NONBELIEVERS, APOSTATES, AND ATHEISTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Chapter 5

The Secular-Religious Divide in Iran: An Analysis of GAMAAN's Online Surveys

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THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE IN IRAN

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When 23-year-old Majidreza Rahnavard was filmed blindfolded, accompanied by his masked executioners, and asked for his final wishes, his response resonated with many Iranians: "I don't want anyone to cry at my grave, to recite from the Qur'an, or to pray. Let them be joyful and play a cheerful song." The contrast between a young, secular population and Iran's aging clerics could not have been more pronounced. Rahnavard was publicly executed by hanging from a crane on December 12, 2022, less than two weeks after being accused of fatally stabbing two regime militia members, tortured, offered a single court session, and convicted of "waging war against God" (Amnesty International 2022). With his final wishes, Rahnavard emphasized his divergence from the Shi'a traditions of mourning and martyrdom, as well as from God's revelation and prayer. His alternative—to be joyful and listen to music—symbolized a celebration of worldly life. This defiant act is a symptom of Iranian society's profound secularization over four decades under theocracy. While protests began from the outset of the regime and reached a mass scale during the 2009 Green Movement (Alimagham 2020; Pourmokhtari 2021), the new generation—raised in an Internet-connected world without personal memories of the Revolution, the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, or the election of reformist president Khatami in 1997—openly rejected the notion of an Islamic Republic. Since the protests of 2017, 2019, and 2022, the concept of "overthrowing" (*barandāzī*) gained momentum, with people boldly chanting, "Reformist, Principlist, the game is over" and, "We don't want an Islamic Republic!" (The self-designated names of Reformists and Principlists refer, respectively, to those who sought nonstructural reforms within the system of the Islamic Republic and those whose view is uncompromisingly in favor of religious

fundamentalism and the Supreme Leader). Today, all hope for change from within the regime, initiated by Reformists—and from within Islam itself—seems to have dwindled.

The Principlists abandoned pretense as well. In 2021, after sham presidential elections, they elected Ebrahim Raisi—once part of a "death committee" that sent thousands to the gallows (Sadjadpour 2021). Subsequently, the killing of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in September 2022, after she was detained for not perfectly adhering to hijab regulations, did not spark calls for reform within the regime or religious circles; it led to an iconoclastic fury. Protestors set ablaze images of the founders of the Islamic Republic—Khomeini and Khamenei—as well as images of Soleimani, the commander killed by the United States. Women discarded their hijabs, cut their hair, and chanted "Woman, Life, Freedom." Such overt irreverence prompted a forceful response from the regime: it arrested thousands, killed over 500 people, including over 70 children; executed protestors after staged trials; shot at female protestors' eyes, breasts, and genitals; and issued threats and punishments for not wearing the hijab—including years-long imprisonment, rape, lashes, and even orders for the accused to wash corpses (Amnesty International 2023; IranWire 2023; The Guardian 2022, 2023). The regime now faces irreversible mass discontent (Bayat 2023). As of the time of writing, women continue to defy the authorities by refusing to wear the hijab in public. Despite the regime's threats, women are redefining the boundaries between private secular life and public religious compliance.

Significantly, those who oppose the regime include devout and practicing Shi'a Muslims. Videos of veiled women standing in solidarity with unveiled women suggest that perhaps these protests should not be viewed as a conflict between secular and religious citizens but rather as a struggle between democratic and undemocratic forces. How, then, should we interpret the scenes of protest that seem to critique not only the state but also Islam? To what extent do people's personal religious or nonreligious beliefs reflect their stance toward the regime?

In this chapter, we dissect the dynamics of societal secularism and religiosity by presenting quantitative data gathered by GAMAAN (The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran).[1] This nonprofit research group was formally established in the Netherlands in 2019 and conducts online surveys among Iranians residing within Iran. The rationale for adopting a digital approach is that traditional probability surveys are susceptible to measurement error. Despite rigorous execution and even reliable findings, they can at the same time yield invalid results due to the constraints of telephone and face-to-face interviews. In an environment of state repression, individuals often censor their true views or even actively alter them to avoid scrutiny by authorities—a phenomenon known as "preference falsification" (Kuran 1997). While sampling bias is a challenge in any country, Iran presents an

additional obstacle: collecting data untainted by the "fear-of-the-state bias" (Zimbalist 2018).

Surveys conducted by telephone and face-to-face interviewing, by IranPoll and the World Values Survey (WVS), suggest that 98 percent of Iranians consider themselves Muslim (Chisaka 2021: 21); as such, the religiosity of the population is so pervasive, their identification with Islam so absolute, that there appears to be little room for further growth. In addition, 78 percent endorse a political system governed by religious laws (WVS, Wave 7, 2020). In contrast, our initial anonymous online survey on Iranians' attitudes toward religion, conducted in June 2020 with around 40,000 respondents residing in Iran, painted an entirely different picture of religious and nonreligious diversity. After weighting and extracting a representative sample from the adult literate population (which constitutes 88 percent of the total population), we found that 32 percent identified as Shi'a Muslims, 22 percent as Nones, 9 percent as Atheists, 8 percent as Spirituals, and 6 percent as Agnostics—alongside smaller groups such as 0.5 percent as Baha'is and 0.1 percent as Jews. Notably, 8 percent identified with Zoroastrianism—a phenomenon attributed to Iranian perceptions of national heritage rather than an accurate reflection of the small ethno-religious community of native Zoroastrians (for a comprehensive analysis, see Stausberg et al. 2023). That is, the online survey provided respondents with an opportunity to express themselves in ways unavailable in telephone and face-to-face surveys and completely invisible in the latter surveys' results. The June 2020 GAMAAN survey also revealed that 68 percent of the population believes that religious prescriptions should be excluded from state legislation—even if believers constitute a parliamentary majority. Inevitably, sampling bias and the absence of the illiterate population affected the results, but the stark disparity with the image of a homogeneous Muslim nation is too significant to ignore (see Nayeri 2022 for a detailed account of the survey process and its reception, in Iran and internationally).

The initial success of GAMAAN's 2020 religion survey paved the way for collaborations with VPN providers Psiphon and Lantern in 2022 and 2023—and, in 2022, satellite television channels Iran International and Voice of America Persian—enabling wider survey distribution. Such VPN providers, with a daily user base ranging from one to ten million, proved instrumental in sampling a diverse cross-section of the Iranian populace—encompassing the young and old, the economically disadvantaged and affluent, and urban and rural residents. The regime's blocking of applications such as Instagram and WhatsApp and websites like YouTube and Google spurred the growth of coverage through VPN tools, while landline telephone coverage is undergoing decline. According to the International Telecommunication Union, 79 percent of Iranian individuals used the Internet in 2021, with respective rates of 66 percent in rural and 83 percent in urban areas.[2] Given that around

12 percent of the adult population is illiterate, according to the Labor Force Survey 2022,[3] and thus less likely to engage with applications dependent on literacy, about 90 percent of literate Iranians make use of the Internet. Moreover, according to the regime-backed Iranian Students Polling Agency in Tehran (ISPA 2022), in May 2022, around 78 percent of adult Iranians utilized at least one social media platform. Even the country's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, maintains a presence on Instagram, Telegram, and X, formerly known as Twitter—all of which are officially banned for the Iranian people.

Over the years, Iranians have devised creative means of utilizing the Internet. From the 2000s, Persian blogs proliferated in large numbers; subsequently, the emergence of new social media platforms played a pivotal role in mobilizing protests during the Green Movement following the disputed 2009 presidential elections. Smartphone apps such as WhatsApp were employed not solely for private messaging but also as a source of news and information (e.g., Alimardani and Milan 2018; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Wulf et al. 2022). In this authoritarian climate, we have consistently found that the lack of expressive avenues in society compels many to participate in online surveys, including devout Shi'a Muslims who support the regime. The anonymity afforded by online surveys is perceived as safer than the confidentiality promised by a surveyor phoning one's landline or knocking on one's door. This anonymity serves as an opportunity for individuals to articulate their genuine opinions on sensitive topics pertaining to religion and politics.

