

# Commentary

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IRAN

## Game of Peacock Thrones

The days of the Islamic Republic of Iran may be drawing to a close. What next?

 SOHRAB AHMARI / JUNE 18, 2018

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Soon after the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his Parisian exile in 1979 to seize power in Iran, his domestic opponents began reassuring themselves that the new regime's expiration date was almost up, that their internal occupation by Islamists would soon be over. Nearly 40 years later, those predictions seem foolish in retrospect—but perhaps not in prospect. For while its Shiite imperium extends from balmy Arabia to snowcapped Lebanon, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces crisis on the home front. Lately, not a day goes by without at least one display of popular anger and usually several.

The death of the actor Nasser Malek Motiee triggered the latest explosion in May. Before the 1979 revolution put the kibosh on his career, Motiee had been a fixture of the potboilers, police procedurals, and lusty comedies (*Black-Clad Mehdi and the Hot Pants!*) known collectively as “Film Farsi.” In the 1969 noir *Qeysar*, he played a butcher who sets out to avenge his sister's rape, only to be stabbed to death by her assailants. “Qeysar!” the butcher cries out to his

brother, the titular antihero of the film. “Where are you? They’ve killed your brother!”

Thousands flocked to Motiee’s funeral in Tehran, though he had been the subject of a media blackout and, save for a single role in 2014, hadn’t been permitted to appear on the silver screen for four decades. “Our state-run media is our disgrace!” his fans chanted at his funeral. Met with tear gas and the truncheons of security forces, they put a twist on Motiee’s best-known line: “Qeysar! Where are you? They’ve killed the people!”

Meanwhile, Iranian truck drivers have been on a nationwide strike for more than a week as of this writing. The drivers park their trucks on long stretches of highway and block access to gas stations and government buildings in protest against low wages, road tolls, and benefits cuts. They aren’t alone. Teachers, steelworkers, hospital staff, railway employees, and sugar-factory hands are among the other groups that have walked off the job over the regime’s apparent refusal to spread the nuclear-deal “butter” promised by the Obama administration—released Iranian assets that might total as much as \$150 billion.

Women are removing their headscarves in defiance of compulsory veiling. Often, security forces hesitate to confront them directly, lest they incur the wrath of the public, though most of the women are identified and arrested after the fact. This gesture of feminine resistance, which first emerged during a mass uprising in December and January, has now become commonplace. And while the New Year’s uprising was suppressed, smaller, more scattered demonstrations continue to break out, forcing the regime to play whack-a-mole with dissidents.

The furies of the present have joined forces with the ghosts of the past. In April, a construction worker excavated a mummified body near the tomb of a Shiite saint in southern Tehran. The mummy appeared to resemble the corpse of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the founder of modern Iran, last seen in sepia-toned newspaper photographs decades earlier. The regime's sketchy reaction—first confirming and later denying the rumors and eventually confiscating the mummy—only intensified the fervid speculation roiling the streets. Chants of “Long live Reza Shah!” rang out from soccer stadiums. Footage posted to social media showed a lion-and-sun flag, Iran's traditional monarchic standard, fluttering high above a major thoroughfare in the city of Karaj.

President Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. from the nuclear deal will no doubt compound the pressures bearing down on the mullahs. While regime change is not on the American agenda, the Islamic Republic may enter its twilight of its own accord. Make no mistake: The process could take years. The exact shape of events is impossible to foresee. Even so, American policy must prepare for the possibility. The end of Islamist rule in Iran would be a world-historical event and an unalloyed good for the country and its neighbors, marking a return to normalcy four decades after the Ayatollah Khomeini founded his regime.

But what exactly is that normal? Some in the West hope that events in Iran today will revive the spirit of 1989. A liberal flowering in Iran would redeem the Arab Spring, the rise of populists in Central and Eastern Europe, and America's own Trumpian turn, among other recent disappointments. What better proof that history tends toward liberalism than the land of the scowling ayatollahs going liberal democratic?

