L'état, c'est moi: the paradox of sultanism and the question of 'regime change' in modern Iran

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Introduction

An obsession with 'regime change' and the persistent vulnerability of the state increasingly dominates political discourse in contemporary Iran. This political culture of paranoia is rooted in historical experience but is powerfully reinforced by an ideology of confrontation, which stubbornly refuses to learn the lessons of that history. This article argues that fears of regime change born of a legitimate concern of foreign subversion have been defined out of meaningful purpose into a tool for the suppression of dissent. This net has been cast so wide as to preclude any meaningful intellectual or political engagement and the application of the phrase within the Iranian context largely resides in the political eye of the beholder. Indeed by the current standards of the Iranian authorities, the most profound political change to affect Iran in the last century—the Constitutional Revolution of 1906—could be defined as an act of 'regime change' inspired by ideas from abroad. It should come as no surprise that some within the hard-line leadership are in fact seeking to diminish this particular revolution in these very terms, drawing fateful parallels with reform movements closer to their own time. Similarly, the accusation of 'foreign interference', extending now to the mere exchange of ideas, would rule out many of the transformational events of Iranian history (the eponymous 'Crossroads of Civilization'), not least the establishment of an Islamic *Republic*.

This paranoia reached new heights in the aftermath of the disputed presidential elections of 2009, when in a series of show trials reminiscent of the former Soviet Union, intellectuals and their foreign muses were indicted with sedition. Key among these was the long-dead German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), whose ideas on 'patrimonialism' and 'sultanism' had informed the leading reformist party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front.[1] In drawing attention to Weber's ideas, the authorities had, somewhat paradoxically, drawn attention to their own insecurities and their failure to learn the lessons of Iranian history, not least the Islamic

[1] For the full indictment against the Islamic Iran Participation Front, see 'Matn kamel keifar khast aleye ozaye mosharekat va mojahedin enqelab' [The complete transcript of the indictment against the members of the Participation Front and the Islamic *mujahideen*], www.ayandenews.com/fa/pages/?cid=11404, accessed 29 Aug. 2009. For this and criticism of other western intellectuals, see Charles Kurzman, 'Reading Weber in Tehran', *Chronicle Review*, 1 Nov. 2009.

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Revolution itself: that a state acutely identified with the personality of the leader is inherently more vulnerable to political upheaval than one that is constitutionally and institutionally bound.

Weber and 'regime change'

The ideas of Max Weber have long informed historical analyses of Iranian development but it was only in the 1990s that his ideas on the nature of authority explicitly informed discourse within Iran's post-revolutionary political elite. The use of Weber's concept of 'patrimonialism' caused consternation among the authorities, who eventually argued in 2009 that in being cited by and informing the constitution of the Participation Front, his ideas had provided not only a template for understanding the nature of the state, but also a blueprint for understanding its development, its political 'evolution' and its propensity for change.[2] The notion of gradual and managed political change was of course central to the entire reformist project, and indeed 'reform' as opposed to 'revolution' had originally been tentatively endorsed by the authorities as a legitimate political discourse. In fact, the mantra of political change was arguably central to the modern idea of 'revolution' and more pertinently to the Islamic Revolution itself, which had defined itself so vehemently against what was seen as the inherent conservatism of the Pahlavi monarchy in particular and the system of monarchy in general.[3] But as reformists from President Khatami (1997–2005) downwards soon realized, there were strict limits as to how much 'reform' the authorities would tolerate, and by 2009 the idea of reform had been effectively redefined and delegitimized.[4] Reformists became fifth columnists and reform itself became a byword not for some form of peaceful 'continuous revolution' but for something altogether more unpleasant, underpinned as it was by a thoroughly western ideological frame of reference. In short, Weber and his co-conspirators were being charged with providing the ideological justification for 'regime change' from within.[5]

[2] Saeed Hajarian, one of the intellectual architects of the reform movement, was keen on Weber and his application to Iranian society: see his 'Sakhtar hakemeyat dar Iran, vijegeehaye nezam-e siyasi va aseebshenasi-ye dowlat' [The structure of government in Iran, the particularities of the political order and the pathologies of the state], an interview with the newspaper *Asr-e Ma* published in no. 108, 27 Aban 1377/18 Nov. 1998; repr. in *Jomhuriyat: Afsoon-zadai az ghodrat* [Republicanism: the de-mystification of power] (Tehran: Tarh-e no, 1379/2000), pp. 689–703. As Kurzman notes, he was forced at his trial in 2009 publicly to denounce Weber. For a wholly simplistic reading of Weber's ideas on authority, see the views of Hossein Allakaram in 'Manazereh hossein allakaram va sadegh zibakalam dar daneshgah-ye olum pezeshki Qazvin' [Debate between Hossein Allakaram and Sadeq Zibakalam in the medical school of Qazvin], Iranian Students News Agency, 14 June 2011.

[3] See Mehdi Karrubi's comments, quoted by the IRNA news agency, 11 July 1998, in BBC SWB, ME/3278 MED/11, 14 July 1998.

[4] For further details of this process, see Ali M. Ansari, *Crisis of authority: Iran's 2009 presidential election* (London: Chatham House, 2010), pp. 22–46.

