia doctrine, and its implementation presented the regime with severe political and theological challenges (Menashri 2001:15). The doctrine did not make sense after Khomeini's death, but it was too late to return to the old system. The revolutionary path followed in Iran, proved to have its limits. Internal struggles and economic problems contributed to undermine the newly acquired legitimacy of the revolutionary cause. Religion soon became an element in state strategies (Roy 1994:25), and its sacred position was undermined. These were logical consequences of the new doctrine.

Khatami's victory and the reform movement

Despite the conservatives' efforts to control elections, the reformist cause increasingly rallied support in elections at the end of the 90's. The victory of Seyyid Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections constituted a severe blow to the Islamist ideology⁹. His campaign evolved around a number of principles related to what Ansari has called 'the myth of political emancipation' in Iran. Central here was the implementation of 'the rule of law', to secure a fairer society, restrict the unpredictability of the state, and realize social justice. Interestingly, his central philosophy was that 'freedom' and 'religion' should work in harmony, and that religion would be defeated if conflict were pursued. Khatami's central philosophies were reflected in the writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, an Iranian religious intellectual, well known for his criticism of the

⁸ Khamenei was president until he was appointed Supreme Leader in 1989. He still occupies the position as Supreme Leader in Iran, and is the head of the conservative establishment in the regime.

⁹ When Khatami was elected president in 1997, he replaced Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who had been president since 1989. Khatami still occupies the position as president, but will be replaced in the presidential elections in June this year.

Iranian regime (Ansari 2000:95p). Soroush has clearly voiced the need of separating religion from politics in order to save religion from being further contaminated. He argues that a government can not borrow its legitimacy and normative framework from religion any longer, but rather should derive its authority from the consent of the governed, and its norms from laws established by institutions representing the people. He further states that a possible motivation for the insistence upon the separation of religion and government could be:

the belief in the fundamental truth of religion coupled with the fear of its deleterious effects on politics, or the belief in the fundamental truth of religion coupled with concern over its contamination and profanation by political concerns (Soroush 2000:57).

Separation of religion and politics is increasingly proposed by both reformist and conservative religious forces – to save religion from contamination. Secularization will banish religion from the realm of politics, and thereby place the right of legislation and government exclusively in the hands of the people. This will further enable attention to civil rights and freedom independent of religion. Soroush argues that a democratic government is subordinate to, and realizes the society. Therefore, the government will take on a religious hue if the society is religious (Soroush 2000:61). By voicing these views on the relationship between religion and politics, Khatami openly embraced secularization, and indirectly opposed the concept of *velayat-e faqih*.

Focus on the freedom and rights of the people were also important elements of Khatami's campaign. Along with his views on the government and the proper role of religion in society, they proved to resonate well with the dominating views and feelings of the Iranian people. Khatami specifically appealed to the young, including students and women (Ansari 2000:97). Writing on gender, Mir-Hosseini states that;

Women's votes were among the decisive factors in the election. No political figure can afford to alienate the new generation of women who have come of age during the Islamic Republic and are demanding equal opportunities under the shari'a on all fronts (Mir-Hosseini 2000:274).

Khatami challenged the existing situation, and generally responded to the needs and growing despair in society. The conservative candidate Nateq Nuri, supported by the Supreme Leader, and expected to win the presidential election, realized much too late that the old Islamist, revolutionary dogmas no longer had appeal. “So unexpected and so dramatic was Khatami’s victory on 23 May 1997 (...) that in retrospect it can be difficult to recapture the sense of national euphoria it engendered” (Ansari 2000:108). The election had an unprecedented 90 percent turnout, and “Khatami won an astonishing 70 percent of the vote, despite his lack of support of the supreme leader, the power establishment, and the state-owned radio and television” (Siavoshi 2002:136).

The reformists were further strengthened by the dramatic electoral triumph in the 2000 parliamentary elections giving them control of the Majles. The reformists won 189 out of 290 seats, and the victory constituted another severe humiliating blow to the conservatives (Ansari 2000:207p). In 2001 Khatami was reelected president. However, the struggle between conservative and reformist forces continues. The conservatives still have considerable powers which they use to constrain reforms, and expel secular, liberal candidates from running in elections. And Khatami has not been able to fulfill his promises of freedom and civil rights. But there are good reason to believe that “[t]he failure of Khatami’s government is not the end of political reform in Iran” (Jahanbakhsh 2003:252). Although highly interesting in its own right, the prospect for reform in Iran is not of primary interest here. I will rather elaborate upon the significance of the above mentioned election results, and their relevance in understanding the trajectories of political Islam in Iran.

In the 1997 election an overwhelming majority of the Islamic Republic voted in favor of a candidate openly opposing the existing Islamist system. This indicates that the people were tired of an Islamic regime that failed to fulfill its promises, and appeared powerless in the meeting with growing social and economic problems. The radical shift in public opinion – from support of Islamist

principles to secularization – also indicates that the Islamists in Iran with their new interpretation of religious dogmas ended up strengthening the social trends they desperately wanted to counter. Khatami realized that separating religion and politics were necessary in order to save religion from further contamination and to allow the government to represent the will of the people.