At GAMAAN, we apply established statistical methods of weighting (Mercer et al. 2018) and matching (Rivers 2006) to balance our initial nonrepresentative large sample, thereby extracting a representative one. To assess the representativeness of our surveys, we compare our weighted results with external data on employment rates and household income levels, as well as with nonsensitive questions from other surveys—including those on languages spoken at home, health care types, and attitudes toward family, work, and friends. We have thus far consistently observed a strong correspondence between our results and nonsensitive questions posed by other surveyors like the WVS. However, significant disparities emerged regarding subjects deemed sensitive in Iran. Detailed accounts of these results can be found in the methodology sections of our published reports, as well as in academic publications that extensively analyze various forms of bias, data collection, and weighting—along with the impact of survey design and the framing and language of our questions (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020, 2023; Maleki 2023; Maleki and Tamimi Arab, under review; Stausberg et al. 2023).

Below, we provide basic sampling information and the most important comparisons, which demonstrate representativeness, with external data and probability surveys on non-sensitive questions. The focus will be on the weighted results of surveys conducted in 2020, 2022, and 2023. These results offer valuable insights into the secular-religious divide in Iran. We describe what

self-identified Shi'a Muslims and other religious and nonreligious groups have to say about the compulsory hijab, political secularism, and the nationwide protests—as well as about their trust in anti-regime satellite and pro-regime national television channels. But before doing so, we start with a contemplation of how other scholars conceptualize the interplay between the secular and the religious in modern Iran.

The secular-religious divide

The Islamic Revolution prompted a wave of publications seeking to understand the "unthinkable revolution" (e.g., Abrahamian 1993; Kurzman 2004; Mirsepassi-Ashtiani 1994). The discontent within Iranian society toward the religious regime soon led researchers to ponder whether a shift toward secularism was underway and what implications that might carry (e.g., Kazemipur and Rezaei 2003; Kian-Thiébaut 1998). Scholarly attention to secularization intensified, mirroring the pervasive influence of secular values and concepts in the daily lives and public expressions of Iranians (e.g., Godazgar and Mirzaei 2023; Hashemi 2018; Khosrokhavar 2013; Loeffler 2022; also see opinions and reports such as Akyol 2022; Delkhasteh 2018; Iran International 2023).

One sociologist who analyzes quantitative data, Abdolmohammad Kazemipur, observes a "tectonic shift" toward secularism. He critiques the notion of "Muslim exceptionalism," which assumes that Iranians and others in Asia and Africa are inherently Islamic. "Religious changes in post-1979 Iran," he contends, "resemble some of the most extreme cases of secularization in the modern West" (Kazemipur 2022: 7). This is a bold assertion given Kazemipur's reliance on the WVS, which reports that in 2020 nearly all Iranians identified as Muslims and 78 percent viewed a political system governed by religious law as being fairly or very good (WVS 2020, Wave 7). How do we reconcile this? We believe that Kazemipur's interpretations of Iranian society are largely accurate based on qualitative assessments. However, the contradictory quantitative evidence regarding identification with Islam and support for the regime presents a methodological puzzle. Kazemipur resolves this by examining how the secular has permeated the sacred. In the wake of the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, he argues, the Islamic Republic's entanglement with worldly matters initiated processes of institutional secularization: the amalgamation of secularity and religiosity didn't give religion the upper hand but rather compelled the state to be less fixated on religious teachings and more focused on governance. Kazemipur even asserts that the state "appears theocratic but is secular in nature" (Kazemipur 2022: 34). We find this assertion counterintuitive. Kazemipur can make this argument because he distinguishes the secondary nature of religious ideas from true social causes, framing religion as "epiphenomenal"—a term he employs—in

relation to the secular. Historically, such outright dismissal of the influence of religion—reducing religious reasoning to a mere facade compared to the underlying substance of political economy—led many on the Left to underestimate the potential for theocratic rule during the days of the Islamic Revolution. That dismissal also does not aid efforts to comprehend why Iranians are increasingly distancing themselves from Islam today.

Certainly, one could argue that Islam is not on the brink of fading away; but, as Mahmoud Pargoo (2021) contends, there does seem to be a secularization of Islam underway in postrevolutionary Iran. This compels religious individuals to provide nontheological discourse and justifications for religious teachings (a process that commenced in the nineteenth century with the establishment of Tehran's first polytechnic college, the Dar al-Funun, which introduced modern medicine, among other disciplines, to Iran). Pargoo posits, for instance, that the justifications for the mandatory hijab have evolved since the 2000s:

> While the hijab is still mandatory in public spaces, new conceptualizations are increasingly emerging that delink it from a purely religious edict and justify it by other means: utilitarian (protection of the family or marital bonds), nationalistic (its purported roots in ancient Persian culture), or legal (all societies have minimum apparel rules and Iran is no exception). In this milieu, while the hijab still is kept central to religious identity, justifications for it are sought from other secular repertoires rather than from the Sharia. In other words, a religious ruling is being secularized.
>
> *(Pargoo 2021: 108)*

In Iran, the use of secular reasoning to rationalize religious commands has given rise to a peculiar hybrid: what is referred to as the Islamic Republic is in fact a patchwork amalgamation—a Frankenstein, even—of modernity. Following the protests in 2022, for instance, women who refused to wear the hijab were subjected to psychological treatment after judges diagnosed them with an "antisocial personality disorder." Such absurd policies reflect modes of thinking where underlying assumptions are secular and must align with scientific standards (for a historical study of this absurdism see Ghajarjazi 2022). An obvious theological critique is that the clergy should refrain from involvement in matters of government, let alone diagnosing individuals with disorders (e.g., Ghobadzadeh 2023).

Anthropologist Alireza Doostdar goes further in deconstructing the boundary between the secular and the religious by elucidating historical entanglements that persist to this day. In his ethnography on the belief in jinns (Doostdar 2018), he unravels twentieth-century conflicts between science and religion, between secular-minded intellectuals and clerics, and between nonreligious and religious citizens in the present day. The ethnographic narrative

tends to present a somewhat exotic image of "Iranian metaphysicals," which comes at the cost of downplaying the impact of secularization and the associated conflict with traditional forms of knowledge—a departure from, rather than a continuation of, those forms as Doostdar believes. For example, he describes a prominent critic of the clerical class, Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), as being fascinated by spiritualism—Doostdar's point being that Kasravi was not as secular as one might think. However, Doostdar does so without informing his Western readers that Kasravi was brutally murdered by Islamists who accused him of blasphemy.

Another way to conceptualize the secular-religious relationship is to argue for an emerging post-Islamist or even postsecularist consciousness. Around the time of the Green Movement and the Arab Spring, Asef Bayat (2010) wrote about how youth in Iran grew disenchanted and simply desired a normal life: they sought to have romantic relationships, aspired to middle-class lifestyles with opportunities for growth and exploration, and, he argued, they did not necessarily reject religion but instead blended the divine with diversion. While some feminists sought to reinterpret patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, Bayat notes soberly that the Iranian regime did not hesitate to imprison such reformers (104–107). Similarly, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2017), in an overview of how Iranian women have increasingly demanded equal rights since the Islamic Revolution, does not emphasize the struggle between secularists and Islamists, instead emphasizing subtle but profound cultural transformations. Quoting the Islamic philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, Mir-Hosseini explains how, over the past four decades, the Islamic concept of gender-related honor has yielded to a popular belief that every woman possesses inalienable human rights that deserve legal and cultural precedence. She underscores that the struggle for gender equality should not be reduced to a stance against Islam, but rather should be viewed as part of a broader struggle against despotism and patriarchy.

Today, the tension between religiosity and secularity has become so woven into calls for democratization that activists advocate for "secular democracy"—using the same English words in Persian, and sometimes the French word _laïcité_. Figures like Soroush—who was once part of the Cultural Revolution Council overseeing the purging and Islamization of universities, only to be praised in exile in the West as a Luther of Islam—express frustration over activists who employ the language of secularism while sidestepping Islam (Soroush 2023). There is a societal basis for this frustration. Bayat (2023) observes a significant turn away from religion when comparing the protests of the 2009 Green Movement with the nationwide protests of 2022. While the Green Movement centered on demands for fair elections and co-opted the regime's symbols (beginning with the color green, the color of Islam), the 2022 protestors openly call for the end of the Islamic Republic and integrate irreverence into their protests (questioning the veneration of

holy Muslim figures, flicking turbans off clerics' heads in the streets, chanting "the mullahs must get lost," and badmouthing Islam and Muslims). To comprehend these developments, in our quantitative analysis, we cannot avoid conceptualizing the secular in opposition to the religious, at least in part, which does not take away the normative appeal of transcending the divide. By "religious" we mean here people who themselves identify as religious or with a religious group, disregarding whether they believe in a higher power and related phenomena. From a theological and philosophical perspective, it might be argued that this is a restrictive notion of religiosity. We do not dispute this but take a sociological perspective that focuses on the vantage points of respondents who might say they are "not religious" even though they do believe in God or perform practices such as prayer. By "secular" we broadly mean people in favor of disentangling religion from the state—which includes Shi'a who oppose theocracy, but more so the groups that see themselves as less religious or not at all religious, such as Spirituals, Agnostics, and Atheists. Were there no significant differences in the various (non)religious groups' responses to questions relevant to secular governance, we would not have spoken of a divide.

