



Comparing Turkey and Iran in Political Science and Historical Sociology: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This article reviews existing comparative literature on Iran and Turkey in terms of their approaches, themes and findings. It extracts and critically analyses two dominant trends in this literature; Comparative Analyses of Cultures and Comparative Analyses of Modernizations. This paper argues that, these two common lines of approaching have serious limitations since they carry the traces of orientalist and ethnocentric assumptions. New literature on this topic however, offers new avenues of research, enabling the debate to avoid the above mentioned pitfalls. As a conclusion, this critical review points to certain dynamics to consider (over-politicization of the Iran-Turkey comparisons and the impact of international developments) in order to facilitate stronger comparative frameworks.

Keywords: *Turkey, Iran, Comparative Politics, Orientalism, Ethnocentrism*

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Siyaset Bilimi ve Tarihsel Sosyoloji İçerisinde Türkiye ve İran Karşılaştırmaları: Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

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Özet

Bu çalışmada Türkiye ve İran karşılaştırmaları literatürünün yaklaşım, tema ve bulgu yönünden bir eleştirel incelemesi yapılmaktadır. Çalışma, sözkonusu literatürde iki baskın çizgi tesbit etmiştir. Karşılaştırmalı Kültür Analizi ve Karşılaştırmalı Modernleşme Analizi diye isimlendirilen bu iki temel çizgi incelenmekte ve bu çizgilerin yoğun olarak oryantalist ve etnosentrik eğilimler taşıdığı değerlendirilmektedir. Farklı temalara yoğunlaşan yeni bir literatürün de varlığı gözlemlenmiş ve bu literatürün yukarıda söz konusu edilen hataları taşımadığı görülmüştür. Çalışma, sonucunda, yeni karşılaştırma çabalarının uluslararası boyutu ve literatürdeki aşırı siyasallaşmayı gözönüne alması gereğine işaret edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Türkiye, İran, Karşılaştırmalı Siyaset, Oryantalizm, Etnosentrizm*

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Introduction ¹

The comparative study of Iranian and Turkish historical trajectories is not a recent field of research interest. First examples to this domain of study can be traced back to 1960's. In 1963, Richard F. Pfaff writes a paper entitled "Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran", his argument being that in a Muslim country authoritarian rule is much more effective than democratic practices in sustaining political and economic development.² Since then, these two countries have offered productive grounds for comparing and testing various conceptual problematics: modernisation, secularism, the relations between Islam and democracy, religion and state relations. Without doubt, not only the debates in history and area studies but also the ones in political science and sociology have benefited much from the analysis of the above mentioned comparative topics. The aim of this essay is to locate and review the comparative works that have been conducted with regard to Iran and Turkey. It is composed of four parts. First, it provides a brief overview of the factors that make Iran and Turkey a fertile ground for comparison. Following this brief contextualisation, the second part of the essay identifies, then critically analyses two main repetitive lines of comparison between Turkey and Iran which I argue, to a large extent, dominate most of the comparative works. I label them as Comparative Analyses of Cultures and Comparative Analyses of Modernizations. I will analyse these two axes in the literature by first exploring the ways in which these comparisons has become popular at certain times and under specific circumstances. Then, I will address the weaknesses and strengths of these lines of comparisons. I argue that although they are focusing on different aspects of Iranian and Turkish historical trajectories and although there are exceptions, both axes usually has fallen into the trap of orientalist and ethnocentric assumptions. In the third part, I will point to a new trend in comparative literature which focuses on different domains such as economic, institutional and daily politics. These recent works, having been influenced by post structural theories to varying degrees, have offered new

1 This is a partially revised version of a section of the first chapter of my dissertation submitted to the Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, 2014.

2 Richard F. Pfaff, "Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 1963, (16) 1.

avenues of research and novel perspectives which have the potential to avoid orientalist and ethnocentric assumptions.

Comparing Turkey and Iran

The validity of the use of the comparative method in both history and political science is well known. Early examples of the comparative social analysis date back to ancient Greece when Aristotle was exploring the ideal constitution in his Politics treatise.³ Without doubt, comparative history is one of the most convenient ways of understanding historical phenomena. Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers aptly commented that: “As long as people have investigated social life, there has been recurrent fascination with juxtaposing historical patterns from two or more times and places.”⁴ In order to understand social structures and their transformations, historians always look at diverse cases. By comparing and contrasting historical experiences occurring in different economic, social and geographical settings, social scientists hope to explore the general rules and exceptions of the historical and political sphere and unravel the uniformities and variations in this sphere. In other words, a comparative study would facilitate an explanation and interpretation of the diverse experiences of societies, nations, cultures and other significant macro social units.

Even a brief look at the history of Turkey and Iran illustrates that these countries share more than being “exceptional cases”⁵ in the Arab Middle East. There is a huge amount of academic and popular literature that compares Iran and Turkey from various aspects. Before discussing the main themes explored in the literature to date, I will give a brief account of the similarities that has popularized these comparisons.

Roy Mottahadeh begins the preface of the Turkish edition of his book

3 Dirk Berg-Schlosser in the very introduction of his work “Mixed Methods in Comparative Politics: Principles and Applications”, asserts that “since the time of Aristotle, comparative politics and comparative method have been considered by many authors to be the “royal way” of political science.”see Dirk Berg Schlosser, *Mixed Methods in Comparative Politics: Principles and Applications*, London: Palgrave Mc Millan, 2012, p. 1.

