

CONTINUITY IN IRANIAN LEADERSHIP LEGITIMIZATION:
FARR-I IZADI, SHI'ISM, AND VILAYET-I FAQIH

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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DEDICATION

There is no one to whom I could possibly dedicate this thesis, and all of my academic work over the past years, other than my husband Michael. He has listened to me when I have needed to work out difficulties (often when he has had no idea what I have been talking about), stayed up late to proofread papers, driven me to school and back when I have been exhausted from those same late nights, nursed me through a frightening illness and a ridiculous accident, and has always made sure that I maintain my perspective. I could never have done this without him.

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TRANSLITERATION

Transliteration has been a tremendous challenge; with my almost non-existent Persian language skills (not to mention my utter ignorance of Avestan, Old Iranian, Old Persian, Middle Persian and Arabic), I am certain I have allowed many inconsistencies to gallop into my text. I attempted to follow the most common usage for well-known names and words, and the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* standards when necessary. I have included diacritical marks on the first use of words if I found them personally helpful for puzzling out the Persian spelling.

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Iranian belief in a mythological force that God bestows on kings in the form of a mystical light that validates their rule, the *farr-ī izadī*, has persisted in Iran for millennia, and continues to influence Iranian concepts of leadership legitimization. The Islamic conquerors who overthrew Iran's Sassanian Empire in the seventh century adapted this myth of Iranian sacral kingship to Islamic political culture, and used it to build a distinct Iranian Islamic political identity that persisted through centuries of regime changes. Iran's Shi'i Muslims drew upon the concept of *farr-i izadi* in both of Iran's twentieth century revolutions, sometimes purposely, often probably totally unconsciously, to forward their objectives. The Ayatollah Khomeini specifically relied on the Iranian penchant for a supreme monarch endowed with a divine right to rule when he converted Iran's Islamic clerics into a new monarchical dynasty, with absolute power.

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INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century historians followed Leopold von Ranke's dictum that history should be understood as: was eigentlich geschehen ist. Then perhaps it was the French positivists who declared, no, history is the record of what people thought had happened. In Iran history is the account of what people thought should have happened.

— Richard Frye¹

Iranian historiography often portrays the Zoroastrian and Islamic eras as discontinuous. However, all societies uphold and regularly reaffirm the collective sentiments based in history and mythology that provide their members with cultural identity and unity, and Iranian society is no exception to this rule.² After their seventh century defeat of Iran's Sassanian Empire, Islamic historians and religious theorists brought together isolated myths and historical facts to create new genealogies for pre-Islamic rulers and a new chronology that explained the success of the Islamic conquest and legitimized Islamic rule in Iranian terms.³ They assembled a new synthesis of the Iranian ethos that defines “the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things

¹ Richard N. Frye, “Impressionistic Views of Ancient Iranian History,” *Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism*, 2006, <http://s-s-z.org/work.htm> (accessed April 2009).

² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1915), 474.

³ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 80-81.

in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.”⁴ This incorporation significantly altered Iranian *lieux de mémoire*, the “...shared spaces of overlapping beliefs and common historical tragedies” that crystallize the Iranian cultural heritage and define Iranian collective memory.⁵

Collective memory is conveyed through literature and drama, which reflect a society’s changes. These media are particularly useful for explaining accommodation to conquerors and the “new” ideas they introduce. The Iranian national epic, the *Shānāmeḥ*, and the Shi’i passion play, the *ta’zīyeh*, are the leading Iranian expressions of collective memory in literature and drama. The *Shahnameh*, a tenth century epic poem that narrates the ancient myths and legends that surround Iran’s kings and heroes, is the “one indisputably great surviving cultural artifact that attempts to assert a continuity of collective memory across the moment of the conquest.” It kept Iran’s pre-Islamic legendary history alive, and “made it available to the Iranian people as a memorial of a great and distinctive civilization.”⁶ The *ta’zīyeh* passion play links ancient Iranian legends to the founding myth of Shi’ism, the death of the Imam Husayn at the Battle of

⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael P. Banton (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Press, 1966), 3.

⁵ Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, vol I, Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136.

⁶ Dick Davis, “Introduction,” in Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, (New York: Viking, 2006), xxxiii.

Karbala in 680. It has therefore been key to the establishment of a unique Iranian Shi'i identity by providing a memorial link to Iran as it was prior to the Islamic Conquest.⁷

The Iranian people used the *Shahnameh* and ta'ziyeh, along with additional *lieux de mémoire*, to channel beliefs that “welled up from the depths of their inner beings into molds that were not theirs but that had been imposed on them as a consequence of military defeat and the adoption of a new religion and a foreign language.”⁸ They then formed these new interpretations into a unique “Persianate conceptual frame” that allowed them to maintain their cultural identity despite their adoption of a new religion.⁹ This enduring Iranian character had an undeniable impact on Islam, and it shaped Shi'ism into a distinctively Iranian religion.¹⁰ Iranians gave themselves the “option to return to the Persian past while experiencing the Islamic present” by adding pre-Islamic religious principles into their version of Islam.¹¹

The ancient Iranian principle of *farr-i izarī* played a key part in this process. The *farr-i izadi*, ‘the splendor of God,’ is a mystical gift of legitimacy that Iranians

⁷ Ernest Tucker, *Nadir Shah's Quest for Legitimacy in Post-Safavid Iran* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 20. Paul Kriwaczek, *In Search of Zarathustra: The First Prophet and the Ideas That Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 223.

⁸ Ehsan Yarshater, “The Persian Presence in the Islamic World,” in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 95.

⁹ Babayan, *Mystics*, 165.

¹⁰ Manochehr Dorraj, *From Zarathustra to Khomeini: Populism and Dissent in Iran* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 9, 34.

¹¹ Babayan, *Mystics*, 264.

traditionally believe God bestows on just leaders as a sign of his sanction. This endowment, which has commonly been represented in Iranian mythology and iconography as a radiant light, customarily gives Iranian rulers special strength and insight, as well as the ability to overcome the forces of evil.¹² Holding the farr means the leader is responsible for just governance, maintaining religion, and ensuring his subjects are well cared for; if he fails in these duties he risks losing the farr, and thus his throne, to a more deserving ruler.¹³

The centrality of justice, a cult of martyrdom and charismatic, divinely sanctioned kingship in both ancient and Islamic Iran brought the farr-i izadi “into the service of Islamicate political culture,” and linked it to the Shi’i *imams*.¹⁴ The sociologist Mohmoud Sadri postulates that this “mythological notion,” which helped shape “the seventeenth century juxtaposition of the Shiite Utopian belief in the charismatic government of the infallible Imams with the ideology of righteous stewardship of the Safavid kings,” ensures Iranians maintain a “penchant for government by divine approval.”¹⁵ It was because of this process that the farr-i izadi became an “atemporal

¹² J. Kellens, “Avesta,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, <http://www.iranica.com/> (accessed March 2009). Shusha Guppy, “The Spirit of Persian Monarchy,” *openDemocracy*, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/> (accessed Feb 2008).

¹³ Abolala Soudavar and Milo Cleveland Beach, *Art of the Persian Courts: Selections From the Art and History Trust Collection* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 411.

¹⁴ Dorraj, *From*, 10. Bertold Spuler, “Iran: The Persistent Heritage,” in *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, ed. Gustave E. von Grunebaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 175.

¹⁵ Mohmoud Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: Dissident Political Theology in Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001), 257-258.

expression of divine authority” that is “deeply ingrained...on Iranian thought” and continues to undeniably influence Iranian concepts of leadership legitimization.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Contested Memories: Narrative Structures and Allegorical Meanings of Iran’s Pre-Islamic History,” *Iranian Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (1996), 162. Spuler, 175-176.

THE FARR

A myth is, of course, not a fairy story. It is the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another.

— Gilbert Ryle¹

The *farr-ī izadī* is a legendary principle of divine sanction that has served as a symbolic source of legitimacy and stability for Iranian rulers since Zoroastrian times.² *Farr* or *farrah* in modern Persian is commonly translated into English as splendor, fortune or glory; *izadi* literally translates as “established by God’s will.” The *farr-i izadi*, the “splendor of God” has its etymological roots in the concepts expressed in Old Iranian as *hvarnah*; in the Avesta as *x^varənah*, *hvareno*, or *khvarenah*; in Old Persian as *farnah*; and in Middle Persian as *kharreh*. The notion of *farr* as an aspect of leadership legitimization arose among the pre-Zoroastrian Aryan tribes of Eastern Iran sometime between 900 and 775 BCE. It later expanded during the fifth to the third centuries BCE under the Achaemenian Dynasty with the convergence of the Mesopotamian idea of sacral kingship and Zoroastrian beliefs regarding the divine origins of leadership and social order.³ The Sassanians, whose dynasty ruled over Iran from 224 CE until the

¹ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1949), 8.

² Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co, 1963), 40.

³ Jamsheed K. Choksky, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2 (1988), 35.

Islamic Conquest in the mid-seventh century, crystallized the concept into the enduring Zoroastrian doctrine of sacral kingship known as the *farr-i izadi*, “the splendor of God,” or simply the *farr*.

The *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian holy book that scholars generally agree was constructed as early as the eleventh century B.C.E. but was not codified until the fourth century C.E. under the Sassanians, identifies three different, but not distinct, types of *farr*—all of the same essence, but of varying intensity. Yasht 18, “An Ode to the Divine Glory” honors *airiianəm x^varənah*—the *farr* that gives Iranians strength and helps them protect their homeland from outlanders and demons. Yasht 19, “The Hymn to the Earth,” praises *ax^varətəm x^varənah*—the *farr* of the gods that all mortals should strive to realize; and also extols the power of the *kauuaēm x^varənah*—the *farr* of the legendary Kayānid dynasty that conferred splendor and fortune upon kings and heroes.⁴

Although the *farr* consecrated the king—he was considered the “brother of the sun and the moon,” and he reportedly descended to earth in a column of fire—he still needed divine assistance and benevolence in order to remain in power.⁵ He was not a god, only their representative on earth, where he served as a liaison between men and the gods and

⁴ “Avesta: Yashts (Hymns of Praise),” in *Zoroastrian Archives*, trans. James Darmesteter, <http://www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm> (accessed October 2008), Yashts 18 and 19.

⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi’ite Iran From the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93

was often described on Persian coins as “deputy of gods on earth.”⁶ Darius I, the Achaemenid emperor from 522 to 486 BC, included an acknowledgment of this humanity in the foundation inscriptions at his Susa palace. His message reads: “Ahuramazda who is the greatest of the gods created me. He made me king. ... Such was Ahuramazda’s pleasure that of the entire earth he chose me, a man.”⁷ However, not all Iranian kings were as humble as Darius, and a leader’s pride and ambition could lead to loss of the farr when the gods deem him no longer worthy of divine sanction.

The *Denkard*, the ninth century compilation of ancient Zoroastrian traditions, relates the tale of King Jamshid (Yima), the last of the mythological Pishdadian kings, who lost the farr as a result of hubris. Jamshid was initially given all three forms of farr in their original united state, so that he could preserve the earth; however, after eighteen hundred years as a just and benevolent ruler, he offended the gods by declaring himself one of them. As a result of this “lie,” Mithra, the god of the covenant and guardian of the farr, seized it from him, and Atar, the fire god, then took it to the bottom of the sacred lake Vouru Kasha. The farr remains there, guarded in its undivided state by the god of the waters, Apam Napat, who delivers just the Kayanid farr—the farr-i izadi—to deserving rulers at their investiture.⁸

⁶ Choksky, 35. Abolala Soudavar, “The Vocabulary and Syntax of Iconography in Sasanian Iran,” *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), 422.

⁷ Inscription DSf 8-22, the “Foundation Tablet,” described in William W. Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings From the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 50.

⁸ Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, *Persian Myths* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 25-26, 13-14, 17.



Figure 1. Relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, “Ardashir Receiving the Farr”⁹

The farr of the Iranians was thereafter considered the property of the Iranian people. It was inextricably bound to the destiny of each individual, allowing him to carry out the duties appropriate to his social class. A man’s farr was linked to his intelligent soul, and its vitality depended on his spiritual awareness—he could strengthen it through strict observance of religious beliefs and rituals and by increasing his wisdom and virtue. The king, as a member of the Iranian nation, also held this personal farr; “king” originally “meant a man capable of realizing, in full awareness, his own destiny by developing his inborn khvarenah”—what modern Iranians refer to as *ṣafā-ī bāṭin*, inner purity or sincerity of mind and heart.¹⁰

⁹ Ahreeman X, “Persian Mythology, Gods and Goddesses: A Pictorial Research and Guide,” *Iran Politics Club*, 2006, <http://iranpoliticsclub.net/culture-language/mythology1/index.htm> (accessed Nov 2008).

¹⁰ Pio Filippini-Ronconi, “The Tradition of Sacred Kingship in Iran,” in *Iran Under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 62-63. M. C. Bateson, et al., “*Safa-Yi Batin*: A Study of the Interrelations of a Set of Iranian Ideal Character Types,” in *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies*, ed. L. Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1977), 262, 269, 273.

Similarly, because kings were expected to train and serve as priests, the king also held a share of the farr of the gods after it was placed in care of the priests. Ardashir, the first Sassanian king, explicitly declared this relationship between the king and religion in the instructions he passed down to his son, Shapur I:

Know that kingship and religion are twin brothers, no one of which can be maintained without the other. For religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship is the guardian of religion. Kingship cannot subsist without its foundation, and religion cannot subsist without its guardian. For that which has no guardian is lost, and that which has no foundation crumbles.¹¹

This ideal association was commonly illustrated on Sassanian coins, with the bust of the leader on one side, and the Zoroastrian fire alter on the other, thus making “church” and “state” literally two sides of the same coin.¹²



Figure 2. Sassanian Drachm; Ardashir I (224 - 242 AD) and Zoroastrian Fire Alter.¹³

¹¹ Irach J. S Taraporewala, “Manichaeism,” *Iran Chamber Society*, 1980, <http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/manichaeism2.php> (accessed March 2009); translation from Shaul Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam: Studies in Religious History and Intercultural Contacts* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1995), I 214.

¹² Choksky, 44.

¹³ “Gobl II Issue: Bust Right With Parthian-Style Headdress: Gobl Sn II/1/2; Mitchiner ACW 787; Courtesy William B. Warden, Jr. Collection,” “Sassanian Coins” in *Grifter: A Splendid Thing*, http://www.grifterrec.com/coins/sasania/sas_ardI_1.html (accessed Apr 2009).

This bond was not total, however; the farr remained divided. At the end of time the gods will reportedly bestow the undivided farr waiting in the depths of Vouru Kasha on the *Saoshyant*, the final savior, who will lead mankind in the final battle of good against evil and relieve humanity from sin, suffering, illness and death.¹⁴ The *Denkard* addresses this scenario with a description of how the farr of the gods and the farr of the kings will come together in a single individual:

The thing against which the Evil Spirit struggles most vigorously is the uniting, in full force, of the glories of kingship and the Good Religion in a single person, because such a combination would vanquish him. ...all creation is joyful, and the people flourish...When these two glories unite in one person, then the Adversary will be completely vanquished and creation saved and purified....¹⁵

This vision of the utopia that will result from the unification of royalty and clergy has profoundly affected the way Iranians view leadership legitimization up to the present day.

The Farr in the *Shahnameh*

Perhaps our most significant source for information regarding the farr-i izadi is contained in the Iranian national epic poem, Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, a poem of over sixty thousand rhyming couplets that relates Persian history and myth, and specifically the stories of their kings and mythic heroes, from the creation of the world up until the Islamic conquest. Ferdowsi wrote the *Shahnameh* over the course of about thirty years at the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh centuries, during the

¹⁴ Filippini-Ronconi, 63.

