

A Glance at the Opportunities for and Perils to

Islamic Art and Culture

in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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In the Name of God,
The Compassionate, the Beneficent.

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Abstract

Before the Islamic Revolution¹ of Iran there was a tension and even a conflict between art and religion. But after the revolution, art became engaged with the teachings of Islam and was thus welcomed by the religious community, finding its legitimacy and rightful place in society as a consequence. This new kind of art was the result of the influence of the revolution, which totally changed the concept of religion as previously conceived to one that was idealistic (in the sense of an art which believes in ideals and strives to fulfill them), yet was action-based, and aimed to establish a new society with a vision that was global.

But a part of society still was not on board with the idea of the integration of art and religion. The combination of art and religion on the one hand led to the integration of religious teachings and artistic approaches. At the same time, as the religious community took steps to welcome this new religiously-inclined movement in art, a great boom in the world of art emerged in Iran. What was anticipated and hoped for was that this new commonality between religion and art would bring about an expansion in the art and culture of the

¹ What is actually meant here is the word uprising or insurrection, as in a movement for the *restoration* of an order, rather than “revolution” which, strictly speaking, means the upending of an order. But the word revolution is what has been used to characterize the Islamic Insurrection from the very beginning, such that it has secured its place in common usage. Thus, using the phrase “Islamic Insurrection” would seem pedantic and awkward; but that is what is meant: a movement to restore the *original* (pre-despotic) order, namely, God’s order.

new religiously-based society, but this did not happen, and reactionary elements gradually emerged.

This essay presents a comprehensive picture of this movement by providing the global, historical and domestic perspectives in the various cultural fronts involved. It also discusses the fault lines created in the transformation process and provides recommendations for the proper resolution to the most important problems that have arisen as a result of these changes.

Key Words: Islam, Art, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Religion, Opportunities and Perils.

Preface

Before the triumph of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, religion and art acted in opposition to each other in most instances. With the advent of the revolution, two things happened:

1. The art world became aware of the significance of religion and its teachings, and as a consequence of this awareness, engaged it as its subject matter.
2. The community of the religious-minded in Iranian society opened their doors to art, and the solid wall which had been erected by the religious community to protect itself from the plague of decadent and even degenerate “art” was removed, granting legitimacy to the sphere of what had hitherto been non-Islamic art.

These events came about as a result of the presence of true Islam in the revolution – an Islam which varied from its pre-revolutionary predecessor and was distinguished by the characteristics of being idealistic², activist (as opposed to the “quietism” of the Islamic seminaries prior to Imam Khomeini’s movement), having a global perspective, and being intent on building community; an Islam whose most important exponents were Imam Khomeini himself, as well as his students and devotees, among whose ranks were such

² Again, idealist is meant here as in the rest of this essay in the sense of an art which believes in ideals and whose main purpose is their fulfillment.

luminaries as Ayatollah Motahharī, among whose ranks were such luminaries as Ayatollah Motahharī, Ayatollah Beheshtī, Ayatollah Khāmeneī, Chamrān, Āvinī, etc; and Alī Shariātī too, of course. Now given this comingling of religion and art, and of the world of religiosity with that of the artistically inclined, it goes without saying that a segment from each world remained outside of the circle that was common to both domains. But the activities within this circle that was held in common by both worlds brought about a fusion of religious teachings and approaches to their subject matter which were artistic; and on the other hand, a new impetus was given to art with the dissolution of the self-imposed boundaries which the religious community had erected before it. In other words, important events took place in both intellectual and practical spheres whose effects were manifested in the production, distribution and consumption of art.

In order to better conceive of the importance of these events, it might serve our purposes to take a look, on one hand, at superficially religious societies such as those of the Tālebān and Saudi Arabia; and on the other, to consider the decadence that has appeared in the art of communist and capitalist societies.³ Over and above the historical precedents that we have, the tensions and strains between religiosity and art are clearly and perfectly observable in various social processes, and it is in this field that one of the wondrous bounties of the Islamic Revolution shines.

The expectation was that the new chapter of the co-mingling of art and religion would continue and turn into the dominant paradigm of the art world; i.e. that the criteria and indicators within the arena of art and of the activity of artists would be in harmony with those of the Islamic Revolution, and additionally, that the sense of affinity to art of the religiously minded would gradually increase, and that they would feel a greater need for art and

³ Literally, “of the societies of East and West”.

for its production and consumption. But this expectation remained unfulfilled and gradually, a reactionary movement began to take shape.

With the waning of the potency of the basic ideas and ideals within the religious ideology of the Islamic Revolution and the hardening of the lines of demarcation between traditional pre-revolutionary religiosity (which was of course filled with reprehensible innovations which had nothing to do with the original religion) and politics and society and idealism and standing up for truth and social justice, the luminous fruit of the Revolution in the field of art gradually began to lose their luster and became indistinct. And with the concurrent efforts of faithless artists and the artless among the religious community, at first the enlargement of the circle of the common ground between art and religiosity came to a halt, and this process ultimately led to the extrication of religion from art and of the extrication of art from the religious life.

Memories of the incursions of alien cultures took the place of a self-confidence which had its origins in the revolutionary spirit which engendered the courage to step outside the bounds of alien paradigms and models. Important roles were played in this regard by (1) the milieu within the art departments of the universities which was still infused with Westernized professors, texts and methods; (2) seasoned and professional artists and their pre-revolutionary ideations and commitments; and (3) the dominant milieu of affiliated institutions, especially that which existed within the mass media and in foreign (and at times domestic) art festivals. On the other hand, thousands of cadres of Islamic/ revolutionary art such as those formed for the purposes of performing revolutionary songs and ballads and plays in centers such as mosques were gradually expelled from the mosques upon the domination of a spirit of reaction and the return of pseudo-traditional innovations, being replaced with certain pre-revolutionary activities.

In the midst of all this, there were of course new groups which emerged which were able to absorb and take on the form of the religiosity which had been stripped of its idealist elements by bogus and disingenuous means – a religiosity which was bereft of its central core – the insistence on the establishment of social justice – having been replaced by an illusory and politically unthreatening “spirituality”, and had thus lost its appeal. These newly-founded organizations were in effect disguised businesses which absorbed a large share of the budgets allocated for resisting and fighting against the incursion of alien cultures (*tahājom-e farhangī*), and which simultaneously gave religious art a bad name. One of the main bases of these groups consisted of certain organizations and associations which were located within the system.

What we have some thirty plus years after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution consists of the following:

A treasure trove of works of art in different categories and mediums which demonstrate the possibility of fusing the principles and purposes of the Islamic Revolution with art, and which have responded in practical terms to the false theses and assertions which allege the innate incompatibility of religion and contemporary art. Additionally, these works of art are considered to be endowed with high and in some cases excellent standards in the Iranian art world in terms of their technical and aesthetic criteria. These works include feature length films, plays, novels, poetry, caricatures, paintings, music, calligraphic art, and so on.

2. A group of highly skilled artists who were the product of the conditions which prevailed during the early years of the revolution, and who were recognized and had established positions as leading artists at the national level in various art forms such as poetry, literature, cinematography, sculpture, music, and so on.

3. A vast collection of art which was produced by artists who were enamored of the ideals of the Enlightenment and which, as such, had no commitment to the principles and objectives of the Islamic Revolution; and who were able to regroup after having suffered material and intellectual setbacks during the early years of the revolution, to train the next generation of Enlightenment oriented artists. This generation benefitted and continues to benefit from the active and targeted support of the secular Enlightenment-allied intellectual and media environment, and is at times the beneficiary of the support of foreign forces active in the world of art, such as film festivals and foreign media providing coverage and favorable reviews for their work. This group of artists enjoys significant support among the governmental cultural administrators of the country, and has succeeded in acquiring access to much of the artistic and cultural facilities of the organs of state.

4. A vast group of money-grubbing opportunist businessmen and professional artists for whom the primary function of art is a means for them to make money and who view the budgets for the production of art projects as business opportunities by means of which they can enrich themselves in illegitimate ways and without bringing any added value to the enterprise. We can perhaps characterize this current as “pork barrel” art projects⁴; that is, “art” projects which are characterized by their being profitable for the private sector and which provides fodder for the balance sheets and financial reports of government departments, from such vast organizations as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB) and the Office for the

⁴ For non-American speakers of English, this is a reference from the American political system: Wikipedia defines it as follows: “Pork barrel is a metaphor for the appropriation of government spending for localized projects secured solely or primarily to bring money to a representative’s district. The usage originated in American English. In election campaigns, the term is used in a derogatory fashion to attack opponents.”