4 Theda Skocpol & Margaret Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1980, (22) 21, p. 74.

5 Israel should be added to these countries after the second half of 20th Century.

on Iranian cultural history covering a wide period between early Middle Ages and 20th century, “The Mantle of the Prophet : Religion and Politics in Iran”, with a quote by Kaşgarlı Mahmut: “Tatsız Türk bolmas, başsız börk bolmas.”⁶ As this quotation reflects, not only have Iranian and Turkish cultures been informed about each other since early periods, but they also took part in the establishment of several states by acting together. This tradition of Iranian and Turkish cooperation continued during most of their respective history. Safavid, Qajar and Ottoman dynasties are similar in the sense that they are Turkic and nomadic in origins. They are intermingled to an extent that Ahmet Ağaoğlu, a nationalist intellectual of the early 20th century claimed that “Iranian history, has been, for a thousand years, a branch of Turkish History.”⁷

Thus, it can be argued that historically and culturally, the common grounds of these two cultures of Rumi and Nasreddin Hoca or Molla Nasreddin in Iranian terms have always been more apparent than the lines that separate them. Even during frosty and conflictual periods on the grounds of their differing Shi’a and Sunni sectarian identities, these two cultures have always remained intertwined. The Iranian language, Persian, was for long time an elite language for Ottomans. Even after the Language Revolution of the early republic, Persian and “Persianized” Arabic words continued to exist in Turkish. It is interesting to note that a great majority of the religious words in Turkish are taken from Persian. For example, Instead of Arabic *salah* and *vadu*, Persian *namaz* and *abdest* are used for praying and ablution. Selim I and Shâh Ismâ’il, the two rulers in the time of Ottoman-Safavid wars in the 16th century, might be given as the most obvious and commonly emphasized example of this cultural intimacy. During that period, Selim I, the Sultan of Ottoman Empire, wrote collected poems – *Dâvân* - in Persian while Iranian ruler Shâh Ismâ’il wrote poems in Turkish by using a pen name Hatayi.⁸

6 Roy Mottahadeh, *Peygamberin Hırkası İran’da Din ve Politika, Bilgi ve Güç*. İstanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2003, p. xvi.

7 Georgeon, Francois, *Osmanlı Türk Modernleşmesi (1900-1930)*, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006, p. 135.

8 For an elaborate discussion on what is called “Turko-Persian tradition” see Bernard Lewis, *Iran in History*, In his lecture Lewis claims that Persian Islam rather than the original Arab Islam was brought to the Turks first in Central Asia and then Turkey. He goes further to claim that “the center of the Islamic world was under Turkish and

As inheritors of different ancient civilisations, those two cultures were Islamised from the 7th to 11th century. After a brief period of belonging to the same Islamic sect, their religious paths diversified during the sixteenth century. Safavid period marked the Shiitization of Iran. Yet, their similarities continued in that they became the leading states of their respective sects. Iran turned into the largest state containing the most numerous minority sects in the Muslim World and the Ottomans -through the most parts of the 13th to 20th centuries- continued to be the largest state in the Sunni Muslim World. Their rulers legitimized their authority by means of these leading positions. Especially, in later eras, these similarities further intensified. Modern Iranian and modern Turkish contexts are also similar in this respect. They were the neighbours of strong Western states and they were integrated into the world economy at the same time. Although they did not experienced direct colonisation, they faced economic and political suppressions during much of the modern period. In fact, their modernization periods were initiated concurrently. Both countries transferred their political systems from monarchy to constitutionalism in similar periods; during the constitutional Revolution in Iran in 1906 and in Turkey in 1908. As the inheritors of strong empires, their modernisation experiences entered a new phase after the first quarter of the 20th century. In this new phase, their similarities became more concrete. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Shah Reza Pehlevi, the elites who led the mission of modernization, attempted to transform their societies via similar reform movements. These features form a visible likeness between Turkey and Iran and separate them from Western countries as well as from North Africa and the Middle East countries where modernization has been initiated, rather lately, through the practices of colonization.

Once the similarities are taken into account, one should not wonder about the popularity of comparisons between these two states, which are not limited to academic studies but also found in popular discussions. As mentioned in the introduction, two main repetitive lines of comparison can

Persian states both shaped by Iranian culture.” Yet Halil İnalçık in his article analyzing Turkish and Iranian political thoughts by focusing on Kutadgu Bilig claims that Turkish traditions are separate from Indo-Iranian traditions. See. Halil İnalçık, “Turkish and Iranian Political Theories and Traditions in Kutadgu Bilig.” in H. İnalçık (ed), *The Middle East and the Balkans under the Ottoman Empire: Essays on Economy and Society*, Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies and Turkish Ministry of Culture Joint Series, 1993. Bernard Lewis, “Iran in History,” *Middle Eastern Lectures*, Moshe Dayan Center, 2001.

be distinguished within these comparative works. First one involves the comparison of their modernisation attempts by mainly focusing on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Reza Shah. This line of comparison was mainly popular in 1960s and 1970s, yet there are also more contemporary examples. In the peak era of modernisation and secularisation theories, these two countries were compared in terms of their relations with modernity. These works mainly focused on the ways in which the modernising elites transformed their states from a traditional country to a modern one. I will refer to such studies under the heading of “Comparative Analyses of Modernizations” The second line of comparison mainly focuses on their sectarian structure. The Shi’a-Sunni divide and its reflections on the political thought have been analysed in this context. They are still popular. I prefer to use the term “Comparative Analyses of Cultures” to refer to such literature since they are likely to present culture, in this sense, sectarian differences of Iran and Turkey, as the main tools of analyses. Yet when we come to the recent era the focus of comparative works diversifies. Institutional and economic dimensions as well as comparisons focusing on daily politics began to emerge. The remaining part of the essay I will analyse and criticize.

Comparative Analyses of Cultures

As mentioned above, throughout a great part of their history, Iran and Turkey were the most important representatives of their respective sects namely; Shi’a and Sunni. This is why, those who want to understand the impacts of sectarian understanding in the Muslim world began their work with the comparison of these two states. Thus, the differences those social structures embody in terms of sectarian identities have become the most commonly discussed theme within Iran-Turkey comparative literature. Apparently, a significant degree of importance has been attributed to the difference between these two sects including the historical and potential political consequences it generates in academic as well as popular literature. The common conclusion of this academic and popular work mainly concerns the differences attributed to the Shi’a and Sunni political traditions in terms of the political outlook. Many scholars consider these differences between the Shi’a and Sunni political traditions as the main lines of distinction within the Middle Eastern geography in general and between Turkey and Iran in particular.