¹⁵ *The Pahlavi Dinkard*, trans. D. M. Madan, (Bombay: The Society for the Promotion of Researches into the Zoroastrian Religion, 1911), 129.18 – 130.16.

artistic and scientific resurgence that began under the Turkic Ghaznavid Dynasty that ruled most of Persia, Transoxiana, and the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁶

Ferdowsi most likely used both oral and written sources for his mythical and historical accounts; however, because none of the written sources have survived it is impossible for scholars to do more than speculate on the subject.¹⁷ Iran's rich storytelling tradition, along with the fact that the *Shahnameh* and other Persian literature of its era are more commonly recited than read make it highly likely that Ferdowsi gleaned at least some of his material from oral accounts.¹⁸

Very little is actually known about the poet and his motivations for writing the epic; what we do know is that the *Shahnameh* was written during a period of renewed interest in Persian culture; that Ferdowsi neglects Islamic cosmology and chronology in favor of the Persian myths on these subjects; that it was the first significant literary work written in Persian after the Arab conquest and it is considered responsible for revival of the Persian language; and that the poem "celebrate[s] the cultural and ethnic inheritance

¹⁶ Patrick Clawson, and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19-20.

¹⁷ Dick Davis, "Introduction," in Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, (New York: Viking, 2006), xvi-xx.

¹⁸ Hamid Mahamedi, "The Story of Rostam and Esfandiyār in an Iranian Dialect," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102, no. 3 (1982).

of ancient Iran.”¹⁹ As a post-Islamic text, the *Shahnameh* also conveys how the Iranians viewed the Arabs and their introduction of Islam.

Ferdowsi’s portrayal of the evil King Zahak is often cited as reflecting the poet’s own time and political situation, and his belief in the superiority of Persian culture over the backward manners of their Arab conquerors. The story of how the wicked Arab Zahak managed to seize the farr, but was then overthrown by Iranians led by an ordinary blacksmith was proof that Iranians had “grown proud and decadent, had fallen to evil foreign powers and had collaborated with those powers despite their tyranny,” and how they could regain their identity “through the courageous leadership of individual people, whatever their rank.”²⁰ The *Shahnameh* thus kept the memory of the Old Persian Empire alive in the Iranian people’s imagination, and helped maintain a sense of belonging to a specific Iranian culture, of being a Iranian—*iraniyyat*.²¹

The *Shahnameh* has therefore become an incredibly important expression of Iranian nationalism, a *lieu de mémoire*—a symbol “in which collective heritage...is crystallized” and “in which collective memory is rooted.”²² Azar Nafisi describes the

¹⁹ Dick Davis, “Introduction,” in Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, (New York: Viking, 2006), xix.

²⁰ Deirdre Lashgari, “‘Zahak the Dragon King’: An Iranian Allegory,” *California State Polytechnic University*, 1992, <http://www.csupomona.edu/~delashgari/readings/zahak.html> (accessed Oct 2008).

²¹ Ann K. S. Lambton, “Social Change in Persia in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Albert Habib Hourani, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 149.

²² Edward Granville Browne, *Literary History of Persia, vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1964), 143. Nora, xv.

Shahnameh as Persian “identity papers,” “the golden thread that links one Persian to the other, connecting the past to the present;” and Michael Fischer explains how the parables of the *Shahnameh*, when “Recited, retold, dramatized in live contexts...can and do continue to inform and stalk the present” and help shape the Iranian national consciousness.²³ The farr-i izadi is one of the central aspects of Iranian heritage passed down in the *Shahnameh*. The Iranian people—the vast majority of whom are at least acquainted with the *Shahnameh*, can often recite long passages of the epic from memory, frequently see paintings depicting its heroes on their coffeehouse walls, and regularly refer to its characters and events in conversation—are therefore certainly familiar with the farr that permeates its verses.

Ferdowsi portrays the farr-i izadi as a gift of legitimacy that just, righteous kings are given as a sign of God’s approval. He alternately tells the stories of kings who lost the farr because they did not rule in accordance with God’s wishes, generally when they developed into tyrants. The *Shahnameh* consequently shows that the farr-i izadi is unmistakably not permanent. The king does not rule by divine right, only with God’s sanction, which he loses if he fails to properly carry out his duties; displays incompetence, poor judgment, or, like Jamshid, hubris; or if he commits the most serious offense—failing to serve his subjects with equanimity and justice.²⁴

²³ Azar Nafisi, Foreword to Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Viking, 2006), x-xi. Michael Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 107.

²⁴ Guppy, “Spirit.”

Ferdowsi repeatedly describes this transitory, elusive nature of the farr-i izadi. He weaves the tales of kings who were given the right of succession and legitimate rule simply because they had won them in battle, a clear indication they had been anointed by God. He also imparts the legends of their successors who were warranted in rebelling against them after they succumbed to injustice and tyranny, thus losing the legitimizing power of the farr-i izadi. These new rulers, often bolstered by a successful revolution based in all classes of society, were considered legitimate simply by virtue of the fact that they prevailed in the struggle for leadership—the only test for possessing the farr was the ability to gain and maintain power.²⁵

The new ruler was supposed to be from the royal family in order to have the farr bestowed upon him, but if he was not, and he proved himself worthy, a new genealogy would be fabricated for him. Cyrus the Great was given the farr and a modified lineage as a reward for his military achievements when he overthrew the Median king, Astyages. Alexander the Great received both the farr-i izadi and an invented Iranian ancestry when he defeated Darius III in the *Shahnameh*; his achievement justified post-dating recognition that the “royal farr” shone from his forehead long before the battle.²⁶

Ferdowsi commonly represented the farr in this time-honored manner—as a shining light that illuminated the ruler’s face, making it evident to all those around him that he was clearly God’s chosen. Kings and heroes are universally described as shining

²⁵ Homa Katouzian, “Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1 (2005), 238.

²⁶ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Viking, 2006), 456-71.

like the sun or the moon; Kaymurs, the *Shahnameh*'s first king, “was like a tall cypress tree topped by the full moon, and the royal *farr* shone from him.”²⁷ Widengren, in his historical account, similarly describes Sassanian rulers who covered their faces because common people would not be able to stand the extreme light emanating from their faces, and the ceremonial requirement for courtiers to put their hands over their eyes while exclaiming “I am burning up” approaching the throne.²⁸ This light was part of the *farr*'s inherent nature, a reflection of the light of the gods, and its most familiar and enduring symbol.²⁹

Ferdowsi's stories, and the symbols he popularized, helped make the theory of *farr-i izadi*—the belief that God gives just kings of the proper lineage a divine light that visibly displays legitimacy that he will take away and bestow on someone more deserving if the king does not rule with justice and maintain the proper social order—”one of the most enduring concepts of Iranian tradition and mythology” and a key aspect of Iranian cultural identity.³⁰ As a result, the king and his legitimizing *farr* have served as

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁸ G. Widengren, “The Sacral Kingship of Iran,” in *The Sacral Kingship: Contributions to the Central Theme of the Eighth International Congress for the History of Religions, Rome, April 1955* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 22.

²⁹ Abolala Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 7-9.

³⁰ Choksky, 44. Ahmad Ashraf and Gherardo Gnoli, “Iranian Identity,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge & Kegan, 2006), 527.

a rallying force for Iranians trying to preserve, as well as create, the unity and continuity of their culture and nation, and it thus plays a prominent role in Iranian national history.³¹

³¹ Richard N. Frye, "The Charisma of Kingship in Ancient Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* 6 (1964), 54.

THE FARR-I IZADI AND IRANIAN SHI'ISM

The past is enlisted to serve the needs of the present.

— Rogers Brubaker¹

The seventh century Islamic conquest initiated a widespread acceptance of Islam, and the collapse of Zoroastrianism as the national religion in Iran. However, this introduction of a new faith was relatively gradual and voluntary, and it was not entirely realized until the tenth century.² As a result of this measured pace, the introduction of Islam did not appreciably affect the continuity of Iranian history—the people never lost their sense of *iraniyyat*, of belonging to a distinctive Iranian culture.³ Iranians were, and still are, practiced at maintaining this awareness of their own unique identity while adopting selected cultural norms and traditions from conquerors and non-Iranian neighbors; and the Islamic invasion was no exception to this pattern. Iranians became Muslims, but they were not “Arabized,” as were most of the other peoples overwhelmed by the victorious Islamic armies during the same period. Iran instead “played a unique

¹ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 171.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Ithnā ‘Asharī Shī’ism and Iranian Islam,” in *Religion in the Middle East, Vol. 2, Islam*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969),

³ Ann K. S. Lambton, “Social Change in Persia in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Albert Habib Hourani, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 149-150.

and crucial role in the origination and diffusion of institutions that eventually contributed to the centripetal tendency of later Islamic civilization,” a process that has been described as the “Persianization” of Islam.⁴

This synthesis resulted in an extensive record of parallels between pre-Islamic Iranian religious thought and Twelver Shi’ism, the form of Islam that became dominant in Iran; indicating what Dorraj refers to as a “line of continuity between the pre-Islamic Iranian religious tradition and the historical development of Shi’ism” at the most essential level.⁵ One clearly identifiable aspect of this continuity is the persistence of the principle that God anointed the Iranian king with a special charisma that legitimized his sovereignty—the *farr-i izadi*.

The Imams, the Mahdi and the Farr

Islam brought with it a new method for determining the rightful ruler, the concept of caliphate. The Islamic caliph, literally ‘successor,’ inherited Muhammad’s responsibilities as the spiritual leader and head of the Muslim state, but not his prophetic role. Medinan tribal leaders elected the first caliph, Abu Bakr, after Muhammad’s death in 632; however, many early Muslims believed Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, was the Prophet’s lawful heir. These *Shi’at ‘Ali*, partisans of Ali, or Shi’i, contend that

⁴ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979), 150. Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View From the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 11. Frye, *Heritage*, 233. Dorraj, 78.

⁵ Manochehr Dorraj, *From Zarathustra to Khomeini: Populism and Dissent in Iran* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 33.

only Muhammad's direct descendants, through his daughter Fatima and Ali, were able to pass on his charismatic legacy of divine sanction and are eligible to serve as caliph.⁶

The Shi'i were unable to wrest the caliphate away from the Umayyad Dynasty in the seventh century; however, they continued to follow an Alid Imam as their rightful spiritual leader, and recognized the caliph as a political leader with only borderline legitimacy. They followed this pattern until 941, when the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, reportedly went into "occultation," a state of suspended animation that allows him to continue to have authority over the community, and to guide and protect its members, even though he cannot communicate with them. Iranians recognize this concept of occultation in their recurring "myth of a hero believed to be dead, but who, either hidden or asleep, awaits the time for his return."⁷ The prime example of pre-Islamic Iranian occultation is in the tale of Kay Khosrow, the Kayanid king who did not die, but instead mysteriously disappeared into the side of a mountain, leaving his soldiers with the belief that he might one day return to the world to restore justice.⁸

With their belief in the eventual return of the twelfth Imam, the Shi'i thus developed the concept of the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam who will come out of occultation

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 110-111.

⁷ James Darmesteter, *The Mahdi, Past and Present*, trans. Ada S. Ballin (London: Unwin Brothers, 1885), 14-18, 23-24.

⁸ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Viking, 2006), 366-367. Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 104-105.

and appear at the end of time as a prophet savior to help achieve the final victory of good over evil and restoring universal justice to society.⁹ The nineteenth century French Orientalist James Darmesteter wrote that this Shi'i doctrine of Mahdism is an Islamic adaptation of the farr-i izadi, and that "The converted Persians had only to change the proper names" in order to incorporate the concept into their version of Islam.¹⁰

Historian Bernard Lewis also traces the origins of Mahdism to ideas

...imported into Islam by the masses of imperfectly Islamised Persian converts, who brought with them the Indo-Aryan idea of a chosen, God-begotten family, transmitting the Glory of God (*Farri Yazdan*) from generation to generation, and eventually producing a Saoshyant or Messiah. This conception was transferred to the family of the prophet and the personality of Ali.

With this inherited 'divine light,' Shi'i Imams were transformed into a new version of the Zoroastrian Saoshyant, the savior who will receive the undivided farr at the end of time and lead mankind in the final battle of good against evil.¹¹

Both the pre-Islamic and Islamic belief systems therefore contain an activist element, which urges believers to struggle for good against the forces of evil and emphasizes free will that allows individuals to choose sides in this battle. This principle that a true believer should always be engaged in a battle against evil manifested itself in Iranian Shi'ism as a requirement for the faithful to permanently engage in a search for a

⁹ Dorraj, 30-33.

¹⁰ James Darmesteter, *The Mahdi, Past and Present*, trans. Ada S. Ballin (London: Unwin Brothers, 1885), 14-18

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Isma'ilism: A Study of the Historical Background of the Fatimid Caliphate* (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 24.

just ruler to serve as a deputy to the Hidden Imam.¹² Just as with earlier Iranian beliefs regarding the *farr-i izadi*, it became honorable, and even a responsibility, for Iranian Shi'i to defy and overthrow an unjust king.¹³

This tradition of resistance, which has its roots in the struggles of the early Shi'i to make a member of Muhammad's immediate family the Caliph, developed into what historian Michael Fischer refers to as the "Karbala Paradigm." This mindset is based on the firm conviction that martyrdom in a struggle against injustice—following the example of the Imam Husayn who, at the Battle of Karbala, knowingly fought against impossible odds in a contest for the leadership of Islamadom—is the noblest cause in the world; and that "the finest form of holy war is speaking out in the presence of an unjust ruler and getting killed for it."¹⁴ Iranian Shi'i have commonly used this principle to encourage collective oppositional action.¹⁵

The Karbala narrative includes additional stories, peripheral to the battle itself, which provide leadership legitimization for the Shi'i Imams. One of these is the legend

¹² Paul Kriwaczek, *In Search of Zarathustra: The First Prophet and the Ideas That Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 223.

¹³ Bernard Lewis, "The Shi'a in Islamic History," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin S. Kramer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 25-26.

¹⁴ Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 7, 21-32. M.A. Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam: An Introduction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75.

¹⁵ Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 146. Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran From the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 241.

of Shahrbanou, reportedly the daughter of Yazdigird III, the last Sassanian king.

Shahrbanou's tale appears in a variety of forms, ranging from the very simple to the detailed and highly romantic. The latter commonly relate how the victorious Arab army enslaved Shahrbanou during their invasion then took her to Medina, where Ali, the first Imam, protected her from her Umayyad captors. She selected Ali's son Husayn, the hero of Karbala, for her husband, and is portrayed as mother of Zayn al 'Abidīn, the fourth Imam and one of the tragic figures of the Karbala storyline.

Shahrbanou binds "the House of the Prophet and the Twelve Imams with the legitimate line of Iranian kings," supplying the Shi'i Imams with both Islamic and royal Iranian authority just as the stories in the *Shahnameh* give Alexander the Great and Ardashir royal Persian pedigrees so they are eligible to have the farr bestowed upon them.¹⁶ The legend of Shahrbanou is therefore one of the most significant links between pre-Islamic Iranian kings and the Imams; it makes the ancient Persian kings ancestors to the Imams, validating both their culture and sovereignty.¹⁷

The stories about Shahrbanou are commonly transmitted and accepted as historically accurate, reflecting an innate desire to link the religious and royal heritages

¹⁶ Michael Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 128-129.

¹⁷ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Šahrbānu," in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, 2005, http://www.iranica.com/newsite/index.isc?Article=http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp7/ot_shahrbanu_20050131.html (accessed March 2009).

among the Iranian people.¹⁸ The historian Bāqir Sharīf Qurashī provides an eleven-page description of the princess' virtues, which is clearly intended to convey that the fourth Imam was the son of a noble Iranian woman who was favored and chosen by God, and not simply the child of an anonymous slave girl.¹⁹ Renowned Qur'anic scholar Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai also describes Shahrbanou without qualification as “the queen among women, the daughter of Yazdigird the king of Iran,” indicating his full acceptance of the legend, as well as his eagerness to provide the Imams with a royal Iranian background and the legitimacy that ancestry entails.²⁰

Abbasid propagandists took full advantage of the Shahrbanou legend, as well as similar myths. They used the Iranian patriotism and loyalty they engendered to help rally newly converted Iranian Muslims, unhappy with Arab rule, to their banner. With this Iranian assistance, in the form of sectarian groups that supported the ‘Alids and their nascent Shi’ism with doctrines based on “syncretistic currents of thought which aimed to amalgamate indigenous Iranian religious traditions with aspects of Islamic teaching,” the

¹⁸ Edward Granville Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1964), 31.

