Chapter Two:

Civil Society in Iran – A Conceptual Framework
2-1. Preface

The idea of a civil society has a very wide, and rather varied, body of committed supporters in the contemporary world. These supporters, who variously live in post repressive situations (South America, the Philippines, Africa), post communist situations (the Czech Republic, Poland and more widely in eastern Europe), and in "postmodern" liberal democratic situations, ALL tend to see a marked advantage to the existence of "a dense network of civil associations" in their own societies.

The various governments in the European Union and North America can be numbered amongst the strong supporters of the cultivation of a vibrant Civil Society. Why is this? What significant benefits do so many interest groups see as being associated with the promotion of the activity of civil associations? These questions are not simply answered because the principle reasons for support vary according to the circumstances in which individual supporters find themselves. Those supporters who live in post repressive situations tend to prize active and widespread involvement in civil associations as having contributed to the overthrow of repressive regimes. An otherwise socially atomized population could coalesce in various civil associations giving rise to broadly based movements that were effective in winning change.

Where a vibrant, inclusive, and connected civil Society peopled with citizens who are used to enjoying rights as citizens under responsive governments is already established anyone who suggests radical change is more or less obliged to make it evident that the changes they seek will not involve any significant negative effects. It
may be that a vibrant Civil Society can contribute to underpinning a more humane future allowing people, in our increasingly globalized and multicultural world.

The theoretical framework for the study of developments in civil society and how it might lead to democratization in the Middle East is discussed in this chapter. Since Iran is a Middle Eastern country with all the characteristics of this region, most of the discussions revolve around the Middle East that is equally valid for Iran as well.

2-2. Definition of Civil Society

Civil society is composed of voluntary civic and social organizations and commercial institutions. The term is often traced to Adam Ferguson, who saw the development of a "commercial state" as a way to change the corrupt feudal order and strengthen the liberty of the individual. While Ferguson did not draw a line between the state and the society, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, made this distinction in his Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Broadly speaking, the term was split, like Hegel's followers, to the political left and right. On the left, it became the foundation for Karl Marx's bourgeois society; to the right it became a description for all non-state aspects of society, expanding out of the economic rigidity of Marxism into culture, society and politics.

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and
market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.\(^5\)

Although central to classical Western political theory, the concept of civil society was largely moribund during the days when models of state-led modernization dominated both liberal and Marxist conceptions of social change and development. It was recovered during the late 1970s and 1980s, as these models disintegrated. Civil society seemed to promise something better and available: it was democracy and prosperity, autonomy and the means to exercise it. Yet, in those regions that have emerged from authoritarian rule or from close political regulation of the economy – that is, in regions which seemed to have created what were assumed to be the preconditions for the emergence of a civil society – the picture has been much darker. Civil society remains as distinct and precarious an ambition as ever.\(^6\)

For Hegel, a civil society is viewed as a separate sphere of interests existing outside the state, and thus a civil society is conceived as a “battlefield where everyone’s individual private interests meets everyone else’s.” Owing to this viewpoint, a civil
society represents a sphere of life that is hostile to the state and its commitment to promote a higher outlook or conception of the common good. In this view, the civil society experience suggests a setting in which individuals pursue their self-interests, often without regard for obligations and duties that are considered essential for protecting the rights that all members are to be accorded. The state must work to overcome the destructive features of these tendencies toward self-interest in order to make possible an atmosphere of civil virtue and a concomitant support for the common good, including respect for the rights of others.\(^7\)

The literature on links between civil society and democracy has its root in early liberal writings like those of Alexis de Tocqueville. However they were developed in significant ways by 20th century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who identified the role of civil society in a democratic order as vital.\(^8\)

They argued that the political element of many civil society organizations facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result.\(^9\) The statutes of these organizations have often been considered micro-constitutions because they accustom participants to the formalities of democratic decision making.