Putting comparative works on Iran and Turkey aside, culture and identity one can argue, are not concepts with which most political sciences are comfortable.⁹ Comparative political works are of no exception to this general tendency. A group of researchers considers culture and identity as mere epiphenomena to economic and political organisation, whilst others assert that “culture makes almost all the difference.”¹⁰ Focusing on culture and religion to compare two different cases has its own merits and flaws. Marc Howard Rose identifies five contributions that cultural analyses have made to comparative works. First of all, culture frames the context which politics occurs. Second, it helps to link individual and collective identities. Third, it defines boundaries between groups and organises actions within and between them. Fourth, it presents a structure to understand the motives and actions of others. Lastly, culture provides resources for political organisations.¹¹ Without doubt, these five dimensions can generate important insights as one analyses the role of culture and religion in shaping the historical trajectory of countries. Yet, there are also risks of focusing on culture and identity on comparing two different cases. Most important one of these risks is to consider culture and identity as fixed and homogeneous entities. When comparison cases cover Islam, or a sect of Islam as the sole basis of an individual or national identity, the risk of fall into the trap of Orientalism also emerge. In this part, I will discuss first why the cultural comparisons dominate the comparative attempts of Iran and Turkey and then explore whether or not, or how far these comparative attempts have orientalist tendencies.

First, the reflections of the Islamic revolution of Iran aroused interest in Islam and its impact on political structures. Attempts to understand this exceptional case of a religious revolution in Iran turned into attempts to understand Shi’a. In this sense, it is not unusual to look at differences between Shi’a and Sunni sects. In other words, the questions that stem from

9 It is remarkable to note that the discipline of International Relations is taking lead to this kind of thinking.

10 David Landes, “Culture Makes Almost All the Difference,” in Lawrence E. Harrison, Samuel P. Huntington (ed) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York, Basic Books, 2001.

11 Marc Howard Ross, “Culture,” in Mark Irving Lichbach, Alan S. Zuckerman (ed) *Comparative Political Analysis, in Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 136-137.

the revolution began to be evaluated within the context of the Shi'a vs. Sunni dichotomy. These evaluations suggested that the revolution was the natural consequence and outcome of the Shi'a political tradition, which is considered as revolutionary in essence. Especially, authors such as Michael Fischer, Samih K. Farsoun, Mehrdad Mashayekhi and even a structuralist such as Theda Skocpol emphasized this Shi'a character of the revolution to a great extent.¹² It is interesting to note that Skocpol revised her general theory of revolution and added a cultural perspective by focusing on the impact of Shia ideology. Her article "Rentier State and Shia Islam in Iranian Revolution" is very much debated in this respect.¹³

As a natural consequence of attributing a revolutionary characteristic to Shi'a, the Sunni sect began to be debated from this perspective. The historical Shi'a-Sunni dichotomy was now debated in terms of their relations with the political sphere. Which sect is more prone to mass movements? Which is more statist? These questions were asked in both academic and popular domain and answered through the lens of the Iranian Revolution. More recently, especially after the Iraqi invasion, this Shia-Sunni dichotomy gained further salience and has been transferred to international politics. This perspective, led by eminent scholars and strategists such as Juan Cole and Vali Nasr, portrays the competition between Shia and Sunni as the main axis of conflict from 1990s onwards.¹⁴ All these dichotomic ways of looking at the Middle East has created a good domain for comparative works.

The second factor that brought the issue of Shi'ism and Sunnism to the center of the research agenda was the so-called cultural turn in social

12 Michael J. Fischer, *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Samih Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, New York Routledge, 1992.

13 Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," *Theory and Society*, (11) 3, 1982.

14 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, London: WW Norton Company, 2006. Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, New York: I. B. Taurus, 2002. Juan Cole, "A 'Shite Crescent'? The Regional Impact of the Iraq War," *Current History*, 2006," (105) 687, 2006. For a brief discussion of this line of thought see. Bayram Sinkaya, "Şii Ekseni Tartışmaları ve İran," *Avrasya Dosyası*, 2007, (13)3, and Sami Zubaida, *The Question of Sectarianism in Middle East Politics*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/sami-zubaida/question-of-sectarianism-in-middle-east-politics>

sciences.¹⁵ Sectarian structures have been considered at length in a period when the theories that put emphasis on the cultural differences, such as postmodernism, started to dominate the social sciences on conceptual grounds. As a result, this issue has been discussed as the stable and fixed essence lying beneath the political culture; or to put it another way, sectarian features considered as the ground upon which the political culture is built. This point of view also dominates the comparative literature on Turkey and Iran.

In addition to these general factors, a conjectural change in Turkey intensified these comparative attempts. After the National Security Council decisions on 28 February 1997, issues concerning religion became exceptionally popular. In this period, Turkish secularism was debated in various ways with ‘Will Turkey become Iran?’ being a popular question in this regard. Many columnists discussed the issue around this specific question. In this context, especially the opinion leaders from the “liberal” wing presented the differences between Sunnism and Shi’ism as factors preventing the actualization of such a political prediction. Taha Akyol’s book “Türkiye ve İran’da Mezhep ve Devlet” became the quintessential example of this line of thought. Although not presented in such a clear cut manner, a great amount of newspaper articles and popular books touched on this comparison.¹⁶

Akyol’s book is a good example to the cultural comparisons. Since his book is semi-academic, he is more direct in explaining his ideas on the cultural differences between Shi’a and Sunni political thought. This directness in explaining its thesis makes the analysis of this work as

15 For a debate on Middle East Studies after “Cultural Turn” see roundtable “Whither Social History?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2014, (46)2.

