

TÜRKİYE, IRAN, *and the* POLITICS *of* COMPARISON

America's Wife, America's Concubine



PERIN E. GÜREL

Türkiye, Iran, and the Politics of Comparison

In a 1962 meeting at the White House, Iran's last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, complained to US President John F. Kennedy that "America treats Turkey as a wife, and Iran as a concubine." Taking this protest as a critical starting point, this book examines the transnational history of comparisons between Türkiye and Iran from Cold War-era modernization theory to post-9/11 studies of "moderate Islam." Perin E. Gürel explores how US policymakers and thought leaders strategically used comparisons to advance shifting agendas, while stakeholders in Türkiye and Iran responded by anticipating, manipulating, and reshaping US-driven narratives. Juxtaposing dominant US-based comparisons with representations originating from Iran and Türkiye, Gürel's interdisciplinary and multilingual research uncovers unexpected twists: Comparisons did not always reinforce US authority but often reflected and encouraged the rise of new ideologies. This book offers fresh insight into the complexities of US–Middle Eastern relations and the enduring impact of comparativism on international relations.

Perin E. Gürel is Associate Professor of American Studies and Director of Gender Studies at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of *The Limits of Westernization: A Cultural History of America in Turkey* (2017) and her articles have appeared in leading journals, including *American Quarterly*, *American Literary History*, and *Diplomatic History*. Gürel is the winner of the 2020 Jack Rosenbalm Prize for American Humor Studies and has held fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Research Institute in Turkey, the Institute of Turkish Studies, and elsewhere. Her debut fantasy novel, *Laleh and the Language of the Birds*, a feminist retelling of a classic Sufi legend, is forthcoming in 2026.

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For Isaac Sinan, the Incomparable

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Acknowledgments

One day, Nasreddin Hodja was visiting Konya. A man stopped him as he strolled through the city. “Excuse me, uncle, do you know what day of month it is?” the man asked.

“How should I know?” replied Hodja, “I’m not from around here.”

The jocular character Nasreddin Hodja is one of the countless cultural touchpoints the diverse peoples of Türkiye and Iran share, along with others in West Asia and North Africa. Being Turkish and doing research on Iran, I felt a bit like Hodja, famously from Akşehir, losing his bearings in the new environment of Konya. I had to learn a whole new language (Persian) to write this book! I couldn’t have done so without support from the Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures and the Institute for Scholarship in the Arts at the University of Notre Dame.

But, perhaps, if Hodja had stayed a bit longer in Konya – incidentally, the final resting place of another shared cultural treasure, Rumi – he would have realized, as I did, that a place and people can be both entirely foreign and delightfully familiar. I owe that realization to the Iranians who taught me Persian and hosted me during my visits to Tehran and Shiraz: Elham, Heeva, Fareeda, along with my research assistants, Leila Seyedghasem, Parisa Akbari, and Niloofar Adnani, and their families. Thanks to them, being in Iran and communicating in Persian never felt like anything other than a homecoming, even as I stumbled over my words and guessed desperately at those unwritten vowels.

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My children, Marjane Honey and Isaac Sinan, reminded me of the importance of not comparing daily. It has been such an honor and inspiration to watch them become readers, researchers, and writers in their own right.

Finally, you, dear reader. The meanings of this text are made possible by you and readers like you. What a commitment it is to read a book in this age of the speedy scroll. Thank you for your time, kindness, and generosity.

Introduction

In a 1962 meeting at the White House, Iran's last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, complained to US President John F. Kennedy that "America treats Turkey as a wife, and Iran as a concubine."¹ Türkiye and Iran, both bordering the USSR, were US allies in the Cold War. However, the shah felt that the military and economic resources allocated to each country did not reflect their relative importance to the so-called Free World. In his *Mission for My Country*, published in English a year before this meeting, the shah had presented a royal vision for Iran's modernization. The book demonstrated his awareness that Iran was often compared to its neighbor Türkiye in terms of development and geopolitical importance, usually to its disadvantage.² With his complaint to Kennedy, the shah proved ready to wield the rhetorical force of comparison himself to demand a better ranking and, therefore, stronger support.

Significantly, in order to get his point across, the shah used the libidinal analogy of a love triangle, representing international power hierarchies in gendered terms and emphasizing the triangulated nature of the relationship between Iran, the United States, and Türkiye. Here were two less powerful countries willing to serve the United States's cause in the Cold War, competing for attention, credit, and material dividends under conditions that subjected them to the hegemon's misguided, ill-informed comparisons. The shah's statement, however, fell short of critiquing the conditions of comparison, challenging merely the final rankings. In fact, his gendered analogy naturalized inequality and foreclosed a vision of solidarity between Iran and Türkiye in challenging US prerogatives.

Türkiye, Iran, and the Politics of Comparison takes the shah's protest as a critical starting point. Combining archival research with in-depth

¹ Memorandum of Conversation, April 12, 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1961–1963*, Vol. XVII: Near East, 1961–1962, ed. Nina J. Noring (Washington, DC, 1994), doc. 243.

² His Imperial Majesty Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shahanshah of Iran, *Mission for My Country* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 40.

analysis of official, scholarly, and popular texts in English, Turkish, and Persian, the book traces the international history of the comparisons made between Iran and Türkiye in an era of US hegemony. My research question hinges not on whether the relations between the United States, Türkiye, and Iran have truly resembled those between a stereotypical husband, wife, and concubine between the Cold War and the War on Terror but on the cultural and political work of comparison under uneven relations of power. I ask which political actors have mobilized comparative representations of Iran and Türkiye and through what categories. Which transnational connections did these comparisons highlight and/or obscure? And finally, what role did the vast power imbalance between the United States and its two interlocutors play in these often gendered and racialized constructions?

Comparison is a type of reasoning that identifies similarities and differences between at least two objects. My analysis of the comparative tropes that have defined Iran–US–Türkiye relations builds upon poststructuralist scholarship, demonstrating that comparison is not a value-free, neutral tool but one that is deeply dependent on historical context, structures of power, and the motives of the comparer. In the process of researching, I have become more and more wary of comparison itself as a reductive mode of relating to the world. However, the main focus of the book's critique is not the everyday practice of comparison, but its wielding as a tool for discipline, control, and resource allocation under conditions of inequality. I use the term “comparativism” to refer to the power-backed, institutionalized valorization and application of comparison.

The introduction, therefore, begins by tracing the historical ascent of comparativism, studying how comparison became a privileged tool of knowledge production in conjunction with imperialism.³ I then examine the minute rhetorical operations and common tropes involved in Iran–Türkiye comparisons through an analysis of modern international scholarship on the *Shahnameh*, a classic verse epic associated with Iranian identity. A summary of the chapters follows. Ultimately, the introduction demonstrates the history and rhetorical patterns underlying comparativism in international studies, highlights the intellectual and political pitfalls associated with this mode of knowledge-making, and offers more ethical ways of approaching comparison.

This is a work of transnational cultural history, which juxtaposes dominant US-based comparisons of Iran and Türkiye with representations

³ I define “imperialism” broadly in line with Naoko Shibusawa’s formulation: “when a stronger polity subjects a weaker polity to its own preferences.” Naoko Shibusawa, “U.S. Empire and Racial Capitalist Modernity,” *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 5 (2021): 855–84, 858.

originating from those countries. Bilingual research on the United States in the world has long demonstrated how peoples othered by US ideologies have anticipated, contested, and manipulated imperial knowledge practices through local cultural production and political strategizing.⁴ Most of this scholarship, however, focuses on the power imbalances between “the center” (e.g., the United States) and a singular locus of dissent and adaptation, such as a single country or region in “the periphery.” My first book, which examined how contradictory Turkish approaches to westernization influenced US–Türkiye relations, was also part of this wave.⁵ However, as the shah’s metaphor of the love triangle demonstrates, and as Walter D. Mignolo has observed, “comparing is minimally a triangular business,” including at least two objects to be compared and a subject to perform the comparison.⁶ This book, therefore, shifts the lenses of inquiry further away from the West versus East dichotomy – itself a linchpin of comparative politics. Instead, it tracks the triangulation of comparative discourses between Türkiye, Iran, and the United States. My goal is to examine how political language and knowledge-making practices promoted by a hegemonic power, such as the United States, can influence bilateral relations between two neighboring middle-power states, as well as those states’ relations with the hegemon, offering a new vantage point on West Asian nationalisms.

⁴ See, for example, James G. Carrier, ed., *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Meltem Ahiska, “Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy of the Modern,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2–3 (2003): 351–79; Afsanah Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Cemil Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Perin E. Gürel, *The Limits of Westernization: A Cultural History of America in Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). For overviews, see Ussama Makdisi, “After Said: The Limits and Possibilities of a Critical Scholarship of U.S.-Arab Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 3 (2014): 657–84; and Perin E. Gürel, “Contested Encounters: Boundaries of American Studies and the Middle East,” *American Literary History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 579–91.

⁵ Gürel, *The Limits of Westernization*.

⁶ Walter D. Mignolo, “On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 99–119, 99.

Türkiye, Iran, and the Politics of Comparison demonstrates how, in the uneven political and discursive nexus between Türkiye, Iran, and the United States from the Cold War to the War on Terror, policymakers and opinion leaders used comparison strategically. The prevalent ideologies of each era informed the terms of comparison and manifested in several intersecting spheres: practices of knowledge generation, foreign policy dogmas, and popular representations. US-led comparativism mobilized gender, race, and class to code for hierarchy, personifying political concepts such as “modernization,” “westernization,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” and “moderate Islam” with reference to stereotypical figures and prominent individuals. US diplomatic and intelligence reports, popular media, and mainstream scholarship largely agreed on the significance of these individuals, casting them alternately as model, copy, or foil figures in different ideological formations. Transnationally disseminated and contested, comparisons did not always benefit the most powerful state entity, but often operated in favor of rising political tides, signaling the increasing influence of ascendant ideologies in any given context.

Introduction to Comparativism: Hierarchies of Knowledge and Civilization

While comparison might be universal and built-in to human cognition and language processing, the institutionalization of comparative methodologies in Europe and its colonial outposts has a history closely linked to race, gender, and class hierarchies and justifications for colonialism.⁷

⁷ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); George M. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Slep Stuurman, “Francois Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification,” *History Workshop Journal* 1, no. 50 (2000): 1–22; Harry Harootunian, “Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem,” *boundary 2* 32, no. 2 (2005): 23–52; Lisa Lowe, “Insufficient Difference,” *Ethnicities* 5, no. 3 (2005): 409–14; Rey Chow, *The Age of The World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Gilbert M. Joseph, and Emily S. Rosenberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 23–68; Aram A. Yengoyan, “Introduction: On the Issue of Comparison,” in *Modes of Comparison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Aram Yengoyan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1–2; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Rethinking Comparativism,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 609–26; Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, “Why Compare?,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 453–71; Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 14–16.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault traces a shift in Western knowledge production techniques from analogies emphasizing connection and similarity to hierarchies based on measurement and ranking. Beginning in early seventeenth-century Europe, he argues, comparison became essential to the construction of truth:

From now on, every resemblance must be subjected to proof by comparison, that is, it will not be accepted until its identity and the series of its differences have been discovered by means of measurement with a common unit, or, more radically, by its position in an order.⁸

The ascendance of comparison to this exalted status as the premier mode of knowledge-making was no accident. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European “explorers” encountered new forms of difference while invading parts of the world that had previously been unknown to them. European scholars followed on their heels, forging the comparative methodologies we are familiar with today in order to define, understand, and manage these differences. The military and economic power gained through colonialism translated into discursive violence: Publications and popular expositions treated conquered lands and peoples as exhibits in an imagined hierarchy of human civilization.⁹ As Lisa Lowe put it, comparison thus became essential to “the institutionalization of ‘difference’ as a modern apparatus for apprehending and disciplining otherness.”¹⁰

Comparativism became the central epistemological tool of Euromodernity, justifying land, resource, and labor expropriation under racial capitalism. Scholars establishing comparative methodologies in anthropology did not do so through deep engagement with the cultures they were examining; instead, they projected Western criteria onto unknown lifeworlds, often with the outcome that the knowledge they produced made European hegemony appear natural and inevitable.¹¹ Comparative knowledge about what counts as “religion” justified genocidal crimes in Africa and the Americas.¹² In the nineteenth century and

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005), 61.

⁹ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1–34.

¹⁰ Lowe, “Insufficient Difference,” 410.

¹¹ Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Racial Regimes, Comparative Politics, and the Problem of Judgement,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 8 (2019): 1321–26.

¹² David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Janet R. Jakobsen, “Religion,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 215–17.

into the twentieth, the categorization of polities along a racialized “standard of civilization” determined whether a nation could expect international laws to apply or whether it would be subjected to colonization as part of Europe’s “civilizing mission.”¹³ Comparative measurements of “cranial capacity” – that is, the measurements of skulls – were used to shore up the system of Jim Crow segregation in the United States. Discriminatory immigration laws hinged upon the classification and ranking of racial/national/ethnic groups.¹⁴ Colonial administrators, including in the mandate system that was implemented across much of West Asia after World War I, mobilized comparativism to monitor and govern “radically different cultures.”¹⁵

Although many colonial structures became formally discredited in the mid twentieth century, the postwar development of “the military-industrial-academic complex” continued to valorize comparison as a significant tool for managing foreign peoples.¹⁶ In the United States, which secured its world power status after World War II, the rise and continuing popularity of the educational tool known as “Bloom’s taxonomy” epitomized the common sense that comparison constituted a “higher” form of knowledge-making. Constructed by US educational psychologist Harold Bloom and his colleagues in a series of publications in the mid-1950s, Bloom’s “taxonomy of educational objectives” proposed a hierarchy of thought with steps leading from knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis to evaluation.¹⁷ The taxonomy’s hierarchy, often visualized as a pyramid, was “cumulative”: “Higher” levels such as evaluation built on “lower” levels such as knowledge, and required what the authors believed were more taxing mental operations.¹⁸ The original taxonomy listed “judging by external standards, the ability to

¹³ Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilisation’ in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Mae M. Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 67–92.

¹⁵ Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 245–72.

¹⁶ Henry A. Giroux, *University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007).

¹⁷ A Committee of College and University Examiners, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain*, ed. Benjamin S. Bloom (London: Longmans, 1956).

¹⁸ Amelia E. Kreitzer and George R. Madaus, “Empirical Investigations of the Hierarchical Structure of the Taxonomy,” in *Bloom’s Taxonomy: A Forty-Year Retrospective*, ed. Lorin W. Anderson, Lauren A. Sosniak, Benjamin S. Bloom, National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago, IL: Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 1994), 66.

compare a work with the highest known standards in its field – especially with other works of recognized excellence” as the culminating intellectual operation.¹⁹ Comparison was confirmed as the most essential tool of human learning.

Having undergone many revisions since 1956, Bloom’s taxonomy remains popular in US teacher-training programs. While I have used the taxonomy in helping college-level students ask more fruitful and open-ended questions that go beyond summary, like many other educators, I have come to suspect its neat little formulas.²⁰ Separating, labeling, and hierarchizing human thought processes on a pyramid is tempting but ultimately misleading. Despite the taxonomy’s apparent internal coherence, proving its validity appears impossible.²¹ In addition, the general consensus around its usefulness obscures potential intellectual dangers. Specifically, the pyramid structure implicitly upholds judgment (with its dominant mechanics of comparing, ranking, and rating) as the ultimate goal of learning, underplaying the complexity of “lower-order” (or, in more generous formulations, “foundational”) processes such as “knowledge” and “comprehension.”

While the dangers of a simple prompt to “compare and contrast” may be minor in an elementary classroom setting, institutionally backed comparativism has often overstepped comprehension with deleterious results. The history of US–Türkiye–Iran comparativism examined in this book is a history of scholars and policymakers developing policy measures by comparing entities via sharply defined external rubrics, often shortchanging internal complexities and transnational processes. The risks are not merely theoretical. Comparative rankings of politics can operate as a new “standard of civilization,” justifying violent policies – from imposed austerity to sanctions to invasion.

When taken as a product of its time as opposed to a universal guide, Bloom’s taxonomy demonstrates the institutionalization of comparativism in the service of the US empire after World War II. On the one hand, the taxonomy pushed against older, eugenicist theories of learning that presupposed inborn differences between students would explain

¹⁹ Bloom et. al, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, 207.

²⁰ Seyyed Mohammad Ali Soozandehfar, “A Critical Appraisal of Bloom’s Taxonomy,” *American Research Journal of English and Literature* (ARJEL) 2, no. 9 (2016): 1–10; Doug Lemov, “Bloom’s Taxonomy – That Pyramid Is a Problem,” *Doug Lemov’s Field Notes*, March 4, 2017, <https://teachlikeachampion.com/blog/blooms-taxonomy-pyramid-problem/>.

²¹ George Malcolm Seddon, “The Properties of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives for the Cognitive Domain,” *Review of Educational Research* 48, no. 2 (1978): 321.

learning outcomes.²² In highlighting step-by-step processes, Bloom's taxonomy had an equalizing effect: Theoretically, all students would be able to progress along the same pyramid given enough time and guidance. At the same time, the taxonomy's prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approach mimicked the chauvinism of US policymakers who set out to educate the world's peoples on the merits of capitalist modernity in the same era.²³ The 1950s and 1960s, after all, saw the rise of modernization theory, area studies, and comparative politics as loose networks of US-based scholars worked to make the entire world into a knowable domain to serve in the fight against Communism. Just as all students would be expected to ascend the pyramid of knowledge with the assistance of their teacher, all countries were expected to follow a set of steps to modernization under the guidance of the United States. As Cold War politics made comparison into a valued tool for understanding and managing newly independent nation-states, educational philosophy uplifted comparison and ranking to the top of a new application-oriented approach to learning.

The collective and the individual progress narratives paralleled each other: In Psychology, the newly invented "social comparison theory" and "the rank-order paradigm" suggested comparing oneself to others could help with upward mobility.²⁴ In each case, comparativism generated the idea of a model "of recognized excellence," which nations or individuals were to emulate, sharpened into relief by a foil or foils. From the Cold War into the War on Terror, the generation of policy-oriented rankings and the placement of different countries into model, copy, and foil configurations remained a defining feature of comparativism in US foreign relations. This comparativism, trained on Iran and Türkiye, justified the shifting policy measures explored throughout this book.

The countless "tyrannies of comparison" are well documented and have led to various methodological crises in self-reflexive disciplines saturated by comparativism, such as comparative literature, comparative religion, and anthropology.²⁵ Leading scholarship in these and other fields,

²² John Chambers, "Bloom's Taxonomy: Six Decades of Cognitive Domain," in *Curriculum Windows: What Curriculum Theorists of the 1950s Can Teach Us about Schools and Society Today*, ed. Thomas S. Poetter, Kelly Waldrop, and Syed Hassan Raza (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2019), 77–89.

²³ On the connections between imperialism and standard educational practice, see Naeem Inayatullah, *Pedagogy as Encounter: Beyond the Teaching Imperative* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 5.

²⁴ Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (1954): 271–82; Ladd Wheeler, "A Brief History of Social Comparison Theory," in *Social Comparison: Contemporary Theory and Research*, ed. Jerry M. Suls and Thomas Ashby Wills (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 2–20.

²⁵ Sophia A. McClennen, "The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2007): 2–19,

including my own field of American Studies, no longer pretends to be an objective space uncontaminated by power. Central to this reckoning was Edward Said's era-shaping book *Orientalism* (1979), which examined the intellectual history of European discourses that constructed "the East" as the comparative foil and inferior Other to "the West." Codification, ordering, and subduing went together in nineteenth-century European colonialism, as Said and others have shown.²⁶ Orientalist scholars and authors often pontificated openly on the supposed inferiority of the so-called East. Even when their assessments were more generous, the non-West's position as an object of Western scholarship implied subordination. Power relations predetermined the positions of the knowing subject and the knowable object and established the dominant categories by which countless communities in the global majority came to be known, judged, and planned upon. As Michael Hanchard put it, "hierarchy" was almost always "comparison's companion, usually lurking in the background, just a few steps or sentences behind."²⁷

Bloom's taxonomy does not have enough dimensions to demonstrate how knowledge-making operates in the modern world system because it omits a view of power, positionality, and historical context. The pose of detached neutrality and objectivity that scholars often maintain obscures the hierarchical triangulation inherent in comparison. Given the complexly stratified world we live in, it matters who gets to compare and rate, and who and what become designated as the subjects of investigation, evaluation, and prescription. Benedict Anderson, who did comparison about as ethically as one could, suggested, in addition to going for unlikely comparisons that shock the mind out of preestablished schemata, one must "think about one's own circumstances, class position, gender, level and type of education, age, mother language, etc.," noting how one's positionality will influence questions, categories, and the outcome of comparison.²⁸

While Anderson does not cite feminist standpoint theory in this discussion, the theory of situated knowledge developed by feminists of color, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Uma Narayan informs my critique of

<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1024>; Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 78.

²⁷ Michael Hanchard, *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *A Life Beyond Boundaries: A Memoir* (New York: Verso, 2016), 131. Also consider Stoler's attention to "the breadth of comparison." Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties," 30.

comparativism.²⁹ I am also inspired by what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has termed “the *comparative feminist studies/feminist solidarity* model.”³⁰ According to Mohanty, this type of scholarship traces the impact of world-shaping processes, avoids cultural relativism while examining local differences, and emphasizes “the interweaving of the histories” of different communities under asymmetrical relations of power.³¹ Taking a transnational feminist approach means I emphasize “the directionality of power” in each chapter, reading up the power structure in order to examine the imbrications of the national, regional, and global without losing sight of agency.³² It also means not obscuring my positionality. Therefore, my life’s trajectory, growing up in Istanbul, Türkiye in the 1980s and 1990s, completing my education in the United States in the new century, specializing in transnational American Studies, doing multilingual, multi-sited research in Türkiye, Iran, and the United States, is inevitably a part of this story.

I was raised in a secularist family in an era when those around me worried about Türkiye turning into “another Iran” (Chapter 4). I knew that Iran’s revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini had resided in Türkiye for a while (Chapter 3), and when a Turkish student praised him in comparison to modern Türkiye’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the secularist outrage was palpable.³³ No one measured up to Atatürk according to Turkish nationalist mythology, even if Reza Shah, the founder of Modern Iran and the father of Mohammad Reza Shah, may have been an imperfect copy (Chapter 1). I moved to the United States soon after 9/11 and found Iran and Türkiye mentioned in the comparative mode in relation to the ascendant categories “Islamic fundamentalism” and “moderate Islam” (Chapter 5). When I visited Iran for stints of research in 2017, my hosts told me semi-nostalgic tales of the late Pahlavi era,

²⁹ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 256–69; Uma Narayan, “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures,” *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1083–86.

³⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” *Signs* 28, no. 2 (2003): 499–535, 523, also published in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 221–51. Italics in original.

³¹ Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited,” 522.

³² Ibid., 521; Perin Gürel, “Broken Solidarities: Retraining Transnational Feminist Critique on ‘the Master’s House,’” in *Religion and Broken Solidarities: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism*, ed. Atalia Omer and Joshua Lupo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 17–44.

³³ “Humeyni’yi Seviyorum, Atatürk’ü Sevmiyorum,” *T24*, June 11, 2008, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/humeyniyi-seviyorum-ataturku-sevmiyorum>, 261.

when Iran had supposedly surpassed Türkiye as a model of modernization (Chapter 2). These comparative visions asserting Iranian superiority existed alongside friendly questions about popular Turkish TV series and assertions of Turkish–Iranian similarity (Epilogue). Each of these narratives has a history at the intersection of knowledge production, international relations, and transcultural contact. This book is my attempt to untangle those threads, trace their history, and put them back together in order to understand and explain how comparativism has shaped Türkiye–Iran relations in triangulation with the United States from the Cold War to the War on Terror.

Same Difference: The Racial Mechanics of Comparing Iran and Türkiye

Comparing Iran and Türkiye is so commonplace that it appears almost prompted by reality. Yet, despite their appearance of inevitability and naturalness, all comparisons require certain preconditions and involve multiple rhetorical steps. Complex discursive genealogies forged through uneven power relations underlie Türkiye–Iran comparativism. This section details the minute operations involved in comparison and identifies the intellectual histories that have led to Türkiye and Iran coalescing into “common sense” comparands, not just in the United States, but also locally.

Comparison at its root necessitates the separation and the reduction of complex, intersecting, and sometimes overlapping peoples, lands, and histories into self-contained units: “Türkiye” and “Iran”; “Turks” and “Iranians.” Underlying Iran and Türkiye’s reified status as UN member states are histories of nation-state formation and recognition, with ancient lands and frontiers gaining new significance under a Western-designed political system of territorial order and sovereignty.³⁴ There was once a time when what scholars have dubbed “Turco-Persian culture” dominated West Asia, and a time of two rival empires, during which Turkic dynasties ruled Persia and Ottoman royals wrote Persian poetry. Even now, deep into the age of nation-states, the two countries have vast overlaps in literary and artistic heritage, folk customs, and

³⁴ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9; Khodadad Rezakhani, “The Present in the Mind’s Past: Imagining the Ancients in the Iranian Popularization of Pre-Islamic History,” in *1001 Distortions: How (Not) to Narrate History of Science, Medicine, and Technology in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Sonja Brentjes, Taner Edis, and Lutz Richter-Bernburg (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016), 97–106.

everyday vocabulary. The movement of people, narratives, and objects across the Türkiye–Iran borderlands complicates the oft-cited trope that the 332-mile border constitutes the region’s oldest, and supposedly most stable, nation-state boundary.³⁵ The severing of Iran and Türkiye into fixed comparands also casts transnational and intranational ethnic populations and religious minorities, such as Kurds, Alevis of Türkiye, Azeri Turks of Iran, and immigrants from each nation to the other, as “problems” or exceptions.

Another precondition of comparison is establishing similitude or “comparability.” Rhetorical moves that signal comparability are necessary in a world where nothing is inherently comparable with anything else because everything is unique, yet everything is comparable with everything else on some external basis.³⁶ In everyday practice, comparisons can proceed through any number of criteria, including personal preference. Modern scholarship, however, demands explicit proof of comparability: The scholar must prove that two separate objects are similar enough to warrant comparison.³⁷

Scholars comparing Türkiye and Iran enter several discursive arenas with preestablished lines of comparability, particularly if they wish to remain conversant with the Anglophone literature on the subject. As noted, Iran and Türkiye are comparable by virtue of having statehood and internationally recognized borders. The two countries also appear comparable due to the longstanding commonsense of Orientalism. While classical Orientalism set “the East” and “the West” apart in rather sharp terms, allowing only for contrast between the categories, it also constructed certain parts of Asia and Africa as inherently comparable. The idea of “the Muslim world” fuels this presupposition of similarity.³⁸ Since the early Cold War, the epistemological foundation of area studies – implicitly producing knowledge about a region even when the explicit focus is on a nation-state – has also boosted the comparability

³⁵ Nail Elhan, “İran Devrimi’nin Türkiye’de Yansımaları: ‘İrancılık’ ve ‘İrancı’ İslamcılık,” *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 3, no. 2 (2016): 31.

³⁶ Ralph Weber, “Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?” *Dao* 13, no. 2 (2014): 151–71, especially, 163–66.

³⁷ James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas,” in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8; Jared Diamond and James Robinson, “Afterword: Using Comparative Methods in Studies of Human History,” in *Natural Experiments of History*, ed. Jared Diamond and James Robinson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 265.

³⁸ Cemil Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

of Iran and Türkiye.³⁹ Ultimately, comparability is what generates the common sense that one country can form a “model” for the other.

In addition to the comparands, the categories of comparison must be fixed as well. Here, too, history and power come into play. Normative scholarly conventions require scholars to define their categories of analysis (“modernization,” “Islamism,” “secularism,” etc.) at the beginning of any written work. The abstract categories used for comparison in the humanities and social sciences are what sociologist Max Weber called “ideal types”: Conceptual yardsticks for measuring reality.⁴⁰ Authors then employ signposting to link the categories of analysis to the foci of study throughout the text. Categories we use for comparing are transnationally disseminated, following intersecting lines of power across nationality, race, gender, and class. There is almost always some flexibility in how the scholarly categories and complex realities are matched; however, the yardstick (i.e., the ideal type) determines the parameters of comparison. As the book explains, in the case of Türkiye–Iran comparativism under US hegemony, US foreign policy dogmas have held outsized influence on the dominant categories of comparison, from “modernization” to “moderate Islam.”

Of course, not all scholarship represents the fit between categories and objects of comparison as untroubled. As Rey Chow notes, a common scholarly move in postcolonial studies has been to demonstrate how and why the object of study (the subaltern, the non-Western, the marginal, etc.) evades modern Western categories of scholarly analysis.⁴¹ Yet, almost all topics involving humans would cloud preestablished categories if one studies them long enough with discriminating lenses. Weber himself never claimed ideal types were real or corresponded perfectly to reality, only that they constitute a “schema into which it would be possible to fit reality.”⁴² The selection of categories has a history. So does the impulse to trouble them.

Comparisons hinge on identifying similarities and differences, but the common rhetorical use of comparison is to assign analytical power to difference. The principle of comparability suggests that if two objects

³⁹ Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1–24; Harootunian, “Some Thoughts on Comparability,” 30.

⁴⁰ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2011), 89–99.

⁴¹ Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, 72–78.

