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The Environmental Movement in Iran: Perspectives From Below and Above

Kaveh L. Afrasiabi

Protection of the environment is enshrined in Article 50 of the Iranian Constitution. Over the past two decades, many environmental groups and organizations have emerged as part of Iran's nascent civil society. In addition to these environmental groups coming "from below," a number of government bureaucracies associated with the environment have evolved "from above," or at the top, especially under the Presidency of Muhammad Khatami. The article examines the evolution of the environmental movement in Iran in both forms, primarily by examining the record in one particularly important area, namely the environmental protection of the Caspian Sea.

With the evolution of Iran's post-revolutionary society, environmental activism has had a growing impact on the country's environment and the political, cultural, and intellectual arenas. The concept of "environmental protection" (*hefz-e mohit-e zist*) has become a popular terminology that evokes dynamic images of groups within the population committed to citizens' participation in protecting their environment, notwithstanding the litany of environmental problems affecting the health and well-being of nature, animals, and communities inside Iran. During the past two decades, several dozen environmental groups and organizations have surfaced at both national and local levels increasingly networking not only among themselves but also with other similar groups in the region and beyond.

Reflecting a larger trend in the evolution of Iran's "civil society," these environmental groups or associations have developed partly in response to the widening scope of what is commonly described as Iran's "environmental crisis." Also, they have emerged in line with the ecological wisdom of the Islamist polity whose Constitution, Article 50, deems *hefz-e mohit-e zist* as a "public obligation" and forbids "all activities, economic or otherwise, which may cause irreversible damage to the environ-

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ment.”¹ Despite rapid growth, a broad grassroots environmental movement is still absent in Iran, and yet, there are strong indications that the ground work for such a movement has already been laid since the late 1990s, coinciding with the era of the presidency of Muhammad Khatami, a reformist cleric firmly committed to the norms of civil society.

Over the past several years, a second tier of environmental activists associated with the government and its various bureaucracies has emerged which parallels, and dovetails nicely, with the environmentalism “from below.” This fact alone refutes any simplistic juxtapositions between the state and civil society in post-revolutionary Iran. The constituency of environmentalism in Iran is diverse, including both official, semi-official, and independent activists. This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not it is more appropriate to speak of not one but at least two movements, since the struggle is waged principally at two fronts, i.e. grassroots level and the state, even though it is predominantly a movement of urban Iranians growing most rapidly among women, the youth, professionals, and people of middle and upper income levels.

In addition to environmentalism “from below” and environmentalism “from above” or “at the top,” there are other significant distinctions within Iran’s environmental movement, such as single-issue versus multi-focused agendas, the capital versus provincial groups and priorities, or the (various) Islamist versus secularist ideological predilections. This is not to mention the serious disagreements over what the movement is all about, its priorities, and its connection to political and societal change. Environmentalism “from below” has the potential of expanding beyond the bounds that Khatami had envisioned, and the evolution of “political environmentalism” is watched with caution by some government officials who view it as a cover for political and secular nationalism.

On the whole, however, this movement represents a progressive politics in contemporary Iran that is destined to play an important part in expanding the concepts of security (*amniyat*) and welfare (*refah*) beyond the preservation of the political order to include environmental security (*amniyat-e zis mohiti*) and environmental welfare (*refah-e zist mohiti*) against the hazards of pollution,² toxic chemicals, deforestation,³ biodiversity depletion, and threats to public health, (e.g. infectious disease).

So far, there has been no systematic study of the environmental movement in Iran, its development, the issues with which it concerns itself, its dynamics of gender

1. The text of the Constitution is available online at <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution.html> and other sites.

2. For a summary of the grave pollution problems in Iran, see “Iran: Environmental Issues,” *Iran’s Green Organization*, April 2000, available on the Internet: <http://www.iran-e-sabz.org/news/iranenv.html>.

3. There is an alarming trend of forest destruction in Iran and despite the environmentalists’ persistent effort of reviving the forests through tens of millions of trees planted each year, their efforts cannot keep pace with the trend of deforestation. See, for example, *Jangalhay-e Gilan dar marz-e naboodi* [“Forests of Gilan on the Verge of Destruction”], *Barzegar*, No. 761 (December 1997). Also see *National Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran for Caspian Environment Program* (UN Caspian Environment Programme, 1998).

and class, and its relationship to the broader political and socioeconomic processes. This article seeks to offer a sketch of this rapidly evolving movement by focusing on one particular aspect of environmental activism in Iran, that is, in relation to the Caspian Sea — nowadays a scene of rapidly mushrooming offshore drillings for oil and gas in light of the Sea's importance as a major depository of global energy resources. Environmental dialogue among the five Caspian littoral states — Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran — has already been on-going since the early 1990s, and this has had as its counterpart a growing network in the Caspian basin of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For the most part, the latter operate on the common terrain of environmental policy for the Caspian and, increasingly in the recent past, dialogue with the trans-national (oil) companies in the hope of achieving, with help by international organizations like the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and Global Environmental Facilities, a measure of balance between energy activities and the environment. But, before discussing this matter any further, a more specific consideration of the major impulses of Iran's environmental movement is in order.

THE IMPULSES OF IRAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

If numbers mean anything, the environmental activists in Iran rightly boast that roughly one out of ten non-government organizations (NGOs), numbering around 3000 as of this writing,⁴ are environmental, and that in less than a decade the quantity of specifically-environmental groups has grown from a few to over 250 involving thousands of activists; a word of caution however: the distinction between environmental and non-environmental NGOs in Iran is to some extent untenable since there are many NGOs and or government-affiliated organizations that, while not environment-focused, nonetheless deal with the environmental issues one way or another and, therefore, should be considered at the borderlines of the environmental movement.⁵ Pertinent examples are the energy-related associations, such as the Iranian Association for Energy Economics (IAEE) or the Institute for International Energy Studies (IIES), which address the energy-related environmental issues, such as changing consumer behavior on energy consumption, as one of their priorities.⁶ Another

4. On Iran's NGOs, see Catherine Squire (pseudo-name), "Countryfocus: Civil Society in Iran: Facing Rapid Change," *Nowavaran* (September 2001).