¹⁹ Bāqir Sharīf Qurashī, *The Life of Imām Zayn Al ‘Abidīn*, trans. Jāsim al-Rasheed (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2000), 1-11. Qurashi’s account is an obvious fabrication, he states that “some historians” have reported the fourth Imam’s mother was “from the country of al-Sind,” and that she was “among those who were taken prisoners in Kabul;” but he then contradicts himself with the statement “narrators and historians have unanimously” agreed that Shahrbanou was definitely the daughter of the Persian king. Qurashi substantiates this claim by stating “All the people knew that.” Boyce, a more objective source, refers to Shahrbanou as “a wholly fictitious figure.” (Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 151.)

²⁰ Allamah Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, *Shi’ite Islam*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 201.

Abbasids were able to overthrow their Umayyad rivals and establish themselves as a hereditary dynasty in the mid-eighth century.²¹

The Abbasids followed the Sassanian governmental system, a centralized government with a hereditary monarchy; and adopted Sassanian bureaucratic practices and court protocols, including the concept of the *farr-i izadi*. Their caliphs were rarely seen in public, and were “often qualified as luminous, in line with the light symbolism” associated with the *farr*.²² The Abbasids held the Caliphate—at least nominally—until the Mongol invasion in 1258 with the help of these Iranian concepts.

As the Abbasids extended their authority to the periphery of the empire, they faced the difficulty of legitimizing their power in its vastly disparate regions. Their caliphs initially met this challenge by allowing local Iranian leaders to sustain limited power to help maintain order. This policy eventually led to the emergence of autonomous or semi-autonomous Iranian states with separate political and religious spheres of leadership legitimization, Iranian and Islamic.²³

The Iranian legitimacy, derived from the *farr-i izadi*, also passed to the temporal rulers of these independent states, who were invested with a “divine light” and therefore

²¹ F. Daftary, “Sectarian and National Movements in Iran, Khurasan and Transoxania During Umayyad and Early ‘Abbasid Times,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vol. Four, Part One*, ed. M. S. Asimov and C. E. Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1992), 42.

²² Aziz al-Azmeh, “Monotheistic Monarchy,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 10 (2005): 133-49., 144.

²³ Ira M Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33, 54.

expected to wield political authority under celestial guidance.²⁴ Their new title became “the Shadow of God on Earth,” and they derived their Islamic power from the Abbasid Caliph, who was considered heir to the “Mantle of the Prophet.”²⁵ They also claimed descent from, and similarities to, legendary Iranian kings and heroes; which provided them with the legitimizing force of the *farr-i izadi*. The Ziyarids proclaimed themselves members of the Sassanian royal family; the Tahirids and Samanids chose to fabricate genealogies that linked them respectively to Rostam and Bahram Chubineh, heroes whose exploits Ferdowsi relates in the *Shahnameh*.²⁶ The Saffarid Dynasty, based in Sistan, was founded in the late ninth century by Ya’qūb al-Saffār, the Coppersmith, who styled himself after Kaveh the Blacksmith, the legendary Iranian hero who defied the evil usurper Zahak. Kaveh offered his plebeian leather apron to Feraydun as a banner around which the soon to be king rallied the Iranian people, and he reminded Feraydun that it was his responsibility to ensure the Iranian people were served by a just king.²⁷ The victorious Feraydun adopted Kaveh’s apron as his dynasty’s standard and a representation of its *farr*, and Kaveh became a symbol of Iranian nationalism that persists

²⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 8-9.

²⁵ Arjomand, *Shadow*, 8, 94.

²⁶ S. M. Stern, “Ya’qub the Coopersmith and Persian National Sentiment,” in *Iran and Islam: In Memory of the Late Vladimir Minorsky*, ed. Clifford Edmund Bosworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), 543.

²⁷ Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*, vol. 35, *Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 27.

into the twenty-first century. Ya'qub took advantage of the many resemblances between himself and Kaveh, some of which were not entirely fictional. He almost certainly did not create the comparisons, and he was definitely not wholly responsible for disseminating them. He was glorified by *shu'ūbīyah* poets who consciously played upon Iranian cultural memories by fabricating his royal genealogy and praising him for heroically serving “under the banner of Kaveh” to restore Persian glory.²⁸

The first of the independent dynasties to embrace Shi'ism, the Buyids, originally Caspian region Shi'i mercenaries, captured Baghdad in the mid-tenth century.²⁹ They did not, however, put an end to the Abbasid caliph, but allowed him to remain in place as a religious figure that provided Islamic legitimacy without any political control. The Buyids built an autonomous empire with traditional Iranian features, and embraced Iranian culture in order to distinguish themselves from the Arab Abbasids. They claimed royal Sassanian ancestry; observed traditional Zoroastrian festivals; and began using the pre-Islamic Persian title for king, *shah*, as well as the imperial concept and designation *Shahanshah*, king of kings.³⁰

Despite the fact that the Buyids maintained the Caliph and Iran remained a Sunni country with a great deal of anti-Shi'i activity; they also melded this Iranian culture into

²⁸ Ibid., 545.

²⁹ Daftary, 52.

³⁰ Said Amir Arjomand, “Monarchy,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, Vol 2*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 474. Dick Davis, “Introduction,” in Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (New York: Viking, 2006), xviii.

Shi'ism and created new customs that persisted in Iran even after the demise of their dynasty. The Buyids introduced the Zoroastrian practice of saint worship into Shi'ism by establishing the Imams as holy figures, sponsoring the erection of shrines for their burial sites, and initiating the custom of making pilgrimages to those memorials. Along with their sanction of Zoroastrian holidays the Buyids also instituted the Ghadīr Khumm festival that commemorates the date on which Shi'i believe Muhammad recognized Ali as his successor. Most significantly, on the tenth of Muharram 352 (8 February 963), Shi'i were allowed to publicly observe the Imam Husayn's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala. The Buyids institutionalized this commemoration, and initiated the tradition of public mourning for Husayn.³¹

These ceremonies blend the Shi'i stories about Husayn's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala with pre-Zoroastrian stories about, and public mourning ceremonies for, Siyavush, the legendary Iranian tragic hero. Fischer states: "Mourning for Siyavush may, in fact, have been a major annual ritual in ancient Central Asia, the original form of what in Islamic Iran became the mourning for Husain."³² The historian Narshaki describes in his mid-tenth century history of Bukhara how "the people of Bukhara have special songs or dirges about the death of Siyavush," and the scholar Biruni, also writing in the tenth century, describes how "At the end of the month of Akhshum the people of Soghd weep and lament on account of their dead in former times and hit their faces and place food and

³¹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 82.

³² Michael Fischer, *Mute Dreams*, 85.

drink for the dead, as do the Persians during the feast of Farvardagan.”³³ The traditions are too similar to be explained by coincidence; the “ritual, imagery, and emotive underpinnings” reveal a clear link between ancient Iranian and Shi’i tradition.³⁴

There is strong evidence that suggests this connection was intentional, and that it was the result of attempts to reconcile the “tension between an active memory of pre-Islamic heroic epics and the unsung stories of Muslim heroes.” Iranians remained attached to the Persian accounts of their mythical heroes and kings, despite the fact that they had converted to Islam. The fourteenth century writer Shaykh Hasan Kashi was one of those who recognized the utility of this attachment. He stated that “from courtier to peasant their souls yearn, constantly craving Persian poetry,” so since “this is the order of things,” he would tell the Islamic stories in the same manner in order to increase their popular appeal. Kashi, along with other writers, very consciously wrote accounts of the Imams, specifically Ali, in Persian poetry, complete with the symbols that related “nobility, loyalty, honor and piety” in the Persian epic tradition.³⁵

³³ Richard N. Frye, “Narshaki’s the History of Bukhara,” in *Central Asian Monuments*, ed. H. B Paksoy (Beylerbeyi, Istanbul: Isis Press, 1992), 69. Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī, quoted in Ehsan Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran,” in *Taziyyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 91.

³⁴ Ehsan Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran,” in *Taziyyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 93.

³⁵ Babayan, *Mystics*, 181-182.

Iranian Influences on Shi'i Doctrine and Law

Despite Sunni dominance in Iran prior to the sixteenth century there was extensive Iranian influence on Shi'i doctrine and law; and the Iranian Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr goes so far as to state that "Shi'ite Islam has an intimate connection with the Persian soul."³⁶ Shi'ism arose in the city of Kufa, where many of the turbulent events that characterize Shi'ism's early history took place. More than two-thirds of Kufa's population was composed of Yemenis and Persians, who shared a tradition of religio-political leadership based on sacral kingship with hereditary succession. These ideas helped "set the trend of the city well on the road toward Shi'i inclinations and moods of thinking."³⁷ Important centers for the development of Shi'i theology, such as Qom, were in Iran; and many of the influential early Shi'ite theologians were Iranian.³⁸ The renowned Shi'i hadith that were collected during the ninth and tenth centuries in Qom and Baghdad under the independent dynasties is still the basis for much of Shi'i law.³⁹ Shi'ism developed its distinctive ethos during this period: "an attitude of mind which refuses to admit that majority opinion is necessarily true or right," as well as "a

³⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972), 148.

³⁷ S. Husain M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

³⁸ Nasr, "Ithnā 'Asharī," 100.

³⁹ Michel Mazzaoui, "Shī'ism in the Medieval, Safavid, and Qājār Periods: A Study in Ithnā-'Asharī Continuity," in *Iran: Continuity and Variety*, ed. Peter Chelkowski and William Hanaway (New York: Center for Near Eastern Studies, 1971), 49.

rationalized defence of the moral excellence of an embattled minority.”⁴⁰ It was also during this era that many of the ideas regarding the twelfth Imam’s leadership and occultation took shape.

Buyid domestic strife allowed for Turkish encroachment and the formation of a number of autonomous Turkish dynasties in eastern Iran. One of these, the Seljuqs, conquered the Buyids and took over Baghdad in 1055. The Seljuqs “liberated” the Abbasid Caliph from the Buyids; and, like their Buyid predecessors, kept him in place in order to use his Islamic authority, along with borrowed Iranian ideas, to legitimize their rule. The Sunni Seljuqs ensured adherence to Shi’ism diminished in Iran, but the influence of Iranian ideas on Islam as it was practiced in Iran did not.

The Seljuqs, from their Iranian capital of Isfahan, restored mainstream Islamic doctrine in Iran with the help of jurists and theologians who reinforced the bifurcation of religious and temporal authority by invoking the Iranian concept of the farr. Nizām al-Mulk, the anti-Shi’i, Iranian, vizier to two eleventh-century Seljuk kings, opens his *Rules for Kings* with the statement: “In every age and time God chooses one member of the human race and, having endowed him with goodly and kingly virtues, entrusts him with the interests of the world and the well-being of his servants.” He then advises that these virtues and trust will disappear if “there occurs any disobedience or disregard of divine laws on the part of His servants,” and God will bestow his good fortune, the farr-i izadi,

⁴⁰ Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), 19.

upon a more worthy leader. Nizam al-Mulk also describes religion and kingship as “two brothers,” echoing Ardashir’s description of the farr.⁴¹

Nizam al-Mulk appointed the jurist Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazālī to head the Baghdad *Nizamiyyah madreseh* in 1091.⁴² While serving in this capacity, Ghazali attempted to combine Persian and Islamic traditions into a single, sequential historical narrative that demonstrated the superiority of Islam.⁴³ He states in his *Counsel for Kings* that: “...kingship and the divine effulgence [farr-i izadi] have been granted to [kings] by God, and they must accordingly be obeyed, loved and followed,” and he invokes the Qur’an to back up this assertion: “To dispute with kings is improper, and to hate them is wrong; for God on High has commanded ‘Obey God and obey the Prophet and those among you who hold authority,’ which means (in Persian) obey God and the prophets and your princes.”⁴⁴ Ghazali and Nizam al-Mulk both tried to buttress Islamic kingship with Iranian beliefs; however, by invoking the farr-i izadi they instead “perpetuate[d] the

⁴¹ Momen, 86. Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government Or Rules for Kings: The Siyar Al-Muluk Or Siyasat-Nama of Nizam Al-Mulk*, trans. Hubert Darke, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1978), 9, 60.

⁴² Abolala Soudavar and Milo Cleveland Beach, *Art of the Persian Courts: Selections From the Art and History Trust Collection* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 414

⁴³ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 78-86.

⁴⁴ Muhammad bin Muhammad Ghazzālī, *Ghazālī’s Book of Counsel for Kings: Nasīhat Al-Mulūk*, trans. F. R. C Bagley (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 45.

fundamental disharmony between the ideal of Islam and the ideal of pre-Islamic Persia” by emphasizing the king’s absolute power and accountability only to God.⁴⁵

Muhammad ibn al Hasan Tusi, known as Shaykh al-Ta’ifa and considered the founder of Shi’i jurisprudence, reinterpreted Shi’i doctrine to allow for delegation of the Imam’s judicial authority to the *fuqahā*, Islamic legal scholars. However he stated they should only take on this responsibility if there was no one else available. Al-Ta’ifa considered temporal leadership a distasteful duty for the fuqaha, and expressed his preference for its delegation to kings with the statement: “The service of a ruler who recognizes the true Imam and rules in his name according to the principles of Imami law is not only unobjectionable but necessary” and entitled to fealty from the Shi’i community.⁴⁶ Al-Ta’ifa explicitly quotes Ardashir when he states that Muslim rulers

...are the regulators of the world, have control of the enactments of laws and of the most expedient measures in daily life.... This is the reason for the interdependence of faith and kingship, as expressed by the Emperor of the Iranians, the Philosopher of the Persians, Ardashir Babak: ‘religion and kingship are twins neither complete without the other.’ Religion is the base and kingship the support: just as a foundation without support avails nothing, while a support without foundation falls into ruin, so religion without kingship is profitless, and kingship without faith is easily broken.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ann K. S. Lambton, “Al-Juwaynī and Al-Ghazālī: The Sultanate,” in *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 126.

⁴⁶ Momen, 189. Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, trans. Janet Watson and Marian Hill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 56-57.

⁴⁷ Nasir al-Dīn Muhammad Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, trans. G. M. Wickens (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), 215.

Iranian ideas of sacral kingship were therefore, by the thirteenth century, firmly entrenched as both a means for legitimizing Islamic rulers and an explanation for the relationship between the shah and the hidden Imam.

Light Imagery and the Farr

Throughout these changes in religion and leadership, the farr acquired a variety of post-Islamic representations and titles based on the old Sassanian concept present in the collective Iranian consciousness; however, its most enduring icon is illumination.⁴⁸ The pre-Islamic farr was symbolized by a corona of light or fire around the king's head, and this representation persisted in Iran after the introduction of Islam. Figure 3, an



Figure 3. Muhammad and the First Three Imams Crowned with Light⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Homa Katouzian, *Iranian History and Politics: The Dialectic of State and Society* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 79. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 280-281.