⁴² Quoted in Christian Aspalter, “Back to the Origins: The Ideal-Type Methodology in Social Sciences as Developed by Max Weber,” in *Ideal Types in Comparative Social Policy*, ed. Christian Aspalter (New York: Routledge, 2021), 95.

resemble each other in some “pertinent” respects, they are likely to resemble each other in additional respects as well.⁴³ Within comparative scholarship, the differences identified under presuppositions of similitude are marked as “telling”: Either worthy of explanation or causally significant.⁴⁴ In choosing to compare “Türkiye” and “Iran,” for example, a scholar might assume certain religious similarities (e.g., being Muslim-majority) that mean the sectarian differences (e.g., being Sunni- versus Shia-majority) will be significant. In fact, this is a common subfield in comparative scholarship focusing on Türkiye and Iran. In his review article on “Comparing Turkey and Iran,” Agah Hazır labels it “Comparative Analyses of Cultures,” and notes its ascendance after the Iranian revolution, as fears about the future of Turkish secularism increased.⁴⁵ The principle of comparability explains the regular outbursts of concern in mainstream Western media that Türkiye might slip from similitude toward sameness with Iran.⁴⁶ An emphasis on telling differences, in turn, allows those holding opposing views to counter such worries.

The mechanics of comparison predate any one scholar. Some mental operations involved occur barely above the surface of consciousness. Still, every step – demarcating the comparands, establishing comparability, fixing and/or nuancing the categories of analysis, and marking certain differences as significant – connects to the nexus of power/knowledge. These overlapping elements influence scholarship outcomes, with the comparer’s motivation determining the strategic emphasis placed on difference/similarity. Through them, comparison reifies, recontextualizes, and makes useful sense of its subjects.

Comparison becomes particularly fraught when it involves living beings. As noted, historically, comparing groups of humans has meant setting up hierarchies along the intersecting and co-constituting structures of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, and so on.⁴⁷ The rest of

⁴³ Richard M. Weaver, *A Rhetoric and Composition Handbook* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), 118, 142–43.

⁴⁴ Caroline W. Bynum, “Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; Or, Why Compare?,” *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (2014): 341–68, 368.

⁴⁵ Agah Hazır, “Comparing Turkey and Iran in Political Science and Historical Sociology: A Critical Review,” *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–30. This line of comparison is the focus of Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ David Kushner, “Atatürk’s Legacy: Westernism in Contemporary Turkey,” in *Atatürk and the Modernization of Turkey*, ed. Jacob M. Landau (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 240–41.

⁴⁷ By noting how these categories intersect and overlap, I am, of course, referring to the groundbreaking work on “intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw, specifically, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; and “Mapping the Margins:

this section delineates the connection between racialization and comparison by examining the interpretive history of Iran's "national epic," the *Shahnameh*. Racialized conceptions of "Persianness" and "Turkishness," informed by Western imperialism and local ethnonationalisms, have turned this classical verse narrative into an ur-text of Iran-Türkiye comparativism. The tropes established around this text – particularly that of the cultured Persian and the warlike Turk – have proven both potent and long lived.

Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi Tusi composed the *Shahnameh* around AD 1010 in Tus, a province that, within his lifetime, passed from the rule of the Persianate Samanid Empire to the Perso-Turkic Ghaznavid Empire. The epic retells mythological stories and old legends about kings and heroes in a verse narrative that reaches from time immemorial to the seventh-century Arab conquest of Persia. While many of the stories had their origins in ancient texts, Ferdowsi also built on the literary precedent of the prominent Samanid poet Abu-Mansur Daqiqi.⁴⁸ In an age of multiethnic, multireligious empires, he gave these old myths and legends their most memorable shape. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* did not gain fame during its author's lifetime; however, within a century, it came to be celebrated and reproduced across the Persian-speaking world and beyond.

The *Shahnameh* has found variant interpretations and uses since its appearance. Significantly for this book, some observers use it as evidence for an essential overlap between Turkishness and Iranianness, even as others view it as the ultimate confirmation of difference, separation, and conflict. According to dominant readings of the text, the origins of Turks, Iranians, and Arabs can be traced to the same patriarchal lineage, as the legendary king Fereydun divided his land between his sons. He gave the Western portions to Salm, "China and the land of the Turks" to Tur, and Persia to Iraj.⁴⁹ Despite the ambiguity inherent in Ferdowsi's retelling of this legend, in mainstream interpretations, Salm has come to represent Arabs, Tur, Turks, and Irij, Persians. Although the brothers share a father, throughout the legendary center of the *Shahnameh*, the main enemy of Iran comes from Turan. The Turanian king Afrasiab, the archnemesis of Iran, is a descendant of Tur. The Persian king Kavus describes him as both evil and formidable, connecting these qualities to his lineage:

Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1994): 1241–99.

⁴⁸ Mahmoud Omidshahar, *Iran's Epic and America's Empire: A Handbook for a Generation in Limbo* (Santa Monica, CA: Afshar, 2012), 119–24.

⁴⁹ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 2016), 134.

This Turk you're dealing with is sly and base,
 Malevolent, and of an evil race (*bad-nizhād*);
 He's powerful, imagining that soon
 He'll lift his head above the shining moon.⁵⁰

It is important to note that “Turk” and “Iranian” clearly did not have the same meanings when Ferdowsi wrote these lines as they do now. His epic uses Turan and Turk interchangeably to refer to the Eastern and Northeastern neighbors of Iran, as Central Asian Turkic raids on Persian-speaking peoples become mixed up with the legendary wars between Iran and Turan. However, one can see how the text can lend itself easily to accusations of anti-Turkish bias.⁵¹ In fact, the *Shahnameh* has not only gained the status of “identity papers” for most Iranians, but it has also become a popular reference point for Panturkists (or Turanists), who claim the ethnocentrism epitomized by Ferdowsi will always make Turkic-speakers second-class citizens in Iran.⁵² (As I write this paragraph in September 2024, both Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, come from Turkic-speaking families, as do around a quarter of Iran's population.)

Because knowledge production does not happen in a vacuum, triangulation with Western scholars is an important part of the racialization of the *Shahnameh*. As Mahmoud Omidshahar has noted, in the nineteenth century, European Orientalists made a habit of comparing Ferdowsi to Homer, claiming the Greek poet was superior to the Persian one.⁵³ Omidshahar convincingly argues that this line of Eurocentric comparativism led to serious misreadings of the text and the context of its creation. The orality of Homer's much earlier historical context and the Western concept of “the Middle Ages,” for example, led to scholars ignoring the importance of written literary precedents to Ferdowsi's work. Yet even as nineteenth-century Western scholars cast the *Shahnameh* as comparatively inferior to the *Iliad*, they nevertheless found pre-Islamic Persian culture to be comparatively superior to Arab and Turkish cultures, as well as to Muslim-majority Iran. In an era of European hegemony in

⁵⁰ Ibid., 509–10. For the same verses in Persian, see Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh: The Book of Kings*, ed. Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, vol. 3 (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1992), 9.

⁵¹ Ahmet Karadeniz, “Şehname’de Türk İmgesi,” *Türk Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5, no. 2 (2020): 120–52.

⁵² For “identity papers,” see Azar Nafisi, Foreword to *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 2016), x.

⁵³ Mahmoud Omidshahar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic, the Shahnameh* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 11–33.

knowledge production, these comparisons influenced Iranians' own views of their "national epic." As Hamid Dabashi puts it in *Persophilia*, "The Europeans' discovery of the *Shahnameh*, which predated Matthew Arnold's poem and outlasted it, had an obvious impact on Iranians' reception of their own monumental epic, which in turn they began to appropriate for both monarchic and anticolonial nationalism – and thus Ferdowsi's epic became a contested site of Iranian nationalized identity."⁵⁴

Influenced by European scholarship, the Pahlavi dynasty instrumentalized the epic to represent modern Iranian ethnonationalism. Royalist readings of the *Shahnameh* insisted that the book demonstrates, as Iran's last empress Farah Pahlavi put it, that "only the kings were legitimate rulers" of the country.⁵⁵ From the millennial celebrations of the epic under Reza Shah in 1934 to the 1971 lecture series organized under his son, the text was also used to code for the Persian "Aryan myth" of whiteness and greatness. The Aryan myth was built on a construction that equated philology with race and associated Persian's status as an Indo-European language (in comparison to a Semitic language like Arabic or a Turkic–Altaic language like Turkish) with whiteness.⁵⁶

Anthropological theories about stages of civilization also bolstered racist comparativism, defining agriculturalist Iranians of the epic as "more civilized" than the nomadic Turks.⁵⁷ The equation of Turkic nomadism with lack of civilization is perhaps best epitomized by US ambassador Henry Morgenthau's claim in 1918 that Turks were "wild and marauding horsemen" who have "no art, no writing, no books, no poets" and thrived on plundering "people who were more civilized themselves."⁵⁸ Such comparisons, while not as strongly worded, also saturate Iranian scholarship around the *Shahnameh*.⁵⁹ A common chauvinist argument is that Persianate culture has remained superior to and has positively influenced Arab and Turkic cultures, even as Arabic- and Turkish-speaking

⁵⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 148.

⁵⁵ Farah Pahlavi, *An Enduring Love* (New York: Miramax, 2004), 47.

⁵⁶ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 445–72; David Motadel, "Iran and the Aryan Myth," in *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Ali M. Ansari (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 119–46. The classification of the Turkish language remains contested; Altaic was the earlier scholarly consensus, and Turkic is the current one as of this writing.

⁵⁷ Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 87–88.

⁵⁸ Quoted in James F. Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo: Drugs, Ethnic Lobbies, and US Domestic Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020), 53.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Ḥusayn Shahīdī Māzandarānī, *Marzhā-yi Irān va Turān bar būnyād-i Shāhnāmih Firdawsī* (Tehran: Balkh, 1376/1997), 21.

communities dominated parts of Iran militarily and politically.⁶⁰ Of course, such claims tend to underplay the multilingual interplay of the area's inordinate cultures, ignoring the influence of Turkic languages on Persian, for example, but not vice versa. Based on this language-based, racialized construction, famous Iranian historians continue to claim that, even when Turkic dynasties ruled over Iran, they “naturally” (*tab'an*) left the arenas of taste, literature, science, law, and education to Persian speakers.⁶¹ This comparison of the cultured Persian with the warlike Turk has proven long lived in Western academia, as well.⁶²

One should point out that not all Persian-language scholarship banks on these comparisons. For example, in a 2021 book, Sajjad Aydenlu rebuts Panturkist criticism against Ferdowsi, pointing to fabrications, spurious attributions, misinterpretations, and lines taken out of context.⁶³ Authors motivated by bad faith, he claims, highlight references to Afrasiab as “*bad- nizhād*” (of a bad race or lineage) without noting that *Shahnameh*'s protagonists use this insult against Iranian antagonists as well. In fact, Aydenlu argues that, within the text, *nizhād* references Afrasiab's mythological, inhuman roots, not his ethnicity.⁶⁴ He claims Ferdowsi demonstrates respect for Turanians and/or Turks throughout the *Shahnameh*, attributing them valuable qualities such as strength, wisdom, patriotism, and compassion, even within a context dominated by war.⁶⁵ According to Aydenlu, Turkish women especially have very important roles in the epic. Perso-centrist mythology claims Ferdowsi sought to preserve the Persian language in the context of Arab victories across West Asia.⁶⁶ Yet, Aydenlu demonstrates that he used Turkic vocabulary and even had some Iranian heroes speak Turkish.⁶⁷ Although exceptionally well fleshed out, Aydenlu's reading is not new. In the

⁶⁰ Golnar Mehran, “The Presentation of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in Postrevolutionary Iranian School Textbooks,” in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), 232–53, 247.

⁶¹ Kāmrūz Khusravī Jāvid, *Ravābiṭ-i Farhangī-yi īrānīyān va turkān (Az dōwṛān-i bāstān tā saljūqīyān)* (Tehran: Hizār Kirmān, 1398/2020), 249.

⁶² For one relatively recent example, see the racialized discussion on “Arabs, Turks, and Persians” between Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami produced by the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, August 7, 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5yLnyQbODE.

⁶³ Sajjad Āydinlū, *Āzarbāyjān va shāhnāmih* (Tehrān: Sokhan, 1399/2021), 561.

⁶⁴ Sajjad Āydinlū, “Nishānihā-yi sirisht-i asāfirī-yi afrāsīyāb dar Shāhnāmih,” *Faṣḥnāmī-yi Pazhūhishhāyi Adabī*, no. 2 (1382/2003): 7–36, 8.

⁶⁵ Āydinlū, *Āzarbāyjān va shāhnāmih*, 103–44.

⁶⁶ Omidsalar, *Iran's Epic and America's Empire*, 77–103. For “Perso-centrism,” see Khodadad Rezakhani, “Pārsгарāyi va buhrān-i huviyat dar Irān,” *Farhang* (pāyīz 1382/Fall 2003): 15–22, available at <https://shorturl.at/cYuUY>.

⁶⁷ Āydinlū, *Āzarbāyjān va shāhnāmih*, 145–46.

same era Reza Shah was promoting the epic for the purposes of Iranian ethnonationalism, Türkiye's leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk used the text to symbolize Turkish–Iranian brotherhood, as detailed in Chapter 1.

How can the *Shahnameh* contain so many contradictory meanings? In his book on the epic, Hamid Dabashi argues this multivalence is inherent in the complex and overlapping worlds constructed by the *Shahnameh*, its “inherently tragic disposition” and basis on “moral paradox.”⁶⁸ Within the humanities, theories of deconstruction argue that semiotic lability and “différance” is inherent in the construction of all texts.⁶⁹ This would be especially true for an epic poem that merges mythology, legend, and history. Cognitive science, on the other hand, traces varying interpretations to the mind of the reader, citing “attribution bias,” that is, the tendency of humans to emphasize data that supports their goals and preconceptions.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the term “bias” implies there is a possibility for pure objectivity. However, between the text, context, and the interpreter, all scholarship comes down to questions of attribution: How much weight do we give to each bit of data? The hypothesis, formed in response to prevailing categories and methods of scholarship, influences the attribution of weight, not to mention what counts as “data.” All this makes it possible to read Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* as a story of brotherhood or bloodshed, evidence of a shared culture, or as a symbol of pre-Islamic Persian-speaking peoples' comparative superiority to Turks and Arabs and to the later generation of Muslim Iranians who intermixed with them.

While the comparisons themselves seem to hinge on the categories of Iranianness and Turkishness, the history of European and Anglo-American domination in knowledge production means local *Shahnameh* scholarship is inevitably triangulated through other centers of power. In his book on the epic, Dabashi recounts the material history of the famous Shah Tahmasp *Shahnameh* manuscript to highlight how the meanings and uses of the text shifted in the era of Western supremacy. This superbly illustrated manuscript was crafted in the first capital of the Safavid Empire, Tabriz, sometime around the 1530s. The Safavid ruler Shah Ismail sent the opulent manuscript as a gift to the Ottoman emperor Sultan Selim II on the occasion of his ascendance to the throne in 1568, both as a mark of goodwill and a display of the shah's

⁶⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 174.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–27.

⁷⁰ Philip E. Tetlock and Ariel Levi, “Attribution Bias: On the Inconclusiveness of the Cognition-motivation Debate,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1982): 68–88.

illustrious lineage. The Ottomans, in turn, recorded the gift-giving procession in a way that represented their own sultan's superior status.⁷¹ Marking this battle for supremacy between the two empires, Tabriz, the city where the manuscript was born, switched hands between the Ottomans and the Safavids multiple times between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

After the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, the Shah Tahmasp *Shahnameh* passed to the Rothschild family's private collection through unknown circumstances.⁷² Prominent US businessman Arthur Houghton II then purchased the manuscript in the 1960s. During this period, Iranian art was becoming increasingly popular in international circles, fueled partly by Empress Farah Pahlavi's collection and promotion efforts (she is the subject of Chapter 2). The empress herself refused to buy the manuscript from Houghton II when he offered it to her at an exorbitant price.⁷³ Houghton II still made a tidy profit by dismantling the manuscript and selling it piece by piece to different bidders. Various parts of the manuscript entered private collections; Houghton II donated other segments to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, eventually earning a spot on the museum's board. Shah Tahmasp *Shahnameh*, a passive-aggressive gift from Safavid Iran to the Ottoman Empire, was thus eventually sacrificed at the altar of US capitalism.

The story epitomizes the profit principle underlying "racial capitalist imperialism": An American businessman dismembers a revered West Asian text for financial and social gain.⁷⁴ It also serves as a poignant metaphor. Dabashi interprets the manuscript's destiny as another example of the "manhandling" of the text by people espousing diverse ideologies.⁷⁵ Not all of those ideologies, of course, had the same power. Shah Tahmasp *Shahnameh*'s history maps onto a specific trajectory of imperialism, the rise of Western military, political, economic, and cultural influence over both Iran and Türkiye. From the Cold War to the War on Terror, strategic comparativism between Iran, Türkiye, and their diverse peoples similarly operated under the shadow of the US empire, influencing local perceptions and policies.

⁷¹ Burzine Waghmar, "An Annotated Micro-history and Bibliography of the Houghton Shahnama," in *Firdavsi Millennium Indicum: Proceedings of the Shahnama Millenary Seminar*, ed. Sunil Sharma and Burzine Waghmar (Mumbai, India: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 2016), 144–80, 145.

⁷² Francesca Leoni, "The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, June 2008, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shnm/hd_shnm.htm.

⁷³ Bob Colacello, "Interview with Farah Pahlavi," *Interview*, January 8, 2014, www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/farah-pahlavi.

⁷⁴ Shibusawa, "U.S. Empire and Racial Capitalist Modernity," 881.

⁷⁵ Dabashi, *Shahnameh*, 163.

Ideologies Personified: A Summary of the Chapters

This book offers an interdisciplinary, transnational cultural history of Türkiye–Iran comparisons from the Cold War to the War on Terror. The chapters are organized chronologically around the key ideologies impacting Iran–US–Türkiye relations and the leading political and cultural figures associated with them. I use Michael Hunt’s definition of ideology, itself influenced by cultural anthropology and poststructuralist theory: “An interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.”⁷⁶ Ideologies, in other words, offer humans a way to interpret and respond to a chaotic, ever-changing world in a strategic and normative manner. Not surprisingly, comparison, with its multiple mechanics of abstraction, has been essential to the maintenance and revision of multiple ideological rubrics in modern foreign relations. Throughout the book, I define ideologies promulgated by individuals and institutions with the utmost economic, military, and political power as “dominant.” I label ideologies that generate renewed discourse in the public sphere and occasion revised rubrics for comparativism as “ascending.”

In order to reduce “a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms,” ideological formations often employ personification alongside comparison. The shah’s metaphor of marriage and concubinage, which forms the book’s title, might have been striking, but his use of gender and sexuality to code for and contest relations of power is not unique.⁷⁷ Personification, often merging real-life and fictional or historical figures, lends emotional and persuasive force to comparativism. In this way, for example, Afrasiab of the *Shahnameh* could stand for “Turks” – a subject that would otherwise be difficult to pin down given the diversity and intermixing of the region’s peoples.

As the book shows, in the increasingly image-based twentieth century, personification gained an important visual dimension. Türkiye–Iran comparativism came to center around real-world individuals believed to embody the dominant and ascendant ideologies of each era. US scholars and policymakers used comparison and personification to fit Iran and Türkiye into different model/copy/foil configurations based on US

⁷⁶ Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), xii.

⁷⁷ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

foreign policy goals. While backed by the considerable military, political, economic, and cultural power of the US empire, these constructions were not immune to challenge by representatives of the target countries and non-state groups. Comparison, whether reinforcing US hegemony or challenging it, was always strategic.

Comparing the founders of modern Iran and Türkiye, Reza Shah (1878–1944) and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), constitutes the linchpin of contemporary Türkiye–Iran comparativism and is, therefore, the subject of my first chapter. Chapter 1, “Daddy Issues: Reza Shah, Atatürk, and Comparison as Personification,” examines the historiography of the comparisons made between Reza Shah and Atatürk in scholarship published in the three main languages connected to the United States (English), Türkiye (Turkish), and Iran (Persian). At its center is Reza Shah’s monthlong trip to Türkiye in 1934 and its outcomes in terms of clothing reform, most vividly, the banning of the veil (*kashf-i hijāb*) in Iran in 1936. English-language scholarship has largely constructed Atatürk as the model for modernizing leadership and Reza Shah as a failed copy. Such proof by personification and comparison, I demonstrate, assigns too much agency to the founding fathers, undermines transnational connections that escape bilateral comparison, and naturalizes the categories of comparison, erasing the role of the comparer. Power differentials in knowledge creation and dissemination also manifest in uneven citational practices.

Although comparativism focused on Atatürk and Reza Shah remains relevant to Türkiye–Iran–US relations to this day, conceptualizing Türkiye as “America’s wife” and Iran as “America’s concubine” only became possible during the early Cold War. Soon after World War II, the claim that Iran/Reza Shah had “failed” at proper modernization in comparison to Türkiye/Atatürk gained a boost when Türkiye became a multiparty democracy with the 1950 elections, and the populist, pro-US Democrat Party (DP) replaced the Atatürk-founded Republican People’s Party (CHP).⁷⁸ Around the same time, the country transformed its neutralist foreign policy, aligning closely with the United States in response to Soviet designs on its territory. It became a beneficiary of the Truman Doctrine (1949), sent troops to the Korean War (1950–1953), and joined NATO (1952).

Yet, even as the United States welcomed the flourishing of democracy in Türkiye, it toppled Iran’s own fledgling democracy with a coup

⁷⁸ Nathan J. Citino, “The Ottoman Legacy in Cold War Modernization,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 579–97, 586.

organized alongside British secret intelligence in 1953.⁷⁹ During World War II, Iran was occupied by the USSR and Great Britain, which forced the abdication of Reza Shah in favor of his son Mohammad Reza Shah. After the withdrawal, Iran operated as a constitutional monarchy for a while, with an active parliament and boisterous party politics. In March 1951, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and his National Front party drew the ire of Britain by overseeing the nationalization of Iran's oil industry. Although US policymakers considered themselves anti-imperialists, President Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and his brother, CIA director Allan Dulles used the pretext of anti-Communism to work with Britain and remove Mossadegh from power.⁸⁰ As a result, Mohammad Reza Shah came to operate as the country's sole leader, taking the parliament under control, and aligning Iran closely with the United States.

Under the shah's leadership, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact alongside Britain, Iraq, Türkiye, and Pakistan as a Middle Eastern analog to NATO. The Pact was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) after a 1958 coup took Iraq out of the US orbit. Iran and Türkiye thus came to share the precarious position of being the only two Muslim-majority US allies in West Asia, both bordering the USSR. This all but guaranteed comparisons that set the pro-Western Türkiye and Iran, along with Pakistan in South Asia, against Arab-majority nations, which were either officially "neutral" in the Cold War or drifting to the Soviet side. The United States did forge alliances with Saudi Arabia and various Islamist groups in order to undermine the socialist model of Arab nationalism epitomized by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, but Türkiye, Iran, and Pakistan were fully integrated into its Cold War defense networks.

While the US Cold War security apparatus linked these countries, scholars of modernization theory compared and ranked them against each other.⁸¹ By the 1960s, the triangulation between Türkiye, Iran, and the United States had led to a competition between Turkish and Iranian leaders regarding who was most deserving of the "Western" label and

⁷⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2013).

⁸⁰ Stephan Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2013), 130; Anthony Lucey, "Iranian Ulama and the CIA: The Key Alliance Behind the 1953 Iranian Coup D'état," *History in the Making* 12, Article 8 (2019), <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol12/iss1/8>; Abrahamian, *The Coup*; Ali Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 127.

⁸¹ Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 5.

US aid and support. The shah's complaint, "America treats Turkey as a wife, and Iran as a concubine," reflected this triangulation and contested its terms.

Chapter 2, "A Modern Empress: Modernization Theory and the Politics of Beauty," examines how Iran's last empress, Farah Diba Pahlavi, came to personify Iran's relative place in Pax Americana. In the mainstream Western press, diplomatic reports, and CIA analyses, the empress was linked to the shah's ambitious authoritarian development project, "the White Revolution," as both a symbol and agent of Iran's modernization. In the 1960s, Iran transitioned from being a client state to near-partner status in the Gulf for the United States, and Empress Farah Pahlavi, regularly compared to other world-famous women such as the United States's First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in terms of style and beauty, came to personify Iran's growing international profile. However, as the political tides turned against the Pahlavi monarchy, regime opponents successfully disseminated an image of the empress as "a painted doll" – an extravagant contrast to and a distraction from the failures of the White Revolution. Mainstream Turkish newspapers and magazines largely echoed this reframing of the empress, mobilizing the gendered discourse of *gharbzadegi* (lit. west-struckness) or over-westernization. Once a model for emulation in modernization theory, Iran and Empress Farah thus became foils for the ascendant ideology of Third Worldism.

Chapter 3, "Aspirational Whiteness and Honorary Blackness: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Defiance" takes a closer look at the oppositional ideologies that damaged the empress's public image, this time centering the intersections of race and religion. Specifically, it examines Islamically worded critiques of Turkish and Iranian aspirations to whiteness and Westernness alongside Turkish and Iranian Islamists' connections with the influential Black American Muslim organization, the Nation of Islam.

In the 1960s and 1970s, transnational revisionism around one of Prophet Muhammad's renowned companions, Bilal ibn Rabah (580–640), also known as Hz. Bilal or Bilal al-Habashi, helped fuel the ideology of a defiant, muscular, non-white Islam opposing "the West." A once-enslaved Abyssinian, Hz. Bilal was already well known and respected among the world's Muslims as the first person to formulate and perform the call to prayer (*adhan*). Yet his image gained new political meanings during this period, merging with West Asian perceptions of the Black liberation struggle.

This chapter considers the influence of charismatic, masculine Black Muslim celebrities, who merged racial, cultural, and religious defiance in

broadening Iranian and Turkish perceptions of Islam's racial politics. My primary documents are dissident Persian and Turkish print sources and their (often overlapping) representations of Hz. Bilal, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali. Among other key events, I focus on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's year of exile in Türkiye (1964–1965), which shaped the cleric's comparative critique of Iranian and Turkish modernizations, and the popular antiracist writings of Kurdish Islamist scholar Said Nursi (1878–1960). Dissident Iranian intellectuals such as Ali Shariati and activist clerics such as Khomeini and Morteza Motahhari symbolically revised Hz. Bilal's legacy to push against the official "Aryan myth" of Iranian whiteness and pre-Islamic Persian supremacy. Around the same time, Türkiye's rising Islamist magazine sector resurrected Ottoman-era polemics against racism, also placing renewed emphasis on Hz. Bilal. These reconstructions emerged in an international discursive atmosphere that increasingly politicized and racialized Islam as an oppositional force against US imperialism.

The transnational personification of confrontational religion, merging Hz. Bilal and Black Power, had significant foreign policy components. It paved the way for Turkish Islamist outreach to Black American Muslims during the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974) and subsequent US arms embargo (1975–1978). The outreach culminated in Muhammad Ali's 1976 visit to Türkiye, during which he met and prayed with deputy prime minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Islamist coalition party. During the Iranian hostage crisis (1979), the vision of antiracist Islam justified Ayatollah Khomeini's command that Black American hostages be freed alongside women hostages. Postrevolutionary Iran even became the first state to issue an honorary stamp in Malcolm X's name, visually merging Hz. Bilal and Malcolm X in the commemorative stamp designed for the 1984 "Universal Day of Struggle Against Race Discrimination."

With the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, the triangulated politics between Türkiye, Iran, and the United States shifted once again. US policymakers responded to the deteriorating situation in Iran in the comparative mode and rushed to improve relations with Türkiye.⁸² The United States sought to bolster the country's faltering economy, worrying it may be "susceptible to the Iranian sickness."⁸³ The White House pressured Congress to repeal the arms embargo and supported the 1980 military coup in Türkiye. The coup paralyzed the left and resulted in a

⁸² Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo*, 126.

⁸³ "Summary of Conclusions of a Policy Committee Meeting," December 28, 1978, *FRUS 1977–1980*, Vol. XXI: Cyprus, Turkey, Greece, ed. David Zierler, fn.1 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2014), 397.

junta rule advocating a new “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” to counter Iran-style revolutionary Islamism. The junta and the subsequent center-right government recemented the country’s alignment with Reagan’s United States. Iran was now a “foil” state and Türkiye, once again, a good ally and a model for the “developing” world.

Bilateral relations, however, complicated such triangulated comparisons: Just as the shah had opposed the arms embargo, Türkiye refused to comply with US sanctions against Iran. The Turkish regime, transitioning from military to civil rule, maintained its neutrality throughout the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and even improved trade with Iran throughout the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Iran’s perceived support for Kurdish separatism, the Turkish state’s willingness to shelter Iranian dissidents, and the two country’s opposing positions on military alliances with the United States and Israel regularly strained Türkiye–Iran relations.

Before the Iranian revolution, the world’s capitalist mass media had focused on Empress Farah Pahlavi, depicting her as a model for modern Middle Eastern womanhood. After the revolution, the anti-Iranian movie *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) and the figure of the veiled woman epitomized popular understandings of Iran in the United States and elsewhere. The film became popular in Türkiye even though its source memoir had the same co-writer as the anti-Turkish cult hit *Midnight Express* (1978).