[5] The most detailed exposition of this paranoia was written by P. Fazlinejad, *Chevalier-ye Nato farhangi: yek nama az coup d'etat makhmali* [The cultural knights of NATO: one example of the velvet coup] (Tehran: Keyhan Research Institute, 1386/2008). Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the newspaper *Keyhan*, which oversees a series on 'secret histories' to which this book belongs, is one of the leading advocates of this conspiratorial world-view. See his comments in *Asgharowladi: Amin rahbari hastam…* [Asghaowladi: I am a trustee of the Leadership…], 15 Bahman 1391/3 Feb 2013, www.entekhab.ir/fa/node/94481, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

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The term itself, with its obvious allusion to the Iraq War, is clearly politically charged, and is broadly applied by the Iranian authorities to encompass a wide variety of internal dissent and criticism, that by extension has (at the very least) been inspired from abroad. In practice, any form of political activism that seeks change, constitutional or otherwise, is regularly categorized as beyond the pale, crossing 'red lines' that are rarely stated but simply meant to be understood. Such broadness and deliberate ambiguity—it is useful to maintain a healthy anxiety among your opponents—do little to help us understand a term whose extensive use hampers any meaningful definition.[6] This is especially so when one seeks to define 'soft regime change' inspired by ideas ostensibly originating abroad. Even within Iran itself the use of the term has befuddled and confused proponents, and while there is a general acceptance among advocates of the idea that it represents a form of 'war', this has been further distinguished into 'hard–soft war', where there is a clear leadership and plan and the more pernicious 'soft–soft war', which is structural and leaderless[7] (a process that western social science would probably define as 'globalization'). A similarly loose and contentious definition is provided by the assertion that a change in behaviour is synonymous with regime change, an assertion that would effectively void any sort of international engagement. [8] Equally, if we adopt a more orthodox understanding and take 'regime change' to mean the subverting of the established political order with the help of foreign powers (military or otherwise), then reformists might just as well argue that the Islamic *Republic* has been effectively emasculated, its republican institutions undermined by an autocratic elite identified with the person of the Supreme Leader, and supported by Russia.[9]

Be that as it may, at the heart of this debate lie questions about the nature of the Iranian state and its ability to respond effectively to the diverse challenges it may face, not all of which may be political in origin. For over two centuries, Iranian statesmen and politicians have repeatedly sought to construct a stable state founded on institutions that can be both responsive and adaptable to the challenges posed by the complexities of the modern age, identified with, but by no means limited to, the challenges posed by growing western power. For them, the stability and authority of the state depended on the depersonalization of power and its limitation through a constitutional and legal settlement, a settlement that would be

[6] For one attempt to define this contested term, see V. Gel'man, 'Out of the frying pan, into the fire? Post-Soviet regime changes in comparative perspective', *International Political Science Review* 29: 2, 2008, pp. 157–80. On the difficulties of defining 'regime', see S. Lawson, 'Conceptual issues in the comparative study of regime change and democratization', *Comparative Politics* 25: 2, 1993, pp. 184–8. For a broader discussion of policy developments, see R. S. Litwak, 'Regime change 2.0', *Wilson Quarterly* 32: 4, 2008, pp. 22–7.

[7] Alternative terms include a 'velvet' or 'soft' revolution, coup and/or regime change. The terms are often used interchangeably and it is not uncommon to see accusers contradicting themselves; see e.g. 'Ronamaee az tarahan dadgah koodetaye makhmalin dar seema' [A present from the planners of the velvet coup court in Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting], Ayandenews.com, 27 Aug. 2009, www.ayandenews.com/fa/pages/?cid=11515, accessed 29 Aug. 2009. For the term 'soft–soft war' see M. Dakhanchi, *Jomhuri-e eslami aleye Jomhuri-ye eslami* [Islamic Republic against Islamic Republic], 10 Mordad 1390 /1 Aug. 2011, www.teribon.ir.

[8] On the distinction see R. Litwak, *Regime change: US strategy through the prism of 911* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007), p. 121.

[9] For an example of popular anti-Russian sentiment, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOTTitrUMTI, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

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legitimized through recognition both at home and abroad. Only in this manner could the 'paradox of sultanism' and the vulnerabilities to 'regime change'—from within or without—be coherently and meaningfully resisted.[10]

'Sultanism' and its critics

'Sultanism', the term Weber used to characterize a patrimonial government in which power had been personalized to an extreme degree, remains a useful conceptual reference for an understanding of the Iranian state before the development of modern institutions. A good practical example was perhaps well articulated by the Iranian king Fath Ali Shah at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a conversation with the British envoy, Sir John Malcolm. Perplexed by the limited power enjoyed by his contemporary King George III, the Iranian shah opined:

> 'Your king is, I see, only the first magistrate of the country … Such a condition of power … has permanence but it has no enjoyment: mine is enjoyment. There you see Suleiman Khan Kajir [*sic*], and several other of the first chiefs of the kingdom—I can cut all their heads off: can I not?' said he, addressing them. 'Assuredly, Point of Adoration of the World, if it be your pleasure.' 'That is real power', said the king; 'but then it has no permanence.'[11]

There were, of course, limitations to this power, and in the absence of the necessary tools of government the writ of the Iranian kings in the nineteenth century rarely extended beyond the capital. But their political authority was, theoretically at least, absolute, and if there were limitations on what they could do, there were arguably fewer restrictions on their capacity to obstruct.[12] Moreover, as Malcolm concluded, it was not so much the existence or otherwise of power, but the sheer uncertainty and inherent instability that such types of government exuded: 'In countries like Persia [*sic*] all government is personal; institutions and establishments rise and fall with the caprice of a sovereign … they prosper and die with their founder; and while their basis is so unstable, and their duration so uncertain, they cannot be permanently efficient or useful.'[13] Attempts in the nineteenth century to reinforce royal authority and add further layers of power foundered largely through the incompetence and indolence of the monarchs themselves, and it soon became apparent to the intellectual and political classes that a state dependent on the whims of an individual would remain politically vulnerable, not only because of the absence of a stable, systematized order, but because the system itself encouraged division, fractiousness, ambiguity and dissimulation.

[10] On 'sultanism', see H. E. Chehabi and J. Linz, 'A theory of sultanism: a type of nondemocratic rule', in H. E. Chehabi and J. Linz, eds, *Sultanistic regimes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 13–21. For Weber's concept, see *Economy and society* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 231–2; also vol. 2, pp. 822–3.

[11] J. Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia* (London: John Murray, 1849; facsimile reprint, Elibron Classics, 2005), p. 215.

[12] On these limitations, see the excellent article by E. Abrahamian, 'Oriental despotism: the case of Qajar Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5: 1, 1974, pp. 3–31.

[13] Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, p. 233.