⁴⁹ Illustration from the sixteenth century "Houghton" *Shahnameh*, "Parable of 'The Ship of Shi'ism,'" in Stuart Cary Welch, *A King's Book of Kings: The Shah-Nameh of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 84.

illustration from a sixteenth-century *Shahnameh*, shows a classic example of this light imagery with its representation of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three Imams with blazing halos.⁵⁰

This depiction of the farr as light or fire is also evident in a common Islamic and Zoroastrian heroic motif. Mothers of heroes and kings are reportedly given its brilliance long before their child's birth; legends regarding Zoroaster and Muhammad's mothers illustrate the endurance of this imagery. The Zoroastrian *Zadspram* describes how the farr came to Zoroaster's mother:

About the glory of Zartosht becoming manifest even before his birth, it is thus declared, that...it came down from the endless light, in the manner of fire, and mingled with the fire which was before [Freno, Zoroaster's grandmother]; and from the fire it mingled with the mother of Zartosht. For three nights it was manifest, to all passers-by, as a species of fire in the direction of the house, and passers on the road always saw great radiance. Also when she became fifteen years old, the radiance of that glory which was in her, was even such that, on the path she was walking along, its brightness was then shed by her.⁵¹

Ibn Ishaq similarly describes the farr, in his biography of Muhammad, as first manifesting itself as a light on the Prophet's father's face "between his eyes...like the

⁵⁰ Welch, 84. Welch states that the veils over the Prophet and the Imams' faces were there to either "confine their blinding effulgence or to compromise with orthodox iconoclasm," indicating a possible continuation of the Sassanian practice of veiling leaders in order to protect courtiers from metaphorically "burning up."

⁵¹ "Zadspram," in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 5, trans. E. W. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), at *Zoroastrian Archives*. <http://www.avesta.org/pahlavi/zadspram12.html> (accessed March 2009), Chpt 13, lines 1-2.

blaze of a horse,” and then moving to his mother, who saw “a light come forth from her by which she could see the castles of Busra in Syria” after Muhammad was conceived.⁵²

An Islamic version of the farr, with its light metaphor, was likewise passed from Muhammad to his descendants, the twelve Imams who are revered by Shi’i as their religious leaders. Along with their biological link to the Prophet they presumably passed along his “special divine Light,” a “metaphysical substance” that provided the Shi’i religious leaders with the innate ability to discern truth.⁵³ The Imams are therefore “reverenced as manifestations of the divine Light,” and are attributed “by virtue of their lineage, an especial divine grace, like the royal Khvarenah,” in Shi’i mythology.⁵⁴

Temporal rulers in the Iranian cultural area, under both Shi’i and Sunni dynasties, also continued to metaphorically receive the farr in the form of a light from God. The Iranian authority, derived from the farr-i izadi, invested the king with a “divine light;” and he was therefore expected to wield political authority under celestial guidance.⁵⁵ Emphasis was placed on the king’s designation as “the Shadow of God on Earth” and he

⁵² Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 69.

⁵³ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1, 377.

⁵⁴ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “How Did the Early Shi’a Become Sectarian?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (1955), 13. Boyce, 152.

⁵⁵ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 8-9.

derived his Islamic power from the central Caliph, who was considered heir to the “Mantle of the Prophet” Muhammad.⁵⁶

Abol-Fazl-e `Allāmi, vizier to the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor Akbar, developed a formula for monarchical legitimacy that overtly spells out its reliance on the farr. Abol-Fazl justified his emperor’s authority by stating:

Kingship is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe; it is the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues. Modern language calls this light *Farr-e Izadi* [Divine Glory] and the tongue of antiquity called it *Kayān Kharra* [Kayānid Glory]. It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone, and men in the presence of it bend the forehead of praise toward the ground of submission.⁵⁷

Abol-Fazl derived this guiding principle from the Iranian concept of the farr as outlined by the twelfth-century Iranian Sufi philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardi Maqtūl.⁵⁸

Suhrawardi’s theories began with a defense of Peripatetic celestial physics, but he received an ecstatic vision that fundamentally changed his outlook. During this mystical experience he

...saw this closed spiritual universe explode, and was shown the multitude of those ‘beings of light whom Hermes and Plato contemplated, and the celestial beams which are the sources of the *Light of Glory* and of the *Sovereignty of Light (ray wa khurrah)* heralded by

⁵⁶ Arjomand, *Shadow*, 8, 94.

⁵⁷ Quoted in: Abolala Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 7.

⁵⁸ Soudavar and Beach, 410-415.

Zarathustra, towards which a spiritual rapture raised the most devout and blessed King Kay Khusraw’⁵⁹

After receiving this insight, Suhrawardi argued that the essences could only be recognized and accepted as the result of direct, mystical experience.⁶⁰ He came to the conclusion that knowledge must go beyond formal education and be participatory, experiential, and serve to unite the individual with God by understanding the Light of Lights, from which all lesser forms of existence and sources of radiance originate.⁶¹

The majority of Suhrawardi’s ‘Philosophy of Illumination,’ which he described as a resurrection of pre-Islamic Iranian wisdom, is devoted to explaining how anyone can find their “inner spark” that connects them to God, a personal farr, through mystical practice.⁶² His work also, however, bound “the prophetic tradition of Zoroaster and the ecstatic holy sovereigns (Ferēdūn, Kay Kosrow), with the Semitic prophetic tradition of the Bible and the Koran.” He achieved this by pointing out the “coincidence between the concepts of the Zoroastrian “Light of Glory” (*X^varnah*, Persian *Korra*), the “Mohammedan Light” (*Nūr-e Mohammādī*), and the ^v*Sakīna* (the Hebrew *Shekhina*,

⁵⁹ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993), 208.

⁶⁰ Hossein Ziai, “The Illuminationist Philosophy,” *Instituto Nokhooja*, http://www.nokhooja.com.br/temas/filosofia_iluminacao/filosofia_iluminacao_filosofia_e.pdf (accessed Jan 2009).

⁶¹ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 153-154.

⁶² Hamid Algar, “The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin,” *Religious Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (1980), 88.

“Presence of the Divine Glory”) as the source of “prophetic charisma” and leadership legitimization in these three religions.⁶³

Suhrawardi’s *Book of Radiance*, written for the Seljuk Sulaymān Shah, unambiguously addresses the legitimization of kings by defining the ideal temporal ruler with the light symbolism of the farr-i izadi:

Whoever knows philosophy, and perseveres in thanking and sanctifying the Light of Lights, will be bestowed with royal Kharreh [Kayanid Light] and with luminous Farreh, and...divine light will further bestow upon him the cloak of royal power and value. Such a person shall then become the natural Ruler of the Universe. He shall be given aid from the High Heavens, and whatever he commands shall be obeyed; and his dreams and inspirations will reach their uppermost, perfect pinnacle.⁶⁴

Suhrawardi specifically refers to the “Kayanid Light,” the farr of the kings, as distinct from the “luminous Farreh” the farr of the gods that all people can obtain through mystical introspection, indicating that the temporal kings who serve as “God’s vicegerents on earth” must obtain both in order to rule with wisdom and justice.⁶⁵

Suhrawardi thus reiterates the Sassanian king Ardashir’s declaration that the relationship between the king and religion resembles that of twins who cannot live without one

⁶³ Henry Corbin, “*Āzar (Ādar) Kayvān*,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, <http://www.iranica.com/newsite/index.isc?Article=http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v9f3/v9f379.html> (accessed March 2008).

⁶⁴ Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, *Partow Nameh—The Book of Radiance: A Parallel English-Persian Text*, trans. Hossein Ziai (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1998), 84-85.

⁶⁵ Hossein Ziai, “The Source and Nature of Authority: A Study of Al-Suhrawardī’s Illuminationist Political Doctrine,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi and Charles E Butterworth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 317

another, and reinforces the concept that the temporal ruler's primary responsibility is to maintain a just society in which Islam can flourish.⁶⁶

The Mongol invaders who captured Baghdad in 1258 killed the Abbasid Caliph and instituted their own methods for establishing royal legitimacy. However, like so many of Iran's former conquerors, they eventually adopted many aspects of Persian culture, including the *farr-i izadi*—which was very similar to Mongol customs that called for charismatic, divinely favored leadership. Like the later Mughal emperors, the Il Khānid Mongol dynasty that ruled Iran from 1256 to 1349 developed a new theory for legitimizing their kings based on Suhrawardi's Philosophy of Illumination.⁶⁷

One of the ways Il-Khanid shahs endeavored to further this supposition was by commissioning illustrated copies of the *Shahnameh* that showed them as ancient Iranian kings with the light of the *farr*. The most famous of these, the early-fourteenth century Abu-Sa'id *Shahnameh*, commonly referred to as the Great Mongol or Demotte *Shahnameh*, was an obvious “ attempt to enhance the legitimacy of Mongol rule in Iran by infusing Ilkhānid history into the iconography of the Iranian national epic.”⁶⁸ Their kings are depicted as the poem's heroic kings, with the light of the *farr-i izadi* in the form of a solar disk or sunburst surrounding their heads.

⁶⁶ Shaul Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam: Studies in Religious History and Intercultural Contacts* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1995), I 214.

⁶⁷ Abolala Soudavar, “The Saga of Abu-Sa'id Bahādor Khān. The *Abu-Sa'idnāmé*,” in *The Court of the Il-Khans, 1290-1340*, ed. Julian Raby and Teresa Fitzherbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 184-186. Soudavar, *Aura*, xi, 10.

⁶⁸ Hossein Ziai, “Editor's Note,” in Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), x.

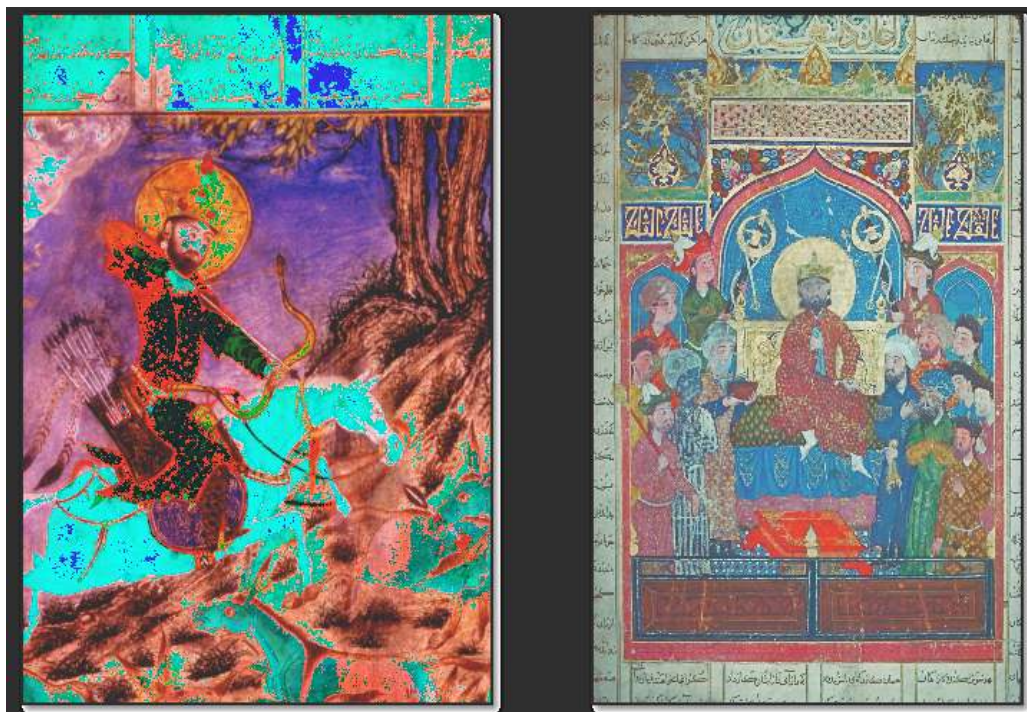


Figure 4. Illustrations from the *Abu-Sa'id Shahnameh*⁶⁹

The Il Khanids also adapted and exploited the *Shahnameh's* general themes, many of which “conformed to Mongol history and traditions, and provided a common ground between Mongol and Iranian epic history” to strengthen Mongol legitimacy.⁷⁰ The images in the *Abu-Sa'id Shahnameh* illustrate episodes in Mongol history as well as the stories originally told in Ferdowsi's epic. Figure 5 is an excellent example of this union. It depicts the *Shahnameh* story about the Sassanian king Bahrām-e Gur and his brother Narseh, the viceroy of Khorāsān; as well as the tale of how the Il Khanid Shah Ghāzān

⁶⁹ “Bahram Gur Hunting Onagers;” “Iskandar Enthroned.” Demotte *Shahnama* (Great Mongol), *Fisher Fine Arts Library Image Collection*, 1328-36, <http://hdl.library.upenn.edu/> (accessed May 2009).

⁷⁰ Abolala Soudavar, “The Saga of Abu-Sa'Id Bahādor Khān. The Abu-Sa'idnāmé,” in *The Court of the Il-Khans, 1290-1340*, ed. Julian Raby and Teresa Fitzherbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 181-182.

formally appointed his brother Uljāyту, also the viceroy of Khorāsān, his successor. The illustration was intended not only to compare the Il Khanids to the ancient Iranian kings, but also to bolster a false claim by the vizier Rashid-od-din Fazlollāh that Ghazan had formally named his brother as his heir five years before his death. The royal brothers are shown with shining halos that symbolize their farr, which is applicable to both the *Shahnameh* and the “true” story.⁷¹

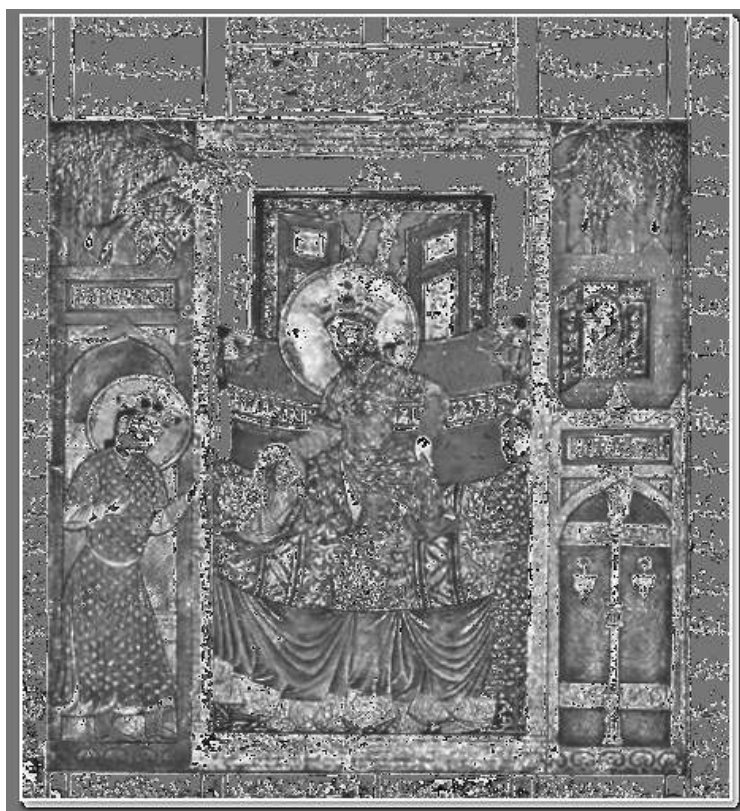


Figure 5. Bahram Gur appoints Narsi Viceroy of Khurasan⁷²

⁷¹ Soudavar, *Aura*, 10.

⁷² “Bahram Gur Talking to Narsi; Folio 212r, *Shahnama (Great Mongol)*,” *The Shahnama Project*, 1335, <http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/shahnama/faces/cardview/card/ceillustration:1643932465> (accessed May 2009).

The Safavid Synthesis

The Il Khanid government, with its relatively relaxed outlook regarding religious diversity, allowed Sufis to freely practice their form of Islam. Many of the Sufi orders had developed as a form of religious expression for the common people to “fill the gap in the field of the esoteric side of Islam left vacant by Shi’ism,” and they therefore developed a decidedly Shi’i orientation.⁷³ Because of influence levied by these Sufi orders and several outstanding Iranian Shi’i theologians, many Iranians gradually moved toward Shi’ism. As a result, the leader of one of these Sufi orders, the Safavid Shah Ismail who at the turn of the sixteenth century wrested Iran from Turco-Mongol rule, was able to relatively swiftly transform Iran into a Shi’i state.⁷⁴

With the twelfth Imam’s occultation, “the legitimate exercise of power disappeared from the world,” and the Shi’i therefore have a tendency to consider all temporal governments “irredeemably usurpatory,” and have consistently avoided developing a comprehensive definition of what comprises a state’s legitimacy during the twelfth Imam’s absence.⁷⁵ However, they were pragmatic enough to concede that because of the Imam’s occultation his political authority has temporarily lapsed, and they afforded leaders who attempted to govern in accordance with Islamic principles a certain

⁷³ Momen, 90, 101.