Propagation of Islam, to the public relations and cultural departments of the various budget-grabbing governmental organs – all of these are the object of the avarice of the opportunists within this current.

5. Organized and targeted planning, by both domestic and foreign forces, for strengthening art whose worldview, purpose and commitment is secular; and the concomitant corollary of this program, which is the purposive and systematic weakening of art that is the product of the Islamic Revolution. This program is engaged in creating problems by creating false memes and by framing issues by means of bogus frames of reference; and busies itself with the regurgitation and reproduction of the non-Islamic and anti-Islamic art of past generations, be this of the liberal, nationalist or communist variety. These forces have been successful in coopting many of the organs of state which have responsibilities for planning and allocating budgets for the production of art, and have been especially successful in doing so with respect to administrators who have executive authority for cultural activities, whom they get to go along with their programs by browbeating and intimidation if need be, but, as is often the case, by bamboozling them and simply offering passive administrators projects which they adopt as their own. Some of the most important policies which this front insists on include the need to maintain “impartiality” and “objectivity”, the imperative of producing “art for art’s sake”, as well as the imperative of being “apolitical” and focusing on “purely artistic” and technical considerations instead.

What is to be done?

1. Remedying the disconnect between the theorists and artists in the intellectual and artistic arenas of the Islamic Revolution. Unfortunately the cohesion and harmony that exists in secular circles between their theorists and artists does not obtain in the forces committed to the Islamic Revolution, who suffer from and are challenged both by intellectual lacunae which bring

about a paralysis in their ability properly to formulate and pose the problems at hand; as well as confusion and uncertainty with respect to the choices concerning what the correct direction forward should be for the resolution to problems which have been formulated. The theorists of the revolution typically dwell in the arena of political theory and do not pay attention to the intellectual needs of the revolution's artists and cultural activists; and as a rule, there is no serious connection and sustained relationship between these two groups, such that some of the most famous theorists of the revolution are incapable even of naming two *hezbollahī*⁵ novelists or five *hezbollahī* poets or film makers.

2. Preventing the diminution of the authentic art of the Islamic Revolution by preventing the production of inauthentic versions of it. The system of assessment and the valuation criteria that prevail in a large number of governmental organs and cultural institutions is premised on an inadequate understanding of Islam which either reduces it to the outward expressions of its devotional elements (such as an inordinate emphasis on the minutia of the requirements of the ritual ablutions that are required before one may offer his or her devotions to God as ritually prescribed); or, reduces the religion to being no more than a quest for the attainment of individual spiritual states (with the concomitant elimination of the much more important social aspects, ideals and objectives operable at the societal level, such as the imperative to establish social justice, transparency, combating systemic corruption, etc.). This reductionism has engendered a culture of "Pork Barrel

⁵ *Hezbollahī*: Literally, belonging to the 'Party of God'. *Hezbollah* is a Qoranic expression which refers to those who have self-surrendered (*islām*; *taslīm*) to the will of God and to His Providential Lordship (*rububīa*^t) and are hence aligned with His Party. *Hezbollahīs* are contrasted with *Hezb osh-Shaytān* or *Hezb ot-Tāghut*, the Party of Satan or the Party of Illegitimate Authority. The partisans of the Islamic Revolution refer to themselves as *Hezbollahīs*.

Art”⁶ the vacuous culture of whose projects has become so prevalent that it is mistaken for and has been officially adopted in lieu of and as the official art of the Islamic Revolution. Thus, a case in point would be where a proposed religious work of art (or project) is evaluated and considered to be acceptable or praiseworthy and commissioned to be produced under the auspices of a Saudi Arabian or Malaysian-type Islam and not on the basis of the value criteria which obtain in the socially and politically aware ideology of the Islam of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Correcting this outlook in the organs and institutions which have their hands on the cultural and artistic budgetary purse strings is an absolutely critical necessity.

3. The realignment of the relationship of the authentic currents within the art of the Islamic Revolution with the various organs of state and revolutionary cadres and institutions, and the transformation of what are currently cultural islands into a chain or archipelago, if you will, which is harmonious and dynamic in all of its various activities. Unfortunately, much of the regime’s capabilities which can be put in the service of revolutionary art are either wasted or remain underutilized. The leaders of the Friday congregational ritual devotions in each township have no connection whatever even with the most powerful artistic and cultural forces which produce authentic revolutionary art, or with the greatest of their productions. The vast organization of the *Basīj*⁷ does not use its enormous network for the distribution and propagation of revolutionary art. In this respect, the national press and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB) and the Office for the Propagation of Islam operate at a level that is much lower than what can be considered to be their respective optimal points. All of these

⁶ See footnote 3.

⁷ *Basīj*: a volunteer people’s militia established in 1979 at the command of Imam Khomeinī. The official estimate of the number of Basīj is 23.8 million, which seems high.

organizations at times deal with art as if it were a “necessary evil” which they have to deal with, and do so with utter reluctance, as if dealing with leprosy or some other contagion, giving the position of the regime and of the *Hezbollahīs*⁸ with respect to the art and culture of the revolution a critical and negative aura which is to be dispensed with as soon as possible rather than promoted, rendering the positive capacities and potentials of these organizations unused or underutilized.

4. The need for serious attention being paid to the matter of attrition (*rīzesh*) within the ranks of the faithful or the loss of support for the regime and for the Islamic values of the revolution; and the need to bring about conditions which are conducive to accretion (*rūyesh*) in the arena of revolutionary Islamic art; and a proactive and sustained program for diagnosing the problems in this field and for making strenuous efforts in order to engender the next generation of revolutionary Islamic artists and art.

⁸ See footnote 4.

The Cultural Front of the Islamic Revolution

In order to provide a clear and comprehensive picture of this front, it is necessary to view it from three perspectives: global, historical, and internal.

1. The Global Perspective

The Islamic Revolution of Iran is a cultural revolution with a vast range of influence in the region and in the world at large. A large number of intellectuals and theorists in Western Asia and within the territories of Islam, as well as in Europe and the Americas became aware of and interested in new concepts and categories after the triumph of the revolution. But the principles and objectives of the revolution are conveyed to them more by way of the political posture and actions of the society which is the fruit of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary order. For years on end, the Islamic Revolution was one of the least productive of revolutions in terms of its presenting its principles and values and beliefs to the outside world, consistently underperforming basic expectations of the systematized and programmatic production, publishing and distribution of works which provide accessible information on the bases of its beliefs, values and goals. But these facts notwithstanding, three decades after the victory of the revolution, it is still considered one of the main foci of alternate thought in the world, and is a beacon of hope for many among both the elite and the masses of people, especially in the world of Islam.

The advent of Talebān-like Islam⁹, with the West doing all in its power to put out the meme that this is indeed what Islam is, can be considered to be a planned effort on a global scale for the defamation of what Islam truly is in light of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. And of course this program has had its successes up to a point. The elucidation of the relative advantages of the revolutionary Islam of the Islamic Republic and its demarcation with respect to the Western world on one hand, and its comparison with the reactionary pseudo-religious sects and movements of *takfirī*, Wahhābī and Talebān-like Islam on the other, is one of the imperative prerequisites for the proper understanding of the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution.

Unfortunately, during many long years and for different reasons including an incorrect understanding of the phenomenon and discourse having to do with cultural penetration and the unwelcome influence and incursion of alien cultures (*tahājom-e farhangī*), the way in which the concept “cultural front” is juxtaposed with “the world” has usually been in terms which can be summarized as a “threat”, and the two other concepts of “ideals” and “opportunities” have been neglected or ignored; whereas in the early years of the revolution, the way we looked upon the world was more in terms of the ideals of the revolution which had a global reach and efficacy, and in terms of the great opportunities which the world presented the revolution with; and it was only in terms of these opportunities and the globalization of our ideals that cultural “threats” obtained at all.