According to Roy, the election of Khatami not only expressed the call for a more open and democratic society, but also showed the increasing crisis of religious legitimacy in Iran – leading to the supremacy of politics and eventually to a *de facto* secularization (Roy 1999:201p). In addition, it led to a crisis in political legitimacy because Khatami was elected against the avowed wishes of the Supreme Leader, which role was mainly political after the constitutional reform in 1989. The Supreme Leader is thereby deprived of both religious and political legitimacy, and one could certainly wonder what is left of his function (Roy 1999:212).

The strong reform movement in Iran could be seen as another symptom of the failure proposed by Roy. A pervasive lack of capacity and means to secure the daily functioning of the state, coupled with obvious deployment of double standards, eventually turned the people against the regime.

Does the Regime in Iran Function Satisfactorily?

The Iranian people believed in change and a better life when the Islamists came to power. The current discontent among the Iranian population highlights the failure of the Islamist project to fulfill its promises, and handle the tensions between religion and politics – between theory and practice.

In several areas it has become evident that the Iranian state does not function properly. Below I will briefly account for evidence of the dysfunctionality of the regime. Apart from the failed economy, the conservatives' responses to agents of the reform movement, clearly show that the system does not

work. Further, the Islamist experiment did not bring justice and security for individuals. The limits of the regime result in desperate efforts to keep the state's viability intact. Societal needs and human concerns are systematically suppressed to secure the survival of the state.

Economy

The regime's failure to deal satisfactorily with the economic hardships in the Iranian society is one central flaw affecting large numbers of the population. The Islamists boldly claimed that in Islam there was the solution to all social and economic problems. But firmly placed in power, it soon became clear that the Islamists could not deal with the problems – the problems even increased. Disparity in wealth grew at an alarming rate, and unemployment continued to be high, especially among the young. Inflation on many key goods appeared to be completely unstable, dramatically affecting the cost of living for most Iranians. Politics and economics are intimately related, and reforms in the one are necessary to affect changes in the other. Khatami and his supporters realized this (Ansari 2000:168p).

Roy argues that the Islamic economy is an ideological construct that will prove unfeasible in practice, in the same way as the Islamic society. Depending on an impossible individual virtue, it will lead to abuse of power, speculation and corruption (Roy 1994:145). This proved to be right in Iran.

The press

The Khatami administration used daily newspapers as a central aspect of political strategy, aiming at informing, educating and extending political consciousness among the people. The press was radically upgraded both in terms of quality and quantity during the 1990's (Ansari 2000:119). The reform movement was largely responsible for the expansion of the press, and thereby the public debate on

freedom and rights. The reformists gradually came to dominate the political discourse, and challenge the nature and structure of the Islamic Republic. The conservatives, increasingly frustrated by their lack of control and legitimacy, responded by provocations in terms of violence and ambiguous laws enabling them to restrict press freedom (Ansari 2000:157). After the consolidation of the reform movement's victory in 1997, the conservative branch moved to close down some twenty-two newspapers and magazines. So sudden and suspicious was this move that it further compromised the position of the conservatives, and made evident that they had lost control (Ansari 2000:211p).

The influence and dynamics of the press in Iran designates a strong civil society operating separately of the regime. The regime's inability to deal constructively with such trends clearly shows its dysfunctionality.

Student movements

A growing awareness among students on fundamental rights and freedoms, has led to a rise in student movements struggling against the social system as a whole. Along with the press they constituted the ideological vanguard of the reformist movement in Iran at the end of the 90's (Ansari 2000:117). The conservatives eventually aimed at the flagship newspaper of the reformist cause, and students at the University of Tehran decided to hold a demonstration to express opposition to the measures. When the conservatives responded by using violence, this sparked the most serious riots in the first twenty years of the Islamic Republic. Again the conservatives proved not to be on top of the situation. They responded by assaults and threats which once again resulted in a reduction of the conservative establishment's popular authority. Contrary to their intentions, the conservatives thus repeatedly rallied the reformist cause and extended its popularity (Ansari 2000:188pp).

Lack of freedom and fundamental rights

The election of Khatami as president in 1997 was a clear indication of the Iranian people's discontent with the Islamist system, and the regime's failure to fulfill its promises. Khatami focused on greater freedom for individuals, along with human rights and civil society. His sweeping victory clearly confirmed that the Iranian people were not satisfied with what the Islamists had achieved. The people want reform and a new system – not Islamism. The majority of the people supported the Islamic Republic in 1979. After two decades of Islamist rule the popular support is gone. The same powerful symbols in Shia Islam that once inspired the Iranian people to overthrow the Shah and support Khomeini, are currently making the Iranian people oppose the Islamic government and its Islamist rulers. Central here are the ideas of social justice and opposition to tyranny firmly placed in the Iranian identity, resulting from a long history of oppression by Sunni rulers, and more recently the Shah. It has gradually become evident that the Islamists brought the Iranian people another tyrannical regime, resorting to suppression and violence to maintain power. Further, the Iranian people are deeply religious, and they want to preserve religion and religious values in the society. Increasingly, people realize that the regime has misused religion to consolidate power, and that the values currently propagated by the rulers are not consistent with the Islam they adhere to.

