

## Article

# Toward a Generalizable Understanding of Rightist Movements: Utilizing the Revolutionary Right's Value Wars in Iran (1995–2009) as a Case Study

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**Abstract:** Bringing rightist movement studies into the Iranian context, this study advances a generalizable understanding of the ideological, moral, and cultural activism of Islamist movements and their rightist counterparts. While numerous studies have discussed the economic explanation of rightist movements, I integrate Islamist movements in the Muslim world and rightist movements in the West to develop a generalizable cultural and moral explanation of rightist movements. Value and ideological conflicts, as well as moral outrage, drive this integrated understanding of rightist movements. The rise of innovative and contentious forms of millennialism in Iran—especially the increasing salience of the Jamkaran mosque, the rise of new media outlets and millennial discourses, and pertinent policies—provide evidence for proposing this generalizable understanding. I argue that the rise of performative contentions surrounding millennialism, known as *Mahdaviat*, within the pro-regime revolutionary rightist movement in Iran was Islamists' ideological response to liberal threat perceptions. These threat perceptions were activated before the liberal Reform era (1997–2005). After the ascent of Ahmadinejad to power in 2005, ideological millennialism became the dominant discursive field in Iran's state politics. Drawing on narratives of prominent Islamist figures and media personalities in Iran and events surrounding *Mahdaviat*, this paper advances a generalizable argument of the moral and cultural explanation of rightist movements.

**Keywords:** Iran; Islamist movements; rightist movements; revolutionary right; state-organized movements; ideology; cultural and value conflicts; millennialism; liberal threats



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## 1. Introduction

Linking Islamist movement studies to rightist movement scholarship, this paper is concerned with liberal threat perceptions and how these perceptions shape the discursive repertoire and innovative contentions of the pro-regime Islamist rightist movement in Iran from 1995 to 2009. Broadly, I ask the following: How do liberal threats shape rightist movements' discursive fields as well as rightist mobilizations? How do states use cultural and ideological forces to enhance their repertoires of contention (Tarrow 2012; Tilly 1986, 2006)? With a focus on the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IR), I also ask the following: How did the liberally recognized Reform era (1997–2005) inspire a new cultural and moral discourse and related actions, exemplified via a millennial language, policies, and contentions? And why did this millennial discourse and these contentions become mainstream after the institutionalization of the pro-regime Islamist movement in Iran (known as principlism—*osulgaraaee*) with the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential election of 2005? To provide insights in response to these questions, I advance an integrated understanding of rightist movements, which is built upon ideological, moral, and value clashes as well as threat perceptions. I argue that value wars, inspired by threat perceptions, are the driving forces for rightist movements in the West and in the Muslim world. What puts Islamist and Western rightist movements into the same analytical category are their cultural crusades; their outrage with perceived social, moral, and cultural

decay; and the way these movements seek to remedy this cultural and moral decline. As Miller-Idriss (2020, p. 16) argues, Islamist extremism is similar to global far-right movements in creating a “sense of urgency”, triggering perceptions of “existential threats”, and working toward “an apocalyptic end times” using, at times, violent means. The Iranian case helps integrate Islamist movements into the scholarship of rightist and far-right movements in the West. This article has a two-fold theoretical goal: First, I foreground the role of millennialism as an ideological force in shaping the discursive field and enhancing the contentious repertoire of the Islamist rightist movement in Iran. Second, I link Western rightist movements to their Islamist counterparts to advance a generalizable understanding of rightist movements. The rise of new rightist, populist movements has compelled social scientists to pay greater attention to the ideological and cultural factors driving rightist mobilizations, particularly in the West (e.g., Mudde 2018; Pertwee 2020). Taking cues from Mann (1986, 2012) and Mudde (2018), I highlight the role of ideology in shaping rightist mobilizations.

The rise of millennial discourse and various contentions and policies surrounding millennialism—known in Iran as *Mahdaviat*—has been one of the most salient manifestations of the moral and cultural crusade against liberal-leaning policies and elites in Iran from the mid-1990s. By millennialism or *Mahdaviat*, I mean the cultural and moral tendencies within the pro-regime Islamist movement that were especially concerned with the reappearance of Imam Mahdi [the 12th Shia Imam]. The Islamist movement within the IR utilized millennialism not only as a solution to perceived cultural, social, and moral ills but also as a mobilizing force in the face of rising liberal threats from the mid-1990s onward, when a monthly magazine by the name of *Mo’ud* (the Promised, indicating the Hidden Imam) came into being in September 1995. *Moud* was one of three periodicals shaping the “cultural front of the Islamic Revolution”, aimed at protesting growing socio-economic liberalization within the IR (Panjari, No. 41, 8 May 2010, p. 40). This ideological crusade helps me advance a generalizable understanding of moral and cultural activism within rightist movements globally. As Mudde (2018) proposes, social scientists must devote more serious attention to the role of ideology in studying rightist movements. I argue that the rise of millennial discourse and contentions in Iran was as much of an outcome of the institutionalized Islamist movement in 2005 as a reaction to emerging perceived liberal threats from the mid-1990s forward.

The political dynamics in Iran gave rise to a revolutionary rightist movement from the mid-1990s onward (Teimouri 2022). The Islamist rightist movement took radical turns in the mid-1990s as a response to social and economic liberalization policies (e.g., Ghoochani [1999] 2000; Ostovar 2016). Liberal intellectuals and newspapers, liberal socio-cultural policies, and liberal movements, such as the student movement led by Reinforcing the Unity (*Tahkeem-e Vahdat*), were the main subjects of Islamists’ attacks before and after the victory of the reformists in the presidential election of 1997 (Ostovar 2016). I consider value conflicts, moral outrage, and cultural insecurities the driving forces of the revolutionary Islamist movement in Iran, which is generalizable to other rightist and Islamist movements across the world. I should highlight that I acknowledge differences between the Islamist rightist movement in Iran and Islamist movements in the broader Muslim world, especially in comparison to their rightist counterparts in the West. For example, one notable feature of rightist contentions in Iran is their state-oriented nature. State-led rightist mobilizations and contentions have been on the rise in several non-Muslim contexts, including Russia, India, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and the United States under the Trump government. As I will discuss later, my theory of rightist contentions rests on a notion of a family resemblance between these movements, which I consider a generalizable theory.