Chapter 4, “Veiled Agents: Islamic Feminism, Similitude, and the Limits of Solidarity,” explains how and why Turks came to embrace Hollywood’s personification of Iran in the figure of the oppressed, veiled woman despite opposing *Midnight Express*, which personified Türkiye in vicious prison guards. It highlights the strategic aspects of comparativism, demonstrating how Turkish policymakers and opinion leaders mobilized negative US depictions of Iran for local political purposes. Türkiye’s laicist leaders, generals, and media cartels emphasized similarity between Iranian and Turkish Islamism through a logic of imminent contagion. The manufactured panic around Türkiye potentially “becoming” Iran helped justify their specific brand of secularism and its signature ban on headscarves. It also foreclosed collaboration between devout Iranian and Turkish women’s activists working to transform each state’s oppressive gender policies. Examining the failed outreach from reformist Iranian women such as Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani and Zahra Rahnavard to Merve Kavakçı, the MP who was denied a place in the Turkish Parliament due to her headscarf, the chapter demonstrates the complex relationship between claims to similitude and the practice of solidarity.

As middle-level powers, Türkiye and Iran have the potential to check superpower goals for the region and work toward a new international consensus. Still, they operate under a global regime in which US discourses about terror, democracy, and human rights dominate. Nation-branding necessarily works transnationally and with attention to dominant international ideologies. Chapter 5, “America’s Coy Lovers: Claiming Mysticism and Dialogue from the Cold War to the War on Terror,” examines how different Iranian and Turkish governments have used Islamic mysticism for nation-branding and public diplomacy. While both countries had legitimate claims to the shared heritage of Islamic mysticism, their nation-branding around religion was transnationally influenced and strategically comparativist. Traditionalist thinkers aligned with the late Pahlavi court cast Kemalist “westernization” as an inauthentic model for development. After the Iranian revolution, Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen and his followers promoted Türkiye’s Sufi-inspired “moderate Islam” as a model and foil to Iranian Shia “fundamentalism.” At the turn of the century, the reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami advocated a renewed “dialogue of civilizations,” promoting Iran as the model democratic Islamic state. The rising interest in Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (known as Mevlânâ or Rumi) – a Sufi scholar and poet who lived and died in a thirteenth-century Turco-Persianate sultanate – in the United States boosted attention to these claims.

By 2000, dialogue discourse had become dominant, as the United Nations declared 2001 “The Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” The terrorist attacks of 9/11, however, boosted rhetoric around a potential “Clash of Civilizations,” as the Bush administration launched a seemingly permanent “War on Terror,” which appeared to make the entire world into a battlefield between “Islam” and “the West.” With the 2003 election of Türkiye’s then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, interreligious dialogue and moderate Islam discourse found new personification. In the first decade of the new century, both Khatami and Erdoğan projected a moderate, calm Islamic manliness defined by “tolerance” (*hoşgörü*) as opposed to fiery ethnonationalism in their international appearances. However, the same Bush-Cheney administration that actively promoted “the Turkish model” with its so-called Greater Middle East Project cast Iran as part of an “axis of evil.” While the United States praised Rumi’s final home (Türkiye), it invaded his birthplace (modern-day Afghanistan), and maligned the land most associated with his native tongue (Iran).

Taken together, the book’s five chapters delineate how the transition from the Cold War to the War on Terror found Türkiye and Iran

compared under different ideological formations, from Modernization Theory to Third Worldism to Islamism to Moderate Islam, alternating the roles of model, copy, and foil in an era of US hegemony.

Finally, the book's epilogue, "The Forbidden Lovers – Beyond the Triangulation?," considers the contemporary moment. Inspired by the title of a Turkish TV series beloved by Iranians (*Aşk-ı Memnu*, The Forbidden Love), I ask whether America's "estranged wife" Türkiye and "ex-concubine" Iran may be reaching a new understanding after the so-called American century.⁸⁴ As with all previous chapters, this concluding section combines cultural analysis with a transnational feminist reading of political events. I juxtapose the complexities of bilateral media consumption with the secret deals made between powerful Turkish and Iranian figures to violate US sanctions against Iran. I end on a series of open-ended questions and musings. How does the regional reception of cultural products build upon and veer from the earlier triangulation of representations via the United States? How have the dynamics of comparativism transformed in the early twenty-first century? What possibilities and dangers lie in the shifting Iran–Türkiye–US relations?

As I hope this book convincingly demonstrates, there is much reason to suspect "proof by comparison." From the Cold War to the War on Terror, US-led comparativism has proliferated and imposed problematic "models" on the world. Because the evaluations produced make sense within the boundaries set up by the intellectual exercise, comparison gives its practitioner undue confidence in their ability to discern, order, and ultimately judge. Given all this, Gayatri Spivak has argued "not-comparing can shelter something affirmative."⁸⁵ In refusing to compare, we may put ourselves in novel and deeper relations to our area of study.

At the same time, there is no denying that some practices of comparison are inescapable, inevitable, and even illuminating. As Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman argue, "acts of comparing are also crucial for registering inequalities and for struggles against the unjust distribution of resources."⁸⁶ When comparison highlights, historicizes, and challenges power differentials instead of obscuring and naturalizing them, helps us rethink supposedly universal categories instead of reifying them, and identifies deep connections and not just surface-level

⁸⁴ Edwards, *After the American Century*.

⁸⁵ Spivak, "Rethinking Comparativism," 611.

⁸⁶ Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, introduction to *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, 2.

parallels between subjects, it can be on the right track. I believe this is what Mohanty recommends when she argues for feminist solidarity and action based on “common differences.”⁸⁷ Of course, such uses of comparison are also strategic, as opposed to natural and inevitable, but they are more likely to operate in the service of justice and liberation. The transnational history of Türkiye–Iran comparativism chronicled in this book is context and prelude.

⁸⁷ Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited,” 503–04.

1 Daddy Issues

Reza Shah, Atatürk, and Comparison as Personification

The contemporary history of comparing Türkiye and Iran begins in the post-World War I era, specifically with the nation-building efforts of two authoritarian leaders with military backgrounds: Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) of Iran and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) of Türkiye. Comparing Reza Shah and Atatürk is a typical scholarly move.¹ Already manifest in early twentieth-century analyses, comparisons between the two leaders became common in the mid-century with the rise of modernization theory and area studies. Since then, popular and academic sources have continued juxtaposing the two men and extrapolating their findings to the two states.

This chapter examines the historiography of the comparisons made between the two leaders in scholarship published in the three main languages connected to the United States (English), Türkiye (Turkish), and Iran (Persian). I focus on two events that Anglophone history has identified as sites of salient difference. First is the fact that Atatürk instituted a republic in Türkiye (1923), whereas Reza Shah continued monarchical rule in Iran under a new dynasty (1925). Second is the contrast between a harshly enforced nationwide ban on women's veiling in Iran under Reza Shah and the absence of such a law in early republican Türkiye. Comparativist texts sharpen and teleologically link these differences to contemporary political structures, often drawing connections between the classed and gendered personality traits of the two father figures and their countries' divergent developments.

The scholarly consensus in both Anglophone and Turkish analyses is that Reza Khan (known as Reza Shah after 1925) wanted to become "Iran's Atatürk" but failed. As I demonstrate in this chapter, Turkish

¹ J. Francois Bayart, "Republican Trajectories in Iran and Turkey: A Tocquevillian Reading," in *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, ed. Ghassam Salame (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 282–83; "Muqāyisi-yi Rizā Shāh va Ātātürk," Pargār, *BBC Persian*, February 4, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmeFRTpxJvE; Hazır, "Comparing," 16.

scholars idealize Atatürk as the unmatched and unmatchable model for modern leadership. English-language comparativism also praises Atatürk in comparison to Reza Shah, but sometimes uses subtle condescension toward Türkiye to sharpen the point about Iran. In such instances, Reza Shah's choosing "half-westernized" Türkiye as a development model contributes to his failures. On the other hand, Iranian scholars are much more likely to equate Atatürk and Reza Shah instead of comparing them to the former's advantage. Pro-revolutionary texts undermine model-copy designations by arguing that both men worked to realize British designs for the region. Conversely, monarchists use social media to promote deeply nostalgic readings of Reza Shah and Atatürk's modernizing rule and "brotherhood."

This chapter uses the language of publication as an organizational scheme. However, contemporary knowledge-making practices are transnational: Scholars I cite have moved between countries; most of the primary documents needed to tell this story are available online and via university libraries. The databases Noormags and Ensani, based in Iran, and DergiPark, based in Türkiye, offer nearly unlimited access to peer-reviewed scholarship published in Turkish and Persian. Multiple works have been translated, although most commonly from English into Turkish and Persian, due to the global domination of the English language and the modern disconnect in Turkish–Iranian academic communication. Ultimately, differences in the historiography of Atatürk and Reza Shah in Turkish, Persian, and Anglophone scholarship do not come down to any essential nationality traits but to questions of ideological bent, the availability of sources, and the rhetorical impact of comparison. In the realm of international history writing, as elsewhere, power and knowledge remain intertwined.

Deconstructing the foundational myth of founding father comparativism requires thinking against the Türkiye–Iran binary, the reductionist West-to-East model of modernization, and patriarchal perceptions of agency. As such, this chapter examines how the two different regimes took root after World War I and offers a transnational feminist history of the 1936 Pahlavi ban on veiling (*kashf-i hijāb*), often claimed to have been inspired by Reza Shah's 1934 trip to Türkiye. My analysis brings in the larger international context as well as local contentions. I argue that dominant ideologies connecting nation-state consolidation, modernization, and gendered reform were transnational – manifesting in context-specific ways under conditions of international inequality. The legibility of political ideologies and policies across state borders allowed local stakeholders to use comparison strategically: They could emphasize similarities or differences to the neighboring country and other

nation-states to fit their political agenda. The chapter thus highlights the strategic uses of comparison, particularly by Iranian women activists, to decenter comparativism's personalized emphasis on Reza Shah as a too-brutish, too-Eastern "failed copy" of Atatürk. The staying power of personified model-copy designations in scholarship, textbooks, and popular texts, in turn, speaks to the close connection between personification and comparison.

A Failed Atatürk?: Reza Shah in the Western Imagination

The "Reza Shah wanted to be like Atatürk but failed" trope is likely familiar to anyone with a passing interest in West Asian history. Perhaps the most well-known depiction of this concept appears in diasporic Iranian author Marjane Satrapi's critically acclaimed graphic memoir series *Persepolis*, which was made into an award-winning movie in 2007. In the book, young Marjane's father explains to his daughter that Reza Shah had the idea of instituting a republic, but he "wasn't educated like Gandhi, who was a lawyer ... Nor was he a leader of men like Atatürk, who was a general."² Instead, Reza Shah "was an illiterate, low-ranking officer" easily duped by the British, who coveted Iran's oil. The cartoon movie based on the memoirs depicts Reza Shah as a literal marionette who suddenly appears on stage yelling he will become "Iran's Atatürk" and declaring, "I will modernize this country and create a republic." When the British hear about his plans, they convince him to become a king instead.³ The film is unequivocally critical of imperialism; however, the visual personification of failure in Reza Shah's person undermines this structural argument. Throughout the scene, the shah's flailing limbs and confused expression mark him as a hapless dupe with good intentions who is tricked by the sneaky, sinuous British figure.

This account is not altogether false – just simplified, as becomes a popular cartoon. Reza Khan did come to power with British support: Great Britain was involved in the coup of 1921, which helped pro-British journalist Sayyid Ziya Tabatabai become prime minister. Reza Khan, then a Cossack officer, provided military force for the coup with the aid and approval of Britain. Becoming minister of war in 1921, Reza Khan then rose to the position of prime minister in 1923 and took the title of shah in

² Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 20.

³ *Persepolis*, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud (Celluloid Dreams, 2007), DVD.

1925.⁴ There is solid evidence that Reza Khan considered implementing a republic before deciding to continue the monarchy. However, despite dominant popular depictions of him as a mindless British puppet, the leader's comments to the Turkish ambassador in Tehran on November 29, 1925 demonstrate that he was deeply conscious of British propaganda against the republic: "If they [the British] find any way to cause chaos and corruption (*fesad*)," he reported, "they do not hesitate."⁵

The construction of the shah as an ignoramus dates back to the early twentieth century. Even when interpreted with begrudging respect, the shah's humble origins, particularly his background as a "stable boy," played as a sort of joke in the mainstream Western press of the era, occasionally precipitating diplomatic crises.⁶ This overlap between the supposed backwardness of Persia and the shah also appeared in US diplomatic reports. Charles Calmer Hart, who was assigned Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Persia in 1930 after serving in Albania from 1925 to 1929, wrote how comparison to other Muslim-majority countries, specifically to Albania and Türkiye, shaped his views:

My impressions are so far unfavorable because, coming from Albania which was once termed "little bit of Asia set down in Europe," and which was regarded by some as more oriental than Turkey, I had expected something better in Persia. I am forced to the conclusion that Zog of Albania is not less than one century ahead of the Shah and that the Albanian peasant is an aristocrat as compared with the poor peasants of Persia.⁷

In his dispatches, Hart highlighted the shah's penchant for physical punishment as a type of brutal masculinity connected to the ruler's "crudity" of mind. Ironically, as a country boy from Indiana, Hart himself had humble origins. In an interview with the *Indianapolis Star*, he credited his rustic roots with helping him understand "oriental mentality."⁸

⁴ 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): 639–63; Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between the Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 117–19.

⁵ Memduh Şevket Esendal, *Tahran Anıları ve Düşsel Yazılar* (Ankara: Bilgi, 1999), 54.

⁶ See, for example, "Army Ex-Groom Crowns Himself Shah of Persia: Reza Khan, Dictator and Premier Since 1923, Who Ousted Ruler, Enthroned Amid Oriental Splendor," *The New York Herald*, April 26, 1926, 1. For examples of the diplomatic crises sparked by such depictions, see Mohammad Gholi Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah: The Plunder of Iran, 1921–1941* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 133.

⁷ Hart, dispatch 16 (123 H 255/75), February 11, 1930, quoted in Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, 144.

⁸ Herrick B. Young, "Hoosier-born US Minister is Acclaimed by Persians," *The Indianapolis Star*, February 9, 1930, 3.

However, the Jacksonian American ideal of rising from humble origins seemingly did not apply to Middle Eastern leaders, whose class histories became racialized in US analyses.⁹ Predictably, Hart's reports also erased US brutality – manifest in Jim Crow, settler colonialism, and imperialism – casting physical aggression as an atavistically masculine, Eastern trait. His Orientalist comparisons thus obscured how empire- and nation-building, authoritarian development, and militarism could intersect worldwide.

Like Hart, Western observers generally depicted Reza Khan as a representative of primitive “masculinity” instead of civilized “manliness.” As Gail Bederman explains in her influential book *Manliness and Civilization*, by the turn of the twentieth century, dominant US gender ideology differentiated manliness, constructed as a matter of moral fortitude and self-control, from masculinity, constructed as a matter of physical strength and virility.¹⁰ Elite discourses on civilization associated Black and working-class men with beast-like masculinity while remaining concerned that upper-middle-class white men might be experiencing a crisis of masculinity due to their “civilized” lifestyles that limited physical violence.¹¹

Some positive Western analyses of Reza Khan as a leader hinged on the discursive complexities that constructed masculinity as atavistic but still worthy of retaining or reclaiming to counter the feminizing influence of civilization. Since Reza Khan was an “Eastern” leader, his military-style masculinity was also seen as tempering the supposed Oriental tendency for sloth, decadence, and fatalism. For example, in 1934, while discussing the shah's ongoing trip to Türkiye, *The Manchester Guardian* noted the similarities and differences between the shah and Mustafa Kemal (i.e., Ghazi), connecting class and gender:

Both have their soldier's virtues, which their predecessors whom they ousted lacked, although the Ghazi's education started in the Gallic atmosphere of Turkish Salonika, while Reza Khan, a peasant from the Caspian littoral, had no education. If, therefore, Reza Khan breaks with his unvaried habits and bucolic doubts to visit Turkey, he is not, like any Eastern prince, upon his travels.¹²

⁹ On the American ideal of upward mobility, see Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 3.

¹⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1–44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23; Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Matthew Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 3–9.

¹² “The Shah in Angora,” *The Manchester Guardian* (1901–1959), June 20, 1934, 10.

The *Manchester Guardian* thus compared both leaders favorably to the sultans and shahs they ousted, who were presumably lacking in masculine “soldier’s virtues.” Reza Khan’s rustic roots supposedly made him more pragmatic and action-oriented than a stereotypical, decadent Oriental prince out to sample foreign delights.¹³ In visiting Türkiye, the piece argued, Reza Khan sought solid policy outcomes, as opposed to mere sightseeing and cultural exchange.

In his 1946 book *Iran*, German-born US scholar William Haas found the shah perfectly suited for the modernization of Iran precisely due to his limited educational and life experience, which included being “uncultured.” These differences, according to Haas, paralleled the differences between Türkiye and Iran: “The two countries, then, required different types of men to achieve modernization.”¹⁴ In such assessments, the shah’s lack of refinement fit his position and allowed him some measure of political success. Iran was so unruly and backward that unapologetic, brutal masculinity was needed for authoritarian modernization to succeed. As one scholar put it dramatically much later, “a more refined and sophisticated man would have been driven to insanity or suicide.”¹⁵

Contemporary English-language sources, however, are more likely to teleologically link Reza Shah’s educational deficiencies to Iranian failures. This scholarly consensus dates back to the period after World War II, when US-led capitalist modernization theory, with its signature comparativism, became the dominant ideology in multiple fields. Area studies was institutionalized as a legitimate academic field connecting “the world of power” and “the world of knowledge.”¹⁶ At the same time, development-oriented social science used personality analyses of leaders in the decolonizing world in the service of predicting and managing political change.¹⁷ These trends provided fertile intellectual grounds for explaining postwar Türkiye and Iran via personified comparisons of the two founding fathers.

The United States and Turkey and Iran (1951) by Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye became the key text entrenching model-copy perceptions of Atatürk and Reza Shah during this period. Thomas and Frye, scholars teaching at Princeton and Harvard, respectively, were architects

¹³ Said, *Orientalism*, 233.

¹⁴ William Haas, *Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 145.

¹⁵ Pierre Oberling, Review of *Riza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran, 1878–1944*, by D. N. Wilber, *Journal of Asian History* 10, no. 1 (1976): 73.

¹⁶ Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), x.

¹⁷ Irene L. Gendzier, *Managing Political Change: Social Scientists and the Third World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

of the rising field of Middle East Studies in the United States. At a time when few resources were available for the study of contemporary Southwest Asia and North Africa, their Reza Shah–Atatürk comparisons became foundational.

As Thomas and Frye explained in the introduction, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* was published to educate the US public on the two countries in light of the US Cold War policy. The book cast Türkiye as a model modernizing state and Iran as a culturally impressive behemoth that had fallen on hard times. Thomas's section on Türkiye, which opened the book and dominated about two-thirds of it, described the country as a relatively stable bastion of republican progress and pro-Western sentiment, giving much credit to Atatürk. Thomas's analysis of the Atatürk period did not mention Reza Shah once. In Frye's section on Reza Shah, however, Atatürk and Türkiye appeared seven times within the span of six pages.¹⁸ Here, Frye compared the two leaders to Reza Shah's detriment and also noted Turks were "better prepared to accept reforms and westernization" than Iranians due to their proximity to Europe.¹⁹

The authors' comparative valorization of Atatürk and Türkiye fit in with the politics of the time. As a glowing *Washington Post* review put it, the book appeared just as Türkiye's NATO membership was being confirmed, while the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute appeared to make Iran "a source of danger to us all."²⁰ The reviewer, Ferdinand Kuhn, praised the collection for its simple language and distinction from Orientalist monographs that "make their readers wade through" chapters on ancient glories and minute linguistic details. With "just enough" historical background, he felt, the authors had managed to relate "why both nations are what they are today." Atatürk and Reza Shah constituted much of that "just enough" background. The personification of modernization via the two fathers made for colorful reading and offered applicable knowledge.

Based on the ground established by Thomas and Frye, Türkiye–Iran comparativism, regularly personified via Atatürk–Reza Shah comparisons, came to saturate much US knowledge- and policymaking on the region throughout the century and beyond, with rubrics and rankings shifting in line with US goals. The earliest Middle East studies textbooks produced in the 1960s echoed Thomas and Frye's framing of

¹⁸ Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Fry, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 223–29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁰ Ferdinand Kuhn, "Turkey-Iran Surveyors Keep Eyes on People," review of *The United States and Turkey and Iran*, by Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye, *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1951, B7.

Reza Shah as “a Persian Atatürk” limited by personal and cultural constraints.²¹ Modernization theory classics like Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958) and Bernard Lewis’s *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961) also contributed to framing Türkiye as the first among equals.

Since then, enriched by new scholarship and modified by the ascendant ideologies of each era, Reza Shah–Atatürk comparisons generated in the service of the Cold War have transformed but not disappeared. The next section explores how personified comparisons between the two founding leaders continue to color the Türkiye and Iran sections of contemporary college-level Middle East studies textbooks produced in the United States.

A Republic If You Can Make It: From Scholarship to Textbooks

Findings from peer-reviewed scholarship often manifest in a simplified form in US-based college textbooks. Reza Shah–Atatürk comparisons, which feed the comparative analysis of Turkish and Iranian political systems, are no exception. A republic or at least a parliamentary monarchy with robust popular representation (*mashrūtiyyat*) was the ideal for many progressive-minded patriots in West Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Iranian constitutional revolution (1906) predated the Turkish one (1908) by a couple of years, with deep connections between the two developments and the overall global context in terms of actors and ascendant ideologies.²² Both movements, however, were suppressed by reactionary rulers. After coming to power in 1923, Atatürk established a republic under a single-party regime and experimented with switching to a multiparty system. Reza Shah, on the other hand, ruled Iran via the parliament he controlled.

Of course, constructing the formation of a new dynasty as opposed to a republic as a “failure” itself requires comparison against a model, mobilizing “the republic” as the ideal (or at least, the preferable) political

²¹ Maurice Harari, *Government and Politics of the Middle East* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), 44.

²² Touraj Atabaki, “Constitutionalism in Iran and Its Asian Interdependencies,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2008) 28, no. 1: 142–53; Farzin Vajdani, “Crafting Constitutional Narratives: Iranian and Young Turk Solidarity, 1907–1909,” in *Iran’s Constitutional Revolution*, ed. Houchang Esfandiari Chehabi and Vanessa Martin (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 319–40; Serpil Atamaz, “Constitutionalism as a Solution to Despotism and Imperialism: The Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the Ottoman-Turkish Press,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 4 (2019): 557–69.

norm. However, given the evidence that Reza Khan did consider instituting a republic, many historians have speculated on why Iran ended up with a new dynasty instead of a republic.

Current peer-reviewed scholarship offers multiple answers to this question, demonstrating the overdetermination of historical events. Personified comparison appears alongside other explanations in the influential edited collection *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Reza Shah and Atatürk*, by Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher, for example. In their introduction, Atabaki and Zürcher argue that, in comparison to Atatürk, Reza Shah was “fascinated by technological aspects of modernization,” which “left no room for society or for his own supporters to enjoy practicing rationalism, critical reasoning, and individualism.”²³ Of course, it is difficult to measure how much Turkish citizens versus the citizens of Iran got to “practice” rationalism, critical reasoning, or individualism amid feverish nation-building. But, here and elsewhere, Atabaki implies Reza Khan lacked the strategic vision and proper planning to achieve a successful campaign.²⁴ In contrast, Ali Ansari has argued he was not committed enough to the idea in the first place.²⁵

Scholars mobilizing Persian-language sources, including Atabaki and Ansari, transcend comparativism by highlighting transnational connections and the strategic use of comparison. As Afsanah Najmabadi has observed, between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, there had long been a tradition of contact and transculturation as well as of strategic comparison.²⁶ Therefore, the declaration of the republic in Türkiye in 1923 encouraged proponents of the republican cause in Iran. Iranian opponents of republicanism, on the other hand, referenced Türkiye’s secularizing moves in agitating against the proposed measure.²⁷ News of the Kemalist abolition of the caliphate in 1924 and other anticlerical measures circulated in Iran and fueled the campaign against the republic. By 1925, a robust coalition had formed against the idea of the republic; conservative religious scholars (*ulamā*) were joined by constitutionalists

²³ Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher, introduction to *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization Under Atatürk and Reza Shah*, ed. Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 10–11.

²⁴ Touraj Atabaki, “The Caliphate, the Clerics and Republicanism in Turkey and Iran: Some Comparative Remarks,” in *Men of Order*, eds. Atabaki and Zürcher, 56.

²⁵ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (London: Longman, 2003), 37.

²⁶ Afsanah Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in *Women, Islam, and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 48–75, 54.

²⁷ Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 433; Atabaki, “The Caliphate, the Clerics and Republicanism,” 58.

such as Hasan Modarres and liberal journalists who feared Reza Khan's dictatorial tendencies.²⁸ Concerned by Turkish anticlericalism and using comparison as a political tactic, high-ranking ulema organized a series of protests in conjunction with the merchant class (*bāzārī*). Ultimately, this collective opposition and British pressure seemed to have led to Reza Khan's backtracking on the republic.²⁹

Although peer-reviewed scholarship in the English language is not immune to personalized comparison, these works also have the bandwidth, the primary sources, and the literature reviews to clarify that the differences between the contemporary Turkish and Iranian political systems cannot be reduced to the personality traits of Reza Shah and Atatürk. On the other hand, non-specialist works are more likely to emphasize the personified and comparative aspects of the analysis. This is a matter of genre. In popular trade books, where colorful personalities rule bestseller lists, the claim that Reza Shah was too fascinated by the material aspects of modernization makes for exciting reading. Textbook authors, who need to cover broad swaths of regional history while keeping the attention of exhausted undergraduates, are also compelled to offer students a more easily digestible narrative. Despite these genre restrictions, textbooks have some advantages over academic monographs. Their broad popularity means new editions appear often, bringing opportunities for revision. As I note later, some popular textbooks have tempered their comparative modeling in the last decade, reflecting an increased scholarly concern for "the tyrannies of comparison."³⁰

US coursebooks commonly mobilize Atatürk–Reza Shah comparisons in chapters that focus on the reordering of West Asian and North African polities after World War I. Having already categorized the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, and the Mughal Empire together as Islamic "gunpowder empires," the textbooks then offer new categorizations that set Türkiye and Iran apart from Arab-majority states such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, which became British or French mandates after the war.³¹ This contrast (Arab–non-Arab; colonized–independent) allows for the establishment of similitude between Türkiye and Iran as nation-states that did not experience direct colonization but instead launched efforts

²⁸ Amanat, *Iran*, 431; Vanessa Martin, "Mudarris, Republicanism, and the Rise to Power of Rıza Khan, Sardar-i Sipah," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 2 (1994): 199–210.

²⁹ Abrahamian, *Iran between the Two Revolutions*, 134.

³⁰ McClennen, "The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination," 2.

³¹ For the "gunpowder empire" designation, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. 3: *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

to centralize and modernize under authoritarian leaders. The principle of comparability then allows the authors to highlight “telling” differences between Atatürk–Reza Shah and Türkiye–Iran. Atatürk’s Türkiye and Reza Shah’s Iran, in other words, become “comparable” under specific parameters.

The categorization of Türkiye and Iran as “uncolonized” makes sense when we compare the two countries to a foil (e.g., official European mandates such as Iraq). However, the designation evades significant differences in the intensity and quality of imperialist influence on the two nation-states’ politics and development. The discovery of oil in Iran and the founding of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909 clearly played a key role in increased European meddling in that state. Consider how the two leaders began and ended their reigns. As noted, Britain played a significant role in Reza Shah’s rise to power. Atatürk, then known as Mustafa Kemal, rose to prominence as the result of the Ottoman resistance against Britain in World War I. The Gallipoli campaign, in particular, boosted his star. He then led a war of independence (1919–1922) against the occupying allied powers, including the British-backed Greek army. Atatürk died in office in 1938. Reza Shah had no such luck. Britain and the USSR invaded Iran in 1941 and removed him from power.

Even though textbooks almost always provide these facts separately, the “uncolonized” categorization effaces considerable differences regarding the parameters of foreign intervention in each country. This, in turn, makes the analysis more likely to focus on personality traits and/or a country’s culture as the telling differences that can explain Iranian “failures.” An analysis tracking “the directionality of power,” as required by transnational feminist analysis, on the other hand, would place more emphasis on these larger international, transnational, and global forces.³²

Contemporary US textbooks either make Atatürk–Reza Shah comparisons that echo the trope of the shah as a failed Atatürk or set up other comparative frames to avoid the cliché. *A History of the Modern Middle East* by William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton is an example of the former approach. The textbook examines the two countries in tandem in several sections, including in a chapter titled “Authoritarian Reform in Turkey and Iran.” Here, the authors describe Atatürk as “an established member of the Ottoman ruling elite” whose presidential rule through the single-party system “sowed the seeds from which a popular democratic system took root.”³³ (That he was “an established

³² Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited,” 521.

³³ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 178.

member of the Ottoman ruling elite” would likely come as a surprise to Mustafa Kemal himself, the son of a customs officer.) The authors describe Reza Shah, who was the leader of the Persian Cossack brigade, as a “military usurper” who ruled via “coercion rather than consensus.” Dismissing any likeness between Atatürk and Reza Shah, they note that, although the latter “borrowed” from the former, “Reza Shah’s background and political attitudes were more akin to those of Muhammad Ali of nineteenth-century Egypt than to Atatürk’s.”³⁴ Whatever else this comparison denotes, it clearly constructs Reza Shah as backward for his era.