⁹ *Eslām-e tālebānī* is a catch-all phrase that is used in Iranian Persian usage to cover *takfiri* Salafism and Wahhābism as well: it refers to various degenerate, reactionary and heretical sects which owe their genesis and existence primarily to Saudi Arabian (and latterly) of Qatari petrodollars, in combination with the aberrant heresy of Wahhābism which traces its intellectual roots to that 13th century miscreant, Eben Taymīya.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran was global in its objectives, and if its message and ideals were restricted within given geographical boundaries, its brilliant and inspirational nature would lose its luster within those boundaries as well. An important part of the revolutionary identity of the young generation of the seminal years of 1358 to 1360 (1980 to 1982, i.e. the second to fourth years of the revolution) consisted of the ideals which they held which had global application and efficacy; and consequently, hundreds if not thousands of forces within various centers throughout the whole world who were sympathetic to and held similar ideals and values as the wave created by the Islamic Revolution were transformed into loci of opportunity for the furthering of the goals of the revolution and for defending the Islamic order it engendered, so that the huge international potential which existed for resisting the forces of oppression were made manifest for the forces working within the revolution; and this gave them heart and hope, and added to and sustained their dynamism.

The universal values and opportunities offered and the threats posed by the Islamic Revolution must be taken in all together and analyzed as a whole in order for the true meaning of “the Cultural Front of the Islamic Revolution” to obtain and for its application to more closely approximate its universal scope.

2. The Historical Perspective

Another perspective from which one can take in the length and breadth of this front is the historical one. Imam Khomeinī strove diligently to demonstrate the historical connection of the Islamic Revolution with the early years of Islam, and beyond that, to the depth of the history of the struggle of all of the prophets commissioned by God to bring about equity and justice and to fight oppression. This historical fortification buttressed an important segment of the revolutionary identity and played a fundamental

part in explicating its ideals and mustering its various disparate thoughts and theories.

On a lower level and as the typology applies to the contemporary era, if we were to do a summary analysis of the cultural front of the revolution, we would perhaps consider six different phases for the explication of the historical stages which the cultural front of the revolution has gone through.

2.1. The era prior to the victory of the revolution

Although it is true that the Islamic Revolution (defined here as the overthrow of the monarchic order) occurred in an interval of about a year (early 1978 to February 11th, 1979), it should not be forgotten that a minimum of fifteen years of continuous intellectual, cultural and political struggle preceded it (starting from 1341/ 1963), which laid the groundwork for this momentous historical event. Thus, giving due and exacting attention to the cultural currents in this fifteen year period alongside the political history and the history of the armed struggle of that period is an indispensable necessity.

Books, pamphlets, classes, compact cassette recordings, public speeches and sermons and so on: these were the most important tools of the struggle and from the perspective of the regime, all of these were considered to be criminal activities and/ or criminal paraphernalia. And although many of the tribunes within the cultural, artistic and mass media arenas were at the disposal of secular forces, the intellectual current of revolutionary Islam was nevertheless able to raise the intellectual and cultural banner of the pure and authentic religion of Islam in the midst of the ruckus and din raised by the activists of left and right in the midst of a climate of severe political repression, and gradually to appropriate more and more facilities and ply more tools in the service of their cultural and artistic trade.

Ayatollah Tāleqānī has stated at some point, “We believed that it would take many a long year for our seminary students even to acquire the habit of reading the newspapers, but Imam Khomeinī turned them into newspaper writers and reporters in short shrift.”

In this fifteen year period, the most important element of the cultural front of the revolution consisted of the intellectuals and theorists and of their intellectual output. And these were gradually joined by artistic veins (such as poetry, theatre, revolutionary songs, etc.), and mass media (official and unofficial publications, speeches and lectures and sermons widely distributed on compact cassette, pamphlets and announcements, etc.).

Mosques, religious committees (*hay'at*), Islamic associations, religious libraries etc. acted as the central nodes of this cultural movement; and these centers had active and up to the minute connections with the movement's theorists, having put into place a relatively efficient network to meet the needs of the movement.

2.2. The period between 1357 to 1360 (1979 to 1982)

During this period, the cultural movement became omnipresent and the activities of the cultural front of the revolution gained breadth and momentum.

A foreign analyst has characterized the Islamic Revolution as “a big revolution using small media”. The revolution was able to establish a vast communication network among the masses of the people despite its not having access to means of mass communication such as television, radio or even newspapers, by utilizing compact cassettes and pamphlets and by reliance on its superior cultural assets.

The efficient and full use of the resources which were available and at hand enabled the leaders of the revolution to spread their message to the hearts of every town and to the farthest villages. But beside the innovative use of this hardware, a software upgrade also took place. Some of the existing communications, advertising and artistic media were put to use in new ways. The slogans of the revolution were poetic translations of its religious ideals which effervesced from the heart of this front together with appropriate concepts, rhythms and harmonies which were so striking that they were echoed throughout the nation and even received some international coverage. Revolutionary chorales formed in house and mosque basements, and the poets of the revolution and their performance artists gave voice to the budding art of the revolution. Posters, photographs and paintings each responded to the communication and artistic needs of the revolution in their own way.

With the triumph of the revolution, distinctions gradually arose between non-religious groupings from the main body of the revolution. Opportunists from the left and from the right – who had experience of organized and integrated cultural activity from at least the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1905 – 1911) and who had hundreds of artists and art circles and centers of cultural activity at their disposal – strove to portray a different image and interpretation of the principles and objectives of the revolution. But the sons and daughters of the Imam¹⁰ went to work despite their not having any educational background or experience and despite their not having any artistic infrastructure in place, and putting what little capital they had of pre-revolutionary artistic activity and relying entirely on the teachings of the partisans of the Imam, put their talents to use in the service of the pure and authentic Islam which had been revived by Imam Khomeinī; and in a praiseworthy and epic struggle, were able to fill the many lacunae which

¹⁰ The reference is to Imam Khomeinī, of course.

existed in their cadres and to come up victorious against the opposing cultural front, despite the latter's forces being more numerous and having significantly more experience in the arena.

The key ramparts and battlements of this cultural front were a few magazines and newspapers with nationwide distribution, some art centers, an Islamic center for teaching cinematography, and various and sundry other cultural centers out of which many writers and artists were introduced into society in different branches of the arts. Countless newspapers and periodicals were produced with both local, regional and national distributions and readerships by the cultural front of the revolution in order to counteract and neutralize the activities of the opposition. Thousands of chorales of revolutionary songs and theatre troops were formed in the mosques and school auditoria in order to defend the pure and unalloyed values of the Islamic revolution against its detractors and adversaries. Tens of thousands of speeches and sermons were delivered at the pulpits of mosques and in street gatherings for audiences who numbered from a handful to over a million. In this way, society was made aware of the values and goals of the revolution and kept abreast of the opportunities that presented themselves as well as of the threats which imperiled the movement. The intellectual struggle between the religiously-minded forces and the secular forces of communism and nationalism continued unabated daily from the highest levels to the level of the ordinary man on the street.

In parallel with the popular current which erupted spontaneously, another expansive arena opened up, and that was the accretion of small and large institutions and organizations of the Shah's regime which were active in the cultural and artistic field and which had escaped the clutches of the Shah's henchmen and fallen into the hands of the Moslem revolutionaries. The Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the National Iranian Radio and Television Network, the Ministry of Education, newspapers, etc. – all of these were in

need of theorists, writers, artists and administrators who, in addition to their task of refining the content and developing the human resources of these organizations, could come up with a new order for the administration of the nation's cultural needs.

2.3. The period between the years 1361 to 1368 (1983 to 1990)

The settling of the political turmoil of the country in the year 1360 (1982) and the elimination of the forces of opposition from the scene had several ramifications for the cultural front of the revolution.

The first of these was that a portion of the forces of the common people within this front who had joined the front and were active in cultural, artistic and propagation activities either because of the exigencies of the times which required their help, or simply because of the excitement that was generated by the triumph of the revolution and the consolidation of its victory – a portion of these forces gradually distanced themselves from the cultural arena in its narrower sense and returned to their previous occupations.

And secondly, a large part of the wave of the common people that was a large part of the cultural front went to the front lines of the Iran – Iraq war (September 1980 to August 1988) in order to defend the country and the revolution on the field of battle.

