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## **Interaction and confrontation between the media and the religion of Islam in the Middle East (with emphasis on Iran)**

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### **Abstract**

Religion and media are two very important phenomena in Middle Eastern societies today. In these societies, the media is considered a newcomer, whose serious presence in different areas of these societies is barely a century old; While religion has been one of the ancient and important elements in the structure of societies in the Middle East for centuries and millennia. This article is an attempt to examine the different dimensions of the confrontation between these two phenomena in Middle Eastern societies in general, and Iranian society in particular, and it tries to explore different ways in which the media appears as a tool for and against religion. It has been shown how religion has been able to use the media in many cases and how it has sometimes been at war with the media, feeling threatened by the media. The present article is based on the hypothesis that the interaction and confrontation between media and religion has profound and important effects on the studied societies and also on how the political and social culture of these societies is formed; Influences whose dimensions can play a decisive role in the confrontation between tradition and modernity and its fate.

**Keywords:** religion, media, culture, Middle East, Iran, internet, satellite.

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### **Introduction**

In recent decades, and especially since the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East has been the fascinating and important subject of study for researchers and analysts in various political and economic fields. These studies and researches have covered a wide range of Middle East issues - from how the government is structured in these societies to the root of the conflicts and crises in the region. However, in some areas, including the cultural sphere, there is a significant line in existing resources about the Middle East, including issues related to religion and the media and how the two relate to Middle Eastern societies.

The Middle East has always been known by most historians and scholars as the birthplace and birthplace of the three great heavenly religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Panania, 2005: 92). If we want to name the important features and manifestations of the Middle East and the people living in it, without a doubt, religion and belonging to religion are among these manifestations. Jonathan Foxx is one of the few thinkers to acknowledge this fact and acknowledge that one of the most important proofs of the important place of religion in the Middle East is its historical significance; A region that has been the source of the emergence of three major religions in the world. In other words, in his view, the antiquity and importance of the place of religion in the Middle East distinguishes it from other societies (Fox, 2001).

The diversity of religions and denominations to which the people of the Middle East belong, along with their fascination, prejudice and affection for their religion and religious beliefs, as well as the profound effects of these religious beliefs on the formation of their historical, political and cultural identity. Confirms the theory that religion is an exceptional and extraordinary phenomenon in Middle Eastern societies. On the other hand, the media is a new phenomenon in the Middle Eastern societies, which has faced many serious problems since the beginning of the days and years of its presence in these societies. The most important of these problems has been finding a way to coexist with other genuine and ancient actors in these societies, led by religion, religious leaders and religious institutions. According to historical evidence, in some periods, this coexistence has been accompanied by tension, conflict

and efforts to remove another from the field, and in sometimes it has become a kind of peaceful coexistence.

### **1. The first encounters**

Although religious leaders in the Islamic world were among the last social groups in Middle Eastern societies to realize the importance, influence, and position of the media, this delay in recognizing the position of the media is not limited to religious leaders in the Middle East. He extended it to the leaders of other religions in other regions and communities. Horsfield is one of the writers who understands this well and says that the lack of awareness of religious leaders and institutions about the fundamental place of the media in what he calls "cultural shaping" in societies is their inability to interact with it. As well as their inability to invest in it and, ultimately, the underdevelopment of religious traditions (Horsfield 167: 1997)

However, if we look at this phenomenon from a comparative point of view, we find that Shiite religious leaders and institutions, especially in Iran, have faced the media with more flexibility and openness, and, of course, more rapidly and on a larger scale. They have broadened and modified their positions and approaches towards it.

In its first appearance in Middle Eastern societies, the media demonstrated a manifestation of brutal hostility by raising new questions, questioning the fundamental tenets of religion, and targeting a wide range of audiences in their homes. There is a comprehensive confrontation with religion. Probably, it was this perception of the media's hostile stance against religion that formed the first reactions of religious leaders and institutions to the media, forcing them to sanction it in their fatwas. Undoubtedly, behind this violent confrontation with the media, their fear was that the media, their followers - who were generally religious people and made up the vast majority of society - would cross the red lines. Defined in religion and destroy their religion and religious beliefs. Iranian society and the reaction of ulema and imitators in Iran to the first appearance of radio and television in Iranian homes in the 1950s and 1970s is a clear example of this initial confrontation between religion and the media; At that time, imitation authorities warned

their imitators against buying and selling and using radio and television (Imam Khomeini, 1983: 353).