16 Another figure whom stressed this difference –via her book “İki Ülke İki Devrim,” İstanbul: Say Yayınları- is Nevval (Çizgen) Sevindi. Although this sectarian difference is not presented in such a clear cut manner in academia, it continued to remain as an significant topic, To name a few see, Sena Karasipahi, “Comparing Islamic Resurgence Movements in Turkey and Iran,” *The Middle East Journal*, 2009, (63)1. J. Francois Bayart, “Republican Trajectories in Iran and Turkey: A Tocquevillian Reading,” in Ghassam Salame (ed) *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995, pp. 282-283. And also see. Taha Akyol, *Türkiye ve İran’da Mezhep ve Devlet*, İstanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1998, which is a study located between academic and popular levels.

worthwhile since Akyol acknowledges at the very beginning of his book that his aim is to provide an answer to the question “Will Turkey be Iran?” His answer is simple. Turkey is not going to be Iran since Iran and Turkey are dissimilar in terms of at least three aspects. First, the understanding of the political authority in Iran is different from that in Turkey. Akyol claims that, historically, Shi’a political culture has had a strong tendency to regard political authority as illegitimate. There has been a frustration between the Shi’a clergy and the political authority. He argues that this specific culture facilitated the Islamic Revolution. Yet, in the Ottoman Empire, the principle of the ‘obedience to the ruling elite’ generated a strong culture that sustained the supremacy of the political authority. Second, the author asserts that the degree of the authority of the clergy was distinct in two cases. In the Sunni Ottoman Empire, clergy was at state’s service; members of clergy were state officers. Yet in Iran-Shia culture, the clergy was an autonomous power and according to Shia political tradition “disobedience to clergy is disobedience to God”. Akyol concludes that since the clergy in Turkey has had no such authority, there will not be an Islamic Revolution.

Most of the comparative works on the Shi’a and Sunni political trajectories mainly revolve around these themes that are presented in a straightforward way by Akyol. The Shia tradition of rebellion versus the Sunni quietest attitude and as a result autonomous (from the state) Shi’a clergy versus a dependent (on the state) Sunni clergy can be found as the most emphasized dichotomies. Although these arguments have some legitimacy, it is difficult to agree that they are comprehensive enough to explain all aspects of the reality. For instance, significant exceptions to such straightforward readings can be found with respect to historical trajectories. As a brief look at historical trajectories of both Iran and Turkey show us that, at various historical moments, Shia clergy worked hand in hand with the rulers and whereas quieter Sunni counterparts rebelled under difficult social conditions.¹⁷ Above all, one must bear in mind that no sect represents a coherent social unity. There are important dimensions determining the historical paths, such as; rural/tribal/urban, religious/secular, left/right, class, educational and regional differences. Moreover, it would be wrong to claim that sectarian identities can emerge autonomously and remain

17 See W. M Floor, “The Revolutionary Character of the Iranian Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1980, (12) 4.

unchanged. Through the course of history, religious identities, as with other identities, have been produced, reproduced and maintained through interaction with other identities.

Putting these in perspective, another question arises. Why does a comparison between Turkey and Iran always embody the religious and sectarian differences of these countries? Why are these differences considered to be the main level of analyses?

Taking political and ideological backgrounds in which these approaches are embedded into consideration can provide some answers. As mentioned above, those who focused on the sectarian differences between Turkey and Iran took one side in a once popular Turkish political debate concerning whether Turkey would become Iran. In particular, the opinion leaders from the 'liberal' political wing put forward the differences between Sunni and Shi'a as the factors preventing the actualization of such a political prediction. On the back cover of his book Akyol wrote unreservedly that "Sunni Ottoman sharia paved way to a secular republic whereas Shia Iranian Sharia paved way to a theocratic republic."¹⁸ Although the contribution of adding culture and religion to the comparative works are discussed above, it is hard to consider Akyol's culturally deterministic line of thought as convincing. The attempt to understand the histories of those two countries only in relation to the differences between Shia and Sunni and to comment on their future trajectories without taking into consideration the economic and political factors and international dynamics seems to remain inadequate. One can rightfully ask such questions as: Why is Shi'a the dominant sect in Iran? Why a certain interpretation of Shi'a has become dominant, although the Shi'a sect consists of various interpretations within itself? Barrington Moore illustrates the problematic of isolating culture, in his classical work, "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy" stating that

Culture or tradition is not something that exists outside of or independently of individual human beings living together in society. Cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history.....To maintain and transmit a value system, human beings are punched, bullied, sent to jail, thrown into concentration

18 See Akyol, *Türkiye ve İran'da Mezhep ve Devlet*, fourth cover.

camps, cajoled, bribed, made into heroes, encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, and sometimes even taught sociology.¹⁹

At the very beginning, I mentioned that academic works have also focused on the difference between the Shi'a and Sunni sects; yet in a more refined way. The way in which Theda Skocpol analyses the Iranian Revolution of 1979 illustrates this approach. In order to analyse her position in this debate, it is worth presenting a brief overview of her theory. In her well-known book "States and Social Revolutions", Skocpol undertakes structural analyses of the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions and investigates the causal factors of these three events. She insists that the comparative historian should be able to find a comparable structure in social revolutions. Her structural approach denies any possibility of intention as a constitutive factor of revolutions. Change is to be explained by the very structures of the society; the nature of the state, its relation to the indigenous classes, and its competition with the other states. A specific combination, or rather coinciding of the politico-military crisis of the state and popular upheaval results in a social and political transformation. Her aim is to explicate the causes of this crisis and the uprising, and to show that there is a general pattern in the revolutions.²⁰ The book was written in 1979, the same year in which the Iranian Revolution occurred. It was one of the major events of the 20th century and in Skocpol's words: "came as a surprise to outside observers which included American friends of the Shah, journalists, political pundits, and social scientists including those like me, who are supposed to be experts on revolutions."²¹ The revolution actually fit into Skocpol's definition that "social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."²² However, Skocpol's three cases were agrarian-bureaucratic monarchies, as opposed to Iran, a Third World dictatorship and a rentier state. According to Skocpol, peasant upheavals were crucial in classical revolutions, especially in Chinese and

19 Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of the Dictatorship and Democracy*, p. 486

20 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions a Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

21 Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," p. 265

22 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*: p. 4.