My analytical approach deviates from the popular economic argument of rightist movements. I take insights from scholarship on Iran’s pro-regime rightist movement (e.g., Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2016) that highlights the role of ideology in mobilizing pro-regime actors, groups, and policies in post-revolutionary Iran. I demonstrate that the millennial moral and cultural discourse and related contentions, which have been growing since

the mid-1990s, were deployed in response to threat perceptions triggered by growing liberal forces and policies. These rising millennial contentions were part of a broader moral campaign which Islamist rightists affiliated with the IR unleashed against liberal forces from 1995 onward. With the rise to power of Ahmadinejad in 2005, however, this moral and cultural crusade made its way into the executive branch of the political polity after sixteen years (1989–2005) of liberal-leaning policies and political practices in the country. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi's concerns with anti-revolutionary policies after the end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) until the rise of Ahmadinejad in 2005 sum up Islamists' perceptions of moral and cultural decay. The cultural invasion from the West, according to Mesbah-Yazdi, was deepened during the liberal Khatami and Rafsanjani periods (1989–2005). Mesbah-Yazdi, an extreme Islamist preacher, argued that “ever since Khomeini passed away [in 1989], Islamic values and ideas were under siege and constantly diluted” (Rahnema 2011, pp. 91–92). In these sixteen years, a revolutionary Islamist media figure, Fatemeh Rajabi, noted, “the sacred values and principles of the [1979] revolution were undermined. Islamic values, however, were replaced by *gharbzadegi* [negatively impacted by Western values] and secularism. It was obvious that, during those sixteen years, *Mahdaviat* was the most marginalized concept compared to other forces”.<sup>1</sup> I treat *Mahdavi* discourse and contentions as one of the main ideological pillars of the “cultural resistance front” that Islamists shaped against liberal forces from the mid-1990s forward.

This article is organized in four parts. First, I discuss theoretical issues, especially a family resemblance between rightist movements in the West and their counterparts in the Muslim world. This is the main theoretical payoff of this paper. Second, I contextualize my case study. That is, I look at the peaks and valleys of the revolutionary Islamist movement in Iran, its shifting political practices, and its main cultural and moral concerns since the mid-1990s until the rise of Ahmadinejad in 2005. I also clarify the meaning of millennialism in the context of Iran. Following the Data and Methods section in the third part, I dive into the shifting discursive field of the Islamist rightist movement and its innovative contentions to develop a generalizable understanding of rightist movements' cultural and moral activism. Finally, I conclude this paper with the implications of my research.

## 2. Theoretical Issues

Deploying Western-oriented rightist movement studies and concepts in an Islamic context might look problematic. To remedy this theoretical issue, I highlight a “family resemblance” between Western rightist movements and their Islamist counterparts. I seek to develop a generalizable understanding of rightist movements in the West and their Islamist counterparts, drawing on their ideological, value, and moral concerns.

Further, I highlight two conceptual complications regarding analyzing right-wing groups in Iran with West-centric concepts. Blee and Creasap (2010) suggest rightism as a “generic category” for Western conservative and right-wing movements. Miller-Idriss (2020) foregrounds “far-right” to analyze extreme variants of global rightist movements, including violent, racially motivated, and misogynist movements, such as white supremacy and white nationalism. Applying these terms to the Iranian context is problematic. In addition to moral and cultural concerns, Islamist forces in Iran were extensively using a social justice narrative in their contentions. Ahmadinejad and rightist media close to him identified his government as a “justice government”. My investigation of rightist periodicals after 1995 shows that social justice was one of the core attributes of the Islamist movement in Iran.<sup>2</sup> This defining feature extends, and problematizes, the boundaries of the “rightist” concept. However, a strong penchant for social conservatism (Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2016) and the valorization of violence to stop socio-cultural decay (Hajjarian 2000) help us categorize Islamist groups in Iran as “rightist” forces. As a result, I use revolutionary rightists and revolutionary Islamists in the context of the IR interchangeably.

Further, as I mentioned above, in comparison to many rightist movements in the West and their Islamist counterparts in the Muslim world, the Islamist rightist movement in Iran has to be categorized as a state-organized movement (SOM) or pro-state movement. Incen-

tivized by unelected bodies—such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—the pro-regime rightist movement in Iran mostly mobilized the populace against the executive branch, the parliament, and opposition movements (Ostovar 2016). In summary, social justice concerns and the regime- or state-driven tendencies and contentions of the Islamist rightist movement in Iran make the Iranian case stand out among its Western and Islamist counterparts. Western rightist movements are hardly driven by social justice issues. Nevertheless, state-led mobilizations—particularly rightist ones—are increasingly prevalent in various Western and non-Western contexts, spanning from India to Russia to Hungary (i.e., Greene and Robertson 2020; Hemment 2015; Kováts 2020; McDonnell and Cabrera 2018). Regarding the Islamist front, Islamist movements have been largely anti-state and anti-authority movements. However, growing research on state-led mobilizations shows some state-orchestrated mobilizations in, for example, Egypt (Anderson and Cammett 2020) and Turkey (Yabancı 2021). Taking the specificities of the regime-led Iranian rightist movement into consideration, this movement's ideological contentions and mobilizations help me advance a generalizable understating of rightist mobilizations, building on their cultural and value concerns. In this article, I highlight the ideological contentions of Iran's Islamist movement with a focus on innovative cultural performances surrounding *Madaviat*.

### 3. Cultural Insecurities and New Rightist Movements in the West

Social movement experts have mostly focused on structural and economic explanations of rightist movements (e.g., McVeigh 2009; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Wuthnow 2011). Scholars of rightist movements (e.g., Blee and Creasap 2010; Harding 2000) have drawn attention to moral outrage against secularism and liberalism as an important aspect of “culture wars” unleashed by the Christian Right in America. Additionally, research (e.g., Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Jost 2019) proposes a causal linkage between cultural insecurities, threat perceptions, and the rise of rightist movements in the West. Various types of far-right rightist movements—particularly in Europe and America—have brought ideological conflicts to the front of rightist movement studies (Mudde 2018). A cross-national comparison of rightist movements going beyond the Western context is a much-needed field of research. To this end, I incorporate Western rightist movements and Islamist movements to advance a generalizable understanding of rightist movements on a global stage.

Regarding the most recent developments in the West, Norr and Inglehart (2019, p. 47) advance a general theory of “authoritarian-populist” backlash. They argue that a “silent revolution in values” has fueled authoritarian forces in the West. They link cultural clashes in the West to shifting values and transformations in areas such as education, gender relations, and urban lives. Other scholars (e.g., Duina and Carson 2019) are more concerned with anti-immigration and anti-Islam forces in Europe. That is, the refugee crisis has given rise to a new wave of rightist populism in Europe. Far-right parties, they argue, have won elections across Europe by triggering a sense of cultural uncertainty and threat perceptions among Europeans. In Duina and Carson's analysis, far-right political parties have embraced the politics of “othering”. In other words, they have portrayed Muslim communities across Europe as the civilizational “other”. In the same vein, Brubaker (2017, p. 1222) calls attention to the rise of the “civilizationist identity” in Europe. According to Brubaker, this new “Judeo-Christian identity”, due to the portrayal of Islam as a threat, is defined in cultural terms. This civilizational battle foregrounds the politics of “othering” within Western rightist movements. Islamist movements' concern with cultural invasion from the West, discussed below, parallel the politics of othering in the West.