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The constitutional solution

For many, the answer lay in the development of a state bound by a constitution and governed by the rule of law. These 'constitutionalists' adopted and to some extent adapted their ideas from the politics of Western Europe and (to a lesser extent) the United States. Their preference remained for a constitutionally delimited monarchy on the British model, in large part because this appeared more practical and certainly less revolutionary than an overthrow of the monarchical system altogether. In the language of contemporary Iranian politics, these constitutionalists, and the revolution they spawned in 1906, would be considered both seditionists and agents of regime change; and indeed it should come as little surprise that hard-line conservatives in post-1979 Iran have consistently sought to denigrate the achievement of the constitutionalists and to argue that the movement, which had in their view originally been intended to see the establishment of religious rule, had instead been hijacked by the British to emerge as a constitutional movement wholly alien to Iranian traditions.[14] That these political ideas, involving the establishment of a legislature and limitations on the power of the monarch, were new to Iranian political discourse cannot be doubted. But neither can the reality that the Constitutional Revolution had a profound impact on the political landscape of modern Iran and a legacy that lasts to this day. Indeed, the notion of an Islamic Republic, with its parliament, constitution and separation of powers, cannot have been conceived outside the innovative frame of reference introduced by the constitutionalists: revolutionaries who were (in the crucial initial period at least) supported by the British and vigorously opposed by the Russians.[15]

Much more damning from a political point of view was the reality that the Constitutional Revolution had failed to achieve its objectives and that, far from stabilizing and strengthening the state, the constitutionalists had made it more vulnerable to aggrandizement, both at home and from abroad. Indeed, unable to provide coherent government, Iran became victim to the depredations of war as the Great Powers ignored its neutrality and treated it as a battleground during the First World War. It was this particularly bitter experience that convinced politicians and intellectuals that constitutionalism was meaningless in the absence of a coherent state. Such was the *personalized* nature of Iranian government, so fixated had it become on the individual, that there were neither institutions to delimit nor the tools to do the delimiting. Everything had to be built from the ground up; but the catalyst for this change had to come from the top. Consequently, and with no hint of irony, the constitutionalists went in search of their own 'Enlightened Despot' who could construct a new state and by extension make himself

[14] For an excellent overview, see K. S. Aghaie, 'Islamist historiography in post-revolutionary Iran', in Touraj Atabaki, ed., *Iran in the 20th century: historiography and political culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 244–7. See also the interview with Ali Motahhari, Fars News Agency, 24 Mordad 1390/11 Aug. 2011, www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=9005240708, accessed 18 Aug. 2011.

[15] For the violent repression by the Russians, see W. M. Shuster, *The strangling of Persia: story of the European diplomacy and oriental intrigue that resulted in the denationalization of twelve million Mohammedans* (Washington DC: Mage, 1987; first publ. 1912), pp. 219–20.

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politically irrelevant.[16] The idea was to centralize authority, if not necessarily power; to construct and impose a 'modern' state, and then delimit it through a coherent and legal articulation of rights. It is worth bearing in mind that this highly ambitious political project, which had been initiated in the Constitutional Revolution, and in large part implemented during the rise and rule of Reza Shah from 1921 to 1941,[17] had been supported by a wide range of Iranian intellectuals including senior members of the *ulema*, and while there were disagreements with respect to details and clear objections to the growing autocracy of the shah, the fact remains that the political structures developed in this period have proved remarkably durable. Even Reza Shah's staunchest critics in the Islamic Republic have resisted the temptation to tinker with their political inheritance, in large part because they have found it extremely useful.[18]

At the same time, if a state was built, the institutionalization of rights, and consequently the delimitation of that state, remained neglected. Nothing exemplifies the limitations of the constitutional project more than the continued existence of a parliament (the Majlis) that successive rulers have retained but largely ignored. Indeed, the battle between a parliament that demanded to be heard and a ruler who was determined to control it could be said to be at the heart of the conflict that has shaped Iranian politics for the better part of a century. It most obviously came to the fore in the struggle between the Nationalist Prime Minister, Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq, and Reza Shah's son and successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, during the oil nationalization crisis of 1951–3. Although Mosaddeq is largely remembered for his determination to wrest control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) from the British, constitutionalism remained at the core of his political beliefs and ambitions.[19] The nationalization of AIOC was a means to an altogether more familiar end: fulfilling the ambitions of the constitutionalists of 1906, the political generation to which the septuagenarian Mosaddeq belonged.

Mosaddeq's fall in a coup orchestrated by the British and American governments has effectively disguised this crucial aspect of his curriculum vitae and made him an iconic figure for self-styled 'anti-imperialists', most obviously in the Islamic Republic. But, like all appropriations, that of the conservative establishment of contemporary Iran has been highly selective. Frequently cited and regularly exploited by Iranian politicians as the archetypal example of regime change by foreign powers, by their own increasingly malleable definitions, an alternative reading might be to describe the coup as an example of 'regime retrenchment'. It was, after all, Mosaddeq and his supporters who were keen on fulfilling the promise of the Constitutional Revolution and restricting the powers of an autocratic

[16] See H. Taqizadeh, *Kaveh*, 4 Sept. 1921, p.3. On the belief that Reza Shah would be a one-man dynasty, see M. Rezun, 'Reza Shah's court minister, Teymourtache', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 12: 2, 1980, p. 127.

[17] He reigned from 1925, but many significant reforms were ratified before his formal accession to the throne.

[18] The figure of Reza Shah has proved, perhaps unsurprisingly, popular among conservative groups in Iran: see H. Kaviani, *Ramz piroozi yek rais jomhur* [The secrets of the victory of a president] (Tehran: Zekr, 1378/1999), pp. 131–2.

[19] See esp. H. Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the struggle for power in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), p. x.