More recently, Robert D. Putnam has argued that even non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy. This is because they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are
transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it.\textsuperscript{10}

Others, however, have questioned how democratic civil society actually is. Some have noted that the civil society actors have now obtained a remarkable amount of political power without anyone directly electing or appointing them.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, other scholars have argued that, since the concept of civil society is closely related to democracy and representation, it should in turn be linked with ideas of nationality and nationalism.\textsuperscript{12}

The term civil society is currently often used by critics and activists as a reference to sources of resistance to and the domain of social life which needs to be protected against globalization. This is because it is seen as acting beyond boundaries and across different territories.\textsuperscript{13} However, as civil society can, under many definitions, include and be funded and directed by those businesses and institutions (especially donors linked to European and Northern states) who support globalization, this is a contested use.\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, others see globalization as a social phenomenon bringing classical liberal values, which inevitably lead to a larger role for civil society at the expense of politically derived state institutions.

Civil society is in close relationship with civil liberty. Civil liberties are especially invoked to limit the justifiable coercive power of
the state: for example, freedom from arbitrary arrest, or detention, and habeas corpus; freedom of speech; freedom of lawful assembly; freedom of association and of movement; and the right not to incriminate oneself. Some civil liberties are seen as implications of respect for the rule of law; for example, the right to a fair trial. The importance of civil liberties has been reflected in attempts to provide constitutional guarantees for them.

In general, the rights to freedom of thought, expression, and action, and the protection of these rights from government interference or restriction. Civil liberties are the hallmark of liberal, democratic “free” societies. In the United States, the Bill of Rights guarantees a variety of civil liberties, most notably freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech, expressed in the First Amendment.

The seventeenth century theorists of civil society based their argument on the concept of a Social Contract. For them, a civil society (societas civilis) was a rule of law in which citizens gave up the freedom of the state of nature in exchange for the guarantee of certain rights – security for Hobbes plus liberty and property for Locke. Later definitions of civil society included the idea of an active citizenry checking violations of the social contract by the state. Mary Kaldor defines civil society as the medium through which a social contract between the governing institutions and the governed is negotiated and reproduced. This includes defining moments – constitutional conventions and round tables, for example – as well as every day public pressure through the media, political parties,
churches, NGOs and so on. Thus civil society is inextricably linked to individual rights.\textsuperscript{15}

Kaldor proposes five different versions of the concept of civil society including: (1) Societas Civilis; (2) Bourgeois society (Bürgerliche Gesellschaft); (3) The Neo-liberal version; (4) The Activist version; and (5) The Post-Modern version.\textsuperscript{16}

(1) \textbf{The Societas Civilis}: For Kaldor, civil society is defined as "a rule of law and political community, a peaceful order, a zone of 'civility'. Civility is defined not as 'good manners' or 'polite society but as a state of affairs where violence has been minimized as a way of organizing social relations. Most later definitions of civil society are predicated on the assumption of a rule of law and the relative absence of coercion in human affairs. Moreover, it is generally assumed that such a Societas Civilis requires a state, with a public monopoly of legitimate violence."

(2) \textbf{Bourgeois society}: Civil society is defined following Smith, Hegel and Marx as "that arena of ethical life in between the state and the family. It was an historically produced phenomenon linked to the emergence of capitalism. Markets, social classes, civil law, welfare organizations were all part of civil society."\textsuperscript{17}

(3) \textbf{The Neo-liberal version of civil society}: The term of civil society was popularized in the aftermath of 1989, neo-liberals and might be "described as 'laissez faire politics' a kind of market in politics. According to this definition, civil society consists of associational life -
a non-profit voluntary 'third sector' - that not only restrains state power but also actually provides a substitute for many of the functions performed by the state. Thus charities and voluntary associations could carry out functions in the field of welfare which the state can no longer afford to perform."