The failure of the Islamic Republic to provide social justice and secure civil rights represents serious flaws. The close association between God and state, and the unconditional drive to preserve the 'Islamic state', place the interests of the state before the interests of individuals. Religious minorities and women have especially been left unsecured (Khazemi 1996:133).

Through the process of institutionalization of ideology, religion came to be associated with these shortcomings. "In Iran (...) there is now a move away from Islamic government. Islamic ideology and institutions, in becoming part of the state and politics, lost their sanctity and charisma" (Zubaida 2000:66). Thus,

secularization is increasingly proposed as a solution to save both religion and society.

The Islamist Paradox

The Islamists rejected a modernization that was already taking place, and at the same time they borrowed from that modernity. In the name of an Islamist ideology they denied the modern Muslim civilization, and sought to replace it by an artificial ideological construct. But their means eventually undermined their goals. “Modernity creeps into Muslim countries regardless of Islam, and the Islamists themselves play a part in this secularization of religion” (Roy 1994:22).

The Islamists in Iran ended up destroying a solid Shia tradition of religious leadership, and they reduced the legitimacy of the religion and the religious institutions they wanted to protect. When the primary aim of political power was reached, the effort of trying to unite religious and political spheres set certain religio-political dynamics in motion, leading to secularization, de-clericalization of political institutions and delegitimation of religion. Along with the dysfunctionality of the ensuing regime, these developments amount to the Islamist paradox central to Roy’s thesis on ‘the failure of political Islam’.

Secularization

Roy argues that; “any political action amounts to the automatic creation of a secular space (...). Herein lies the limit of the politicization of religion, of any religion” (Roy 1994:23). As a secular political space is an element of modernity, Islamist political action, necessarily had to lead to modernization and secularization.

We have seen that general legislation and the daily functioning of the state led to the establishment of such a secular political space. In 1979 the Constitution

set the place of *sharia*, and in the following years, political needs have repeatedly been given priority at the expense of religious concerns. This was evident in questions of taxation, Family Law, the amendment of the Constitution, and in the appointment of Khomeini's successor. Put in Roy's words, after the Islamist Revolution;

Iran has been able to find a political space, beyond Islamist and revolutionary rhetoric, that does not depend on the impossible virtue of its members, but rather functions on the basis of institutions that survive in the absence of the divine word. A space, in short, that is secular (Roy 1994:177).

The dynamics central to Roy's thesis concern the associations between religion and politics, and they mainly occur at the state level. Separation of religion and state follows from the systematic suppression of Islamic principles to benefit politics. In a post-Islamist society, the conditions are thus set for profound secularization. In addition, secularization is increasingly encouraged by religious milieus in Iran:

De facto secularization is brought about not only by the hegemony of politics but also by the endeavours of conservative religious milieus to 'save' religion from encroachments by political authority, even if such authority is Islamic (Roy 2004:91).

A growing number of traditional clerics want to separate religion and politics – to save Islam.

The secular, political space does structure the religious space in Iran, but it should be noted that what we are witnessing is not secularism – it is a form of secularization. Soroush has tried to express this in terms of 'religious civil society' (Roy 2004:91). The people in Iran are religious, and they do not endorse secularism as a new ideology, they rather support the separation of religion and state to save religion and secure a better society. This follows from the realization that both institutions will be strengthened if they are made autonomous. The crisis of political Islam does not necessarily lead to a weakening of faith among the masses, but rather to the privatization of belief (Roy 1999:215p).

Islamism in power increased the distance between each individual believer and God. Roy argues that; "The ebbing of political Islam is bringing about a

detachment from religion. The fact that the revolution took place means that the flow can run only in the direction of secularization” (Roy 1994:181).

Fundamentally, this is because: “Secularization is the unexpected but logical destiny of any mediator of a religious fundamentalism that happens to be taken seriously by a whole nation and society” (Roy 2004:41). It is the logical consequence of politicization of religion, because “politicisation entails desacralisation” (Roy 2004:89).

Delegitimation of religion

“The overemphasis on state power by Islamists has resulted in the devaluation of religion. Empowerment leads to corruption, compromise and the loss of utopia” (Roy 2004:90). In the end, religious authority is lost.