Russian revolutions, but in the case of Iran, it was the urban community that revolted. Perhaps, more interestingly, what Skocpol had considered as a necessary for the weakening of the state, namely international pressures or a military defeat of the state, were absent in the Iranian Revolution. The revolution succeeded in spite of the Shah's huge war machine. All these points were carefully observed by Skocpol, and in her article "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution" she tried to explain the inconsistencies between the dynamics of this revolution and her general theory of revolutions.

Skocpol emphasized in *States and Social Revolutions* that revolutions are not made but that rather they happen. Yet, in 1982, after the Iranian revolution, she spoke of the Iranian revolutionary people as follows: "Their revolution did not just come; it was deliberately and coherently made".²³ In one of the two arguments she used in order to explain the specific characteristic of the Iranian Revolution, she refers to Shi'a Islam. In her words, what is crucial in the making of Iranian revolution is Shi'a Islam, "because of a culture conducive to challenges the authority...historically woven into fabrics of social life."²⁴ Her words on Iranian Revolution are worth quoting:

... the sorts of moral symbols and forms of social communication offered by Shi'a Islam in Iran can sustain the self-conscious making of a revolution. No innovative revolutionary propaganda retailed to "the masses" overnight, in the midst of a societal crisis, can serve this purpose. However, a world-view and a set of social practices long in place can sustain a deliberate revolutionary movement.²⁵

By focusing on the role of Shi'a Islam in Iranian Revolution, Skocpol added a new dimension to her structuralist theory of revolutions. In other words, she claimed that non material factors such as culture and ideas are of crucial importance in order to understand the developments of Iran's late 1970's. This is a key difference which does not have a valid counterpart in Chinese, Russian or French Revolutions. This is not only a complete break

23 Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," p. 267.

24 *ibid*, p. 275

25 *ibid*, pp. 275-276.

from her previous theory of revolutions but also an overestimation of Shi'a ideology. As the above quotation of the Moore brings out cultural values do not exist independent of the material processes. For Iranian Revolution, it is clear that Shi'a ideology was not the only motive for masses to act collectively. During 1970s Iran experienced one of the most powerful leftist movements in the Middle East and there is no proof that leftist or secular groups were any less active than the religious groups throughout the revolutionary era.²⁶

So why does Skocpol choose Shi'a political culture as one of the main axis of difference and determinant? It is clear that her approach does not stem from a strict position taking within the ideological debates circulating in Turkey, as in the case of other figures referred above. In other words, she does not take a side in the debate concerning whether Turkey will become like Iran. The cultural medium, dominated by concepts such as pluralism, the clash between civilizations, identities, and the dialogue between civilizations can constitute one side of the answer to the question. Nevertheless, one can find a more comprehensive answer if the "Orientalism" debate is taken into consideration. In other words, the ways in which the west looks at the east can be explanatory. As Edward Said wrote in 'Orientalism', the European academic tradition, as well as fine arts and literature, have their own flaws when looking at the east. One of the most important of these flaws is placing religion, at the center of the analysis; in this case, Islam. Said criticized the orientalist view on the Middle East as follows:

Even the ones whose specialty is the modern Islamic world anachronistically use texts like the Koran to read into every facet of contemporary Egyptian or Algerian society. Islam, or a seventh-century ideal of it constituted by the Orientalist, is assumed to possess the unity that eludes the more recent and important influences of colonialism, imperialism, and even ordinary politics.²⁷

26 For a structural approach on Iranian Revolution see Misagh Parsa. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

27 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Noida: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 301.

In accordance with the critique of Said, one can realise that there is a tendency to overemphasize the religious and sectarian structures in Western or even Turkish authors' observations of Iran. As mentioned above, I do not argue that differences in religion and sects have no explanatory power. They should not be seen as mere epiphenomenon to economic and political developments. Since the author of this essay basically deals with religion and state relations he is quite aware of the fact that, such differences will also be taken into consideration. As discussed above focusing culture as a tool for comparison has its own merits. Indeed, there is extensive literature that explores the role of religious and sectarian differences to explicate different historical paths.²⁸ Sectarian differences seem to play a role in creating different historical trajectories in Turkey and Iran. Yet, limiting the causes of completely different forms of religion-state relations to the differences between Shia and Sunni traditions cannot provide us with a satisfactory explanation.

Comparative Analyses of Modernizations

As discussed above, there is a vast amount of literature on Iran and Turkey that tries to explain the difference in their historical trajectories by looking at their sectarian differences. However, there are exceptions to these comparative studies. In most of these exceptions Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah are compared with regard to their modernization attempts. As J. François Bayart claims, comparing Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah is a classic in political science.²⁹ Such studies highlighted the similarities between these two figures rather than their differences. This perspective was especially popular in 60s and 70s and the literature mainly included studies conducted within the parameters of the modernization theory.³⁰ Indeed,

28 Timur Kuran is a leading scholar on this issue, He wrote a wide array of articles on this issue. To name a few, Timur Kuran, *İslâm'ın Ekonomik Yüzleri*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002; Timur Kuran, "The Economic Impact of Culture, Religion and the Law," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*. 2009, (71)5.

29 . J. Francois Bayart, "Republican Trajectories," p. 287.

