Sociological study of Religious Approaches to Civil society in the Arab world and Iran

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to give a sociological analysis of religious approaches to civil society in Arabian countries and Iran. We aim to identify the similarities and differences between both approaches.

This study was performed through library method and employing comparative meta-analysis techniques. Our studied approaches are religious fundamentalism and religious modernism. The results of our study showed that religious fundamentalists in Arabian countries and Iran put the emphasis on the differences between Islam and civil society in terms of many indicators such as pluralism, governance, legislation, human rights, individual freedoms, and conclude that the religion (Islam) is incompatible with civil society; therefore, the establishment of civil society in Islamic societies is impossible, unnecessary and harmful for social solidarity of the Islamic Ummah.

Religious approach recognize a lot of similarities between Islam and civil society among Arabian countries and Iran's world with respect to many aspects and indicators such as the public domain, independence from government, non-governmental organizations, and finds that there is no incompatibility between Islam and civil society and hence, the establishment of civil society in the Islamic world is possible, necessary and functional. Religious modernists consider the factors like authoritarian governments or governmental and totalitarian interpretation of Islam (and not Islam itself) as serious obstacles to civil society realization.

Keywords: religion, government, civil society, public domain, non-governmental organizations, civil rights.
Introduction

Over three decades, the civil society is discussed in Arab world. Since 1992, “Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies” in Cairo published a journal called “civil society” under the supervision of the Egyptian sociologist, Saad Eddin Ibrahim. In addition to this journal, there other one entitled “democratic transformation in the Arab world” and special issues such as Middle East Report in the “Middle East Journal” which are in line with the strategy of civil society development in the Arab world. Besides the many conferences and meetings, including “Gramsci's civil society in the Arab world seminars” that was held in Cairo in 1992, “Civil society in Arabs’ view and its role in democracy realization seminar” was held in Beirut from 20th to 23rd January 1992. In this Conference organized by the “Center for the Study of the Arab League”, about a hundred of Arab researchers, politicians and intellectuals discussed civil society. In addition, Western academic centers consider the realization of the civil society an important step towards the realization of lasting peace in the Middle East region. In this regard, we can refer to the project “towards lasting peace in the Middle East” performed by the “International Peace Academy” in 1993 in New York. The outcome of this study was published in spring 1993 at a special “Middle East Journal” (Tanneberg & Wills, 1995). Besides, some proceedings about civil society held by the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London were held in 2000 and 2001, and its results were released in 2002 in a book called “Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives”. In August 1993, the al-Hayat newspaper published debate series in successive five volumes about “the idea of civil society in Egypt and the Arab World” (Moussali, 2012).

In Iran, the civil society discussion was presented in the late 60s and early 70s in some specialized humanities journals such as Kian, Iran-e Farda, Farhange Tose’e, and Aftab from the university professors and political activists, and raised among public in less than a decade during the seventh presidential election campaign in June 1997, by Mohammad Khatami, presidential candidate, and became one of the political demands of the Iranian people. On 31st January and 1st February 1997, in a conference “civil society realization in the Islamic Revolution of Iran”, civil society issues were discussed in four areas and in 65 articles by intellectuals and political activists. The results of these discussions were released in a book called “Conference” by the organization of Islamic Revolution cultural documents in March 1997. Since then, until 2006 elections, a few books and articles were written on this subject. In general, there are two strong approaches towards civil society in the Arab world and Iran: liberal approach and religious approach. The purpose of this paper is conducting a sociological analysis of civil society from the perspective of religious intellectuals (conservative and modernist) in the Arab world and Iran, and identifying the differences and similarities between them.

Religious Approach to civil society in the Arab world
Islamic approach to civil society in the Arab world and Iran is divided into two sub-approaches: religious fundamentalism and religious modernism.
Religious Fundamentalism Approach

The discussion about religious fundamentalism in the Arab world mostly focuses on “democracy” and “pluralism”, and less on the “civil society”. They were mostly presented by the heads of the fundamentalists organizations and political parties that have the political and ideological attitude- and not scientific- to civil society. Some religious fundamentalists in the Arab world are Shukri Mustafa, Saleh Syariah, Aboud Al Zomar and Omar Abdul Rahman.

- **Shukri Mustafa** was one of followers of Seyed Qutb and the founder of the Muslim community called “al-Takfir wal-Hijra”. According to Shukri, plurality of political parties and thought disagreements of different schools have no crediblity. One’s relationship with God is direct and no group can mediate between these two. Any interpretation which is not from Quran text is non-Islamic. No one can add anything to the Quran and Sunnah or remove something to them; any attempt in this regard violates the sovereignty of God. Disputes among Muslims are only solved by reference to the Quran and Sunnah and is not resolved by the human intellect.