Such velvety dreams are unlikely to materialize, however. Policymakers in Washington and other Western capitals would be wise to gird themselves for the more realistic outcomes for an Iran after the mullahs.

For more than two millennia, the unchanging principle of Iranian political life was *estebdad*, or arbitrary rule, and it remains so today. One defining feature was state ownership of all land. The state could grant plots to various classes as a special privilege but never as a matter of right. Moreover, all economic activity, agricultural or otherwise, involved winning the favor of the state; what the state gave, the state could take away. The implications for Iran's political development were profound.

“Social classes did not enjoy any rights independent from the state,” the Oxford historian Homa Katouzian has persuasively argued, and “there was no law outside the state, which stood above society, despite a body of rules that were subject to rapid and unpredictable change.” Thus, “unlike in Europe, the state's legitimacy was not founded in law and the consent of influential social classes.” From the satrap to the peasant, all lived in fear of and at the mercy of the state.

Pre-Islamic Persia had laws, to be sure, and with the Arab conquest came an elaborate religious code governing nearly every aspect of life. Yet neither the pre-Islamic law nor Shariah could order the relationship between state and society. Neither could act as a constitutional or fundamental law, a concept that simply didn't exist in Iran. As Katouzian notes, “this is what made the arbitrary exercise of power possible, indeed normal.” State agents could punish without license from Shariah—or decline to enforce Shariah precepts when it pleased them.

The arbitrariness of power extended to its source at the throne. Rulers exercised power because they possessed divine grace, and they possessed divine grace because they exercised power. Rebellion was thus a fine way to seize power, so long as you succeeded. If you didn't, you might have been beheaded if you were lucky, or had boiling oil poured down your throat if you weren't. With no formal rules of primogeniture, the death of each shah triggered a succession crisis. The heirs-designate blinded or castrated male siblings to secure their own ascent to the throne.

*Estebdad* has left deep imprints on the Iranian mind. It is *estebdad* that must be credited for the genius of Persian poetry and literature and wit, so much of which said obliquely and elliptically what couldn't have been said forthrightly, lest the writer get the boiling-oil treatment. Iranian manners, too, owe much to *estebdad*: The affected deference, that circular way of dialogue, the maddening refusal to speak directly—the key to all of these things is probably fear of arbitrary power. The downside is that *estebdad* has foreclosed the possibility of social trust.

Outsiders sometimes observe that while individual Iranians shine in every human endeavor, from art and literature to medicine and engineering, they rarely work well together. On the soccer field, for example, individual stars achieve heroic feats of kicking and dribbling, but Iranian sides founder before more cohesive foreign teams. From an early age, every Iranian boy is told that he is a little shah, and he grows up to encounter legions of other little shahs, all of whom live under the established, inescapable fact of *the shah*.

The main political consequences of *estebdad* were disorder and discontinuity. There were good shahs, great ones even. And there were bad ones. The problem was that government was never established on a principle or set of

principles. There were no Permanent Things. *Adalat*, justice, wasn't something that could be baked into a system. The best one could hope for was a just shah. Everything depended on the character and personality of the man sitting on the Peacock Throne. As political actors, Iranians toggled between high passion and magical idealism, on the one hand, and cynical passivity, civic indolence, and shocking venality, on the other. There was no moderate mean between these two extremes.

So it was that, when Western-style modernity and nationalism arrived, Iranians were caught flat-footed. Two-and-a-half millennia earlier, Persia had been the superpower of its day. But by the late 19th century, the country had reached a nadir. It was a time of illiteracy, malaria, and poverty, and the nation, especially the intellectual elite, was newly awakening to Iran's dilapidation, material and spiritual. Shame as much as pride thus fueled the nascent Iranian nationalism. A poem of the era summed up the state of affairs:

Our army the laughingstock of the world.  
Our princes deserving of the pity of beggars.  
Our clerics craving the justice of the unbelievers.  
Our towns each a metropolis of dirt.