However, this approach and traditional view of the media with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of religion and religious leaders in Iranian society, completely changed and underwent profound and fundamental changes. The acquisition of political power, which coincided with the acquisition of the media in the national arena, gave religious leaders a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the decisive role of the media, and henceforth used it as an effective and efficient tool. Take; In the same way that their opponents and opponents have used it so far.

This new approach can be well observed and understood in the famous sentence of Imam Khomeini, in which radio and television were mentioned as a public and national university (Imam Khomeini, 1980: 203). From this perspective, the media was a tool that could be used to educate any nation or to corrupt and destroy it (Imam Khomeini, 1980: 175). The fact that now, imitators and important religious leaders, from Qom to Najaf and from Tehran to Beirut, have all launched their own websites on the World Wide Web and made a relentless effort to attract their audiences. Spending on a global scale indicates a major shift in their approach to the media. It also testifies to the tremendous impact that the media, and especially the electronic media, has had on religious leaders, both secular and modern, and how they have turned it from a bridge to hell into a platform for salvation.

The confrontation between religion and the media, especially in Iranian society, entered a new phase with the launch of satellite TV networks from 2000 and 2001 onwards. The culmination of this confrontation was when some of these satellite channels - which mainly recorded and broadcast their programs from there - mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom - openly behaved in a highly hostile manner towards the religion and the sacred and religious beliefs of their audiences. They took over. Although the ultimate goals of these networks were to destabilize Iranian society and bring about political change and even the overthrow of the religious government in Iran, but the arrow of their attack was on religion and the principles and sub-principles of religion within the framework of Shiite thought and doctrine. The aim was to attack

principles and concepts such as monotheism, prophecy, resurrection, or to question the philosophical and intellectual foundations of practices such as prayer, fasting, zakat, Hajj, and so on. The important and interesting point in this regard is that this unprecedented propaganda campaign against religion could never open its place among its audience, and even among its non-religious audience, it could not attract the least audience. However, this new phenomenon, as a potential danger that seriously threatens the masses, especially the youth, attracted the attention of religious leaders and made them think of measures to deal with it (Mo'men, 1987). : 186).

What has been said so far clearly shows how the challenge of religion by the media has presented it with different opportunities and threats. In enumerating the opportunities that confronting the media phenomenon has brought to religion, the following three opportunities can be mentioned:

1. Facing the media phenomenon has led religious leaders and institutions to think seriously about new questions in the field of religious thought, and to remove the ambiguities and doubts that have overshadowed the minds and thoughts of their audiences in the light of the use of new media. Think of providing new and compelling answers. This forced the leaders of religious institutions to establish a new discourse and dialogue with their audience, one based on providing convincing answers to the audience's boundless questions, not on one-sided sermons.

As the volume and size of questions and criticisms received from local, national and cross-border media increased, the efforts of the institution of religion and its custodians to broaden the religious horizon and adapt the religious worldview to the modern world and its requirements became more and more. This trend quickly led to the emergence of a new generation of religious thinkers loyal to the traditional place of religion in society and beyond. The above trend is potentially good and happy news for religion, and mala, meaning empowering its theoretical foundations, promoting its position in society and strengthening its capacity to play an effective and active role with other actors in society. It is the age of globalization.

2. The second positive achievement that confronting the media has brought to religion is the unique and extraordinary tools at its

disposal. The media, in general, and the electronic media in particular, for the first time in the history of the life of religions, have equipped religious institutions and leaders with a means by which their audiences are covered in number, dimensions, and territory.

This new tool, which was initially seen as the source of evil, quickly emerged as a source of good and as the most comprehensive, shortest, least costly, and most effective tool for conveying the message of religion to the masses. Now, in the early years of the first century of the third millennium AD, the formal and informal guardians of religion recognize the effective and crucial role of the media in shaping culture in societies and are increasingly interested in better and more effective interaction with those tools. (Badar Aqua, 2005: 8).