- **Saleh Syariah** is another follower of Seyed Qutb and leader of the militant and radical group of “Tanzim Al-faniah Al-askariyah” who attempted a coup d’état against President Anwar Sadat which was failed, and was executed in 1974. In the Risalah “Al- Iman”, he divided people into three groups: Muslims, unbelievers and the hypocrites. Those who disobey the divine task are an apostate and his punishment is execution. In Syariah’s view, Muslims should use the mechanisms of democracy to establish an Islamic government. Islam should be criterion to everything and Muslims are allowed to join a party called Hizbollah. In his idea, membership in all non-Islamic parties including socialist, nationalist; and non-Islamic biased philosophies such as democracy, capitalism and nationalism, as well as, supporting any non-Islamic law is blasphemy (Moussali, 2012)

- **Aboud Al-Zomar**, one of the leaders of the Egypt’s “Islamic Jihad community” and military leader of “Tanzim Al-jihad” believes that Islam has not determined an unchangeable way to choose the governor, but has established the council as a doctrine and a procedure. Any political development should be based on the Quran, the Sunnah and the consensus. Inspired by Qutb, he emphasized on the importance of procedure based on which a united Islamic movement should be formed according to a practical and clear view of Islam which can fight with non-Islamic governments, do not deviate from the right path like previous movements, and finally lead to the formation of an Islamic caliphate. Al-Zomar rejects and denies the development of any society based on non-Islamic ethics, laws, ideology and thoughts, because Islam is comprehensive and division of any kind will be considered as the changing of its meaning. Therefore any Western innovative concept including secularism, nationalism, parliamentary system, individual freedom, etc. must be abandoned. According to him, the realization of these concepts can destroy the Islamic lifestyle. In Al-Zomar’s view, in order that Muslims can realize their way of life, it is necessary for them to rid itself of non-Islamic governments.

- **Omar Abdul Rahman** is the leader of a branch of Jihad Organization in Egypt, known as “Al-Jamaat Al- Islamiya Al-Jihadiyah”, which unlike al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen who accepted the legitimacy of the political order of Sadat and Mubarak governments, and considered the elections within the existing political system as a way to establish an Islamic government, he
considered them as illegitimate governments, and confronted them. According to him, the difference between Islam and democracy is profound, and can be only solved by dealing decisively with contentious issues such as identity, ethics, values and so forth. Therefore, he rejects joining the believers in democratic civil institutions because it gives legitimacy to the government. According to Abdul Rahman and his political group and based on the principles of group called “Mithaq al-amal al-Islami” (Covenant of the Islamic Action), all Western political philosophies including secularism, socialism, nationalism and liberalism are ignorant and unbeliever. People do not have the right to legislate, so they are not allowed to join in a party or to establish a parliament. Instead, they can try to understand what Allah asked them, and all disputes and disagreements should be resolved in this respect. Although there is Council in Islam, it is only a procedure and has a clear nature and cannot change any fundamental principle (Moussali, 2012).

Religious Modernism Approach
Religious modernists offer “Ahli society” or therapeutic / family society- which has a traditional and historical concept- instead of civil society which has a Western and liberal concept. According to them, the considered concept is more consistent with Islamic culture and protects citizens from tyranny of autocrats. Ahli society members and their intermediary institutions rely on the part of community between the government and the family. Islamic intellectuals criticize the issue in which the liberals know the religious institutions as tribal and family institutions and separate it from civil institutions. They believe that liberals do not scientifically apply this concept, but they use it politically against the Islamic movement. Religious intellectuals try to locally define the indigenous civil society that is compatible with the values and principles of Islam. According to the Arab Muslim intellectuals, the concept of civil society which is spontaneous and voluntary, involving intermediary institutions between the government and families is not inconsistent with the principles of Islam. In addition, throughout the history of Islam, Ahli society had partially formed the government. Social institutions or “Ummah” organizations which includes mosques, educational classes, the clergy institutions, and dedicated religious foundations, had a very important role in the history of Islam. So, these institutions must be revived and reconstructed in accord with the government and society. Muslim intellectuals believe that dynastic community and Ahli society in the sense of their considered concept is not against with the view of Islam and political system because in Islam "the theocracy" does not exist in Islam and sovereignty or power has a civil nature, i.e. it stems from the Muslim community; this power is on the basis of the “council” and participation of all members of the Islamic society in Public Affairs. In the Islamic system, there is discrimination among social institutions and political institutions in terms of duty and function; both have separate tasks. Political institutions are responsible for power practice and governing Muslims, and the social institutions are responsible for protecting people and governing the society. Discrimination between the tasks of social and political institutions does not mean that they are against each other. Social institutions within the framework of Islamic order have been responsible for constituting a power against the government domination in order to make the government to realize his tasks towards people. In sum, moderate Islamists do not deny the concepts of civil society, democracy and pluralism, they try to redefine them within the
framework of Islamic community and comply them with Islam (Ibrahim, 1995). Religious modernism relates any violence in Muslim societies to the lack of public institutions and pluralistic civil society. They see the pluralism as a means of saving community and the individuals from violence. In addition, this approach does not see any contradiction between Islam and liberalism. They recognize basic human rights such as right of assembly, freedom of speech and opinion as natural religious rights.

One of the common roots between two approaches which is in line with liberal democracy of John Locke is the Islamic law. Modernists consider individuals independent of society and the process of absorption of society in the government are not allowed for them. By insists on the fact that a person is independent of society, and the society is independent of the government, they conclude that both the person and the society should have some equipments to protect themselves against totalitarianism and tyranny (which exist in the Arab world) (Moussali, 2012). The most important religious modernists in Arab countries are: Bushra Tariq and Mohammad Ova from Egypt, Fahmi Al-Howaidi from Algeria, Hassan Al-Turabi from Sudan, Nur Al-Khalish Majid from Indonesia, and Rached Ghannouchi from Tunisia.