(4) The Post-Modern version of civil society: Civil society is defined as "an arena of pluralism and contestation, a source of incivility as well as civility. Following this definition, NGOs is only one of the many components of the civil society."¹⁸

2-3. Impact of Civil Society on Democratic Values

Civil society has been one of the most prominent concepts in the study of political science for the last 20 years. As part of the interest in the third wave of democracy that flooded Eastern Europe and — in later years — the Middle East, political scientists, observers, and analysts have been writing extensively on the subject. Yet most of these writings and research studies have reached the same conclusion: Civil society is either weak or nonexistent in the areas of concern.

This conclusion was based on the assumption that civil society is a group of well-structured, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that work in the buffer zone between society and the government. Membership in these organizations should be voluntarily. Thus, while excluding family, tribe, and other organizations based on primary ties,
these organizations include syndicates, trade unions, political parties, and interest groups.

With the historical development of countries in the Middle East taken into consideration, a search for well-structured organizations is almost like chasing ghosts. Institutions and political organizations in those countries suffer from structural deficits and social liabilities that hinder their development and their ability to serve an active part of civil society. An alternative definition looks at the core of the phenomenon: the tools and mechanisms that connect the government to society.

The forms of these mechanisms and tools may differ from one society to another according to social, economic, political, cultural, and even historical and geographical settings. This definition claims to be more openly oriented towards a study of the phenomenon in its different forms and different situations. This approach tends to deal with civil society as a recent Western phenomenon rather than a concept. In other words, though it has taken different forms throughout history, civil society is a characteristic of human societies; however, the interest in it is a recent phenomenon that has developed lately in Western societies. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the Western contribution to the study of the concept, not as a guideline for the development of the phenomenon, but rather as a human experience beneficial for others. The study of civil society in a given country should be performed at two levels, the first of which is intellectual and academic. An interest in the concept and civil society activities on the academic and intellectual level would lead to a creation of a more positive and encouraging environment that
eventually leads to strengthening civil society regardless of the
definition adopted for it. The second level deals with the field study of
the mechanisms and tools developed within the context of a given
society.

Ali Abootalebi suggests that the term "civil society" has gained
currency as an important factor correlating with democratization in
developing countries (LDCs), including those in the Middle East. Civil
society is used to label groups contrasted to the state, regardless of
purpose or character. Their mere existence and function is thought
somehow to deter the state's power and increase prospects for
democratization.\textsuperscript{20} This concept's broad usage sometimes makes civil
society as indistinguishable from society as a whole. Further, the
precise components of civil society supposedly causing or correlating
with democracy's emergence are left to speculation.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover,
there is an understating of how the state can spoil prospects for
democratization. The state's influence on society is as important--or
more important--than society's influence on the state.\textsuperscript{22}

Assessing the content of the new alternative (democratic
values) looks easy at first, but it is actually difficult because it requires
accurate and all-out study of the democratization phenomenon, its
contents and its outcomes. Human rights, political participation, small
government versus powerful civil society, as well as accountable and
transparent government seem to be four values that have gained in
importance over the past two decades and have turned into goals of
many political and social groups in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{23} Some of those
issues are so attractive that few governments consider themselves as
being against human rights or political participation or are willing to be known as undemocratic. In the light of that situation, today, many nongovernmental organizations have become very active to carefully assess activities of governments, as well as political and social groups. Since the early 1980s, such organizations have mushroomed in the Middle East, the most important of which are Arab human rights organization in Cairo, which was established in 1983. Such issues as civil rights or women’s rights are usually discussed under the same topic and many groups have become active to increase awareness of citizens or women of their rights. Growth of such organizations will be undoubtedly a major step toward strengthening the civil society and downsizing the government because such goals can be achieved through developing and expanding political participation to impart some meaningful control over public policies to all citizens (democratization).

Here, we must put emphasis on the importance of expansion of nongovernmental organizations; instead of increasing the number of political parties because party pluralism in the Middle East is usually guided form above and parties are not considered to be representatives of social classes and existing political forces.

More study will reveal that the wave of democratization brings with it two more general attitudes, which are not less important than the above four issues; though they are mentioned less frequently.