30 Mohammad Homayounpor, "The Process of Modernization in Iran and Turkey: The Era of State Building," unpublished PhD Submitted to New School for Social Research, 1978; Rebecca Joubin Aghazadeh, "Science, Rationalism and Positivism as the Basis of Secularism and the Disestablishment of Islam: A Comparative Study of Turkey and Iran,"

this line of thought mainly discussed the exemplary function of European modernization on non-European societies, and the influences of this European modernization on Turkey and Iran. ‘Men of Order- Authoritarian Modernization under Reza Shah and Ataturk’ edited by Touraj Atabaki and Erik j. Zürcher, can be considered as an example to this line of comparison.³¹ In the preface of their book, the authors analysed the similarities between the periods of Ataturk and Reza Shah, within the framework of the modernization theory. According to the authors, European modernization was considered as a model in both countries. Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah transformed their own rural, traditional, agricultural communities into an urban, secular, industrialized society. In this process personal and institutional differences resulted in different levels of modernization. Mustafa Kemal, as the inheritor of a more developed institutional legacy from the Ottoman Empire, was more successful in his attempts to modernize his country. Reza Shah did nothing but follow in his footsteps. The emerging difference between Iran and Turkey overwhelmingly stems from the varying levels of modernization. This line of comparison focuses on important points and generates a valuable insight. Yet, I argue that it also has certain flaws.

First, as the critiques of modernization theory claim, studies of this kind carry the risk of falling into the trap of ethnocentrism.³² As they

unpublished PhD Submitted to the American University, 1993; Serhan AFACAN, “Devletle Yazışmak: Türkiye ve İran Sosyal Tarihçiliğinde Dilekçeler,” *Türkiyat Mecmuası*, 2011, (21) ; Celal Metin, *Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme: Türk Modernleşmesi ve İran (1800- 1941)* Ankara: Phoenix, 2011; Touraj Atabaki, “The Caliphate, the Clerics and Republicanism in Turkey and Iran: Some Comparative Remarks,” in E. J. Zürcher And Touraj Atabaki (ed) *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernisation in Turkey and Iran, 1918-1942*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004; Touraj Atabaki, “Time Labour Discipline and Modernization in Turkey and Iran” in Touraj Atabaki (ed), *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and State in Turkey and Iran*, I.B. Tauris: London, 2007; Richard F. Pfaff, “Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, 1963, (16)1; Tolga Gürakar, *Türkiye ve İran, Gelenek, Çağdaşlaşma ve Devrim*, İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2012.

31 E. J. Zürcher and Touraj Atabaki, (ed) *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization in Turkey and Iran, 1918-1942*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004.

32 See. Dean C. Tipps, “Modernisation Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1973, (15)2 ; Howard J. Wiarda, “the Ethnocentrism of the Social Science Implications for Research and Policy.” *The Review of Politics*, 1981, (43)2.

compare modernization attempts of Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah, they consider the western experience as the example of the universal pattern. The actions of Reza Shah and Mustafa Kemal are evaluated in terms of their proximity to this so-called universal pattern. In other words, the Iranian and Turkish experiences are judged by the values and standards of the western historical path. For example, Homayounpor claims that the framework of political, economic and social development that was built in Iran and Turkey, were a “prominent feature of a process which originally began sometime in the seventeenth century and from there spread to other regions and continents.”³³ Rebecca Aghazadeh, after writing a long chapter summarizing the thoughts of western rationalists and positivists, compared the speeches of Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah to see the extent to which these speeches fit into the western thought. This hierarchical relation between the already modernized west and the modernizing Iran and Turkey can be considered as problematic in itself. Furthermore, another problematic hierarchical relation is being constituted between Turkey and Iran. Celal Metin’s book entitled *Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme: Türk Modernleşmesi ve İran* is a quintessential example of such a hierarchical relation constructed among Turkey and Iran. Metin focuses on the imitation relation between Reza Shah and Mustafa Kemal explaining that most of the reform attempts in the Reza Shah Era stemmed from this relation. As a result of its closeness to the modern west, Turkey became a forerunner of modernisation. He claims that it is impossible to consider Reza Shah and Atatürk as equals despite Reza Shah’s attempts to follow and imitate Atatürk.³⁴ This point of view neglects the domestic dynamics of Iranian society and portrays it solely as an imitator. Note that, Metin uses loaded adjectives such as the “primitive” motives of Iranian society, at another point in his book.³⁵

Second, most of the authors who undertake this sort of comparison are prone to neglect the pre-modern period. As a starting point to their comparison they tend to take the Tanzimat era in the case of Ottoman

33 Mohammad Homayounpor, “The Process of Modernization in Iran and Turkey,” p. 9.

34 Celal Metin, *Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme*, p. 319.

35 Ibid, p. 297. Serhan Afacan points out this usage of pejorative language in his review of the book. Afacan, Serhan, “Kitap Değerlendirmesi: Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme: Türk Modernleşmesi ve İran (1800- 1941),” *İnsan ve Toplum*, 2012, (2).

Empire and the early Qajar movements of modernization in the case of Iran. In terms of the Turkish case the Ottoman classical age or Safavid period are not taken into account. A number of studies do not even take the pre 20th century period into consideration. Richard F. Pfaff's classic article "Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran" is an example of such a framework. He argues that in "both Shiite Iran and Sunni Turkey ... society as late as 1900 was little different from society a millennium earlier. Islam had literally frozen the basic pattern of society in each country."³⁶ Such an argument overlooks important dynamics such as the early modernization attempts, the incorporation of Iranian and Turkish economy into capitalism, consequent transformations in the social structures and the impacts of nationalist ideologies. Pfaff can be criticised in terms of the contribution he makes to the dissemination of orientalist motives.³⁷

Without doubt, not all attempts to compare Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah Period contain such fallacies. There are various works that go beyond the modernization paradigm. For example, John R. Perry's article 'Language Reform in Turkey and Iran' focuses on the inner dynamics by not neglecting the antecedent experiences. He claims that the ancient regimes of Iran and Turkey are the key to understanding the respective success of language reforms. Perry points to one general difference between the modernizations programs of Turkey and Iran. Turkey's problems were, or were seen to be, simple. There was one villain, the Islamic Ottoman past, one goal, independent westernization, and one method which were to persuade the masses to see things just as simply. Neither Reza Shah nor the Iranian intellectuals managed to simplify Iran's problems in this way, either for themselves or for the masses. The catalogue of villains included Britain and Russia as well as traditional Islam, but none of them could be antagonized outright.³⁸ Serhan Afacan's article in the *Turkiyat Journal* can also be considered to avoid the common fallacies. He compares Mustafa

36 Richard F. Pfaff. "Disengagement from Traditionalism," p. 80.

37 The use of concepts such as traditionalism is also criticized by the critiques. Samuel Huntington noted that "modernity and tradition are essentially asymmetrical concepts. The modern ideal is set forth, and then everything which is not modern is labelled traditional. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Change to Change: Modernisation Developments and Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, 1971, (3) 3, p. 293.