GAMAAN's surveys (2019–2023)

The advantage of probability surveys lies in their minimal sampling bias, ensuring higher representativeness. However, even if interviewers do not request personally identifiable information during phone or in-person surveys, many Iranians will still feel uneasy due to the constant presence of the state in the back of their minds. Anonymous online nonprobability surveys, when properly designed and disseminated by trusted sources, can alleviate this fear-of-the-state bias and reduce measurement errors. However, they may suffer from sampling bias, since individuals inclined to express critical views of the Iranian regime are more likely to participate than will be those not so inclined. Researchers can do nothing to correct the data if respondents are not telling the truth. However, it is possible to balance a nonprobability sample, gathered in a way that assures anonymity, so that it aligns with a target population—thereby making it more representative. Such efforts are challenging, as they require large sample sizes of high-quality data, ensuring participation from diverse demographic groups. Fortunately, it has been feasible for GAMAAN to repeatedly obtain such large samples thanks to both people's willingness—due to the unique circumstances in Iran—to mass-share survey links and GAMAAN's innovative use of mass media technologies.

One of our initial data-gathering attempts was a straightforward poll titled "Islamic Republic: Yes or No?" disseminated in 2019 on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the referendum on having an Islamic Republic.

This poll, conducted via the survey platform SurveyMonkey, yielded over 170,000 responses from within Iran (Maleki 2019; this sample size and others described below reflect the size after data cleaning—for example, by removing respondents who failed to correctly answer a bot-detection question, who did not reside in Iran, or who gave contradictory answers, such as not having reached voting age in 2017 and yet being 30 years and older). After weighting—using the variables of sex, age, education, province, urban and rural region, and voting behavior in the 2017 presidential elections—71 percent indicated they would not, under any circumstances, choose an Islamic Republic in a hypothetical free referendum. The results garnered significant attention on social media; in response, the regime blocked SurveyMonkey in Iran.

GAMAAN's methodology combines sampling techniques including snowball sampling (using multiple referral chains), river sampling (using opt-in online samples via social media), network sampling (initiating "seeds" to disseminate the survey within specific networks), and quota sampling (using real-time monitoring of the socio-demographic distribution of samples and initiating new seeds to improve sample quality). In June 2020, a survey on religion also gained widespread attention, enabling the sampling of approximately 40,000 respondents from Iran within two weeks, including individuals from various demographic backgrounds such as women without higher education, people with low income, in rural areas, marginalized groups, and regime supporters. Poster advertisements designed for diverse groups circulated and drew samples from different directions (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The survey was attacked by bots, which were intercepted by the CAPTCHA system. After weighting with interlocked variables—accounting for the proportions of combined demographic variables such as age by education—the effective sample size was determined to be 1,911.

The results revealed a shift in religious affiliation, with 47 percent claiming to have transitioned from being religious to nonreligious in their lifetime (*az dīn'dārī bih bī'dīnī risīdah'am*), while a majority, 90 percent, identified as hailing from believing or practicing religious families. This transformation is corroborated by external evidence such as the decline in the selection of Muslim names for newborns. In the year 2000, 6.2 percent of boys were named Muhammad; by 2017, the percentage had dropped to 2.7 percent. In the same period, the important Shi'a name Ali for boys decreased from 7.9 percent to 2.5 percent, and the name Fatimah for girls decreased from 13.8 percent to 5.1 percent. Aggregating the major Muslim names shows a consistent decline that began in the 2000s—that is, when postrevolutionary generations started having children.[4]

The experience gained from the 2020 religion survey informed the design of subsequent surveys, which also compared politically nonsensitive outcomes with other probability surveys to assess representativeness. Since

FIGURE 5.1   Example of diverse advertisements spread on Instagram by GAMAAN. Figure showing a woman without a hijab in a colorful mosque in Shiraz, targeted people who may identify as Spiritual but not religious.
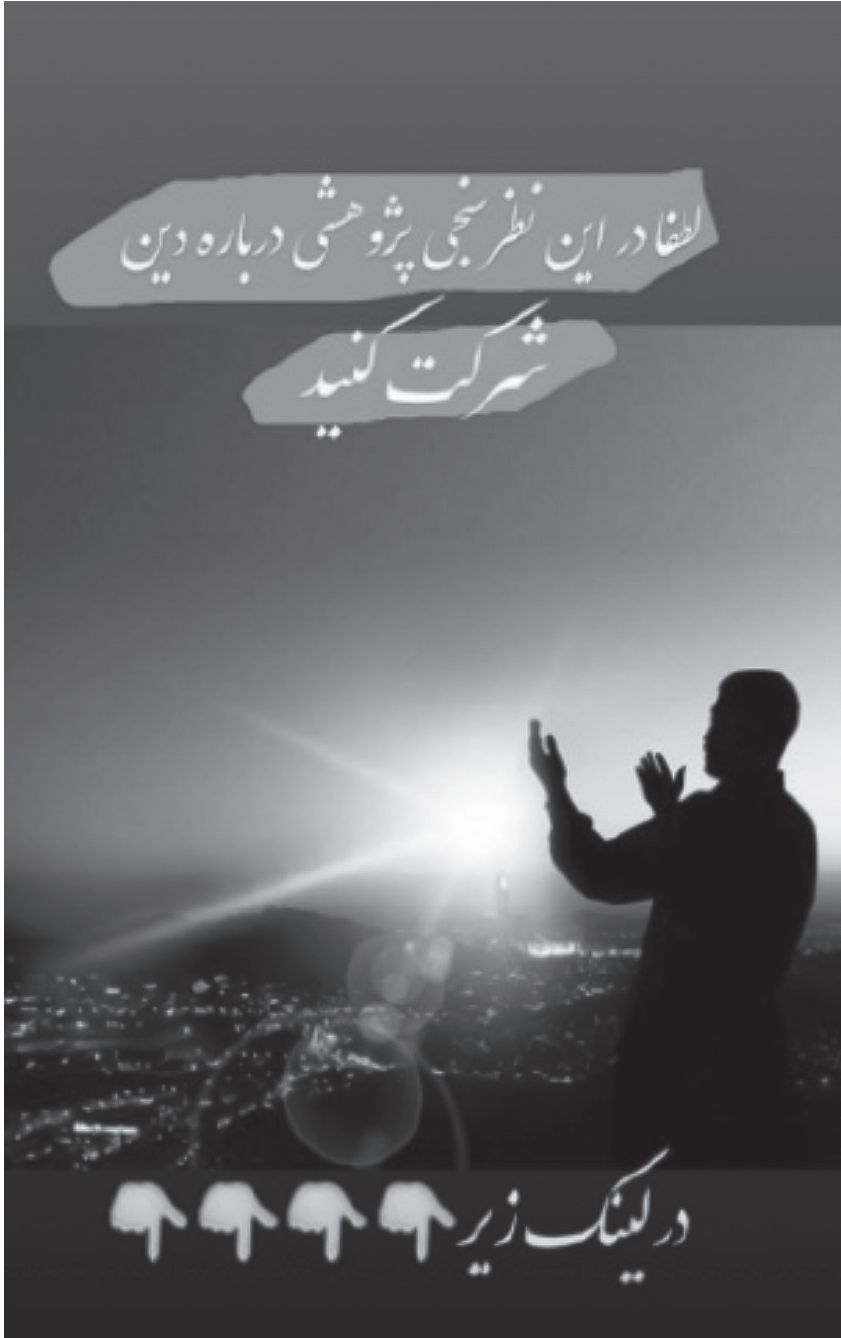
FIGURE 5.2   Example of diverse advertisements spread on Instagram by GAMAAN. Figure showing a man praying outside, targeted religious respondents.

the regime had blocked all major social media applications, GAMAAN's approach evolved to incorporate sampling through VPN tools and, in one instance, through satellite television channels as well. In December 2022, a survey on the nationwide protests yielded a substantial sample size of over 158,000 respondents in Iran (and over 42,000 outside the country). After weighting, again with interlocked variables, the results indicated that 81 percent of Iranians opposed the very notion of an Islamic Republic, confirming the established interpretation that reformist positions have lost popularity (see also Beidollahkhani 2022).