### 4. Islamist Movements and a Family Resemblance

When it comes to threat perceptions, values and moral insecurities, and ideological conflicts, I suggest that a family resemblance emerges between rightist movements in the West and their Islamist counterparts. I briefly look at some cultural and moral issues that have been inspiring Islamist movements in some Muslim contexts. The “regulation of public morality”, Ismail (2006, p. 59) argues, is the area within which all brands of Islamists

in Egypt converge. Ismail's argument can be generalizable to other Islamist movements across the Muslim world.

Several salient cultural issues which have incentivized Islamist movements include the hijab; women's growing demand for rights; the blasphemy law; cultural invasion by the West; and the rise of liberal intellectuals, elites, media, and policies. In Egypt in the late 1990s, "the piety movement" (Mahmood 2005, p. 4) came into existence in response to the perceived marginalization of religious knowledge. Other manifestations of the piety movement in Egypt comprise an increase in mosque attendance, a growing number of covered women, and the rise of religious media and self-identified religious intellectuals. Scholars focusing on Islam also call attention to a growing number of veiled women in public as a noticeable manifestation of the Islamization campaign in Egypt and Turkey in the 1990s (Çınar 2008). Also, in Iran, the hijab has been one of the most important areas of Islamist mobilizations since 1988 (Ahmadi-Khorasani 2011).

Similar cultural issues and moral outrage have shaped Islamist mobilizations in other Muslim contexts. Butt (2016) demonstrates that Islamists use Friday prayers to impact public policy in Pakistan. Religious and cultural issues which have shaped Islamists' mobilizations in Pakistan include changes to the blasphemy law, anti-Indian and anti-American foreign policy, gender segregation, and minorities' demand for rights. Anti-American sentiments have shaped pro-regime rightist mobilizations in Iran as well (Ostovar 2016). Lorch (2019) highlights top-to-bottom Islamization in Bangladesh. The state-organized Islamist campaign in Bangladesh covers a wide range of issues, including blasphemy laws, the Islamization of the education system, and financial support for madrassahs.

Regarding the family resemblance, ideological, cultural, and moral threats drive rightist movements in both the West and their Islamist counterparts. The cultural issues that have been triggering new rightist movements in the West range from the rising status of cultural and ethnic "out-groups" to an increasing number of immigrants to shifts in gender relations (e.g., Walby 2018). According to various types of Islamist movements from Egypt to Iran, the cultural invasion by the West and domestic liberal forces pose a broad range of threats to public morality.

## 5. Contextualizing the Case Study

Social, cultural, and economic policies after the Iran–Iraq War, the unexpected victory of liberal reformists in the presidential election of 1997, and the subsequent institutionalization of the Reform Movement in Iran's state politics (1997–2005) had tremendous impacts on the IR and Islamist groups affiliated with it. Islamists' responses to the liberal policies of the 1990s and beyond took various shapes. In the mid-1990s, the first generation of radical Islamist identities and fronts came into existence. The Society for Defending Values (*Jamiat-e Defa' az Arzeshha*) and the Hezbollah's Followers (*Ansar-e Hizbollah*) were the most salient Islamist political and cultural identities of the decade (Teimouri 2022; Mortaji 1999). These two political fronts were, to some extent, reactions to the liberal threats of the 1990s, especially the policies of the Hashemi Rafsanjani government (Ghoochani [1999] 2000). The institutionalization of the Reform Movement in state politics in 1997 and the following liberal student uprising of summer 1999 gave rise to the second generation of Islamist political identities and fronts. That is, Islamist groups established a new political front known as the Council of Collaboration Among the Revolutionary Forces (*Shoray-e Hamahangi-e Niruhay-e Inghelab*). Islamist mobilizations, combined with reformists' miscalculations, went well beyond expectations; they took back city councils in 2003, parliament in 2004, and finally the executive branch (the administration) in 2005. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was selected as Tehran's first revolutionary mayor after rightists' victory in the city council election, which paved the way for him to run in the presidential race in 2005.

On 24 June 2005, Ahmadinejad was elected as the new president of the IR. Ahmadinejad was the only candidate who used the word Islam in his presidential campaign (Rajabi 2005; San'ati 2008). His ardent supporters called the election process the "Islamic renaissance" (Rajabi 2005). With the victory of Ahmadinejad, the Islamists' dream finally came

true. They captured the executive branch of the IR for the first time after the end of the war with Iraq. The ascent of Ahmadinejad to power, notes [Albloschi \(2016\)](#), radicalized the IR.

Pro-regime rightist groups used a wide range of contentions to fend off liberal threats during the Reform era. Two mobilizing forces, the social justice narrative and *Mahdaviat*—from the mid-1990s onward—dominated the discursive field of the pro-regime Islamist movement ([Teimouri 2022](#)). In this article, I examine the discursive repertoire and innovative contentions revolving around *Mahdaviat*. Various events and contentions surrounding *Mahdaviat* enhanced the IR's contentious repertoire from the mid-1990s onward.

## 6. The Islamist Rightist Movement in the Context of Iran

My consultation of select Islamist rightist newspapers and periodicals, such as *Sobh*, *Risalat*, and *Kayhan*, shows that cultural and moral values were at the center of Islamists' outrage with liberal elites, intellectuals, and the policies of the 1990s and 2000s. These cultural concerns, to name a few, comprise the cultural invasion from the West; rising liberal cultural products such as new movies and newspapers; the normalization of ties with the West, especially with the United States; the promotion of a liberal understanding of Islam by liberal-leaning intellectuals and newspapers; and finally, nuclear negotiations and agreements with Western powers after 2003.

As I mentioned above, the year 1995 was an important moment with respect to the rise of the self-styled "cultural front of the Islamic Revolution" against liberal forces in Iran. Three periodicals—*Sobh*, *Mo'ud*, and *Sarvestan*—were published in the spring and summer of 1995. These three outlets, led by "men of cultural jihad", shaped an ideological front against liberal "cultural invaders" (*Panjarih*, No. 41. p. 40). *Mo'ud* (the Promised) was specifically designed to promote *Mahdavi*-related topics and concepts. *Sobh* was one of the most influential revolutionary rightist outlets prior to the Reform era, theorizing and promoting cultural resistance against liberal elites, intellectuals, policies, and women's growing demand for rights. *Sobh* and its founder, Mehdi Nasiri, were promoting a type of cultural policy that was portrayed as "authoritarian and value-oriented" ([Salehi 2019](#), p. 160). *Sobh*, in an editorial, welcomed the birth of the above-mentioned "Society for Defending Values", doing so because "it has targeted secularism and liberalism" (*Sobh*, 27 February 1996). My findings show that *Sobh* published 22 commentaries, editorials, and articles from May 1995 to May 1997 against various gender and women's rights issues not including the hijab. These pieces range from the "pro-feminism Iranian delegate" in the Beijing Conference on women's rights to rising feminist tendencies in Iranian media—especially the liberal magazine *Zanan*—to women's growing political, social, and economic participation. *Sobh* encapsulated the pro-regime rightist Islamist movement in Iran in three words: "the Islamic resistance movement", which took on cultural issues in particular (*Sobh*, 26 September 1995).