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sovereign.[20] Indeed, for all the political value Mosaddeq's overthrow holds for Iranian politicians inveighing against the perfidious West, he remains far more popular with Iranian reformers seeking change than conservatives, who can barely whip up the enthusiasm to name a street after him, and at one stage even went so far as to abolish the holiday commemorating the date of oil nationalization.[21] Perhaps the real long-term tragedy has been that the events have been generally presented as ones in which Iranians had no hand at all, stripping the people of any responsibility for, and power over, their own affairs and engendering a political culture of paranoia that has reached its apotheosis in contemporary Iran.[22]

With respect to the man who had been effectively reinstated in power, Mohammad Reza Shah, it soon became apparent to observers that he was not quite the political visionary they had hoped for, and within a decade moves were afoot to encourage substantive reform in order to stabilize and strengthen the state, in the face of what was regarded as the very real prospect of 'regime change' inspired from the north: in other words, the fear of a communist revolution. Mohammad Reza Shah initially proved most reluctant to take on the mantle of political change, but in time he was induced to take the lead and pursue a large-scale social and economic reform of the country, if for no other reason than to stabilize a throne that was widely regarded as dependent on foreign sponsorship. However, far from cementing the constitutional structure of the country, 'The White Revolution', as it was branded at its formal launch by referendum in 1963, simply ensured the centralization of power in the person of the shah: the stability and security of an individual who grew to regard himself as the personification of that state. From a theoretical perspective, the shah promoted a concept of divinely mandated monarchy, which he sought to situate within the esoteric traditions of Iran, arguing that the king was limited by ethics rather than law.[23] This was a considerable shift away from the constitutional project inherited by his father, and it appeared to share some characteristics with the pre-constitutional monarchy, now considerably empowered not only by the apparatus of the state at his disposal but also, crucially, by the easy availability of steadily growing oil revenues.

Rather than completing the constitutional project and stabilizing the state through a managed programme of institution-building and democratization, which would have paralleled the tremendous expansion of education that took place under his rule, the shah, encouraged by a dramatic increase in oil revenues, decided to lead the country in a different political direction, arguing both that the

[20] For this reason, Kermit Roosevelt's account of his covert activities in Tehran is called *Counter-coup: the struggle for control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). In stark contrast, the official CIA account of the coup by Donald Wilber, leaked in 2000, was published in 2006 under the title, *Regime change in Iran* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books), p. 111.

[21] See the Persian newspaper *Arya,* 28 Mordad 1378/19 Aug. 1999, p. 3.

[22] For the ideological legacy see Ervand Abrahamian, *The coup: 1953, the CIA and the roots of modern US–Iranian relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), pp. 205–26.

[23] See M. Honarmand, *Avalin va akharin hokumat jahani ya hokomat atefi* [The first and last world government or empathetic government] (Tehran: Ofogh, 1972), vol. 4, p. 127. For the Shah's own views on the nature of Iranian monarchy, see M. R. Pahlavi, *Be Sooye Tamadun-e Bozorg* [Towards the great civilization] (Tehran: 1978). For a reading of the concept of sultanism in the entire Pahlavi period, see Homa Katouzian's essay in Chehabi and Linz, eds, *Sultanistic regimes*, pp. 182–205.

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people were not ready for democracy and that myriad, often opaque 'challenges' required 'firm' government. These justifications would re-emerge in a somewhat more Islamic guise later, but for our purposes the significant parallel was this: that the shah convinced himself that the centralization of power and the state, and their identification in his person, would strengthen the state. In this he was proved emphatically wrong. Politically isolated and surrounded by sycophants, deeply superstitious (and given to fatalism) and fearful of his own army, not only was *he* overthrown, but so was his monarchical project; a project that he had increasingly made in his own image and which proved all the more ephemeral in the public consciousness as a consequence. When his father had been deposed in 1941, although he was forced into exile the 'regime' (i.e. the state) he helped establish survived, in large part because it had not been identified with his person. Under his son and successor, because the state had become identified with the person of the shah, when the shah departed, so ostensibly did the state.

Revolutionaries and reformists: lessons learnt and unlearnt

Of course, the reality was more nuanced. For all the ambitious rhetoric of the revolutionaries in 1979, it is remarkable how much of the Pahlavi state, taken as a whole, survived the wreckage of the fall, reflecting perhaps how much had actually preceded Mohammad Reza Shah. What was discarded were in the main the superficial paraphernalia of Mohammad Reza Shah's vanity, most obviously the imperial calendar, imposed by somewhat haughty decree in 1976. In stark contrast, many of the institutions of the constitutional era, including those imposed during Reza Shah's rule, survived the vicissitudes of Islamization. Indeed, for all their antagonism to the state they had inherited, the creators of the Islamic Republic found its basic structures too attractive to discard—all the more so because, for all the internal preoccupations of the revolutionaries, their ambitions and anxieties were global. But it remains one of the great ironies of a revolution determined to 'eject' foreign influence that an event intended to pre-empt it—the seizure of the American embassy on 4 November 1979—effectively ensured that the revolution would come to be defined by its relations with the United States.

Indeed, if there was one lesson many revolutionaries learnt from the trauma of the Iran–Iraq War that was to dominate most of the next decade, it was that 'isolation' and 'rejection of foreign influence' were something of a chimera in the modern world. Ideas were more difficult than armies to resist, and 'independence' of action, while useful as a rhetorical flourish, in practice required careful and repeated negotiation. In fact, many concluded what their constitutional forebears had long recognized: that the question was not whether you engaged but how you engaged—and this in turn depended on the stability, strength and durability of the state. Ayatollah Khomeini's charisma, and the continuing war, may have helped cement an otherwise fragile revolutionary polity, but the revolutionaries had learnt the lesson that the shah's fall was due to his political, not economic, weakness. The majesty of monarchy had proved ephemeral when it mattered, especially when the

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office-holder proved so indecisive. The elite of the Islamic Republic would not make the same mistake; they would build institutions that would last. Indeed, with respect to state-building, as the title Islamic *Republic* suggested, the revolutionaries were less resistant to western ideas—and in many ways far keener to be seen as part, if not the leader, of an international movement—than official pronouncements implied. The challenge, as before, was not to confuse the centralization of authority with the centralization of power, and in either case not to allow it to become personalized. The personalization of power weakened the state; and in order to prove this, the ideologues of reform began to scour the (largely western) intellectual landscape to provide a conceptual justification for their views. Thus it was in the Iran of the 1990s, confronted with what many described as the 'bureaucratic centralism' and hubris of the Rafsanjani presidency, that Max Weber found himself recruited into Iranian political discourse.[24]