5. An increasing number of authors have pointed out that the concept of NGOs is somewhat problematic and needs to be refined. See, for example, Rema Hammami, "NGOS: The Professionalization of Politics," *Race and Class*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1995).

6. See, for example, *Panzhoosheshi dar asarate-e tasmimat dar ghavayed-e zis mohiti bar bazar-e jahaniy-e mayeaat-e hidrocarbon va taghaza baray-e naftva gaz-e Iran* ["A Survey of Impacts of Decisions in the Environmental Conventions on the International Market of Hydrocarbon Fuels and Demand for Iran's Oil and Gas"], *Gozareh*, Report published by the Institute For International Energy Studies (IIES), 2000. Iran is already party to several environmental conventions, such as the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species, Desertification Convention, Environmental Modification Convention, Climate Change Convention, Convention on Biological Diversity, and Ozone Layer Protection Convention.

relevant example is the Iranian National Center for Oceanography, whose flagship journal *Oceanography (Oghiyanoos Shenasi)* features regular articles on various marine environmental issues facing Iran.⁷

Another impelling force deals with the role and place of the nation's universities and academic centers in the environmental movement, notwithstanding the growing trend of "environmental studies" in Iran as reflected in the quarterly Journal of Environmental Studies (*Majaleh-e motaleaat-e mohit-e zist*), published by the Graduate Faculty of Environment at Tehran University (formerly the Institute of Environmental Studies). While a state institution, Tehran University and its Environment Program, employing more than 45 (mostly foreign-educated) faculty and offering dozens of courses in all aspects of environmental management, engineering, design, and so on, undoubtedly plays a crucial role, along with the smaller similar programs at other universities, in cultivating Iran's nascent culture of environmentalism as well as in providing critical research on various environmental issues — research on air pollutants in Tehran and the provinces, environmental impact assessments, hazardous waste management, waste water treatment, zoning and designing of national parks, land use planning projects, suitable landscape designs, river engineering, and noise pollution control, to mention a few. Hence, any study of Iran's environmental movement must pay close attention to the dynamic interrelationship between the educational "apparatuses of the state" and the various intellectual and practical dimensions of this movement. To be sure, environmentalism in Iran is not "politics beyond the state,"⁸ but rather *incorporates* the state as one of its central components.

In tracing the history of Iran's environmental movement, what surfaces is an interplay of local, regional, and global influences resurrecting the old debate of "internal" versus "external" causal factors. This debate is particularly relevant in the analysis of Iran's so-called "green" groups directly or indirectly influenced by the globalized environmental phenomenon; these include the Green Party of Iran (*hezb-e sabz-e Iran*); the Young Green Group (*gorouh-e sabz-e javan*); the Ever Green (*Hamisheh sabz*), the Nature Front (*Jebh-e Tabiaat*); True Green Message (*Rastinpayam-e Sabz*); Green Wave Front (*Jebh-e sabz*); Wildlife and Nature Conservancy Foundation of Iran (*Bonyad-e hefz-e tabiaat va hayvanat-e vahshee*); Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution (*Anjoman-e zanan zed-e aloodegy-e mohit-e zist*).

A survey of these groups conducted by the author indicates a plurality of perspectives and divergent environmental priorities, although it is fair to say that in general they share the common denominator of conceiving of themselves as agents of social change. But, to give an example, whereas a cluster of green activists are apo-

7. See, for example, P. Eghtesadi-Araghi, G. Riazi, M.R. Sheikholeslami, A. Mohebi, O. Ronaiee-Saidat, and M.R. Shokri, "Biomakers: Biochemical Tools of Marine and Environmental Impact Assessment," *Oghiyanoos Shenasi*, Vols. 4-5 (Autumn/Winter 1999).

8. See, P. Wapper, "Politics Beyond the state: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 47 (1995).

litical and give primacy to environmental education, others are more politically-oriented and emphasize the link between environmental, human rights, democracy, women, crisis management, and peace issues.⁹

A fundamental difference exists, however, between the green activists who view themselves as independent, self-reliant, and, in some cases, even as dissidents framing their activities as a form of political protest, and those who have adopted a collaborationist strategy and view their role as environmental policy-brokers. The latter includes various government officials-turned-environmentalists by virtue of their experiences in various national organizations, bureaucracies, and academic centers involved in some capacity with the environmental issues. In fact, there appears to be a growing revolving door between the environmentalist groups and these organizations, most notably the following: Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Organization of Management and Budget, Iranian Fisheries Research Organization, Geological Survey of Iran, Department of Environment, the Petroleum Ministry and its research organization, National Cartographic Center, Oceanic and Atmospheric Science Center, Islamic Republic Meteorological Organization, Ports and Shipping Organization, Soil Conservation and Watershed Management Research Center, and Water Research Center. Sharing personnel between the (mainstream) environmental NGOs and the (quasi) government organizations (often as consultants) thus constitutes a key feature of Iran's environmental movement, one advantage of which, beside providing a source of income for the former's "volunteers," is a reciprocal relationship covering exchange of expert knowledge and co-ordination of activities.