1) **Link between economic and political liberalism**: In the course of democratization, especially its impact on the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the link between economic and political liberalism became more evident and this issue has put a lot of pressure on regional governments. As we know, most regional governments have
adopted privatization policies according to recommendations of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to achieve economic liberalism or have even consented to control political liberalism. However, they have not accepted “real” changes in existing relations and have not been willing to deepen democracy.27 Global experience shows that although political renovation and economic growth are not synonymous28, real reconstruction in the field of economy is mainly dependent on political reconstruction in the sense of establishment of democracy. Interestingly, regional Islamists try to make the most of political liberalism and foreign policies, but are among the main critics of such a relationship and they stress on shortcomings of liberal economy.

2) **End of historical deterministic models:** The second attitude is that no fate has been determined beforehand, but “the process of dialogue is constantly going on to cause continuation of democratic life.”29 In fact, as put by Giddens, one of the main features of modernity is that deterministic historical models are given up. On the other hand, under the influence of modern thinking, an end has been put to liberation policies and they have been replaced by “living policies”.30 Importance of this issue (termination of deterministic historical models) is that political discourses in the modern Middle East were inspired by beliefs in the savior.31 Now after “the most severe failure of the communist utopia”32 and demystification of such models, the roles of many political activists in the region, both rulers and not rulers, have lost in significance.
2-4. Middle East and the Civil Society Debate: A Regional View

The expression "civil society" is used today to indicate how clubs, organizations, and groups act as a buffer between state power and the citizen’s life. Thus, in the absence of such associations, the state dominates socioeconomic and private affairs, intensifying the state's authoritarian tendencies. Modern states have become more efficient in using persuasive and coercive means to achieve their goals. In the Middle East, oil revenues, expanded militaries, and the growing group of state bureaucrats, technocrats and professionals have increased the state's capabilities. But declining oil revenues in the 1980s and the 1990s have forced states in the Middle East to make structural adjustments, through limited privatization (e.g., Jordan, Syria), reduction in government subsidies (e.g., Iran, Iraq), and increased borrowing or aid from abroad (e.g., Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iran). Nonetheless, in the Middle East, state financial and coercive power remains strong and far superior to resources available to its social, economic, and political opposition. The challenge to the state by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, or the National Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, for example, have failed to change the state's domestic and foreign policies. Economic decline, due to declining oil and gas prices, and foreign aid, has forced states in the Middle East to "liberalize" the economy and withdraw from such sectors of the economy as education, health, and welfare. The state's control of the national economy (e.g., government's high level share of the total expenditures in the economy, as a percentage of Gross...
National Product), however, remains intact. Furthermore, the dominant presence by the state in all aspects of social and political life of citizens, since virtually the rise of the modern state in the Middle East and elsewhere in developing countries, has made it very resistant to sharing political power with opposition. For, example, The "powerful interventionists state" remains the "structural factor" responsible for the absence of democracy in the Arab World.\(^{35}\)

Recent expectations for the emergence of civil society and democracy in the Middle East--intensified in the post-Cold War era--must be viewed with caution, specifically, the premise--reversing long previous belief--that states in the Middle East are weak and societies are strong. The Iranian revolution, the rise of Islamist movements in the 1980s, and declining oil prices are underscored as reasons for optimism about the rise of civil society in the region. This has led to growing interest in state-society relations and prospects for civil society's emergence.\(^{36}\) Today, most scholars confidently affirm that "both intermediate powers and autonomous social groups exist in the Middle East."\(^{37}\)

However, the civil society debate on the Middle East has focused on changes in formal governance procedures rather than substantive change in state-society relations. The emergence of state-regulated quasi-pluralism in countries like Egypt or Jordan is seen as a shift from one-party rule to pluralism, involving the rise of numerous political parties and associations.\(^{38}\)
Islam is correctly seen as a force which can be compatible with a modernization process and with democracy. But the augmentation of political parties in the area may be more a result of the state's adjusting to pressure from Islamic groups and their allies than a genuine, broader political opening. Middle East political parties remain largely ineffective, playing mostly a ceremonial role serving to legitimate state policies. Moreover, embryonic associations, though they exist, are poorly organized and remain dependent on patrons within the state. As Carrie Rosefsky Wickham put it in discussing Egypt, "The emergence of independent sites of social and political expressions within an authoritarian setting is not the same as the emergence of civil society, at least not in its liberal conception." 39