⁷⁴ Nasr, “Ithnā ‘Asharī,” 100.

⁷⁵ Haggay Ram, “Islamic ‘Newspeak’ in Iran,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1993), 203. Mangol Bayat, “Shi’a Islam as a Functioning Ideology in Iran: The Cult of the Hidden Imam,” in *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*, ed. Barry Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 26.

degree of legitimacy in order to maintain “domestic tranquility” and avoid anarchy.⁷⁶

Twelver Shi’ism, while denying “legitimacy in the ultimate sense,” considers a temporal ruler, “a necessity for order and prosperity”—a necessary evil.⁷⁷ The Imamate therefore lost most of its political power and become almost a purely religious concept, and sovereignty was split between the caliph and the king.

Although the religious authority had gone into occultation with the Twelfth Imam, Shi’i philosophers and mystics continued to believe in an “uninterrupted chain of human mediators acting as spiritual representatives of the Hidden Imam.”⁷⁸ Iranians, both Sunni and Shi’i, were always in search of a “true leader” endowed with a God-given charisma that manifested itself in light, a clear reflection of the farr of the gods. Ismail Safavid took advantage of these convictions and formally introduced Shi’ism, with its many similar tenants, into Iran’s governmental structure as a legitimizing factor for Iranian kings.⁷⁹ He claimed descent from the Seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, with a falsified genealogy, and declared that because of this heritage he was destined to rule as a Shi’i monarch on behalf of the Hidden Imam. Ismail accordingly recombined the temporal and religious lines of legitimacy by appealing to Iranian and Shi’i messianistic mythology.

⁷⁶ Momen, 192. Ram, “Newspeak,” 203.

⁷⁷ Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavī Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 13.

⁷⁸ Mangol Bayat, *Iran’s First Revolution: Shi’ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.

⁷⁹ Soudavar and Beach, 147-148.

Ismail overtly proclaimed himself a defender of Iran's past and heir to the glory of its former, non-Islamic kings and heroes as well as its Islamic heritage. He consequently reinvigorated the concept of the *farr-i izadi*, with the process Roger Savory drolly describes as having it "so to speak, taken out of the closet, dusted off and reinvested with all its former splendor as the *zill allāh fi 'l-arzi* or 'Shadow of God upon Earth.'"⁸⁰ Ismail proclaimed at his coronation that: "Today I came down to the earth: I am lord and king! Know as true that I am Haydar's son! I am Fereydoon, I am Khosrow, I am Jamshid, I am Rustam, son of Zal." By invoking the name Haydar, a designation for Ali, the first *Shi'i* Imam, and also the name of his own father, Ismail claimed his right to rule as a *Shi'i* Imam; by calling upon Feraydun, Khosrow, and Jamshid, pre-Islamic Iranian kings all glorified in the *Shahnameh*, and on Rostam the mythic hero of the epic, he claimed the *farr-i izadi*.⁸¹

Safavid shahs, including Ismail, did not, however, entirely merge temporal and religious authority. They delegated administration of religious issues to a deputy, the *sadr*, a position that had been created a century earlier by the Timurids. The *sadr* was responsible for administering the legal system and religious endowments, and for spreading and enforcing the *Shi'i* faith. The monarch appointed and paid the *sadr*, and could dismiss him—and those who worked for him—at will. This power allowed the Safavids to develop religion into a political tool by forcing the *ulama* into a bureaucratic

⁸⁰ Roger Savory, "The Safavid State and Polity," *Iranian Studies* 7, no. 1/2 (1974): 179-212.

⁸¹ Hamid Ahmadi, "Unity Within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 127-47. 137.

organizational structure and controlling their operations along with those of the state.⁸² However, when the dynasty collapsed in 1722 after an Afghani rebellion, the clerics withdrew from the political arena and developed a disregard for political involvement, and as a result they were able to obtain relative freedom from state control.

The Farr in Post-Safavid Iran

Afghani rule over Iran was short-lived. Nadir Qoli, the orphaned son of an Afshar tribal peasant, rallied a coalition of Khorasani bandits and mercenaries in support of Tahmasp Mirza, the son of the last Safavid shah. Nadir defeated the Afghans in 1726, and allowed Shah Tahmasp, “an ineffectual, lazy, vindictive alcoholic,” to hold the Iranian throne for six years before declaring him unfit and replacing him with his infant son.⁸³ Nadir then, with personal charisma and a successful military record, deposed the child shah and established his short-lived Afsharid rule in 1736.⁸⁴

Nadir Shah did not go to the trouble of creating a false genealogy to establish himself as a descendent of the Imams or a member or an Iranian royal family; and he even tried to “effect a definitive break with Safavid rule and its principles of legitimacy

⁸² Savory, 24. Halm, 86-88. Soudavar and Beach, 148. Lapidus, *Islamic Society*, 234, 241.

⁸³ Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 152.

⁸⁴ Ernest Tucker, *Nadir Shah's Quest for Legitimacy in Post-Safavid Iran* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 9, 12.

of kingship,” as well as with Shi’ism in general.⁸⁵ However, although Islamic political theorists did not view his exercise of *imārat al-istilā*, “government by someone whose mere control of a territory legitimized his rule of it” as a sole reason for legitimization, it was perfectly congruent with the Persian concept of *farr-i izadi*. Additionally, at this point in Iran’s history a shah’s legitimization depended more on “how well he provided for his subjects’ welfare and defended them,” and even more on “how he supported a Shi’i clerical hierarchy as it developed more and more autonomous power and status.”⁸⁶ The dual line of legitimacy had become more entrenched, and the accepted belief was that kings were needed only to preserve order for the ulama, the protectors of religion.⁸⁷

The Qajar Dynasty that emerged in 1779 explicitly restored these two separate lines of authority, a standard that continued until the Ayatollah Khomeini merged them back together two hundred years later.⁸⁸ The Qajars did not try to bolster their legitimacy with claims of descent from the Imams, nor did they claim to be agents of the twelfth Imam.⁸⁹ They did, however, like so many of their predecessors, create a fictitious history

⁸⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, “The Qajar Era, Part I,” in *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi’ism in History*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 194.

⁸⁶ Tucker, 5-15.

⁸⁷ Arjomand, *Shadow*, 223.

⁸⁸ Lapidus, *Islamic Society*, 244-245. Arjomand, *Shadow*, 222-223.

⁸⁹ Abdul-Hadi Hairi, “The Legitimacy of the Early Qajar Rule as Viewed By the Shi’i Religious Leaders,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 3 (1988), 271.

that traced their lineage back to Iran's ancient rulers, revealing a desire to legitimize their rule by claiming the *farr-i izadi*.⁹⁰

The Qajars also tried to reinforce their legitimacy with royal sponsorship of the *ta'ziyeh* passion plays, and it was during their era that the *ta'ziyeh* was formalized and institutionalized in Iran.⁹¹ The *ta'ziyeh*, which literally translates as “mourning,” re-enacts the slaughter of Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, and his righteous followers by the Umayyad army under the command of the evil Yazid during the Battle of Karbala, which took place about 60 miles south of modern Baghdad in 680. *Ta'ziyeh* performances range from the extremely sophisticated with professional actors, expensive costumes and elaborate sets to simple street dramas performed by local amateurs with makeshift—or no—costumes. The thing they all have in common is that they evoke strong emotional responses from their audiences, similar to the one Kriwaczek describes:

...many in the audience, both men and women were crying bitterly, real tears streaming from their eyes, their shoulders heaving with sobs; burly men with rifles over their shoulders were wiping their damp, unshaven cheeks with huge bandana handkerchiefs. This was no play-acting, no demonstration of religious piety for the sake of the clergymen in the crowd.... I was seeing real, genuine, unashamed weeping that could only possibly come from the heart.⁹²

⁹⁰ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Fragile Frontiers: The Diminishing Domains of Qajar Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 2 (1997), 209.

⁹¹ Peter Chelkowski, “Indigenous Theatre: *Ta'ziyeh* Mourning Rituals,” *The Iranian*, April 2001, <http://www.iranian.com/Arts/Taziye/> (accessed Oct 2007); and “Time Out of Memory: *Ta'ziyeh*, the Total Drama,” *Asia Society*, <http://www.asia.society.org/arts/taziye/chelkowski.html> (accessed Nov 2007).

⁹² Kriwaczek, 222.

Kriwaczek goes on to explain how members of the crowd described the story behind the performance as a fight between good and evil that never ends in a manner similar to those outlined in Zoroastrian beliefs.

Dabashi describes the ta'ziyeh as a medium in which “reality and fiction are counternarrated,” and “art and politics [are] almost impossible to separate.” The ta'ziyeh brings the thirteen hundred year old tragic events that took place at the Battle of Karbala into the present. Historical events and their remembrance are “collapsed into each other” in the ta'ziyeh, “preventing a sympathetic distancing of the audience from the fact of the event.”⁹³ The ta'ziyeh also creates a sense of timelessness, a space in which there is “...no difference between the past and the present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history 1,300 years ago actually became a reality in that moment,” and history and myth are blended into present events.⁹⁴

Iranians have often used the ta'ziyeh's themes and its ability to fold the past into the present to encourage collective oppositional action.⁹⁵ During the 1906 Constitutional Revolution mullahs who supported the revolution “whispered in the neighborhoods that the Qajar tribe had assisted Yazid in his war against the sons of Ali” in order to discredit

⁹³ Hamid Dabashi, “Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest,” *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005), 94

⁹⁴ Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). 80.

⁹⁵ Arjomand, *Shadow*, 241.

the Shah and imply that his family had never received God's sanction to rule.⁹⁶ These revolutionary clerics believed a Western-style constitution would help ensure the government did not defy Islamic law.⁹⁷

There were also many critics of constitutional government among the ulama; one of the most outspoken was Shaykh Fazl Allāh Nūrī, a Tehrani *mujtahid*. Nuri's *Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism* called upon God to bless the Shah, asking him to "corroborate our king and his army; eternalise his life; immortalise his kingship and rule; and establish him on the straight path." Nuri also stated that religious and temporal rule were sometimes given to a single person, but were more often divided; that

...two authorities are complementary and supplementary to each other, that is to say, the foundation of Islam is laid upon these two [sets] of affairs: deputyship in the affairs of prophecy and kingship. Without these two, Islamic provisions would be inactive. As a matter of fact, kingship is the executive power of Islamic provisions, and doing justice depends on executing them.⁹⁸

However, even the triumphant revolutionaries, both secular and religious, did not abandon the monarchy and its legitimizing farr with the 1906 Constitution. They allowed the Shah to insert the sentence "Kingship is a gift that with divine will is bestowed upon the person of the king by the nation" into the 1906 Supplementary Fundamental Law—making the Iranian nation the means through which God's farr would be conferred upon

⁹⁶ Ram, "Newspeak," 203.

⁹⁷ Mackey, 146.

⁹⁸ Abdul-Hadi Hairī, "Shaykh Fazl Allāh Nūrī's Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 3 (1977), 338, 335-336.

the Shah.⁹⁹ The end result of the 1906 Revolution therefore created an explicit link between the ancient farr of the Iranians and modern nationalism, a connection the upcoming Pahlavi shahs tried to capitalize on in their pursuit for legitimacy.

⁹⁹ Ahmad Ashraf and Gherardo Gnoli, "Iranian Identity," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge & Kegan, 2006), 527.

THE PAHLAVI DYNASTY AND THE FARR

Nothing is more difficult than competing with a myth.

— Françoise Giroud¹

In the years immediately following World War I, Iran's new constitutional government was struggling to overcome the war's devastation. Iran had served as a battlefield for Russian, Ottoman, German and British soldiers—as much as a quarter of the civilian population died either during the fighting or as a result of its devastation, which included a crippling famine and epidemic disease. Nationalist movements that might have developed a program to restructure the government were overcome not only by the effects of the war but also by territorial infighting; the lack of urban development; and primitive, insecure roads. Centralized economic structures were factionalized; and foreign powers, specifically Great Britain and the Soviet Union, contributed to the confusion by pressing to obtain ever-greater control of the country.²

A Cossack Brigade Commander, Reza Khan, took advantage of this chaotic situation in February of 1921. He used his military might to stage a coup and place the pro-British journalist, Sayyid Zia al-Din Tabatabai in power as Prime Minister. Reza

¹ Françoise Giroud, *I Give You My Word* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 128.

² Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74, 79-80. Michael P. Zirinsky, "Imperial Power and Dictatorship: Britain and the Rise of Reza Shah, 1921-1926," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 4 (1992), 640

Khan then installed himself as army commander, and elevated himself to Minister of War in April, thus firmly establishing his power base. The new government promised land reform, national independence and an industrialized economy; annulled the Anglo-Persian treaty; and restored relations with the Soviet Union on a seemingly equal basis. Reza Khan focused on strengthening the Army, and he used its new capability to quickly replace Sayyid Zia with Qavam as-Saltaneh and to continue consolidation of real power in his own military might.³

The formal government focused on suppressing tribal discord, trade union protest, and all other forms of opposition. Reza Khan took over as Prime Minister in 1923 and continued his machinations aimed at centralizing political power in his own hands. In 1925 he successfully obtained both clerical and majles support for his bid to depose the Qajar Dynasty and replace them with his own Pahlavi Dynasty, styling himself Reza Pahlavi Shah.⁴

British diplomat, Victor Mallet, described how Reza's rise to power conformed with earlier dynastic changes: "Persian history presents many examples of such changes; indeed the Kajars themselves came in on a revolution, while Nadir Shah rose...in a very similar way...."⁵ Reza Pahlavi Shah was thus "...not a usurper from the standpoint of Iranian history and society, which had always lacked a continuous aristocracy, and where

³ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 80-82. Zirinsky, 639.

⁴ Hamid Ahmadi, "Unity Within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005), 137. Keddie, 82-83.

⁵ Quoted in Zirinsky, 19.

rebellion was always justified by its success;” he was the “imposing warrior ‘come out of the mountains,’ like Ardashir Papakan, founder of the Sassanian dynasty, or Arshak, the first of the Parthians, or—mythically—like the future Savior-Heroes...presently asleep in the mountains of Tabaristan.”⁶ Reza Pahlavi established his dynasty and the opportunity to begin the modernization of Iran by first obtaining a charisma that distinctly resembled the traditional *farr-i izadi*.

Under the Pahlavis, for the first time in Iranian history, the central state extended its reach to the local, village level. However, in the process, the two Pahlavi shahs set themselves against all sectors of Iranian political culture by dramatically enlarging the state bureaucracy while simultaneously canceling all social support.”⁷ Reza Pahlavi’s primary concerns were secularization and modernization; he introduced new civil and criminal law codes, abolished the *shari’a* courts, limited religious courts to only dealing with divorce and marriage, instituted property registration laws, and forced western dress and the unveiling of women. All of these actions alienated both the clergy as well as ordinary Iranians, primarily those in the urban working class. Reza Pahlavi’s “Modernization from Above” also included land, civil service, military, educational, economic, banking, taxation, and foreign trade reforms, as well as infrastructure improvements. However, he forced these reforms without also restructuring the old

⁶ Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 337. Pio Filippani-Ronconi, “The Tradition of Sacred Kingship in Iran,” in *Iran Under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 81.