- **Bushra Tariq**, is a contemporary religious modernist of Egypt who sees the civil society as an informal network of mutual and independent economic-social interaction which is not designated by the government; such as Quranic schools, charities, schools, clinics and other health facilities and services, which have been established by the Islamic Movement and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In his idea, the existence of these institutions are often better equipped than public centers and offer cheaper and more beneficial services to the people, especially the vulnerable ones. It means that there was a social structure which was independent of the government in the distant past. Today, we can make use of them to advance social life, have closer relations with them, address them, and if required, mobilized them against government (Tanneberg & Wills, 1995).

- **Mohammad Ova**, a lawyer and prominent member of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen in Egypt, defines the civil society institutions as freedom of institutions that develop political, social and professional life. Like Bushra Tariq, Ova believes that non-governmental institutions of Islamic communities are part of civil society, and civil society is not limited to a special case of the civil institutions since such institutions, are different at various times and places. In other words, this is not true that Western liberals only consider institutions such as unions, clubs, federations and parties as civil society institutions. Civil institutions of Muslim communities such as mosques, churches, religious endowments, educational circles, trade organizations, industries and neighborhood are of civil society because like modern civil institutions, they are mechanisms for social actions. Therefore, Ova concludes that with the help of Islamic institutions and without imitating the West, civil society can be achieved.

Ova believes that the major obstacles to the realization of civil society in Islamic communities is the Arab authoritarian governments not Islam. He believes that there was a fact called tyranny in the history of Islamic societies even since the establishment of the first Islamic government, but Islam has opposed that. Ova states that it is wrong to call Islam authoritarian, especially by governments that dominate the Islamic communities, since these governments are not Islamic they and are not representative of their people, but they are nationalist with military nature. Ova concludes that restructuring government leads to social structures renewal because Arab
governments inhibit the formation of real civil institutions by the society itself based on public interests. Instead, they impose political institutions and dependent professional unions on their community. This has led voluntary associations and parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood to act secretly (Moussali, 2012).

- **Al-Howaidi** considers civil society compatible with Islam. According to him, Islamic civil society is composed of voluntary social organizations and is a government rival power, but is not in conflict with the Islamic government. Thus, Islamic democratic government guarantees the existence of civil society. He described his vision towards civil nature of the Islamic government on the basis of Islamic fundamentalists’ ideas about this issue. Islamic fundamentalists believe that there are no clergy in Islam in the Christian concept, and the legitimacy of power in the Islamic government arises from the will of God and the Muslim society theoretically has the right to dismiss their governors. In his view, Islam puts emphasis on Muslim affairs based on the “Council” and people invitation to have role in their fate and helping the poor and dispossessed in order to predict the ways to make community participate in political and social life (Ibrahim, 1995).

- **Hassan Al-Turabi**, a lawyer educated in France and was the leader of National Islamic Front (NIF) in Sudan. He sees civil society beyond the variety of institutions, which are permitted by Islamic constitution to take action. In Al-Turabi’s view, government is formed on the basis of the mutual social contract between the people and the leader, and in this basis, the leader finds the authority to manage people politically and socially, and obtains power which should be used for the goodness of society. According to the contract, the governors should never violate the freedom that Quran is vested in the people. Since this freedom should be realized within the constitution framework, any possible way to violate the freedom from the leader must be balanced with the establishment of the Representative Council (Moussali, 2013). In Al-Turabi’s view, society should be free, free from the government forces, free from the cast of any entity including a political party or religious party; but on the contrary, people can create limitations on the government. The government has no right to impose his views on people, even if they contain known legal opinions. Therefore, the educational institution must be managed without government intervention; if there is such intervention, it should be dependent on the Council. According to him, the government must obey the Council and consensus in his decision making. The government should surrender the public opinion, which is the organized form of the Council, reflects public opinion, and is not necessarily integrated since integrated public opinion hinders social developments and leads to its incompatibility with social change. In addition, the consensus of scholars on specific topics should be taken into serious consideration by the government (Moussali, 2012). Al-Turabi states that society must be free in reorganization of political institutions, and this requires reformulating the [political] philosophy of Islam, which Islamic societies desperately need it. Religion, Fiqh and Sunnah If not reread, do not provide grounds for this change. According to Al-Turabi, Muslims today live in the world very different from what the Islamic law formulated within; therefore, the historical evolution of Fiqh based on Aristotelian logic should be replaced by the process which is dependent on the thought free from the constraints imposed by previous scholars (Moussali, 2012).
Nur Al-Khalish Majid believes that the Quran accepts diversity and pluralism because pluralism is the result of God's will. In his opinion, we should not be afraid of the diversity of views about various issues of life, but these differences should be the basis for the competition which requires civil society. Majid consider social pluralism, especially religious pluralism, more important than the political pluralism which becomes significant by religious tolerance. In this regard, discussions are more centered on the acceptance of other religions and proper treatment with non-Muslims who live in Islamic society. In Majid’s idea, this is the reason that civil society and political participation are known as political pluralism and Islamic modern pluralism discourse that Western scholars are unaware of their occurrence in Arab societies.