From the point of view of some experts, the most attractive aspect of this new tool for religious institutions is to provide a basis for a kind of simultaneous and two-way dialogue for the origin and destination of the message. Therefore, a tool such as the Internet as a gift to spread the words of the Prophet (PBUH) in all parts of the world, which has brought many fruits and benefits to Islam (Rahimi, 2003). From this perspective, the interaction of religion and the media and the sharing of their interests in influencing culture and society has created a kind of complex and overlapping relationship for them.

The third opportunity that the age of media has provided to religion and religious individuals and groups, in the context of providing the necessary grounds for finding each other, establishing effective and continuous communication with each other, and creating and expanding local and national communication networks. And transnational between each other can be explained. For the first time, new media have made this possible for sub-sections of the institution of religion, from traditional religious schools to groups with religious orientations, as well as individuals whose common religion and religious thoughts and beliefs are aligned. They were created to unite in small and large networks and to form a virtual think tank by sharing their understandings and perceptions of religion, to achieve

a kind of collective thinking and a new understanding of religious categories.

Ray Tekiye, an expert on Middle East issues, endorses this view, especially of Middle Eastern societies, and states that the media is playing a vital role in changing the face of Middle Eastern societies by connecting elite circles around the world. The Middle East is from Tehran to Cairo. According to him, the fact that in the Middle East

Today, Al-Dawa, the organ of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, can easily be bought from press stores in the Persian Gulf countries, or Jordan's Islamist newspaper Al-Sabil is widely distributed in other countries, due to the significant influence of the media. And there is a rift in the Middle East today.

He sees the culmination of this trend in the Islamists' optimal use of the Internet and the publication of online magazines and the widespread dissemination of lectures and sermons by religious leaders on the Web. For example, he cites the access of religious intellectual circles throughout the Middle East to the views and ideas of Abdul Karim Soroush, as well as the ability of Egyptian writer Hassan Hanafi to find an audience in Tehran as other examples of this phenomenon (Takiha, 2001: 69).

Regarding the effective and efficient use of media tools in the service of religion in Middle Eastern societies, in general, and in Iran in particular, the following can be mentioned:

**Radio and Television:** Using radio and television programs at the local, provincial and national levels by targeting local audiences is still an important and convenient way to attract audiences. One of the important theoretical approaches regarding the role of radio and television is the educational analysis of the role of radio and television in societies.

According to this theory, the media in general and television in particular play a very important role in shaping people's worldviews. This approach considers the media, especially television, as the most important source that in modern culture, not only affects the type and depth of information and their orientation towards the outside world, but also shapes their behavior in the same direction.

Programmers who produce programs by focusing on religion and promoting religious views and ideas in radio and television groups

play an important role in this regard. This phenomenon, which Eckelman and Anderson refer to as the "spread of radio and television," has led to the emergence of new areas of religious discourse. According to him, this phenomenon has occurred in Lebanon and Turkey more rapidly than in other Middle Eastern societies (Eckelman and Anderson, 2003: 4). However, it seems that this phenomenon is happening in Iran after the revolution with increasing speed.

**Satellite TV Networks:** The production and broadcasting of television programs by satellite channels Although a relatively new phenomenon, religious institutions and leaders in the Middle East are rapidly using it to promote their ideas. This is evidenced by the fact that dozens of religious satellite channels are now making their way to the homes of their audiences across the Middle East through NileSt, Arab and Hotbird satellite transmitters.

**Print Media:** Print media, including newspapers, weeklies, monthly magazines and quarterly magazines, are among the oldest and most traditional media tools that have long been used by religious leaders and institutions as a desirable means of disseminating religious beliefs.

This type of media, despite the emergence of new competitors, continues to play its traditional role, albeit in relation to a more limited segment of the audience, which is mainly elites and academics. Undoubtedly, the publication of most of the deepest and most serious religious issues in the context of this type of media is taking place.

**Internet:** The World Wide Web is undoubtedly the most important and newest area in the interaction between religion and the media. This field has opened new and unconventional ways for the interaction of these two phenomena in Middle Eastern societies and has presented unique opportunities and unimaginable challenges to religion.