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14- 15.

agrarian organizations or making any changes that would benefit the lives of the peasants; in fact, peasants were burdened with higher taxes and with greater military obligations than before. He also took action against opposition with either terror or incarceration.⁸

Reza Shah, in the midst of his determination “to remove the influence of religion from politics” and to “undermine the political influence of the clerics,” tried to force modernization on Iranian society.⁹ As a result, he conformed to the traditional archetype of the unjust king—a tyrant unconcerned with protecting religion who has lost the *farr-i izadi*. When faced with this reality, in the form of a 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion, Reza Shah took the example of many of his predecessors described in the *Shahnameh* and chose abdication in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza.¹⁰

Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi recreated many of his father’s worst mistakes. He pushed through his “White Revolution” (a six-point reform program that called for land reform, sale of government-owned factories to finance this land reform, a new election law including women’s suffrage, nationalization of forests, a national literacy corps, and a plan to give workers a share of industrial profits) with a plebiscite in 1963. The White Revolution did not exempt religious endowments from land reform if they produced

⁸ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 87-102. Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, Revised ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), 36-39.

⁹ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, vol. 24, Library of Modern Middle East Studies (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 13.

¹⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions, Princeton Studies on the Near East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 164-165.

income; it therefore had the potential to drastically limit religious incomes. Prominent religious jurisconsults did not openly oppose land reform, it was too popular with the masses they were working to influence—they focused instead on challenging women’s suffrage and the practice of allowing elected officials to swear their oaths of office “by the holy book” instead of “by the Qur’an.”¹¹ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then a teacher at the Faiziyeh madreseh in Qom, publicly denounced the Shah for his reforms.¹²

The Shah retaliated, and played into Khomeini’s hands, by attacking the Faiziyeh madreseh in March of 1963; a number of students were killed or injured.¹³ Khomeini led demonstrations (in the form of funerals and memorial ceremonies that are traditionally held forty days following a funeral) against the Shah that coincided with Moharram and the year’s Ashura commemorations.

These demonstrations spread throughout the country, and Khomeini thus was able to very successfully use Shi’i protest and martyrdom symbolism from the ta’ziyeh dramatic presentations, as well as the ancient Iranian theme of just kingship in this initial skirmish. One of the most often used slogans was “Imam Husayn, protect us from injustice,” and Khomeini warned that “Islam [was] in danger” when he likened the Shah

¹¹ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 244.

¹² Peter Avery, et al., *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 279-281. Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 145, 147.

¹³ There is a wide range of speculation regarding the actual casualty numbers, the most precise statement that can be made is that at least one student was probably killed.

to the evil Yazid in his sermons and speeches.¹⁴ A number of Khomeini's students and followers were killed during the course of these demonstrations, and Khomeini was arrested, thus deepening Khomeini's association with the Karbala stories by forging a "catalytic link" between Khomeini and Husayn."¹⁵

As part of his insecurity, Muhammad Reza first retaliated with actions that very effectively alienated the politically active Shi'i clergy, arresting and executing some of their most vocal members. He did not, however, permanently imprison or execute the one leader who, in retrospect, it seems he most needed to silence—Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was left free after 1964 to openly denounce the Pahlavi regime from exile in Iraq.¹⁶ The Shah then tried desperately to maintain his legitimacy, primarily by glorifying himself and Iran's ancient heritage in the name of nationalism.

These attempts were notoriously unsuccessful. Most notable was the 1971 international extravaganza Muhammad Reza staged to celebrate the twenty-five hundred year anniversary of Cyrus the Great's supposed founding of the Iranian nation, and to emphasize the Pahlavi Dynasty's link with this glorious leader. The Shah intended to underscore his status as *Āryāmehr*, the Light of the Aryans, in possession of the

¹⁴ Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 23.

¹⁵ Manochehr Dorraj, *From Zarathustra to Khomeini: Populism and Dissent in Iran* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 162-163.

¹⁶ Hoveyda, 24.

farr-i izadi.¹⁷ However, the incredibly expensive spectacle attended by over 70 world leaders only impressed the Iranian people with the fact that “the shah had spent \$300 million on makeshift silk tents with marble bathrooms, and on food and wine for twenty-five thousand people, flown in from Paris.”¹⁸ As a result, many labeled it a “ridiculous farce” and considered the fact that the Iranian public had not been invited to the

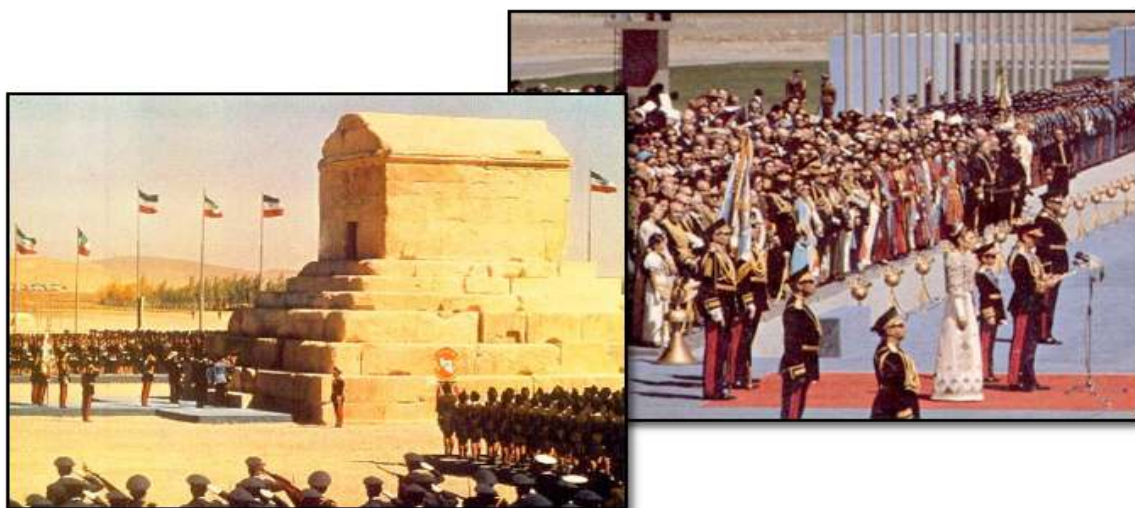


Figure 6. 1971 Celebration of 2,500 Years of Iranian Monarchy¹⁹

ceremonies as a “sign of imperial arrogance.” Foreign journalists took time away from being feted to document the poverty surrounding the opulence and used the contrast in their documentaries to characterize the Shah’s negligence. Khomeini labeled it the

¹⁷ Cottam, *Nationalism*, 328-330. Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 7.

¹⁸ Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 23.

¹⁹ Cyrus Kadivar, “2500 Years of Iranian Monarchy Celebrations in Persepolis 1971,” *Aryamehr*, 2002, <http://aryamehr11.blogspot.com/2009/03/2500-years-of-iranian-monarchy.html> (accessed Mar 2009).

“Devil’s Festival,” and asked, “What happened to all these gilded promises, those pretentious claims...that the people are prosperous and content?” The Shah’s attempt to invoke ancient Iranian symbols and hold on to the farr had foundered; however, he refused to acknowledge this fact.²⁰

The 1978-79 Islamic Revolution hinged on Khomeini’s charisma, and the Shah’s lack of it. In 1973 the Shah stated that he had “been chosen by God to perform a task. My visions were miracles that saved the country. My reign has saved the country, and it has done so because God was on my side.” However, by 1978 Richard Cottam cites the Shah’s loss of personal control as “the most important accelerating force” behind the disintegration of the Iranian state’s institutional base for peaceful succession of power, and lists an impressive array of economic measures that indicate Iran had not been “saved by a miracle.”²¹

To seal the Shah’s fate, Khomeini and his followers successfully enlisted ancient symbols and motifs to convince the Iranian people that their Shah, by failing to protect physical and spiritual needs of the people, had lost the farr-i izadi, and that the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had received it.²²

²⁰ Kadivar. Ebadi, 24.

²¹ Cottam, *Nationalism*, 322-323.

²² Mackey, 277-278.

KHOMEINI, VILAYET I-FAQIH AND THE FARR

The terrible charisma of kings...men crept close, longing to bask in it, for something more than material reward. The lure of heroism, the benediction of action, might have only death for its prize, and yet men flocked to the king's banner. [Is it] the seductive promise of perfection in service to this bright-seeming thing?

— Lois McMaster Bujold ¹

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers skillfully exploited Iranian cultural images and symbols in a modern, nationalist context to gain and consolidate power during and after the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution. They “carefully and deliberately” drew images “from the depth of Persian historical memory” to build a “collective fantasy” that “gave the masses a sense of personal integrity, collective identity, historical rootedness, and feelings of pride and superiority” when they constructed Khomeini’s authority.² Because of this reliance on Iranian collective memory, it appears Khomeini did not modernize Shi’ism with his revolutionary conception of Islamic government: vilayet-i faqih, governance by the jurist. With vilayet-i faqih Khomeini instead reached back into the past and claimed the farr-i izadi; and his followers used Islamic manifestations of this ancient Iranian concept to mobilize

¹ Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Hallowed Hunt* (New York: Eos, 2005), 384.

² Ahmad Ashraf, “Theocracy and Charisma: New Men of Power in Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 (1990), 114.

support, characterize the revolution's villains and heroes, provide their demonstrations with the necessary drama to gain power, and to legitimize Khomeini's theocracy.

The Islamic Revolution began with protests against the Shah by a variety of groups, with vastly disparate ideologies. However, in the final months prior to the Shah's departure in January of 1979 most of the Revolution's actors perceived it as a crusade for justice against Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's tyranny. The conflict between the Shah and the Ayatollah was rooted in the pre-Islamic belief that it is the king's obligation to support religion, and that if he does not he will lose the legitimizing force of God's sanction—the *farr-i izadi*.

Soudavar brings this central struggle of the Islamic Revolution into historical focus with his assertion that "Persians intuitively evaluate the intensity of their leaders' Divine Glory and shift their loyalties accordingly," and Persian history is rife with examples of "opportunistic shifts of allegiance."³ Khomeini triumphed in this contest for legitimacy with rhetoric that portrayed the Shah as a tool of western imperialism, an enemy of religion, and "an impious brute with loose moralities" who no longer had God's approval.⁴ Khomeini then, with a "contemporary manifestation of ancient doctrine" recombined temporal and religious rule, and took the Shah's place as the head of the

³ Abolala Soudavar and Milo Cleveland Beach, *Art of the Persian Courts: Selections From the Art and History Trust Collection* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 415.

⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 498.

Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵ The revolution therefore “fundamentally transform[ed] the very basis of governance, the relationship of citizens to laws, the organizing principles and social contracts along which society is conducted” by changing a central notion of Shi’ism—the rejection of all temporal governments as illegitimate so long as the twelfth Imam remains in occultation.⁶ The means by which this transformation was accomplished was Khomeini’s philosophy for leadership legitimization, *vilāyēt-i faqīh*, guardianship of the jurisconsult.

Khomeini’s plan is ostensibly based on the work of two prominent Shi’i jurists, Mullah Ahmad Narazi (d. 1829) and Shaykh Muammad Husayn Nā’īnī (d. 1936).⁷ However, he took these theories regarding vilayet-i faqih out of context and far beyond their original intentions; and he did not reconcile them with the classic Islamic legal sources, which only provide the clergy with the authority to give rulings in technical disputes, not to exercise sovereign rule.⁸ Additionally, although these earlier writers hinted at the concept of clerical leadership, they did not have a strong or clear basis for

⁵ Marvin Zonis, “Review: *Iran Under the Pahlavis*,” *The American Political Science Review* 73(3), no. 3 (1979), 911.

⁶ Mehdi Khalaji, “Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy, Policy Focus #79,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf> (accessed July 2007), 6. Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 170. Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 51.

⁷ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 425

⁸ Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 260.

their work in the Shi'i Traditions, religious rule was not one of their central themes, and no Shi'i cleric prior to Khomeini claimed political authority other than advising rulers and kings to ensure they complied with shari'a law.⁹

Khomeini's proposal for vilayet-i faqih expected the ulama to do a great deal more than simply provide guidance; it called for them to assume the king's role, and his power. Khomeini believed that there is no place in Islam for temporal rulers, who he considered "historical aberrations." He stated that kings had stymied the emergence of true Islamic government since the days of the Imam Ali, and in modern times they have simply been tools of western imperialists.¹⁰ He went so far as to state that the "separation of religion and politics," an Iranian tradition ensconced in both Zoroastrian and Islamic mythology, had actually been "formulated and propagated" by imperialist powers to prop up their puppet Shah and steal Iranian resources.¹¹

Khomeini's alternative to monarchy, as stated in his treatises on vilayet-i faqih, is that a just *faqih*, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence (pl. *fuqaha*), chosen by acclamation, should rule with near absolute authority over the Iranian state as its supreme Leader.¹² Khomeini believed fuqaha who have obtained the rank of *marja*, source of emulation,

⁹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹¹ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1981), 37.

¹² Marvin Zonis, "The Rule of the Clerics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 482 (1985), 96.

inherently hold “executive power,” the authority referred to in the Qur’anic verse “O you who believe, obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you” (4:59). They should therefore be entrusted with the “divine right” to govern because their knowledge of Islamic law provides them, and only them, with the ability to serve as just rulers.¹³ Khomeini’s vilayet-i faqih is thus an institutionalized way of ensuring that only a cleric is eligible to receive the legitimizing force of the farr-i izadi in order to obtain and maintain power in an Iranian *Islamic* state.

Khomeini supported his arguments for vilayet-i faqih by redefining infallibility, which Shi’ism doctrinally characterizes as residing only in the Twelve Imams, to simply “the product of faith.”¹⁴ He claimed the Twelve Imams are infallible, and therefore the logical rulers, not because they are members of an exclusive, divinely chosen group descended from the Prophet, but because their faith, in the form of “asceticism, acquisition of illumination, and virtuous dispositions” allowed them to see themselves “in the constant presence of God.”¹⁵ Khomeini made the Imams’ inherited infallibility irrelevant to their leadership legitimization; and this allowed him to argue that anyone who achieved this mystical, illuminative goal of perfection—a state remarkably similar to the farr-i izadi—was qualified to rule Iran.

¹³ Khomeini, “Islamic Government,” 353.

¹⁴ Khomeini, “Lecture on the Supreme Jihad,” in *Islam and Revolution*, 353.

¹⁵ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 463-465. Homa Katouzian, “Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1 (2005), 238.

Khomeini's conception of vilayet-i faqih institutionalized this mythical metaphor within a modern governmental structure. According to the ancient Iranian prescription, rulers established the fact that they had been endowed with the farr-i izadi by seizing and holding on to power, and the Iranian people acknowledged their status with popular consent. When rulers were no longer able to command authority, usually after they became unjust tyrants, they were presumed to have lost the farr and their ability to govern, and it was the people's responsibility to oppose such rulers. A new leader, obviously endowed with the farr, would then arise, seize power and gain approval from the people.

Vilayet-i faqih likewise instituted a system in which rulers are supposedly chosen by acclamation after successfully displaying their innate leadership ability. Khomeini personally met both of these tests. The Iranian Constitution as adopted in 1979 accordingly refers to Khomeini's personal charisma as a necessary attribute for future leaders, attributes it to his status as the most learned faqih, and therefore limits eligibility to the clergy with the statement:

“Whenever one of the fuqaha possessing the qualifications...is recognized and accepted as *marja* and leader by a decisive majority of the people—as has been the case with the exalted *marja'i taqlid* and leader of the revolution, Ayatullah al-Uzma Imam Khomeini—he is to exercise governance and all the responsibilities arising therefrom.”¹⁶

Khomeini, by enshrining vilayet-i faqih in the new constitution with his explicit example, attempted to ensure future leaders would be chosen in the same manner that he was: by displaying that they had the Grace of God—the traditional Iranian farr-i izadi.

¹⁶ *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 66.