On the other hand, the position of the Party of God was gradually consolidated and control over the management and administration of the cultural arena came into the hands of the religious forces of the revolution. Consequently, the formal executive authority of the nation took over some of the commissions of the people's front, and this had the automatic effect of dampening the passion and excitement and spontaneity of cultural currents which had hitherto erupted spontaneously.

At the same time, some of the traditional obstacles which were positioned on the path of revolutionary art and which had been removed as a result of the explosive event which was the Islamic Revolution began to rear their heads and drive back the progress that had been made in the fields of art and the press and culture, which had all penetrated to the heart of the local mosques and religious gatherings, which now, as a result of the pressures brought to bear by this conservative force, returned to their strictly religious activities and did not allow revolutionary cultural and artistic activities to take place and to develop within the confines of their mosques. Consequently, the tide of revolutionary-Islamic choral groups and theatre troops and mosque libraries which was on the ascendant hitherto turned and began to wane.

Of course the first wave of the revolution left its indelible mark in some arenas such as that of the arts, and in these same years a qualitatively different artistic movement took shape under the auspices of the Islamic Revolution, and the experiences of this movement reached a kind of maturity toward the end of the decade of the nineteen eighties.

During this same period, the forces which were opposed to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and which had been defeated in the political arena began the process of examining and evaluating their situation *vis-à-vis* the cultural and intellectual milieu, in order to prepare themselves to return to the arena as soon as the opportunity arose.

2.4. The period between the years 1368 to 1376 (1990 to 1998)

One year after the acceptance of Resolution 598,¹¹ the government of President Hāshemī Rafsanjānī came to power and took on the responsibility

¹¹ United Nations Security Council resolution 598 (1987) adopted unanimously on 20 July 1987, called for an immediate ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and the

for the economic, social and cultural administration of the revolutionary nation of Iran with a new outlook and on the basis of new principles. During this period, the political opposition took advantage of the opening in the political climate and accelerated and expanded their activities. They began to devise false memes that posed challenges to the revolution and its religious order on the basis of imported ideologies and strove to create a solid integrated edifice in the intellectual, artistic and mass media arenas with which to confront the culture of the Islamic Revolution.

On the other hand, the weakening of the idealist elements in the new government, and the rise of an atmosphere of vagueness and ambiguity in the principles and ideals of the revolutionary order brought about a milieu of confusion and stagnation within the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution; so that rather than concentrating on disseminating the teaching of the differences between authentic, socially-conscious Islam and its socially somnolent pre-revolutionary forms, the cultural activities of the revolutionary activists focused more on the commonalities between the two and on the promotion of the popular forms of religiosity; and traditional religiosity gradually replaced the revolutionary and socially-conscious religiosity which Imam Khomeinī's movement was a clarion call for. As an example, the revolutionary songs which conveyed the clear and unambiguous message of authentic Islam and of the revolution gave their place to meaningless hymns which served the purpose of endowing certain ceremonies with an aura of pomp and circumstance; and so, on many occasions, the religious and cultural activities carried out under the aegis of

repatriation of prisoners of war, and for both sides to withdraw to the international border.

the Islamic Republic recalled those of the Hojratieh¹² Society, or of the apolitical Islam favored in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

The sum of these conditions brought about a wave of reaction and attrition among forces in favor of the Islamic Revolution which were present at its beginning; and what lent impetus to this wave within the main body of the cultural front was firstly the experience and capabilities of the forces of the opposition in waging a psychological war (by means of boycotting and ostracizing rival cultural elements); and secondly, the passivity and at times even commitment of high- and mid-level cultural administrators during Rafsanjānī's government relative to the ideological currents of the oppositional forces.

This period also saw the flaring up of the political differences of factions which were nominally allied with the revolution. The fire of factionalism spread to the cultural arena as well, and in this midst and over and above the struggle between the forces loyal to the Islamic Revolution and those opposed to it, a group of opportunists and profiteers entered the arena whose function was to produce projects which provided fodder for the balance sheets and financial reports of administrators and managers in government departments with cultural budgets to spend, and whose content was value-neutral and bereft of any revolutionary message, but which were at times produced under the guise of religious and spiritual programming.

¹² The Hojratieh Society is an organization which advocates strict political aloofness and non-involvement prior to the advent of the Mahdi (or universal savior of Islam) as its political posture and platform. If that sounds like a contradiction, it is because it is: if you choose not to decide (and to remain aloof), you still have made a choice.

2.5. The period between the years 1376 to 1384 (1998 to 2004)

In this period (which roughly corresponds with the years of Khātamī's presidency), the forces of opposition entered into the arena of battle with the Islamic Revolution openly and benefitted in their struggle from the intellectual and spiritual support of significant segments of the executive and legislative branches of government. This current was in part managed from outside the country from which quarters its strategies were directly planned by Western intelligence agencies.

This period was also witness to the creation of a vast program which was carried out by the mass media by means of which Western ideologies and ways of thinking were injected into the public discourse and through which counterrevolutionary intellectuals and artists and statesmen were given voice and support by Western-allied media organs and tribunes. This vast psychological operation strove to graft a new generation of secular and Enlightenment-type thinking onto the cultural body of the nation so that it could act to support the continuity of the defeated secular ideology of the Enlightenment within the Islamic Revolution.

But this same cultural thrust of the forces of the opposition caused the fog of stagnation and sluggishness that had set in during the previous period in the cultural front to gradually be lifted and various movements to appear which responded first and foremost to the challenges that were posed to the creedal principles of the new order by this intellectual incursion.

Additionally, some administrators who worked with a sense of urgency in the intellectual and cultural arena were willing to set aside the negligence which the cultural arena suffered during the previous era of economic development and to welcome the activities of the intellectual and cultural forces of the

cultural front of the revolution. But the development of the cultural front was asymmetrical and imbalanced and its development was reactive to the exigencies of the moment, being mainly directed at responding to questions and memes designed to spread misconceptions and misunderstandings in the political as well as intellectual and cultural domains. And so the arts and the content of the national radio and television networks and of the media more generally remained neglected and deprived of their due attention.

2.6. The period between the years 1384 to 1386 (2004 to 2006)

During the ninth cycle of elections for the presidency of the Islamic Republic,¹³ the extremism of the opposition on the one hand and the vigilance of the supporters of the revolution on the other, meant that once again the discourse of post-revolutionary Iran entered into a serious confrontation with secular forces, out of which it emerged victorious. But the important point that emerged from this challenge was that an important section of the cultural front of the revolution in its specific sense separated from the wave of the cultural mass and, having been influenced by the ideology of the opposition, consented to an alliance with them. The government of President Ahmadīnejād failed to support an important part of the revolution's talented artists, even though the reverse of this obtained with respect to the revolution's intellectuals and theorists; and this distinction itself betrays the divide that exists between artistic and intellectual circles in the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution.

Unfortunately, the great victory within the discourse of the Islamic Revolution of the ninth cycle of elections for the presidency of the Republic has yet to be capitalized on, and it can even be said that there is a sort of paralysis or lethargy that can be seen on the part of the government in its failure to

¹³ The ninth cycle of elections took place after President Khātami's two terms had expired, where President Rafsanjānī (35.9%) unsuccessfully competed against President Ahmadinajād (61.8%) and was defeated in the second round.

absorb and strengthen revolutionary cultural elements to be put in the service of the consolidation of these gains. Even the serious confrontation with and calling to account or the replacement of administrators who fell in line with the current of the forces of the opposition that was envisaged prior to the victory of President Ahmadinejad in the elections did not take place, and many of the administrators continue to pursue a conservative and passive position with respect to this current, preferring not to rock the boat.

3. The View from Within

What are the dimensions of the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution and what elements is it comprised of? The cultural front can be divided into four main categories:

1. The theoretical branch, consisting of its nature, its ideals, concepts, objectives, and descriptors.
2. The creative elements: intellectual, artistic, cultural.
3. Administrators and politicians.
4. The intended audience.

We shall proceed with an analysis of each of these four categories.

3.1 The theoretical branch of the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution

It can be said that the most important problem confronting the cultural front is the distortion of its principles and ideals, and that without making course corrections and a concerted effort at a clear and categorical redefinition and clarification of the revolution's true nature and objectives, any movement in other domains will only add to the complexity of the knot that will eventually have to be untied.