The target of the critics' ire was of course Rafsanjani, not Khamenei, who was considered at this stage largely irrelevant to the broader political situation. Rafsanjani was widely criticized for not having fulfilled the political promise of the revolution and built a state that moved emphatically away from the patrimonial and highly personal politics of the shah. On the contrary, Rafsanjani, in arguing that economic regeneration was the basis for political change—the time for which never seemed to arrive—appeared to be emulating the shah in his modus operandi, especially in the construction of a state bureaucracy that was largely loyal to his person, and in his tactical alliances and compromises with the conservative hardliners. The liberal agenda he espoused appeared largely cosmetic, especially when starkly contrasted with the corruption that was widely assumed to be rife among his family and associates. Indeed, Rafsanjani's apparent obliviousness to the financial incongruities of his family's situation reinforced the popular image of Rafsanjani as the new 'shah'.[25] And, as if to prove the vulnerabilities of 'patrimonial' government, Rafsanjani's administration soon came under relentless attack from both 'republicans' (the left) and 'Islamic authoritarians' (the right), alike determined to unstitch the political settlement he had crafted. Both sides were unhappy, but for different reasons and with different aims in mind. Those on the right felt that Rafsanjani had compromised too far on the religious and revolutionary nature of the state and sought the retrenchment and reinforcement of authoritarianism around the Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Khamenei). Those on the left, on the other hand, felt that Rafsanjani had done too little to develop and institutionalize the republican aspects of the state. The former wanted to further personalize the state around the figure of Khamenei; the latter sought its depersonalization altogether on a rigorously 'rational–legal' model as idealized by Weber. It is not difficult to draw historical parallels to these more recent developments, not least because each side tended to argue its case with reference to the past in order to circumvent the political sensitivities of the present. The 'constitutionalists', Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah were all conscripted

[24] BBC SWB, ME/2513 MED/8, 19 Jan. 1996; IRNA news agency, 17 Jan. 1996.

[25] For an account of this period, see A. M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and democracy: the politics of managing change* (London: Chatham House, 2006), pp. 52–110.

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into service to prove one point or another about the nature of the state and the direction of travel.

It was much to Rafsanjani's credit that his political swansong, as his second and final term of office came to an end, was to throw his substantial political resources behind his former minister of culture, Mohammad Khatami, the new-found champion of the left whose political philosophy put him squarely, and perhaps more profoundly than many appreciated, within the constitutionalist camp. For Khatami, the promise of the Islamic Revolution was to fulfil the aspiration of the constitutionalists—an aspiration that had originally failed because of a fatal neglect of the Islamic inheritance of the country and its political culture. This having been rectified in the revolution, Khatami set out to make the system work, *not* to change it. Indeed, his determination to work within the parameters of the constitution, despite the pressures from his allies and supporters to push for a more radical and transformative political agenda, belie the subsequent characterization of the reform movement under Khatami's direction and leadership as some sinister conspiracy to change the regime. Far from it: the original objective had been to fulfil the promise of the constitution of the Islamic Republic—*the* fundamental act of political change that had redirected the country away from autocracy and towards constitutionalism.

If Khatami's critics from his own side are to be believed, the President was far too resistant to the notion of constitutional change of any sort, despite the fact, as many argued, that the constitution had already been changed and amended in favour of the right over the previous decade and was much less of a sacred text than the authoritarians might care to admit. Radicalization had only gathered momentum when it rapidly became apparent that the hard-line right would resort to all sorts of extra-legal measures of dubious constitutional provenance to prevent any proper application of the constitution. Indeed, on the contentious issues of freedom of the press and the abolition of torture, constitutional statute supported the reformist position.[26] Hardliners argued that reformists were seeking to change, incrementally, Ayatollah Khomeini's inheritance and in particular the dominant position of the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) in the constitution; reformists countered that it was the conservatives who were seeking to change the constitution and that not only was the guardianship subject to—and not above—the constitution (and by extension the rule of law), but Khomeini's *charismatic authority* was exceptional and could not be replicated. Indeed, expanding on their Weberian thesis, reformists argued that Khomeini's charisma was necessary to deconstruct the patrimonial autocracy of the shah and prepare the ground for (an Islamic) democracy.[27] Little wonder that hardliners grew to dislike the ideas of Max Weber.

Khatami in time found himself assailed from both left and right for either wanting or not wanting to change the system—a political bifurcation that was

[26] On these particular debates, see Ansari, *Iran, Islam and democracy*, pp. 211–12, 241–2.

[27] This argument was articulated by Akbar Ganji in an article for the newspaper *Khordad*, 3 Esfand 1377/22 Feb. 1999; see A. Ganji, *Tarik-khaneh-ye ashbah* [The cellar of phantoms] (Tehran: Tar-e No, 1378/1999), p. 68. See also Weber, *Economy and society*, vol. 1, pp. 245–6, vol. 2, pp. 1127–8. Weber makes it clear that this route is an arduous one that in his time only the United States had achieved in totality. The comparison with the United States was, of course, one made by the reformists and abhorred by the hardliners.

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not at all helpful to the cause of reform. He was further criticized by overseas observers whose expectations that he would be the 'Gorbachev of Iran' proved ambitious, inaccurate and damaging to his political prospects at home. Khatami may be best described as the Dubček of Iran; someone who wanted to make a system and constitution, seemingly riddled with contradictions, work better, by ironing out the excesses of the revolution and revolutionary ideology. His opponents sought to reconcile these contradictions, not by thinking through the system and procedures of governance, but by empowering an individual with such power and authority that he could push through any political log-jams that might arise. This solution, of course, simply reinvented the traditional problem for the modern age.