“The discrepancy between the political and the clerical order has logically been coupled with a slow *de facto* declericalisation of political institutions” (Roy 2004:88). Political skills were given precedence, and middle-ranking clerics are currently running the state in the name of Islam, whereas the authority of the traditional religious leaders is undermined. The interference of religious, spiritual leaders in practical politics with all its imperfectness eventually reduced the legitimacy of those leaders, and the institutionalization of the religious state diluted the traditional hierarchical system of Shia ulama.

Momen states that the Revolution headed by Khomeini was the last step in the development of the doctrine of *Na'ib al-Amm* (general representative) of the Hidden Imam, and that this change has altered Shia doctrine in an irreversible way. He also notes the institutional development accompanying this profound transformation. Shia Islam used to be a very individualized religion, with the lack of institutionalization as a central aspect. This was changed by the establishment of the Islamist Republic and the new Constitution, which put an end to the traditional religious hierarchy based on charisma and following (Momen

1985:298p). The previous situation without a politically appointed leader with absolute authority to interpret religious dogmas and setting rules of conduct, and the fact that each individual Muslim could choose which religious leader to emulate, gave a pluralistic and democratic character to the organization of religion. This arrangement was profoundly altered by the institutionalization of *velayat-e faqih* (Siavoshi 2002:130p).

The traditional religious leaders lost their previous influence and authority, and the religion was deprived of its sacred position and transcendent role through its close association with profane concerns and political action. Roy highlights the irony of the Islamist experiment in Iran. He points to how Khomeini undermined the Shia clerical system developed over three centuries when he led the Islamists to power, and then placed politics over religion. “[He] eliminated the transcendent, autonomous space from which the clergy spoke: the clergy was brought down to the level of state, yet without really controlling it, since the political hierarchy is not the religious hierarchy” (Roy 1994:180).

The unavoidable consequence of the inconsistencies in the Islamist agenda was accordingly a delegitimation of religious leaders, and a weakening of the role of religion in society. An increasing number of Iranians seem to be endorsing the view that “the clerics’ political involvement is ‘compromising their historic spiritual role’ and that it would be better for both Iran and Islam if the clergy returned to the mosques and left the task of government to professional politicians” (Menashri 2001:34).

A dysfunctional state

From the position of the Iranian people, the new regime has definitively failed to fulfill their promises and aims. Social and economic conditions have deteriorated, and the majority of the people do not enjoy fundamental freedom and rights. These flaws and failures are looked upon as a fundamental betrayal throughout the

population. The regime depends on violence and suppression to stay in power, because the Islamist project is not capable of generating institutions that can survive in a modern society, demanding fulfillment of juridical equality and other democratic principles.

The regime seeks to limit and restrict the full operation of civil society, and opponents of the Islamic Republic's theocratic vision are systematically excluded from political participation (Khazemi 1996:150). Still, the Iranian society is undergoing rapid secularization and modernization compared to other Middle Eastern countries where the question of the proper relationship between religion and politics has not yet been put on the public agenda to the same extent. There is also evidence of a significant move towards democracy in the country. Future developments in Iran are difficult to predict, but they are likely to be related to the Islamist experience in the country.

Failure of Political Islam in Iran

As previously stated, the Islamic Republic was characterized by tensions between religion and politics from its very beginning. These tensions and the dynamics unfolding as a consequence of them, proved decisive in the fate of the Islamist project.

I have argued that the Islamists coming to power in Iran in 1979 failed to build an Islamic state, that an autonomous secular political space appeared, and that politics repeatedly prevailed over religious concerns in the Islamic Republic. This was evident in the 1979 Constitution, the constitutional reform in 1989, general legislation, as well as in the appointment of Khamenei as successor to Khomeini. The unanticipated victory of Khatami in 1997, along with the continuous demand from the Iranian people of reform, reveals a growing frustration with the existing situation. The discontent among the Iranian

population results from a stagnated economy, and a fundamental lack of freedom and rights for the vast majority of the citizens. Extensive suppression and violence is not sufficient for the regime to control public opinion. The Iranian people were originally the prime supporters of the new Islamic Republic. Their present attitude signifies the extent of the Islamist failure.

The analytical framework, centered on the Islamist paradox, provide useful references for understanding these developments. Roy's theoretical arguments on the nature of ideological movements and religio-political dynamics thus seem to be strengthened by the findings. Inherent in the Islamist project are the seeds of its own destruction. Once the aim of political power was achieved, the Islamist's actions systematically undermined their ambitions, because their aspirations towards political power were not compatible with their objectives.

The Islamists in power in Iran not only failed to build an Islamic state and integrate religion and politics, they also instigated a crisis in Shia legitimacy and undermined the role of religion in society as they prepared the ground for secularization. The relationship between religion and politics in post-revolutionary Iran has been profoundly altered by the Islamist experiment in the country. The current situation reflects Roy's description of 'post-Islamism'. It results from politization of religion, and the political reaffirmations are repeatedly done in the name of religion itself.