Thus, despite the new optimism, serious questions on the status of civil society in the Middle East remain unanswered. How really autonomous are socioeconomic and political groups in the region and how do we measure the degree of autonomy? Does autonomy necessarily imply the presence of well-organized, institutionalized groups and associations capable of counterbalancing the state's power? How weak or strong are states, given the decline in their financial bargaining power in the 1980s and 1990s? What role do external forces play in the formation of civil society and democracy? A serious shortcoming of studies on civil society generally is the absence of empirical studies that systematically measure and establish correlation between civil society and democracy. 40
The thesis is that the disproportionate growth in the state's strength vis-à-vis the society leaves the latter still at the former's mercy. The major obstacles to inaugurating democracy are the presence of strong states and weak societies, where not only are there no effective groups and associations to limit the state's power but also the majority of people, due to uneven and rapid modernization, remain poor and uneducated.

The rise of civil society and democracy necessitates a certain level of socioeconomic development but, more important, it requires a balanced development. Balanced development in turn depends on the state's role and policies vis-à-vis the society.

Indeed, it is quite possible for societal preconditions for democracy to exist and yet authoritarian rule to persist where the state refuses to give in to pressures from society for popular participation. The dominant position of the state has meant the rule of politics by powerful families, elites, and military and bureaucratic sub-classes. The emergence and growth of independent groups and associations, in contrast, has been slow. A primary agent of civil society, labor unions, remain either non-existent or are repressed by the state. Elites in charge of the state which might be willing to open the system to popular participation usually face a weak, divided society, making political reform a dangerous enterprise.

In other words, the inauguration, and stability, of democracy is possible not only when its social requisites are present, but also when the state-society relationship is one of balanced power.
2-5. Prerequisites for Democracy

Lipset's hypothesis that, "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy," has been very influential in contemporary explanations of democracy. Lipset also emphasizes education as a necessary condition for inaugurating democracy. Others have argued that particular social and political structures must be in place before democracy can occur. For example, in his later studies, Dahl's explanation of democratization expanded from addressing extreme inequalities in the distribution of such key values as income, wealth, status, knowledge, and military prowess to include extreme inequalities in political resources.

Economic inequality within countries is important to the extent that it influences the distribution of power resources. An implication of a high concentration of wealth in the hands of landlords, influential families, and political elites is that the population on the whole will be deprived of basic necessities of life, like adequate health care, education and housing. The level of socioeconomic development relates to the emergence of various groups and associations that is defined as the growth of civil society. The rise of civil society and democracy is impossible where people constantly worry about the basic necessities of life. Tatu Vanhanen has argued, "The relative distribution of economic, intellectual, and other power resources among various sections of the population is the fundamental factor..."
that is assumed to account for the variation of political systems from the aspect of democratization."  

The problem with the alleged association between economic development and democracy is that the former is often measured using a country's Gross National Product/Gross Domestic Product and their growth. These figures are, however, a better indicator of a country's overall wealth than of its overall level of development. The relative development of a country should be associated more accurately with the quality of life of its citizens. The Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) is a better indicator of the level of human development of a country. As Morris M. Morris puts it, "The traditional measure of national economic progress—the gross national product (GNP) and its component elements--cannot very satisfactorily measure the extent to which human needs of individuals are being met, nor should it be expected to do so."