Although Islamists had enjoyed political power in parliament and in the unelected bodies of the IR, such as the judiciary branch and the Guardian Council before 2005, the Islamist movement became institutionalized in 2005 when Ahmadinejad won the presidential election. The administrations or the executive branch of the IR from 1989 to 2005, due to their socio-cultural and economic policies, were under constant attacks from revolutionary Islamists. Thus, the victory of Ahmadinejad, in Islamists' language, put an end to sixteen years of liberal policies. In contrast to Iran, [Butt \(2016\)](#) argues that Islamization in Pakistan is more of a bottom-up phenomenon rather than a top-down phenomenon because Islamists in Pakistan have not occupied the political polity. Islamists in Iran, however, have always enjoyed institutional power outside of the executive branch. The victory of Ahmadinejad in the presidential election of 2005 expanded Islamist rightists' institutional reach within the IR.

## 7. Millennialism

Despite numerous studies on millennial movements (e.g., [Amanat 2009](#); [Arjomand 1984](#); [Cohn 1970](#); [Festinger et al. 2008](#); [Kaplan 2018](#); [Luebbers 2001](#); [Wilson 1973](#)), the

relationship between millennial movements and rightist movements—particularly from a comparative perspective—has remained underexamined. A few studies, however, have incorporated modern millennial movements into the “war on terror” paradigm and the surge of radical Islam in the post-9/11 era (e.g., Hall 2009). Scholars of millennial movements have portrayed these movements as fundamentalist backlash movements (Luebbbers 2001), chiliastic backlash to secularization (Miles 2010; Zygmunt 1970), cult movements (Wilson 1973), and folk religions (Amanat 2009). Some scholars (e.g., Kniss and Burns 2004) treat millennial movements as social responses to socio-cultural decay and threats felt and imagined by ordinary people. Due, in part, to the global rise of religious cults in the 1970s (Schwartz 1976), a few sociologists (e.g., Allan 1974; Carroll 1975; Zygmunt 1970) focused on millennial movements. This attention, however, has disappeared over time. By focusing on the context of Iran, this study brings millennial studies back in, relating millennial language and contentions to rightist movements, especially moral and cultural threat perceptions and value conflicts that increasingly drive rightist movements. It is necessary to indicate that most of the above-mentioned research has been built on Christian millennial responses, especially Protestant Evangelicalism. What makes the Iranian millennial movement stand out is its different theological history. As opposed to Evangelical millennial activism, which is rooted in the Bible (e.g., Cohn 1970; Lee and Simms 2008), Iranian Shia millennialism has not been grounded in the Quran (Amanat 2009; Jafaryan 2013). Rather, Iranian and Shia millennial figures and preachers have used other traditional sources in Islamic history to justify their positions (Teimouri 2022). Christian and Shia millennials alike have deployed millennial language as a response to perceived socio-cultural decay.

## 8. Millennialism in Iran

I cannot help noticing that many scholars, including Iran scholars (e.g., Amanat 2009; Rahnema 2011), have been alternating the terms messianism, millennialism, millenarianism, and apocalypticism. Comparing the Protestant millennial movement with its Shia counterpart, I suggest that one interpretation of Protestant millennialism, known as “premillennial dispensationalism”, can be conceptually adjacent to Shia millennialism in Iran (Teimouri 2022). Social scientists (Boyer 2002; Wuthnow 2014), as well as historians (Miller 2015), have argued that “premillennial dispensationalism” is at the center of the “fundamentalist” Protestant theology. According to premillennial dispensationalists, the Bible predicts “the end of the world” that happens after the Antichrist’s arrival, the Rapture, the beginning of the Tribulation, and finally, “the final battle of Armageddon” (Miller 2015, p. 6). One can trace the same premillennial order in Shia Islam. Historian Abbas Amanat (2009, p. 27) argues that the reappearance of Imam Mahdi triggers the “great revolt” (*khuruji*), “the Resurrection” (*qiyama*), and finally, “the Day of Judgement” (*yawm al-din*). Based on this family resemblance, I deploy millennialism, particularly its premillennial tendency, in this article.

I juxtapose my research with those scholars (Amanat 2009; Rahnema 2011) who argue that the most recent era of Iranian millennialism started with the reaction to liberal-leaning reformists and policies after 1997. My findings show that the urge for *Mahdaviat* as a defining component of the cultural resistance front against liberal threats started at least from 1995 with the rise of mass public marches to the Jamkaran mosque and the birth of the aforementioned *Mo’ud* periodical. The Jamkaran mosque is a place where Imam Mahdi disappeared, as per some contested Shia sources. Public marches to Jamkaran, as I traced them in the *Risalat* newspaper, date back to 18 January 1995, when a caravan of clergymen, *Basij* paramilitias, and IRGC forces marched from Qom to the Jamkaran mosque. Prior to this event, the only major event related to Jamkaran that I found in pro-regime rightist outlets harkens back to October 1988, when the IR dispatched Iraqi Shia paramilitary forces to Jamkaran for a military maneuver (*Risalat*, 3 October 1988). These Iraqi forces were part of the Iraqi opposition and resistant groups who escaped Iraq in the 1980s to fight Saddam’s Sunni regime alongside the Iranian Shia regime. As I discuss later, the IR conducted some contentious military maneuvers at the Jamkaran mosque during the Reform era. Further,

the biannual international conference of *Mahdaviat* began in February 1996, 15 months prior to the Reform era. In other words, *Mahdavi* contentions were on the rise from the mid-1990s, largely due to increasing liberal threats and policies. Religious ceremonies and services surrounding *Mahdaviat*, which appealed to a broader audience beyond the IR's fervent supporters, helped the IR upgrade and expand its non-violent repertoire of contentions.

The reaction to liberal threats posed by reformists after 1997 took different shapes. In addition to constant attacks on liberal reformists, journalists, intellectuals, and liberal-leaning policies and newspapers, *Kayhan*, an extreme Islamist newspaper, started publishing a series of commentaries about "the strategy for the waiting (*intizar*)" from August 2000 onward. In terms of the waiting, *Kayhan's* papers highlighted Imam Mahdi and his coming. The rise of new ideological revolutionary outlets, including *Jebbeh* and *Shalamcheh*, the weaponization of *Mahdaviat*, and the increasing attention paid to the Jamkaran mosque were among the important responses of revolutionary Islamists to liberal reformists and their policies after 1997.

The victory of the revolutionary right in city council elections in February 2003 was the beginning of its electoral successes after 1997. With the victory of the Islamist rightists, Ahmadinejad became Tehran's first vocal revolutionary mayor. Ahmadinejad's service as Tehran's mayor helped expand *Mahdavi* activities and make them mainstream. In September 2004, Tehran's municipality threw huge celebrations for Imam Mahdi's birthday across all twenty-two regions of the city. These celebrations were accompanied by multiple meetings, book fairs, and art exhibitions related to Imam Mahdi (*Kayhan*, 23 September 2004). Finally, Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005 placed the presidency within the context of Islamist millennial language. The government identified as a *Mahdavi* government for the first time in post-revolutionary Iran (*Kayhan*, 14 May 2008). The Reform era's discursive repertoire—dominated by human rights, women's rights, cultural tolerance, freedom of the press, social permissiveness, and moderate foreign policy—shifted toward the Islamist and revolutionary *Mahdavi* discourse in state politics. That is, the liberal discourse of the Reform Movement (1997–2005) was pushed aside by Islamists' *Mahdavi*-driven ideological cultural and moral politics.