Khamenei and the re-personalization of power

Ayatollah Khamenei's appointment had come at a difficult time for the Islamic Republic, following on from the end of the Iran–Iraq War and then, relatively soon thereafter, the death of the founding father of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, known in Iran as 'Imam Khomeini' or simply as 'Agha'. Both these titles were in their own ways distinctive and elevated Khomeini onto a different political plane from either his predecessors or contemporaries. The title 'Imam' may be relatively common in the Sunni world, but in Shi'a, with its reverence for the Imams, descended from the first Shi'i Imam, Ali, the title carried considerably more weight, and the implications were clear. Khomeini was more than an Ayatollah, or even a Grand Ayatollah; he had achieved, or indeed simply was, something quite different. The term 'Agha' (in this sense, 'sir') was in much more general usage, but was likewise a term of respect (and to some extent endearment) towards someone who might be considered a father-figure. In Weberian terms he betrayed both charismatic and patrimonial characteristics, and while it was his charisma that was most often cited by adherents and observers alike, his modus operandi—that of a patrimonial ruler (a stern father-figure perhaps)—while less often referred to, was certainly noticed by those around him.[28] Indeed, Khomeini's charisma, which has been much embellished since his passing, was in reality an eclectic affair, and something that, as he soon appreciated, had to be cultivated through circumstance as much as sheer will. If he was to be master of events, he had to ensure that his political position was both necessary and protected from the vagaries of chance. The perception of impotence was not a realistic option, certainly if his office was to last.[29]

The evidence points to Khomeini having to cultivate and build his authority, carefully calculating each response as events dictated. He clearly benefited from his position, certainly among his adherents, as the prime mover behind the overthrow of the shah, and subsequently from the series of domestic and international crises

[28] See Hasan Yusefi Eshkevari, quoted in M. A. Zakray, ed., *Conference-e Berlin: Khedmat ya khiyanat?* [The Conference of Berlin: service or treason?] (Tehran: Tar-e No, 1379/2000), p. 229. Weber, of course, makes clear that none of his ideal types of authority exist in isolation.

[29] See e.g. speech by Khomeini, 28 Feb. 1979, BBC SWB, ME/6056/A/7, 2 March 1979.

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that beset the fledgling Islamic Republic, but he also took care to maintain a fractious political environment that relied on him for adjudication. At the same time, for all the realities of power, Khomeini possessed sufficient gravitas and authority to take decisions that were often difficult and in many cases contradicted his earlier positions. The most quoted example of this was his decision in 1988 to accept the UN-sponsored ceasefire resolution bringing the traumatic war with Iraq to an end—this despite years of intransigence against any such concession short of total victory. Khomeini famously took his cup of poison and silenced criticism by pronouncing that the war was blameworthy, but no one was to blame. Since then, considerable ink has been spilt seeking to distance Khomeini from a war that appears to have been prolonged for reasons few Iranians have been able to understand.[30]

Perhaps Khomeini's greatest political influence lay in his legacy and the shadow he was to cast on Iranian politics, and not least on the position of his successor, lately nominated and somewhat abruptly elevated to the rank of 'Ayatollah', much to the consternation and barely disguised contempt of his peers. For the better part of the first decade after his appointment in 1989, Khamenei found himself marginal to the political stage, dominated as it was by the personality of Hashemi Rafsanjani. With a reputation as a 'sensitive' and highly literate man, Khamenei was generally regarded as right of centre, but not hardline—a characterization illustrated by his suggestion, as President, that Salman Rushdie might be forgiven if he apologized for his transgressions. He found himself swiftly rebuked by Khomeini, and this may have encouraged him to be much more circumspect in his comments, at least until he felt he could emerge from the shadow of his predecessor. In this process, he was encouraged by those who sought economic and political salvation by reinforcing the authority and executive power of the Supreme Leader, and over time deference and generous doses of sycophancy began to take their effect.

As time passed, Khamenei began to believe that his role went well beyond the duty to protect the political order (*nezam*) and the office of the guardianship of the jurist, which he had inherited and which supporters were arguing was a divine blessing.[31] Now he seemed to believe that his interests were at one not only with those of the nation and the revolution, but by extension with the progress and happiness of the faith itself.[32] Some have suggested that Khamenei's accumulation of power was simply an attempt to protect himself and his office from the continued attacks being launched by his critics, especially among reformists. But this is a tendentious and highly selective reading of the historical record. There is no evidence that his opponents were seeking to diminish the status of the

[30] In 2002, Rafsanjani argued that Khomeini had been against the war being extended to Iraq in 1982: see *Hayat-e No*, 4 Khordad 1381/25 May 2002, p. 2. Meanwhile, Rafsanjani himself, among others, has been the target of criticism in this regard; see A. Ganji, *Ali-jenab sorkhpoosh va ali-jenab khakestari: asib shenasi gozar beh dowlat democratic-e tose'ekar* [His red eminence and his grey eminence: the pathology of transition to the developmental democratic state] (Tehran: Tare- No, 1380/2001), p. 139. The article by Ganji was first published in a newspaper in 2000.

[31] See e.g. 'Janesheen vali-e faqih dar sepah: velayat-e faqih, nemat khodi baraye mardomn Iran ast' [The successor of to the representative of the *vali-e faqih* in the Revolutionary Guards: the *velayat-e faqih* is a divine blessing for the people of Iran], IRNA news agency, 12 Bahman 1391/31 Jan. 2013.

[32] Antonio Gramsci perhaps sums up this process of conflation best in *The modern prince and other writings* (New York: International Publishers, 2000), pp. 183–4.