Concerning the latter, a good example is with respect to the role of environmental NGOs in bridging the gap between the Islamic government and the wealthy expatriate community via the issues of environmentalism and the related subject of sustainable development in Iran. This has led to joint action plans by, among others, the Foreign Ministry's Center for the Iranian Expatriate Affairs and the Iran NGOs Initiative, aimed at encouraging the involvement of expatriate Iranians in the environmental projects. This is a relatively recent development and according to Mr. Ebrahimi, the director of Iran NGOs Initiative, a "preliminary process of confidence building" between the government and the expatriate community is needed. An important catalyst in this process, according to Mr. Ebrahimi, is a "more expanded and efficient use of information technology" in order to "increase the flow of information and communication."¹⁰

Indeed, the Iranian environmentalists completely converge when it comes to the issue of "capacity building" through Internet "connectivity" even though some admit

9. In an interview with the author in August 2002, one activist of the Green Party stated, "the government tolerates us in practice as long as we appear limited to benign environmental issues." When asked what they think of the biggest difference between the government's environmentalism and their "societal" environmentalism, one of the activists responded that it was age, since most of the people in her movement were in their twenties whereas people in the government's agencies were "middle aged or older."

10. Personal communication to the author.

that this comes with a price, namely elitism since the majority of the population still has limited access to the Internet and there is a huge divide between Tehran and the provinces in terms of Internet access. Still, some environmental activists such as Farokh Mostofi, the director of Wildlife and Nature Conservancy Foundation, scoff at the notion of elitism and emphasize the internet's long-term role in closing the gap between Tehran and the provinces by creating "environmental internet communities." The creation and evolution of such "virtual communities" is, according to Mr. Mostofi, an important prerequisite for animal protection by generating support across borders for, among other things, environmental laws; the latter is one of the key priorities of many environmental NGOs in today's Iran. Here, an increasing number of Iranian women are involved as central players.¹¹

ISLAMIC ECOFEMINISM

The growing women's dimension of Iran's environmental movement is based partly on a synthesis of Islam, feminism, and environmentalism, following the conviction that (a) *Qur'an* and Islamic legal traditions (*shari'a*) place a significant role on the protection of the environment,¹² (b) Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is dynamic and evolutionary (*pouya*) and mandate a unique mixture of traditional laws and customs with modern norms and values, and (c) the re-interpretive process will yield a feminist interpretation of the Islamist environmental priorities and prerogatives. Thus accordingly, the Islamist notion of "practicing good and prohibiting misdeed" (*amr b'il ma'ruf va nahy-e az munkar*), when viewed from the prism of ecofeminism, results in radically different interpretation of the government's priorities; it leads, for example, to government regulation of toxic industries, particularly those in close proximity to (poor) communities, the most vulnerable members of which are the women, usually mothers who bear the brunt of children's illness due to toxic pollution, particularly of sources of drinking water.

According to Fereshteh Rownaghi, an environmental activist in Tehran, the "high vulnerability of women to environmental problems" is a major reason for their involvement in environmental activism, the other reason being a "channel for participation."¹³ This, and the fact that a number of Iranian "official females" are leading spokespeople for Iran's environmental movement, have made it perfectly legitimate to speak of the "ecofeminization" of the Islamic Republic of Iran, albeit with the

11. A clue to the recent nature of the women's active involvement in the environmental movement, this issue is hardly mentioned in the scholarly writings on Iran during the early and mid-1990s. Case in point is Valentine Moghadam, "Women's NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa: Constraints, Opportunities, and priorities," in Dawn Chatty and A. Rabo, eds., *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

12. For a discussion of Shiism and ecology see Afrasiabi, "Islam, Shiism, and Ecoeschatology," in Richard Foltz, ed., *Islam and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

13. Personal communication with the author.

caveat that we are still at the incipient stages of a long and protracted process wrought with potential setbacks and backlashes — the relative newness of this phenomenon leads us to believe that a balance sheet on the strengths and weaknesses, failures or successes, of the country's environmental movement is at this stage premature.

The project or vision of Islamic ecofeminism in a system that lurches between traditionalist and (post) modern interpretations of Islam cannot, however, be expected to proceed without muddling through creative tensions at practical, intellectual, and theological levels. So far, this has been primarily a project of educated middle class Iranian women without much participation by the poor and working class women, who are typically more apt to prioritize economic over environmental issues. But that typically does not mean all the time, as was vividly demonstrated in a 2002 Iranian television broadcast of a spontaneous public gathering of women in South Tehran denouncing the poor quality and shortage of their drinking water. The pollution of Iranian water sources is often attributed to industrial waste and sewage, and relevant officials have given highly cynical projections of the scope of this problem in the coming years.¹⁴

In addressing this and other similar environmental problems, for example, with respect to the pollution of air and soil, a number of Iranian feminists have turned into pioneers in environmental law-making. Prominent among these are the “green academics” at Tehran University's Environmental Program, such as Victoria Jamali, the founder of two NGOs, Iranian Society of Environmental Law and Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution, who advocate the implementation of western-style environmental laws.¹⁵ The environmental agendas of Jamali and others like her have found strong support in the leadership of the Department of Environment, currently headed by the Vice President, Masoomeh Ebtekar, a former militant Islamist whose program now prioritizes the maintaining of biodiversity¹⁶ and cooperation with the environmental NGOs.¹⁷

14. See “Official: 20 Percent of Water Sources Are Contaminated,” *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA), 11/18/02, and Richard C. Foltz, “Iran's Water Crisis: Cultural, Political and Ethical Dimensions,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2002).

15. See Bern Johnson, “Emerging Environmental Movement in Iran,” *Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide* (Summer 2001).

16. See “Interim Report on Biodiversity Enabling Activities,” *Department of Environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 2000. The report provides details on the Department's “National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan,” such as the “stocktaking and identification of bio-resources in Iran,” holding workshops, e.g., on biodiversity laws, publishing and translating books, internet capacity building, and public awareness programs.