Roy attributes the failure to the inconsistencies in the Islamist ideology. One basic flaw is related to its dependence on individual virtue, tautologically defined as a result of the Islamic society it is intended to contribute to create. Further, the aspiration towards political power and unification of religion and politics, coupled with the central goals of countering secularization and strengthening the position of religion in society are loaded with incoherent and conflicting objectives.

As an ideological movement, Islamism showed its potential as a progressive force gaining momentum in society in a certain socio-cultural context.

In Iran the Islamists were given the chance of turning ideology into practice, but confronted with socio-political realities, they did not pass the test of power. According to Roy's theoretical argument, the Islamist experiment deprived religion and religious leaders of their legitimacy, and worked as a vehicle for secularization of society in post-revolutionary Iran. The Islamists have not just failed to fulfill their goals – they have even ended up escalating the processes and ideas they wanted to fight.

6. The Findings – Evaluated

This study has been concerned with the central claims of Roy's thesis on 'the failure of political Islam'. With a theoretical and empirical approach, my purpose has been to analyze religio-political developments in post-revolutionary Iran, and by this means to explore the relevance of Roy's thesis.

In the following I will evaluate the findings, and comment on the theory and method used. The limits and centrality of the findings will be highlighted with reference to the unique and central nature of Iran in the Middle Eastern context. I will consider the fruitfulness of Roy's thesis in explaining the developments in Iran, and based on these considerations, comment upon the general viability of Roy's thesis. I will also return to the theoretical debate on the trajectories of Islamism, to underline the productivity of Roy's approach and the relevance of conceptual frameworks in this field. Finally, I will comment upon the general importance of the case of Iran.

Interpretation of the Findings

Generally there is broad agreement on the view that the Islamic Revolution in Iran did not fulfill its promises, and even if successful at its inception, it did not succeed in the long run. The findings presented above seem to establish an unambiguous picture of a failed Islamist experiment in Iran. It is always difficult to isolate factors influencing such complex dynamics. Nevertheless, even if direct causes are difficult to establish, I find it reasonable to assume that current trends in the Iranian society are directly related to the Islamist experiment in the country. The Iranian expression of political Islam did alter the relationship between religion and politics. The associations considered above suggest that the Islamists worked

as a catalyst speeding up and intensifying the likelihood of their own failure, because they were obsessed with the impossible task of institutionalizing religious control over politics. Consequently, based on the factors and characteristics laid out by Roy, I find it rational to claim that political Islam failed in Iran.

Were the failure and the developments caused by it, inevitable consequences of the Islamist experiment? Again, it is difficult to answer unconditionally. However, from a theoretical point of view, with focus on religio-political dynamics, the answer is ‘yes’. The nature of such dynamics turns it into a logical necessity that religion and religious arrangements will be desacralized – and thereby delegitimated – in becoming part of every-day politics with its profane and fallible characteristics. It is also evident that in a power position it is impossible even for a religious movement to avoid the creation of a secular political space. And when confronted with social, political and economic realities, politics will have to be given precedence over religion if power shall be maintained. Thus, a *de facto* secularization of society, and delegitimation of religion will ensue. The legitimacy of the rulers will be undermined, and fundamental freedoms and rights for the inhabitants of the society are likely to be suppressed to secure the survival of the state.

If a religious movement with a political agenda gains power and seeks to implement its ideology and vision, the likelihood and strength of the above mentioned dynamics significantly increases. Accordingly, the failure of political Islam in Iran followed from the Islamist paradox: Once the Islamists came to power they instigated certain processes necessarily undermining their own agenda and the legitimacy of their project. The theoretical framework provided by Roy’s thesis on the ‘failure of political Islam’ is consequently fruitful in explaining the developments, and my findings support Roy’s central theoretical claims.

I have used historical material to document the failure and highlight the dynamics involved. Obviously, the findings presented are influenced by the method and theory used. Nuances in the historical developments have been

suppressed to draw attention to the relevant dynamics under question. Other historical events could have been chosen, and the developments could have been interpreted in different ways. However, there is relatively broad agreement on the nature of the developments under question. Disagreement is largely related to how to conceive of and express the relevant characteristics. As Roy's thesis has been the crucial analytical tool and the focus of my evaluation, other relevant understandings and conceptions of the developments have not been given weight.

The case of Iran

Iran is a special case of Islamism in many respects. The historical relationship between religion and politics in Shia Islam is significantly different from that of Sunni Islam. Moreover, the historical-national context of Iran enabled the Shia Islamist movement, led by Khomeini, to gain an unprecedented support in the majority of the population. The successful revolution and its institutionalization is also unique to Iran, and the unambiguous situation of Islamists in power makes Iran very suitable for testing the theoretical claim that Islamism does not pass the test of power.

Iran is such a good example of Islamism in practice that it is difficult to use properly; the present developments were largely unforeseeable twenty-five years ago, but now they are too explicit to properly compare Iran to other Middle Eastern countries. The fact that Islamism in power in Iran led to a deterioration and failure of the Islamist agenda can hardly be taken to prove that in other societies the same mechanisms were at work. However, Roy's theoretical arguments are generally phrased, and my findings are consequently both concerned with the unique features of the Iranian example and general religio-political dynamics. Thus, even if my findings are limited to the case of Iran, they suggest relevance for Roy's thesis on a larger scale.