Other textbooks set out to avoid the pitfalls of personalized comparison between Atatürk and Reza Shah. *A Concise History of the Middle East* (2016) by Goldschmidt and Boum, for example, breaks down the Arab–non-Arab binary to include King Abdulaziz’s Saudi Arabia alongside Türkiye and Iran in its analysis of independent nation-building and praises all three leaders for their “inspiration, ingenuity, and industry.”³⁵ Among the three named leaders, only Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gets an entire framed page for his biography, marking him as the archetypal modernizer. However, the book undermines this apotheosis somewhat by critiquing how “the two leaders have often been compared, usually to Reza’s disadvantage.”³⁶ Instead, the authors choose to highlight the different conditions in each country to explain different outcomes. While this approach can be productive, the authors de-emphasize transnational connections and international pressures and seem set on the idea that an excess of Islam can best explain the problems of Iran. Even as Reza Shah worked to implement reforms, “his people,” we learn, “remained loyal to Shi’ite *mujtahids* and *mollahs*.” Here, the textbook’s use of Persian words in italics signals the inscrutable quality of devout Iranians. While Reza Shah was able to “follow Atatürk’s example” in many ways, the authors lament, “Muslims did block what might have been a useful reform: romanizing the Latin alphabet.”³⁷ “Muslims” is surely a broad group to blame here, considering how Reza Shah himself identified as Muslim. Yet, in this construction, the term means more than a professed follower of Islam and comes with Orientalist connotations of backwardness, stubbornness, and irrationality. In order to avoid making Reza Shah a failed copy of Atatürk, the authors contrast the Great Man Reza Shah to the

³⁴ Ibid., 172.

³⁵ Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. with Aomar Baum, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 11th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2016), 171.

³⁶ Ibid., 214.

³⁷ Ibid., 216.

Iranian population, furthering the long-established myth that his opponents were all “reactionary and obscurantist or entirely marginal.”³⁸

Goldschmidt and Boum’s approach in this edition of the text amounts to comparing Iranians to Türkiye’s people, with the end result that the former came out as illogically resistant to change, unable to realize the gifts of their benevolent father, Reza Shah, due to their fanatical adherence to Islam. This line of comparativism erases the work of reformist Iranian intellectuals and works against longitudinal intellectual and cultural connection, not just between “the West,” “the East,” and Iran, but also between Türkiye and Iran. One of the strongest advocates of Persian alphabet reform, after all, was the Iranian intellectual Mirza Fatali Akhundzade, whose Azeri Turkish mother tongue and connections with the Russian and Ottoman empires influenced his advocacy for reform.³⁹ Akhundzade was also a strong supporter of Persian-language-focused nationalism, which identified a primary role for Persian in the formation of Iranian identity and became state dogma under Reza Shah. Perhaps in recognition of such complexities, the revised edition of the textbook (2019), by Goldschmidt and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, excised these claims about a potential Persian alphabet reform.⁴⁰

The Modern Middle East: A History (2020) by James Gelvin is perhaps the most widely assigned introductory textbook on the subject and its reputation is well deserved. Not only does the book contain primary documents, which allow students a look into the process of history writing, it also encourages a critical attitude toward mythmaking. Gelvin’s sections on Atatürk’s Türkiye and Reza Shah’s Iran appear in a chapter titled “State-Building by Revolution and Conquest,” in which the author broadens the binary to contrast European mandate states in the Levant and Mesopotamia with Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as “independent states” formed via “an anti-imperialist struggle (Turkey), coup d’etat (Iran), revolution (Egypt), and conquest (Saudi Arabia).”⁴¹ Türkiye and Iran are grouped together at various sections in the chapter, yet a nuanced picture emerges from the author’s world-historical analysis. Reza Shah “self-consciously modeled himself and his Iranian

³⁸ Stephanie Cronin, “Introduction: Contesting Power in the New Iran,” in *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

³⁹ Musayev Shahbaz Shami, “Relationships of Mirza Fatali Akhundzada with his Contemporaries in the Field of Struggle for New Alphabet,” *Revista Do Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas Em Gênero & Direito* 9, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.2179-7137.2020v9n2.50867>.

⁴⁰ Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 12th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴¹ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 193.

experiment on Mustafa Kemal and Turkey,” notes Gelvin.⁴² However, he avoids projecting Iran’s political troubles onto the person of Reza Shah. Instead, in examining authoritarian modernization, he highlights the dominant ideologies, discourses, and state-building practices worldwide, including in Europe, where uniformed dictators were on the rise. Equally impressive is the author’s focus on economic conditions, from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to the ascendance of “import substitution industrialization” as an anti-imperialist measure.⁴³

Gelvin has noted “something of a cult” among foreign observers who “admire Atatürk as an icon of modernization and promote him as a model for the rest of the region.”⁴⁴ In countering this valorization, however, he brings in another common trope of Türkiye–Iran comparativism: that of over-westernization or westoxication (*gharbzadegi*). I explain *gharbzadegi* discourse and its variants in depth in the later chapters, but the term basically operates as an accusation of being too taken in by the West and losing one’s authenticity. While Goldschmidt and Baum praise Atatürk and Reza Shah for their “inspiration, ingenuity, and industry,” Gelvin critiques both leaders for what he sees as their penchant for indiscriminate westernization. Specifically, he compares them to intellectuals identified as “Islamic modernists,” who, we are told, “sought to find a compromise between local and Western ideas.”⁴⁵ The book takes a whole paragraph to speculate on why Atatürk and Reza Shah “borrowed directly from Western experience” instead of taking a more critical approach to modernization. Gelvin starts by suggesting maybe they found it “easier to borrow from the West hook, line, and sinker” instead of sorting out the “essential” from the trivial. “Whatever the case,” he concludes, the two leaders “looked at Western modernity and instead of seeing a source of inspiration, they saw a source from which to draw.”⁴⁶

The notion that both Atatürk and Reza Shah might have taken from the West without using much critical thinking not only furthers the image of Reza Shah as a baffled copier but also contains echoes of official US reports about Türkiye from the early twentieth century, which snidely commented that “immature minds always take to ready-made systems.”⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., 213.

⁴³ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁴ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 200.

⁴⁵ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 5th ed., 213.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁷ G. Howland Shaw, “An Intellectualistic Interpretation of Modern Turkey,” RG59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910–1929, document dated September 12, 1924, no. 867.401/8, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

Certainly, the pragmatism both Atatürk and Reza Shah demonstrated in many of the reforms they initiated, their balance-of-power foreign policy, their utilization of Islam for state-building, and their search for “authentic” Turkishness and Iranianness via cultural production easily belie the “hook, line, and sinker” claim. Turkish scholarship has long rejected the image of Atatürk as an immoderate westernizer, and the leader’s concern with “the limits of westernization” has been reflected in English-language scholarship as well.⁴⁸

Depicting Atatürk and/or Reza Shah as immoderate westernizers who misunderstood the essentials of modernization offers a helpful framing device for authors who want to avoid the Eurocentric pitfalls of modernization theory. However, as I explore in depth in Chapter 5, the idea of “over-westernization” is no less dependent on comparativism and Orientalism. Over-westernization discourse suggests that certain, often Islamic, forms of traditionalism constitute the authentic core of any Muslim-majority society and must be maintained, regardless of other historical changes. The idea that “Islam” constitutes the essence of Middle Easternness elides the thoroughly transnational and modern genealogy of traditionalism and religious reaction in West Asia and North Africa. This has the effect of gatekeeping Islam and racializing Muslims by casting secularizing reforms as always already suspect foreign impositions. Over-westernization rhetoric thus underplays the local agitation and buy-in for West-facing development, some of which I delineate in the section on clothing reform. It implies the scholar can simultaneously be an arbiter of modernization and ethnoreligious authenticity.

The paragraph about borrowing “hook, line, and sinker” from the West has remained largely unchanged between the 2011 and 2020 editions of the textbook, but there is no reason to assume it will remain so. In 2011, writing at a high point of what many observers called the Justice and Development Party (JDP)’s “Islamic liberalism,” Gelvin may have been simply summarizing the common comparative critiques regarding Atatürk-era secularization. A couple of pages later, for example, we read that both Atatürk and Reza Shah, earlier designated “unabashed Westernizers,” can also be classified as “defensive developmentalists.”⁴⁹ Gelvin’s emphasis on international factors, including imperialist pressures, also complicates the over-westernization trope.⁵⁰ The 2020 edition

⁴⁸ Gürel, *The Limits of Westernization*, esp. ch. 1; Nicholas Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4–5.

⁴⁹ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 3rd ed., 206.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

contains these elements, as well as an additional report on “creeping Islamization” in the next era of JDP rule. This, too, is reflective of the moment of revision and publication.⁵¹

Textbook authors have a tricky balancing act since comparison can be rhetorically compelling. The sharp contrast between the westernizing autocrats and the “Islamic modernists” and the long speculative paragraph pondering *why* the two leaders were so indiscriminate in borrowing from the West will likely stick to the readers’ minds over and above the rest of the information. It would be difficult for a student to read that paragraph and leave without thinking Middle Eastern leaders *must* prioritize Islam more extensively if they wish to be seen as strategic thinkers, just as a student who reads Goldschmidt and Boum will come to the opposite conclusion: Less Islam is needed in the public sphere for “useful” reforms to take root.⁵² Although these arguments clash with one another, they both benefit from the unearned persuasiveness of comparison.

Gelvin was correct in noting that there is something iconic about Atatürk the modernizer. The consensus view of Türkiye-as-model and Iran-as-copy, built in the golden years of modernization theory, is still with us. In the title of most comparative works, Türkiye appears ahead of Iran, with the English phrase rolling off the tongue with easy catenation: “TurkeyanIran.” Even in noncomparative histories of Iran, authors mention Türkiye and Atatürk when explaining the reforms initiated under Reza Shah. Consider the widely read histories of Zürcher (2017) on Türkiye and Nikki Keddie on Iran (2006): Reza Shah is absent from Zürcher’s recounting of the Atatürk era; however, Atatürk appears twice in reference to Reza Shah’s reforms in the latter book.⁵³

The direct impact of Atatürk’s example on Reza Shah’s reforms is debated, as I explain in depth in the section on veiling. However, it is important to emphasize here that the chronology of centralizing and modernizing reform between Atatürk’s Türkiye and Reza Shah’s Iran did not always go in a West-to-East order. The Turkish Parliament, for example, passed a law requiring all Turkish citizens to take on surnames during Reza Shah’s 1934 visit to the country, in the shah’s presence, and while referencing the precedent set in Iran.⁵⁴ Reza Shah has long

⁵¹ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 5th ed., 221.

⁵² Goldschmidt and Baoum, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 213.

⁵³ Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 4th ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017); Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 85, 92.

⁵⁴ Meltem Türköz, *Naming and Nation-building in Turkey: The 1934 Surname Law* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

been described as the “Ataturk of Persia,” but not vice versa.⁵⁵ However, Atatürk came to be called Atatürk due to the Turkish surname reform, which was inspired by the Iranian example.

As a manifestation of the implicit assumption that progress is transferred from West to East, and perhaps as a result of Afghanistan’s lack of fit within “Middle Eastern” history, Amanullah Khan (ruled 1919–1929) is often omitted from the story of authoritarian modernization as a point of comparison in English-language textbooks.⁵⁶ This is despite his extensive travels within Europe and Asia and his connections with both Atatürk and Reza Shah.⁵⁷ Similarly, the long histories of Iranian transculturation and intellectual exchange with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia are eclipsed by all too many accounts.⁵⁸ Given Bolshevik outreach to the Middle East and the long list of illustrious West Asian intellectuals who trained in the USSR, the USSR itself proved to be a significant model and point of reference for development for Turkish and Iranian policymakers, as well as a geopolitical force to be balanced by the two states.⁵⁹

Mentioning Türkiye when speaking of Iran, therefore, is not merely reflective of the realities of bilateral exchange but also telling of what the authors assume will be familiar to English-speaking readers. Atatürk is introduced as a more familiar example of modernization, a supposedly stable point of comparison – “a known” that can allow the reader access to the “unknown.” A parallel move since the Iranian revolution has been referencing Iran when expressing concerns about Islamism in the Turkish political sphere (see Chapters 4 and 5). In these analyses, Iran becomes the iconic Islamist state, paralleling Türkiye’s position as the iconic “modernizing” state. Such rhetorical maneuvers can allow the readers to feel confident as they get ready to understand a new topic.

⁵⁵ Albert Miller, “Persons and Personages: The Ataturk of Persia,” *The Living Age*, June 1, 1941, 338.

⁵⁶ Houchang Chehabi, whose work on clothing reform I recount later in this chapter, has long taught a class that places Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan together.

⁵⁷ See Milani’s “the case for Iran in Asia” in Milad Milani, *Sufi Political Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), ch. 3.

⁵⁸ Atabaki, “Constitutionalism in Iran,” 142–53.

⁵⁹ Lana Ravandi-Fadai, “‘Red Mecca’ – The Communist University for Laborers of the East (KUTV): Iranian Scholars and Students in Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 5 (2015): 713–27; Etienne Forestier-Peyrat, “Red Passage to Iran: The Baku Trade Fair and the Unmaking of the Azerbaijani Borderland, 1922–1930,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2013): 79–112; Gotthard Jaschke and Hüseyin Zamantılı, “1919–1939 Yılları Arasındaki Türk-Rus Yakınlaşması Hakkında Bir İnceleme,” *Istanbul Journal of Sociological Studies*, no. 19 (1981): 159–74; Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Authority and Agency: Revisiting Women’s Activism during Reza Shah’s Period,” in *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 159–77, 167.

Unfortunately, the strategy is fraught with intellectual risk. The reference point is stabilized and stripped of nuance to serve as a well-known “example,” and the subject under consideration becomes marginalized as a “copy” even in its role as the primary topic.

What about Turkish and Iranian texts comparing Reza Shah and Atatürk? As I explain later, neither is immune to the copy-model trope nor the influence of Anglophone scholarship. Still, the authors employ different rhetorical maneuvers based on their presumed “local” readers and make strategic choices according to their political commitments.

Atatürk the Incomparable?: The Failed Republic in Turkish and Iranian Scholarship

It should come as no surprise that the “Atatürk, the exceptional model” trope dominates published Turkish scholarship. In addition to a 2012 translation of Zürcher and Atabaki’s 2004 volume, two monographs focus on comparing Turkish and Iranian authoritarian modernization in the Turkish language as of this writing: Celal Metin’s 2011 *Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme: Türk Modernleşmesi ve İran, 1800–1941* (Modernization in the Imperialist Age: Turkish Modernization and Iran, 1800–1941); Tolga Gürakar’s 2012 *Türkiye ve İran: Gelenek, Çağdaşlaşma, Devrim* (Türkiye and Iran: Tradition, Modernization, Revolution). In addition, two essays in a 2020 edited collection on Türkiye and Iran consider the reforms and foreign policy of the era.⁶⁰ All of these sources venerate Atatürk and Türkiye explicitly through comparison to Reza Shah and Iran.

Celal Metin’s 2011 book, developed from a Ph.D. thesis, emphasizes factors underlying authoritarian modernization, including pre-twentieth-century Ottoman–Iranian interactions and the role of prominent intellectuals. The title references imperialism, promising an intellectual history synthesis informed by political context, balancing comparison with transnational analysis. Metin’s section on Atatürk and Reza Shah groups the two men as “leaders of modernization,” yet the analysis soon crowns Atatürk as “an unmatched model.”⁶¹ Metin agrees with the general bend of Zürcher and Atabaki’s book, crediting Kemalist reforms with institutionalizing responsible citizenship, and criticizes Pahlavi reforms as *faits accomplis* enforced with harshness, “lacking convincing

⁶⁰ Erkan Afşar, Barış Kandeğer, and Abdullah Erol, eds., *Türkiye–İran Üzerine Okumalar: Devlet–Siyaset–Hukuk–Toplum–Ekonomi–Kültür–Din* (Istanbul: Hiper, 2020).

⁶¹ Celal Metin, *Emperyalist Çağda Modernleşme: Türk Modernleşmesi ve İran, 1800–1941* (Ankara: Phoenix, 2011), 246.

and conviction.” This comparative framework necessitates underplaying instances of resistance to Kemalism, such as the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion and underplaying local buy-in to Reza Shah’s projects.

Ultimately, the narrative identifies Reza Shah/Iran as failed copies of Atatürk/Türkiye due to Reza Shah’s personal “inadequacies,” which parallel the supposedly “primitive” aspects of Iran:

Even though Reza Shah had similar dreams [to Atatürk], the inadequacies of his knowledge and the cultural and educational milieu which shaped his personality, the primitive instincts (*ilkel güdülere*) of the society, the position of special interests and the processes surrounding his rise to power shaped all his actions.⁶²

Multiple instances of comparison and personification operate here alongside the reference to imperialism (e.g., “the processes surrounding his rise”). As in dominant Anglophone analyses, Reza Shah’s “inadequacies” match his homeland’s “primitive” traits.

Other Turkish texts choose to group Reza Shah and Atatürk together as venerable leaders but compare Turkish and Iranian populations to the latter’s detriment. Saygı’s *Atatürk ve Şah* (Atatürk and the Shah, 2012), for example, focuses on the shah’s 1934 trip to Türkiye and summarizes the events associated with the visit. Saygı emphasizes the “friendship” between the two men (and the two countries) and notes that Reza Shah took developments in Türkiye as a model. His normative comparison is not necessarily directed at the shah but at Iran’s people. The book mainly cites Turkish- and English-language secondary sources, referencing the “intransigence of the Shia ulema” to explain why “unlike Atatürk, Reza Shah could not implement the principle of secularism into the state’s regime” or declare a republic.⁶³

In addition to these monographs, two relatively recent peer-reviewed articles written in Turkish focus on Reza Shah’s Türkiye visit and compare Turkish and Iranian modernizations through that pivotal moment. Acknowledging different beginnings and manifestations of modernization and reform efforts in the two countries, Hilal Akgül argues Türkiye and Iran nevertheless entered into a relationship that can be defined as “serving as a model” and “exporting a model” in the Atatürk era.⁶⁴ In his introduction, M. Volkan Atuk references Akgül’s article, noting his goals are different in that his study will emphasize differences over

⁶² Ibid., 297.

⁶³ Tarık Saygı, *Atatürk ve Şah* (İstanbul: Paraf, 2012), 18.

⁶⁴ Hilal Akgül, “Rıza Han’ın (Rıza Şah Pehlevi) Türkiye Ziyareti,” *Yakın Dönem Türkiye Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7 (2012): 1–42, 13.

similarities.⁶⁵ Perhaps, ironically, his piece ends up with a similar conclusion, setting up Atatürk as the primary model and echoing not only Akgül but also Atabaki and Zürcher in depicting Reza Shah as an intellectually deficient, failed copy:

Mustafa Kemal could follow the world closely due to his intellectual accumulation ... Reza Pahlavi, on the other hand, set up a system that was completely dependent on a one-man dictatorship, did not allow for the development of political institutions, and was harsh in its style. The fact that he did not get a modern education, the weaknesses of his intellectual side, and his action-oriented (*ameli*) style prevented him from assessing his country's realities in a healthy manner.⁶⁶

In sum, contemporary Turkish-language scholarship on the topic era does not differ much from dominant English-language analyses, valorizing Türkiye and Atatürk in comparison to Iran and the shah. Consider the tight overlap between the Turkish sources examined previously in this chapter and the views of retired senior CIA analyst and influential US expert on political Islam, Graham Fuller: "The model for Reza Shah in implementing his own reform program of imposed westernization was Atatürk himself, although Reza's reforms were executed with far less brilliance, skill, understanding or lasting effect."⁶⁷

Shared cross-cultural assumptions regarding modernization and leadership clearly play a role in this overlap between Turkish- and English-language analyses. Another contributing factor may be the professional tendency of scholars to valorize formal education. As traditional intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, historians from any country are simply more liable to interpret Reza Shah's relative dearth of formal education as an unforgivable failing that set Iran on the wrong course. Limited education transforms into limited intellectual prowess all too easily in a range of scholarly texts. Operating as a civilizational cue, comparisons that hinge on education locate in Reza Shah a harsh, masculine, Oriental despotism, as opposed to manly leadership.

Citational practices are also influential. Despite the geographic nearness of Türkiye and Iran and the deep history of transculturation between the two countries, contemporary Turkish scholarship almost exclusively uses Turkish and English primary sources, with some Persian-language secondary sources in English or Turkish translation.⁶⁸ Sometimes, books

⁶⁵ M. Volkan Atuk, "İran Şahı Rıza Pehlevi'nin Türkiye Ziyareti," *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 17, no. 35 (2017): 219–47, 220.

⁶⁶ Atuk, "İran Şahı Rıza Pehlevi'nin," 243.

⁶⁷ Graham E. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008), 107.

⁶⁸ Celal Metin's book is actually an exception in citing Persian scholarship. See Metin Yüksel, "Iranian Studies in Turkey," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2015): 531–50.

published on Iran in Türkiye do not prioritize primary documents in any relevant language, mostly offering syntheses of English- and Turkish-language secondary sources.⁶⁹ However, primary documents in Persian are most likely to be left out.

This exclusion of Persian-language sources in Turkish works about Iran may come as a surprise to readers who expect geographic and cultural proximity to influence intellectual life. Unfortunately, except for work produced by diasporic Iranian authors living in Türkiye, Turkish scholarship on Iran is resolutely bilingual in a way that prioritizes English over Persian.⁷⁰ In addition to marking the hegemony of Britain and, later, the United States in knowledge production, the Turkish–English bilingualism that dominates Turkish-language scholarship on Iran is an outcome of Kemalist education policy. The contemporary dearth of familiarity with Persian in Türkiye, after all, is the direct result of the Turkish alphabet and language reforms initiated in the service of ensuring a “contemporary” education for the new Turkish youth.⁷¹ This is a version of the alphabet reform Goldschmidt and Boum once faulted “Muslims” in Iran for blocking.

I should note that Persian-language scholarship rarely incorporates Turkish sources any better, even though approximately a quarter of Iranian citizens speak some type of Turkic as their mother tongue. The widespread unawareness of the neighboring country’s intellectual output is part of a larger post-World War I “rapture” between Turkish, Persian, and Arabic literary and scholarly worlds that still needs bridging.⁷²

While citational practices follow the lines of power in each case, post and pro-revolutionary Iranian sources differ radically from dominant Turkish and English-language analyses of the “failed” republic and Reza Shah. Most obviously, they expand the comparative references to include other Muslim-majority countries (particularly Afghanistan), emphasize the role played by Britain, and refuse to deify Atatürk. An Iranian middle school history textbook epitomizes this approach, claiming that Reza Shah, Atatürk, and Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan all came to power as a result of covert British policies to dominate the Middle East.⁷³

⁶⁹ cf. Tolga Gürakar, *Türkiye ve İran: Gelenek, Çağdaşlaşma, Devrim* (Istanbul: Kaynak, 2012).

⁷⁰ Yüksel, “Iranian Studies in Turkey.”

⁷¹ Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷² Reza Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 108; Arash Azizi, “Finding the Cultural Bridges of the Middle East in Literary Istanbul,” *Global Voices*, December 30, 2015, <https://shorturl.at/muSLt>.

⁷³ Sāzmān-i pāzhūhish va barnāmīrī-ye āmūzishī, *Tārīkh-i mu‘āşir-i Irān, sāl-i siyūm-i āmūzish-i mutivassīṭi* (Tehran: Shirkat-i Chāp va Pakhsh-i Kitābhā-ye Darsī-ye Iran, 1392/2013), 83.

Whereas US-based “over-westernization” discourse blames West Asian leaders for misunderstanding the proper rubrics of modernization, the dominant Iranian ideology on westoxication constructs Reza Shah’s initiatives as the flawless implementation of British plots to weaken Islam. A twelfth-grade book for students specializing in the humanities, for example, argues Reza Khan imitated Atatürk. However, the framing of the chapter introduces Reza Khan as an agent of Britain who believed progress would only be possible by copying Western mores.⁷⁴ According to this line of thinking, the establishment of a republic in Türkiye was hardly to be lauded in comparison to Reza Shah’s establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, ultimately serving the same aim.

As I explore in Chapter 3, the strategic designation of Atatürk and Reza Shah as pro-Western agents became foundational to Iranian revolutionary thought with Ayatollah Khomeini’s sermons and Ali Shariati’s lectures. Of course, to claim such a substantial overlap, pro-revolutionary Iranian history ends up underplaying significant differences regarding the scope and depth of imperialist influence in how the two leaders rose to power and how they ruled. After all, the idea that the resolute leader of the independence war against “the West” was acting in line with British goals would be sacrilegious to mainstream Turkish history.

In sum, due to shared ideologies regarding modernization, class bias, and uneven citation practices, Reza Shah’s rustic upbringing codes for political failure in bodies of scholarship published in the United States and in Türkiye. Moreover, there is remarkable continuity between early twentieth-century English-language accounts and contemporary US and Turkish publications in connecting the failed republic to the shah’s uncultured masculinity. The official pro-revolutionary Iranian history of the era, on the other hand, pushes Türkiye and Iran together and highlights the role of the British hegemon in a way that severely clashes with mainstream Turkish narratives as well as with English-language scholarship. This casual overlap between Reza Shah, Amanullah Khan, and Atatürk, and the denial of evaluative comparison, is particularly true of proregime works, which dominate formal education but do not constitute all published Persian-language scholarship on the era. I delve closer into the different Iranian scholarly approaches to authoritarian modernization in Iran and Türkiye in the next section on the Pahlavi ban on veiling (*kashf-i hijāb*) – another key topic for scholarly and popular comparativism.

⁷⁴ Sāzmān-i pāzhūhish va barnāmirizī-yi āmūzishī, *Tārīkh, Īrān va jahān-i mu’āshir*, rishti-yi adabīyāt va ‘ulūm-i insānī barāyi pāyi-yi davāzdahum, chāp-i chāhārum (Tehran: Shirkat-i Chāp va Pakhsh-i Kitābhā-yi Darsī-yi Iran, 1400/2021).

The Hijab Ban: A Souvenir from Türkiye?

Did Reza Shah “copy” the idea of unveiling Iranian women from Atatürk but failed to implement the program properly? In his highly acclaimed *Iran between the Two Revolutions*, Ervand Abrahamian does some bet-hedging, implying but not directly claiming influence: “The drive to raise the status of women began in 1934, immediately after Reza Shah’s visit to Turkey, where Mustafa Kemal was waging a similar campaign.”⁷⁵ In her widely assigned history of Iran, Nikki Keddie also notes the influence of the trip to Türkiye while arguing Reza Shah’s ban was unique in its starkness: “More problematic was Reza Shah’s unique absolutist approach to changing women’s dress which, following a trip to Turkey, he saw as a hallmark of modernization.”⁷⁶ Keddie’s phrasing approximates the main line of comparison on this subject, which can be summarized as follows: Reza Shah was inspired to unveil Iranian women after visiting Atatürk’s Türkiye in 1934 but implemented an overtly harsh, nationwide ban causing significant backlash. Scholars often teleologically connect Reza Shah’s implementation of unveiling to the institutionalization of forced hijab under the Islamic Republic. Once again, the shah is too uncultured and, therefore, too focused on appearances when it comes to modernization in comparison to Atatürk. In such formulations, his civilizational failings explain not only the ills Iran faced during his reign but reverberate decades after as daddy issues.

Keddie cites Houchand E. Chehabi’s “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes,” which, to date, stands as one of the most informative articles on the Pahlavi hijab ban published in the English language due to the author’s thorough use of Persian-language primary documents.⁷⁷ In this succinct and rich piece, Chehabi emphasizes the pre-Pahlavi associations of unveiling with modernity, nation-building, and women’s civic inclusion, and lists the trip to Türkiye as an accelerating factor. Chehabi also discusses the cultural and structural strategies the Iranian government used to prepare the ground for kashf-i hijāb. Chehabi does compare Türkiye–Iran and Atatürk–Reza Shah along the lines Keddie summarizes in this article and elsewhere.⁷⁸ The Pahlavi hijab ban, he

⁷⁵ Abrahamian, *Iran between the Two Revolutions*, 144.

⁷⁶ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 100.

⁷⁷ Houchang Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3–4 (1993): 209–29. An exemplary monograph-length history is Hamideh Sedghi’s *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ Houchang Chehabi, “The Banning of the Veil and its Consequences,” in *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: Routledge, 2003), 193.

argues, followed the general lines of “modernization” in the reign of Reza Shah in so far as it was unilaterally decreed and enforced without proper consideration: “Modernization was literally staged, with directors who had not fully understood the play and actors who had not volunteered for their parts.”⁷⁹

Challenging this widely accepted notion of a telling difference between Turkish and Iranian anti-veiling campaigns is a more recent essay by Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi and Afshin Matin-Asgari. The authors use many of the same Persian-language primary sources but reach a different conclusion: “Unveiling campaigns in Iran and Turkey, both in terms of intent and implementations, had more in common than previously appreciated.”⁸⁰ In addition to referencing scholarship on the more tyrannical local implementations of the Turkish campaign, this argument requires the authors to emphasize the fluidity of Iran’s *kashf-i hijāb*. My summary of the history of the Pahlavi hijab ban below weaves between these two threads, which respectively emphasize difference and similarity. Following the lines of power, I highlight the transnational circulation of ascendant ideologies regarding gendered modernization. Taking a cue from the work of feminist Iranian scholars such as Hamideh Sedghi and Asfanah Najmabadi, I also emphasize the role played by women intellectuals and activists who clashed and collaborated with the state. Finally, in line with the book’s goals, I draw special attention to the strategic use of Türkiye–Iran comparisons in both the primary documents and secondary scholarship.

As Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari have convincingly argued, the study of Iran’s *kashf-i hijāb* is filled with ambiguities, starting with the dearth of information on preexisting clothing practices, which any ban would have targeted.⁸¹ The practice of veiling in West Asia and North Africa predates the rise of Islam and was particularly common as a marker of urban class status.⁸² With the advent of Islam, a consensus emerged among Islamic jurists that modest clothing and comportment for all genders was mandated by the Qur’an (24:31; 33:59). Of course, the shape such modest clothing may take has varied from region to region. It is safe to state that, for much of Iran’s history, traditional Islamic clothing

⁷⁹ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes,” 229.

⁸⁰ Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi and Afshin Matin-Asgari, “Unveiling Ambiguities: Revisiting 1930s Iran’s *Kashf-i Hijab* campaign,” in *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 122.

⁸¹ Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, “Unveiling Ambiguities,” 121–22.

⁸² Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), part 1.

included some form of head covering for women interacting with men outside the immediate family. This commonsense was challenged in the nineteenth century due to a congruence of international, transnational, national, and local factors.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Iranian travelers to Europe reported on the unveiled women and the public mixing of the sexes they encountered, with modernists and traditionalists taking roughly opposite views regarding the desirability of unveiling and heterosocialization.⁸³ The late Qajar shahs found that moving with ease in courtly European settings, where mixed-gender interactions were common, boosted their cosmopolitan credentials and signaled their nation's independence and modernity.⁸⁴

The first Iranian woman known to have cast off her face veil in public was the poet and Bábí religious leader Tāhiri Qurrat al-Ayn in 1848.⁸⁵ She rose to an exalted status within the faith and received praise from Western suffragists such as Carrie Chapman Catt.⁸⁶ However, the Qajar state accused her of collaborating with would-be assassins and executed her. In line with Baháism's outcast status within Iran, she has come to personify the controversy on unveiling.⁸⁷

The nineteenth century saw the development of transnational modernist ideologies that linked women's clothing, comportment, and education with nation-building. Camron Michael Amin locates the beginnings of a discourse connecting women's progress with the fate of Iran with the publication of Mirza Fatali Akhundzade's *Three Letters* in 1865.⁸⁸ In the lead up to the Constitutional period (1905–1911), gendered reform became clearly yoked to visions of national progress and patriotism.⁸⁹

⁸³ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 54–76; Afsanah Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 132–56; Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 50–55; Monica M. Ringer, “The Quest for the Secret of Strength in Iranian Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature: Rethinking Tradition in the Safarnameh,” in *Iran and the Surrounding World*, 146–61, 159.

⁸⁴ David Motadel, “Qajar Shahs in Imperial Germany,” *Past & Present* 1, no. 213 (2011): 191–235.

⁸⁵ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 86–88.

⁸⁶ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 34.

⁸⁷ Amīr-Mas'ūd Shahrāmīyā and Najmī Sādāt Zamānī, “‘Ilal va payāmadhā-yi shiklgīrī-yi padīdī-yi kashf-i hijāb dar dowrī-yi Pahlavī,” *Ganjīnī-yi Asnād* 89 (1392/2013): 62–85, 68.

⁸⁸ Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 6.

⁸⁹ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Patriotic Womanhood: The Culture of Feminism in Modern Iran, 1900–1941,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (2005): 29–46.

Modernist Iranian poets popularized the metaphor describing hijab, which refers to practices of gender segregation as well as women's Islamic clothing, as a dark shroud (*kafan*), associating it with backwardness.⁹⁰

Calls for unveiling across West Asia largely focused on face covering (*picheh* or *peçe*), which was more common among the urban classes, and sometimes targeted the loose outer garment known as *chador* in Persian and *çarşaf* in Turkish.⁹¹ In practice, however, full Western-style dress remained limited to royal and elite women who had regular contact with Europeans or US missionaries.⁹²

Local critiques of veiling and women's seclusion from public life became ascendant after World War I as nationalist leaders in several Muslim-majority countries considered improving women's status a part of their nation-building projects.⁹³ In 1919, Amanullah Khan rose to power in Afghanistan and began to initiate gendered reforms focused on education. Along with his progressive, unveiled wife, Queen Soraya, he advocated for women's inclusion in civic life.⁹⁴ In 1921, Reza Khan (later Reza Shah) took power in Iran with a military coup. Following a war of independence (1919–1923), Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) was elected president of Türkiye in 1923. Kemal's wife, Latife Hanım, was a strong advocate for women's rights and a proponent of gradual reform in the arena of women's clothing. She played a significant role in shaping Kemalist gender policies. As a newlywed, Atatürk toured the nation with Latife Hanım, and photos of her wearing riding breeches and a simple headscarf or cap were disseminated as a part of Kemalist propaganda regarding gendered modernization.⁹⁵ The Turkish Hat reform (1925) banned the fez for men. The Kemalists did not introduce nationwide

⁹⁰ Muhammadrizā Javādī Yigāni and Fātimi 'Azīzī, "Zamīnihā-yi farhangī va adabī-yi kashf-i hijāb dar Īrān, shī'r-i mukhālīfān," *Majallī-yi Jāmi'ishināsi-yi Īrān* 10, no. 1 (1388/1968): 99–137.

⁹¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Authority and Agency," 161–62.

⁹² Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Dressing up (or Down): Veils, Hats, and Consumer Fashions in Interwar Iran," in *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World*, 153.

⁹³ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 19–45; Hans Kohn, "A New Force Rises in the Near East: From the Dardanelles Out to Afghanistan Nationalism Challenges the Great Powers," *New York Times*, July 31, 1938, 100.

⁹⁴ Shireen Khan Burki, "The Politics of Zan from Amanullah to Karzai: Lessons for Improving Afghan Women's Status," in *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*, ed. Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 293–305.

⁹⁵ "Mme. Kemal's Clothes Are Pledge of Reform: Her Riding Breeches Indicate Her Intention of Sweeping Away the Harem Conventions," *New York Times*, March 15, 1923, 2; İpek Çalışlar, *Latife Hanım* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi, 2019), 264; Enis Dinç, *Atatürk on Screen: Documentary Film and the Making of a Leader* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 76–77.

laws regarding veiling; instead, state cadres promoted mixed-gender gatherings, and regime propaganda discouraged the veiling of women, with a particular focus on the face veil (peçe). These efforts gained the new regime international recognition. Türkiye became a reference point in Afghanistan and Iran, as well as in other Muslim-majority contexts.⁹⁶

According to Yahya Dowlatabadi, who served as a member of the Iranian Parliament at the time, Reza Khan was hesitant to target the practice of veiling early in his political career.⁹⁷ In 1927–1928, Afghanistan's King Amanullah Khan undertook an extensive tour of Europe, North Africa, and West Asia, including visits to Türkiye and Iran.⁹⁸ In both countries, Queen Soraya participated freely in meetings and appeared in European-style clothes. Reza Shah's wife, however, did not face Amanullah Khan in the same manner.⁹⁹

Although the Pahlavi government had not yet developed any consensus on the issue of veiling, cultural developments of the 1920s brought noticeable changes in women's clothing practices. Alongside face veils disappearing and chadors becoming shorter, women's public presence increased enough to be reflected in memoirs dating from the period.¹⁰⁰ When the shah's female relatives wore light chadors to the holy shrine in Qom, where they had gone to observe the Iranian New Year and the Shia commemoration of Imam 'Ali's martyrdom, some clergymen vocally objected to their attire. In response, the shah reportedly drove to Qum, entered the shrine without taking his boots off, and "had the cleric who had criticized the queen whipped."¹⁰¹ This mythologized incident, however, does not imply Reza Shah was ready to push for additional reform on women's clothing options.

Before the 1930s, Iranian clothing reform only targeted men's traditional and local clothing practices. In 1928, European-style suits and brimmed Pahlavi caps were made mandatory across the country, with government-issued exemptions available for religious officials and trainees.¹⁰² High-ranking government figures in Iran disagreed on the issue of veiling.¹⁰³ Scholars suggest the 1928–1929 coup against

⁹⁶ Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 144.

⁹⁷ Yahya Dowlatabadi, *Hayāt-i Yahyā, chāp-i chāhārūm* (Tehran: 'Atṭār, 1333/1954), 433; see also Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 81.

⁹⁸ Mehmet Okur, "Atatürk Tarafından Yabancı Devlet Başkanlarına Verilen Hediyeler," *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 9, no. 33–34 (2004): 79–88, 82.

⁹⁹ Chehabi, "Staging," 213.

¹⁰⁰ Najmabadi, "Authority and Agency," 166.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰² Chehabi, "Dress Codes for Men," 218–19.

¹⁰³ Najmabadi, "Authority and Agency," 163; for an argument suggesting state support for unveiling as early as 1926, see Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 85.

Amanullah Khan also caused Reza Shah to be cautious about further sartorial reforms that might offend religious sensitivities.¹⁰⁴

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, pioneering Iranian feminists played significant roles in advocating against women's seclusion from public life and sometimes connected the issue to veiling. Rawshanak Naw'dust, whose journal may have been the first to publish the word "feminism" in Persian, was a socialist advocate for reform, marking the influence of the USSR on the Iranian women's movement.¹⁰⁵ Fakhr-Afaq Parsa was another prominent figure who advocated for women's education, the revision of marriage laws, and against veiling from the pages of her journal, *Ĵahān-i Zanān*. Her views were controversial enough to lead to a ban on the magazine and her own exile in 1921.¹⁰⁶

In 1922, Mohtaram Eskandari led the founding of the Patriotic Women's League (Anjuman-i Nisvān-i Vaṭankhāh). The League propagandized for the right to appear unveiled in public and even petitioned the shah for his support.¹⁰⁷ Sediġeh Dowlatabadi, the founder of the progressive women's magazine *Zabān-i Zanān* (f. 1919), and Mastoureh Afshar, the daughter of a prominent intellectual who had lived in Russia and the Ottoman Empire, were active members. Dowlatabadi was among a handful of Iranian women who appeared unveiled in public in the late 1920s.¹⁰⁸

Throughout 1931 and 1932, women's magazine *Ālam-i Nisvān* hosted discussions on veiling and women's seclusion and regularly editorialized against the practice.¹⁰⁹ Iranian feminist discourses had already established similitude between Ottoman and Iranian gendered reform movements.¹¹⁰ During the early republican era, Türkiye became a point of strategic comparison as well. In 1933, for example, an opinion piece in the magazine declared, "It would be better for the Iranian women, like Turkish women, to come out of this shroud, which is nothing more than a heresy [or, harmful innovation] in Islam and is

¹⁰⁴ Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Kashani-Sabet, "Patriotic Womanhood," 35. For more on the role of Communist and socialist women, see Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96–98.

¹⁰⁶ Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 78–79.

¹⁰⁷ Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 39.

¹⁰⁸ Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 82.

¹⁰⁹ Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, "Expanding Agendas for the 'New' Iranian Woman: Family Law, Work and Unveiling," in *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: Routledge, 2003), 168–69.

¹¹⁰ Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, ch. 2.

called hijab.”¹¹¹ Iranian conservative discourse in favor of gender segregation and veiling was also influenced by transnational developments and translated texts.¹¹²

Toward the end of 1932, the Patriotic Women’s League, under the leadership of Mastoureh Afshar, chaired an international Eastern women’s congress in Tehran. The congress demonstrated how much Iranian women disagreed on the compatibility of unveiling with women’s advancement, education, and work outside the home. The activists also disagreed on the role the Pahlavi state should play in the movement. The government, however, was able to penetrate the organization to a large extent. Princess Shams Pahlavi was declared honorary president, and the opening speech from Afshār credited Reza Shah with improving women’s opportunities in comparison to “other women of the East.”¹¹³ This became a turning point, alienating many active members. The Pahlavi state soon took over independent women’s movements, institutionalizing an official state feminism.¹¹⁴ It was this state feminism – the result of a compromise between some Iranian feminists and the regime – that would promote *kashf-i hijāb*.

Under this new arrangement, the Pahlavi state sutured unveiling to girls’ education and public heterosocialization, putting its weight on one interpretation of gendered modernity. As Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari convincingly demonstrate, “legal and institution-building projects” preparing the ground for women’s clothing reform began before the shah set foot on Turkish ground.¹¹⁵ The Ministry of Education led the way as teacher training colleges did away with the hijab in the assigned uniforms for young girls and teachers. Iranian women, who had long pushed the boundaries of self-styling, and feminist activists also played a role in constructing as well as promoting the new order.

If a large part of the story includes a convergence between several prominent women’s activists and the Pahlavi state toward the end of 1932, how do we explain the significance that secondary literature assigns to Reza Shah’s 1934 trip to Türkiye? As Chehabi notes, the shah’s Türkiye visit seems to have accelerated the developments already underway in Iran.

¹¹¹ Şadiq Burūjirdi, “Tabī’at va zan,” *Ālam-i Nisvān* 13, no. 4 (1312/1933), quoted in Mahdī Salāh, *Kashf-i hijāb: zamīnīhā, vākunishhā, va payāmadhā* (Tehran: Mu’assisi-yi Muṭālī’āt va Pazhūhishhā-yi Siyāsī, 1384/2005), 40.

¹¹² Chehabi, “The Banning of the Veil and its Consequences,” in *The Making of Modern Iran*, 194–95.

¹¹³ Salāh, *Kashf-i hijāb*, 104–05; Najmabadi, “Authority and Agency,” 172.

¹¹⁴ Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity,” 56; Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 83; Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, 40.

¹¹⁵ Rostam Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, “Unveiling Ambiguities,” 126.

Although the visit ostensibly prioritized military infrastructure as recommended by the Turkish ambassador to Iran in a 1933 notice, the publicity-savvy Kemalist regime did not miss too many opportunities to perform gendered modernity for this high-profile event.¹¹⁶ When *The Sunday Express* wrote in anticipation that “for the first time in history, Moslem women unveiled will curtsy at social functions before a visiting Moslem king,” the Turkish ambassador in London included an excerpt of the piece in his dispatch back to Ankara.¹¹⁷

The Kemalists made sure to choreograph modern Turkish women into the itinerary. The shah visited a model girl’s occupational school (İsmet Paşa Kız Enstitüsü), shaking the unveiled teachers’ hands and observing the students’ work.¹¹⁸ Uniformed girl scouts formed a centerpiece of the parade at the Hippodrome in Ankara. Wives of senior officials were occasionally in attendance in “modern” clothing, and mixed-gender evening galas often included women singing and joining in European-style dances.¹¹⁹ According to prominent politician İsa Sedigh, the participation of women in the economic, social, and political spheres impressed the shah even more than the military and agricultural developments he observed.¹²⁰

Turkish propaganda regarding men’s clothing reform could be even less subtle. According to General Arfa, who accompanied the shah during the visit, during one stop, Mustafa Kemal harshly berated a turbaned “molla” for his attire, and the man, abandoning his white turban, disappeared into the crowd.¹²¹ Soon after, the Kemalist regime forbade men of religion from wearing their occupational outfits outside of work environments. Reza Shah also began issuing orders about men’s clothing policy while still in Türkiye. Dowlatabadi notes that he sent a telegraph ordering fieldworkers to start wearing full-brimmed hats to protect themselves from the sun during his trip.¹²² This would mark the beginning of a renewed emphasis on clothing reform, with an increasing focus on women’s public appearance.

¹¹⁶ From Ambassador Hüsrev Bey to Deputy of Foreign Affairs, no. 2173/263, Tehran, September 11, 1933, reprinted in Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Yabancı Devlet Başkanları*, vol. 2 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1989), 479.

¹¹⁷ Extract from *The Sunday Express* of April 15, 1934, reprinted in Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Yabancı Devlet Başkanları*, vol. 2, 490–91.

¹¹⁸ *Hakimiyeti Milliye*, June 20, 1934, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ Husayn Makkī, *Tārīkh-i bist sāli-yi Īrān*, Vol. 6: *Mulāqāt-i siyāsī va sowghāt-i safar-i Turkiyi* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1362/1983), 151–52.

¹²⁰ İsa Sedigh, *Yādigār-i ‘umr, khātirāt az sarguzasht-i Īsā Şiddīq*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Kitābforūshī-yi Dihkhudā, 1354/1975), 303.

¹²¹ Hassan Arfa, *Under Five Shahs* (New York: W. Morrow, 1965), 250.

¹²² Dowlatabādī, *Hayāt-i Yahyā*, 431.

Upon his return, the shah made multiple comparative remarks referencing Türkiye to government officials. According to Mohsen Sadr, then President of the High Court of Justice in Tehran, the shah was motivated by the need to demonstrate Iran's progress visibly by the time of Atatürk's planned visit to Iran.¹²³ The shah reportedly told his Prime Minister Mahmoud Jam that, since he went to Türkiye and saw the Turkish women unveiled and working shoulder to shoulder with the men, he had been bothered by the sight of women in chador.¹²⁴ In a meeting with his ministers about veiling policy, Reza Shah asked, "are not millions of unveiled non-Iranian women honorable?," likely in reference to the Muslim women of Türkiye.¹²⁵

Reza Shah thus compared Türkiye to Iran and anticipated Atatürk comparing the two countries as well. In addition, he constructed a racialized theory to explain Türkiye's development, arguing Turks were simply more obedient than the supposedly more free-willed Persians: "It is easier to control Turks than Iranians," he told confidantes.¹²⁶ This theory allowed him to explain away what he saw as the more progressive aspects of Atatürk's Türkiye while maintaining an ethnonationalist belief in Aryan superiority. The Türkiye visit was partially prompted by Reza Shah's wish to counterbalance British and Russian pressures by strengthening regional ties.¹²⁷ In the midst of idealistic talk of brotherhood and anti-imperialist political strategizing, comparativism introduced an element of competition with masculinist, racial, and civilizational undertones to Türkiye-Iran relations. Although the comparison was ostensibly between Türkiye and Iran, "the West" loomed large in local visions of modernity and nation-building projects, making any comparison implicitly triangular.

In May 1935, an organization called Jam'iyat-i Zanān-i Āzādikhāh-i Īrānī (Organization of Freedom-Seeking Iranian Women), later known as the Women's Center was founded under the honorary leadership of Princess Shams to advocate against veiling and seclusion.¹²⁸ Women's activists such as Dowlatabadi and Hajir Tarbiat played significant roles in the organization and influenced government policy and strategy.¹²⁹ Around the same time, the European-style brimmed hat replaced the

¹²³ Mohsen Sadr, *Khāṭirāt-i Sadr al-Ashraf* (Tehran: Vahid, 1364/1985), 302.

¹²⁴ "Zanān chādūr va chāqchūr rā kinār guzāshtand," *Rastākhīz*, no. 511 (1355/1976): 12–13.

¹²⁵ Makkī, *Tārīkh-i bist sāli-yi Īrān*, 263.

¹²⁶ 'Alī-'Aṣghar Haqdār, *Riṣā Shāh dar Turkīyi bi ravāyat-i asnād-i tārikhī* (Tehran: Daftar-i Muṭālī'āt-i Mashrūṭi-khāhī-yi Hizb-i Mashrūṭi-yi Īrān, 1398/1978), 72.

¹²⁷ Arfa, *Under Five Shahs*, 244.

¹²⁸ Ṣalāh, *Kashf-i hijāb*, 120.

¹²⁹ Najmabadi, "Authority and Agency," 173–74.

Pahlavi hat as the standard headdress in Iran by decree, bringing Turkish and Iranian sartorial practices in alignment.¹³⁰ These developments sparked gossip that a nationwide women's unveiling was in the offing, and occasioned widespread protests, which the Iranian military violently suppressed.¹³¹

The much celebrated and maligned "launch" of *kashf-i hijāb* came on January 7, 1936, at a celebration at the Tehran Teacher's College. At this ceremony, Reza Shah gave a general speech about women's advancement and integration into society while standing next to his wife and the two princesses, who were wearing hats, jackets, and long skirts. The newspapers disseminated the speech and the pictures, demonstrating the royal will behind European-style dress for women. Reza Shah's eldest daughter Ashraf Pahlavi, who was present at the event, recalled his father's reluctance to showcase them as models of modern Iranian womanhood. She also described the general understanding that followed the event: "After this ceremony, all women were required to remove their veils, and those who refused were forced to do so."¹³² The princess's comment is in line with Chehabi's argument that, by this point, "Reza Shah's regime had become so autocratic that his remaining dress reforms were promulgated not as laws but as decrees."¹³³

Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, on the other hand, argue that this speech did not constitute a "decree" but was, instead, the continuation of a multipronged anti-veiling campaign. For this argument, they use the memoirs of the Minister of Education Ali-Asghar Hekmat, in which Hikmat took credit for suggesting a royal demonstration in support of the campaign. According to the memoirs, in the fall of 1935, the shah asked him about progress on the *kashf-i hijāb*. After noting the ground had been prepared by the actions of the ministry, particularly with girl students, Hikmat suggested more would be needed to convince older women. He requested that the shah – who had been reluctant to see his family members unveiled – set an example for the population. This would, Hikmat believed, increase support for the unveiling campaign already underway under the auspices of his ministry because "people follow the religion of their kings."¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Chehabi, "Dress Codes," 222.

¹³¹ Makkī, *Tārīkh-i bīst sāli-yi Īrān*, 255.

¹³² Ashraf Pahlavi, *Faces in the Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 25.

¹³³ Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 215.

¹³⁴ Ali-Asghar Hekmat, *Sī khāṭiri az 'aṣr-i farkhundi-yi Pahlavī* (Tehran: Shirkat-i Chāp-i Pārs, 1355/1976), 91.

In working to nuance the “decree” argument, Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari demonstrate that the legal framing for kashf-i hijāb occurred via administrative directives issued by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Interior.¹³⁵ A series of preliminary reforms targeted girls’ schools; civic and military officials were encouraged to organize and attend mixed-gender social events.¹³⁶ The girl scout program also promoted new habits of dress and comportment.¹³⁷ Because practices of veiling differed across Iran, the state’s unveiling campaign manifested differently in various provinces, with exceptions being made for some rural practices.¹³⁸ The primary record also demonstrates that the government frowned on overzealous enforcement and urged caution and understanding.¹³⁹

For Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, these details imply similitude to Türkiye, where anti-veiling campaigns occurred as local initiatives, “leaving a space for the negotiation of the regime ideals at the local level as well as for the involvement of various local actors in the shaping of campaigns.”¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, whether one emphasizes the role of Reza Shah or a larger national elite in conceiving of and implementing kashf-i hijāb, it is clear that traditionally inclined women resented the campaign, and many families still recall the difficulties it caused.

Mokhber-ol Saltaneh, who had been the shah’s prime minister (1927–1933) and was against clothing reform, called kashf-i hijāb “the Shah’s souvenir from Turkey” in his 1950 memoirs.¹⁴¹ This colorful metaphor, which depicted the shah casually shopping for radical reforms as if they were cheap trinkets, has stuck. However, few world leaders considered such changes superficial or superfluous in the early twentieth century. Western colonial powers had long enforced sartorial standardization over conquered populations. In the case of the United States, for example, clothing reform was forced upon Indigenous children in

¹³⁵ Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, “Unveiling Ambiguities,” 127–31.

¹³⁶ Chehabi, “Banning of the Veil,” 198.

¹³⁷ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Cultures of Iranianess: The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism,” in *Iran and the Surrounding World*, 162–81. Leila Papoli-Yazdi and Maryam Dezhmakhoo, *Homogenization, Gender and Everyday Life in Pre- and Transmodern Iran: An Archaeological Reading* (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2021), 98; Makkī, *Tārīkh-i bist sāli-yi Īrān*, 265–68.

¹³⁸ Rostam-Kolayi, “Expanding Agendas,” 166–68.

¹³⁹ Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari, *Unveiling Ambiguities*, 134.

¹⁴⁰ Sevgi Adak, “Anti-veiling Campaigns and Local Elites in Turkey of the 1930s: A View from the Periphery,” in *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World*, 59; and Sevgi Adak, *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in Turkey: State, Society, and Gender in the Early Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022), 49–86.

¹⁴¹ Mehdi Qoli Hedayat (Mukhbīr al-Saltāni), *Khāṭirāt va khaṭarāt* (Tehran: Rangīn, 1329/1950), 516–17.

American Indian Schools, promoted heavily for European immigrants, and institutionalized in new overseas colonies such as the Philippines. As newly independent nation-states that had been the target of imperialism, Türkiye and Iran mobilized sartorial reform as a part of their centralization efforts to strengthen the state, inculcate “modern” habits of comportment, and represent themselves as equal members of “international” civilization.¹⁴²

Türkiye certainly formed a reference point for Iranian proponents of unveiling. However, international modernist discourses about gendered progress circulated in more ways than West to East. In revising Mokhber-ol Saltaneh’s declaration, we can say kashf-i hijāb was a souvenir to Iran, not merely from Türkiye, but from an Iran operating in a global context. While likely accelerated by the Türkiye visit, kashf-i hijāb built on past internal and transnational developments and followed a gradual pattern.¹⁴³ Women’s civic presence and modernization had become linked in Iranian elite discourses long before the shah’s decision. Although women’s activists disagreed on unveiling, feminist nationalism, the state’s focus on gendered modernization, and a wish to gain public diplomacy dividends overlapped in Iran’s kashf-i hijāb.

Critiques of harsh enforcement cannot be dismissed. However, clearly, some segments of the population supported clothing reform and helped prepare the ground for it. Wearing European-style clothes in public remained common, especially in wealthier neighborhoods, even as enforcement dropped with the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941. In fact, by then, Western-style clothing had become habitual for city dwellers across West Asia and North Africa regardless of legislation or lack thereof.¹⁴⁴

Kashf-i Hijāb in Iranian Scholarship: Ideology, Sources, and Style

Iranian clothing reform under Reza Shah has not received extensive scholarly engagement in Türkiye. In Iran, on the other hand, secondary sources are abundant and divided in their approach. Works aligned with the regime’s official stance read kashf-i hijāb and the entire rule of Reza Shah as an imperialist ploy to undermine Islam. The introduction to the collection of primary documents on the veil ban, published by

¹⁴² Chehabi, “Dress Codes for Men,” 224–29; Arang Keshavarzian, “Turban or Hat, Seminarian or Soldier: State Building and Clergy Building in Reza Shah’s Iran,” *Journal of Church and State* 45, no. 1 (2003): 81–112.

¹⁴³ Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 85.

¹⁴⁴ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 19–46.

the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1999, epitomizes the official stance.¹⁴⁵ According to the authors, after the failure of the 1919 Anglo-Iranian agreement, Britain began to follow a policy of “invisible penetration” in the region and brought Reza Shah to power as a result of this policy.¹⁴⁶ Reza Shah was selected to implement an insidious British “anti-Islam” program, and kashf-i hijāb was part and parcel of a plan to weaken Islam and demoralize the country’s population. Multiple Persian-language articles offer slight variations on this argument.¹⁴⁷ Even when the authors mention Türkiye, the influence of Atatürk is largely irrelevant in these accounts that prioritize Western machinations.

This conspiracy view of kashf-i hijāb is well grounded in Iranian revolutionary ideology. Ayatollah Khomeini’s anti-Pahlavi speeches, for example, argued Reza Shah had used the “pretext” of imitating “the incompetent Atatürk” to tear “the veil of humanity.”¹⁴⁸ Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati, known as the ideological father of the Iranian revolution for his synthesis of Shia symbolism with Third Worldist and Marxist tenets, also argued that both Atatürk and Reza Shah had come to power through Western plots, attacking Islam from the inside.¹⁴⁹ He claimed that at the height of the Ottoman Empire’s position as “the center of manifestation of Islamic power,” Iran was “the shining center of Islamic thought.” This, of course, repeated the Persophilic trope of warlike Turks and cultured Persians, but Shariati did not emphasize difference with his comparison. Instead, he noted that it could not be an accident that Reza Khan came to power at the same time as Atatürk, “following a very similar prescription.” With these two implants, the West was able to “paralyze” two key Islamic centers.

Many proregime Iranian scholars cite an interesting source with transnational connections to Türkiye to argue that the veil ban was

¹⁴⁵ Introduction to *Taghyr-i libās va kashf-i hijāb bi ravāyat-i asnād-i tārikhī va vizārat-i ijtihādīāt* (Tehran: Markaz-i Barriši-yi Āsānd-i Tārikhī, 1378/1999), 29–89. The documents themselves paint a much more nuanced picture.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁷ For example, Narjis ‘Abdiyānī, “Chādur va ta’sirāt-i siyāsī ijtimā’i-yi ān dar farhang-i shī‘ayān-i Īrān,” *Bānuvān-i Shī‘i*, no. 10 (1385/2006): 7–36; Rizā Ramizān Nargisī, “Zamīnī-sāzi-yi kashf-i hijāb dar Īrān (naqsh-i Šidiqi Dowlatābādī),” *Bānuvān-i Shī‘i*, no. 2 (1383/2004): 123–46; Siyyid Ma’sūm Ḥusini, Siyyidi Fātimi Salimī, and Nargis Iḥsānī, “Āsar va payāmadhā-yi ijtimā’i-yi hijāb dar salāmat-i ravān az manzar-i āmūzihā-yi dinī,” *Muṭālī‘āt-i Ravānshināsī va ‘Ulūm-i Tarbiyati*, no. 47 (1399/2020): 25–34; Muḥammad-Rizā Akbarī, *Hijāb dar ‘aṣr-i mā* (Tehran: Payām-i Āzādī, 1389/2010).