17. Masoomeh Ebtekar, *En jee ohay-e zanan bva gahrzedayee: tejrobeh-e Iran* [“Women's NGOs and Poverty Alleviation: The Iranian Experience”] *Farzaneh*, Vol. 4, No.9 (Spring 1998). This recalls Habermas's insight that the renewal of tradition is “ever more strongly dependent on individuals' readiness for critique and capacity for innovation.” Jurgen Habermas, “Reply,” in Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza, eds., *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). For a critique of Habermasian theology, see Afrasiabi, “Communicative Theory and Theology: A Reconsideration,” *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (January 1998).

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT

Initially established by the former regime in 1971, the Department of Environment in recent years has achieved a new level of importance and prominence commensurate with rising national concern for the plethora of environmental issues, such as massive air pollution in the capital city of Tehran, gripping the population. The Department of Environment's functionaries include scientists, engineers, physicians, social scientists, lawyers, economists and journalists working in various fields of environmental protection. The main functions of the Department of Environment are: environmental monitoring of the air, water, and soil in Iran;¹⁸ devising short and long-term environmental programs and priorities; promulgating regulations; public education to promote environmental values; organizing civic activities to protect and improve the environment; preparing environment impact assessments of various economic and industrial projects; training of environmental experts; organization of an environmental monitoring laboratory; preparing environmental legislation (e.g., on public transportation and the use of unleaded gasoline); the preservation, along with other relevant organizations, of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries; exploring renewable energy sources; organizing workshops and conferences; databank on pollution; and publishing the scientific quarterly, *The Environment (Mohit-e Zist)*.

In tandem with the Third Five Year Development Plan (2000-2005) which encourages the formation of NGOs,¹⁹ the Department of Environment has prioritized its NGO ties, particularly in the fight against pollution in Tehran and other main cities, echoing the demand of environmental activists for the removal of (nearly one million) old cars from Tehran's streets and highways and expanding the underground system. However, neither of these priorities seems likely in the near future in light of the government's budgetary constraints.

Under the banner of biodiversity conservation, a lion's share of the Department of Environment's budget and energy has been devoted to the preservation of national parks (11 sites), wildlife refuges (25 sites), biosphere reserves (9 sites), protected areas (47 sites),²⁰ national nature monuments (5 sites), not to mention the country's

18. The Department of Environment conducts its monitoring of pollution in the Persian Gulf through a research ship. See, "Iran Facing Environmental Crisis, Warns Vice President," *Tehran Times*, May 28, 2000. A related organization in this region is the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) headquartered in Kuwait. ROPME's priority issues coincide with the Department of Environment's priorities in the Persian Gulf and this calls for closer cooperation between the two organizations particularly in the realm of updating data on pollutants. As a case in point, in 2000, the DOE shut down the Ramsar Grand Hotel on the southern coast of the Caspian for noncompliance with environmental measures. *Hamshahri*, December 4, 2000.

19. See, Afrasiabi, "Iran's Third Five Year Plan: Could It Be the Last?" *Middle East Executive Report* (Summer 1999). This Plan's neo-liberal emphasis on privatization through deregulation has had contradictory effects with respect to the environmental objectives, and the absence of data on the pollution by the privatized industries in the recent past makes it difficult to assess the latest Plan as "environmental friendly" or its opposite.

20. Protected areas are best described as quasi-national parks which support significant wild-
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vast wetlands and rangelands and 37 major river basins. The Department has also made contingency plans for the unforeseen circumstances – earthquakes, floods, broken dams, etc. – which can skew the best designed environmental strategies.

Protection of the coastal ecosystem, where many endangered species live, forms another priority area for this and other state agencies. In the case of the Caspian Sea, however, the government's environmental policies and initiatives are increasingly entangled in the web of multilateral diplomacy among the five littoral states, principally over the thorny issue of the Caspian Sea's legal status or regime. This, in turn, has raised the concern of some environmental activists who are weary of any "encroachment" or "NGO paternalism" or "instrumentalization" by the government, preferring to maintain a "healthy though not too close" relationship with the environmental officials and other officials of the state.²¹

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN GOVERNMENT-ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS' RELATIONS

Notwithstanding both the range and seriousness of the environmental issues and problems as well as the complexities of Iran's somewhat two-tiered environmental movement, it is hardly surprising that certain tensions and even frictions between the government of the Islamic Republic and Iran's environmental activists have begun to emerge. According to one activist, "We welcome the government's support, especially financial and technical support and we have yet to see a genuine horizontal relationship with generous funding that has no stipulations. What we do not want, on the other hand, is losing our independence and our image in Iran and outside Iran by entering into a close relationship with the government, and thus appear as a conduit for its foreign policy."²²

One of the common complaints of the environmental activists is that so far the government has provided merely token financial and material support, and has favored the pro-government environmental NGOs over the more independent ones. Another criticism is that an environmental *glasnost* is still missing in the area of information-sharing, partly because the government's ministries "jealously guard" their data, and also because the vast para-statal organizations and foundations and their industrial conglomerates rarely heed the government's call to provide systematic data

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life, but do not justify the intensity of management of a fully-fledged national park. These areas present an especially thorny problem today because there is intense lobbying for the right to exploit their resources.

21. This information is based on the author's telephone interview with two green activists in Isfahan in October 2002. One of these activists accused the government's environmentalists of using their positions for personal advancement and said that in her opinion "these people are neither competent nor really care about the environment."

22. The environmental activist quoted here is a professor at Tehran University's Graduate Environmental Program who consented to being interviewed with the author in July 2002 on the condition of remaining anonymous.

on their activities. Charges of financial impropriety, such as against a former mayor of Tehran, Mr. Karbaschi who is credited with “greening” the capital, have also weakened the image of government environmentalists.