The productivity of Roy's thesis

The pervasive religio-political changes in Iran bring to light the country's centrality for understanding the trajectories of Islamism. Roy himself draws heavily on the experiences from Iran in building his theoretical framework. He states that; "[w]hat happened in Iran is a good illustration of the conflicting relations between religion and politics in an Islamist system" (Roy 2004:84). He repeatedly stresses that Iran is a specific case, but following from the comparative nature of his study, he uses experiences from Iran to strengthen his claims for the entire movement (Roy 2004:88). Caution should be applied in generalizing from the case of Iran to countries where the essential premise of Islamism in power was never fulfilled. Roy, in building his general framework naturally makes limited differentiation between various fractions of the movement; differences in cultural, historical and regional contexts are suppressed for comparative purposes.

Again judgments on generalizations versus particularities are central. Comparative studies with potential for generalizations are clearly of interest in this field; however, particularities must not be ignored altogether. It might be fruitful to be more receptive to differences in historical and cultural contexts. The special case of Shia Islamism in Iran is central in understanding the trajectories of Islamism because the religio-political dynamics involved in the movement's failure are very explicit in the Islamic Republic. Still, the case is unique, and it should be distinguished on key features from developments in Sunni Islamist fractions of the movement. Roy's project may take on even greater relevance if more attention to particularities is included.

Another weakness of Roy's thesis is related to limited conceptual clarification. Although he briefly defines the concepts relevant to his study, he does not put much effort into accounting for his conceptual framework relative to other conceptions of the phenomenon. And as previously stated, the new concepts he invents are problematic as analytical categories because they are not properly specified. Yet, for the most part his conceptual framework harmonizes with

established practice in the field, and I largely believe he applies it in a consistent and productive way.

Roy addresses an important social phenomenon, with relevance far beyond the Middle East. Fundamentally, his thesis is fruitful because it generates new insight about the topic. The theories are developed from reliable and specific arguments, and they generate a comprehensive framework. The thesis is consistent with existing knowledge on the subject, and contributes in a satisfactory way to explain the relevant developments. I believe that my analysis has not been severely affected by Roy's lack of sensitivity to individual cases and attention to concepts; I have been concerned with his key theoretical arguments, and I have been able to specify aspects and relations relevant for analyzing developments in Iran. Roy's thesis did prove highly fruitful in explaining the relevant dynamics, and the shortcomings mentioned above refer more broadly to the productivity of Roy's project from a general perspective.

Roy's position is strengthened by the changes in his thesis from 1994 to 2004. From indicating that the Islamist movement had failed and that its remnants would largely disappear from the public scene, he still sticks to his notion of failure but modifies it by acknowledging that parts of the original movement may continue to influence societies in the Middle East. His contributions in the field of political Islam are of great value. He has repeatedly shown that he is willing and able to renew and elaborate upon his arguments and views when the realities change. He will probably do that again.

The Trajectories of Political Islam

The debate on Islamism is multifaceted, and so is the phenomenon. I have highlighted aspects of this debate, to argue that central critique directed at Roy's thesis are more concerned with the nature of his project, than with his findings.

The debate has also been considered to show that different conceptions of the phenomenon are closely associated with differences in approach, focus and conceptual frameworks. Fundamentally, I have highlighted the relevance and productivity of Roy's approach, but argued that different approaches may be fruitful for different purposes.

Different conceptions of the phenomenon

Roy and Burgat focus on different aspects of the Islamist impact on societies in the Middle East. My findings are consistent with Roy's thesis; however this does not mean that Burgat is wrong. Even if political Islam has failed to build an Islamic state, and even encouraged secularization, political Islam is not yet irrelevant as a political factor. Islamism in its present form can, according to Burgat, contribute to modernize and democratize societies in the Middle East. Then what are the criteria for being a democratic actor? Can Islamism – if taken seriously – under any conditions be said to be an ideology promoting the common good? Such a view necessarily rests on a re-conceptualization of the phenomenon.

It may be that Islamism, in its present form, can have positive and even democratic effects on politics in the Middle East in general and Iran in particular. The elections in Iran in 1997 and 2000 proved that the Islamists in power had lost support, but they also made evident that the Islamic Republic with its Islamist government allowed for a change of president through public elections. According to Burgat, "[t]he fundamental import of the Iranian elections was in the fact they allowed the first real instance of political change via the ballot box in Middle Eastern history" (Burgat 2003:171). I agree that these Iranian elections proved a democratic potential, even if Iran still has a long way to go. I also agree that the Islamists can be held indirectly responsible for these democratic tendencies. However, is it reasonable to assume that this was the Islamist's intention? Or is it

more likely that the developments caused by Islamist action have occurred against the actors' will?