Earlier, when we were reviewing the history of the cultural front, we stated that the culture of the Islamic Revolution is grounded in revolutionary Islam, and that whenever the ideals of this authentic Islam are better manifested in the workings of the system and in the discourse of the society it engenders, cultural activities will also see a greater flowering and have greater efficacy and influence.

The Islamic Revolution embodies the confluence of the individual and society, culture and politics, justice and spirituality, and mysticism and mythos. Complying with this true but delicate point requires individual vigilance, effective social oversight and the continual updating of one's understanding. **On either side of the promontory of the revolution's path, the abyss of the purposive quest for the establishment of ideals that is devoid of spiritual grounding, and the abyss of a spirituality absent the purpose of establishing social as well as individual ideals, are agape and patiently await the unwary traveler.**

If we look at the middle of the decade of the eighties (2003 to 2007) with an objective lens, we can see how a large number of the cultural institutions of the Islamic Republic have fallen prey to both of these prevalent errors and by so doing have placed the facilities of the revolution at the disposal either of reactionaries or of modernists.

If we look to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB) as the vignette that symbolizes the way in which the culture of the Islamic Republic is administered, we can see that the ideological veins of the apoliticism of the Hojjatieh Society¹⁴ are present and clearly visible; and at the same time, we observe with dismay how modernists and Enlightenment-enamored intellectuals are esteemed and given places of honor and afforded

¹⁴ See footnote 12.

access to the megaphones which are the apparatus of the mass broadcasts of the community-owned media.

Losing sight of the horizon of the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and of the purpose and objectives of revolutionary Islam deprives its cultural front of many of the themes and teachings of the revolution.

To speak in specific terms, the history of the Islamic Revolution, be it from 1963 to 1979 or from 1979 to the present, is one of the most neglected areas of our cultural endeavors, such that less than one percent of the roughly two thousand feature-length films that have been produced in the last twenty years is devoted to the history of the revolution.

This neglect is the functional equivalent of a boycott, and as such, it cannot be easily explained away and dismissed.

A main reason for this omission and neglect is the tendency toward abstraction and the abstract treatment of topics related to the themes and teachings of the revolution. The predominance of abstract philosophical discussions broadcast in order to establish the rightfulness (*moheqq*) of Islam has detracted from the role of the *agent* of that rightfulness (*mohaqqeq*) in the revolution and within the Islamic order. Whereas we can observe many of the values and pure and authentic teachings of Islam as being brought about and embodied by the agent¹⁵ of this rightfulness in the glorious history of the revolution and of the revolutionary order that followed in its wake.

¹⁵ The reference here is undoubtedly to Imam Khomeinī, as well as to the revolutionary scholars who preceded him, as well as to the Immaculate Imams عليه السلام and to the Prophet صلى الله عليه وآله of Islam himself, of course. May God's peace and serenity be unto all of them.

Documenting the history of the revolution is a way of giving objective form to its values and of demonstrating the possibility of the realization of its ideals given the will and forbearance and perseverance and sacrifices of the people. If one were to adopt a cynical outlook, one could conclude that doing so is a completion of the argument and thus rests the case against a large number of politicians and bureaucrats working in the cultural arena, and exposes their political position, which is one that has become wayward relative to the agent of the rightfulness of the authentic and revolutionary Islam of the revolution, i.e. relative to Imam Khomeinī's revolutionary and socially conscious Islam.

The propagation of individual and collective models of struggle and resistance, and demonstrating the scope and depth of sacrifices that have been made in order to bring about the victory of the revolution and to consolidate the revolutionary-Islamic character of its order, elevates the consciousness and motivation of the masses for their effective and perpetual demand of these values from their representatives in the political sphere. And of course, this would not be in the interests of those elements active within the regime at various administrative levels who have given up on the revolutionary ideals of the revolution and become passive or whose ideology has become degenerate; these types of people would prefer for the intellectual atmosphere and cultural propagation milieu of the Islamic Republic be guided and formed on the basis of the principles of the apolitical and hence innocuous Islam that is prevalent in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, which is more in harmony with the type of development, administration and political economy which they have in mind.

But given such an approach, cultural activities which aim to clearly explain the mission and objectives of the prophets and the teachings of the Quran and to provide criteria and standards and paradigmatic examples of the revealed sacred teachings, will not be well received if their political position

is inclusive of the basic Qoranic tenet of treating each other with justice and equity, “*so that men might behave with equity [toward one another]*.”¹⁶ Instead, what we see supported and promoted at times is whatever programming or project that has the superficial aura of religiosity or spirituality or piety, even if its message is at variance or even at odds with that of the revolutionary Islam that is supposed to be the Islam of the revolutionary Islamic Republic.

Perhaps the time has come whereat just as his eminence Imam Khomeinī at times explained the difference between authentic Islam and the various facets of American Islam; now, at the dawn of the fourth decade of the revolution, to restore this discourse and to explicate the concrete characteristics of the pure Islam of the revolution and to differentiate it with the variety of other readings which have sprung up, be they of the syncretistic variety, royalist, American, capitalist and so on. In this way, a great treasury of knowledge of Islamic principles and concepts and themes from the Islamic Revolution would be revived and, with the help of God, would turn into a veritable movement in the field of cultural activities.

3.2 Creative elements

Without educated elements that become the driving force for the production of culture and channels which transform the teachings and values of a given culture into cultural goods and products, culture will not only fail to progress but will stagnate and will not even be able sustainable. Creative elements in the intellectual and artistic arenas in various media must always be endowed both with the proper motivation as well as with the necessary facilities which

¹⁶ Here is the relevant Qoranic passage: (57:25) “Indeed, even aforetime did We send forth Our apostles with all evidence of this truth; and through them We bestowed revelation from on high, and thus gave you a balance wherewith to weigh right and wrong, so that men might behave with equity.”

engender their creative acts. Unfortunately, many of the human resources of the Islamic Revolution have been squandered or lay dormant as a result of the mismanagement and lack of vision of the executives and bureaucrats in various governmental organs and cultural institutions of the country; or worse, their talents have been used in projects which promote deviant or at best erroneous themes and values. And all of this is taking place in a situation wherein our adversaries view and act on the efficient management of human resources as a fundamental and indispensable principle and have a system that ensures that no such wastage of human resources occurs.

Regrettably, looking at the guidance institutions working in the cultural arena, and even at those who are administrators in institutions whose senior staff are not appointed by the different administrations that come and go with each election cycle and are thus immune to the whims of the political climate, we see that the report card of these educational institutions who are responsible for training the next generation of artists and cultural activists is a poor one. The college of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB) and Soore University are two concrete examples of the inefficient management of the cultural education of the nation, a large number of whose graduates end up working for the opposing front.

The reform of educational institutions, especially those in the field of the visual arts and cinema and broadcast media requires new textbooks, new professors and new approaches, and one cannot expect the process that is currently in place to have output that can be considered to be brilliant by any stretch of the definition of the word.

Beside the cultivation and training of formidable talent, it is necessary to organize the existing forces at hand, and to provide them with the incentives and facilities they need to operate at the peak of their potential. Indeed, it

can be argued that the current system of the administration of the cultural arena of the country is incapable of managing the actual artistic and cultural talent that is at hand in a way that directs this precious resource toward the ideals of the revolution and to fulfilling the real cultural and artistic needs of the nation. An important part of this inefficiency and ineptitude can be traced back to the disarray which exists concerning the basic principles, tenets and values of the cultural front; and it is this disarray that is the cause of the rifts that exist between administrators, artists, intellectuals, journalists and writers working in the cultural front. Another reason has to do with the incorrect decisions concerning the appointment of cultural administrators. Unfortunately, the administration of cultural institutions has suffered and continues to suffer very severely from political cronyism, nepotism and self-serving patronage.

One of the infamous mistakes with respect to the administration of cultural institutions is the cry, "We do not have enough [talented and qualified] personnel!" How can it be that a revolution whose nuclear scientists have an average age of less than thirty cannot cultivate and produce reporters and writers and film makers!? What is interesting to note is that some of these cultural administrators who made this bogus claim in the first year of their taking office continue to do so in their tenth year! And this is while huge financial resources have been put at their disposal for the elimination of this claimed lacuna.