There is also a growing sense among the especially young cadre of the environmental movement, that the government’s environmentalists have not produced tangible results. Furthermore, since the election of local councils in 2000, the expectation of greater local participation in environmental politics has yet to be met, and there is a sense that Khatami’s popular mandate has been weakened during his second term in office due to his inability to make good on many of his promises, particularly on the economic and employment fronts.

Patronage and ineffective environmental legislation without adequate implementation, such as the 1996 Clean Air Act, are also factors on the negative lists of environmental activists who view these shortcomings as symptomatic of the limits of “reform from the top.” Another criticism is inadequate environmental laws, notwithstanding the calls for an oil pollution act and a marine mammal protection act. The Department of Environment has promulgated a set of standards that limit the lead content of fuels. However, Iran’s environmentalists have called for more stringent standards to control exhaust pollutants from cars, buses, and trucks, and the installation of equipment on vehicles to control emissions. While placing great emphasis on emission reductions, a number of Tehran’s environmental activists have also pressed on the “criminal liability issue” and enforcement by calling for mandatory fines and even imprisonment for pollutants. The actual “nuts and bolts” of environmental compliance in Iran are clearly in dire need of being fine-tuned and strengthened. The Department of Environment has yet to publish an environmental compliance handbook.²³

One of the pitfalls of environmentalism “from the top” is the multiplicity of actors and intergovernmental competition and, at times, even disputes among the multiple government agencies. The “environmental domain” is, in practice, shared by several agencies often vying with each other over “turf,” “attention,” and “resources.” To give an example, the provincial heads of the Department of Environment have to contend with several other agencies, such as the Forestry Organization, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Industry, and/or the local Departments of Natural Resources, not to mention the local “interest groups,” with respect to their biodiversity action plan. These officials are often frustrated by their multi-agenda mandate and the excessive intermeshing of environmental and other bureaucracies.

For some environmental activists, however, the main problem is the “government’s disease of centralization” and its continued inability to localize, among other things, the management and control of water.²⁴ The author agrees that local

23. Such criticisms of the government’s environmental policies and priorities were raised at a “marine biomes workshop” at Bandar ‘Abbas, Iran, May 13-14, 1999, held by the Department of Environment, Iran’s Green Wave Front, Global Environmental Facilities, and UNDP.

24. According to one activist: “On paper, the government is responsible to make sure that discharges into water will not upset the water quality standard (requirements). Yet, while we all

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authorities should have more environmental controls. These controls may come in the form of city or town bylaws, for example with respect to wetland protection, industrial zoning and permits, and reflect the same concern as any other ordinance or law, particularly the public-health type ordinances. Should this happen, the national and local permits may conflict, especially in those parts of the country which are declared by the government as free trade zones or “special economic zones;” the latter includes Sirjan where the government has committed to providing “legal licenses for production, alteration, transportation, separation, packing the foreign materials and goods for re-exportation (without any limitation).”²⁵ Unsurprisingly, Sirjan has attracted a number of chemical and motor oil and hydraulic oil producing companies which enjoy lack of environmental scrutiny in spite of potential harm to the local communities. The Caspian Sea port city of Anzali has also been considered a “special economic zone” under the authority of Iran’s Ports and Shipping Organization, which publicly boasts about Anzali’s sewage treatment plant.²⁶ Yet, there is little doubt that with increased economic activity, the scope of environmental problems, such as air pollution from ships, will increase in the future in Anzali and other port cities and islands deemed as free trade zones or “special economic zones.”²⁷

On the other hand, a clue to the complexity of issues in Iran, some environmental activists complain of the obverse problem of the lack of a sound nexus between the government and activists in the provinces as a result of excessive localism whereby, in the City of Shiraz for instance, powerful clergy and their followers “run everything and everyone,” to paraphrase a frustrated environmentalist in the Fars province. This individual, who studied medicine at Shiraz University, stated that his group was treated as *persona non grata* by city officials after the group criticized the officials for failing to inspect “contaminated meat” smuggled to the city from the Persian Gulf in early Fall, 2002.²⁸

As noted, environmental activism in general, since it often relates to questions of identity and territoriality, is emotionally charged, and Iran is no exception.²⁹ Environmental criticism of the government is to some extent warranted and understandable. Environmentalism “from below” has a tendency, however, to be overly critical,

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know that the harm produced by the introduction of any pollutant to water is dependent on the resulting concentration of that material in the water, the government has yet to conduct such an analysis.” Interview with the authors.

25. See “Sirjan Special Economic Zone,” available on the internet: <http://www.sirjan.net/advantge.htm>. In addition to Sirjan, ports of Shahid Rajaie, Khorramshahr, Anzali and Amirabad are considered special economic zones.

26. See: www.salamiran.org/Economy/FreeZones/IFTIZ.html.

27. See, for example, Keyvan Pazouki, “Air Pollution From Ship: Impact on the Communities and Concerned Regulation,” paper presented at the 5th International Conference on Coasts, Ports, and Marine Structures, Ramsar, Iran, October 17, 2002.

28. Personal communication with the author.

29. A relevant work is J.M. Stewart, ed., *The Soviet Environment: Problems, Policies and Politics* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1992).

exclusive and negative, as well as prone to the contradictory tendency of undermining the integrity of its own values through using them as rationalization for other purposes, such as a (class-based) politics of protest. Indeed, one of the biggest assets of environmental activism in Iran — namely, its relative facility to access and mobilize the public — is at the same time one of its major vulnerabilities and weaknesses, not the least because it has the potential of creating excess demands on the government more than it is capable of absorbing, such as the demand for government transparency on such matters as pollution by Iran's oil industries and other industries.³⁰

This points, in turn, at the institutional constraints and limits of environmental activism in Iran, as well as its transgressive nature, i.e., its tendency to transgress the limits of the possible in Iran's theocratic republic. Yet, a rational politics of environmentalism is what is needed in Iran, one that remains perpetually cognizant of the subversive element and keeps it under control — that is, seeks to push back the limits without collapsing them.