Rached Ghannouchi, the co-founder of Ennahda movement in Tunisia, assumes that the need for respecting public and private freedoms and human rights is essential as the principles prescribed in Quran and adopted by international covenants and treaties. This issue includes principle of freedom of speech, association and political participation and condemns the use of violence and repression of freedom of opinion. According to Ghannouchi, presenting this issue provides a plan for peaceful coexistence and dialogue between rulers and ruled. He believes that the acceptance of any political order is subject to the presence of military that provides the free competition of political parties and segments of society on political, social and ideological issues. People and parties assist government in the administration through participation in social institutions and membership in the representative Councils of government. If it is realized, the Islamic Movement is ready to recognize the system having public support and political legitimacy. He mentions that the most superior authority is people's authority (after acknowledging the sovereignty of God) and it moves in line with the people's rights to form political parties and civil institutions (and even Communist Party). Ghannouchi gives a lot of freedom to society in which members even have the right to change their religion. According to Ghannouchi, any social engineering that leads to apply restrictions on it, is not permitted. Freedom of building all kinds of societies must be recognized. Citizens may conclude that their interests are better served with secular parties and other non-religious gatherings, or the entire political system change is necessary, and their demands must be respected (Moussali, 2013).

Religious approach to civil society in Iran
Like Arabian approaches, religious approach to civil society in Iran has two types: the religion fundamentalism and religious modernism. The first approach puts priority on the religion of society and believes that a civil society is different from the religion in terms of many indicators and factors and thus, its implementation in a religious society is impossible. The second approach, in addition to acceptance and prioritization of the religious societies, agrees with the establishment of civil society in a religious society, since it sees a lot of similarities between the components of the religious society and civil society.

Religious Fundamentalism Approach
This approach opposes its establishment in the Islamic communities because of the reasons that consider the idea of civil society liberal, and recognizes the differences between the principles of
the liberalism and Islam. Some of the key arguments of this group towards the incompatibility of Islam and civil society groups are as follows:

1. The civil society was founded on the basis of the legitimacy of government formed with the public vote and provincial society was built on the basis of the legitimacy of the system with divine origin (Mohebian, 1997);

2. Civil society lacks religious values, and the behavioral principles of people and their beliefs is on the basis of the wisdom or reason, not on religion (Aghajari, 1997). Therefore, if any law, even immoral, satisfies public, it is applicable and the government is obliged to implement that (Larijani, 1998);

3. While individual interests prevail civil society, there is no commitment, responsibility, self-interest and fear of God in provincial society;

4. In political system of Islam, people have no right to legislate and directly elect the leader. Provincial society rules are divine and the ruler is appointed by God or the Prophet, the Imams and their successors, i.e. the Islam scholars, not by direct public vote. The right of selection is limited for people and Islam is not on the basis of the majority. Therefore, in contrast to democracy, which is based on the public vote, and is temporary and limited to civilian rule, theocracy is divine, permanent, targeted (human happiness and welfare) and human has no role in the formulation of its laws (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000).

5. The relationship between people and government in the provincial society is different from that in democracies. People in the Islamic community are divided into two groups of scholars and public. However, people are mature in some private field, but in general field of life including political governance of the country, legislation, etc. they are need supervision and guidance (Kadivar, 2003).

6. Liberalism limits human in his or her instincts and material desires, while the human has two material and spiritual aspects in Islam.

7. In a liberal society, people have absolute freedom; but from the religious perspective, individual’s freedom is limited to the religious values.

8. Liberal perspective is based on the tolerance of the opposite thoughts, while the tolerance is permissible in framework of the Islamic law.

9. From liberal perspective, a favorable government is one which considers the people welfare, public order and security and has less interference in their private affairs, while in the Islam, government should think about spiritual and moral growth of the society in addition to welfare and security of the people. Islamic government prioritizes the collective rights over individual rights, and spiritual matters over material affairs (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000).

Following we review the attitudes of religious fundamentalists In Iran:

- Mohammad Javad Larijani, one of the experts of that approach, in his article “government and its legitimacy”, believes that people can't criticize and depose the Islamic leader, because in his view, “Islamic leader is himself a symbol of state legitimacy and obedience to him is not considered legally, but is a duty”. (Kadivar, 2003). Therefore, according to Larijani, the religious leader of Islamic society is placed beyond the political administrations and gives them legitimacy. As he writes: in the Islamic government, “without any flaw in its legitimacy, the leader could dissolve administration of government that he has established due to its efficiency” Kadivar,
In Larijani’s viewpoint, the relationship between the governor and people is one-sided and based on religious duty. Islamic government derives its legitimacy not from the people but from the Vali-e Fagih, and the authority of the leader is his success rate.

- **Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi**: To answer this fundamental question of whether civil society has any place in Islamic society or not, he, first defines the concepts of “civil society” and "Islamic society”, then analyzes the relationship between these two. In Mesbah Yazdi’s view, civil society is defined in three ways: first, civil society means civilized society against primitive and uncivilized society and it should be told that law and rules govern the behavior of citizens. Second, civil society means a society where people voluntarily participate to perform their social duties. Third, civil society, in its new sense, is defined as a part of human life which is independent of government and is in relationship with communities, guilds, parties, groups that mediate between the individual and the government (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000). According to him, the Islamic community is formed on the basis of the common belief, which is called “Ummah (community)”. To join in the community, there are two conditions: one is that the divine leadership acceptance on the basis of which one obeys Muslims’ Imam. The other is being responsible and accountability, that is, the Islamic community members must concerned religious practice more than getting their rights. According to him, the religious practice takes precedence over the interests of individual, group, and party (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000). As Mesbah Yazdi states, there is no compatibility between civil society in its modern sense, i.e. a society independent of the government, and the Islamic community, because this society is based on the principles that Islam is against them. These principles include:

a) **Secularism**, meaning the separation of religion from all social areas that constitute the basic pillars of civil society. Orientation in civil society is towards the invalidity of religion in social affairs, and the law is what people formulate and religion has no right to interfere in the political destiny of the people.