In December 2022, Psiphon promoted a link to GAMAAN's survey on the nationwide protests. While GAMAAN continues to rely on social media for survey dissemination, there is a growing use of "VPN-sampling" as coverage through VPN tools expands (CNBC 2022; Figures 5.3 and 5.4). At the time of writing, the Islamic Republic's Parliament Research Center estimates that 90 percent of Internet users in Iran use either a paid or a free VPN application (Donya-e Eqtesad 2023).

The July 2023 survey gathered samples from over 38,000 literate individuals aged twenty and above residing in Iran. Interlocking variables were employed for weighting, resulting in an unusually large effective sample size
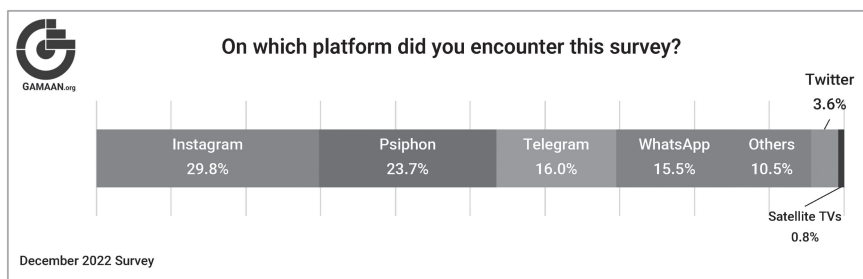

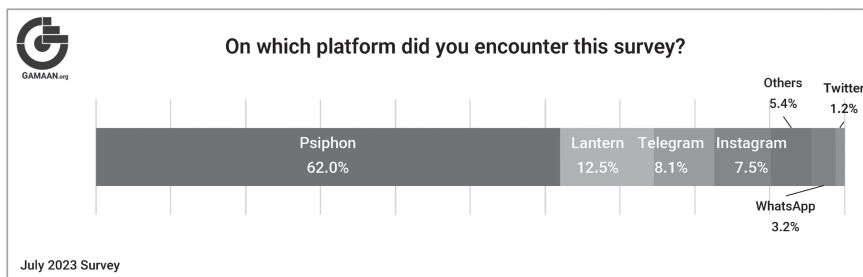**FIGURE 5.3** Ways of access to GAMAAN's December 2022 survey (after weighting).

FIGURE 5.4 Ways of access to GAMAAN's July 2023 survey (after weighting).

of 8,108 due to high-quality data. Unlike in previous surveys, the variable of 2017 election behavior was not used for weighting the final sample, as it had become increasingly unreliable over time. We could not update this variable by using the 2021 election outcome since it was widely perceived as having been manipulated (The Economist 2021b). However, the random sampling method through VPN tools ensured that the raw survey sample already included a relatively balanced distribution of respondents with various political orientations in society. To verify this claim, one can examine responses to a question about respondents' political orientation. It was determined that those who support "the principles of the Islamic Revolution and the Supreme Leader" (referred to as Principlists or Conservatives) constituted 12 percent of the weighted sample, which is consistent with the social base of this group in previous GAMAAN surveys: 11.4 percent as of December 2022. Additionally, in a revealing question from the WVS on hypothetical elections (WVS 2020, Wave 7, Q223), 15.6 percent expressed intent to vote for the Principlists. Given that Principlists are not constrained by the fear-of-the-state bias that affects groups with other political orientations, we posit that GAMAAN's weighted and WVS's probability survey results, which differ by only 4 percentage points, fall within the correct range of Principlists.

GAMAAN's 2020 and subsequent surveys were weighted using the country's most recent census and workforce statistics (Table 5.1). Representativeness was then assessed by comparing the weighted results with external evidence such as employment (Table 5.2). The surveys conducted in 2022–2023, as described in this chapter, further tested representativeness by adding comparisons with external data and probability surveys (Tables 5.3–5.5; for more detailed information on sampling and weighting, see the methodology sections in Maleki and Tamimi Arab [2020, 2023] and Maleki [2023]). As can be seen in the tables, there is a high congruency between GAMAAN's weighted results and those of other data and probability surveys asking politically nonsensitive questions on employment rate, household income, spoken language at home, and different health care insurance types. This means that people of all income levels and ethnicities are represented in the weighted samples in the roughly correct proportions. For example, the weighted samples of December 2022 and July 2023 showed that, respectively, 26.4 percent and 28.2 percent were categorized as belonging to low-income households—approximating the official figure of 30 percent. Similarly, the percentage of people who say they speak Kurdish at home was 5.7 percent according to Ethnologue; that same percentage was 6.5 percent and 5.2 percent in those GAMAAN surveys. Another example is the proportion of people whose health insurance is provided by the Social Security Organization: according to a telephone survey by the regime-backed Iranian Students Polling Agency, this figure is around 50.7 percent

TABLE 5.1 Comparison of demographic variables between GAMAAN and Iran's official statistics

		GAMAAN						Statistical Center of Iran
		Unweighted			Weighted			
		June 2020	December 2022	July 2023	June 2020	December 2022	July 2023	2022
Demographic variables		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sex	Female	31.9	38.0	19.7	47.0	47.0	47.9	47.9
	Male	68.1	62.0	80.3	53.0	53.0	52.1	52.1
Age	20–29 years	28.4	17.8	8.8	30.4	30.4	30.1	30.1
	30–49 years	61.0	66.5	60.0	51.4	51.6	51.1	51.1
	50 years and above	10.6	18.8	31.2	18.2	18.1	18.8	18.8
Education	High school diploma and lower	14.6	20.1	30.0	72.0	72.0	72.3	72.3
	University education degree	85.4	79.9	70.0	28.0	28.0	27.7	27.7
Region	Rural Areas	3.5	3.5	5.3	20.4	20.4	21.2	21.2
	Urban Areas	96.5	96.5	94.7	79.6	79.6	78.8	78.8
Province	East Azerbaijan	2.5	3.0	4.2	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.8
	West Azerbaijan	1.8	1.9	2.3	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.7
	Ardabil	0.5	0.7	1.2	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.4
	Isfahan	6.1	6.4	9.4	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.9
	Alborz	4.8	5.7	4.8	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8
	Ilam	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
	Bushehr	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.4
	Tehran	40.7	39.9	29.4	19.1	19.1	18.7	18.7
	Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	0.5	0.6	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
	South Khorasan	0.4	0.4	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
	Razavi Khorasan	7.6	5.9	6.3	7.8	7.8	8.0	8.0
	North Khorasan	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
	Khuzestan	3.2	3.3	3.5	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.5
	Zanjan	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.3
	Semnan	0.7	0.6	0.7	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Sistan and Baluchistan	1.1	0.7	0.8	2.1	2.1	2.4	2.4
	Fars	5.4	5.7	7.6	6.3	6.3	6.2	6.2
	Ghazvin	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Qom	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Kurdistan	2.0	1.7	2.0	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8
	Kerman	1.5	1.5	2.0	3.6	3.6	3.9	3.9

(*Continued*)

TABLE 5.1 (Continued)

| | GAMAAN | | | | | | Statistical Center of Iran |
| | Unweighted | | | Weighted | | | |
Demographic Variables	June 2020 %	December 2022 %	July 2023 %	June 2020 %	December 2022 %	July 2023 %	2022 %
Kermanshah	1.7	1.9	2.2	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.3
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Golestan	1.0	1.0	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.1
Gilan	3.4	4.2	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.4
Lorestan	1.0	1.1	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Mazandaran	3.6	3.6	3.3	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
Markazi	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8
Hormozgan	1.2	1.3	1.3	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.1
Hamadan	1.1	1.1	1.5	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0
Yazd	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5
(Effective) sample size	39,981	158,395	38,445	(1,911)	(1,498)	(8,108)	–

Note: Population of literate individuals 20 years and older. Minor discrepancies are due to GAMAAN's 2020 and 2022 surveys using the 2016 Census (Statistical Center of Iran, 2017) for weighting, whereas the July 2023 survey results were based on weighting with the 2022 work-force statistics (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022).