On the other hand, the “legitimation deficits” of the government notwithstanding, to borrow a term from Habermas,³¹ its prestige and legitimacy-enhancing environmentalism runs the side-effect of creating undue expectations in the public for immediate solutions to the endemic pollution and other symptoms of the environmental crisis, which can in turn add to and further augment those deficits. Besides, even mild unmet expectations, such as the government's failure to deliver on its promise of substantial reduction of Tehran's pollution, a failure vividly illustrated by the growing use of face masks by Tehran's residents, can have similar impacts on the government's legitimacy.

However, it is in the area of the Caspian Sea where the political legitimacy of both the government, and indeed the entire environmental movement, is most on the line. Here, too often diplomacy is pitted against ecology. The international dimension of environmental protection is nowhere more sensitive or problematic than in the Caspian region, where the concerns and constraints facing Iran are compounded and complicated by the interests of four ex-Soviet states with different norms and priorities.

30. One of the directors of the biodiversity action plan at the Department of Environment confided with the authors about the tensions between his department and the Oil Ministry which “has kept our hands empty” by failing to provide vital data on the environmental impact of the country's energy activities. This individual concurred with the environmentalists in their criticisms of lack of transparency, adding that their only problem was to overlook the important distinctions between the different branches of the government and to “beat us all with the same stick.” He further stated that he had lost a few key assistants who had quit their jobs because of bureaucratic red tape and “losing their motives.”

31. See Jurgen Habermas, *Toward A Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). Contrary to Habermas, who has a romanticized view of the “new social movements” encompassing feminist and environmental movements, our study of Iran's environmentalism leads us to a less sanguine conclusion, in view of the performative contradictions and legitimation problems *sui generis* of the movement alluded to in this analysis.

THE CASPIAN SEA AS A FOCUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

The majority of Iran's environmental groups and organizations are based in Tehran and tend to work inland. A few of these, however, have active branches in the coastal provinces in the south and, more so, the north along Iran's 740 kilometer Caspian coastline, notwithstanding the Caspian Sea's proximity to the capital. This is due to the government's Caspian priority, and the unique opportunities to network with the regional NGOs and the international organizations — in the race to save the fragile ecosystem of the Caspian Sea the global hub to a unique variety of flora and fauna including 90% of the world's stock of sturgeon.³² Iran's Green Party, for instance, spearheaded a popular campaign in 1999 to clean the beaches. Moreover, in the provinces adjacent to the Caspian Sea, a number of environmental groups, such as the Green Defence Society of Mazandaran, have surfaced. They interact with the local branches of the Department of Environment and other relevant agencies like the Fishery Organization of Mazandaran and Gilan.

The Caspian's environmental problems have galvanized Iran's scientists as well, who have formed the Iranian Society of Environmentalists (IRSEN) and work closely with the Caspian Environment Program (CEP). CEP is a joint initiative of the five littoral states, UN Environment Program, UN Development Program, the World Bank, and the European Union. The CEP "is focused on understanding the Caspian's water level fluctuations, abating and preventing new types of pollution, recovering and rehabilitating degraded elements of the environment, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the region's environmental quality and resources."³³ The CEP has established ten Caspian Regional Thematic Centers (CRTC) which are responsible for developing and implementing activities in their respective thematic areas. Iran has been assigned the inter-coastal zone management/emergency response and pollution monitoring.

The CEP's thematic center for "Effective Regional Assessment of Contamination Level" is also in Iran. This center's main focus is the creation of a Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) of the Caspian, mainly through an "At Sea Training Program" aimed at a limited regional contamination assessment, monitoring and assessment of background pollution of the Caspian. The environmental specialists from Iran and the other four littoral states have participated in this training program wherein sampling is made at "hot spots" and intermediate locations along the central and southern part of the Caspian Sea, in order to define contamination levels, as well as to conduct water temperature/salinity measurement, etc.³⁴ According to Nasser Mehradadi, the head of the Department of Environment in the province of Mazandaran,

32. See Abbas Adl-Tabatabai, "Preliminary Needs For A Public Environmental Monitoring Program," available on the internet: <http://www.caspianstudies.com/article/Public%20Monitoring.htm>. Also, Michael Glantz, "Global Environmental Problems in the Caspian Region," available on the Internet: <http://www.caspianstudies.com/article/global%20environment%0peoblem.htm>.

33. Amy Evans and Michelle Kinman, "Caspian Environment Programme: Thematic Areas to Define Activities," *Give & Take*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 2001), p. 39.

34. See "Second Stage of Sea Training Program," *Azernews*, Nov. 19, 2002.

“the flow of industrial waste as well as slick from oil exploration and extraction” in the Caspian Sea “has taken up a dangerous turn.”³⁵

Indeed, most if not all the environmental activists in Iran and elsewhere emphasize the potential and/or actual threat from poorly managed energy, i.e., oil and gas, development in the Caspian Sea.³⁶ Thus, Iran has objected to a proposed plan for a Turkmenistan-Turkey pipeline along the Caspian Sea floor because of its potential environmental hazard. The problem, however, is that whereas the Iranian activists by and large favor environmental restrictions, Iran is not principally linked to energy projects in the Caspian Sea, at least not yet.³⁷ This, i.e., the relative disparity of interests with other littoral states, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan which are heavily dependent on their Caspian offshore extractions, implies that environmental activism of Iranian origin in the Caspian Sea region is somewhat problematic, insofar as it conceivably might create tension over these neighbors’ access to the Sea’s energy resources. The Iranian press has been particularly alarmist about the role of Azerbaijan in polluting the Caspian Sea’s water — with some justification as the rapid growth in Azeri oil production and transportation in the Caspian Sea has brought about serious environmental consequences; for instance, “around 45 million tons of wastewater and 300,000 tons of harmful gases are released in the environment” in the Apsheron Peninsula where Baku is located.”³⁸