Thanks to European imperialism and early globalization, Iranians came into closer contact with the West than ever before, and this only heightened their sense of humiliation and inadequacy. Diplomats, Orientalists, *concessionaires*, and missionaries brought with them the seeds of modernity along with their own commercial, scholarly, and imperial ambitions. These developments triggered an unprecedented legitimacy crisis in Iran at the turn of the 20th century.

Western-educated elites clamored for *mashrutiat*, government that was “conditional” on the consent of the people. Similar ideas percolated among some of the *ulama*, the high priests of Shiite Islam. Drawing on pan-Islamist ideas then gaining currency across the Middle East, leading *ulama* called for lawful government in which “the people—be they shah or beggar—would be equal,” as one influential cleric put it.

In 1906, the Majlis, or parliament, was established. But Iran’s brief experiment with constitutionalism was a disaster. The great powers, Moscow especially, were hostile to constitutionalism. The forces of *estebdad* wouldn’t relinquish so easily. And the constitutionalists were bitterly divided among themselves. The two decades that followed were marked by foreign invasion, tribal rebellions, and license instead of ordered liberty. Soon self-government came to be associated with terror, famine, and chaos.

In the early 1920s, an ambitious officer named Reza Khan stabilized the country’s borders, put down various rebellions, and forged a new nation-state from the shabby remains of the Persian Empire. The Majlis declared him shah in 1925, and he was crowned the following year. He dragged Iran, kicking and screaming, out of the depths of backwardness. The oil era had already dawned (in 1901), and the flow of black gold quickened his various projects. Roads were built, universities founded, a modern civil service born, even a new calendar adopted. Civil law and secular lawyers eclipsed Shariah and the clergy. Women were liberated, according to Reza Shah’s lights, whether they liked it or not. *Estebdad* remained the supreme principle, though it gradually softened, particularly under his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch, who ascended the Peacock Throne in 1941 following his father’s abdication.

Reza Shah's project would end six decades later in the Islamic Revolution. But how did Khomeini pull it off? Under the Pahlavis, Iranians had achieved an unprecedented degree of prosperity and social mobility. Toward the end, in the 1960s and '70s, they grew accustomed to double-digit growth, vacations abroad, children educated at universities in Europe and America, international prestige. Life was good. Yet millions of Iranians managed to convince themselves that they would be better off with Khomeini at the helm. This was political ingratitude on an incomprehensible scale.

Khomeini's powers of deception can't be overstated. Few of those who supported him, particularly among the middle classes, appreciated that they were about to replace a benign autocracy with an Islamist state. Yet deception on a mass scale is impossible without a strong appetite for it on the part of the deceived.

Recall that *estebdad* had yielded centuries of disorder and discontinuity. Dynasties and shahs came and went, but there was nothing solid to hold on to. The pace of disruption and discontinuity accelerated under the Pahlavis. The prosperity and stability of the era were real enough. But modernity handed down from on high was dizzying. Mohammad Reza Shah, especially, lost sight of how conservative his people really were. Perhaps Iran wasn't ready for *Black-Clad Mehdi and the Hot Pants!* and social-insurance schemes for Tehran prostitutes. Perhaps it wasn't wise for the shah to be known to cavort with Madame Claude's girls.

In 1971, the shah attempted to paint something like a vision of continuity with his celebrations of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy. He had the right idea anyway, though in execution it entailed little more than a decadent party in the desert. Khomeini's vision of Islamic justice, melded with vague leftish talk

about the triumph of the dispossessed, was more enticing. Amid the “confusion of a people of high medieval culture awakening to oil and money,” as V.S. Naipaul described Iran’s revolutionary generation, Khomeini promised community, enchantment, and, above all, continuity with a wholesome Islamic past.

Yet the Islamic Republic proved even more destabilizing and discontinuous with Iranian history than had the dynasty it replaced. Resurrecting the rule of the warrior-imams of the seventh century and fashioning a sort of neo-Islamic Man called for a police-and-surveillance state that was utterly alien to Iranians. Islamic continuity, moreover, came at the expense of *national* pride and memory. Khomeini and his followers had no love for the pre-Islamic elements of Iranian identity, and like all totalitarians, they set out to erase whatever was incongruous with their ideology.