## 9. Data and Methods

I use multiple outlets affiliated with the revolutionary right faction of the IR. These media outlets comprise *Sobh*, *Kayhan*, *Risalat*, *Panjarih*, and the Fars News Agency (FNA). Data related to millennial language of the rightist Islamist movement are mainly drawn from the FNA and *Kayhan*. I use the rest of the outlets to establish the cultural and ideological tendencies of the revolutionary Islamist rightist movement. Studying *Kayhan* and the FNA is important on three accounts: their consistent attacks on liberal forces since the mid-1990s, their coverage of a wide range of pro-regime contentions during and after the Reform era, and their affiliations with ideological military forces such as the IRGC (Ostovar 2016). It is necessary to mention that the Islamist right in Iran self-identified as principlist (*osulgara*) from the mid-1990s onward (Teimouri 2022). Principlism simply highlights the revolutionary Islamist right's understanding and perceptions of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Founded in January of 2003, the FNA is the first major news website of the Islamist right, and its .com domain was shut down by the Trump administration in early 2020. The FNA ardently supported Ahmadinejad in the 2005 election. I looked at the online archive of the FNA during Ahmadinejad's first term from June 2005 to June 2009. I examined all reports and articles pertinent to *Mahdaviat*, cultural and moral policies, and rightist Islamists' attacks on reformist and liberal groups. Because this article is part of a bigger project, I was able to examine all issues of the previously mentioned outlets. I analyzed all issues of *Kayhan* from January 1995 to June 2009. Studying *Kayhan* matters because one survey conducted by reformists (Mohajerani 1999) shows that *Kayhan*—after *Hamshahri*—was the second most widely read newspaper in July–August 1998, the heyday of the Reform era. The archive of *Kayhan* is available at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

Moreover, I borrowed microfilm reels of *Risalat* from Princeton University. I studied all issues of *Risalat* from the end of the Iran–Iraq war in July 1988 until January 1995; after studying those issues, Princeton University, due to the pandemic, stopped shipping reels. *Risalat* is affiliated with the old guard of the rightist faction of the IR, known as the Islamic *Motalefe’* Party (The Islamic Allied Party). The archives of *Sobh* and *Panjarah* are available at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

It is necessary to indicate that one should cautiously treat media representations of a movement’s contentions. Due to my focus on the key political players, opinion-setters, and media personalities of the Islamist rightist movement, I have no intention to argue that my text corpus shows how pro-regime grassroots activists frame threat perceptions and moral and cultural insecurities. Media data, however, do a good job explaining the agendas set by key movement figures and the way they framed moral and cultural issues (McVeigh 2009). One of the limitations of this paper is related to grassroots *Mahdavi* contentions. If one searches for some *Mahdavi* terms on Google, he or she might find hundreds of related news and stories on many fringe Farsi websites. Although these sources are valuable for analyzing the broader public culture, they do not represent any main political groups affiliated with the pro-regime Islamist movement in the IR. I am focused on political figures and the ideological language of the Islamist rightist movement shaped by these prominent agenda-setters. Studying media personalities’ and political figures’ *Mahdavi* language also helps us make sense of how the IR upgraded its repertoire of rhetorical and practical contentions, leveraging religious resources. I do not examine the broader *Mahdavi*-driven public discourse, which could be a direction for future research.

## 10. Identifying *Mahdavi* Language

I searched for millennial *Mahdavi* terms and phrases in Islamists’ language. Further, I looked at millennial events. The major themes and concepts used by the revolutionary rightists include *Mahdaviat*; *Imam Zaman*, *Imam Asr*, *Hazrat-e Hojrat*, and *Hazrat-e Baghyat Allah* (Imam Mahdi); *modiriate Imam Zaman* (Imam Zaman’s management); *akhar al-zaman* (apocalypse); *edalat-e Mahdavi* (Mahdavi justice); *jamea montazer* (waiting society); *daneshjuyeh montazer* (waiting student); *jamea Mahdavi* (Mahdavi society); *artesh-e Mahdavi* (Mahdavi army); *zohur* (the Advent); and *insan-e kamel* (complete human).<sup>3</sup> These terms distinguish the revolutionary right from other factions of the IR such as liberal reformists who believe in *Mahdavit* but never used it as a mobilizing force against imagined threats.

It is necessary to mention that some of these terms appeared in Islamists’ language only after 2005. I could not find some of these terms, such as the waiting society, the waiting student, the *Imam Zaman*’s management, and the complete human, in Islamists’ discursive repertoire before the rise of Ahmadinejad. This discursive shift in Islamists’ language from 2005 suggests that a new cultural identity within the Islamist movement was developing. Additionally, the Islamist movement’s strong penchant for the Jamkaran mosque and its utilization as a battleground for cultural and political contention against liberal reformists from 2000 onward demonstrates that a new ideological *Mahdavi*-oriented identity and repertoire was growing within the pro-regime Islamist movement (Teimouri 2022). The IR was mobilizing its supporters on various occasions to rally against a broad range of liberal threats approaching and occurring during the Reform era. As a result, *Mahdavi* events helped the IR enhance its performances from the mid-1990s onward, meaning that *Mahdavi* events integrated the broader populace into the IR’s discursive and contentions repertoires. Expanding *Mahdavi* contentions—drawing on Tilly (2006)—helped the IR elevate its non-violent and non-threatening repertoires to contain various types of real or imagined threats. Per Tilly’s conceptualization (2006), issuing a statement, sit-ins, etc., are examples of performances. The combination of various forms of performances shapes a repertoire of contention.

## 11. The Backlash Movement and the Inception of Mahdavi-Oriented Contentions

According to celebrated Islamist preachers such as Mesbah-Yazdi (Rahnema 2011; San'ati 2008), the long reign of liberal political practices, cultural policies, and administrations ceased in 2005. Prominent Islamist media personalities such as Fatemeh Rajabi called Ahmadinejad's ascent to power the materialization of the "Mahdavi society" (Rajabi 2005, p. 145). Per her account, 2005 was the beginning of "the tsunami" that revived the Islamic identity of the country in a global context (Rajabi 2005, p. 79). Thus, the ascent of Islamist rightists to the executive branch under Ahmadinejad, for the first time after the end of the war with Iraq, shifted the balance of power within the IR. The new environment created a political space for an Islamic-based discursive field surrounding *Mahdaviat*.