On the other hand, the rise in the sea level of the Caspian, a total of about 2/12 meters since 1978, has seriously compounded the environmental problems.³⁹ It has led to the inundation of several petroleum deposits and the abandonment of several oil fields and pipelines, the forced resettlement of scores of villages and destruction of hundreds of acres of agricultural land, as well as substantial damage to the coastal roads in Iran, thus thinning the lines between the environmental and welfare problems.⁴⁰ Principally caused by global climate change in the opinion of most scien-

35. Quoted by Iran News Agency, August 9, 2002.

36. Rory Cox and Doug Norlen, “The Great Ecological Game: Will Caspian Sea Oil Lead to Environmental Disaster?,” The Pacific Environmental Resources Center (January 1999). Also, Arne Jensen, Hans Jacob Vedsted, and Jesper Doerge, “Oil Contamination of the Caspian Sea,” paper presented at the 5th International Conference on Coasts, Ports, and Marine Structures, Ramsar, Iran, October 16, 2002.

37. For more on this see *Sources of Oil and Gas in the Caspian Sea* (Tehran: International Institute of Caspian Studies, 2001).

38. Islam Mustafaev, “Independent Environmental Monitoring Along the Baku-Supsa Pipeline,” *Give & Take* (Winter 2001), p. 14.

39. Other Caspian environmental problems include the decline of sturgeon, due to overfishing, poaching, and pollution of spawning grounds in rivers like the Volga, which provides about 80% of the Caspian’s annual inflow. See, “Caspian Environment: Decline in Commercial Fish Stock,” *Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis*, available on the Internet: http://www.grida.no/caspian/priority_issues/fish_stock. In Iran, rapid urbanization and industrialization of coastal areas has not been followed by adequate construction of sanitary and solid waste infrastructure, leading to pollution of rivers in these areas. The Zarjab River that enters the Anzali lagoon and carries the pollution of numerous factories and towns (including the city of Rasht) is a conspicuous example. It is estimated that there are 500 and 473 large industrial units in Mazandaran and Gilan respectively. *Caspian Regional Coastal Profile* (UN Caspian Environment Programme, 2001.)

40. Rachel Neville, “Environmental Protection in the Caspian Sea: Policy Constraints and Prescriptions,”

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tists,⁴¹ the Caspian's radical changes in sea level has caused the erosion of the coastline at a rate of 10 meters a year and flooding of land at a rate of 1.2 kilometers a year. There is increasing soil salinization and hydromorphization of vegetation.⁴² It is becoming harder to ensure safe drinking water supplies, and the danger of infections such as cholera is increasing. More and more rich spawning grounds of valuable fish species are being lost from the Volga Delta and from the deltas of other rivers flowing into the Caspian Sea; catches of such fish are declining, as are the Sea's mammals: whereas at the beginning of the past century, 1.2 million seals inhabited the Caspian, today there are about 400,000. Iran's environmental NGOs have recently begun working with the "SOS! Save Our Seals, Save Our Seals" project initiated by Russian and Kazakhstan NGOs. Iran's Wildlife and Nature Conservancy Foundation, on the other hand, has focused its attention on the preservation of well over a million migratory birds in the Caspian Sea, including ducks, geese, swans, coots, pelicans, cranes, herons, egrets, and gulls.⁴³ In December 1998, several environmental NGOs participated at an international conference in Ramsar on protecting marine habitat in the Caspian Sea.

Perhaps more than any other problem, the Caspian's fluctuating sea level and its impacts have jolted the riparian states into recognizing their shared responsibility with respect to the Sea's unique ecosystem, and the fact that only through trans-boundary cooperation can the Caspian's environmental problems be effectively addressed. In 1993 and 1994, this concern brought the heads of hydrometeorological and meteorological services of all Caspian states together, and they drew up, with assistance by the World Meteorological Organization and various UN agencies, an Integrated Program on Hydrometeorology and Monitoring of Environment in the Caspian Sea Region (CAPCAS). The principal objectives of CAPCAS are to set up a regional system for collection and exchange of information on air and water conditions of the Caspian Sea, and to carry out a comprehensive investigation of changes in level of the Caspian Sea, as well as on the environmental pollution. CAPCAS has also adopted 12 sub-projects which call for, among other things, the introduction of modern technology for collection of data, including satellite means, and the "mobilization of national resources."⁴⁴

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available on the internet: <http://www.caspianstudies.com/article/Rachel%0Nevil.htm>. See also, C. W. Blandy, "The Caspian: A Sea of Troubles," Surrey Conflict Studies Research Center (August 1997); "The Caspian: A Catastrophe in the Making, the Destruction of a Unique Ecosystem," Surrey Conflict Studies Research Center (September 1997).

41. See M.H. Glantz and I.S. Zonn, eds., *Scientific, Environmental and Political Issues in the Circum-Caspian Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

42. H. Zomorodian and M.R. Sheikholeslami, "Distribution of Temperature, Salinity and Density in the Caspian Sea Deep Water Based on the Investigation in Late Summers of 1995 and 1996," *Oghyanoos Shenasi*, No. 1 (Autumn 1998).

43. See Farrokh Mostofi, "Iran's Miankaleh Peninsula a Haven for Wildlife," *Give and Take* (Winter 2001).

44. See, "The Caspian Sea – "The Pearl" of the Planet," available on the Internet: <http://www.irimet.net/irimo/khazar.htm>.