38 John R. Perry, "Language Reform in Turkey and Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1985, (17) 3.

Kemal and Reza Shah Periods by looking at the petitions sent from segments of Turkish and Iranian masses to their official institutions. By doing so, Afacan concentrates on the relations between state and society, which is a largely neglected issue in the modernization literature.

Current Comparative Analyses

As I noted earlier, above mentioned works do not represent the entire academic and popular works that compare Turkish and Iranian historical trajectories. There has been a rising interest in comparative studies focusing on different aspects of social domain such as daily politics, institutional and economic affairs. Specifically with the effect of Reform Movement and the Rule of Justice and Democracy Party, Iran and Turkish experiences began to be more frequently and intensely discussed in relation to popular rank. These current comparative works, to a great extent manage to avoid essentialist-orientalist assumptions. Especially after 1990s, with the increasing influence of critical scholars such as Edward Said or Stuart Hall, a new way of thinking about identities in social sciences began to rise. Identities in general, have begun to be understood as “not an essence but rather a positioning”³⁹ positioned by history and politics. This rather novel and refined approach allowed researchers to analyse religion without essentialising it. Specifically, Aziz al Azmeh’s book “*Islams and Modernities*” should be noted here. He claims that “there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it”,⁴⁰ supporting the view that different sorts of religious identity formation is possible under different circumstances. Hence this new line in the literature shows the ways in which religious identities are related with different spheres of political and historical domains.

One of the examples of these ways of thinking in the literature comparing Turkey and Iran can be found in Elizabeth Shakman Hard’s article “Contested Secularisms in Turkey and Iran” Shakman rejects what she calls ‘fixed lenses of European and American approaches to religion and politics’. She claims that this way of thinking constraints western responses to religious and political developments outside the west. Shakman Hard

39 The concept belongs to Stuart Hall.

40 Aziz Al Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 1.

offers a non-essentialist reading of recent rise of Islamic politics in Iran and Turkey. She argues that what is considered as rise of Islamism in these countries can be understood as a public opposition against authoritarian secularist tendencies. Yet they are not religious in the sense that they emanate from a pure religious essence. On the contrary, they present secularist tendencies. Using the conceptual framework posed by Nilüfer Göle,⁴¹ Shakman Hard claims that the Green movement and the Justice and Democracy Party are similar in the sense that they “endorsed alternative models of separation and accommodation between politics and religion. Representing variations of non-theocratic politics they have sought to contest and refashion secularism.”⁴² Briefly, Shakman Hard claims that Islam, whether Shi’a or Sunni, is not an obstacle to secularism. Religious movements in both Iran and Turkey can be understood as representatives of alternative modernity.

Another work that compares rise of religious politics in Turkey and Iran is Güneş Murat Tezcur’s “Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: the Paradox of Moderation”. Tezcur focuses on the trajectory of the Reform Front (RF) in Iran and that of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in Turkey from the beginning of 1990s to 2005. From the framework of “moderation theory”, he scrutinizes how far these two movements, RF and JDP, fit into the theory. He argues that although these two movements were moderate in ideology, it cannot be easily claimed that this ideological shift turned into a behavioral shift. In other words, moderation of these two post Islamist movement did not lead them to become fully democratic in the sense that they promote human rights or embrace total transparency. In addition Tezcur, tried to answer the question why RF failed but JDP succeeded in terms of gaining political power. According to him this difference in political trajectories lies in the respective political culture and ideology of existing regimes in Turkey and Iran.

41 See Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Örtünme*, İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2014.

42 Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Contested Secularisms in Turkey and Iran,” in E. S. Hurd (ed) *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, Princeton,NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

One scholar who compares Turkey and Iran by focusing on current political developments is Hootan Shambayati. Shambayati in his article written in 2004 compares constitutional structures of Iran and Turkey and discuss the role assigned to the judiciary in the two systems. He claims that Iran and Turkey are similar in the sense that their political structures combine both authoritarian and democratic practises. In these countries sovereignty is divided between elected sources of power and unelected bodies which he called “guardians of the regime”. In Iran, this is reflected in the Parliament and the supreme leader, whereas in Turkey, it is embedded in military bureaucratic apparatus. According to Shambayati, in both countries judiciary is positioned as an integral mechanism to serve for maintaining the needs of guardians. He analyses the trial of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Gholamhussein Karbaschi within this paradigm. He claims that their imprisonment shows the position of judiciary in the struggle between elected and non-elected sources of power.⁴³

Birol Başkan is another scholar who contributes to the comparative studies in Iran and Turkey. He focuses on institutional developments. Başkan develops a conceptual framework in which he utilises in a wide array of comparisons.⁴⁴ His work is mainly based on the relations between state and religious institutions during the state building era. He analyses the different trajectories of different countries by looking at the levels of incorporation of religious institutions into the state apparatus. According to Başkan, during the state building process, states either incorporate religious institutions into its apparatus or exclude them. In this context Turkey and Iran can be considered as two ideal types: Turkey as an example of total incorporation and Iran as an example of total exclusion.

43 Hootan Shambayati, “A Tale of Two Mayors: Courts and Politics in Iran and Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. (36) 2, 2004.