TABLE 5.2 Employment rates in the whole country according to GAMAAN's surveys and Iran's workforce statistics[*]

| | GAMAAN (June 2020) | | | GAMAAN (December 2022) | | | GAMAAN (July 2023) | | |
Employment status	Unweighted %	Weighted %	Workforce statistics %	Unweighted %	Weighted %	Workforce statistics %	Unweighted %	Weighted %	Workforce statistics %
Employed	62.6	45.1	42.0	62.9	42.1	42.2	61.1	45.6	42.2
(Effective) sample size	39,981	(1,911)	–	158,395	(1,498)	–	38,445	(8,108)	–

[*] GAMAAN's data and the workforce statistics reflect the literate population aged 20 years and older.

TABLE 5.3 Household income distribution in GAMAAN's surveys

| Household income level of different deciles* | GAMAAN 2022–2023 | | | | Official distribution |
| | Unweighted December 2022 | Unweighted July 2023 | Weighted December 2022 | Weighted July 2023 | |
	%	%	%	%	%
Low-income (first three) deciles (below 4 million Rials)	11.0	14.9	26.4	28.2	30
Middle-income (second three) deciles (between 4 and 7 million Rials)	24.2	23.0	31.4	29	30
High-income (last four) deciles (above 7 million Rials)	64.8	62.1	42.2	42.8	40
(Effective) sample size	158,395	38,445	(1,696)	(8,108)	–

* The distribution of wealth in the society for each decile should be 10%. Reference for our estimation of household monthly income in 2022: Eghtesad News (2020) and Eco-Iran (July, 2021).

for both literate and illiterate adults, approximating GAMAAN's findings of 47.9 percent and 48.4 percent. All in all, these results show that the adjusting methods (weighting and matching) were effective in extracting representative samples of Iranian society.

Results on (non)religiosity and regime support

While GAMAAN's survey results regarding politically nonsensitive questions are highly congruent with results of face-to-face and telephone probability surveys, the results on religion and politics—in other words, sensitive topics—show huge discrepancies. In the following subsections, we outline the survey results of GAMAAN concerning self-identified religious and non-religious groups. Additionally, we provide cross-tabulations pertaining to the compulsory hijab, the nationwide protests of 2022, and media consumption. This analysis aims to offer a *general* understanding of the secular-religious divide.

TABLE 5.4 Home language distribution according to GAMAAN and Ethnologue

	GAMAAN 2022–2023				
	Unweighted December 2022	Unweighted July 2023	Weighted December 2022	Weighted July 2023	Ethnologue 2021*
Home language	%	%	%	%	%
Farsi	79.9	74.4	68.5	68.2	60.1
Turkish/Azeri	6.9	9.3	9.9	10.6	12.9
Kurdish	4.8	4.9	6.5	5.2	5.7
Luri	3.0	3.5	4.7	4.0	4.8
Arabic	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.9	1.8
Gilaki	1.3	1.3	1.7	1.7	2.9
Mazandarani	0.8	1.1	1.6	1.4	2.7
Balochi	0.5	0.5	1.7	2.0	1.4
Laki	0.5	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.4
Turkmeni	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.9
Tati	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.6
Armeni	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Other	1.7	2.9	2.7	4.2	4.7
(Effective) sample size	158395	38445	(1696)	(8108)	–

* Ethnologue did not conduct survey research but relied on linguists' expertise; in this table, Luri may overlap with Bakhtiari. Discrepancies may be caused by these differences and the fact that GAMAAN sampled the adult literate population only. For a critical evaluation on estimating the languages of Iran, see Moradi 2020.

Religious and nonreligious groups

The main aim of GAMAAN's 2020 survey on religion was to explore informal affiliations with a wide range of religious and nonreligious beliefs. Respondents were presented with the question "Which option most closely aligns with your belief and faith (*bāvar va i'tiqād-i shumā*)?" Notably, in this survey, only 32 percent identified with Shi'a Islam and 5 percent with Sunni Islam. Furthermore, 22 percent indicated that they did not affiliate with any specific religious or nonreligious beliefs (*hīchkudām*). Additionally, 6 percent identified as Agnostic (*nadānam-girā*), and 9 percent declared themselves Atheists (*āti'īst, khudānābāvar*). By highlighting Iran's religious and nonreligious diversity, this survey challenged the long-held notion of a predominantly homogeneous Muslim nation.

Citing this research, The Economist (2021a) quipped about the "not-so-Shi'a state," suggesting that "repression is spurring alienation from the official creed." We find this interpretation to be accurate, as it addresses the obvious question of what happened to Iran's Muslim population. The survey revealed that a substantial majority, constituting 78 percent, still profess

TABLE 5.5 Healthcare insurances according to GAMAAN and the Iranian Students Polling Agency

Insurance	Unweighted December 2022	Unweighted July 2023	Weighted December 2022	Weighted July 2023	ISPA March 2022
	GAMAAN 2022–2023				
	%	%	%	%	%
Social Security Organization	54.9	51.8	47.9	48.4	50.7
Iran Health Insurance Organization	8.8	8.9	7.9	10.3	7.8
Salamat	5.8	13.2	9.6	9.7	7.2
Roostaa	1.2	2.1	6.3*	6.4*	9.8
Armed Forces Insurance	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.5	3.4
Other insurance	1.5	2.5	1.8	2.3	2.9
I am not insured	25.0	18.7	23.7	20.5	17.6
(Effective) sample size	158,395	38,445	(1,696)	(8,108)	1,591

* Discrepancies may be because GAMAAN sampled the literate population only, whereas ISPA (2022) sampled the literate and illiterate population. This can explain why the group which has Roosta insurance, which is for rural areas, is lower in GAMAAN's results.

belief in God. This implies that many individuals now associate Islam with state repression. Among those who identified as Nones, 73 percent professed a belief in God. This finding prompted us to incorporate a distinct category in subsequent surveys (beginning with 2022 and 2023) that focused on informal, personal religious, and nonreligious identification—namely, believers in God who do not consider themselves religious (*khudā'bāvar ammā ghayr-i'maẕhabī*). Additionally, based on respondents' feedback, we included "Yarsan" and "Humanist" (*insān-girā*) as options. These adjustments had interesting effects on subsequent findings.[5] Table 5.6 illustrates the outcomes for the 2020, 2022, and 2023 surveys.

Collectively, about half of the literate population (constituting 88 percent of the total adult population) personally identified as Muslim across the three surveys. The percentage of Atheists (7–9 percent), along with other groups like Sunnis (5 percent), remained relatively stable. Identifications such as "Spiritual," "Zoroastrian," and "None"—which is fuzzier in the case of Spiritual and connected to ideas about national heritage in the case of Zoroastrian—saw fluctuations (mainly due to the changing available options in the survey). Those groups who selected these options in June 2020 appear to have selected "Believer in God without religion"

TABLE 5.6 Religious and nonreligious groups according to three online surveys (weighted results)

Which option is closest to your belief and faith [bāvar va i'tiqād-i shumā]? *	GAMAAN		
	June 2020 Religion Survey	December 2022 Protests Survey	July 2023 Media Survey
	%	%	%
Shi'a	32.2	37.8	37.9
None	22.2	8.5	6.6
Believer in God without religion	–	26.4	17.3
Humanist	–	–	16.1
Atheist	8.8	7.4	6.5
Agnostic	5.8	2.6	1.6
Sunni	5.0	5.1	4.9
Spiritual	7.1	2.6	1.6
Zoroastrian	7.7	4.6	2.8
Mystical (Sufi)	3.2	0.9	1.0
Christian	1.5	0.3	0.5
Yarsan	–	0.5	0.3
Baha'i	0.5	0.2	0.2
Jewish	0.1	0.15	0.1
Other	5.9	2.95	2.9
Effective sample size	1,911	1,498	8,108