¹⁴⁸ Ruhollah Khomeini, “Sukhanrānī dar jam‘i rūhāniyūn va ṭullāb darbāriyi jināyāt-i riziḥim-i Pahlavī,” vol. 3, *Ṣaḥīfi-yi imām khumiynī*, diy māh 1356/1977 (Tehran: Mu’assisi-yi Tanzīm va Nashr-i Āsār-i Imām Khumiynī, 1378/1999), 299.

¹⁴⁹ Ali Shariati, “Tavallud-i dubārī-yi islām dar nigāhi sarī bar farāz-i yik qarn,” *Majmū‘i-yi āsar*, vol. 27, *Bāzshināsī-yi huvīyat-i Irānī Islāmī* (Tehran: Ilhām, 1361/1982), 227–52.

part of a British plot: *The Memoirs of Mr. Hempher, The British Spy to the Middle East*. Initially published in Turkish in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, this controversial pamphlet claims to be the memoirs of a British spy, one of many assigned to the region. According to the memoir, Hempher is charged with pretending to convert to Islam and sowing discord among Muslim populations by promoting various vices and sectarian separatism.¹⁵⁰ Hempher's memoirs have not received much attention in Western scholarship, where they are largely considered an Ottoman forgery used to besmirch the Salafi movement.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Hempher claims credit for starting Salafism in Arabia but also mentions fueling Ottoman–Iranian enmity as one of the key methods for imperialist success.¹⁵² Despite its disputed authenticity, referencing the book helps Iranian proregime authors claim Reza Shah was the continuation of a longstanding imperialist plan to weaken Islam across the region. This approach not only underplays any local Iranian support for unveiling but also makes any role the Türkiye visit played irrelevant.

Pro-Pahlavi memoirs also represent the visit as limited in its effects. Arfa, Sedigh, and Dowlatabadi all wrote at length about the Türkiye trip but ultimately credited the shah for Iran's progress. Diplomat Fathullah Nuri Isfandiari's 1944 memoirs ignored the Türkiye trip entirely while praising the shah's reforms, including kashf-i hijāb.¹⁵³ The shah's children epitomized this veneration. Princess Ashraf and Mohammad Reza Shah both praised kashf-i hijāb and assigned all the credit to their late father.¹⁵⁴ For these memoirists, kashf-i hijāb was thoroughly interlinked with women's education and participation in civic life, and the shah deserved credit for it.

Türkiye plays a much larger role in the canonical eight-volume history series *Tārīkh-i bīst sāli-yi Īrān*, published by Iranian politician and historian Hussain Makkī in the 1980s and 1990s. In volume 6, dedicated in part to Reza Shah's Türkiye visit, Makkī notes the precedent of Amanullah Khan. However, he also places great emphasis on Mustafa Kemal's reforms, claiming, "clothing and hat reform and some other

¹⁵⁰ M. Siddık Gümüş, *Confessions of a British Spy and British Enmity Against Islam* (Istanbul: Hakikat, 2013).

¹⁵¹ Bernard Haykel, "Anti-Wahhabism: A Footnote," *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, March 25, 2008, http://blogs.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/03/anti_wahhabism_a_footnote/.

¹⁵² M. Siddık Gümüş, *İngiliz Casusu Hempher'in İtirafı: İngilizlerin İslam Düşmanlığı* (Istanbul: İhlas, 1990).

¹⁵³ Fathullāh Nūrī Isfandiyārī, *Rastākhīz-i Īrān* (Tehran: Chāpkhāni-yi Sāzmān-i Barnāmi, 1335/1956), 637.

¹⁵⁴ Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 231.

reforms were imitated from Turkey.”¹⁵⁵ The book cites and agrees with the memoirs of Mokhber-ol Saltaneh, that kashf-i hijāb was indeed “another souvenir from Turkey.”¹⁵⁶ Makkī also references the objections of the religious classes and highlights the violent clashes around the 1935 hat reform. While Britain gets less emphasis in this analysis, Makkī connotes foreign influence by comparing the military’s suppression of antireform protests to the World War II invasion of Iran by Russian forces.¹⁵⁷

Some Persian-language scholarship diverges from the official line to offer a multivalent analysis at the intersection of the local and international, citing multiple relevant sources.¹⁵⁸ Sadegh Zibakalam, a professor of Political Science at Tehran University, stands furthest from the official Iranian narrative. In the interviews he has given, Zibakalam has openly contested readings that cast kashf-i hijāb as a British ploy against Islam. Pointing to what he believes is a conspiracy theory-oriented reading of the Reza Shah era, Zibakalam explains kashf-i hijāb as simply a part of Reza Shah’s modernization project, urging women toward the civic, public sphere.¹⁵⁹ It is clear that Hempher would have no place in such an argument: Britain, according to Zibakalam, did not care about veiling one way or the other and still does not.

In his book on Reza Shah, Zibakalam expands upon these views, arguing kashf-i hijāb had roots unrelated to Britain, which controlled multiple Muslim-majority regions at the time and implemented no such policy elsewhere.¹⁶⁰ Zibakalam’s analysis proposes an equivalency between Atatürk and Reza Shah, not in terms of being agents of the British, but as nationalists rising from lower ranks through individual effort.¹⁶¹ Zibakalam also uses comparisons that violate established categorizations (e.g., “the Muslim World”) to highlight the transnational ascendance of political ideologies. In critiquing the official view that these two men were under imperialist influence, for example, he notes authoritarian modernization occurred simultaneously in many other countries, including North Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico.

¹⁵⁵ Makkī, *Tārīkh-i bist sāli-yi Īrān*, 250.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁵⁸ Ṣalāh, *Kashf-i hijāb*; Yigāni va ‘Azīzī, “Zamīnīhā-yi Farhangī.” See also, M. Aḥmadzādī, “Arzyābi va naqd-i mas‘ali-yi kashf-i hijāb az manzar-i rābiṭi-yi qudrat va siyāsathā-yi farhangī,” *Jāmi‘i-pazhūhī-yi Farhangī* 6, no. 1 (1394/2015): 1–26, esp. p. 5; Shahrāmniyā va Zamānī, “Ilal va payāmadhāyi shiklgīrī-i padīdi-yi kashf-i hijāb.”

¹⁵⁹ Ma’sūmi Sutūdi, “Guft u gū bā Ṣādiq Zibākālām: Rūh-i Ingilistān ham az kūditā-yi Rizākhān khabar nadāshst,” *Nasīm-i Bidārī*, no. 23 (1390/2011): 48–54; Sadegh Zibakalam, *Rizā Shāh* (Tehran: Rowzani; London: H & S Media, 1398/2020), 234.

¹⁶⁰ Zibakalam, *Rizā Shāh*, 24.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 166–67.

To summarize, the outcomes of Iranian scholarship, even on a subject as thorny as kashf-i hijāb, hinge on ideological approach, sources, and the strategic use of comparativism, much like scholarship elsewhere. In an excellent essay on the history of scholarly comparisons made between Türkiye and Iran, Agah Hazır claims, “social sciences in Turkey and in Iran are very much likely to remain over-politicized when compared to their Western counterparts.”¹⁶² Of course, to believe in such a contrast, one will have to ignore too much about Western knowledge production – not just the entire genteel heritage of Orientalism, which Hazır himself critiques, but also the modern history of comparative politics, think tanks, and decades of culture wars. Certainly, proregime Iranian scholarship and Kemalist Turkish history sometimes engage in an obviously political *style* of nationalism that would be jarring for most peer-reviewed scholarship in English. However, what differentiates the various approaches to kashf-i hijāb in Persian-language scholarship is not their “political” nature but the absence of the pro-Atatürk consensus established within English- and Turkish-language scholarship.

Nostalgia for the Modern Patriarch

While official Iranian history contains little admiration for Reza Shah or Atatürk, social media is another story altogether. On the popular video-sharing site YouTube, segments of the Iranian diaspora join Turkish nationalists, watching, commenting on, and praising videos of the shah’s 1934 visit to Türkiye. A search for “Reza Shah Atatürk” returns countless such videos, including many copies of recorded scenes from the visit. Initially disseminated as state-based propaganda for the Pahlavi and Kemalist regimes, these moving images have gained a new life in the social media age.¹⁶³ Liked, shared, and commented on, the clips now serve new political purposes, such as critiquing the two countries’ current regimes and emphasizing Turkish–Iranian bilateral ties.

The contemporary focus on the “friendship” between Atatürk and Reza Shah has gained a boost from what Esra Özyürek has called “nostalgia for the modern.”¹⁶⁴ Özyürek describes Turkish nostalgia for the modern as a secularist reaction to the rise of Islamist politics in the

¹⁶² Hazır, “Comparing,” 24.

¹⁶³ On the original propaganda function of the clips, see Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vol. 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 187; and Dinç, *Atatürk on Screen*, 61.

¹⁶⁴ Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

1990s, manifesting in individualized, unofficial performances of adoration for the early Republic and Atatürk. Some scholars of contemporary Iranian culture have found this concept helpful for explaining how members of the Iranian diaspora idealize and celebrate a prerevolutionary Iran associated with modernity.¹⁶⁵ Within Iran, as well, many dissidents express dissatisfaction for the current regime by positively reevaluating the Pahlavi shahs.¹⁶⁶ These affective investments and popular interest in the two founding fathers repurpose past instances of official propaganda to demonstrate “nostalgia for an imagined era of order and stability.”¹⁶⁷

While some comparison between Atatürk and Reza Shah slips into social and popular media commentary about the two men, most posts on the 1934 footage express discontent with contemporary politicians compared to the glorified founding fathers. A March 24, 2017, article in the hardline secularist Turkish newspaper *Sözcü* demonstrates this discursive bend. Noting the popularity of videos of Reza Shah and Atatürk from the visit on social media, the piece contrasts the exchange between the two leaders with the comportment of the politicians of the day: “The dialogue between the two, the body language, and the respectful discussion offer us clues regarding Türkiye and Iran of the 1930s. And whether we want it or not, this leads to comparisons with today.”¹⁶⁸

Titled “Politeness in Foreign Policy,” the piece clearly urges its readers toward a comparison that will find today’s policymakers and representatives lacking in manners (and implicitly in class and modernity) by contrast. The article does reserve a unique place for Atatürk and Türkiye by noting how, before entering a building, the shah asked Atatürk to go first because he is a “great commander,” whereas the shah was “just a soldier.” While there are hints regarding the exceptional status of Atatürk in such recollections, the primary push of comparison is one of nostalgia for both the Turkish and Iranian modern.

Comparisons also appear in YouTube comments. The assessments are not always positive. One post, for example, references the Pahlavis’

¹⁶⁵ Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Farzaneh Hemmasi, “Iran’s Daughter and Mother Iran: Googoosh and Diasporic Nostalgia for the Pahlavi Modern,” *Popular Music* 36, no. 2 (2017): 157–77; Neda Maghbouleh, “‘Inherited Nostalgia’ Among Second-generation Iranian Americans: A Case Study at a Southern California University,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no. 2 (2010): 199–218.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Erdbrink, “After a Mummy Turns Up, Nostalgia Grips Iran,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, <https://bit.ly/4ilXL5o>.

¹⁶⁷ Cronin, Introduction to *The Making of Modern Iran*, 2. See Naficy, *Exile Cultures*, 22–23; and Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern*, ch. 3 for this repurposing.

¹⁶⁸ “Dış Politikada Nezaket: Atatürk’ün 1934’te İran Şahı Pehlevi ile Sohbeti,” *Sözcü*, March 24, 2017, <https://rb.gy/cmcybg>.

nonelite origins, calling them “a peasant family,” and stating the current state of Iran is preferable to that under pro-Western rule.¹⁶⁹ Overwhelmingly, however, the prevailing tone of these posts idealizes the early Pahlavi and Kemalist eras and eulogizes the two leaders. A comment from a user named Dariush Tousi epitomizes this approach: “You surprised why Iran n Turkey are falling down into the hell?! these two great countries once had two modernist n nationalist leaders such as Reza-shah n Atatürk! now look what they’ve got: formal mullahs in Iran n mullahs in suit in Turkey!”¹⁷⁰

While the parallels between the two leaders operate in strategic comparison to a negative Islamist present in twenty-first-century social media, the comparative foil of the early twentieth century was the past. Propaganda from the early Pahlavi and Kemalist regimes attributed centuries of conflicts between the two states to the deposed Ottoman and Qajar rulers, as well as to imperialist intrigue.¹⁷¹ The Iranian and Turkish press covering the visit linked the two countries by constructing the two leaders as symbols of the state. The prevailing metaphors were of masculine friendship and brotherhood in standing against the combined forces of backwardness and colonialism.

The first Turkish opera, *Özsoy* (lit. “pure lineage”), written and performed precisely for the shah’s visit, most obviously belabored the rhetoric of brotherhood. The plot of the opera, as proposed by Atatürk, was based on the legendary Persian epic *Shahnameh*. It represented the people of Türkiye and Iran via the twin brothers *Tur* (the wolf, representing Turks) and *İraç* (the lion, representing Persians), separated by the vagaries of fate. It ended on a note of a peaceful reunion and promise of love and collaboration. During the performance, Atatürk and the shah quite explicitly filled in for the two brothers, as the actors ended the play by pointing in the direction of the two leaders when asked to identify Tur and İraç.¹⁷² According to the composer Adnan Saygun, at this point, the shah exclaimed, “Kardeşim!” (lit. my younger brother) and hugged Atatürk.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Nader Shah, YouTube comment to video “Reza shah Pahlavi speaks in Azeri-turkic with Atatürk,” posted by Javad İbrahimov, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIDoWw-hPzI&t=11s.

¹⁷⁰ Punctuation and spelling reproduced from the original. Dariush Tousi, Untitled YouTube comment to video “Reza shah Pahlavi speaks in Azeri-turkic with Atatürk.”

¹⁷¹ Afshin Marashi, “Performing the Nation: The Shah’s Official Visit to Kemalist Turkey, June to July, 1934,” in *The Making of Modern Iran*, 109.

¹⁷² Namık Sinan Turan, “Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde ‘Ulusal Kimliğin’ Opera Sahnesinde İnşası: Özsoy,” *Ahenk Müzikoloji Dergisi*, no. 2 (2018): 1–30; Zeliha Demir, “Türk-İran İlişkileri Çerçevesinde Rıza Şah Pehlevi’nin Türkiye Ziyareti,” *Dünden*, July 4, 2021, <https://rb.gy/7b28k8>.

¹⁷³ Emre Yalçın, “Cumhuriyet Döneminin İlk Lirik Sahne Eseri: Özsoy Operası,” *Tophumsal Tarih* 4, no. 24 (1995): 42–43.

In such performances of Turkish–Iranian brotherhood, one type of comparativism was momentarily and strategically eclipsed, whereas another – Türkiye and Iran as models of development for the rest of the region – became boosted. The shah echoed the trope of similarity between Iran and Türkiye, claiming to the Turkish ambassador that the eyes of “all Eastern nations” were upon himself and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.¹⁷⁴ In response to the shah’s positive feedback about the Turkish reforms at the end of the visit, Atatürk reportedly said, “We are brothers and neighbors. It would be good for us to resemble each other.”¹⁷⁵ This romantic vision of blood brotherhood (i.e., “pure lineage”) and exemplary similitude existed alongside the myriad negative racial and cultural theories Iranians and Turks held of each other.

Aspirations for Turkish–Iranian similarity were not in opposition to but coeval with centralized ethnonationalism. After all, strengthening Türkiye–Iranian relationships had only become possible after Reza Shah agreed Türkiye’s borders would include Mount Ararat, which clarified the boundaries of the two nation-states in 1932.¹⁷⁶ The concession of Mount Ararat in exchange for farming land elsewhere limited the movement of Kurdish populations between the two countries. The personification of Turkish–Iranian friendship in two father figures, therefore, was not just patriarchal. It also implied the one-on-one interaction of two homogenous nation-states, eclipsing ethnic, regional, and religious complexity.

In contemporary social media, the trope of brotherhood is furthered by the fact that the two leaders spoke Turkish to each other. In fact, Atatürk spoke Istanbul Turkish, and Reza Shah spoke Azeri Turkic (also known as Azerbaijani), but they were able to communicate without an interpreter most of the time. Ironically, the use of Azeri Turkic relates to one of the few points of comparison where Atatürk comes out “worse” than Reza Shah in Western scholarship: The accommodation of ethnic differences. Like all comparisons, the largely accurate claim that the first Pahlavi regime tolerated internal diversity better than the Kemalists erases some nuance. While, unlike early republican Türkiye, the Iranian regime would not go so far as to deny the very existence of its largest

¹⁷⁴ Esendal, *Tahran Anıları*, 18–19. See also, Erkan Afsar, “Tarihsel Perspektif Bağlamında: Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Reformlarının İran’a Etkileri (1920–1933),” in *Türkiye–İran Üzerine Okumalar: Devlet – Siyaset – Hukuk – Toplum – Ekonomi – Kültür – Din*, ed. Abdullah Erol, Erkan Afsar, and Barış Kandeğer (İstanbul: Hiperlink, 2020), 63.

¹⁷⁵ İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, *Anılarım* (İstanbul: Güneş, 1990), 297.

¹⁷⁶ Alpaslan Öztürkçü, “Türkiye–İran İlişkilerinde Bahar Havası: Mutlak Uyumlu bir Kesit (1932–1937),” in *Türkiye–İran Üzerine Okumalar: Devlet–Siyaset–Hukuk–Toplum–Ekonomi–Kültür–Din*, ed. Erkan Afsar, Barış Kandeğer, and Abdullah Erol (İstanbul: Hiper, 2020), 91–115.

linguistic minorities, Reza Pahlavi did oversee centralization and language reform programs that established “Persian” as the official language of the state.¹⁷⁷ As noted in the introduction, the Iranian reevaluation and valorization of *Shahnameh*, which had inspired Atatürk’s theme for the first Turkish opera, was deeply connected to Persian linguistic nationalism.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, intellectuals focusing on language reform in Iran followed and referenced developments in Türkiye, in line with strategic comparativism.¹⁷⁹

While benevolent patriarch rhetoric rules contemporary nostalgia. English-language analyses of the shah’s Türkiye visit tend to be subtly patronizing. Central to these constructions is the claim that the trip constituted the first and last time the shah left Iran for a foreign country. In fact, Reza Khan visited the Shia shrines in Iraq in 1924.¹⁸⁰ It appears that authors who repeat the first and only trip claim either do not know this (like I did not until conducting research for this chapter), consider those parts of Iraq not foreign enough from Iran to matter, or do not feel the need to specify that the Türkiye trip was the shah’s only foreign excursion *while in office*. Turkish media posts sometimes construct this as a sign of the country’s status at the time: The shah was choosing Türkiye and Atatürk as exemplary among all other nations. Western analyses, however, overwhelmingly use this fact to reinforce the point that the shah was uncultured and an easily duped novice in terms of modernity. A British diplomatic memorandum exemplified this line of thinking most clearly in 1935: “It must be remembered that for all practical purposes the Shah had never before left his country and the impact on his mind of an intensely nationalist and half-westernised Turkey was inevitably intense.”¹⁸¹ Clearly resenting the nationalism manifest in both countries under the two leaders, the author, Sir Douglas L. Busk, thus passed judgments on modernization efforts in both, placing Türkiye barely above Iran, and using the insult to “half-westernised” Türkiye to express further disdain for the shah and Iran. Similarly, the qualifying phrase “for all

¹⁷⁷ Mehrdad Kia, “Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (1998): 9–36.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ John R. Perry, “Language Reform in Turkey and Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 3 (1985): 295–311; Paul Ludwig, “Iranian Language Reform in the Twentieth Century: Did the First Farhangestān (1935–40) Succeed?,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 78–103.

¹⁸⁰ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 168.

¹⁸¹ Douglas L. Busk, “Memorandum,” January 1, 1935, 10, reproduced in *Iran Political Diaries 1881–1965*, eds. Robert Michael Burrell and Robert L. Jarman, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Archive Editions, 1997), 64.

practical purposes” implies the British were aware of the Iraq visit but did not consider Iran and Iraq to be different enough to warrant commentary.

Although contemporary scholarship is rarely that explicitly condescending, English-language analyses critical of the shah continue to bank on the fact that the reader will recognize Türkiye not as an exemplary modern nation but as an exemplary “modernizing” nation. For example, we learn from one popular book on Iran–US relations that Reza Shah was “part drill sergeant, part action figure,” who “refused to travel abroad,” in willful contrast to Qajar elites. “The lone exception” – the Türkiye trip of 1934 – only helped him force modernity on Iran in a brusque manner.¹⁸²

Atatürk and Türkiye do come out as “better” in such evaluations. Yet, better is hardly the best. Reza Shah’s lack of past traveling in Europe proper and Türkiye’s “not enough” status combine to make the shah’s reforms problematic – too hasty, too brutal, too superficial, and so on. The rhetorical force of comparison, in the meantime, obscures the role and the perspective of the comparer on setting the standards and rankings of modernity.

In fact, the oft-repeated “his one and only trip to a foreign country” remark obscures the fact that traveling outside the country was rare for ruling heads of state at the time. Historians often note the unusualness of the sitting US president Woodrow Wilson traveling to Paris to oversee the Peace Conference after World War I. As noted, King Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan did travel extensively across continents in 1928. However, Atatürk himself did not make any official state visits during his years as president.¹⁸³ Therefore, Reza Shah’s visit to Türkiye remains an outlier, not because he visited the not-European-enough Türkiye, but because he visited a foreign country for an extensive period while in office. In the consensus scholarship, Woodrow Wilson leaving the United States for Europe signifies his commitment to an internationalist outlook and his willingness to shape the postwar world. Reza Shah’s visit to Türkiye was preceded by and yielded diplomatic dividends, most notably the 1937 Treaty of Saadabad, which confirmed a policy of non-aggression between Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.¹⁸⁴ Despite the faulty belief that Türkiye disengaged from the region during this period, the meeting between the shah and Atatürk also formed a centerpiece in the Kemalist regime’s larger program of outreach to the Middle East.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² John Ghazvinian, *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2021), 107.

¹⁸³ Akgül, “Rıza Han’ın,” 1.

¹⁸⁴ Kashani-Sabet, “Patriotic Womanhood,” 40–41.

¹⁸⁵ Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 83–86.

Another outcome was the – still operational – railroad linking the two countries. However, the common view of the visit remains that of a rough-hewn Eastern dictator going to the periphery of Europe to return with problematic schemes regarding modernization.

Comparing Comparisons

What can we make of the continuing popularity and explanatory force of the claim that Reza Shah lacked a series of personality characteristics in comparison to Atatürk? Certainly, a glance at Reza Khan's humble origins alongside Mustafa Kemal's education "in the Gallic atmosphere of Turkish Salonika" makes for enjoyable reading, putting a human face on history. Perhaps it even allows the reader, clearly in some position of educational privilege to read a history book, to feel superior to a world-famous leader. Yet, these compelling aspects of personalized comparison can be misleading. Focusing on the founding fathers as individuals personalizes policies to the detriment of other local actors, transnational trends, and international pressures. The gendered, classed, and subtly racialized depictions of Atatürk and Reza Shah speak to us powerfully, giving an almost naturalized, teleological bend to history writing. The long-debunked "Great Man" school of history lurks in such analyses. If Daddy can do no wrong in pro-Pahlavi social media posts, Daddy is an uncivilized brute who can be blamed for our current issues, according to others.

Bilateral comparisons between Reza Shah and Atatürk often introduce unnecessary hierarchical assessments into scholarship. In fact, hierarchy attends every comparison. It could not have escaped the readers' attention that I have juxtaposed academic publications comparing Reza Shah and Atatürk in three languages. My goal was to note how ideological and political context and the primary sources available to the author influence scholarship, but certainly judgment sweeps in. Nationalist Turkish history nearly deifies Atatürk; pro-regime Iranian publications utilize a suspect primary document to advance a conspiracy narrative; English-language materials are especially given to comparing Atatürk and Reza Shah from a position of authority on "modernity." I have not claimed that one body of scholarship is somehow acontextually "better"; however, comparison inevitably carries the seeds of judging, ordering, and ranking. The construction of knowledge from the primary record is always an exercise in flux where the standpoints of the author and the reader meet.

My own experience while researching for this chapter is proof that a "writerly approach," highlighting the reader's role, is necessary to

interrupt the brain-lulling effects of proof-by-comparison.¹⁸⁶ Reading pro-Atatürk comparisons in Turkish, I felt inclined to roll my eyes since my entire early education had consisted of reading effusive praise for Atatürk in the same language. Similar comments by authors with non-Turkish names written in English, however, seemed more factual. They rang truer, although, of course, these authors simply used the same sources and shared assumptions regarding modernization and leadership. I had become inoculated to Turkish Kemalism but not to its English-language variations. Then, I noticed that my Iranian research assistant for this chapter, herself a Ph.D. in Persian language and literature, was more skeptical of pro-regime Iranian secondary sources. We shared a laugh about our differing points of view and noted how we were both subconsciously taking an antinationalist approach to the body of work we were considering. Surely, we were also being nationalistically inclined in other, unnoted ways. There is no way to automatically “correct” for our standpoints. Yet, critically examining scholarship from multiple contexts is one method of mitigation. As Ann Laura Stoler has argued, postcolonial analysis is perhaps at its most useful when trained on “the political task of comparing as much as – or more than – on what was compared.”¹⁸⁷

In her influential critique of comparativism, Lisa Lowe recommends locating and foregrounding the “fragments of mixture and convergence that are ‘lost’ through modern comparative procedures.”¹⁸⁸ Transnational ideologies regarding gendered modernization connected the nationalist development projects implemented during the early Pahlavi and Kemalist regimes. After World War II, US-based intellectuals and their local collaborators built modernization theory partially by studying state-led development efforts under the two leaders and by comparing the two countries. The dominant policy discourses examined in the rest of this book, therefore, are not “American” in a pure sense but are instead hegemonic versions of transnational constructs that were disseminated in connection with prevailing US foreign policy doctrines. In the next chapter, I examine the high point of capitalist modernization theory – a time when Türkiye and Iran became US allies, and an elegant queen, instead of a rough-hewn father figure, personified Iranian modernization.

¹⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

¹⁸⁷ Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties,” 56.

¹⁸⁸ Lisa Lowe, “Insufficient Difference,” *Ethnicities* 5, no. 3 (2005): 412.

2 A Modern Empress

Modernization Theory and the Politics of Beauty

On the evening of April 12, 1962, US President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy hosted Mohammad Reza Shah and Empress Farah Pahlavi of Iran at the White House for a glamorous dinner and reception. The visit constituted the first meeting between the president and the shah, who had single-handedly held the reins of Iran since the US-sponsored coup of 1953. Much was at stake. Although Iran was a staunch US ally, the president and the shah disagreed sharply on the road the country should take. JFK had come to power through idealistic rhetoric that considered human rights and democratization a significant part of modernization and a practical way of averting radical left-wing revolutions.¹ The shah, the autocratic leader of an increasingly oil-rich nation, believed socioeconomic development had to precede democratization in Iran to prevent destabilization. Stability before democracy had long been standard US policy. President Dwight Eisenhower, after all, had greenlit the 1953 coup against Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh on the claim that the oil nationalization stand off with Great Britain had made Iran too unstable to withstand Communism.² Now, the shah, secure in his role as an active monarch, sought to convince the new president and the US public that Iran's progress meant steadfast royal leadership – not a precarious switch to liberal democracy.

When the royal couple entered the White House reception room, it became clear that their point would be made via appearances first and foremost. The shah's crisp military uniform spoke of modern manly authority. Still, it was the dazzling, crowned, and bejeweled appearance of Empress Farah by his side that drew audible gasps.³ In his popular

¹ Abrahamian, *Iran between the Two Revolutions*, 444.

² David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 187–93.

³ “Shah Receives Kennedy Praise as State Visit Begins: Kennedy's Praise Welcomes Shah,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1962, 1.

book on the late Pahlavi era, Andrew Scott Cooper uses powerful military metaphors to describe the empress's sartorial message and its impact: "Wheeled into place, Farah's soft power was illuminated with all the subtlety of a Krupp cannon facing a French cavalry charge."⁴ The elegant, gold-threaded gown and the large diamonds on her crown signified the stability, potency, and permanence of an Old-World empire, in contrast to the shifting winds of presidential elections – Republican one term, Democratic the next – in the US empire that had set out to direct the fates of other nations in the postwar era. With their appearance, the shah and the empress seemed to signify that only this kind of stability could properly modernize Iran.

On that day in 1962, the popular press had a field day comparing Empress Farah to the famously chic first lady of the United States, who, it seemed, had been aesthetically outshined "for the first time in her public life."⁵ The *Washington Post* columnist Maxine Cheshire claimed that, after reporting on Mrs. Kennedy's "prettiness," the journalists were at a loss, "groping for adjectives superlative enough" to describe Farah Pahlavi's ensemble.⁶ Paralleling the empress's aesthetic coup, the two leaders' disagreement ultimately resolved to the shah's advantage. Approximately three months after the White House visit, in July 1962, the shah accepted the resignation of liberal politician Ali Amini – whom the shah believed JFK had foisted on him – from the position of Prime Minister.⁷ He replaced Amini with his close friend and confidante, Asadollah Alam. The Kennedy administration eased talk of liberalization and endorsed the shah's own reform program labeled "the White Revolution."⁸ An ambitious royal project intended to "modernize" Iran via measures ranging from land reform to literacy corps, the White Revolution was partially based on reforms initiated during Amini's premiership. However, it did not involve democratization and, instead,

⁴ Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2016), 101. For "soft power," see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁵ "A Much Jazzier Town," *TIME* 79, no. 16 (April 20, 1962): 26–27.