It could be imagined that Islamism might contribute to democratization today in two different ways. Firstly, the redefined groups and parties discussed by Burgat, may naturally give up on Islamist values and adhere to democratic aspirations. Secondly, the adversarial experiences from Islamism in power may push public opinion in a democratic direction. This might have been what happened in Iran. Neither of these alternatives, however positive they may seem, amounts to a label of Islamist success. 'Democratic Islamists' could hardly be called Islamists, and if Islamism has acted as a constructive force to convince people that democratization may be the best way to preserve religion as well as the rights of individuals, this could be seen as further evidence of a failed project.

In line with Roy's argument I believe that the reformist and democratic tendencies in Iran amount to a label of 'Islamist failure' rather than 'success'. And even if it is possible to prove that future varieties of political Islam can contribute to democratic developments, this hardly undermines the argument that the original ideology of the Islamist movement has failed. Burgat's observations consequently do not challenge or contradict Roy's notion of 'failure'. It may even seem as if Burgat's criticism is based on a superficial rejection of the central tenets of Roy's thesis.

Still, I agree with Burgat that today's proponents of political Islam, with their redefined ideology and aims, along with central roles in their respective societies, deserve closer attention in the future. But I believe that it might be beneficial to see them in light of the religio-political dynamics instigated by the original Islamist movement. I thus support Roy's focus on the failed aspects of the movement, because this generates a relevant context in which to view the current expressions of political Islam.

The relevance of conceptual frameworks

I have emphasized the importance of being conscious and explicit in choosing and applying concepts in this field. Differences in conclusions reached may very well be related to what concepts are chosen and how those concepts are applied. This may easily divert attention from central issues, and deter constructive knowledge from being shared. The divergence between Roy and Burgat could largely be attributed to such lack of conceptual clarification. Whereas Roy mainly reserves the 'Islamist label' to groups with an explicit aim of establishing an Islamic state through political action, Burgat argues that even if they play new roles, such elements are a continuation of the original movement. In the theory part I related this divergence more specifically to the relations between Islamism and modernization. There is general agreement on the fact that today's Islamists relate to modernity in a different way. Thus, whether the notion of 'failure' is fruitful to describe the situation, and whether the actors involved deserve the Islamist label is a question of concepts rather than substance.

Utvik holds that today's Islamist movements increasingly underline the need for pluralism, democracy and human rights, but he acknowledges that whether this is called 'post-Islamism' or 'Islamism as it has developed today', is a matter of preferences rather than substance (Utvik 2003:15). To Roy, this radical transformation in attitude indicates the transition to post-Islamism, and underlines the failure of the movement.

When adhering to the notion of 'failure', while acknowledging that political Islam is not yet irrelevant as a political factor, some distinction between 'Islamism' and 'political Islam' might be useful for discussing current trends. Roy himself is not explicit on the nuances of these central concepts, and no general agreement exists on how to define and apply them. As analytical categories denoting complex political and social processes, they will probably have to be adjusted to be productive in different contexts.

Islamist movements have evolved in different circumstances and on different stages. Some fractions have undergone radicalizations while others have become more democratic. For the most moderate fractions the original Islamist ideology is largely suppressed, or only remains as a distant vision. They are all examples of political Islam. Islamism more precisely implies antagonism towards modernization coupled with the vision of establishing an Islamic state. To denote the views presented by theoreticians like Soroush, wanting to separate religion and state and create a democracy based on Islamic values, political Islam may be a more fruitful term.

To preserve the analytical value of these concepts it is necessary to avoid watering them down, but at the same time to allow for different definitions. As the concepts are likely to be repeatedly adjusted and applied for different purposes in the future, productivity will be increased if contributors to the debate are conscious and explicit on how the concepts are applied.

The General Importance of the Case of Iran

Iran constitutes an outstanding example of the inherent incompatibilities in the Islamist project, and the developments presently unfolding in the country are also exceptional in the Middle Eastern context.

Several scholars in the field have noted the importance of the developments in Iran: “Current debates on democracy in Iran are critical not only to Iran but also to developments across the Muslim world” (Gheissari & Nasr 2004:94). Roy has also stated that; “more than ever, what is at stake in contemporary Iran is of prime importance for the relations between Islam and politics in general” (Roy 1999:216). These are interesting and significant observations, underlining the importance of understanding and appreciating the developments in Iran.

The Iranian society has experienced radical political changes and diverse political arrangements during the past decades. It aimed at becoming a religious state twenty-five years ago, and is currently showing democratic tendencies. Observers, like Ansari, argue that the country will find a suitable arrangement that secures the will, freedom and rights of the Iranian people, and thereby show that democracy is compatible with Islam (Ansari 2000:219). This way Iran could inspire and influence other countries in the region struggling to find the right arrangements between religion and politics. Consequently, the developments presently unfolding in Iran deserve close attention in their own right, but also as central developments of general interest in the Middle East. Zubaida notes that:

It is also a surprisingly more open and diverse political field than that of most other countries in the region. These differences, if anything, bring Iran closer than the Middle East countries to the Western model of a modern national political arena (Zubaida 1988:6).