b) **Humanism**, is the other pillar of the civil society, in which human and his interests comes first and everything should be in the service of human, even religion is acceptable to the extent that provides human comfort and does not conflict with his interests.

c) The value rate, based on which there is no cognition and or fixed or absolute value.

d) Instrumental rationality and the governance of profit originality (pragmatism) in ethics and human behavior and the principle of natural rights in legislation.

e) The primacy of human freedom on the basis of which the greatest freedom is bestowed on individuals in life.

f) Small government, according to which the government should have the least interference in the public affairs and the main role in governing society is vested in people, i.e. people should have the right of interference in all matters including economic, cultural, social, artistic, military, etc. through parties, associations, unions, councils, unions, and institutions etc. (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000). However, Mesbah Yazdi believes that the compatibility of civil society, in the sense of participatory society, with Islam is possible subject to some circumstances. According to Mesbah Yazdi, if the purpose and functions of civil society are vindicating people's rights, attracting people’s participation, using the ideas and thoughts to reform conditions,
improving methods, decision-making and planning, preventing administrative and social corruption, performing social practices such as enjoining good and forbidding from the evil, guiding and educating people, easing the burden on enterprises and responsibilities of the people, it can be founded in Islamic community. However, there are some conditions for doing so: first, the commitment of the members to the Islamic community and its leadership is prior to their commitment to the institutions of civil society, second, the purpose and functions of civil society do not have the same value: the purposes that are in line with the public interests are superior to the ones that solely provide individual and group interests (Mesbah Yazdi, 2000).

- **Ahmad Vaezi** in “religious community, civil society” states that there are similarities such as limited power, political participation, responsibility of public between religion (Islam) and civil society, because of fundamental conflicts in principles, integration of them is impossible. Vaezi distinguishes the most important contradictions between the principles of civil society such as individualism, utilitarianism, instrumental rationality, secularism, pluralism, moral skepticism and non-ideological religion... with religious principles including rejection of issues like individualism, instrumental rationality, utilitarianism, and secularism. He also believes that the laws in the religious community have divine origin and because religious obligations are definite, any compatibility and reconciliation between civil society and religion or realization of a society, which can be as civil and religious, is impossible and contradictory. He explains his opinion:

“How can on the one hand, the religious and Islamic laws (Sharia) be followed, and on the other hand the civil society and necessity of realizing it be talked about? In the legislation of civil society, is there any place for divine sovereignty and laws? Or what exists, are individual and collective rights, these are discussed by political parties and civil organizations and are beyond religious legislations (Sharia)? ... How can moral (ethical) pluralism and secularism be combined with Islamic value system and its law (Sharia)? On the other hand, pluralism and tolerance should be viewed from two theoretical and practical aspects. Largely in civil society both pluralism (theoretical and practical) are common. Political pluralism and moral skepticism provide appropriate conditions for the spread of relativism, and recognition of completely opposite opinions and ideas. In practice, in civil society, as tolerance is respected, different thoughts and ideas with respect to collective essential rights have peaceful coexistence with each other. But in our religious thinking, although practical tolerance and pluralism are somehow recognized, theoretical contradictory views and pluralism are not so acceptable. Religious beliefs and values are not equal with other beliefs which in the pluralism have equal value and validity. Even in practical tolerance Islamic tolerance is not so spread as its counterpart in civil society. In religious society the matters such as Idolatry, laicism and homosexual relationship are not tolerated either individual or in groups” (Vaezi, 2002).

- **Amir Mohebbian** believes that a journalist and one of the experts in this group, because of essential differences, any compatibility between religious community and Western civil

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society is impossible. In his opinion: “significant differences between civil society and religious community are based on fundamental principles”. The legitimacy of civil society is derived from people vote but religious community is from divine origin. The establishment of divine government based on Western civil society’s principles is impossible; likewise the expected civil society of Westerners based on divine legitimacy is not possible” (Mohebbian, 1997:30).

**Religious Modernism Approach**

This approach resulted from the so-called “religious Intellectualism” in Iran, which serves three objectives based on the analysis of one of its experts (Alavitabar, 2003):