In addition, Iran has recently looked to the regional organization, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), for a role in protecting the Caspian's environment.⁴⁵ ECO's environmental directorate has pursued an agenda of collecting energy-environment databases, identifying suitable techniques for treating energy and environment concerns, and linking with other regional and international organizations, such as the UN Environment Program.

A number of Iran's environmental activists, such as Behzad Haghghian of the Green Front, favor entering into dialogue and cooperation with the trans-national corporation (TNCs) engaged in the various energy projects in the Caspian Sea.⁴⁶ In the opinion of Mr. Ebrahimi, of Iran's NGO Initiative, the Caspian environmental NGOs need to develop a set of "general principles" in their relations with the TNCs.⁴⁷ These principles can be extrapolated from the relevant international agreements and standards, such as the European Union's Framework for Oversight and Auditing, or the Charter for Business Groups for Sustainable Development of the International Chamber of Commerce. Yet, an important prerequisite for a sound NGO-TNC interaction is lacking, namely, adequate networking and coordination among the Caspian environmental activists themselves. A host of political, legal, communication, and policy problems⁴⁸ has hampered the environmental NGOs' interrelationship until this day.

Thus, for example, the Iranian environmentalists have unanimously supported a draft convention on the environmental protection of the Caspian Sea, which includes "polluter pays" principles and resurrects a now defunct all-Caspian organization, i.e., the Caspian Sea Council, to monitor the implementation of its provisions. Yet, Turkmenistan has been reluctant to sign this multilateral agreement, following the argument that any such multilateral accord must be postponed until the legal status of the Caspian Sea has been settled. Consequently, Turkmenistan's mostly newly-formed environmental NGOs have shied away from disputing the official stance and thus bringing the wrath of government upon themselves.⁴⁹ In Fall 2002, a number of Iranian environmentalists traveled to Turkmenistan and other littoral states to shore up support for the proposed environmental convention.⁵⁰ According to one, his mis-

45. For more information on the ECO, see Kaveh Afrasiabi and Yadollah Pour Jallali, "The Economic Cooperation Organization: Regionalization In A Competitive Context," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Fall 2001).

46. For more on the subject, see Sergei Solyanik, "NGOS and Transnational Corporations," available on: http://www.greensalvation.org/English/Publish_eng/Herald_2000/2000_09.htm.

47. Interview with the author, October 16, 2002. The issues on the agenda of Iran's environmentalists with respect to the TNCs are: information-sharing, particularly on marine damages, details of production-sharing agreements, emergency response plans, and participation in environment impact assessment studies.

48. Compared with the Russian and Kazakhstan environmentalists, who have focused on the issue of radioactive wastes, Iranian environmentalists active in the Caspian basin have not made this a priority since it is an "out of area" issue in the words of an official in the Department of Environment interviewed by author on October 6, 2002.

49. Turkmenistan's main environmental NGOs are: Turkmenistan Society For the Protection of the Environment, Umit, Social Laboratory of Geo-Ecological Design, South Caspian Hospital.

50. This information is based on the author's interviews with various environmental activists in Iran in September and October, 2002.

sion was “regional environmental diplomacy.” This activist, who preferred to remain anonymous, was not the least concerned about an “image problem” of appearing as an arm of Iranian diplomacy. Scoffing at the label, he stated that since there was a convergence of views among the other four littoral states and “the whole environmental community,” it was absurd to denigrate their initiatives by attributing them to “some government hands.” Rather, “it is a question of regional lobbying by the environmentalists who need to cross the border and be heard by the leaders of the neighboring regime.”⁵¹

Finally, a prevailing view among Iran’s environmental activists is that in view of the increasing globalization of the Caspian Sea’s economic and political affairs, Iran must resort more and more to international law, international environmental laws in particular.⁵² Another powerful idea is that the Caspian Sea is best viewed as a “regional common” to which resources all the riparian states should have access and who should work collectively to protect its ecosystem. The idea of “regional common” is closely linked with the “condominium” approach of Iran to the question of the Caspian’s legal status. According to this approach, the Caspian Sea was owned jointly by Iran and the Soviet Union until the latter’s break-up in 1991 and, ideally, should continue to be so even now that the number of Caspian littoral states has jumped to five.

Irrespective of how the current quagmire on the legal regime of the Caspian Sea is finally resolved, and there are strong drifts toward the division of the Sea into territorial waters, the fate of the Caspian Sea’s ecosystem, as well as the millions of humans inhabiting around the Sea, can only be shouldered collectively. To repeat a truism, pollution recognizes no national borders and the mere anticipation of any future damage, such as oil slicks from cargo ships, provides enough impetus to set aside (geo) political and ethnic differences and to work collectively, by the governments and environmental activists in all the five states, toward environmental crisis-management. For the moment, the idea of collective environmental crisis-management is, however, one that has slowly begun to catch the imagination of environmental activists in Iran and its Caspian neighbors. The time to instill its wisdom into actual practice has definitely arrived.

51. Interview, October 15, 2002. For more information on the legal/environmental diplomacy in the Caspian Sea region, see Abbas Maleki and K. Afrasiabi, “Iran’s Foreign Policy After 11 September,” *Brown’s Journal of World Affairs*, No. 1, 2003.

52. Related works are: Patricia Birnie and Alan Boyle, *International Law and the Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); John Carroll, *International Environmental Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Institutions For Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Kaveh Afrasiabi, “*Darya-ye Khazar, Hoghoogh-e Beynomelali va Siyasat-e Iran*” [“The Caspian Sea, International Law, and Iranian Policy,” *Rahbord: Journal of the Center for Strategic Research*, No. 27 (Spring 2003).