Anderson, a media expert, believes that the internet, as a medium with modern and unique features, goes far beyond a mere tool and, in practice,

It is a media phenomenon, but with its functions and effects, it has become far beyond and more complex. According to him, the Internet in the role of the media has played a major role in the



development of social space between elites and ordinary people. In this position, the Internet has brought discussions to the public sphere and presented them to an audience beyond national borders, which used to be behind closed doors and in small groups of students of every religious school (Anderson, 2003: 45).

While the anti-religious camp uses the Internet to keep up with the latest advances in communication science to fight religion and its guardians, religious institutions and leaders, in turn, make every effort to counter-attack to thwart their opponent's attacks. The following methods and mechanisms are among the important ways that religious people use to make the best and most comprehensive use of the Internet in the service of religion:

- A) Creating special websites for research centers that are dedicated to religious studies is one of the familiar, interesting and effective ways to publish religious topics. Today, even the most traditional schools of religious sciences in the most remote cities of Iran have their own websites and, in line with the latest methods of attracting audiences, try to increase the number of their visitors.
- B) B. Designing and creating personal pages and websites by important religious figures, such as seminary professors and imitators, is another way for religious people to use the Internet. The interesting thing about this phenomenon is that the Internet has provided the possibility of a direct connection between the source of imitation and its imitators and has reduced the time and space distance between the two to an unimaginable extent.
- C) C- Designing and creating dedicated blogs for each individual, regardless of the level of expertise with their title and job and just sharing their interests in religion and religious topics, are other manifestations and examples of using the Internet in religious camps. The phenomenon of blogging, which according to many media researchers has become a unique cultural phenomenon in Iran, has found a large part of its supporters among religious people - including scholars, students and even ordinary people in society - to create and Updating tens of thousands of Persian blogs has made Tehran the capital of blogging in the Middle East. It entered a new phase and reached its peak when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as

President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, launched his personal blog. Hamid Shahriari, one of the experts and activists in the field of Internet in Islamic research centers, believes that both blogging and blogging should be considered in terms of "opportunities" and "problems". In his view, if this opportunity cannot be used properly, its problems must definitely be fought. He then recommends that with proper expert planning and culture building, the problems of the blog should be turned into a suitable opportunity and a platform for the growth and promotion of religious, moral and revolutionary issues (Shahriari, 2006).

- D) Finally, the establishment and management of specialized working groups and the establishment of Internet chat rooms with a focus on religious issues are other popular and effective ways of using the Internet to achieve religious goals. Examples of this phenomenon can be found in the Religious Discussion Rooms at Yahoo. اس. Anne, and the Orkut network groups abounded.

A look at the prioritization and planning of religious authorities to use the Internet shows that religious institutions and leaders pursue the following three main goals in using the Internet:

- 1- Demonstrating the compatibility and alignment of Islam and its rules with the requirements of social life in modern times;
- 2- Emphasizing and showing the failure of materialism and material civilization of the West to make human beings happy and presenting the model of Islam as a suitable alternative model;
- 3- Increasing emphasis on the increasing need of contemporary human societies for spirituality and moral values, both of which are an integral part of the religious teachings of Islam.

The common denominator in all three goals and priorities is to align the relationship between media and religion with the discussion of development in religious communities. This approach in today's societies can be explained by the theory of development communication. According to this theory, media and communication tools have a key and important impact on the development of societies. This theory has been welcomed and supported by UNESCO in recent decades.

## 2. challenges ahead

In spite of all the mentioned opportunities that the media has created for religion, and in parallel with the actual and potential uses and exploits that religion has been able to use the media as a tool, the serious threats and problems of the media for religion remain well. It feels. These problems can be summarized as follows:

1. The media and those who use it against religion are sometimes in a superior and more effective position than the religious camp. Naturally, attacking and creating questions and creating an atmosphere of doubt in the minds of the audience and then leaving them alone and leaving the scene is much easier and more possible than defending and neutralizing. Counterattacking and trying to repair the effects of the anti-religious media attack will be very difficult for religious institutions and leaders, at least for two reasons. First, it will require a lot of time, energy, and resources to provide convincing answers to new questions, ambiguities, and doubts. The second reason is that in many cases, all audiences whose religious beliefs have been shaken and weakened by the instincts and propaganda of the anti-religious media will not necessarily have the motivation, will, and resources with sufficient time to find convincing answers. As a result, even if the religious authorities have provided the desired answers, these answers may never reach their audience again.