* A dash indicates that this option was not available in that survey.
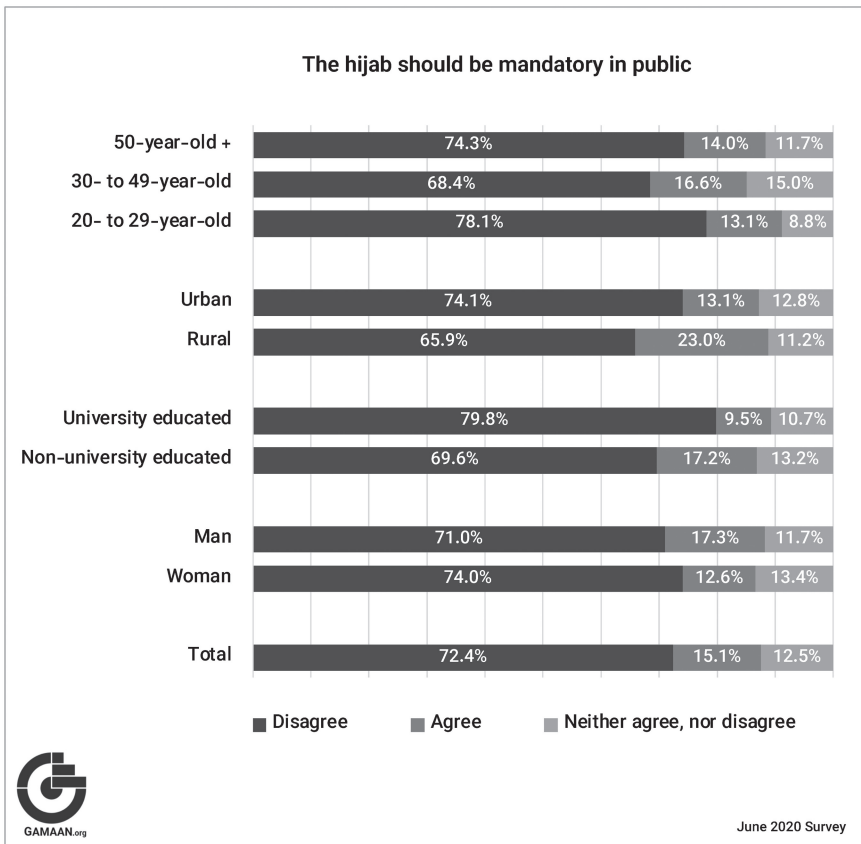
or "Humanist" in the December 2022 and July 2023 surveys. In general, the results captured a population disenchanted with the national narrative presented by the Islamic Republic. It should be noted that, although the figures for smaller groups like Jews and Christians might be more influenced by the weighting process compared to larger groups like Shi'a and Atheists, the order of magnitude for Jews, Christians, and Baha'is is consistent and roughly aligns with expectations, ranging from 0.1 percent to 1 percent.

In all of GAMAAN's surveys, the weighting process resulted in an increased percentage of Shi'a. For instance, in 2020, the initial raw sample indicated 20 percent Shi'a affiliation, which rose to 32 percent after weighting. This 12 percent difference decreased in the July 2023 survey to 5 percent, indicating a more randomized sampling process. Also, given that GAMAAN's surveys exclude the illiterate population, the percentage of Shi'a is likely to be several points higher.

Compulsory hijab

The 2020 religion survey indicated that the majority of our target population—literate adults—opposed the mandatory hijab. As expected, variations were observed based on factors such as educational attainment, age, gender, and urban or rural residency, with differences of up to 10 percent (Figure 5.5). However, a more influential factor in predicting differing perspectives on the Iranian regime and its policies was an individual's identification with Shi'a Islam—or lack thereof (Figures 5.6 and 5.7).

Figure 5.6 shows that individuals who expressed a personal disbelief in wearing the hijab as a religious practice also tended to disagree with its compulsory enforcement. Conversely, among those who affirmed the hijab as a religious practice, over 50 percent were in favor of the compulsory

The hijab should be mandatory in public

	Disagree	Agree	Neither agree, nor disagree
50-year-old +	74.3%	14.0%	11.7%
30- to 49-year-old	68.4%	16.6%	15.0%
20- to 29-year-old	78.1%	13.1%	8.8%
Urban	74.1%	13.1%	12.8%
Rural	65.9%	23.0%	11.2%
University educated	79.8%	9.5%	10.7%
Non-university educated	69.6%	17.2%	13.2%
Man	71.0%	17.3%	11.7%
Woman	74.0%	12.6%	13.4%
Total	72.4%	15.1%	12.5%

GAMAAN.org

June 2020 Survey

FIGURE 5.5 Opinions on the compulsory hijab by demographic variables. Survey on religion conducted by GAMAAN in June 2020.
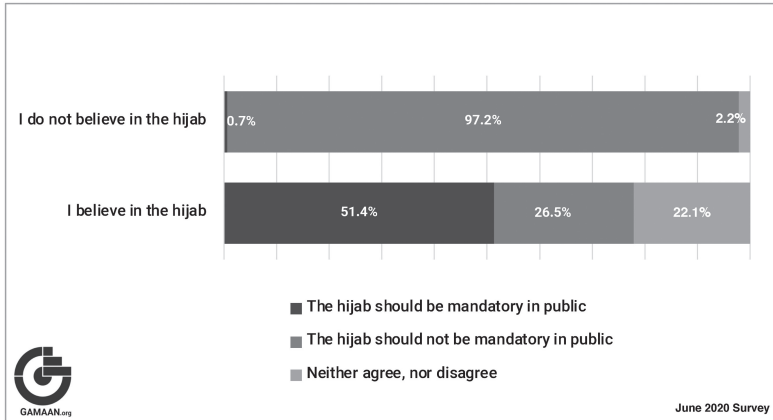
FIGURE 5.6   Opinions on the compulsory hijab based on belief in the hijab. Survey on religion conducted by GAMAAN in June 2020.

hijab, while only a quarter explicitly opposed it. Although this figure may have evolved following the nationwide protests triggered by Mahsa (Jina) Amini's death, as of June 2020 we observed that the secular-religious divide remains a pivotal factor in comprehending the interpersonal dynamics among Iranians. This is confirmed by a cross-tabulation that examined support for the compulsory hijab in relation to religious identification. As depicted in Figure 5.7, a noticeable distinction emerges between the various
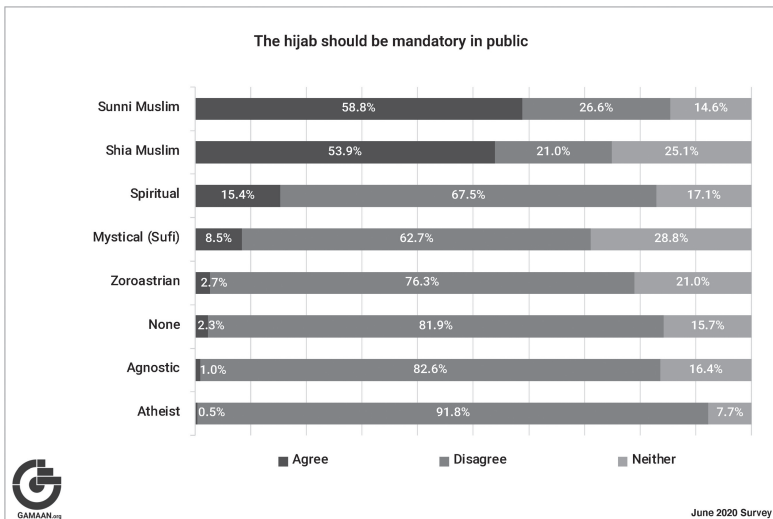

FIGURE 5.7   Opinions on the compulsory hijab across (non)religious groups. Survey on religion conducted by GAMAAN in June 2020.

religious and nonreligious groups. While those identifying as Mystical (Sufis) tend to be more inclined to disapprove of the compulsory hijab, a substantial majority of those identifying as Shiʻa and Sunni express agreement with this regulation. We believe this helps explain why some Iranian women resorted to the uncompromising act of hijab burning during the 2022 nationwide protests, as it is an outburst resulting from existing social tensions.