There is no automatic policy relationship between any particular level or rate of growth of GNP and improvement in such indicators as life expectancy, death rates, infant mortality, and literacy. A certain level of socioeconomic development is a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for inaugurating democracy. In terms of level of socioeconomic development then, setting aside Israel which is already considered a democracy, Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria are countries with most plausible prospects for establishing democracy. Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Iran, Algeria, Oman, Egypt, Morocco, and Pakistan are less plausible future democracies. Yemen, Afghanistan, and Sudan are among relatively less-developed Middle
Eastern countries, with prospects for democracy least plausible. The absence of democracy in the high-oil-income/low-population countries of the Persian Gulf and North Africa is mainly due to these states' patrimonial rule and an organizationally weak labor force. The overwhelming presence of foreign workers in these countries has also played against the native laborers' attempt to organize themselves in labor unions and federations. This will be discussed further below.

Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens argue that the more resources the state controls and the more independent the state elites are from other socioeconomic classes, the more likely that an authoritarian regime will take hold. They also argue that the dependent position of periphery countries in the world system involves mechanisms unfavorable to democracy in general.47

Organized labor, as well as professional groups and associations, are potentially parallel groups limiting the state's power. Powerful labor federations and confederations points to an ability to use such tools as collective bargaining, strikes, and other means to compete with both the state and corporate interest groups. It is in labor's interest to push for political democratization, since this would improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the state and business groups. Organized labor has the potential capability to either cripple or boost the economy (e.g., the oil workers' strike during the Iranian revolution) and therefore be a formidable force checking the state's power.
A number of studies have discussed the relationship between beliefs, attitudes and culture, participation and democracy. Samuel Huntington blamed Islamic revivalism and Shia fundamentalism for a lower probability of democratic development in Islamic countries. He argued that all religions, including Protestantism and Catholicism, possess some elements clearly undemocratic and others favorable to democracy. What seems to be the case is that beliefs and values held by people in any cultural setting are susceptible to change over the years as societies become wealthier and more educated. This is not to say that people necessarily become more secular or democratic, but that people become more receptive to ideas and beliefs that are in opposition to their previous orientation.

Huntington points out, for example, that democratization of Catholic countries shows democracy can take root in non-Protestant countries. In his later study, Huntington still held that Islamic (and Confucian) cultures pose serious obstacles to democratic development, although he began to question the insuperability of these obstacles. He claims there are also a few elements within Islam and Confucianism that make both religions receptive to democracy.

The Western misperceptions of Islam stem from a long history of mutual distrust, criticism, and condemnation. Recent studies on "militant Islam [have] unfortunately reinforced the conclusion that it is only through emancipation from Islam (passing through the stages of enlightenment and secularization) that Muslims can hope to advance on the road to liberty and democracy." This is not to forget the
serious scholars of Islam in the West who have contributed to accurate representation of Islam.

Cultural studies for the purpose of making generalizations about political systems and the nature of democratic participation within different cultural contexts have been of limited use. The role and impact of ideology in society, as in religion's case, is "linked more to structural and organizational realities" than ideological or religious doctrines. Islam is no more innately anti-democratic than Judaism or Christianity. And the popularity of Islam in the 1980s is largely a reflection of the bankruptcy of other alternatives posed to resolve social ills than some inevitable preference for authoritarianism or an anti-democratic society. It is economic crisis, coupled with a crisis of legitimacy in most Muslim states, has encouraged and strengthened religious opposition. But religious groups and movements and their leaders can be pragmatic contenders for state power as much as their secular counterparts. Islamic candidates and organizations have participated in elections in Algeria, Tunisia, the Sudan, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait as well as Pakistan, and Malaysia.