⁶ Maxine Cheshire, "Sneakers were Vying with Diadems," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1962, A1.

⁷ Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 22–23.

⁸ James Goode, "Reforming Iran During the Kennedy Years," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 1 (1991): 13–29; Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 1–24; April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 560–75; Roland Popp, "An Application of Modernization Theory during the Cold War? The Case of Pahlavi Iran," *The International History Review* 30, no. 1 (2008): 76–98.

entrenched the shah's authoritarian rule further. Beauty, it appears, could be advanced weaponry in international relations. But how powerful was this weapon, and which conditions allowed it to operate?

Since beauty is proverbially known to be "in the eye of the beholder," fixed verdicts on it require agreed-upon criteria – what Michel Foucault has called "the comparison of measurement" – and fodder for comparison, ordered into rankings.⁹ In the introduction to this book, I reviewed how Western imperialism came to prioritize proof by comparison as a tool of knowledge production, and discussed how politics of comparativism depend upon the establishment of similitude, the selection of analytical categories, and the strategic emphasis placed along the axes of difference and similarity. Chapter 1 examined the transnational histories of comparing Türkiye and Iran with a focus on the mechanism of personification. I demonstrated how scholars could judge authoritarian modernization in a simplified manner through comparative evaluations of the two countries' "founding fathers," Türkiye's Atatürk and Iran's Reza Shah. This chapter, in turn, examines an era that is broadly considered the "golden age of comparative politics": the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ During this period, social scientists used modernization theory to rank countries against each other using US-oriented rubrics. At the same time, mainstream media compared the famous women of the world, such as Empress Farah and Jacqueline Kennedy, in terms of beauty and style. While seemingly distinct, capitalist ideologies of modernization and beauty both used comparison to generate models for emulation, mobilizing civilizational ideas at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Empress Farah served as an agent and symbol of both beauty and modernization (and their intersections) for Iran in those same decades, participating in and bearing the brunt of countless international comparisons.

Building on research into US government archives, Pahlavi propaganda texts, Islamist sermons, and print media from US allies, including Iran's common comparand, Türkiye, this chapter demonstrates how State Department officials, CIA researchers, and public intellectuals used representations of Empress Farah to link beauty to modernization theory and mobilized comparative critiques of both on aesthetic grounds.¹¹ I use the term "aesthetic" broadly here and throughout the chapter to

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 58–62.

¹⁰ Richard P. Gunther, "Reflections on the Golden Age of Comparative Politics," review of *Comparative European Politics: The Story of a Profession*, by Hans Daalderm, *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (1998): 322–24.

¹¹ My request to interview the empress herself was initially accepted (November 18, 2019) and then rejected (April 12, 2020) by her office.

refer to the realm of appearances and judgments on beauty and taste, which are often taken to be objective, or at least apolitical, but intersect with questions of power.¹² Empress Farah's personal beauty and style remain the focus of my analysis. However, it is important to note that comparative judgments on Iranian modernization regularly combined commentary on Farah Pahlavi's embodied aesthetics with references to developments in other arenas associated with feminized aesthetics, such as fine arts and design. As a serious patron of the arts with college-level architectural training, the empress was highly active in these fields. Therefore, her appearance and actions could signify the intersections of beauty and modernization in multiple overlapping ways.

While there have been laudable scholarly and journalistic attempts to unearth the empress's political agency from underneath an image-dominated archive, this chapter has a different goal: examining how and why the empress lost control over her image – and the Pahlavis over the country's brand – in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹³ Two key terms are relevant to this discussion. The first is “nation-branding,” that is, the generation of a coherent, positive, and “useful” national identity for international consumption.¹⁴ Modern nation-states seek legitimacy and security by avoiding negative press and improving their global reputation. Jackie Kennedy's youthful and stylish image, for example, constituted an important part of the US Cold War public diplomacy arsenal.¹⁵ Given the racist legacy of the standard of civilization and vast power balances in the world system, however, non-Western and postcolonial states often have higher barriers and stakes to securing state legitimacy and sovereignty.¹⁶

The second relevant term is “soft power,” which, in the words of its foremost theorizer, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., involves the ability to achieve policy objectives without coercion and instead through persuasion and

¹² Mimi Thi Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 2 (2011): 359–83, 360–61; Mika Suojanen, “Aesthetic Experience of Beautiful and Ugly Persons: A Critique,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–10.

¹³ For example, Victoria Penziner, “Selective Omission: Inserting Farah Pahlavi and Jehan Sadat into the Women's Movements of Iran and Egypt” (PhD diss., the University of Arizona, 2006); Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven*; Miriam Berger, “The Divisive Legacy of Iran's Royal Family,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/16/divisive-legacy-irans-royal-family/.

¹⁴ Melissa Aronczyk, “How to Do Things with Brands: Uses of National Identity,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 2 (2009): 291–96.

¹⁵ Carol Schwalbe, “Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49, no. 1 (2005): 111–27.

¹⁶ Jianming Shen, “The Non-Intervention Principle and Humanitarian Interventions under International Law,” *International Legal Theory* 7 (2001): 1–32.

“attraction.”¹⁷ Under the shah’s one-man rule, the Iranian state linked nation-branding to the global reputation of the royal family. Empress Farah, specifically, was believed to play a deeply gendered soft power role, attracting policy dividends by representing Iran as a modern, progressing nation under righteous rule.

Past scholarship has connected women’s participation in comparative international events focused on embodied aesthetics, such as beauty contests, to cultural performances of nationalism, authenticity, and modernization.¹⁸ Empress Farah’s elegant image did bolster positive political arguments about Iran, especially before the tumultuous late 1960s and in the sympathetic corporate media. Overwhelmingly, however, politics was the lens through which beauty was viewed and not vice versa. Not only were Empress Farah and Iranian modernization compared and ranked in tandem through aesthetic criteria, but both were also eventually condemned due to their associations with feminized aesthetics. These critiques then fed into a dismissal of Pahlavi nation-branding as a superficial ruse. Comparison as a tool of knowledge-formation, whether about modernization, beauty, or their intersections, operated in favor of the rising political tides. Examining these depictions alongside the empress’s own views on her appearance and political role offers new insights into the gendered limits of nation-branding and soft power.

Beauty and Modernization: The Stakes of Comparativism

Farah Diba was born in Tehran in 1938 as the only child of an upper-class family. She is of Gilak origin on her mother’s side; her father, whom she lost at a young age, came from an Azeri–Turkic-speaking family. In

¹⁷ Nye, Jr., *Soft Power*, 7.

¹⁸ Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Stoeltje, Beverly, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “‘Loveliest Daughter of our Ancient Cathay!’: Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 5–31; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 188–200; Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, “Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen’s Body: Implications for a ‘Hindu’ Nation,” *Meridians* 4, no. 1 (2003): 205–27; Andrea Lauser, “Was sucht die Ethnologie auf dem Laufsteg? Lokale Schönheitskonkurrenzen als ‘Riten der Modernisierung,’” *Anthropos* 99, no. 2 (2004): 469–80; Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), ch. 2; Oluwakemi M. Balogun, “Beauty and the Bikini: Embodied Respectability in Nigerian Beauty Pageants,” *African Studies Review* 62, no. 2 (2019): 80–102; Genevieve Alva Clutario, *Beauty Regimes: A History of Power and Modern Empire in the Philippines, 1898–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

fact, she reports having first become aware of her beauty when she overheard two women in the bathhouse commenting on it in Azeri Turkic.¹⁹ A successful student, Diba also became involved with sports, especially basketball and scouting, in high school. She was only twenty-one years old and still a college student at École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris when she got engaged to the twice divorced shah of Iran in 1959. Thus, quite suddenly, she entered the world of politics and was pulled into the international sphere of gendered, image-focused, high-stakes, mass media comparativism.

Marital unions of monarchs, of course, have always been explicitly political. The shifting representations of Mohammad Reza Shah's three consorts map onto changes in the global media landscape and dominant ideologies. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's first marriage occurred while he was the crown prince in 1939. His marriage to Princess Fowzieh of Egypt was arranged at the initiative of Reza Shah, who sought to strengthen his new dynasty's legitimacy through ties to a long-standing ruling family with roots in the Ottoman era. Iranian propaganda represented the prince's union as an example of a modern, companionate marriage that would improve relations between the two countries.²⁰ Princess Fowzieh, however, was reportedly homesick for cosmopolitan Cairo and initiated the 1945 separation that led to divorce in 1948.²¹

The shah's second marriage, to Princess Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiary, lasted from 1951 to 1958. This queen's time in the spotlight came during a boom decade for television and illustrated magazines like *LIFE* across the capitalist world. Such media operated on an international ideological formation Christina Klein has labeled "Cold War cosmopolitanism."²² Deeply connected to rising US hegemony in the political, economic, military, and cultural realms, Cold War cosmopolitanism envisaged a world of interlinked, modern, capitalist nation-states sharing liberal internationalist values and interacting as peers. In practice, equality was aspirational for US allies, especially for those with postcolonial histories. However, the magazines' content and style promoted "the lifestyles that capitalist democracy promised to make possible" for all.²³

Queen Soraya was of mixed German and Iranian origin. Her Iranian lineage on her father's side connected her to the powerful Bakhtiary clan,

¹⁹ Pahlavi, *An Enduring Love*, 41.

²⁰ Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 136.

²¹ Ashraf Pahlavi, *Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 74.

²² Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

²³ Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism*, 7.

making her a fitting match for the shah. Her mixed-race status, on the other hand, intensified popular discussions of her beauty. Her “emerald green eyes” appeared near daily in the illustrated German press, which earned the nickname “die Soraya Presse” for its obsession with the shah’s consort.²⁴ The queen’s glamorous appearance and her ability to transition easily between East and West seemed to make her the ideal cosmopolitan woman. Yet when infertility led to divorce from the shah, the press continued to make money, this time by reporting on her “sad green eyes.” This was, after all, the 1950s. The capitalist press took for granted that, no matter how beautiful, rich, and famous a woman was, she could not be truly happy without experiencing motherhood.

The compelling and profit-generating backstory of the shah’s ex-wife all but guaranteed that the new queen’s everyday life would become a beauty pageant of sorts as well. Immediately, Farah Diba’s likeness began to appear in feature sections of tabloids and magazines, which encouraged readers to compare the famous women of the era: “Which beauty are you?” “Ask your husband which one of these famous women he prefers!” “Who is the best-dressed woman of the year? Vote now.” Farah’s and Soraya’s photos would thus appear alongside others, often as the only non-Western women featured, urging the readers to form their personal rankings from the comfort of their couches (Figure 2.1).

Rosalind Krauss has called the grid format, which became ubiquitous in twentieth-century Western art and visual culture, “emblematic of modernist ambition.”²⁵ The grid flattens its subjects and prioritizes their “relationships in the aesthetic field,” eclipsing history and context.²⁶ Mid-century magazines’ grid layouts established the principle of similitude with their equal assignment of photographic and print space to each woman, implying that the featured individuals shared common characteristics that made them “comparable.” Residing in “the Free World,” young, wealthy, stylish, and globally famous, these women were models for properly modern feminine styles and identities worldwide.

As noted, comparative scholarship often marks differences identified under presuppositions of similitude as significant and telling. Operating on the same logic, the magazines promised edification based on selected differences: the readers could gain insight into their personality traits, confirm their cultural capital, and get ideas on self-styling

²⁴ Peter Kaupp, *Massenmedien und “Soraya-Presse”: Eine soziologische Analyse* (Hamburg: Verlag-Gruppe Bauer, 1969).

²⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (1979): 50–54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.



Figure 2.1 *Hayat*, the Turkish version of *LIFE* Magazine, asks its readers to pick one of these famous women to decipher their own personality traits in its November 1962 issue. The Shah's second and third wives were often the only non-Western women to appear in such features.

by observing, comparing, and ranking the dozen or so internationally known women featured regularly on the global tabloid circuit. Here was a practical, leisurely application of the newly invented psychological principle of “upward comparison,” which linked motivation for self-improvement to the willingness to compare oneself to higher-status individuals.²⁷

The fact that Soraya Esfandiary and Farah Pahlavi were often the only non-Western women in such grids implied they belonged among the world's (white) elites. Esfandiary likely had gained this status due to her part-German roots; in line with international mass media, the Turkish minister of foreign affairs İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil credited the

²⁷ Wheeler, “A Brief History of Social Comparison Theory,” 8.

former queen's beauty to her mixed-race (*melez*) heritage.²⁸ Empress Farah's beauty, however, appeared entirely Iranian.

Although the new empress's mixed linguistic ancestry could have stood for the complications inherent in separating nation-state boundaries, her position as a diplomatic icon worked to construct a Persian-language-centered Iranian identity apart from Turkishness, however friendly the relations. Unlike Reza Shah, who famously spoke Azeri Turkic with Atatürk, the Queen-to-be emphasized difference and argued that the language she knows is "very different from Istanbul Turkish."²⁹ As a result, she did not conduct any interviews in Turkish.³⁰ Her education in Paris, France, on the other hand, deeply colored perceptions, conferring civilizational benefits and connecting her chicness to Europe by proxy. Either way, the fact that Iran's Tehran-born empress could be ranked alongside European royals and the US First Lady seemed to validate Pahlavi aspirations to both greatness and whiteness.³¹

From the mundane to the geopolitical, the mediated international public sphere of the early Cold War encouraged categorizing, comparing, and ranking. As a result, comparativism saturated both US-based representations of West Asia and local responses to it. Perhaps most obviously, proof by comparison undergirded the leading political epistemology of the era: modernization theory. Disagreements about the rubrics, priorities, and rankings of modernization, such as those between the shah and JFK, demonstrate that the "science" of modernization was hardly fixed. However, between the tabloids and social science scholarship, the tabloids were more honest about the primacy of the ranker's goals and agency in determining outcomes. Throughout her tenure as Empress, Farah Pahlavi cut across these "facile" and "serious" types of comparativism, especially as her public profile grew and she began to take an increasingly active role in politics.

Crowned and designated regent in 1967, the empress would play a significant public diplomacy role in representing Iran to the rest of the world. Initially cast as a naive schoolgirl in a modern-day Cinderella story, her image shifted to serve as the gendered embodiment of Iranian modernization. A self-described "soldier of the [White] Revolution," she ran her own bureau with hundreds of employees, overseeing countless

²⁸ Çağlayangil, *Amlarım*, 297.

²⁹ "Hayat Ekibi Tahran'dan Bildiriyor," *Hayat*, December 25, 1959, 4.

³⁰ In 2020, Empress Farah declined an interview with me; however her representative did note in an email that she remembers her visits to Türkiye "fondly" and "believes that the then President of Turkey even spoke and greeted them in Persian." Kambiz Atabai, email to author, April 12, 2020.

³¹ Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 63.

artistic, cultural, educational, welfare, and public health initiatives.³² In the early 1970s, she also began to play a more active role in foreign policy; for example, representing Iran in China in 1972 on the heels of the shah's visit to the USSR. Farah Pahlavi was a popular figure, but her rising profile meant she became the subject of gossip and criticism as a symbol of the shah's regime and its Western orientation. Throughout these shifts, the meanings of the empress's beauty and theorizations of her soft power also changed. These assessments paralleled the fate of modernization theory, which was first taken as an article of faith and increasingly critiqued for being a superficial ruse that failed to deliver on its most important promises.

As noted in Chapter 1, modernization theory had its roots outside "the West"; through authoritarian modernization, leaders like Atatürk and Reza Shah sought to direct development to strengthen their nation-states with the ultimate goal of countering imperialist encroachment.³³ After World War II, US-based social scientists built a hegemonic (albeit flexible) version of modernization theory through uneven interactions with non-Western scholars and communities.³⁴ Constructed by scholars such as Talcott Parsons and Walt Whitman Rostow and with devotees including JFK and the shah of Iran, US-led modernization ideology proposed a linear and objective route of development and progress.³⁵ Based on the foundations of Weberian sociology, the comparativism of modernization theory went beyond identifying similarities and differences between nation-states; it designated exemplars and urged conformity. In this formulation, the contemporary United States constituted the ideal model and could actively serve as a guide and benefactor to other states.³⁶ The modernization ideology promulgated by the United States underplayed the colonial and imperial entanglements

³² "Empress Farah: Her Thoughts and Remarks," *Keyhan*, March 9, 1967, as translated in Press Information Report on Iran, no. 21 (Arlington, VA: U.S. Joint Publications Research Service, 1967), 6; Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 167–68.

³³ Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 31; Citino, "The Ottoman Legacy in Cold War Modernization," 579–97; Matthew F. Jacobs, *Imagining the Middle East: The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918–1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

³⁴ Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), esp. 23–53.

³⁵ Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). For an overview, see Nick Cullather, "Modernization Theory," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 212–20.

³⁶ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 99–148.

that had led to the “development” and “under-development” of various political entities. At the same time, along with the doctrine of containment, it justified US involvement in parts of the world where the United States did not yet enjoy hegemony, including West Asia and North Africa.

US Cold War ideology established similitude between Iran and Türkiye as modernizing, Muslim-majority, US-aligned states bordering the USSR. As such, Türkiye and Iran (sometimes with the addition of Pakistan) served as foils to Arab nationalism and neutralism, personified by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser. The two countries’ intersecting histories and parallel positions all but guaranteed that they would be compared to each other as well. Thus, Iran and Türkiye appeared in a comparative fashion in classic US analyses of modernization, including Thomas and Frye’s *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (1951) and Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), which sought to point out “relative positions of Middle Eastern individuals and countries on a common scale of modernization.”³⁷

US analyses from 1950s to the mid 1960s ranked Türkiye higher than Iran when measuring modernization in the Middle East, constructing the country as the US-approved model for the region. Lerner declared the country “the area’s bright model of successful transition.”³⁸ In the field-defining *Politics of Developing Areas* (1960), Dankwart Rustow similarly placed Türkiye ahead of the curve in terms of “the cultural and social transformation set off by the Western impact” and assigned Iran to an “intermediate group.”³⁹ In the words of a 1955 National Security Council report, Türkiye could be “an example of peaceful evolution for other underdeveloped areas.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958), 84.

³⁸ Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, 409. Osamah F. Khalil, *America’s Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 194.

³⁹ Gabriel A. Almond and James Smoot Coleman, eds., *The Politics of the Developing Areas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 390. See also, Richard H. Pfaff, “Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1963): 79–98.

⁴⁰ US National Security Council, “US Policy on Turkey,” NSC Report, February 28, 1955, Department of State, S/S–NSC Files: Lot 63 D 351, NSC 5510 Series, *FRUS 1955–1957*, Vol. XXIV: Soviet Union, Eastern Mediterranean, document 320. See also, Hakan Yılmaz, “American Perspectives on Turkey: An Evaluation of the Declassified US Documents between 1947 and 1960,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 25 (2001): 77–101; Citino, “The Ottoman Legacy in Cold War Modernization,” 58; Matthew Jacobs, “The Perils and Promise of Islam: The United States and the Muslim Middle East in the Early Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (2006): 705–39, 717.

The “alignment of knowledge practices and Cold War politics” meant that the stakes of comparative modernization theory could be high.⁴¹ US policymakers and popular media worried about wasting aid on “incompetent” nations and peoples.⁴² Comparativism under Pax Americana, therefore, often meant competition among US allies for the political, military, and economic resources allocated by the United States. Türkiye’s status was reflected in its NATO membership and in the larger amount of aid it received compared to Iran.

While an ascendant ideology based on earlier, more explicitly racialized theories of civilization, US-led capitalist modernization theory was not uncontested. Perhaps its biggest challengers were Marxist approaches to development promulgated by the USSR, its allies, and non-aligned nations.⁴³ In addition, even pro-US non-Western leaders, such as the shah, regularly pushed back against US-based comparisons, rubrics, and recommendations. In his 1961 *Mission for My Country*, the shah also compared Türkiye and Iran but with the intention of contesting what he saw as a discrepancy in US policy. “Our good friends the Turks,” the shah complained, “have received over *three times* as much military and non-military aid as has Iran.” After several paragraphs relying on similar comparisons with several other states, he argued Iran deserved “a higher rank in the scale of assistance priorities.”⁴⁴

While the shah ostensibly cited foreign policy needs, his book also demonstrated his conviction that perceived civilizational rank had influenced aid assignment. He conceded that Türkiye had been much more advanced than Iran during his father’s 1934 visit. While Reza Shah had credited the difference to Turks’ racial obedience to authority, his son referenced Türkiye’s geographic closeness to Europe. Türkiye, “being nearer to the West and in constant contact with it,” simply had more time to absorb its methods and techniques.⁴⁵ This reinforced the standard US narrative – critiqued in Chapter 1 and in the shah’s other commentary about Persian history – that progress is transferred from West to East. However, it also challenged personified Reza Shah–Atatürk comparisons that operated to the former’s detriment (Chapter 1). While

⁴¹ Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*, 32.

⁴² Michael B. Boshku, “Turkey and Iran During the Cold War,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 16, no. 1 (1999): 13–28, 18; John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 142–43.

⁴³ Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and US Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 73; Amanat, *Iran*, 618.

⁴⁴ Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 324–25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

the historical comparison was ostensibly to the advantage of Türkiye, strategically, the shah's claim demonstrated how far Iran had progressed under the Pahlavi dynasty.

At his 1962 meeting with JFK, the shah sought again to challenge US-based modernization rankings and their connections to US policy by complaining that "America treats Turkey as a wife, and Iran as a concubine."⁴⁶ He thus described US–Türkiye–Iran relations as an intimate power triangle, qualifying the egalitarian illusions of Cold War cosmopolitanism. The shah's metaphor placed the United States over and above as the powerful authority acting upon the others. The husband ("The United States") was giving the wife ("Turkey") preferential treatment while treating the concubine ("Iran") as less worthy. Despite the wife's official position, the shah's metaphor established similitude between wife and concubine via their passive positioning: The two rendered similar services to the husband and competed for his good judgment and rewards. Although the analogy feminized Türkiye and Iran, the casual reference to wives and concubines taking place between two male leaders known for their extramarital escapades also marked the space of politics as one of masculine jocularity.

Befitting the shah's metaphor, "jealousy" and "envy" became operational terms for Türkiye–Iran relations under Pax Americana even as the old "friend and neighbor" trope continued to dominate official speeches.⁴⁷ In 1965, for example, the US embassy identified "envy and frustration" as the dominant Iranian response to the recent free elections in Türkiye, making a "painfully embarrassing comparison" to the highly repressive political situation in Iran.⁴⁸ "The Turkish ambassador," continued the document, "with a certain amount of pride, has told us that he has heard many envious remarks by Iranians as a result of the free elections in Turkey." While technically focused on comparing Türkiye and Iran, such rankings highlighted the role the United States played as the transcendent model and arbiter of modernization. Relations between the two countries remained friendly. However, the fact that two ostensible allies would be upset about each other's progress demonstrated the symbolic and material stakes of comparativism during the Cold War.

⁴⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, April 12, 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963*, Vol. XVII: Near East, 1961–1962, ed. Nina J. Noring (Washington, DC, 1994), doc 243.

⁴⁷ John Calabrese, "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 75–94, 78; Barın Kayaoğlu, "The Limits of Turkish–Iranian Cooperation, 1974–80," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 463–78.

⁴⁸ Memorandum A-328, From Tehran Embassy to Department of State, "Iranian Parliamentary Shadow-boxing and the Turkish Elections," November 6, 1965, NARA, POL 15–8 IRAN & POL 14 TUR.

The White Revolution, launched officially in January 1963, gave the shah a chance to push back against the perceived unfairness of Western rankings and dividends. The reforms initiated under its auspices included large-scale infrastructure projects, land distribution, disease eradication, workers' profit-sharing, the establishment of a literacy corps, and the institution of women's suffrage. Supporting this ambitious program with oil wealth, the shah hoped to temper the dissatisfaction brewing within multiple segments of Iranian society, cement the dynasty's role as the primary agent of "revolutionary" progress, and justify its continued existence.⁴⁹ In addition to leading to profound changes within Iran, such as raising per capita incomes, destabilizing feudal arrangements, and increasing urbanization, the reforms also boosted the country's and the shah's international profile. In less than a decade, the regime drastically improved Iran's relative status on Western rubrics of modernization.

1967 was a key year in which the outcomes of comparison between Türkiye and Iran shifted in favor of Iran. In October of that year, the shah and Empress Farah's official coronation took place, filling the world's media with images of pomp, glamor, and beauty. The same year, Empress Farah became regent, and the United States declared Iran to be "a developed nation."⁵⁰ The USAID mission to the country was cut. The shah, now lobbying for partner (opposed to client) status, vastly increased his US arms purchases on credit. After a CENTO meeting in Türkiye in 1967, the shah and Asadollah Alam, now his court minister, concurred that the shah's leadership in the region was becoming increasingly apparent.⁵¹

In 1968, with the withdrawal of Britain from the Persian Gulf and the election of Richard Nixon, the shah found further opportunities to challenge the metaphorical concubine role. US arms began to flow even more freely to the country as Nixon and Kissinger largely acceded to the shah's foreign policy goals.⁵² In his meetings with US representatives, the shah argued Iran was the only stable country the United States could count on in the region. Arab nations were reeling from their defeat in

⁴⁹ Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution," 2.

⁵⁰ "A Reform-Minded Ruler: Mohammed Riza Pahlevi," *New York Times*, October 27, 1967, 10; Sara Ehsani-Nia, "'Go Forth and Do Good': US-Iranian Relations During the Cold War Through the Lens of Public Diplomacy," *Penn History Review* 19, no. 1 (2012), <https://rb.gy/qzicj0>.

⁵¹ Asadollah Alam, "Chahār-shanbi, sī-yu yik-i Khurdād-i 1346 [Wednesday, June 21, 1967]," vol. 7, *Yāddāsh-t-hā-yi 'Alam: 1346-1347* [Diaries of Asadollah Alam: 1967-1968], ed. 'Alīnaqī 'Alikhānī (Tehran: Kitābsarā, 1392/2014), 31.

⁵² Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially ch. 2.

the 1967 war against Israel. "Even Turkey," Alam noted in his diary in 1969, was "too volatile to trust."⁵³

A significant blemish in the shah's plan to boost Iran's international standing was the notorious 1963 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which gave criminal immunity to US personnel in exchange for a massive US weapons loan. Resembling the old capitulations granted to imperial powers, the agreement seemed to reinforce Iran's subservient role. In his fiery sermon against the SOFA, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini mobilized comparisons that differed little from the shah's wife/concubine quip, except perhaps in intensity. According to him, the agreement had "reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog" and had made the Iranian nation seem even "more backward than savages in the eyes of the world."⁵⁴ For these insights, the regime charged Khomeini with inciting rebellion, placed him under house arrest, and exiled him to Türkiye. He resided for less than a year in Bursa, Türkiye, before making his way to Najaf, Iraq, and, in 1978, to Paris, France. While Khomeini and other regime opponents seethed, waited, and organized, the shah proceeded with the White Revolution.

The economic and military advantage shifted further toward Iran as the decade progressed. So did the direction of perceived jealousy. As early as 1972, the State Department considered Iran to be "a success story among developing countries" – an intermediary model of sorts.⁵⁵ The 1973–1974 oil crisis and the attendant price hike flooded the shah's treasury with petrodollars, whereas the Turkish economy – heavily dependent on oil imports – faltered. Türkiye's diplomats found the "pavenu" shah unsympathetic to their plight.⁵⁶ While the shah channeled Iran's coffers toward military infrastructure, the Turkish military was hit with a US arms embargo over the Cyprus invasion (more on this in Chapter 3). Turkish opinion leaders expressed envy about the higher standard of living Iranians had been gaining and Iran's close relations with the United States.⁵⁷ This time, it was the US Embassy in

⁵³ Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969–1977*, trans. Alinaqi Alikhani (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 66.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 123.

⁵⁵ Telegram 2641, From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, Tehran, May 6, 1972, 1315Z, *FRUS*, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 7 US/NIXON.

⁵⁶ Fuat Borovali, "Iran and Turkey: Permanent Revolution or Islamism in One Country," in *Iran at the Crossroads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade*, ed. Miron Rezun (New York: Routledge, 1990), 82.

⁵⁷ Kayaoğlu, "The Limits of Turkish–Iranian Cooperation," 473; Turgut Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Hatıraları* (Istanbul: Boğaziçi, 1998), 7; Süleyman Elik, "The United States' Strategic Relationship with Iran and Turkey: Implications for Cold War and post-Cold

Ankara informing its Iranian counterparts that Turks were increasingly worried about the country's "secondary role" in the new world order, while allies like Greece and Iran "were determining the tempo of change in the world."⁵⁸

Unmatched by the status of any Turkish celebrity in Iran, Empress Farah's elegant visage graced Turkish newspapers and magazines regularly (as it did European and US periodicals), operating as one of the most constant reminders of Iran's strides in modernization and increasing prestige in the world. The Turkish state had a long history of encouraging participation in international beauty competitions, with questions about female visibility and beauty linked to "larger questions of Turkey's visibility and legibility to the Western gaze."⁵⁹ Under Atatürk, the regime had presented its first Miss Universe, Keriman Halis, as a representative of state feminism and a model for emulation for the rest of the region.⁶⁰

However, in this period, the country lacked a comparable feminine figure to mobilize for nation-branding. Princess Fazilet, the great-granddaughter of the last Ottoman sultan deposed and sent to exile by Atatürk himself, made international news when she became engaged to King Faisal II of Iraq in 1957. Yet, despite the general consensus on her beauty and impeccable upbringing ("a blue-eyed blonde Istanbul schoolgirl and a princess to boot," effused *The Chicago Daily Defender*), she could hardly be expected to represent republican Türkiye.⁶¹ The teenager was also star-crossed: Two weeks before the wedding, her betrothed was murdered in Iraq's July 14 Revolution.