The 2022 nationwide protests

According to GAMAAN's December 2022 survey, 81 percent of literate adults within Iran expressed agreement with the 2022 nationwide protests in Iran. Discontent with the Islamic Republic and support for protest actions were widespread, transcending political affiliations (both Left- and Right-wing), ethnic backgrounds (including, among others, Baluch and Kurds), and differing socioeconomic strata in both urban and rural settings (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2023). The results also indicate that, despite solidarity efforts from Shiʻa individuals advocating for a separation of Islam from the state, the protests were unable to bridge the secular-religious divide (and, adding to the complexity, attempts to reconcile differences among regime opponents in diaspora were also unsuccessful).

Of all groups, Shiʻa believers clearly stood out in the December 2022 survey, with 32 percent stating "I disagree with the protests and see them as chaos [*ightishāsh*]," and another 6 percent disagreeing with the protests but not using the regime's preferred term, "chaos," while a majority of Shiʻa, 55 percent, supported the protests. Among Sunni Muslims and Spirituals, only 4 percent stated disagreement with the protests and saw them as chaos and another 3–4 percent disagreed with the protests, while the rest supported the protests. Near 100 percent of Nones, Atheists, self-professed Zoroastrians, Mysticals (Sufis), and Christians supported the protests. Among all groups, Shiʻa believers also exhibited the highest degree of division regarding their preference for a political system—whether the Islamic Republic, a secular republic, or a constitutional monarchy. While virtually none of the Nones, Atheists, self-professed Zoroastrians, Mysticals (Sufi's), Christians, and others chose the Islamic Republic as their favored political system, 39 percent of Shiʻa expressed support for the current regime; approximately 12 percent favored a constitutional monarchy, 30 percent leaned toward a secular republic, and around 20 percent indicated they were either not sufficiently informed to make a choice or preferred an alternative altogether.

These statistics shed light on extraordinary actions by critics of the regime, revealing them as symptoms of an underlying societal tension between secularity and religiosity—as well as between different religious orientations.

A prime example lies in Shi'a Muslims who critique the entanglement of religion with the state, blurring the lines between Islam and governance. During the first anniversary of Ruhollah Zam's death, a journalist executed in December 2020 after being abducted in Iraq and charged with "corruption on Earth," his father, a member of the Shi'a clergy, standing beside his son's grave, removed his turban to the applause of attendees. The father's act made headlines and resonated online within the transnational Iranian public sphere (Radio Farda 2021). For many believers and nonbelievers alike, the turban had come to symbolize moral and political corruption. In another example, during the 2022 protests justice seeker (*dādkhvāh*) Gohar Eshghi, the mother of the murdered blogger Sattar Beheshti and a devout Shi'a woman, recorded a video in which she removed her hijab in solidarity with young protestors. She stated, "For the sake of our youth, after eighty years, because of this religion that wants to kill people, I am taking off this hijab." Her use of the word "religion" (*dīn*) reflects a strongly perceived association between religion and the state. This video also quickly gained widespread attention. Eshghi, who had often been seen wearing the black chador, exemplified a new Iranian aesthetic—one critical of theocracy. (She has been frequently threatened by the regime, see BBC Persian 2023.) At the time of writing, criticism internal to Islam continues. In November 2023, Sedigheh Vasmaghi, a well-known scholar of Islam, appeared in a televised interview without wearing the hijab (Zarghami and Scollon 2023).

Anthropologist Reinhold L. Loeffler has documented similar transformations, observing a devout believer in Iran over three decades since the 1970s. His fieldwork provides insight into how even the elderly in Iran, influenced by societal pressures toward secularization, have come to question and criticize not only the state but also Islam itself. In the decades following the Revolution, his interlocutor became increasingly skeptical:

> While after the Revolution his belief in God remained as adamantly firm as ever, the whole complex of what he came to call [*dīn*] was falling away as he came to see it as made of constructions by the mullahs. He began to avoid the very word [*dīn*], which now meant to him the conceptions propagated by the government and mullahs. He openly stated the reason for his reversal of attitude to be the changes that the religious authorities brought about after the Revolution.
>
> *(Loeffler 2022: 105)*

Loeffler's interlocutor passed away in 2008. We interpret his increasing skepticism as being part of a broader shift in societal values toward the secular and in opposition to the religious—which is imagined as being tied to the regime or as being illusory in a broader sense. This shift is intertwined with the decline of the reform movement and is most notably demonstrated by

both the absence of religious discourse in the 2022 protests and the resurgence of the long-dreaded word "revolution" (*inqilāb*)—symbolized by the removal of religious attire and the positive emphasis on displaying skin and hair.

Media consumption

The division between Iranians living in the diaspora and those within the country has been exploited by supporters of the Islamic Republic, including both Reformists and Principlists. They have sought to discredit dissident voices by exiling them—both from discourses about Iran and physically, from the land itself. This has contributed to the proliferation of satellite television channels broadcasting in Persian. Along with the broader influence of foreign films and media, and accelerating Internet penetration, the categorization of Iranian voices inside as being authentic and those outside as being inauthentic is unraveling. The emergence of channels like Voice of America Persian in 1994, initially airing only a one-hour program in Persian, marked the beginning of this transnationalization of the Iranian public sphere. Subsequently, Radio Farda (since 2002) among others extended this trend. Decades later, Iranians within the country have widespread access to professionally produced satellite television. BBC Persian Television was launched in 2009, followed by Manoto TV in 2010, and Iran International in 2017, all based in London. These channels represent diverse political factions, encompassing reform-oriented individuals, monarchists, and republicans advocating for a transition away from or even the overthrow of the existing regime. This competitive media landscape, which includes smaller channels targeting, for example, Sunnis and Christians, has eroded the credibility of the Iranian regime's media apparatus and highlights on daily basis the diversity of political—secular and religious—perspectives.

According to GAMAAN's July 2023 survey on media consumption (the second survey on this topic, the first being conducted in 2021), trust in foreign Persian media surpasses that of regime-affiliated channels overall (Figure 5.8). The proliferation of social media and communication applications has facilitated the rapid dissemination of short video clips, leading to an amalgamation of media environments into a transnational sphere for Iranians both inside and outside the country. Alongside competing political ideologies, secularity and religiosity are key determinants in understanding these media environments' prevalent patterns and the divisions into distinct social spheres. A cross-tabulation of religious and nonreligious identifications with the question of trust in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) demonstrates that Shi'a respondents reported the highest levels of trust in state media (Figure 5.9). Conversely, Atheists, Nones, and Sunni Muslims expressed significantly lower levels of trust.
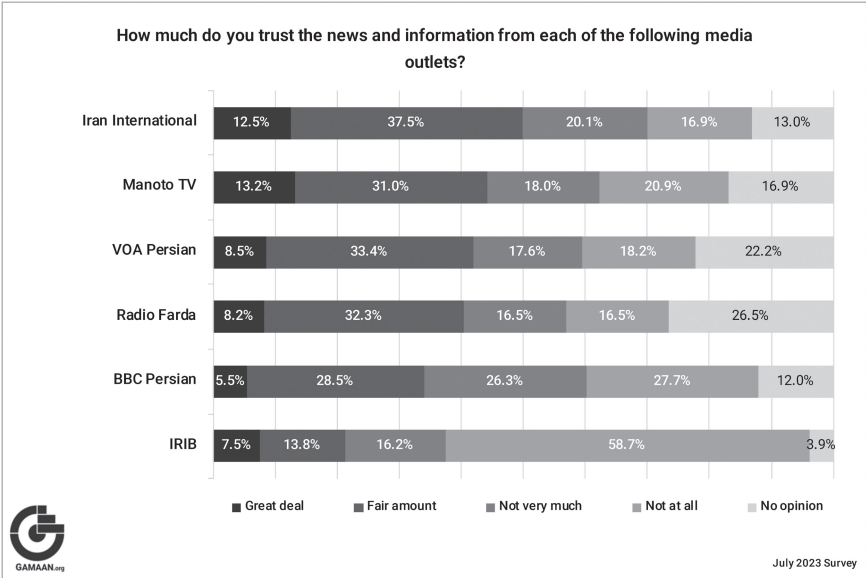
How much do you trust the news and information from each of the following media outlets?

	Great deal	Fair amount	Not very much	Not at all	No opinion
Iran International	12.5%	37.5%	20.1%	16.9%	13.0%
Manoto TV	13.2%	31.0%	18.0%	20.9%	16.9%
VOA Persian	8.5%	33.4%	17.6%	18.2%	22.2%
Radio Farda	8.2%	32.3%	16.5%	16.5%	26.5%
BBC Persian	5.5%	28.5%	26.3%	27.7%	12.0%
IRIB	7.5%	13.8%	16.2%	58.7%	3.9%

July 2023 Survey

FIGURE 5.8   Trust in media outlets. GAMAAN, July 2023.