In countries such as "Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan, Islamic organizations have been among the best-organized opposition forces, and are often willing to form alliances or cooperate with political parties, professional syndicates, and voluntary associations to achieve shared political and socioeconomic reforms." The case of post-revolution Iran, in particular, and the other self-declared Islamic states like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia provide vivid examples of the triumph of realism over ideology and
rhetoric. In short, Muslim groups and associations have the capacity to contribute positively to the development of civil society and democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

2-6. Measuring the Strength of the State in the Middle East: A Regional View

The strength or weakness of the state in developing countries must be looked at in the context of the state's position vis-à-vis society. The state might appear omnipresent and strong where a society is weak, or the state might appear weak relative to a society well-organized into groups. In advanced industrial democracies, the state's primary role is the preservation of peace, order, and security, along with some redistribution policies (e.g., welfare programs). The role of the state in the economy remains far less involved where private business dominates. This does not prove that the state in the developed countries is weak. On the contrary, the state is very strong, as shown by its ability to tax and regulate. But the limits to government's power in the developed countries arise from groups with tremendous economic and political power of their own, organized into pressure groups.

States in the Middle East share similar characteristics with those in other developing countries. Thanks mainly to oil dollars, foreign military and financial support, and the weakness of local political opposition, Middle Eastern states have expanded their power
over the past few decades. States in the region dominate the society and economy to the extent that they have become centers of tremendous wealth and prestige. Even the local bourgeoisie, in theory a major force for democratization, is very highly dependent on the state for financing, contracts, employment, and protection. Indeed, the weakness of the middle class--and its economic dependence on the state--is a key factor in the state's continuing power. The decline in financial capability of the state in the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s has forced it to give a freer hand to the private sector, with the state cutting back its involvement in such areas as education, health, and welfare. The state, however, remains authoritarian and unwilling to genuinely share political power.55

In fact, the real locus of state power in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) has largely had an informal, not institutional, basis. Personal, family and group ties help sustain the executive power of the ruling elites. The sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf are perhaps the primary examples of extreme personalized autocratic rule. On the other extreme, Turkey, Tunisia, and other countries show a changing state-society balance, with institutionalization of power relationships is gradually undermining informal and arbitrary power associations.

One index for measuring these factors is the percentage of the central government's total tax revenues obtained from direct taxes on income, profits, and capital gains. However, given the poor statistical data available on tax structure and collection in the Middle East, alternatives measures for such countries must be considered. This study suggests that the central government's annual expenditures as
percentage of GNP are a reliable alternative to measure the strength of the state. The contention here is that states with larger expenditures in both public and private sectors are in a better position than states with smaller resources to manipulate social groups that may otherwise compete with the state for power.56

Ruling elites in the Middle East, along with their allies in top level positions in the state's institutions and agencies, continue to resist pressure for power-sharing. The prospects for democracy increase only when the growth and strength of rival social, economic, and political groups' pushing for power-sharing leaves the weakened state with no choice but to loosen its grip on power.

Conversely, society persists as weak and powerless, and thus unable to check on the power of the state, as long as socioeconomic structure remains underdeveloped (e.g., people remain illiterate, poor, undereducated, etc), and opposition to the state, like labor unions, remains poorly organized. Structural changes within the society can produce demands for democratic participation in power-sharing, leading to increasing pressure on the dominant elites--inside and outside of the state domain--to let go of power. Of course, the state might choose to use force on some level to continue its monopoly over socioeconomic resources and political power. But a continuing coercive policy can prove more harmful than beneficial to the political elite in the long run, especially where modernization process has led to the growth of a vibrant, organized civil society. The rise of new social groups and classes (e.g., bureaucrats, technocrats, business and professional groups, labor) in the modernization process usually
Civil Society in Iran

leads to changes in state-society relations. The ruling elite either tries to preserve its status by accommodating to some extent the demand for wider political participation and better economic opportunities (e.g., Turkey, Tunisia, Jordan), or resists any meaningful concession to the opposition, increasing the risk for eventual political instability (Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran before the revolution), or they choose a policy of oppression (e.g., Libya, Algeria, Syria, Iraq).

Of course, the collapse of the state is also possible through political revolutions from above, as happened with the former Soviet Union and the East European countries. In such cases, the loss of authority of the state creates a vacuum of power where competition by rival groups to take control of the state becomes possible. This is most evident in the case of Afghanistan.