Sadly, many take the attrition that is endemic in the cultural front very lightly. In addition to the theoretical and ideological attrition that is attributable to the lack of an active intellectual infrastructure and support base that can respond to questions posed and pay attention to seeming theoretical contradictions, an important segment of the ongoing attrition within the cultural front can be traced to economic hardships and administrative inefficiencies and ineptitudes. The recognition and appreciation of artistic

talent and providing financial and moral support to the highly talented within our cultural forces is usually the exception which underscores the rule. By way of example, let us make a comparison with the world of sport. The money that is spent on a young footballer from the public purse are orders of magnitude more than that which is spent on a young artist; and if a top shelf writer of the revolution asks for one tenth of the money which the government spends on a sports champion, he will immediately be accused of being greedy and of demanding a misappropriation of government funds.

Some time ago, Mr. Rezā Dāvārī resigned his post as the general manager of the quarterly publication *Farhang*, giving the reason for his resignation to be the unbearable financial pressures he faced in paying the salaries of the operations personnel of the magazine whose payments he would at times have to postpone for several months. There are many such examples, to the point that such financial hardships and struggles for and delays in payment are almost the rule. There are instances of thinkers and writers and artists who have not had a single book of theirs published despite years and even decades of activity; and the going to press of books sometimes takes years in numerous cases.

3.3 Administrators and politicians.

If we take a partisan view of the situation, the intellectual and artistic forces of the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution should not, as a rule, be isolated but rather, should have close ties with other arenas. But one of the serious lacunae of the cultural front is the absence of the support which it should naturally be receiving from the political and social spheres. Cultural productions and works of art are in need of serious social support. For example, given its potential, the institution of the leadership of the Friday Congregational Prayer service pays little if any attention to the artists of the revolution. We would perhaps not be remiss in stating that in the last twenty

years or more, not a single couplet of verse from one of the poets of the revolution has been uttered in a single one of the over four hundred sermons that are delivered each and every week throughout the various cities and towns of the nation; and that almost none of the representatives of the sovereign jurisdicator, the *valī-e faqīh* (i.e. of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Alī Khāmeneī) has any connection, even if it be at the level of one tenth that of the Leader of the Revolution himself, with the artists in their districts or with their works of art. Vast organizations such as the Basij¹⁷ with its tens of thousands of Centers of Resistance, does not have a single program for effectively introducing the prominent personalities working in the artistic front and in the media of the revolution to the faithful believers within their twenty million plus organization.

The Ministry of Education which has close to twenty million teachers and pupils under its umbrella thinks of itself more as an educational institution whose mission is to produce graduates in the various scientific and technical fields of study, rather than as a unit within the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution. And so, consequently, the unsurpassed capabilities of the Ministry for talent spotting, and for the recruitment and guidance of young talent, and for making available the products of the cultural front of the revolution to children and young adults, etc. – these potentials are undoubtedly underutilized and at times even turn into channels and tribunes for the opposite front. The prevalence of the works of writers such as Gholām-Hosayn Sāedī, Ahmad Shāmlū, Fereydūn Moshīrī, etc. in the textbooks of the Ministry are examples of the situation that we are facing.

Unfortunately, our political leaders are strangers to the cultural front, whereas the cultural nature of the Islamic Revolution necessitates that the authorities at the higher echelons of the regime have at least a minimal level

¹⁷ See footnote 7.

of familiarity with the intellectual and artistic and mass media currents within the front, even if this is merely at the level of knowing the important names and gaining some general information by monitoring the milieu at a distance. But it is a sad fact that the majority of the members of the Cultural Committee of the Majles (the Iranian legislative chamber) could not name the names of many of the prominent and renowned *hezbollahī*¹⁸ writers and artists if pressed to do so.

The sum total of these conditions induces a sort of alienation and a sense of having been forgotten in the creative forces within the cultural front of the revolution.

3.4 The intended audience

The national average for the print run of books is between two and three thousand; and if a movie sells more than two hundred thousand tickets it is considered a top seller. In a country of 75 million people, the market for cultural products for domestic consumption is not a thriving one. And the direness of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the cost of such products is very low relative to the cost of similar products in other countries.

Unfortunately, this low participation ratio is even lower for the religiously minded and *hezbollahī* segment of the populace. The cultural consumption of individuals, households, institutions and various and sundry *hezbollahī* associations is extremely low; of which a small portion has to do with the paucity of financial resources, the lion's share of the responsibility being due to the failure to create an interest in culture and its products, and to the failure to disseminate information and properly to distribute such products.

¹⁸ See footnote 4.

The modernist and Enlightenment-enamored current has a small but loyal and committed audience, and given its several decades of institutional experience, it has been able successfully to bring about and manage the production, distribution and consumption cycle. But on this side of the isle, while the Basīj people's militia has tens of thousands of bases and facilities, Mr. Qadamī's book *The Henna-dyeing Festival (Jashn-e Hanābandān)* has yet to reach its second edition after the passage of more than fifteen years! And the names and works of numerous writers and artists of the Islamic Revolution remain completely unknown to tens of thousands of *hezbollahī* centers and gatherings.

In a case study of the mosques of Mashhad in 2002, it was found that the shelves of the libraries of the mosques contained works by Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, a history of the music of the world, a history of Iranian theater, and so on, all in high quality and high-priced formats from publishing houses belonging to the opposition, but not even a single copy of a book from the Bureau of the Literature of Resistance was found, and the *Sahīfe-ye Nūr's*¹⁹ absence was equally conspicuous. Alas, these kinds of statistics can be found at will.

Thus, if the indispensability of revolutionary artistic and cultural works is properly explained and this belief takes on general currency among groups of *hezbollahīs*, the cultural front of the revolution can even be managed with the budgets that are at the disposal of households, and we would not have to bother with raising the administrative vision and managerial expertise of the authorities in the various institutions and organs of state to such a level for them to consider themselves a link in the chain that is the cultural front, and for them to consider one of their main missions to be the propagation

¹⁹ This is the name given to the multi-volume collection of the speeches and sermons of Imam Khomeinī.

and distribution of cultural and artistic and intellectual works of the cultural front of the revolution.

The Friday Congregational Prayers, the imams of the mosques, the bases of the Basij militia, the schools of the Ministry of Education, colleges and seminaries, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB), the Office for the Propagation of Islam, NGO's under the auspices of the National Youth Organization, and the cultural departments of various state organizations: all these are capable of becoming seedbeds out of which creative saplings can sprout.

The global audience is yet another example of a completely neglected arena which the culture of the revolution can enter. While several films have been broadcast by the national television networks about the life of Salvador Allende, President Mohammad-Ali Rajāi and Prime Minister Mohammad-Javād Bāhonar are figures who are completely unknown to the new generations of Iranians, let alone to the general international audience!

The Islamic Revolution has numerous events and personalities and new concepts to offer up to the brotherhood of man, but, regrettably, despite the vastness of the resources available to institutions such as the Organization of Cultural Relations (a branch of the Foreign Office), the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB), and the Office for the Propagation of Islam, these concepts and personalities remain in the twilight of existence on the world stage.



These four sections (theory, creativity, administration and the audience) must be linked together with bonds that are dynamic and organic in order for them to be able to convey the true meaning of the cultural front. Any infirmity, defect, weakness or inefficiency in one sector can spread to other sectors. And the reverse of this tenet also holds: in the event that the correct balance is struck between these sectors, the development and improvement of each will also be reflected in the other sectors and each of the improvements in each sector's potentials will have a positive synergistic effect on all of the others.

Unfortunately, the absence of a serious and dynamic relationship between these sectors has at times meant that their respective potentials have remained unactualized, and their growths have thus been stunted and their potentials wasted.

The most important fault lines in our cultural front

1. The disconnect between religious knowledge and art

One of the most important causes of the emergence of this disconnect is the creation of confusion in the clear teachings of the religion and the offering up of bogus interpretations of Islam. While the opposition expended strenuous efforts to distort the reality of the socially conscious Islam of the revolution, unfortunately, the truth of the teachings of revolutionary Islam were not properly explicated, so that the religious literature in the wake of the revolution gradually turned into a new iteration of the pre-revolutionary Islam of the 1960's, and took on the hue of the apoliticism of the Hojjatīeh Society²⁰ in many critical junctures.