How much do you trust the news and information provided by IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting)?

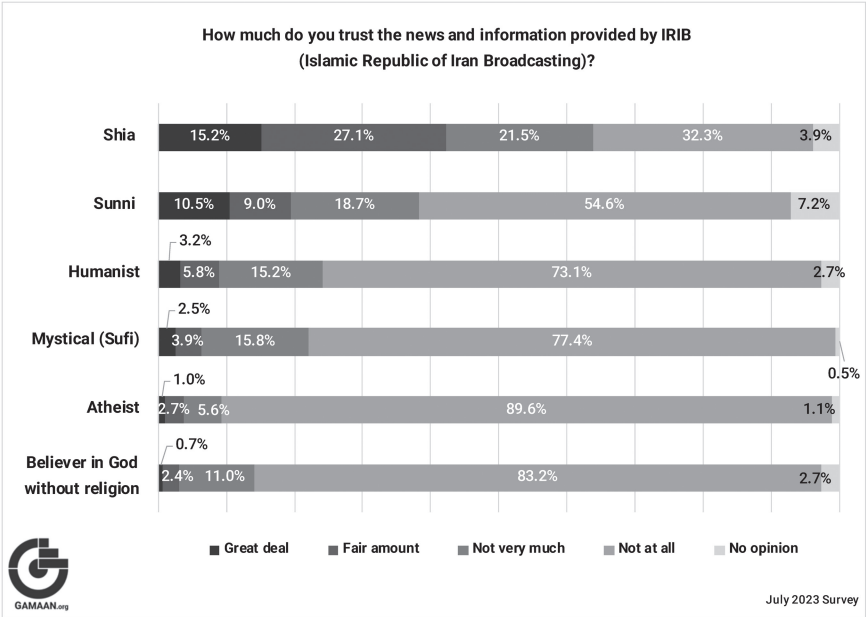|	Great deal	Fair amount	Not very much	Not at all	No opinion
Shia	15.2%	27.1%	21.5%	32.3%	3.9%
Sunni	10.5%	9.0%	18.7%	54.6%	7.2%
Humanist	3.2%	5.8%	15.2%	73.1%	2.7%
Mystical (Sufi)	2.5%	3.9%	15.8%	77.4%	0.5%
Atheist	1.0%	2.7%	5.6%	89.6%	1.1%
Believer in God without religion	0.7%	2.4%	11.0%	83.2%	2.7%

July 2023 Survey

FIGURE 5.9   Religious and nonreligious identification and trust in the IRIB. GAMAAN, July 2023.

Once again, Shi'a individuals stand in stark contrast to nonreligious individuals in their varying perceptions of the regime's information dissemination, with only 15 percent expressing a high level of trust in the IRIB, while 32 percent conveyed a complete lack of trust.

Due to improved data quality facilitated by broader access to the population through VPN-sampling, we observed that the disparities before and after weighting were less pronounced compared to previous surveys and that the July 2023 survey results confirmed previously identified patterns. Thus, it can be said that proponents and opponents of the regime favor different mediated spheres. This suggests that in Iran, the tension between secularity and religiosity seen within society is closely intertwined with the conflict between dissenting citizens and the regime, along with its supporters.

Conclusion

Article 12 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishes Islam—in particular, Twelver Shi'ism—as the state religion. It adds: "This principle [of establishing Shi'ism] shall remain eternally unchangeable." Seeing just how vast and rapid the changes in Iranian society are, it is hard not to think that the clerical regime has lost touch with reality. In the theocracy, critiquing the state today invariably entails critiquing religion. This is an inherent association, which may appear obvious to some readers. Nothing, however, can be taken for granted in a politically charged context like Iran's. That is why we endeavored to offer quantitative substantiation for this overarching assertion, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging pivotal changes in Iranian society, particularly its secularization and connected demand for political secularism. Due to the scarcity of data in authoritarian settings and the absence of other reliable survey data on politically sensitive matters, social scientists and humanities scholars have often ignored or written around the emergence of widespread nonreligiosity and even Atheism in Iran. Many academic publications have continued to focus on understanding Iran through the lens of Islam's extensive historical influence and the enduring impact of modern revolutionary Shi'ism. However, the 2022 nationwide protests compel us to confront Iran's secular shift. The implications of this shift for the future of the Middle East are bound to be profound.

No doubt, the tensions observed derive from a contested view of what secularity and religiosity mean or should mean. We believe that attempts at overcoming such tensions require cool-blooded assessment of their reality, which can prevent being surprised by the fast-paced changes in Iranian society. This can help avoid the erroneous analyses of recent years such as the statement that "a majority of Iranian women, regardless of the law, wear the

head scarf by choice," which found its way to major outlets such as the *New York Times* (Moaveni 2016).

This chapter highlighted the correlation between individuals' secular inclinations and their religious beliefs without delving into the intricate causes of secularization or its multifaceted dimensions. We highlighted what were mainly secular-religious differences without explaining the complex reasons for secularization or its various dimensions. In general, scholars of Iranian secularization largely agree that it is, in many ways, a response to theocratic violence. This supports José Casanova's assertion that secularization theory should be sensitive to the unique historical trajectories of individual nations. In his latest analysis of global dynamics between secular and religious forces, Casanova (2019) argues that the relationship between state and religion significantly influences the character and scope of secularization within a given society. However, there is more to this narrative. Secularization in Iran is inseparable from broader modernization, encompassing declining birthrates, swift urbanization, enhanced literacy rates, and access to a diverse array of worldviews. These modernizing trends are reshaping conventional family structures, fostering a growing belief among Iranians in the primacy of individual choice—as opposed to the idea that one's faith should be determined by familial or national ties. The research problem for studying nonreligiosity and unbelief in officially Islamic nations, then, lies not necessarily in the inadequacy of macro-theories that stress, among others, changes such as going from profertility to individual-choice norms, like that of Ronald Inglehart (2021); the challenge lies in the formidable task of generating reliable survey data in many countries hindered by both sampling bias and preference falsification.

Our findings regarding Iran lead to a conclusion that some academics may find challenging to accept: we cannot reason our way out of conflicts between secular and religious forces. Acknowledging the secular-religious divide in Iran imbues the words "Woman, Life, Freedom" with a more assertive, secular feminist resonance. This alignment is inevitable—considering that, within the Islamic Republic, women's rights are intrinsically linked to matters of religion and politics. For those who advocated for the symbolic act of burning the hijab, likening the compulsory veil to Iran's Berlin Wall, the term "Life" encompasses more than just the pursuit of a stable middle-class existence, job security, health, or safety. It fundamentally opposes the Shi'a principle of martyrdom and the Islamic emphasis on death and the afterlife. Especially for "nonreligious" Iranians, whether they believe in a higher power or not, valuing life revolves around cherishing worldly existence. Consequently, unveiling represents more than just a critique of the regime; it is an existential gesture that signifies not only a yearning for secular democracy but also a shared aspiration to distance oneself from Islam.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 GAMAAN or the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (*gurūh-i mutāliʿāt-i afkārsanjī-i īrānīān*) is an acronym for the Persian word *gamān*, meaning "opinion" as well as "estimation." GAMAAN's publications can be found at www.gamaan.org.
2 See "Iran (Islamic Republic of): Individuals using the Internet," DataHub, the International Telecommunication Union, n.d., accessed December 2, 2023, https://datahub.itu.int/data/?i=11624&e=IRN.
3 Data from Persian site amar.org.ir; see https://tinyurl.com/laborforce2022.
4 After 2017, the Islamic Republic's National Organization for Civil Registration (Sabt Ahval) stopped publishing the exact numbers online.
5 We also found in a February 2022 survey that when the question was formulated to ask about "religion" rather than emphasizing personal beliefs, the percentage of Shiʿa would go up, with a higher percentage of Shiʿa reporting that religion is not important in their lives or leaving a comment in an open box to explain that Shiʾism is their formal, paper identity. The effects of survey design on religious identifications in GAMAAN's surveys are analyzed in Stausberg et al. (2023). In this chapter, we discuss results on religious identifications based on a question that was repeated in exactly the same formulation.

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