It has been widely argued that civil society is on the rise in the region and that therefore prospects for democracy in Middle Eastern countries look promising. The proponents of this argument, however, have lacked precision in the definition, function, and measurement of "civil society." The distinction between the society and a civil society has been unclear. Mainstream social science students of democracy, on the other hand, have argued that Middle Eastern countries generally lack the preconditions necessary for inaugurating democracy. Islam as a religion dominant in these countries are cited as primary forces hindering democratization in the region. But regardless of outlook, the literature on democracy and democratization has paid scant attention to the state's crucial role vis-
à-vis its society. The socioeconomic requisites for democracy are often emphasized, but the distribution of power resources among social groups, has been given less attention.

What is most crucial and most often neglected is the distribution of socioeconomic and political power resources both within society and between the society and the state. Elites in charge of the state machinery do not voluntarily relinquish their hold on power unless challenged by rising social, economic, and political organizations. Ideally, however, successful challenges for democratization take place and endure in societies where no one group, including the state, has the opportunity to monopolize power. An implication of the structural approach adopted here is that cultural explanations of democratization (e.g., Islam as inherently antithetical to democracy) are rejected.

Thus, prospects for democratization in the Middle East are less promising than the defenders of civil society would have us believe. The working class remains disorganized and politically powerless, as the level of Organizational Unity of Labor remains low. This has meant that labor organizations, where they exist, remain isolated from the political process, with little chance for political influence. Organized labor in Turkey, Egypt, and to a less degree in Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco is in a better position to challenge their state, but not without the help of the middle class.

The financial capability of the state, at the same time, remains high, as data on central government expenditures indicate. States in
Tunisia, Morocco, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Yemen have developed strong ties with economic elites, and are thus very resistant to drastic political reforms. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States continue to rely on traditional sources of legitimacy, e.g., Islam and monarchy, in combination with policies of coercion and co-optation to maintain the political status quo. The Afghan and Sudanese governments have yet to reestablish their monopoly over socioeconomic resources after the conclusion of civil wars. Society remains weak vis-à-vis the state particularly in Morocco, Egypt, the Sudan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.

In sum, the conceptual framework for understanding civil society in Iran refers to the discussions of the rentier state in which there is a strong state which has its own independent revenues other than taxation confronted with a weak society. The only relationship between this state and the society is that of redistribution of oil revenues by the state within society. This makes the state strong beyond imagination. Indeed, in order to develop, the civil society has to deal with the tradition of strong state in Iran which has been further enhanced with huge oil revenues since the early 1970s.
Notes and References:


2. Civil society (Hegel used the term "buergerliche Gesellschaft" though it is now referred to as Zivilgesellschaft in German to emphasize a more inclusive community) was a stage on the dialectical relationship between Hegel's perceived opposites, the macro-community of the state and the micro-community of the family. “The Significance of Hegel's Separation of the State and Civil Society,” in Pelczynski, A.Z. (ed.), The State and Civil Society; Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 1-13.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


7. Steven M. Delue, Political Thinking, Political Theory and Civil Society, p. 198.


9. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1172072094957&pathname=Zone-English-Muslim_Affairs%2FMAELayout


For more information on the status of women in Middle East and efforts made to promote their awareness, see: Haleh Esfandiari (ed.), *Middle Eastern Women on the Move: Openings for and the Constraints on Women's Political Participation in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003.


Farhad Kazemi and Augustus Richard Norton, op. cit., p. 178


Hudson says political discourse in the Arab World has been imbued with ideology, also see: Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.


Chapter 2

38. Hudson, "After the Gulf War."


40. This is to stress the scarcity of empirical studies in analyses of civil society and democracy in discussions of democracy and democratization in the Middle East.


55- See, Sivan, "Constraints and Opportunities in the Arab World," op. cit., p. 103.

56- As for theoretical justification, it is clear that a state may be large without being strong. That is, the size of the state bureaucracy and its various organizations and institutions is not necessarily an indication of a strong or a weak state. On the other hand, the bigger the relative size of the state machinery, the better the opportunities for extraction of resources.