- **Secularism**: a religion criticism and rereading it in order to provide new things from religion with the help of the human intellect. The index discriminate the religious intellectualism from religious fundamentalism, which is extremely committed to tradition; since it does not believe in “separation from tradition and rejection of religion”, it does not differ from secularists.
- **Endogenous modernization of society**: localizing the development or the attempts to achieve a local model of development based on material and spiritual values of Iranian society is possible.
- **Making it Religious**: it means the restructuring and modernizing the society on the basis of modern understanding of religion. According to this, building a modern and religious society, i.e. the developed religious community, is possible. Religious intellectualism disagrees with materialism, religion aversion, anti-spirituality and the exclusion of religion from the public domain and privatization, it believes that in order for the transformation to democracy and the sustainable republic in Iran, the role of religion cannot be ignored. In line with the above mentioned objectives, religious intellectualism in Iran is trying to criticize the fundamentalist, totalitarian and authoritarian interpretations of Islam, and with the help of modern rationality achieve a modern interpretation of Islam, that not only is in consistent with civil society and other liberal concepts such as democracy, parliamentary republic, elections, etc. but also supports them from spiritual and moral aspects. Religious intellectualism believes that there conciliation of God trainings with democratic values; particularly, with civil society is possible through two important mechanisms: de-ideologizing civil society and the reflection in the concept of religion.
  i. **De-ideologizing civil society**: in opposition to religious fundamentalists and in accord with the religious intellectuals’ belief; although, civil society has been theoretically and practically formed in West, many of its components can be found in all societies and all cultures including Islamic communities and the religion of Islam. Therefore, by de-ideologizing civil society and not paraling it with atheism, it is possible to implement it in other non-Western and religious societies; in other words, to make the civil society indigenous and religious. Based on this, the civil community consists of features such as legalism, civilization, pluralism and so forth, which is found everywhere and is executable.
  ii. **Rethinking about concept of religion**: in religious intellectuals opinion and regarding multiplicity and interpretability of the concepts of “religion” and civil society, all attempts should be made towards reconciliation of the two concepts and on the basis of this fundamental question: “Which version of the religion can be compatible with the interpretation of civil society?”
Following, we review the perspectives of some of religious intellectualists in Iran:

- **Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari** is among scholars of this group. Without presenting a specific definition of civil society, regarding the relationship between religion and civil society, Shabestari, believes that this relationship depends on two different kinds of our understanding of religion: In the first understanding of religion, the task of setting of worldly affairs is entrusted to humans by God and they through their wisdom and without the help of a supernatural power could solve their everyday problems and issues. According to the second understanding of religion, the human reason is not enough to solve the problems of everyday life. Therefore the people need to apply holy books and methods of prophets. According to him, in the second type of interpretation, the compatibility of religion and civil society is not possible. But based on three reasons, he rejects the totalitarian interpretation of religion and believes that religion and civil society can be compatible with each other.

  “First… many of worldly needs of human beings such as science, art, philosophy and literature are not from occult world’s guidance but are created by man throughout history. And thereby can be found that in the creation of human it was not determined that an occult power meet human needs. Second… human communities are inherently variable and changeable and cannot be considered fixed frameworks or mechanisms in their survival and development to be delivered by prophets. Third… historical phenomenology of religions shows that the essence of religions is different from their substantial aspects and matters such as social evolution rule, the rules of social evolutions and changes of societies are outside of essence of religion. What is inherent in the monotheistic religion, are only to hear the message of God, confess testimony of faith and to follow monotheistic conduct. Religiosity could be bring combined with different social changes and mechanisms into a group and is also compatible with civil society” (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2002).

- **Abdolkarim Soroush**, believes that civil society is synonymous with “political society” and in contrary to the “primitive society” is defined as follow: “Civil or political society is placed versus primitive society, as society without government and without law, in which the separation of powers has not been done” (Soroush, 1998). Soroush has considered six characteristics for the civil society: independent sphere of government, non-ideological, pluralistic (political, cultural, and religious), and defender of human rights, lawful and based on law and diverse sources of knowledge (Soroush, 1998). Regarding the relation of religion with civil society Soroush believes that the interpretation ability of religious understanding makes the reconciliation between religion and modern concepts possible. In his opinion, for this purpose it is necessary first to define religion and then, measure the relationship of acceptable religion to modern concepts, including democracy and civil society. In this regard, Soroush has mentioned two types of religious understanding and expectation of the religion, namely “minority insight of religion" and "majority insight of religion”:

  “I call this perception which believes that all necessary and sufficient rules and information and policies for the economy, government, business, law, ethics,
theology etc., for each type of simple and complex mind and life are entered in the religious law (Sharia), and therefore believers don’t need any sources (for common good) other than religion, as Maximization insight or Maximization expectation of religion. Along with the majority vision, there is another insight that believes religion in the abovementioned cases (i.e. in the area of religious missions) has taught us few things” (Soroush, 1998).

According to Sorouh, the religion can be compatible with civil society only if our perception of religion changes. It means that we should believe in a religion that is non-ideological, non-political and non-totalitarian and we accept that religion can only meet the spiritual needs of human and human beings in order to meet other needs must refer to other sciences. Soroush states:

“In civil society discussion is about how the governments can be limited... So far there is no contradiction between religion and civil society, but they complement each other totally. Where is religion in conflict with civil society in which the religion does not recognize diversity and pluralism?. However, we need a new interpretation and understanding of the religion. The reform of interpretation and understanding of religion can reconcile religion with civil society”. (Soroush, 1998)

• Mohammad Khatami, the ex-president of Iran, believes that Islamic civil society is synonymous with “city of Prophet” that was a religious, not secular society. Khatami describes:

“Our desired civil society originates historical and theoretical from the city of Prophet. […]. In this city and society, worship of God is combined with self-determination and autonomy. Commitments of human to the divine and human virtues don’t contradict with his authority and comfort. Spirituality and piety are in accordance with fair and justice enjoyment of world benefits” (Khatami, 2000).