A state that exercised arbitrary power was one thing; a state that sought to reshape the soul quite another. The people lost the individual and social liberties they had enjoyed under the shah but gained none of the justice and stability they pined for. The new regime made life a misery in the name of ideology while retaining all of the venality and corruption of a classical Persian court. Forty years later, Iranians have had more than their fill of the Islamic Republic.

The key to Iran’s political future lies in the tension between the ineluctability of *estebdad* and the longing for continuity. If the Islamic Republic is to give way to a decent order, sooner rather than later, Iranians must resolve the dilemmas that have brought them to this point. This requires honesty and a willingness to read Iranian history as it really is.

First, Iranian political culture demands a living source of authority to embody the will of the nation and stand above a fractious and ethnically heterogeneous society. Put another way, Iranians need a “shah” of some sort. They have never lived collectively without one, and their political imagination has always been directed toward a throne. The constitutionalist experiment of the early 20th century coexisted (badly) with monarchic authority, and the current Islamic Republic has a supreme leader—which is to say, a shah by another name. It is the height of utopianism to imagine that a 2,500-year-old tradition can be wiped away.

The presence of a shah needn't mean the absence of rule of law, deliberative politics, or any of the other elements of ordered liberty that the West cherishes in its own systems. As the late Bernard Lewis insisted when speaking of the Arab world, it is possible to have freedom and deliberation and checks and balances within nonrepresentative, nondemocratic institutions. Iran has had a Majlis for more than a century, at various points during which the body operated as a genuine legislative chamber. In a post-Islamic Republic Iran, the Majlis can be revived as a true legislative body. But a revitalized Majlis wouldn't obviate the need for a living authority, an ultimate guarantor of the state and of Iranian freedom.

A shah, moreover, can galvanize opposition to the current regime. The failed 2009 Green uprising and the more recent New Year's revolt showed that while leaderless mass movements can lay bare the regime's legitimacy deficit, they can't finally overthrow the Islamic Republic. Labor strikes and hijab campaigns and occasional skirmishes with the security forces are useful. But they can't answer the question: “Who do you propose should rule us?”

Perhaps the opposition forces will conjure a leader at the right moment and in organic fashion. Or maybe an ambitious would-be shah will emerge from among the security apparatus. Yet the most plausible current candidate is probably Reza Pahlavi, Reza Shah's exiled grandson, whose prestige and popularity have spiked in recent years, as Iranians born after the revolution reckon with what they lost to their parents' collective folly. Among the revolutionary slogans in currency today, the one with the greatest political meaning and potential is "Long live Reza Shah!" The slogan is pregnant with nostalgia, yes, but also with political imagination.

Second, Iranian political culture demands a source of continuity with Persian history. The anxieties associated with modernity and centuries of historical discontinuity drove Iranians into the arms of Khomeini and his bearded minions, who promised a connection to Shiite tradition. Khomeinism turned out to be a bloody failure, but there is scant reason to imagine the thirst for continuity has been quenched. To weather the storms of modernity, Iranians need a point of orientation—perhaps a mast to tie themselves to. Islamism wasn't it. Iranian nationalism, however, could be the answer, and, judging by the nationalist tone of the current upheaval, it is the one the people have already hit upon.

When protestors chant "We Will Die to Get Iran Back," "Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, My Life Only for Iran," and "Let Syria Be, Do Something for Me," they are expressing a positive vision of Iranian nationhood: No longer do they wish to pay the price for the regime's Shiite hegemonic ambitions. Iranian blood should be spilled for Iran, not Gaza, which for most Iranians is little more than a geographic abstraction. It is precisely its nationalist dimension that makes the current revolt the most potent the mullahs have yet faced.

Nationalism, after all, is a much stronger force, and the longing for historical continuity runs much deeper in Iran than liberal-democratic aspiration. Westerners who wish to see a replay of Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 in today's Iran will find the lessons of Iranian history hard and distasteful, but Iranians and their friends who wish to see past the Islamic Republic must pay heed.

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