Theorists working in the field of Islam proceeded to provide theoretical defenses of the principles upon which the Islamic revolutionary order was based and to advocate its legitimacy, whereas the true role of such theorists is to mentally proceed *ahead* of the realities of the day like scouts, and to identify the needs of the movement of the revolution and its order with respect to each stage that it is to traverse and to provide answers for the challenges of each of these stages. The paucity of detailed and forward thinking theoretical considerations and mapping distorts the intellectual and informational path that artists and thinkers are to traverse and places them in a social and political crisis, preventing their creativity from offering effective options and alternatives alongside the social developments to which

²⁰ See footnote 12.

they are witness. And this is because the outer cultural *jehād* or sacred struggle is dependent on an inner *jehād* that is being waged in the hearts and minds of the artist. Unfortunately, there has been much inattention and neglect that has taken place in this field.

Every revolutionary order fails to achieve some of its ideals because of a shortage of human resources, attrition, enemy conspiracies, etc. and these shortfalls give rise to inner contradictions. One of the roles of the artists alongside the theorists is to explain that, firstly, these conditions are challenges that every revolution must necessarily face and are not products of the revolution, and that these challenges are indications of the continuity and longevity of the revolution rather than signs of its defeat. In conditions in which the problems of the Islamic Revolution were performance-based (manpower, the nature of the struggle, oversight, unmet demand, etc.), the dissidents immediately posited any deficiencies in the realization of the ideals of the revolution as being due to its principles and fundamental presuppositions. Consequently, instead of engaging the performance-based problems and trying to solve them by bringing to bear the capacities of the revolution, a group proceeded reactively to defend the principles and legitimacy of the revolutionary order rather than working for the positive realization of its objectives. The art of the revolution which needed tangible and concrete and intuitive raw materials did not understand the language and literature of the revolution's theorists who were engaged in theological apologetics and the abstractions of pure logic in their discursive arguments concerning the legitimacy of the revolutionary order; and this disconnect caused religious and revolutionary knowledge to be deprived of the revolution's artistic capacities, and of the art of the revolution to be left in a state of confusion and to wander around aimlessly and busy itself with matters of little consequence.

2. The disconnect between the media and art and between the media and cultural theory

One of the most important lacunae in the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution is the media. While the opposition's forces have an active and professional presence in this area, the strongest personalities on our side continue to close the doors to their respective cultural enterprises in quick succession. Examples of this are numerous and include Seyyed Mehdi Shojā'ī's *Neyestān*, Mehdi Nasīrī's *Sobh*, Salīmī-Namīn's *Kayhān Havāī*, Morteza Sarhangī's *Kamān*, and Yād Māndegār's *Mehr*.

Given the capacities of the large circulation newspapers *Ettelā'āt*, *Kayhān*, *Jomhūrī-e Eslāmī*, *Qods*, *Jām-e Jam*, *Hamshahrī*, *Irān*, and others, what role could they have played in framing the right questions and posing the right resolution to the issues, promoting the right personalities, developing the culture, and more generally, of directing the public discourse in the interest of the needs of the revolutionary order, and to what extent were these capabilities utilized? Are the number of *hezbollahī* intellectuals which have become known national figures due to the efforts of the above newspapers in any way comparable to the number which the opposition can claim to have promoted (by way of, say, newspapers such as *Sharq* or *Jāme'e*)?

Has any steering committee been formed for the purpose of transferring the revolutionary-Islamic intellectual output of the seminary and university systems to the public sphere by way of the mass media?

3. The generational divide

Many of the high-spirited youth who become active in the cultural front of the revolution are not familiar with their own historical background and do not understand their identity and mission as being a link in a continuous cultural chain; thus, the paradigmatic examples and lessons of the past and

other values within our cultural memory are not properly transferred to them, causing them to fall victim to false routines and to repeat the previous errors.

In such a situation, the accumulation of professional experiences, institutional memories and value systems does not obtain and each generation has to start from scratch and it is almost as if the wheel has to be reinvented again and again in each new generation. This is particularly the case in the cultural arena where durable battlements have not been created. As an example, the opposition has a periodical called *Film* which has continuously been in circulation for over 25 years. But on our side of the isle, the editor in chief of the weekly periodical *Sorūsh* has been changed four times in Mr. Zarghāmī's tenure as publisher alone!

The major cultural bases of the regime are the publicly owned institutions whose *raison d'être* and mission changes with vicissitudes in the political climate or with changes to its management; and this state of affairs does not allow a continuous and sustained policy to be implemented in these institutions. The cultural forces of the revolution all seem to be operating on the basis of a revolving door policy, and it is very rare to find someone engaged in the cultural arena that has been working in a given institution for more than four or five years.

4. The disconnect between production and consumption

4.1 The theory of enticement

There have been a lot of solutions proposed in recent years concerning the crisis of the end user in the cultural front of the revolution, including the

theory of enticement whose objective has been to offer a more attractive portrayal of Islam by way of an array of superficial slogans and embellishments, and approach which has turned into the dominant method in cultural policy-making circles.

But with a little deliberation we can see that the main problem lies in the content rather than its form or the way in which it is being presented. These policy-makers initially distance Islam from its social ideals and goals, limiting it to an Islam whose efficacy is limited to the individual and is thus reactionary rather than revolutionary. And this results in these watered down versions losing their attractiveness compared to the content proffered by the opposition, all of which have their own specific and integral themes and political backdrops. Having made this fatal mistake, they then try to make this modified religion attractive by adding permitted and at times prohibited additives to the mix, all the while forgetting the wisdom of the adage that you can put lipstick on a pig, but at the end of the day it will still be a pig.

Naturally, in such a cultural environment, a significant synergy exists between professional opportunists and hucksters and sham-mongers and peddlers on one hand, and the conservative and reactionary administrators and bureaucrats who appreciate and value the wares on offer, and place what are essentially the thinly disguised scams of con artists on pedestals and honor the “artists” who have produced them, so that they can themselves be recognized as righteous and pious practitioners and bask in the glory of the limelight of the secular religion. Meanwhile, the fact remains that the most attractive and most popular cultural productions among the community of believers were those which were allied with and were thematically the closest to the authentic ideology of the revolution. These include such movies as Ebrāhīm Hātāmīkā’s *The Glass Travel Agency (Azhāns-e Shīsheī)*, Majīd Majīdī’s *Children of Heaven*, Kamāl Tabrīzī’s *Leily Is with Me*, and Reza Mīrkarīmī’s *Under the Moonlight*, to the novels of Seyyed Mahdī Shojā’ī, the

poetry of Alī Mo’allem and Alī-Rezā Qazve, and the caricatures of Seyyed Mas’ūd Shojā’ī.

Unfortunately, rather than resulting in the accretion of the forces of the cultural front, the theory of enticement has, not surprisingly, ended up adding to the wavering and attrition of its forces, and has turned the unadulterated atmosphere of the artists and writers among the rank and file of the faithful to something akin to that which obtains in the free market mentality of the secular opposition.

And lastly, there is another innate problem in this approach of enticement which is that if everyone is engaged in the “enticement” approach and is intent on attracting the opposition in this way, the question remains as to what is to be done with respect to the nurturing and guidance and growth of those who are already on board (and whose numbers are nothing to scoff at)? Who is to address the intellectual and cultural needs of the hundreds of thousands of *hezbollahī* youth that join the ranks of the cultural front from within the mosques and seminaries when they come of age?? The “enticement” approach does not address this basic question.

4.2 The theory of distribution

The movement of the modernists and Enlightenment-type thinkers and the current of intellectual degeneracy (*jaryān-e ebtezāl*) both have their respective steady producers and consumers of cultural products and productions. What has been institutionalized there is the active distribution network of their front. Publishing houses, book stores, newspapers, websites, and local and student publications are all responsible for creating potential and actual connectivity between the two ends of the spectrum of production and consumption. Where there is demand, the supply is made available; and where something is supplied, demand for it is generated. Unfortunately,

thirty some years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, many of the worthy works that have been produced do not reach their intended audience for various reasons, from inadequate distribution strategies and mechanisms to lack of the requisite bricks and mortar infrastructure, including distribution centers, book stores, advertising budgets, and so on. And then, as a result of the poor sales which are the natural consequence of this sorry state of affairs, it is claimed that there is no demand for *hezbollahī*-type works! For example, Mr. Qadamī's book *The Henna-dyeing Festival (Jashn-e Henābandān)* which is a powerful work has yet to reach its second edition after the passage of more than fifteen years. And these kinds of examples are plentiful.