## 12. The Liberal Reform Era, Value Conflicts, and Moral Outrage

As Arjomand (1984) argues, millennialism as a mobilizing force is traceable to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Iran–Iraq war. What makes post-1995 millennial contentions different is the utilization of various symbols related to *Mahdaviat*, such as the Jamkaran mosque, to mobilize the IR's supporters against liberal threats. I argue that the weaponization of the Jamkaran mosque and other *Mahdavi*-related symbols was an innovative and performative form of contention that enhanced the IR's repertoire of actions. The rise of the *Mahdavi* millennial discourse in this period was a response to liberal cultural policies and reforms that liberal-leaning elites promoted during the Reform era.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the 2005 election, Ahmadinejad met with Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. Their meeting was quite telling regarding cultural concerns. As reported by San'ati (2008, p. 879), neither did Ahmadinejad nor Mesbah-Yazdi discuss the presidential election. This focus on cultural issues prior to the 2005 election shows the extent to which revolutionary Islamist forces were concerned about the cultural trajectory of the country under liberal reformists.

During the Reform era, Mesbah-Yazdi repeatedly warned against the cultural situation of the country (San'ati 2008; Kayhan, 5 October 1998). He was extremely concerned with the rise of liberal newspapers and cultural products after 1997. According to well-known reformist journalists (Baghi 2000), Mesbah-Yazdi was encouraging violence to stop liberal cultural threats. Other prominent Islamists called reformists' strategies and policies—especially policies run by the Ministry of Culture under the Khatami administration—a "value coup d'état" (*kudetay-e arzeshi*). This moral and cultural "coup d'état", according to Kayhan (4 March 1998), was aimed at the core values of the 1979 Islamic revolution and the IR's revolutionary principles. One of Mesbah-Yazdi's well-known clergy students suggested that "after the end of the war with Iraq [in 1988] a war against revolutionary values and carriers of these values was waged. [This new] war, finally, paved the way for the deviation in revolution's values and principles after the victory of the Reform Movement in 1997".<sup>5</sup> Mesbah-Yazdi's and his students' concerns with the cultural decay of the country encapsulate their perceptions of liberal cultural threats posed to revolutionary principles after end of the war, especially during the Reform era.

After the victory of Ahmadinejad in 2005, Mesbah-Yazdi met with officials of the new Ministry of Culture. He highlighted the idea of a "cultural ambush by the West" (*Shabikhoon-e Farhangi*), which was not taken seriously by cultural policy makers after the 1979 revolution. Without mentioning the Reform era, Mesbah-Yazdi contended that "the cultural policy makers, at time, carried anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary thoughts".<sup>6</sup> In this context, the victory of Ahmadinejad was portrayed as "the materialization of the Islamic revolution's values" and "the defeat to liberalization of the Islamic Republic".<sup>7</sup> Disparaging liberal cultural products during the Reform era, Saffar-Harandi, the first Minister of Culture under Ahmadinejad and Kayhan's former deputy editor, called for the "reconstruction of public culture".<sup>8</sup> According to another prominent rightist figure, Ali Motahhari, "economic and political independence are built upon cultural independence, which was reformists' Achilles' heel. . . During the Reform era, we extremely deviated from Islamic values".<sup>9</sup>

*Mahdaviat* was one of the ideological forces which not only shaped new policies but also upgraded the IR's repertoire of contentions and its discursive field. Hadi Nili, an official in the new Ministry of Culture, juxtaposed the new *Mahdavi*-oriented Islamic discourse after 2005 with the liberal democratic discourse:

"During the Reform era, some [reformist] policy makers who believed in secularism kept saying that the era of Islamic values ended. The Islamic Republic was supposed to move toward *Mahdaviat*; however, we leaned toward Western values and norms [under the reformists' rule]".<sup>10</sup>

Quoting a figure close to the Islamic Allied Party (*Motalefeh*), *Kayhan* reported that during the Reform era, reformist newspapers and periodicals "produced 2350 *shobbeh* (doubts in religious orthodoxies) against the religion and the revolution" (*Kayhan*, 3 March 2009). This perceived cultural decline of the country, or "cultural transmogrification" (*istihale*), in Islamists' language, was stopped by the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005.<sup>11</sup> Per pro-regime rightist activists, all administrations in Iran from 1989 to 2005 were inclined to liberalism. The rise of Ahmadinejad reversed this trajectory and provided an opportunity to expand on "the global mission of the 1979 revolution".<sup>12</sup> Ahmadinejad stopped "the creeping secularism and Westernization of the country". The executive branch under Ahmadinejad, compared to previous administrations, showed "unique value and religious tendencies".<sup>13</sup> Due to the marginalization of revolutionary values and "creeping" secularism, social and cultural problems were pervasive before 2005. According to rightist activists, *Mahdaviat* became a dominant discourse after 2005 that created a significant opportunity.<sup>14</sup>

### 13. The Weaponization of *Mahdaviat* and the IR's Contentious Repertoire

To fend off threats posed by liberal reformists, the IR and rightist groups affiliated with it utilized multiple innovative and performative contentions, exceeding street rallies and repressive policies (Ostovar 2016). Events related to *Mahdaviat* were among these new forms of performances. It is necessary to mention that although *Mahdavi*-related events can be traced to the 1980s (Arjomand 1984), they took new forms in this period. Three developments distinguish new *Mahdavi* contentions from previous years: the politicization and weaponization of *Mahdaviat* against liberal forces from the mid-1990s onward, the rise of Ahmadinejad as Tehran's first revolutionary mayor in 2002, and growing pro-regime social justice mobilizations after 2001.

The politicization of *Mahdaviat* started after 1997. The expansion of the Jamkaran mosque and the decision to hold military maneuvers adjacent to it were among these contentious events. From 2000 onward, self-styled "military and cultural maneuvers" by *Basij* militias were taking place within the Jamkaran mosque territory close to the city of Qom. These maneuvers, led by IRGC commanders, became a field of harsh attacks on reformists and their policies. In November 2000 and in one of these military-cultural showdowns organized by the IRGC, the keynote speaker harshly attacked reformists and their penchant for normalizing ties with the United States (*Kayhan*, 4 November 2000). The Jamkaran mosque was hardly used as a mobilizing force against the internal opposition groups prior to the Reform era. *Mahdavi* events not only struck a chord with the IR's diehard supporters but also tapped into the populace's cultural and religious psyche. Regarding visits to the Jamkaran mosque, in 23 October–23 November 2001, *Kayhan* reported that 200 thousand pilgrims visited the Jamkaran mosque. One year later, this number jumped to two million visitors. On 13 August 2008, the heyday of the IR under Ahmadinejad's government, the number of visitors reached three million pilgrims and visitors. The possibility of *Kayhan* exaggerating this huge leap speaks to the fact that this mosque became an iconic, contentious, and mobilizing symbol for the IR and the rightist groups affiliated with it.