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office, even if they were not always overly respectful to the person who occupied it. In the eyes of many, Khomeini's shoes would have been difficult to fill in any circumstance. Others argued that Khamenei was simply fulfilling the promise of Khomeini's notion of *absolute* guardianship. While a case could certainly be made, it was not uncontested; even one of the key religious figures who had drafted the constitution challenged such an interpretation.[33]

At a more fundamental level, the process was justified on the basis that it assisted with the stability of the state, an argument that would have been familiar to proponents of authoritarian rule everywhere, not least in Iran. Yet this latest Iranian manifestation is peculiar not only insofar as the lessons of recent Iranian history seem to be stubbornly ignored—among them the reasons for the fall of the shah—but also because in this case the pursuit of this particular case of *sultanism* has been on a level unprecedented since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The two Pahlavi monarchs enjoyed unrivalled power—in an Iranian context—through the development of the modern state and its associated apparatus; but if Mohammad Reza Shah enjoyed spiritual aspirations and considered himself in some manner divinely mandated, he was never able to completely discard his constitutional shackles and he certainly made no claims beyond that of inspiration and a sense of destiny. His father Reza Shah, in stark contrast, had no such conceit. If the preceding dynasty of the Qajars enjoyed an unprecedented level of personal authority, and were characterized as the 'Shadows of God' on earth, their ability to exercise their power beyond the immediate confines of the capital was increasingly restricted and subject to continuous negotiation. All these monarchs, to a greater or lesser extent, remained sensitive to how others—especially foreigners—might judge their behaviour. Ayatollah Khomeini was quick to lay that particular consideration to rest, and while he was undoubtedly keen to present a positive image to the Muslim world, this more often than not entailed 'not caring' about what others might think. Still, even Khomeini, as noted above, had to cultivate his power and was clearly restricted by events, not least the Iran–Iraq War, and the political and economic realities they imposed. His successor has been subject to no such restrictions, and in an effort to move beyond his inheritance has sought to define his role in a manner that sees him less as Khomeini's successor than as the fulfilment of his promise. In religious terms, and with implications that Shi'is would easily comprehend, Ali Khamenei has been increasingly identified as the 'Imam Ali' to Khomeini's 'Prophet Muhammad'.[34]

This has, of course, been a process that has taken time to unfold and reach fruition. It began in earnest during the Khatami presidency, the popularity

[33] See Ayatollah Montazeri's comments in A. Abdo, 'Rethinking the Islamic Republic: a conversation with Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri', *Middle East Journal* 55: 1, 2001, p. 15. Among the most rigorously scholarly critiques of the 'absolute' guardianship are the works of the cleric Mohsen Kadivar. For a more accessible account of his arguments, see M. Kadivar, *Bahaye Azadi: defa'at Mohsen Kadivar* [The price of freedom: the defence of Mohsen Kadivar] (Tehran: Ghazal, 1378/1999).

[34] The allusions were largely made by his supporters, though Khamenei did little to deny the association and some were bold enough to protest: see 'Letter of 27 university academics to the Leader: do not liken yourself to [Imam] Ali', Iranian news website http://www.Rahesabz.net, 16 Sept. 2009, BBC Mon Alert MEI MEPolka.

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of which had stung the hardliners into action, and arguably achieved its aims with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Buoyed up by extraordinary oil wealth, Ahmadinejad's presidency, vigorously co-opted, though it should be noted not initially supported, by Khamenei, initiated the systematic process of dismantling the 'constitutional' state nurtured over a century of political development and began repersonalizing the state ostensibly in the direction of the Supreme Leader. Money and power flowed in the direction of the Supreme Leader, his supporters and acolytes, and away from those deemed to be subversive or simply not part of the self-selected 'elect'. The former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, his wealth and his family, were obvious targets. Others such as Khatami and the former elite of the reformist movement were threatened, systematically repressed and humiliated. They soon found themselves relocated beyond the political pale. In governmental terms, systems of audit and accounting were incrementally removed, while the Majlis, whose powers of scrutiny had been gradually restricted, found itself effectively emasculated by the repeated and explicit intervention of the Supreme Leaders in its affairs.[35] Repeated attempts to hold Ahmadinejad to account were blocked by Khamenei's anxiety to keep his acolyte close to himself.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this development has not been the direction of travel, but the unusual degree of personalization that has taken place, enhanced as it has been by the religious nature of the office. Unlike his royal predecessors, Khamenei has laid claim to a religious authority far in excess of anything even Ayatollah Khomeini might have aspired to, and this has been reflected (as noted above) in his characterization as the 'Ali' of the age. This cultivation of 'charisma' was partly a response to the reality that Khamenei's theological credentials were considerably weaker than those of his predecessor. He had not completed the sort of studying required to attain the lofty heights he aspired to, so his supporters decided to short-circuit the process by arguing that he had access to esoteric knowledge. This divine connection, although much alluded to in previous years, became explicit in the crisis that convulsed the country following the highly controversial presidential elections of 2009. Any remaining fiction about the constitutional nature of the state was discarded when Iranians were duly informed that obedience to Khamenei, and by extension his anointed President, was the equivalent of obedience to God. So outrageous was the statement seen to be that newspapers were swift to edit and effectively censor the pronouncement (made by the ubiquitous Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi), lest it provoke rather than calm tensions.[36] This was subsequently made more explicit when the constitutionally

[35] *Ali Motahhari: Majlis beh shakheh-ye daftar rahbari tabdeel shode ast* [Ali Motahhari: the parliament has been transformed into a branch of the Leader's office], Radiofarda.com, 21 Tir 1390/12 July 2011, http://www.radiofarda.com/content/news/24262737.html, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

[36] 'Misbah-Yazdi: eta'at az rais jomhur, eta'at az khodast!' [Misbah Yazdi: obedience to the President is obedience to God], *Tabnak*, 13 Aug. 2009, http://www.tabnak. com/nbody.php?id=8792, accessed 13 Aug. 2009. Since then officials have competed to proclaim the unconditional nature of Khamenei's power; see, for example, *Amr Rahbar baraye ghove-ye ghazaye bartar az ghanoon ast* [The Leader's commands are higher than the law for the judiciary], *Digarban* website, 18 Bahman 1390/7 Feb. 2012, www.digarban.com/node/4807, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

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mandated powers of the Assembly of Experts—established to hold the Supreme Leader to account and, if needed, to replace him—were casually dismissed.[37]

Government became less of a process and more of a matter of opinion, and Khamenei's disdain for procedure has perhaps been best exemplified by the repeated assertion that he has issued a fatwa outlawing weapons of mass destruction. Traditional theological practice would require that some sort of methodological apparatus support any fatwa, and that, at the very least, it be written down. But there is no evidence of any such fatwa existing beyond various pronouncements, lending credence to the view that government in Iran has become government by decree. Khamenei has himself periodically shown some sensitivity to the charges of religious dictatorship, though his protestation that he was not 'Stalin' was probably a poor analogy.[38] His supporters have been somewhat less circumspect, as Misbah-Yazdi's pronouncements have made clear, and the belief akin to Caesaropapism that Khamenei 'personally' represents some sort of political apotheosis is widespread among his supporters.[39] Indeed, given his weak theological credentials, Khamenei's authority has always been defined in specifically political terms. As one of his key supporters, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami (not to be confused with the former president), recently pronounced, in Shi'i jurisprudence one name for *velayat-e faqih* is 'sultan'.[40] In a very real sense Khamenei has become the state.