Another noteworthy point here is that, in the opinion of some experts, the absolutism in drawing a line between the media and religion, and the ruling on the hostility and hostility of the media against religion, is not very realistic and fair. From this perspective, it is possible that in some cases, the media, due to its alignment and belonging to a kind of enlightenment, is among the critics of religion, which must be separated from biased and blind hostility (Wall', 1996). Others see this as a kind of deep dichotomy between the secular media and the majority of people in society; The same people who have religious inclinations (Rasti, 1997)

2. The second obstacle to the natural, logical, and constructive interaction between religion and the media, which is somewhat more complex than the first, stems from the fact that the interaction between religion and the media is largely a kind of relationship between religion and the other. Social and political institutions -

including the institution of power and government, as well as other sections of society, especially economic actors in societies - depend.

In other words, the causes and factors of interest in political power and economic power to a large extent, have a decisive effect on the scope and limits of religious activity and its use of the media, and draw its limiting lines. Accordingly, anyone who runs a media firm, whether it is a government official or an economic activist who works for a higher profit, or an independent religious figure or institution, has some sort of perspective. And applies its own considerations to the production of content and how it is presented. The cultural affiliations and origins and social and political relations of media owners cannot be separated from their economic and professional considerations and concerns. This can easily be extended from national societies to international scales and shows how one of the main concerns of owners of large media companies - such as Robert Murdoch, Henry Loos, Silvio Berlusconi and Warner Bros.- Loyalty and maintaining their belonging to their business partners and political allies (Shoab, 2005).

This fact is a vulnerable point in the interaction of media and religion; Especially for religion, which presents it as a kind of subset and dependent variable. In other words, when it comes to the scope of interaction between media and religion, it is political and economic power that decides on the nature, type and extent of interaction between religion and media. Of course, in countries such as Iran, where a religious state is in power, religious considerations become the main criterion for determining this range, and these considerations, of course, dramatically change the equation in favor of religion and facilitate the interaction process in a favorable way. When secular governments are in power, the scales are clearly heavier in favor of the media. The interesting and common point in both examples is that in the end, the main and decisive position is held by the government and the type of thinking that governs the government, and in both places, governments use different tools - including revoking the license to operate by resorting to censor in its various forms - apply their ideas.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary world, media and religion seem to have a reciprocal, complex and at the same time inevitable relationship. Religion is the message and the media conveys the message and carries it to the audience. According to the issues addressed in this article, the media in the age of globalization has not only appeared in the role of a means of conveying the message, but also in a way, is considered part of the message. In fact, today, modern technology in the field of communication has tangibly extended the relationship between media and religion to other cultural, social and political spheres and opened up golden opportunities and at the same time serious problems for religion and its future position in the community has put.

Accordingly, the media can be considered as a double-edged sword that is used in the service and in the interests and goals of religion, and at the same time, can cut the roots of the foundations of religion and religious beliefs of society. The media is a tool that can defend the essence of religion, make it fatter, empower it, spread its message throughout the universe, and at the same time, it has the capacity and power to brutally go to war with religion. Promote misunderstanding and misinterpretation of it and separate its followers from it and alienate it.

In response to this fact, religious institutions and leaders in general, and scholars and elders of Shiite jurisprudence in Iran in particular, with a relatively realistic understanding of the importance of the role of the media, with a new approach, a logical process to interact with it. They have designed in the long run. This new approach has been based on two main pillars. The first is how to minimize the harms and harms of the media, and the second is how to maximize the benefit of it to the benefit of religion. However, it seems that the adoption of any long-term strategy regarding the interaction between the media and religion, should take into account the fact that both phenomena are inevitable requirements of societies in the present age, and accordingly, Should be looking for solutions that the two can have their own effect and special function in society in a kind of peaceful coexistence.

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