The second development during the Reform era was related to the ascent of Ahmadinejad as the first self-identified revolutionary mayor of Tehran. During his tenure, *Mahdaviat*-related events reached a high and new level. My examination of *Kayhan* demonstrates that in just one month, 22 September–22 October 2004, 77 events, including meetings,

exhibitions, and marches, were reported across the country, and most of them took place in Tehran. Finally, another factor that contributed to the increasing number of *Mahdavi* events in the last years of the Reform era was the rise of pro-regime social justice mobilizations in this period. My examination of *Kayhan* shows that 38 rallies focusing on social justice concerns were shaped in the second period of the Reform era (2001–2005). Highlighting this new pro-regime contention is important because Ahmadinejad became an institutional expression of social justice contentions in this period. He also ran on a social justice-centered platform during the presidential election of 2005. Research (Safikhani and Safiri 2019) shows that the increasing amount of attention paid to *Mahdaviat* and the mosque of Jamkaran among the populace is tied to their perceptions of justice. In other words, the reappearance of Imam Mahdi will pave the way for a more just world. In this context, it makes sense that Ahmadinejad and the revolutionary right were pushing for policies related to *Mahdaviat*. In addition to justice, Ahmadinejad also self-identified his government as “Imam Mahdi’s government” (*Kayhan*, 14 May 2008), meaning that its government is inspired—and works—toward *Mahdaviat* tenets.

#### 14. The “*Mahdavi Society*” after 2005

Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned cultural perceptions, moral outrage, and developments from the mid-1990s onward, *Mahdavi* discourse became the discursive backbone of the Islamist movement after 2005. Also, Ahmadinejad became “the revivalist” of the declining values of the [1979] revolution.<sup>15</sup> Justice, the Islamic state, *Mahdaviat*, and the second wave of the 1979 Revolution were Ahmadinejad’s key terminologies in this period. Rejecting Western theories of governance and development, he made sense of Islamic justice with “*Mahdavi justice*”.<sup>16</sup> “The second wave of the Revolution”, noted Ahmadinejad, has started in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Arguing that “we are in a heavy cultural battle”, he proposed that “they [the imperialist forces] have targeted *Mahdavi* ideals”.<sup>18</sup> According to him, “the missing part of new cultural intervention is to embrace *Hazrat-e Baghyat Allah* [Imam Mahdi]”.<sup>19</sup> He also juxtaposed *Mahdaviat* and justice with liberalism and democracy.<sup>20</sup> My interrogation of *Kayhan* shows that Ahmadinejad’s profound Islamist language distinguished his presidential campaign from other rightist candidates in 2005. He repeatedly used the terms “revolutionary management” and “Islamic state”, whereas his opponents appealed to urban, middle-class, and upper-middle-class citizens (San’ati 2008; *Kayhan*, 9 May 2005).

Moreover, Ahmadinejad addressed the UN general assembly with *Mahdavi* language multiple times. Ahmadinejad visited the city of Qom to meet with religious authorities following his first UN General Assembly speech. His meeting with Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli went viral and produced many debates and controversies in the country. Referring to Imam Mahdi, Ahmadinejad claimed that throughout his first UN speech, “he felt enshrouded in a beam of light” (Rahnema 2011, p. 38). Additionally, his spokesman suggested that the “President’s first UN speech paved the way for *Mahdaviat* to become a new discourse and to open new horizons for the human being and various religions”.<sup>21</sup> It was the first time that an Iranian President’s UN speech was extensively inspired by *Mahdaviat*.

Other rightist media figures were also raising the profile of the millennial discourse. According to these figures, *Mahdaviat* can become “the solution to many problems”.<sup>22</sup> Proposing that “*Mahdaviat* is our identity code”, rightist forces suggested that “the government’s and other institutions’ strategy ought to be paving the way for the reappearance of the *Imam Asr* [Imam Mahdi]”.<sup>23</sup> Gholam-Hossein Elham, Ahmadinejad’s spokesperson and one of his closest allies, contended that “we need to facilitate the reappearance of *Imam Zaman*”.<sup>24</sup> Some disputed reports also showed that Ahmadinejad even called himself “the president of *Imam Zaman*”.<sup>25</sup> The increasing urge for *Mahdaviat* within the revolutionary rightist forces after 2005 also yielded policy outcomes. According to *Kayhan* (13 August 2008), the vision documentary of the Jamkaran mosque started in 2008, meaning that vast resources were allocated for the expansion of the mosque and other *Mahdavi*-related events.

In addition to Ahmadinejad and his allies, prominent Islamist preachers were consistently using millennial language in this period. For prominent preachers, *Mahdaviat* drives “cultural engineering” or “cultural jihad” against secularism and modernity (Teimouri 2022). Celebrated extreme preachers such as Morteza Agha-Tehrani published multiple books about the *Mahdavi* discourse, proposing that institutions such as family, the public, and higher education play important roles in expanding a “*Mahdavi* upbringing” in society.<sup>26</sup> In a speech among university students in the Jamkaran mosque, Alireza Panahyan, another prominent Islamist preacher, proposed that “we should raise our youth with *Mahdavi* values. . . . The ideal situation of human being takes place within the *Mahdavi* society, and our society is far from the *Mahdavi* society”.<sup>27</sup> In this new era of cultural and political practices, *Mahdaviat* became an ideological fight against “creeping” liberalism. As opposed to policies and political practices under Ahmadinejad, liberal elites and intellectuals during the Reform era were promoting liberal and secular lifestyles. Islamist preachers and rightist activists foregrounded the *Mahdavi* policies and language due, in large, to growing secularism and liberalism in the country. Table 1 shows the increasing number of *Mahdavi* events and contentions from the middle of the Reform era onward.

**Table 1.** A sample of *Mahdavi* contentions reported in *Kayhan* after 2000.

Event	Date	Event	Date
200,000 pilgrims in Jamkaran	23 October 2001	<i>Heyat Razmandegan's Mahdavi</i> caravan in Qom	23 August 2005
Three <i>Mahdavi</i> conferences	23 September 2002	Nationwide prayers for Imam Zaman	23 August 2006
2 million pilgrims in Jamkaran	23 October 2002	5000 volunteers worked for a <i>Mahdavi</i> event in Qom	23 July 2007
<i>Mahdaviat</i> week and multiple events	23 September 2003	Live streaming Imam Mahdi's birthday celebration on TV in Isfahan (60,000 people attended an event in the Imam Square)	23 August 2007
Nationwide <i>Intezar</i> events and an Advent festival by Tehran's municipality	20 April 2004	12,000 people worked at a <i>Mahdavi</i> festival	21 June 2008
Massive <i>Intezar</i> celebrations in 22 regions, 50 fairs and 23 meetings for <i>Mahdaviat</i> , and <i>Mahdavi</i> caravans in Iraq toward Karbala (~3 million pilgrims)	22 September 2004	Hundreds of pilgrims walked from Kashan to Jamkaran; 77 counties and 777,000 mosques and cultural centers hosted <i>Mahdavi</i> celebrations	22 July 2008

## 15. Threat Perceptions and the Cultural Explanation of Rightist Movements

The rise of the liberal practices and policies in the IR from the mid-1990s triggered Islamist ideological, cultural, and value threat perceptions. With the victory of revolutionary Islamists in the 2005 election, policy and social liberalization—as prominent Islamist figures claimed—ceased to exist. The *Mahdavi* discourse and contentions were some of the most notable discursive and ideological manifestations of the political and cultural reconfiguration after 2005. *Mahdavi* contentions, to Islamist preachers and rightist figures, were a key solution to socio-moral decay that took place under liberal policy makers and administrations from 1989 onward, particularly from the mid-1990s forward. As the case of the institutionalization of the Islamist movement in Iran after 2005 shows, the new *Mahdavi* discourse was developed to reverse the liberal trajectory that the county adopted, particularly under the reformists' reign.