44 Birol Başkan, *From Religious Empires to Secular States: State Secularization in Turkey, Iran and Russia*, Routledge: New York, 2014. Birol Başkan, Religious Institutions and State Building: Incorporation vs. Exclusion, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Submitted to the Graduate School, The Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, 2006. Birol Başkan, *State Secularization and Religious Resurgence: Diverging Fates of Secularism in Turkey and Iran, Politics and Religion*, available on CJO2013. Doi: 10.1017/S1755048313000059. Birol Başkan, “State Secularity and Its Impact on Societal relations in Turkey and Egypt,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2013, (35)2.

Başkan gives two basic reasons for this diversification. Firstly, during the state building process in 1920s, ruling elites of Turkey felt more threatened than their counterparts in Iran. Thus, they chose to incorporate religious institutions, which could be a focus of religious opposition, into the state. Secondly, the relatively strong institutional capacity of the state in Turkey made this incorporation process successful. On the contrary, the relatively weak state in Iran and the relatively strong internal organization of the religious institutions led to exclusion. Başkan goes further claiming that the reason behind the strong Islamic opposition in Iran during the 1970s was the exclusion of the religious institutions.

Başkan's work is highly important in gaining an understanding of the structure of religion and state relations during the first half of the 20th century. The differences between the level of institutional capacities of the Iranian and Turkish states were extensively presented in the modernization literature. The differences between the internal organizations of Shi'a and Sunni ulama were mentioned in the literature. Yet, this does not limit the explanatory power of Başkan's work in which the novelty lies in his attempts to theorise these popular arguments in a clear cut and academic manner by going beyond the essentialist and modernist assumptions. However, certain limitations can be identified. Firstly, the time frame that was explored – mainly the 20th century- remains relatively limited. The aberrations and exceptions are also neglected -as in any Weberian ideal typing-, and the impacts of the international relations are not taken into analysis.

Conclusion

This essay has given an account of the comparative works that focus on Iran and Turkey. Tracing the theoretical changes that influenced these comparisons, the essay has identified and critically reviewed the trends in this specific comparative domain. As mentioned above, the influence of orientalist and ethnocentric views has gradually decreased. The rise of post-colonial studies and the diversification of the comparison topics have generated more sophisticated, robust and academically sound analyses. Moreover, the rising interest of general public and academic community in the Middle East boosted the number of comparative works on Turkey

and Iran in the form of articles, books and PhD thesis submitted to Turkish universities.⁴⁵ Without doubt, these works hold less ethnocentric and orientalist assumptions; yet it is not an easy task to go beyond “the biases and misperceptions about Iran prevailing in Turkey”⁴⁶.

To summarise, although it would be a mistake to look for a common agenda of problems that continue to exist in the current comparative works, it is necessary to address certain challenges that prospective Iran-Turkey comparisons may face with. Firstly, one must bear in mind that social sciences in Turkey and in Iran are very much likely to remain over-politicized when compared to their western counterparts. Together with the studies covering the issue of ethnicity, works focusing on religion-state relations are overtly politicized in both the Turkish and Iranian contexts. Comparative works focusing on Iran and Turkey are not an exceptions to this case. The reasons behind this politicization are beyond the scope of this essay however, it is important to note that the comparative works carry the potential to fall into the trap of such inner political debates. The age-old ‘Will Turkey be Iran’ debate can illustrate the scope of this over-politicization and its influences on popular and academic discussions.⁴⁷ To avoid the pitfalls of inner ideological paradigms and to constitute a more analytical perspective, the material and political factors should be explored and scrutinised meticulously in a comparative manner.

Secondly, as my review showcases, the international dynamics have been neglected to a great extent in this comparative literature. Without

45 To name a few written in English and submitted to Turkish Universities in recent years. Esra Çeviker Gürakar, *Institutions and Economic Development: An Analytic Narrative Approach to Turkish and Iranian Cases*. Unpublished PhD dissertation submitted to Marmara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İktisat (ING) Anabilim Dalı, 2011; Mustafa Suphi Erden, *Citizenship and Ethnicity in Turkey and Iran*, Unpublished PhD dissertation submitted to The Graduate School of Social Sciences, The Department of Sociology, Middle East Technical University, 2010; Agah HAZİR, *A Comparative Analysis of Religion-State Relations: A Case Study on Turkey and Iran*, Unpublished PhD dissertation submitted to The Graduate School of Social Sciences, The Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, 2014.

46 For a critical review of Turkish scholarship on Iran which also discusses above mentioned biases see Metin Yüksel, *Iranian Studies in Turkey*, *Iranian Studies*, 2014. DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2014.890848

47 For a very recent example Oral Çalışlar, “Türkiye İran olmadı, İran, Türkiye olacak mı?”*Radikal*, 18 May 2015, Web. 18 May 2015.

doubt, the relations between Turkey and Iran have been affected deeply by the international factors, in many occasions. For instance, international dynamics demonstrated their influence directly through wars and invasions that took place on Anatolia and Iranian Peninsula. Moreover, the dynamics introduced by ‘the west’ such as incorporation into capitalism and the dissemination of new ideologies (i.e. enlightenment and nationalism) have had undeniable impacts on the national experiences of these two countries. Iran and Turkey’s trans-border relations can be considered as another dimension of such international influences that should be considered in comparative works. Prospective studies should recognise that the international processes not only influence the foreign affairs of these countries but also shape and structure the very national, seemingly isolated, inner’, developments. As Kamran Matin suggests, “the historical development of every society is fundamentally co-constituted by its international relations.”⁴⁸ Future comparative studies on Iran and Turkey, I argue, can benefit much from such an international insight and will certainly prosper if the impact of over-pollicisation can be avoided. This article has aimed to present an overview of the accumulated comparative literature, and thus, hopefully, can provide guidance for upcoming comparative endeavours.

48 Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity International Relations and Social Change*, New York: Routledge, 2013. p. 145.

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