About other characteristics of “religious civil society”, Khatami writes:

“Although our desired civil society is based on Islamic thought and culture, it should not realize any case of individual and group despotism, majority tyranny and elimination of minority. In this society humans are behaved with dignity and honor and their rights are respected. The citizens of Islamic civil society have right of self-determination, control of their affairs and critic on state. The state in this society is considered servant, not master of people, and in any case must be responsible to people. Our civil society, is not a society, in which are recognized only Muslims as citizen, but also is a society that everyone in the framework of law and order have all equal rights of citizenship and defense of them is the most important duty of Islamic government” (Khatami, 2000).
Therefore, respect to human rights, equality of humans in front of the law, respect for minority's rights and the rights of self – determination are common characters of both civil societies (religious and western). But Khatami has distinguished two major differences between religious and western civil societies. First, religious civil society is a religious, not a secular society. Second, there are no vast liberal freedoms in religious civil society and all freedoms are limited to Islamic norms.

- **Mohsen Kadivar**, an Islamic scholar and one of the religious intellectuals, defines civil society” as intermediate sphere between private life of people and government […]“that its basic characteristics are “free communities, participation, pluralism, competition, and recognizing human's rights” (Kadivar, 2000). According to Kadivar, denial of civil society is equal to acceptance of totalitarianism and autocracy, because in the absence of civil society and pluralism, totalitarianism of government will spread and gradually will expand the control and supervision of government over all social systems (Kadivar, 2000). About the relationship between civil society and religious society, Kadivar raised the question “how must one administrate a religious society? “And then identified two despotic and democratic methods:

“The first method is closed, non – democratic, based on totalitarianism and or on individual despotism, the main feature of this approach is believing to do anything with permission of the leader of government that is considered representative of God. The second method is democratic and non – totalitarian. In this method the administration of society is based on human experience and reference to human reason to solve the problems. So when we speak about the relationship between religion and civil society, we should determine what we mean: totalitarian and non - democratic religious society or democratic and non - totalitarian religious society?” (Kadivar, 2000)

While accepting the above dichotomy political typology Kadivar, concludes that the totalitarian religious society is never compatible with civil society, whereas non- totalitarian religious society is compatible with civil society.

- **Habibullah Peyman**, a political activist, in a paper entitled “civil society in religious thought” puts the civil society against the tribal community and gives the case of foundation of “the city of Prophet” as a historical example of it. According to Peyman, civil society means a public sphere in which civil institutions, political parties, and free individuals, religions and ideologies are allowed to be present. Peyman writes:

“It is the public sphere, that all civil institutions with any class or ideological origins can have rational and non – imperative dialogues and raise and publicize their ideal values and intellectual perspectives along with their desired interests in connection with any issues of social, political or economic solutions … civil institutions like political parties, the variety of political, social, cultural and economic interest groups,
… could raise their commands in the framework of ideological and religious values” (Peyman, 1997).

In Peyman’s view, in civil society which has a safe sphere and is free from dominance and violence, public opinion is formed and can be achieve common consensus through free and rational dialogue. He considers rationalism, collective consensus, tolerance, pluralism and diversity, respect to rights of others, individual freedoms and rule of law as important features of civil society (Peyman, 1997). He, like Shabestari, Kadivar and soroush in response to the question about the relationship between religion and civil society, links it to two different types of understandings of religion: In the first perception, religion is a divine institution, which is engaged in spiritual needs and its rules don’t originate from human reason and will. This religion has no compatibility with civil society, because civil society is a worldly institution which is formed to solve everyday problems of human life according to common sense. According to the second perception of religion, there is compatibility between religion and civil society, because religion is considered as a value and thinking system that allowed to be raised and discussed along with other thinking systems. In this interpretation, the only valid criterion for evaluation and judgment is common sense (Peyman, 1997).

- Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, an Islamic scholar like Soroush and Peyman, has compared civil society with traditional society and has attributed to it features such as human will, choice and freedom, common sense, justice distribution of power and wealth, civil law and equality of all before the law, non-elitism, independence from the state, protect of human’s rights and freedoms (Yousefi Eshkevari, 1998). About the relationship between religion (Islam) and politic in general and civil society in particular, Eshkevari believes that Islam has not designed a permanent political system and God has not determined anybody to ruling. Legislation, like the governing is considered as human duty, because based on new changing needs we always need to enact new laws. But according to him, in a civil society in which people live based on religious values, government cannot disregard the religion, but it is obliged to act in the framework of religious values and norms, if they are codified and approved as regulations. The Religious civil society like the secular civil society is an independent society of the state and its various organizations protect the rights and freedoms of citizens. In opposition to secular civil society, it must protect the religious virtues and values of the society (Yousefi Eshkevari, 1998).

Conclusion
According to the materials discussed in this paper regarding study of religious approaches to civil society in Arabian countries and Iran, following points were concluded:

- Religious approach towards civil society in the Arabic and Iranian countries has two trends: religious fundamentalism and religious modernism.
- Religious fundamentalism have political and ideological attitude towards civil society in Arab communities. They reject all forms of pluralism (political, cognitive, religious and social). They define the Islamic community as a single nation which should be governed by a Party,
government and single Law of Islam. Therefore, they reject the establishment of political and civilian institutions such as other party, association or legislature, arguing that it harms the Islamic community.