As Mann (1986, 2012) explains, ideologies exist outside of economic, political, and military powers. Ideologies drive policies and set agendas, as research on the Islamist movement in Iran shows (e.g., Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2016). Taking cues from Polletta's

definition of culture (Polletta 2008, p. 92), I argue that ideologies “can set the very terms of strategic action”. The ascent of liberal forces to the fifth majlis in 1996, the liberal discourse of Iranian reformists, and radical policy shifts after the victory of the Reform Movement in 1997 deeply disturbed Islamist rightists in Iran. Islamists perceived these drastic policy and discursive shifts as an existential threat to the IR’s revolutionary principles. Consequently, they deployed several cultural agendas and political strategies to enhance their repertoires of contentions. *Mahdaviat* was one of these ideological forces that upgraded rightist groups’ repertoire of actions from the mid-1990s onward. This new discursive agenda and performative action—initially triggered by liberal threat perceptions—became one of the leading discursive and policy domains after 2005.

While some social movement scholars attribute the rise of rightist parties and movements in the West to an economic loss of status, the Iranian case shows that moral and cultural anxieties, regardless of economic issues, shaped rightist and regime-led mobilizations. Consistent with new far-right populist movements in the West and Islamist movements in the Muslim world, which keep lashing out against cultural and moral decay, the core concern of the Islamist movement in Iran lies in ideological conflicts and cultural insecurities rather than economic anxieties. The economic explanation of rightist movements undermines the cultural and moral anxieties of rightist groups (Mudde 2018). McVeigh (2009) argues that rightist movements come into existence due to structural and economic uncertainties. Cultural toolkits, according to him, frame these anxieties. The case of Iran helps integrate Islamist movements into rightist movements, foregrounding the cultural and ideological explanation of rightist movements. The moral and cultural argument helps avoid the analytical oversight of the economic explanation. Social scientists need to treat ideological conflicts and cultural insecurities beyond just using a framing toolkit. As recently stated by an expert on the American electoral system and polling, “It is not just the economy anymore” (Silver 2024), meaning that cultural anxieties forge a new “political fault line” during presidential elections in the United States.

## 16. Implications and Conclusions

Islamists’ perceptions of the Islamic state and policies in Iran prior to the rise to power of Ahmadinejad are at odds with Juergensmeyer’s (2008) articulation of a “religious state” in Iran. Juergensmeyer (2008) suggests that Iran is the only successful theocratic state in recent decades. As I discussed above, to Islamist rightist groups, sixteen years of political practices prior to 2005 did not satisfy the definition of an “Islamic state” in Iran. The Islamic state materialized when the Islamist rightist movement won the 2005 presidential election and Ahmadinejad became president.

The case of Iran integrates Islamist rightist movements into rightist movement studies. Further, the focus on millennial discourse and contentions broadens our understanding of Islamist rightist movements, especially regarding ideological conflicts and the cultural insecurities of rightist groups. The cultural and moral argument of rightist movements can help remedy the analytical oversight of rightist movement studies. Classic millennial studies did not pay attention to the relationship between millennial language and contentions, rightist movements, threat perceptions, and state politics. The Iranian case is a worthwhile contribution on three accounts: (1) it links rightist activism to Islamist movements; (2) it helps sharpen an ideological, cultural, and moral explanation of rightist movements with a focus on the Islamist reaction to liberally recognized policies and political practices; and (3) it raises the profile of millennial activism as one of the most notable manifestations of rightist Islamist activism in Iran. The discursive field of the Islamist movement in Iran was widely impacted by the takeover of mainstream politics by Islamists and their cultural and moral politics of *Mahdaviat* after 2005. Innovative and contentious *Mahdavi* events from the mid-1990s onward were mostly responses to sixteen years of liberal-leaning political practices and discourses.

Classic functionalist approaches (e.g., Barber 1941) propose that millennial movements can have stabilizing functions for those social classes that are experiencing socio-cultural

uncertainties. Future research can extend the classic approach, integrating millennial cultural politics into the ideological and moral explanation of social movement studies. The rise of new far-right movements in Europe, coupled with analyses of Islamist movements, problematize the economically oriented approach. Future research needs to further delve into the moral and ideological explanation of rightist movements and their policy implications.

Violence is another aspect of moral and cultural backlash that links extreme brands of Western rightist movements (e.g., Jones et al. 2020) and global far-right movements (Miller-Idriss 2020) to their extreme Islamist counterparts (e.g., Yasmeen 2012). What makes rightist movements, especially the far right, stand out among other movements are their violent solutions to socio-cultural ills and threats perceived as existential (Miller-Idriss 2020). Although the IR and rightist groups affiliated with it have violently repressed a wide variety of opposition movements since 1979 (Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2016), rightist millennial activism in Iran has not yielded any violent outcomes. This is largely due to the pro-regime nature of millennial contentions in Iran. However, millennial movements in America (Bromley and Melton 2002; Kaplan 2018) and in the Muslim world have produced bloody conflicts from Sudan to Iraq to Saudi Arabia (Filiu 2011; Hegghammer and Lacroix 2011). After the occurrence of the Arab uprisings, nevertheless, some of the above-mentioned Islamist preachers in Iran—especially Panahyan—increasingly utilized millennial language to justify the IR's involvement in the region. By examining varying forms and shapes of cultural and political violence, social movement scholars can expand our understanding of the violent outcomes of extreme rightist, Islamist, and state-organized movements.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rajanews.com/news/8490>, accessed on 28 November 2023.

<sup>2</sup> A sample of these periodicals and the topics covered by them will be provided by the author upon request.

<sup>3</sup> Please see Ahmadinejad (2007). For further examples, see the following links (a more exhaustive sample will be provided upon request): <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8601290034%20%20%20%20/%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4-%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%87%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD-%D9%88-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>, accessed on 28 November 2023.

<https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8708240026/%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1%DA%AF%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B0%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF>, accessed on 28 November 2023.

<https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8712180010%20%20%20%20/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF> accessed on 28 November 2023.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8604120602%20%20%20%20/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B0%D9%87%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%BE%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF>, accessed on 28 November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8706171323%20%20%20%20/%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%88>

- 5-<https://www.farsnews.ir/news/8704110917%20%20%20%20/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%83-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-> accessed on 28 November 2023.
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