4.3 The global audience

The Islamic Revolution's message is compassionate and one that has universal appeal. Over and above the ideal that a work must be produced at the level of global standards, it can be said that many of the cultural works produced (be they intellectual, artistic or formatted for visual media) are worthy of being translated into different languages; and this is also one of the most neglected fields in the cultural front of the Islamic Revolution. But the reality is that there are books that have been recommended by the Leader of the Revolution as suitable candidates for translation over ten years ago, but which have yet to see the light of the serious attention of the relevant authorities.

5. The disconnect between the administrators and the producers

One of the basic problems that exists in the cultural administration apparatus of the Islamic Republic is the intellectual, methodological and ideological distances which exist between some cultural administrators and bureaucrats and the producers who are supposed to produce artistic works and cultural productions under their administrative aegis. The cultural administration of the Islamic Republic requires its own special administrative culture. The ideal

cultural administrator must be endowed at one and the same time with an excellence of virtues (*fazl*), empathy, the correct envisioning of the revolution's ideals, dynamism and administrative circumspection and resourcefulness (*tadbīr*); or at a minimum, to be endowed with a portion of each of these attributes. His failure properly to interact and manage the denizens of the world of the arts and culture will be commensurate and directly proportional to his shortcomings in these attributes; and he will perforce demonstrate his shortcomings either by eliminating artistic and intellectual resources who are more virtuous and more visionary and better managers than he is, or, he will do so by his patronage of opportunists who are happy to fill his book of accounts within budget without imposing the above-mentioned strains on his person.

The culture of the Islamic Revolution is a revolutionary culture and non-revolutionary administrators and bureaucrats, and political operatives, and those whose priority is to enrich themselves materially through their office, or those with conservative temperaments will not be able properly to execute the functions of this office. Furthermore, any sort of weakness or political triangulation or ideological deviation on the part of such administrators will immediately be picked up on by the artists and cultural activists under his patronage and will be doubly reflected in society.

What is to be done?

Granted that the cultural front of the Islamic revolution properly identifies its capabilities and opportunities and implements them wisely and in accordance with its original ideals, it has the potential of revivifying itself and creating a revived movement within Iran and the Islamic world at large. The most important of these opportunities are the following:

1. The treasure trove of the transcendent teachings and wisdom of the Islamic Revolution that are in harmony with man's primordial disposition and innate nature and which are taken from the lost sea of Islamic knowledge, be it spiritual, scientific, political, social, individual, moral, philosophical or otherwise; that has great applicability and efficacy for contemporary man's predicaments, and which in many instances are the offerings of the intellectual heritage of the Islamic Revolution which are peerless and unique.
2. The many actually and concretely realized concepts, values and ideals pertaining to the individual as well as to society at large which are the fruit of the decades-long history of the Islamic Revolution and its revolutionary order, which is able to realize and offer them as a tangible and felt experience rather than merely as unapplied theory.
3. A prominent and brilliant collection of intellectual and artistic works and cultural productions which have been produced under the auspices of the aspirations of the Islamic Revolution during the course of the last four decades by the revolution's pious and faithful thinkers, writers, journalists,

artists, film-makers etc. And while it is true that the sum total of this collection is not quantitatively at an ideal level and does not meet each and every one of the vast needs of society and of each individual, but nevertheless, it has been able successfully to break the back of the sterile cultures, aimless “art” and slipshod and improvident strains of thought which predominated, and to open the arena to greater and brighter experiential horizons.

We have today, in almost all of the various facets of the arts (cinema, theater, poetry, music, caricature, calligraphy, novels, painting, graphic arts, etc.), in the mass media (the press, internet, radio, television, documentary film-making, etc.) and in thought (philosophy, political science, sociology, history, etc.), intellectual and artistic works and cultural productions which are first rate (on a national and possibly regional rather than an international and global scale), which have been produced despite the institutional and administrative weaknesses and failures mentioned above; and these success can become mainstays for future directions and activities.

4. There are first rate cultural personalities and intellectuals active in almost every arena of the arts; but that is not to say that the light of some of these luminaries is not hidden from view as a consequence of the psychological operations and fourth generation warfare waged by the enemies of the revolution, so that the impact that is worthy of their art is not fully felt in the public cultural discourse.

5. The young artistic talents of the new generation who yearn for the ideals of the revolution, if properly guided and supported, have the potential of being transformed into a force that can revivify the Iranian-Islamic civilization, and bring about a renaissance in Iranian culture and even in the culture of the world. Talents such as H. F., a youth from the village of Sarvestān who grew up in an extremely poor family and who does not even

have the means to pay the 140,000 Toumam (\$38) registration fee to enroll in the Payām-e Nūr University and who currently makes a living as a laborer. Or the case of A. E. who on one hand is a bread baker's assistant in one of the villages of Gā'em-Shahr, and on the other, writes articles whose brilliance is only matched by that of the best journalists of the capital. And so on.

6. The vast conglomeration of state organs and institutions which are at least nominally responsible for the training and cultivation of artistic talent and for the production and distribution of artistic works and cultural productions of substance and value, and which are endowed with the proper and sufficient organizational and fiscal wherewithal, and the extent of whose networks reaches from Tehran to the farthest villages of the country.

7. Ayatollah Khāmeneī, a leader of the revolution who is urbane and cultured and who is a connoisseur and patron of the arts, and who, over and above the depth and breadth of his cultural vision, has a good grasp of the inner workings of the cultural, intellectual and artistic realms of the country; and who can be the most reliable and steadfast cornerstone for an effort to muster and organize our artistic forces and facilities in a long-term movement whose mission would be the bringing about of deep changes in the culture of the nation on the basis of our authentic Islamic principles and goals.

Having a detailed understanding of these capacities and paying due attention to the opportunities which they avail our policymaking and planning, implementation and operation faculties will undoubtedly bring about a cultural transformation and is the first step in the path that is the response to the question "What is to be done?"

Some of the main suggested strategies

1. The Reevaluation and revitalization of existing capacities

Having reached this stage, state organs and institutions and their executives must not act in accordance with past behavior patterns or in reaction to the weaker position of others but rather in accordance with the mission statement of the cultural front of the revolution and its lofty ideals, and their actions should be evaluated relative to their own potentials and the work that it enables them to produce but which has remained underutilized and unproduced. This reevaluation should encompass institutions large and small, from the very large organs of state and ministries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB), the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and not least the Ministry of Education; to smaller institutions such as the Ettela'aāt corporation, the cultural division of the Astān-e Qods-e Razavī, and the like.²¹ Sometimes these smaller organizations act as the last refuge of tens of artists and cultural actors who are talented and even prominent in their respective fields but who have fallen by the wayside for lack of proper appreciation and support and are in need of the mental, emotional and financial support and security that can be provided by such institutions. And unfortunately, in all

²¹ Astān-e Qods-e Razavī is a *bonyād* or autonomous charitable foundation based in Mashhad, Iran. It is the administrative organization which manages the Imam Reza shrine and various institutions which belong to the organization.

too many cases, this vital support has not been forthcoming, and the resources and facilities of the public treasury are instead put at the disposal of neutral and uncaring agents, or worse, of adversarial forces.

2. Bridging the divides of the disconnects

A special committee should be formed for the express purpose of bridging the divides of these disconnects and for providing efficient hardware interfaces and software protocols for increasing the interconnectivity of the various hardware and software capacities of the cultural front, and for increasing the internal throughput between the intellectual, artistic and media arenas, and for capitalizing on the resultant synergies.

3. Strengthening the private sector and the grassroots elements within the cultural front of the revolution

The cultural front of the Islamic Revolution must attain to such a level of strength and autonomy that it becomes immune and impervious to the political changes of election cycles and their concomitant executive and administration changes, so that it can effectuate and realize its goals by means of long-term planning. One of the main strategies for bringing about this autonomy is providing support to the formation of independent nodes for the production, publication and distribution of worthy artistic products and productions as adjuncts to artistic and cultural institutions and organizations, universities, magazines, websites, publication houses, and independent centers working in literature and the arts.

Given the formation of such cultural nodes, the government's latitude to act will be increased several fold.