- The disagreement between of Islam and democracy over the fundamentals and principles is very deep and Inextricable; these principles are as follows: individual freedom does not matter in Islam, human always needs care; happiness of the individuals is a secondary aspect compared to the happiness of community (i.e. the happiness of community has superiority over the happiness of the individuals). One’s relationship with God is direct and no group or party can mediate between the two. Islam is comprehensive and has no need for laws and human thought. One's relationship with God is direct and no group or party can mediate between the two. Islam is comprehensive and has no need for laws and human thought. Community leaders are elected from God not people. The only legitimate government is the one that obeys the rule of Sharia, and people have no right to rebel against it. Islamic government is the representative of the public and is responsible for forcing people to obey the moral trainings of Islam and is allowed to use force to do so. “Council” does not mean the right of people's participation in public decision-making, but it is a decision-making procedure among the Islamic rulers. Community is deprived of the right to oversee the government. On the contrary, the government has the right to control people. In conclusion, the interests of the people should be collectively represented and it is not the task of the parties, associations or other civil organizations. Therefore, only the government (not the political parties, interest groups, private organizations or any other associations and non-governmental organizations) can represent the public will. Finally, the collective interest must reflect divine will. Finally, the public interest must reflect divine will.

- Religious modernism approach does not see any incompatibility between Islam and democracy in the Arab world, but since it does not consider the mere imitation of western civil society and following the values of Western democracy appropriate for Arab civil society, it tries to redefine modern liberal concepts in accordance with social and common condition of the Arab community and Islamic trainings. From their point of view, Islamic civil society is the same dynastic community or Al-Ahli complex, which is based on traditional institutions and social participation in public affairs of Muslims. Civil society is formed of traditional institutions (such as the mosque, religious endowments, etc.) and new civil institutions placed between community and the government are independent of the government and monitor its performance. In religious modernists’ point of view in the Arab world, there is no theocracy in Islam and power has a civil nature and is “Council-based”, which recognizes the participation of all members of the community in public affairs. Although the legitimacy of power arises from the will of God in Islam, the government in the Christian sense (the religious government) does not exist and people have the right to choose and remove their rulers.

- Community is free and the government has no right to interfere in people's private affairs such as imposing its wants and views on them, but people can impose limitations on the will of the government. Government decisions should be based on “consensus” and “Council” and obey the “public opinion”.

- Arab religious modernists respect all forms of pluralism (religious, political, cognitive, social) and individual freedom, including freedom of speech and opinion and human rights; and recognize individual membership in civil parties, associations and institutions.
• The most important obstacles for realizing the civil society in the Arab countries are authoritarian governments of Arabs, not Islam.
• In Iran, religious fundamentalists believe that the civil society is based on the principles of Western liberalism and they try to highlight the differences between Islamic community (provincial) and civil society (liberal) and conclude that these two communities have different nature and origin; therefore, they are not incompatible. They specify the difference of these two communities according to the following principles. Islamic society is based on God centeredness, the principle of truth, faith, people duties toward God, the divine legislation, unified and integrated nation, combining religion and politics, theoretical and practical tolerance, and freedom subject to the divine law. In contrast, liberal society is based on humanism, the majority principle, and moral skepticism, duties of people towards each other, civil legislation, pluralism, and separation of religion from politics, unconditional tolerance, complete equality and freedom. While the first political official is the religious leader in Islam, who have been permanently appointed to this position and has divine legitimacy and wide authorities limited to legal rules, the head of government has public legitimacy and authority limited civil constitution in secular, liberal, selective, temporary societies.
• From the perspective of Iranian religious fundamentalists, existing many contradictions in the principles of the Islamic community and liberal civil society are the unsolvable obstacles of civil society's realization in Iran.
• Unlike the religious fundamentalists, Iranian religious modernists notice the differences and similarities of the two societies. According to religious modernists, Islamic civil society differs from liberal civil society in terms of the following criteria. In Islamic civil society, religiosity, civil and divine law governance, divine and public legitimacy of the government, combination of religion and politics, and freedom subject to legal rules are recognized. While the basic features of liberal civil society are as follows: secularism, civil laws, public legitimacy of government, separation of religion from politics, and positive and negative freedom.
• According to Iranian religious modernists, religious society and liberal society have the following criteria in common:
  • Definition: civil society is a modern society with non-governmental organizations, public domain, and public opinion.
  • Indicators: The most important components of civil society are: legalism, freedom and equality of all people before the law, respect for civil rights, collective wisdom, independence from government, non-ideological, pluralistic.
  • Specific actions: of civil society include public discussion, monitoring the government, the formation of public opinion, social participation in power, equal distribution of wealth and power, avoiding elitism, safeguarding the social and religious values.
• From the perspective of Iranian religious modernists, there is no fundamental contradiction between the Islamic and religious society and the main barrier of the civil society realization is the ideological, pluralistic, totalitarian interpretation of the religion that will be resolved by changing the perception of religion.
• It was concluded that the religious fundamentalists in the Arab world and Iran agree with the issue of fundamental difference between Islam and civil society and they point out that Islam is incompatible with civil society.
Thus, religious fundamentalists in the Arab world and Iran believe that the establishment of civil society in Islamic societies is impossible, unnecessary and harmful to the social solidarity of the Islamic communities, thus disagree with it. These approaches are generally similar. Religious modernists in the Arab world and Iran agree on the issue that there is no inconsistency between Islam and civil society; if there is, it is partial. They believe that other factors such as authoritarian governments or governmental and totalitarian interpretation of Islam (not Islam itself) is serious obstacle of civil society realization. Hence, the establishment of religious civil society in Islamic societies is possible, necessary and useful to Islamic society.
Reference