Iranian Cultural Memory

Khomeini would certainly never have admitted to this, even if he had consciously intended it. But what he believed and said about himself is not really important; the “Construction of a collective revolutionary myth need not be a conscious and deliberate act,” and it does not matter if the “Pieces of the mythological puzzle” are accidentally or purposely arranged, or who puts them together.¹⁷ In Khomeini’s case what is significant are the cultural myths and ideals that his followers believed in, and the ways the Iranian people projected these beliefs onto him, much as they had upon Ya’qub the Coppersmith in the ninth century.

Khomeini’s intense charisma allowed him to develop a unique relationship with his supporters that went far deeper than what was common for a high-ranking Shi’i cleric. He was able to tap into and exploit a “Mystical universe of shared sentiments” composed of “Mental pictures of communal and doctrinal origin, on one hand, and social and political realities, on the other” that resided “at the most sublimated levels of subconsciousness.” It is from these the icons of the Iranian collective consciousness that he created his image as the ultimate Shi’i champion of justice.¹⁸

The sociologist and revolutionary Dr. Ali Shariati popularized a nineteenth century saying during the early days of the Revolution: “Every place should be turned into Karbala, every month into Moharram, and every day into Ashura.” Khomeini

¹⁷ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 496.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 417, 459

embraced this sentiment as his own.¹⁹ As Swenson aptly summarizes the situation: “The utilization and manipulation of symbols and rituals in the martyrdom idiom became the means to articulate the polarity between the Iranian people in dynamic relation to their Shahanshah, Muhammad Reza; underscoring hatreds, justifying violence.”²⁰ Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari also connected the Karbala Paradigm to the pre-Islamic past in his 1968 treatise *The Epic of Hoseyn* in which he compared the Islamic martyr to Rostam, the hero of the *Shahnameh*.²¹

Khomeini and his followers, Motahhari among them, employed this imagery to the utmost during the Revolution. Khomeini assumed the characteristics of Rostam the Hero as well as those of the martyred Imam Husayn; the Shah those of the villainous monster Zahak and the evil King Yazid, and the entire world became a ta’ziyeh. The Iranian people became players in their own nation-wide *Ashura* commemoration played out over the course of a year, from January 1978 to January 1979. They had a true-to-life Yazid in the person of the Shah and real bullets, clubs, fire—and martyrs. On September 8, 1978 alone five to nine hundred people were killed, and they, along with

¹⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 29.

²⁰ Jill Diane Swenson, “Martyrdom: Mytho-Cathexis and the Mobilization of the Masses in the Iranian Revolution,” *Ethos* 13, no. 2 (1985): 121-49.

²¹ Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 108.

the hundreds of others killed throughout the year, were granted martyrdom status that placed them alongside Iran's heroes from both the ancient and Islamic eras.²²



Figure 7. Classic Coffee House Painting Depicting an Episode in the *Shahnameh*; a Scene from a Ta'zīyeh; and a Poster from the Islamic Revolution²³

Mottahedeh especially noted how the fourteen months of the Islamic Revolution resembled the ta'zīyeh. He describes how during the early days “Iranians looked on with curiosity, then—with the removal of all barriers between actors and audience—were drawn into a community of emotion.” People brought themselves into the theater to the

²² Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 232.

²³ Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 64, 109.

extent that they put their own bloody handprints—a familiar symbol from the ta'ziyeh—on placards and into graffiti.²⁴ This passion sustained the demonstrations that ultimately led to the Shah's abdication and flight from Iran in January of 1979.²⁵



Figure 8. Blood of the Martyrs²⁶

This theatricality extended to the second phase of the Islamic Revolution, during which competing factions, especially those who recognized the inconsistencies between Khomeini's earlier statements denying any desire to take over the government and his subsequent seizure of power, began struggling for power. The November 1979 seizure of

²⁴ Chelkowski and Dabashi, 109.

²⁵ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 373-374.

²⁶ Kaveh Golestan, "Iranian Revolution, 11 of 30," *Kargah.com, Iranian Artists' Site*, <http://www.kargah.com/golestan/revolution/index.php?other=1> (accessed Nov 2007). Abbas, "Blood of the Martyrs Calls for Revenge (Image Reference PAR189834)" *Magnum Photos*, <http://www.magnumphotos.com/> (accessed Feb 24, 2008).

the U.S. Embassy in Tehran then “became the central drama of the revolution.”²⁷

Khomeini used the images of the hostage crisis, especially those of having faced down and beaten the ultimate symbol of the West—the United States—as the “enduring motif of the revolution.” For Iranian hard-line revolutionaries the embassy seizure consolidated the revolution’s Islamic character.²⁸

Centrality of Justice

Khomeini deliberately and overtly built his appeal for vilayat-i faqih around Shi’i ideology and mythology, because “though the shah claimed legitimacy on the basis of hereditary right, and implied it through divine guidance in titles such as Zill Allah (Shadow of God), or played upon the concept of farr-i izadi (divine grace), what mattered was that he should conform to the shari’a” and ensure that his reign was “associated with justice.”²⁹ However, justice is also the most important principle that a traditional Iranian ruler must uphold in order to retain the farr-i izadi.³⁰ The Shah’s perceived inability to serve as a just ruler in accordance with the shari’a was therefore also seen as a sign that he had lost the farr. Both beliefs produced the same result; he no longer held the loyalty

²⁷ Ebadi, 45.

²⁸ Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2006), 89-90.

²⁹ Said Amir Arjomand, “History, Structure, and Revolution in the Shi’ite Tradition in Contemporary Iran,” *International Political Science Review* 10, no. 2, (Apr 1989), 111-119. Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 8.

³⁰ Guppy, Shusha. "The Spirit of Persian Monarchy." *openDemocracy*. June 24, 2002. http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-Literature/article_552.jsp (accessed Feb 2008).

of his subjects, and in time-honored Iranian parlance this meant that the farr had deserted him.³¹

Khomeini's writing from exile during the 1960s and 70s particularly focused on the many injustices the Shah was inflicting on Iranian Muslims. Vanessa Martin provides a vivid description of the response these treatises elicited from his most ardent supporters, the artisans and merchants of the traditional bazaar networks. She notes that their "abiding ideal was that of justice, particularly in the struggle against a state which, if not necessarily perceived as unjust, was certainly seen as liable to be so...." They believed "Iran as a just state under a brave and just leader represented yet another utopia in its cultural tradition," and that

The paragon of the believers was the Imam Husain, whose passion and martyrdom exemplified resistance to tyranny and self-sacrifice in the cause of Islam and of justice. The other heroes of this community were the just ruler, Anushirvan, and the legendary warriors of Firdausi's eleventh-century poetic epic, the *Shahnama*, such as Jamshid and Rustam, depicted in bristly combat in the pictures which adorned their coffee-houses.³²

The *bazaris* therefore responded to Khomeini's messages, which focused on these very traditional themes, at a visceral level. They came to recognize Khomeini as a legendary Iranian hero, renowned for his courage and piety, standing tall and on par with the mythical figures of the *Shahnameh* and the ta'zīyeh.³³

³¹ Martin, *Qajar*, 12.

³² Martin, *Creating*, 64-65.

³³ *Ibid.*, 66.



Figure 9. Rostam in Coffee House Painting; Khomeini in Revolutionary Poster ³⁴

As Khomeini's reputation spread beyond the bazaar, it became clear to a growing number of the members of the organizations opposing the Shah that Khomeini was the latest in the line of just rulers endowed with the *farr-i izadi*, and that he was ready to assume his place as the rightful ruler of Iran. Khomeini fit the characteristic pattern for founders of Iranian temporal dynasties as defined in Iranian mythology, specifically in the *Shahnameh*.³⁵ He exhibited signs of greatness when the nation was faced with the peril created by a tyrannical leader. Like many of the ancient kings and heroes, he was

³⁴ Ahmad Papakh, "Rostam Fighting With Dragon," *FestiveArt.com*, <http://www.festiveart.com/View.aspx?Artwork=897> (accessed Jan 2009). Chelkowski and Dabashi, 151.

³⁵ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 17. Mackey, 199-200. Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41-43.

an orphan; his father was killed when he was an infant, and his mother and the aunt who helped raise him both died when he was only sixteen. He was a *sayyīd*, a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad through the seventh Imam, and therefore a member of the Shi'i 'royal' family—as well as the Iranian, through the Sassanian princess Shahrbanou.

Khomeini had been persecuted by an 'evil' shah; and, according to widespread legends, his father had been murdered by either bandits in the employ of the Qajars or agents of Reza Khan (despite the detail that Reza Khan's coup was almost two decades after the crime).³⁶ Khomeini therefore complied with the "change of dynasty narrative" that is found in the *Shahnameh* and actual historical events. This recurring tale relates how a

...new king, often related to one of the ruling houses, has been brought up in humble circumstances far from his future seat of power, tasting hardship and deprivation. He has been unrecognized until the decisive moment comes, when his royal attributes show in his countenance and behavior. He vanquishes, often with divine blessing, the corrupt holders of power and institutes a reign of peace and prosperity.³⁷

Most significantly, Khomeini was in exile from 1964 until his return after the Revolution in 1979. As the revolution progressed, his supporters distributed his sermons through an international telephone and cassette tape recording black-market network that conveyed them almost instantaneously to Tehran where they were played in mosques, sold on the

³⁶ Brumberg, 41-43. Raymond H. Anderson, "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 89, the Unwavering Iranian Spiritual Leader," *New York Times*, June 4, 1989, 39.

³⁷ William Hanaway, "Iranian Identity," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993), 149.

streets and sent throughout the country.³⁸ He remained in contact with his followers, yet not visible to them—as if he were in occultation.

Khomeini as Imam and the Mahdi

This distance played to an enduring Shi'i political archetype; it is a precise reflection of “how the Shi'i collective memory remembers its last figure of cosmic authority—the Hidden Imam.”³⁹ To add to the resemblance, Khomeini conducted a divination that revealed he would die in Qom. His followers interpreted this prophecy as proof that he would return from exile, and their anticipation of his return led to further elaboration of, and speculation regarding, Khomeini's resemblance to the Mahdi—as well as to the Zoroastrian Saoshyant and the *Shahnameh* heroes who also experienced occultation.⁴⁰

Khomeini also resembled the Mahdi and pre-Islamic kings and heroes with his reported illumination, the most common manifestation of the farr-i izadi. His followers frequently referred to him as a source of light, with a shining face or a halo, and, “determined to sacralize the charisma,” they posted images of “Khomeini's face shining

³⁸ Marvin Zonis, “Iran: A Theory of Revolution From Accounts of the Revolution,” *World Politics* 35, no. 4 (Jul 1983): 586-606.

³⁹ Dabashi, *Discontent*, 459.

⁴⁰ Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 177-178.



Figure 10. Revolutionary Posters Depicting Khomeini's "Brilliance" ⁴¹

forth from the sky, emanating from the sun as if surrounded by a halo."⁴² Even western observers related stories about his radiance; the political economist Marvin Zonis states: "There is a light around Ayatollah Khomeini. I think it is only the power of that charisma that has made it possible to overcome the differences among the clerics."⁴³

The most explicit account of Khomeini's brilliance comes from Kuffash Bashi, who was on the airplane that returned Khomeini to Iran from France in 1979. Bashi tells the story of how "Suddenly [the] Imam rose from the place where he was sitting and went

⁴¹ Chelkowski and Dabashi, 70, 110.

⁴² Ali M. Ansari, "Iran Under Ahmadinejad: Populism and Its Malcontents," *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008), 688.

⁴³ Marvin Zonis, "The Rule of the Clerics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 482, (Nov 1985), 102.

to the front of the plane in order to pray. His face was truly shining and a halo of light could be seen around it. I swear that I saw that halo of light around the perimeter of his face.”⁴⁴ This account replicates Ferdowsi’s description of kings who were “as splendid as the sun,” because they radiated the light of the farr.⁴⁵

The farr is also commonly associated with moonlight in Iranian folklore and Zoroastrian texts and iconography. The Sassanians had specific symbols for the farr that linked it to the moon, and their terminology for the farr included references to the king’s image as a reflection.⁴⁶ Ferdowsi often referred to kings and heroes as looking like “a tall cypress tree topped by the full moon.”⁴⁷ During the early days of the Revolution an unnamed “religious authority” reportedly saw Khomeini’s face reflected on the full moon, and this vision was interpreted as an omen of divine approval.⁴⁸ As Khomeini’s charismatic power increased, seeing his face on the moon became a revolutionary loyalty test. Khomeini’s followers would ask people if they could see the image, and if the answer was no it was a clear indication of insufficient devotion to the Revolution and Khomeini, and the punishments for this infraction could be swift and brutal. As a result,

⁴⁴ Kuffash Bashi, “Story 40: Namaz-E-Shab on the Airplane,” Trans. M. Raza, *Tranquil Heart: Forty-Three Recollections of Imam Khomeini Relating to Prayers*, 2005, <http://www.al-islam.org/tranquilheart/> (accessed March 2009).

⁴⁵ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Viking, 2006), 1.

⁴⁶ Abolala Soudavar, “The Vocabulary and Syntax of Iconography in Sasanian Iran,” *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), 427-431.

⁴⁷ Ferdowsi, 1.

⁴⁸ Chelkowski and Dabashi, 41.

even educated Iranians reported having seen Khomeini's face on the full moon.⁴⁹

Chelkowski and Dabashi describe this as “the intentional imposition of meaning and significance on an otherwise innocent natural object” with “the full power of the Persian and Shi'i symbolic signification of the moon” and communicating a message that led the Iranian collective consciousness back to images of the *farr-i izadi*.⁵⁰

Khomeini's mythical status was extended to the point that he was granted the title ‘Imam,’ even though, as Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari, one of Khomeini's disciples, wrote: “in Shi'ite parlance, the word [Imam] is applied to those who lead to Allah who are immune from sin—and these are only twelve.”⁵¹ Despite this historical distinction, Khomeini's militant followers “played upon the mystical connotations of the word ‘imam’ to imply perfection, sainthood and imbuelement with the divine.”⁵² They began referring to him as *The Imam* in the early 1970s, and they did this *in Persian*, so there would be no confusion with the title ‘imam’ in Arabic parlance, where it is commonly used to refer to ordinary mosque and community leaders.⁵³ As the Revolution progressed, prayer leaders began to refer to Khomeini as simply “Imam,” without his

⁴⁹ Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 35. 20-21.

⁵⁰ Chelkowski and Dabashi, 41.

⁵¹ Murtaza Mutahhari, *Wilāyah: The Station of the Master*, trans. Yahya Cooper (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982). 75.

⁵² Martin, *Creating*, 202.

⁵³ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101.

surname, a title Iranians had not bestowed on any living person since the sixteenth century.⁵⁴

Leftists also adopted the use of the term Imam to refer to Khomeini in late 1978, “invoking Ali Shari’ati’s equation of the Islamic Imām with the Weberian ‘charismatic leader,’ one who articulates the inchoate desires of the people.”⁵⁵ Shari’ati’s followers contended that Khomeini was not just an ordinary ayatollah, but rather a charismatic Imam, and that his exalted stature would allow him to lead the revolution that would bring about the long-awaited and utopian classless society.⁵⁶ These secular revolutionaries consciously promoted the use of this loaded term as a “tactical means to the strategic end of overthrowing the shah;” they believed that the anticipated end result of their “somewhat cynical manipulation of the superstitions of the people” justified their actions.⁵⁷

Khomeini’s followers thus purposely confused the Shi’i concept of Imam with the Sufi ideas regarding the “Perfect Man.” This principle states there is always one man one earth who serves as the “perfect channel of grace from God to man.” The Perfect Man, also known as the *qutb*, the Pole, or the Axis of the Universe, holds the authority to teach the Sufi path and lead the community, a right that has been passed down from master to

⁵⁴ Arjomand, “History, Structure, and Revolution,” 113.

⁵⁵ Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 512.

⁵⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 534.