Conclusion

The noted Iranian nationalist thinker Ahmad Kasravi, on hearing the complaints of his compatriots about the persistent interventions of foreign powers, countered that the solution lay with the Iranians themselves.[41] International relations, in all their forms, were a fact of life and what mattered was how Iran managed these. Weak states—characterized by the inherent instability wrought by personal rule—would always be vulnerable to international influence and intervention, as domestic insecurity became reflected in foreign affairs. Only by constructing a state founded on institutions and the rule of law could the vagaries and vulnerabilities of personalized government be avoided. These vulnerabilities were many and various, and in the absence of institutions simply prolonged uncertainty,

[37] *Janesheen namayandeh ayatollah Khamenei dar sepah: na mardom meetavanand vali faqih ra azal konand na Majlis khobregan* [The successor to Ayatollah Khamenei's representative in the Revolutionary Guards: neither the people nor the Assembly of Experts can remove the Guardian], 21 Aban 1388/13 Nov 2009, www.rahesabz.net/story/3913, accessed 13 Nov. 2009. It does not help that members of the Assembly frequently confirm the supremacy of the Leader: see *Ayatollah Namazi: Ekhteyarat vali-e faqih bish az ghanoon asasi ast, eteghad emam be velayat-e motlaghe* [Ayatollah Namazi: The rights of the Guardian are greater that the Constitution, the Imam's belief in the absolute guardianship], *Mehr* news agency, 18 Shahrivar 1390/9 Sept. 2011.

[38] *Ali Khamenei: Man Estalin nistam* [Ali Khamenei: I am not Stalin], *Digarban* website, 27 Shahrivar 1391/17 Sept. 2012, www.digarban.com/node/8959, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

[39] More recently Misbah-Yazdi has argued that it is the Leader, not the 'office', that is a blessing: *Misbah-Yazdi: agar ma ghadr-e nemat rahbari ra nadanim, khoda ma ra kefar khahad kard* [If we do not appreciate the blessing that is the Leader, God will designate us heretics], *Baztab* news, 27 Shahrivar 1391/17 Sept. 2012, http://baztab.net/fa/news/14599, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

[40] *Nazar Khatami dar mored-e velayati faqih* [Khatami's opinion on the subject of velayat-e faqih], *Digarban* website, http://arashnarimanzadeh.blogspot.se/2013/01/blog-post_6910.html, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

[41] See E. Abrahamian, 'Kasravi: the integrative nationalist of Iran', *Middle Eastern Studies* 9: 3, 1973, pp. 111–12.

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anxiety and paranoia. This was a fundamental lesson of history that Iranian statesmen would be wise to heed. A generation later, the second Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, failed to learn these lessons and paid the price, reflecting to the end of his days on the 'conspiracy' that had unseated him. Similarly, the Islamic Republic, in eschewing its republican inheritance, seems bound upon the same route albeit to a degree unprecedented in modern Iranian history.

The paradox that exists is twofold. On one level the maintenance and extension of Khamenei's power have rested on cultivating division among his political foes and friends alike. Continued fractiousness and instability are the hallmarks and central contradictions of patrimonial government, and sultanism is its extreme form. Khamenei seeks to adjudicate but must also maintain a delicate balance of distrust—a modus operandi that unsurprisingly seeps into foreign policy. Red lines are never clear and always shifting. This politics of distrust is deliberate, since group cohesion is dangerous and no pretender must feel secure enough to launch a challenge. This in turn encourages a politics of superstition and conspiracy, partly as a consequence of the complete lack of transparency—itself encouraged to enhance the esoteric and charismatic authority of the Leader, but also in part to overcome the other significant paradox, the continued vulnerability and growing dependence of the leader on his military and bureaucratic elites.[42] To assuage, contain and suppress these tendencies, the politics of distrust must be extended abroad with the construction of a broad, multilayered international conspiracy possessing an internal logic of its own. These obsessions with international conspiracies, in turn, blind the leadership to the realities of self-inflicted vulnerabilities, vulnerabilities that become exposed in times of political and economic crisis, leading in turn to a reinforcement of paranoia, a further centralization of power and a narrowing of the political base.[43]

Fearful for his position, Khamenei has methodically moved to centralize both power and authority in his person. Yet the central contradiction of the political system he operates is the institutionalization of instability. It would appear that Khamenei, having failed to learn the lessons of Mohammad Reza Shah, is doomed to repeat his mistakes. To paraphrase his more distant, if acute royal predecessor, he may enjoy real power, but he has no permanence. In obsessing about 'regime change' he has paradoxically reinforced a political culture that is more vulnerable from within than it will ever be from without. The paradox of sultanism is that the real threat of regime change comes from within the regime itself.[44]

[42] Recent events suggest that Khamenei is finding it more difficult to manage his elite, *Enteghad saree-e blogerhaye hami Ahmadinejad az rahbar* [The swift criticisms of bloggers supportive of Ahmadinejad of the Leader], *Digarban,* 1 Esfand 1391/19 Feb. 2013, www.digarban.com/node/11244, accessed 19 Feb 2013. Listen also to the interview with a member of the *Basij* militia, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/01/130105_basiji_interview_hamedani.shtml, accessed 15 Feb. 2013.

[43] Some of these anxieties over poor political management are beginning to surface from unlikely sources, see Asgharowladi's comments in *Asgharowladi: Amin rahbari hastam…* [Asgharowladi, I am a trustee of the Leadership…], 15 Bahman 1391/3 Feb. 2013, www.entekhab.ir/fa/node/94481, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[44] See B. S. Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 80–81.

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