The Iranian case is a unique case of general importance. The vigorous press in the country, the reform movement, and the public democracy debate are developments closely monitored and followed with great interest all over the Middle East, and far beyond. Experience from developments in the country ought to be taken into account in trying to understand the relationship between religion and politics in the region. However, the specific features of the case of Iran must not be ignored. In the debate on religion and politics in the Middle East, Iran is too special to be overused, and too central to be ignored.

7. Concluding remarks

The Islamists enjoyed broad support when they reached power in Iran in 1979, but in the aftermath of the revolution they were not able to fulfill their promises and aims. A new dominant understanding of the proper relationship between religion and state is evolving among the Iranian people – they want reform to create a better society and protect religion. Clearly, the Islamists did not pass the test of power.

I have tested the fruitfulness of Roy's thesis on 'the failure of political Islam' in explaining religio-political developments in post-revolutionary Iran. Based on Roy's theoretical arguments on the inherent inconsistencies in the Islamist project, I developed an analytical framework centered on the Islamist paradox, and subsequently applied it to the case of Iran. Based on the findings, I have considered the productivity of Roy's thesis, and aspects of the theoretical debate on the trajectories of political Islam.

The historical method and material used for analyzing religio-political developments have been fruitful for the purpose. I believe that the relatively unambiguous nature of the historical events and institutional arrangements considered has enabled me to generate a coherent and reliable picture of the failure of political Islam in Iran. Further, I find that Roy's theoretical framework, despite its general and comparative nature, proved appropriate for analyzing the relevant developments.

I have highlighted that Iran is not an Islamic state, that politics prevail over religion in the Islamic Republic, and that the effort to fulfill the Islamist agenda led to the establishment of a dysfunctional regime. The failure of political Islam in Iran was the inevitable result of Islamism in power, because the Islamists' actions necessarily instigated the processes undermining the legitimacy of their project.

Based on the analytical findings, I have argued that Roy's theoretical framework provides useful references for understanding the relevant dynamics and their consequences, and that the Islamist paradox is illustrated by the fate of the Islamic Republic. The Islamist experiment in Iran contributed to a secularization of society, and a delegitimation of religion. Moreover, the Islamist ideology, with its inherent inconsistencies, did not provide a blueprint for a functional Islamic state. Accordingly, the central tenets of Roy's thesis are supported by the findings.

It has been stressed that these findings do not verify the general nature of Roy's thesis, even if it is plausible that similar dynamics have been at work in other countries. I have considered the general theoretical debate on the trajectories of Islamism, and generally argued that Roy's approach is fruitful for understanding the phenomenon. Further, I have suggested that whether or not the notion of 'failure' is suitable to describe the developments, basically is one of terminology, and underlined the relevance of conceptual frameworks in this field. Finally, I have argued that the experiences from the case of Iran are unique – and central – in the Middle Eastern context.

Iran is still trying to find the right middle way between the Islamist ideology and political realities – between religion and state. The latest developments have shown a setback for the reform movement, and the conservatives are likely to win the presidential election in June. However, the opposition is strong, and the civil society flourishes. It is reasonable to assume that the setback is temporary; the Iranian people will not tolerate further repression and tyranny. According to Ansari, the processes have gone too far to be stopped altogether: "[A]n army may be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come" (Ansari 2003:66). And to some extent, the reformists have already won the political battle, because they have managed to transform the public debate in Iran. People talk freely about their rights, and even if Islam continues to be important to the vast majority of Iranians, its overt political role will continue to decline (Ansari 2000:215pp).

Future developments in the country are difficult to predict, but there are prospects for democratization in Iran. Significant in this respect, is the fact that the relevant developments are currently originating from within the country; the move towards democratization could not be attributed to Western influence. This is likely to strengthen the trends, because large parts of the Iranian population continue to be suspicious of the West, and especially the US. Ansari's unambiguous recommendation is that: "Washington should resist the temptation to indulge in direct intervention" (Ansari 2003:65). Unconstructive responses to the country might undermine important developments presently unfolding. And as previously suggested; if Iran finds a way to preserve the rights of individuals along with its Islamic heritage, this could be relevant for the general prospect of future democratization in the Middle East.

The Islamist movement failed to fulfill its political vision, but political Islam continues to be relevant as a political force in the Middle East. The debate on the trajectories of Islamism concerns an important social phenomenon of our times, and knowledge on the subject is significant for the future of international relations. Roy's contributions to the debate are of great value. The insight provided by his thesis comprises an important background against which to view future developments in the region. The dynamic relationship between religion and politics, and the Islamist heritage are likely to shape political developments in Iran and the Middle East for years to come.

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