⁵⁷ Ansari, “Under Ahmadinejad,” 685.

student over the generations, traditionally reaching back to Ali. This idea directly conflicts with the Shi'i belief that the twelfth Imam is the living qutb, even though he is in occultation; however, Khomeini's followers persisted in their projection of these Sufic concepts onto Khomeini despite this inconsistency.⁵⁸ They "expanded use of the term [Imam] beyond its common meaning, until it reached the point at which they used the designation to imply that he was almost of the same rank as the twelve 'rightful' Imams of the Shi'ah, or perhaps of the same rank as the last Shi'i Imam who was to return from Occultation as the expected messiah."⁵⁹ They chanted "slogans implying that he rules by divine right and proclaiming that cognizance of the Hidden Imam is possible only through love of Khomeini."⁶⁰ They ranked Khomeini as a 'Supernatural Being,' beside, or immediately after, God and the Hidden Imam.⁶¹

Khomeini took full advantage of this projection; encouraging it with his mysticism and by not denying that he was the Imam. He initially had his portraits carefully labeled '*nāyeb-e Imām*', deputy to the Imam, "but his propaganda handlers could not resist, and he did not object to, the play on the utopian resonance of being called an 'Imām.'"⁶² He shrewdly permitted a "degree of ambiguity [to] prevail over the

⁵⁸ Momen, 208-209.

⁵⁹ Haggay Ram, "The Myth of Early Islamic Government: The Legitimization of the Islamic Regime," *Iranian Studies* 24, no. 1/4 (1991), 50.

⁶⁰ Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 28.

⁶¹ Ram, "Myth," 53.

⁶² Fischer and Abedi, 512.

precise nature of his religious charisma” and he ensured the 1979 constitution institutionalized his status as imam.⁶³

Zonis and Brumberg precisely summarize Khomeini’s association with the term Imam:

“There is a strong implication in the principle of vilayet-i faqih that Khomeini’s claim to the leadership of the Shi’is is based on divine power, on his having inherited the infallibility and the divinity of the Imams themselves. By making sure that he is referred to as the Representative of the Imam (*nayeb-e Imam*) in the constitution and the official press; by claiming that he “takes refuge with God and his miracle,” and through his insistence that the “country’s aspiration is for the emergence of the hidden Imam,” Khomeini suggests that his return to Iran, if not synonymous with the Return of the Twelfth Imam himself, has at least heralded that return. Moreover, given Khomeini’s evident charismatic appeal and the willingness of a good part of Iran’s urban poor to accord him divine power, it is clear that Khomeini rules by virtue of an attributed or claimed divine right.”⁶⁴

This quote highlights the fact that Khomeini also “ingeniously exploited the Shi’ite Messianic yearning” by encouraging his association with not just the Imams, but with the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, specifically. Ayatollah Yusef Sanei, a member of the Assembly of Guardians, went so far as to assert that Khomeini was equal to the twelfth Imam with the statement: “The Iranian nation knows that all the officials in the country are dependent on the velayat-e faqih [Khomeini], that is, the *Vali-ye ‘Asr* – the Hidden

⁶³ Ansari, “Under Ahmadinejad, 685. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 35.

⁶⁴ Marvin Zonis and Daniel Brumberg, “Shi’ism as Interpreted By Khomeini,” in *Shi’ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin S. Kramer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 58-59.

Imam.”⁶⁵ Thus “...with the fourteenth Islamic century about to expire and a new one to begin, the quasi-millennial charisma of the man they called Imam was compounded for the young militant clerics by his image as the Renovator (*mojadded*) of the century.”⁶⁶ He allowed his followers to refer to him not simply as ‘Imam’ but also specifically as the ‘Imam of the Age,’ and the ‘Lord of Time,’ titles reserved for the Mahdi; making sure that those who did not consider him the Mahdi were at least open to the idea that he was the precursor of the Mahdi.⁶⁷

Khomeini’s intensely devoted followers also began to describe him as divinely inspired, with a place among the pantheon of Islamic prophets. The journalist Clifford May describes standing in a crowd in Qom in 1979

“...as Khomeini appeared on the roof of a modest bungalow, wearing black robes and turban. He did not smile like a politician would. His face was stern, like a father gazing on an errant son. He slowly raised his hand. The crowd erupted in frenzy. ‘There have been only a few such figures in history,’ an Iranian instructed me. ‘Moses, Jesus, Muhammad—and now there is Khomeini.’”⁶⁸

This mythical status, along with Khomeini’s careful construction of vilayet-i faqih, put

⁶⁵ *Kayhan*, 23 Nov 1980, quoted in Haggay Ram, “Islamic ‘Newspeak’ in Iran,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1993), 202.

⁶⁶ Arjomand, “History, Structure, and Revolution,” 113-114.

⁶⁷ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Political Dimensions of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 230.

⁶⁸ Clifford D. May, “Iranian Revolution@30: Simultaneously Dangerous and Decrepit,” *National Review Online*, 2009, <http://www.nationalreview.com/> (accessed Jan 2009).

him on an equal standing with the twelve Imams, and allowed him to claim both temporal and religious rule of the Iranian Islamic Republic.

Vilayet-i Faqih and the Farr-i Izadi

Khomeini was able to recombine these dual lines of authority in part because of the myth of the farr-i izadi, its earlier assumption into Shi'i tradition, and the way his followers related Khomeini and his ideas regarding Islamic government to the ancient conception of Iranian kingship. Vilayet-i faqih is generally described as an innovation because there is no ideological precedent that justifies direct clerical rule in Iranian society, and it does not comply with Shi'i norms that call for the *'ulama* to distance themselves from temporal government, which is traditionally considered illegitimate during the absence of the twelfth Imam.⁶⁹ Khomeini works around this difficulty "by unequivocally declaring the faqih the rightful successor to the Imams," and thus accrediting the Leader with the Imams' political *and* religious abilities and responsibilities.⁷⁰

Vilayet-i faqih is therefore, when viewed through the prism of ancient Iranian history and mythology, and early Shi'i belief, not a modern concept. It is instead the expression of classical Iranian principles of idealized divine leadership; a theological

⁶⁹ Mansoor Moaddel, "Ideology as Episodic Discourse: The Case of the Iranian Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 3 (1992): 353-79.

⁷⁰ Bayat, *Iran's First*, 26.

innovation, but not an original political initiative.⁷¹ There are distinct aspects of Khomeini's design that echo the farr and illustrate how "the Islamic Republic institutionally reproduced royal charisma, although in a different jargon."⁷² The combination of "the glories of kingship and the Good Religion in a single person" as stated in the Zoroastrian *Denkard*, and echoed in Ardashir's third century declaration that "religion and kingship are twins," has traditionally been considered a mystical, utopian, state of affairs.⁷³ Khomeini's vilayet-i faqih reunites the two farrs of kingship and religion in the all-powerful faqih who fills the office of Supreme Leader in the very real Islamic Republic of Iran.⁷⁴

Khomeini knew the "codes" for the transmission of Iranian cultural memory. He used them, and he allowed his followers to use them even more blatantly, to recombine the dual lines of temporal and religious authority and to take on the shah's role and responsibilities.

⁷¹ Mohmoud Sadri, "Sacral Defense of Secularism: Dissident Political Theology in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001), 257-258.

⁷² Matthijs van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, From the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 221.

⁷³ *The Pahlavi Dinkard*, trans. D. M. Madan, (Bombay: The Society for the Promotion of Researches into the Zoroastrian Religion, 1911), 129.18 – 130.16.

⁷⁴ Pio Filippini-Ronconi, "The Tradition of Sacred Kingship in Iran," in *Iran Under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 56.

CONCLUSION

It is a myth, not a mandate, a fable not a logic, and a symbol rather than reason by which men are moved.

— Irwin Edman¹

Khomeini described vilayet-i faqih as “a blueprint for an Islamic government,” but in practice it turned out to be “little more than a criticism of the status quo and promises of a better form of government under the guidance of the clergy;” the old system “painted with religious colors.”² Abol-hassan Banisadr Bani Sadr, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s first president, dubbed vilayet-i faqih “political despotism under the guise of religion;” and Mehdi Bazargan, the IRI’s first prime minister, referred to it as a “clerical regency,” with clerics not just monopolizing the position of Supreme Leader, but all positions at every level across the entire span of the Republic’s government.³

Khomeini had essentially used Shi’i anti-monarchical political rhetoric to replace royal authority with religious charisma and install himself as a theocratic monarch.⁴ His

¹ Irwin Edman, *The World, the Arts and the Artist* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1928), 39.

² Homa Omid, *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State in Iran* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 40. David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society, and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 37.

³ Quoted in: Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), 247.

⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 443.

followers accepted his leadership in part because of a deeply ingrained Iranian cultural predisposition for government by divine approval based in Iranian mythology and assumed into the Shi'i traditions. They believed Khomeini's intense charisma indicated he had been chosen by God to rule their community; and as a result they treated him not simply with the respect and devotion due a renowned cleric and spiritual leader, but as a king endowed with the *farr-i izadi*. Implementation of *vilayet-i faqih* invested Khomeini as the ultimate religious and secular ruler, and resulted in a government that had the characteristics of, and operated as, a monarchy—with the head of state exercising absolute power.⁵

Khomeini paradoxically created “a power structure that was not much different from the monarchical absolutism he so vehemently opposed” during the Revolution.⁶ He defied shari'a law by putting the state above the sacred when he changed the position of supreme jurist from leader of the Shi'i religious community to the totalitarian ruler of the Iranian political community. He displaced theology with politics and gave political goals priority over religious doctrine in order to claim his position as Supreme Leader of Iran.⁷ He then, in 1989, overtly put nationalism above Islam in a revised constitution by eliminating the requirement for the Supreme Leader to be a *marja* or to be chosen by

⁵ Menashri, 36.

⁶ Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 240.

⁷ Mangol Bayat, “Shi'a Islam as a Functioning Ideology in Iran: The Cult of the Hidden Imam,” in *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*, ed. Barry Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 25-26.

popular acclaim, thus negating his primary stated justification for vilayet-i faqih—that the ruler must be the most learned jurist.⁸ Further changes have been proposed that introduce “the modern concepts of ‘majority rule,’ ‘social contract’ and ‘representation’” into the process of choosing a new Supreme Leader, none of which are congruent with traditional Shi’i methods for recognizing knowledge and wisdom in a faqih.⁹

The only significant difference between vilayet-i faqih and an Iranian Islamic monarchy is therefore a change in the pool of those eligible to serve in the top position. The old system allowed anyone who could manage to grasp power and hold onto it to take over as the shah. Khomeini, by enshrining vilayet-i faqih in the new Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution, with his explicit example stated in the document, tried to remove the position of Supreme Leader from the secular realm and to limit authority to the most learned members of the clergy. However, Khomeini’s assumption of power by means of his own distinct charisma resulted in a governmental system Bazargan described as “a dress sewn to fit the Ayatollah,” that could not be passed on to an heir.¹⁰ Therefore, like the Iranian kings who preceded him, he could not ensure his chosen successor was able to obtain the farr.

⁸ Ahmad Ashraf, “Theocracy and Charisma: New Men of Power in Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 (1990), 146. Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 200. Menashri, 17.

⁹ Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, “A New Interpretation of the Theory of Vilayat-i Faqih,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 1992), 102-103.

¹⁰ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 257.

Clerics remained in charge of Iran's government after Khomeini's death in 1989; however, they were of lesser rank and "ultimate authority was no longer exercised by the supreme religious sources or by prominent theologians." Ali Hoseyni Khāmene'i, the new Supreme Leader, was not the most learned jurist available and he did not gain his position by popular consensus. Khamenei was instead, against all traditions, both Iranian and Islamic, 'promoted' to the position by the religio-politicians then in power and forced upon the Iranian people.¹¹ He has consequently not been able to obtain the same mystical power that sustained Khomeini—the farr-i izadi.¹²

The farr, however, continues to be an important concept in Iranian power politics, and the current Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has been trying to demonstrate that he has obtained it. After his 2006 speech at the United Nations Ahmadinejad described being "protected by a sacred halo of light" while he was speaking, and how God had fixed all the world leader's eyes upon him, not allowing them to blink. Ahmadinejad's critics, believing these statements would discredit him, posted a video of him making them on the Internet. This effort appears to have backfired; many of the viewers have instead posted comments that recognize Ahmadinejad's words as proof of his "genius" and "divine wisdom," and cite his

¹¹ Menashri, 17.

¹² Haggay Ram, "The Myth of Early Islamic Government: The Legitimization of the Islamic Regime," *Iranian Studies* 24, no. 1/4 (1991), 51.

experience as “the miracle of the third millennium,” indicating they believe Iran’s president has gained the *farr-i izadi*.¹³

There are many Iranians who quite vehemently disagree with this estimation; and the government has become increasingly repressive in their attempts to limit potential revolutionary action stirring among these non-believers. As a result, the regime is beginning to resemble those that, in the past, had lost the *farr-i izadi*. The people recognize that their leaders have not gained the *farr*, and that they now have what Siamak Khatami described in 2002 as:

...a new set of decision makers who use religion only as a shield to hide behind, and behind which to commit all sorts of atrocities as well as acts of corruption, while ensuring that anybody who opposed them would be labeled as ‘anti-religion’ and, by implication, ‘anti-God,’ and persecuted jailed, exiled or killed.¹⁴

The symbols Khomeini and his followers exploited so skillfully in their attacks on Muhammad Reza Shah are now being used against the Islamic regime by bloggers, artists, and writers; all of whom can circulate their renderings on the Internet in minutes to a worldwide audience. The most obvious example of how these new technologies are being exploited is in the many UTube videos of *Shahnameh* readings and performances, editorials and their associated cartoons that allude to the epic poem as well as serious artwork and poetry with *Shahnameh* themes. These new renderings are abundant and

¹³ Abbas Milani, “Pious Populist: Understanding the Rise of Iran’s President,” *Boston Review*, 2007, <http://bostonreview.net/BR32.6/milani.php> (accessed March 2009).

¹⁴ Siamak Khatami, *Iran: A View From Within*, (London: Janus, 2004), *iv*.

easily accessed by anyone with an Internet connection as new nationalist movements with democratic ideals challenge the Islamic government using the same persistent symbols.



Figure 11. 2007 Political Cartoon with Allusions to the *Shahnameh* ¹⁵



Figure 12. Fereydoun Ave's 2004 "Rostam and Sohrab" ¹⁶

¹⁵ Serendip, "Islamic Zahak Occupiers," *Serendip*, 2007, <http://fleetingperusal.blogspot.com/2007/10/islamic-zahak-occupiers.html> (accessed May 2008).

¹⁶ Fereydoun Ave, "Rustam and Sorhab," 2004, <http://www.godsbecomingmen.com/fa.htm> (accessed April 2008).

A particularly ironic story is the one Iranian-American scholar Reza Aslan tells in the April 30, 2006 *New York Times* about a young boy he stopped in the act of scrawling graffiti on a stone block at Persepolis. Aslan states that when he looked to see what the boy had written he “immediately recognized a verse, familiar to many Iranians” from the *Shahnameh*:

*Damn this world, damn this time, damn this fate,
That uncivilized Arabs have come to make me Muslim.*¹⁷

Aslan’s story, and the couplet the boy chose to quote, bring to mind a line from the historian Stephen Humphreys: “However rationally conceived and pursued a policy may be, then, it is ultimately grounded in fallible but extremely powerful images of the past. Policy is in a sense the struggle of memory to control the future.”¹⁸ The Iranian Islamic regime is engaged in the same struggle they were in thirty years ago—the key difference is that this time they are fighting on the other side. They are being forced to recognize that leadership is a construct of the imagination, and that it is impossible to lead a nation without the support of its citizens. A dictator can rule by force without this cooperation, but he cannot sustain a viable government without a people’s belief in his legitimacy—and in Iran that means gaining, either consciously or subconsciously, the mystical, mythical force of the farr-i izadi.

¹⁷ Reza Aslan, “The Epic of Iran,” *New York Times Online*, April 30, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/books/review/30aslan.html?pagewanted=print (accessed April 2008)

¹⁸ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 85.

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