Empress Farah held such a presence in Türkiye that a journalist reminiscing about his childhood years later wrote that the faces and names of the shah's second and third wives had been as familiar to him as the

War Order," in *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From American Missionaries to the Islamic State*, ed. Geoffrey F. Gresh and Tugrul Keskin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 124–25.

⁵⁸ The Airgram from the US embassy in Ankara to the Department of State titled "Role of Turkey in New World Order" (A-128) was sent to both Athens and Tehran, July 16, 1973, POL 18 IRAN, NARA.

⁵⁹ Kaitlin Staudt, "(In)visible Beauty Queens: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Women's Visibility in Nezihe Muhiddin's *Güzellik Kraliçesi*," *Feminist Modernist Studies* 2, no. 3 (2019): 287–303; Alev Çınar, "Globalism as the Product of Nationalism: Founding Ideology and the Erasure of the Local in Turkey," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (July 2010): 104; Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, ch. 2; Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East*, ch. 5.

⁶⁰ Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East*, 139–55.

⁶¹ "How Does It Feel to Wed A King? Fazilet Tells," *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 19, 1957, 14; "King Faisal of Iraq Is Betrothed to Youthful Ottoman Princess: His Fiancee is 16-Year-Old Relative of Farouk – Date of Wedding Not Set," *New York Times*, September 16, 1957, 13.

members of his own family.⁶² My family history matches this assessment. My mother remembers habitually skimming *Hayat* magazine as a teenager, considering the periodical's regular comparative question, "Farah or Soraya?" She remembers being partial to Soraya's look. Unbeknownst to her, my aunt on my father's side, then also a teenager living in Istanbul, cut out and pasted photographs of the shah and Empress Farah's 1967 coronation on her room's walls, partaking in their aesthetic pleasure. She remembers the "magnificent" clothes and the throne and notes, "Farah Diba was especially beautiful." Like other teen girls, the two were fans of various Turkish actors and singers as well, but the country simply did not have a comparable female icon among its political elite. The president's wife was propelled into national style news only during a 1967 visit to Türkiye by the Pahlavis: Empress Farah had praised her dress, and *Hayat* dutifully offered its model to its readers.⁶³ The policy documents and the magazine spreads thus shared a silent question: Had Iran become the wife and Türkiye the concubine?

Even as countries jockeyed for better rankings, the rubrics of modernization remained labile, including within the United States. Walt Whitman Rostow's *Stages of Growth*, which prioritized large-scale economic development, had shaped the initial direction of the theory; however, scholars consistently debated the parameters of proper modernization.⁶⁴ They agonized over the dearth of information, the instability of categories, and the ethics of comparison. They dreaded the prospect of being called out by representatives of lower-ranked states.⁶⁵ Some critiques even made their way into popular culture. Perhaps, most famously, the best-selling political novel *The Ugly American* (1958) demonstrated how US middlebrow culture both affirmed the importance of modernization as a bulwark against Communism and remained skeptical of its various applications. In addition to highlighting the risks of corruption, racism, and incompetence in diplomacy, *The Ugly American* criticized the wasting of aid funds on large, flashy projects that made little sense for local conditions.⁶⁶ Even the "ugly" in the novel's title warned about the lure of aesthetics; it refers to a physically unattractive, roughhewn American engineer who is nevertheless cast as a hero for working hard, avoiding elitism, and responding to local needs. JFK himself was a fan of this line

⁶² Haşmet Babaoğlu, "Prenses Süreyya'dan Bugüne ... İran ve Biz," *Sabah*, January 4, 2018, <https://rb.gy/egqp6w>.

⁶³ "Kraliçe Farah'ın Hayran Olduğu Tuvalet," *Hayat*, July 6, 1967, 8.

⁶⁴ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 82–84; Matthew K. Shannon, "Reading Iran: American Academics and the Last Shah," *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 289–316, 297.

⁶⁵ Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*, 34–37.

⁶⁶ Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, *The Ugly American* (New York: Crest, 1958).

of critique, which convinced him to prioritize smaller-scale initiatives, such as the Peace Corps, and view the vast amounts of military aid sent to modernizing autocrats such as the shah with a critical eye.⁶⁷

Thus, increasingly in the United States, an obsession with the aesthetics of modernization (the buildings, the highways, the gendered styles of self-presentation, etc.), which could confirm a non-Western nation was advancing along the correct developmental trajectory, operated alongside a suspicion that such visible markers of modernization might hide unseemly realities, including oppression and corruption. This distrust of aesthetics was perhaps ironic for an academic theory that had borrowed its foundational term (“modern”) from the arts.⁶⁸ Yet it cohered because modernization theorists advocated deep transformations in the societies they deemed “traditional.” As primarily white men working at the masculine intersection of academia and politics, they maintained a gendered and classed suspicion of “the superficial.” While seemingly opposed, these two aspects of modernization theory – aesthetics as proof and aesthetics as ruse – both assigned the prerogative for judging modernization onto the US elites.

As Iran’s new empress became a symbol and active agent of her country’s development, depictions of her beauty and fame merged with politicized views on Iran’s modernization and global status. As delineated in Chapter 1, the personification of policy doctrines or entire countries through salient or stereotypical figures is not unique to the Cold War era. A long-standing dynamic of foreign policy, personification permits simplification. Naoko Shibusawa has noted, “This is how an entire country could be depicted and acted upon as if it were a singular, developing human being.”⁶⁹ Personification also adds to the persuasive force of comparativism: Coding individuals as stand-ins for complex political realities facilitates ideas regarding race, gender, and class to color the comparison, fueling blunter assessments.⁷⁰ Commentary about Empress Farah and Iranian modernization thus boosted each other in comparative scholarship, popular media, and diplomatic reports in alignment with the authors’ and the institutions’ ideological stances.

⁶⁷ “Author Backs Kennedy Plan,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1960, 35.

⁶⁸ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 1. Atatürk had used the term “çağdaşlaşma” (lit. becoming contemporaneous) to define Türkiye’s development projects.

⁶⁹ Naoko Shibusawa, “Ideology, Culture, and the Cold War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous *Diplomatic History* reviewer for this formulation.

The Official Politics of Aesthetics: Obsession and Disavowal

Reflecting some ambivalence about the aesthetics of modernization, US diplomatic dispatches from the 1960s and 1970s Iran evinced a simultaneous obsession with and disavowal of Empress Farah's appearance and political role. Beginning with the lead-up to Farah Pahlavi's ascent to regency in 1967, US diplomatic entities in Iran and the CIA considered the empress significant enough to be mentioned repeatedly in their reports. They represented her as both the symbol and an agent of Iran's modernization, praising her self-presentation and touting her artistic, educational, and public health initiatives. However, the reports simultaneously disavowed her political agency. The analysis, therefore, often landed on the "Farah as symbol" trope.

The Tehran embassy reports tended to depict the empress's role in passive terms while emphasizing "appearance" and "image." For example, in 1967, the embassy reported "the systematic upgrading of the Queen through public appearances, provincial tours, and other devices" as "a significant political development." It was likely, the report stated, that the shah was "grooming her for the succession."⁷¹ The word choices here highlight what we might call the important non-importance of the empress, emphasizing "a significant development," in which Farah Pahlavi herself appears to play a relatively subservient role. While she is becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere, the report interprets this agency in the passive voice as her being "groomed."

This reading of the empress's public appearances as both noteworthy and primarily orchestrated by the shah was common. An August 22, 1968, report on her visit to the Western regions of Iran similarly stated, "The visit was clearly another successful image-building effort to strengthen her role as regent."⁷² An October 7, 1972, telegram about her visit to China, the first for an Iranian leader in decades, argued that "substance" had not been the goal of the journey, but image-building and "psychological" maneuvering. "From this point of view," that is, in the realm of appearances, the report stated, the "visit was resounding success."⁷³ These official documents, therefore, associated Empress Farah's in-country outreach to the people and her international diplomatic

⁷¹ "Semi-Annual Assessment of the Political Situation in Iran," from Amembassy Tehran to Department of State, February 20, 1967, POL 2-3 IRAN, 5, RG 59, USNA.

⁷² "Empress Farah Visits Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan," from Amembassy Tehran to Department of State, August 22, 1968, POL 15-1 IRAN, RG 59, USNA.

⁷³ "Visit of Empress Farah to China," from Amembassy Tehran to Secretary of State, July 10, 1972, POL 7 IRAN, RG 59, USNA.

efforts with “appearance” and dismissed both as shallow (if wily) maneuvers of the shah.

Occasionally, discussing the empress gave US government officials a chance to delve into romance and storytelling, as with the flowery 10-page telegram titled, “Portrait of an Empress,” written by Ambassador MacArthur for the State Department on January 20, 1971.⁷⁴ The report’s very title offers a promise of Orientalist titillation, mobilizing the pre-established associations of the empress with aesthetics. The Embassy regularly produced reports on key Iranian political figures. However, they were titled generically in all capital letters as “BIOGRAPHIC REPORTING,” not with a title that might have jumped out of a mid-century Harlequin paperback. The telegram praised Farah Pahlavi as “a European woman of Iranian birth,” highlighting her education in France and noting her role in “humanizing” the monarchy. Yet, while giving the empress credit for her good works and outreach to the population and highlighting her steadily rising public profile, MacArthur ended his report on a note that doubted her ability to hold on to power if the shah left the throne before the crown prince’s majority. Instead, he claimed, even as Regent, her primary role would be image based: “a symbol of legitimacy and continuity.”⁷⁵

The State Department was not the US government entity assigning a superficial importance to Empress Farah and connecting her to the aesthetics of modernization and nation-branding. In a 1973 intelligence survey about Iran, the CIA echoed the empress-as-symbol trope, connecting political power to “image” and “beauty” but failing to explain the parameters of this power. “The image [Empress Farah] projects – that of a beautiful and talented woman devoted to her family and to good works – is especially useful in Iran,” explained the authors. Claiming that “the culture had lacked before any such ‘lady bountiful’ tradition,” they argued that “the attractive Empress” constituted a “useful model of the modern Iranian woman.”⁷⁶

The CIA analysis thus both gave and took away. The report called Farah’s attractiveness “useful” twice and connected this usefulness to a previous lack of a “lady bountiful” tradition without explaining either. The authors praised the empress to highlight a certain civilizational lack: The image she projected was “especially” valuable “in Iran” and as a

⁷⁴ “Portrait of an Empress,” from Amembassy Tehran to Department of State, January 20, 1971, POL 15-1 IRAN, RG 59, USNA.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁶ “National Intelligence Survey 33: Iran, Government and Politics,” May 1973, Central Intelligence Agency, Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, doc. CIA-RDP01-00707R000200070040-4, 15-16.

“model of the modern Iranian woman.” The analysis thus utilized the application-oriented comparativism of modernization theory: Empress Farah, by her very presence, could model the type of womanhood worthy of emulation. The document assigned some political importance to the empress as regent designate and as the court member “with the greatest influence” on the shah. However, the following sentence undermined this power: “Of more political significance are the Prime Minister, other members of the Cabinet, high-level civil servants, and political party leaders.” A twofold comparison operated here: Farah Pahlavi was “less than” when it came to Western women and Iranian male political figures but much “more than” other Iranian women, who apparently needed her to model gendered modernity.

The US State Department and CIA reports thus appeared unable to theorize a politics of beauty. They awkwardly mentioned Empress Farah’s appearance, clearly considering it significant and somehow connected to modernization and nation-branding. Then they prevaricated and exited the conversation, refocusing on the men in power. The authors constructed themselves as immune to the effects of Iranian image building despite constantly – and sometimes effusively – commenting on Empress Farah. Of course, the men who dominated the US State Department and the CIA also regularly invested in cultural outreach and “psychological” tactics, but did not recount their own efforts so dismissively. The archives they left confirm the racist/sexist dismissal of non-Western women in international relations and anticipate scholarly debates about the effectiveness of soft power, explored in the conclusion of this chapter.

Aesthetics as Proof, Beauty as Good Governance

In her groundbreaking 1990 monograph, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Cynthia Enloe urged scholars of international relations to ask, “Where are the women?”⁷⁷ This question is deceptively easy to answer in the case of Empress Farah, who was everywhere in the image-oriented culture of the 1960s and 1970s – from the style sections of women’s magazines to top-secret telegrams ferried between US embassies. She traveled frequently, locally and internationally, alone and with her family, and her every step at every airport became a news item. In 1964, the empress made it to the list of the world’s best-dressed women for the first time and stayed high up on such

⁷⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, rev. ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 81.

lists throughout her reign.⁷⁸ The mainstream French media lionized her as one of its own daughters; “die Soraya Presse” of Germany was equally invested in discussing all things Farah.

In short, Farah Pahlavi was hard to miss: She appeared everywhere, at once familiar and aspirational. Moreover, unlike official government sources, the popular press worldwide put the empress front and center (often over and above the shah) in their coverage and openly pontificated on the politics of her appearance. “When the monarchs of Thailand and Iran met in Teheran last month, some onlookers thought they were attending a beauty pageant,” a 1967 *Washington Post* article began, bracketing questions of what the male monarchs were doing at the same meeting.⁷⁹ As her 1972 visit to China demonstrated, Farah Pahlavi could draw admiring gazes across vast ideological divides; however, her star shone brightest in the world’s capitalist media.

Throughout most of the 1960s and into the 1970s, tabloids, illustrated magazines, and newspapers based in “the free world” mobilized aesthetics as proof of Iranian modernization and the rightfulness of Pahlavi rule. They held as self-evident that Farah’s beauty – in comparison to other famous women – mattered. They helped popularize the hairstyle the famous Carita sisters had designed for the young bride and offered the “Farah Diba” hairstyle to their readers as a model up for adoption. Their breathless analyses of Farah Pahlavi’s sartorial choices, personality, and everyday habits operated as political signals. The message they gave was that of a young queen who was glamorous enough to compete with the *crème de la crème* of the world but also a kind and down-to-earth mother who breastfed, translated children’s books, and remained “as simple and unaffected as when she was a commoner-school girl.”⁸⁰

The popular press most openly compared Empress Farah to her predecessor Soraya, whose postdivorce dating life generated gossip. It also subtly juxtaposed Farah Pahlavi with Princess Ashraf, the shah’s twin sister and outspoken proponent of women’s rights. The Princess’s connections to scandals had made her a very polarizing figure in Iran and abroad.⁸¹ Media gossip depicted her as power-hungry and conniving and

⁷⁸ “International Set is Best Dressed: The Best Dressed,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 1964, F9.

⁷⁹ “Queen Sirikit Looks Lovely, East or West,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 1967, C1.

⁸⁰ Cindy Adams, “Queen Farah’s Simplicity Abounds,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 16, 1969, 7.

⁸¹ CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Intelligence Report: Centers of Power in Iran,” May 1972, report no. 2035/72, Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, doc. CIA-RDP85T00875R001100130080-4,14; Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Hatıraları*, 25.

pitted her against her brother's wives. One particularly pernicious rumor claimed she had given drugs to Soraya to ensure her infertility.⁸² In contrast, Farah Pahlavi was depicted as a modern, humble, and hard-working mother with no time for palace intrigues. Through the persuasive power of personification and sexist comparison, aesthetics became proof not only of the empress's modern, feminine virtues but also of Iran's standing as a developing nation under righteous rule.

In its outreach to the nation and abroad, the Pahlavi state broadly utilized visual tools, and the Farah Pahlavi's positive public image was an essential part of this arsenal.⁸³ She was represented first and foremost as a modest mother and dedicated servant of the country.⁸⁴ This preferred understanding of the empress was apparent in the full-page ad the Iranian embassy took in the *Washington Post* in 1967 to coincide with a visit of the shah to Washington, DC, and the upcoming coronation ceremony.⁸⁵ Titled "Iran A Country on the Move," the ad contained a large picture of Empress Farah and the crown prince alongside the shah (Figure 2.2).

The photo initially seems to be an unusual choice. None of the subjects look at the camera; instead, dressed in understated elegance, they appear caught in a candid, private moment. The shah's gaze is fixed forward, and the empress holds her son with a demure and downcast look. The crown prince stands, leaning sideways with a hint of a smile. The empress and her son's white clothes suggest a subtle hint at "the White Revolution," the achievements the ad copy delineates, and a certain purity and innocence. Combined with the off-camera gazes, the ad implies the family was not concerned with publicity themselves – they were too busy being productive and caring – just like any other nuclear family. Given how preestablished representations of the Middle Eastern family centered around the sexualized, decadent trope of the "harem," this understated monogamous arrangement itself coded progress.⁸⁶

Not leaving much to interpretation, the ad copy informed the readers that "The shah and Empress Farah exemplify the youthful and

⁸² Pahlavi, *Faces in a Mirror*, 123.

⁸³ Paidar, *Women and the Political Process*, 149; Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 87; Liora Hendelman-Baavur, *Creating the Modern Iranian Woman: Popular Culture between Two Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 258.

⁸⁴ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 201; Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 227.

⁸⁵ "Display Ad 41 – no Title," *Washington Post*, August 22, 1967, A13.

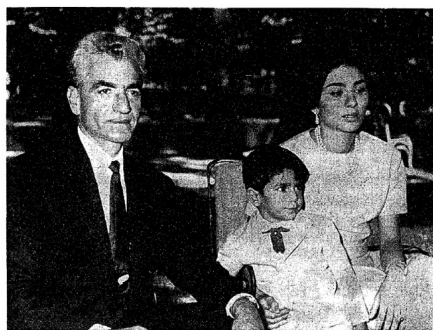
⁸⁶ For more on this trope in Pahlavi propaganda, see Paidar, *Women and the Political Process*, 148–49.

g. A13

IRAN

A COUNTRY ON THE MOVE

TODAY WASHINGTON GREET'S THE SHAHANSHAH OF IRAN, THE
SHAH, WHO SITS UPON THE WORLD'S OLDEST THRONE, IS ONE
OF THE TRUE REVOLUTIONARY LEADERS OF OUR TIME, AND
IRAN, UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP IS AT PRESENT IN THE MIDST
OF A DRAMATIC REVOLUTION.



The Royal Family of Iran
His Imperial Majesty, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, H.I.M. Empress Farah of
Iran, and The Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi.

Figure 2.2 In this *Washington Post* ad sponsored by the Iranian embassy, the off-camera gazes of a modern nuclear family represent “a country on the move.”

dedicated leadership that characterizes the ‘White Revolution’ at every level.” The text, which contained separate sections about land reform, the Literacy Corps, and technical improvements in farming, also noted that Farah’s crowning as regent would constitute the first for a Muslim-majority country, “marking the new and important role of women in Iran.”

With its reference to youthfulness, the text subtly modified the metaphors of maturity associated with Cold War modernization theory, making youth an advantage connected to dynamism and open-mindedness.⁸⁷ This emphasis on youth would have been especially resonant for any readers who could remember Iran’s past Prime Minister: the elderly, ailing Mohammad Mossadegh. Leading up to the coup, Orientalist representations of age and gender had molded the mainstream US public’s view of Mossadegh as unfit to rule.⁸⁸ In his 1961 *Mission for My Country*, the shah had similarly used vivid gendered and sexualized metaphors in maligning Mossadegh, criticizing his “political honeymoon” with devotees and accusing him of entertaining “strange bedfellows” in a section of the book that was technically devoted to the woman question.⁸⁹ At the

⁸⁷ Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6.

⁸⁸ Mary Ann Heiss, “Real Men Don’t Wear Pajamas: Anglo-American Cultural Perceptions of Mohammed Mossadeq and the Iranian Oil Nationalization Dispute,” in *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945*, ed. Peter Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 178–94.

⁸⁹ Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 221–22.

same time, he demanded privacy for himself, connecting the issue to political freedom.⁹⁰ This was likely an attempt to quell rumors about his countless extramarital escapades.

A symbolic emphasis on the everyday life of the nuclear crown family, especially on Farah Pahlavi, while recounting Iran's modernization was common in sympathetic articles across the US and international media. A 1963 *New York Times* article praising the White Revolution, for example, contained a candid photograph of the first family on vacation along the shores of the Caspian.⁹¹ The unassuming image of the family – the empress in a simple daytime attire consisting of a button-up shirt and pants, the shah's bare legs visible in shorts, and the little crown prince taking careful steps with the aid of his doting father – appeared alongside pictures of peasants getting land deeds and Iranian women celebrating the right to vote. Having the right to vote for any gender meant little in 1960s Iran, where the shah controlled both the incumbents and the opposition. However, women's voting was a powerful symbol of "progress" and "reform" in both Pahlavi propaganda pieces and the sympathetic media the world over.⁹² Everyday pictures of the crown family connoted progressivism, caring, and youthful energy, a symbolic sleight of hand that could help the readers forget they were looking at the photograph of a thoroughly undemocratic leader.

Good governance could sometimes be symbolized by regal flamboyance, as at that 1962 reception in the White House. More often than not, however, it was indicated by the simplicity of Empress Farah's make-up and clothing and her use of Iranian materials and designs. In her interviews, Farah Pahlavi emphasized that, no matter the focus on her appearance, she was to be identified by her acts as a "working empress." The positive press took its notes from her. For example, in the 1971 article/interview "It Isn't Easy Being the Empress of Iran," Sally Quinn of the *Washington Post* noted that the empress welcomed her in "what looks like a very pretty long cotton house dress, a simple old silver necklace, a gold wedding band, and a plain gold watch."⁹³ This emphasis on "plain," "simple," and even "old" accessories complemented the author's

⁹⁰ Ibid., 217.

⁹¹ Jay Waltz, "Iran's Shah Leads a 'White Revolution': His Aim is to End 2,500 Years of Feudalism and Transform His Middle Eastern Kingdom into a Modern Nation in the Western Mold, but Powerful Forces Oppose Him," *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1963, 210.

⁹² Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 56.

⁹³ Sally Quinn, "It Isn't Easy Being the Empress of Iran," *Washington Post*, October 8, 1971, C1.

suggestion that Farah Pahlavi was busy with work and most interested in connecting to the real people of Iran. The gold wedding band invoked the Cold War ideal of heterosexual monogamy and would have appeared understated even for the middlebrow American reader. While glamorous chicness linked Empress Farah to the Western feminine icons of Cold War cosmopolitanism, such references to “simplicity” implied her connectedness to the Iranian people and her similitude to the stereotypical white, middle-class American woman.

In a famous 1975 article written for the *Ladies Home Journal*, Betty Friedan, one of liberal US feminism’s most well-known leaders, called Empress Farah a “feminist,” using aesthetics as proof.⁹⁴ Friedan, for example, noted the subtlety of Farah Pahlavi’s eye makeup alongside her many public roles: Both symbolized how “down-to-earth” and busy she was. Friedan was visiting Iran with a feminist delegation in response to a call from the shah and Princess Ashraf to advise on the status of women. Her visit, however, came a couple of years after the shah’s infamous interview with Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, in which the shah had emphasized the importance of beauty and femininity in women and had insisted that women could never be truly equal to men in any real capacity. Asserting that no woman had ever influenced him, the shah rhetorically assigned women to the level of superficial, feminized aesthetics: “In a man’s life, women count only if they’re beautiful and graceful and know how to stay feminine.”⁹⁵

Defending her husband to the famous feminist icon, Empress Farah claimed the shah had just been “teasing” the journalist and that she herself, in fact, represented Iranian women’s liberation beyond the aesthetic. As evidence, the empress referenced her position as regent: “For the first time in our history, [the shah] had me crowned Empress in my own right.” She emphasized this was “not just a gesture to be modern” but a sign of his respect for her as “a person in my own right.”

In contrast to US diplomats and spies, the popular press was willing to concede political agency to Farah Pahlavi and connect her appearance to her actions. These accounts also liberally quoted the empress, giving her a relatively unfiltered platform. Thus, the capitalist media constituted the prolific, image-dominated ground on which Pahlavi nation-branding flourished. A “pattern of enthusiastic support for the Pahlavi regime,” deeply connected to ideas of gendered reform and bolstered by visual aesthetics, prevailed in the US mainstream press

⁹⁴ Betty Friedan, “Coming Out of the Veil,” *Ladies Home Journal*, June 1975, 100.

⁹⁵ “The Shah of Iran: An Interview with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi,” December 1, 1973, reproduced in *The New Republic*, <https://rb.gy/ic6g89>.

throughout the 1960s and late into the 1970s.⁹⁶ However, the question of whether Farah operated as a mere symbol of modernity justifying the reign of a dictator (“a gesture to be modern”) became more and more common even in the Western corporate media as the century progressed. Therefore, we can read a tone of frustration in Empress Farah’s response to Friedan above. The repeated, defensive use of “in my own right” aside, the shah had not “had her crowned,” as she phrased it, but had crowned her himself. Although grounded in a different context, the gesture resembled a well-known iconography of dictatorship: Napoleon snatching the crown from the Pope to bestow it upon himself and Empress Josephine.⁹⁷

Aesthetics as Ruse, Beauty as Distraction

In her overwhelmingly positive article, Betty Friedan mused whether women in Iran were serving as “mere window-dressing of modernization and progress for a despotic regime.” Iranian-born critics of the regime across the political spectrum were less muted on this question. They shared a gendered discourse of *gharbzadegi* (west-struckness or westoxication) directed at Western-inspired modernization efforts. Popularized by Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his iconic 1962 book of the same name, *gharbzadegi* ideology warned that Iran risked losing its soul in modernizing superficially and becoming beholden to capitalist imperialism.⁹⁸ Although gendered critiques of modernization in Iran have a long history, the publication of *Gharbzadegi* set a new tenor to these debates as the book was “read and acclaimed by every oppositionist.”⁹⁹

According to Al-e Ahmad, the much-celebrated “liberation” of women in Iran had proceeded superficially with attention to aesthetics alone: Women were simply unveiled and thrown into the streets with “no purpose other than to add to the mass of consumers of powder and

⁹⁶ William A. Dorman and Mansour Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran: Foreign Policy and the Journalism of Deference* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁹⁷ Robert Steele, “Crowning the ‘Sun of the Aryans’: Mohammad Reza Shah’s Coronation and Monarchical Spectacle in Pahlavi Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 175–93.

⁹⁸ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharb-zadigī* (Tehran: Firdaws, 1372/1993). See also Brad Hanson, “The ‘Westoxication’ of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, Āl-e Ahmad, and Shari’ati,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 1 (1983): 1–23; Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity,” 48–76; Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96–114.

⁹⁹ Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity,” 64. For precedents, see Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 54–76 and Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 132–56.

lipstick – a product of Western industries.”¹⁰⁰ Underlying this passive construction was the comparative, idealized foil of proper Iranian womanhood: The spiritual equal of the man and “the guardian of tradition, family, generation, and blood.”

Another influential voice critiquing gendered gharbzadegi was Ali Shariati, often considered the ideological father of the Iranian revolution due to his synthesis of Third Worldism, socialism, and Shia theology. In his works, Shariati argued the European women paraded in high-circulation tabloids and magazines (likely appearing alongside Empress Farah) as models of modern womanhood were merely the “playthings and dolls of the capitalist industry,” and differed from politically and intellectually active Western women such magazines purposefully ignored.¹⁰¹ Thus, instead of emulating these superficial simulacra, Iranian women had to find an active middle ground between traditional femininity and dynamic, modern womanhood.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who had become a leading source of oppositional discourse against the Pahlavi government during the 1963 protests against the White Revolution, also expounded on gendered westoxication.¹⁰² While in exile, the cleric spoke out on various issues at the intersection of nationalism, socioeconomic justice, and Islam in his recorded sermons, gaining a considerable transnational following.¹⁰³ In his criticism of Pahlavi gender policy, Khomeini mobilized gharbzadegi ideology, arguing against the treatment of women as beautiful playthings or, as he put it, “dolls” (*arūsak*). Khomeini claimed that the coming of Islam had empowered and liberated women. Reza Shah, who had reigned from 1925 to 1941 and institutionalized the “modernization” of Iran, on the other hand, had made women into superficial deceivers (*farībā*) due to his materialistic outlook: “In the name of uplifting women’s status, he brought the woman down from her position. Made the woman like a doll.”¹⁰⁴ Then, in the name of making half of the population active and productive, the late

¹⁰⁰ Al-e Ahmad, *Gharb-zadigī*, 131.

¹⁰¹ Ali Shariati, “Fāṭimi fāṭimi ast,” *Majmūʿi-yi aṣṣar* (Zan, fāṭimi fāṭimi ast), vol. 21 (Tehran: Muʾassisi-yi Bunyād-i Farhang-i-yi Duktur ʿAlī Sharīʿatī Mazīnānī, 1395/2011), 100. See also Zohreh T. Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern?: Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Abu-Lughod Lila (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 215–42.

¹⁰² Amanat, *Iran*, 572; Fakhreddin Azimi, “Khomeini and the ‘White Revolution,’” in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26–27.

¹⁰³ Abrahamian, *Iran between the Two Revolutions*, 425.

¹⁰⁴ Ruhollah Khomeini, “Payām-i rādiyū tilivīziūnī bi millat-i Iran (Maqām va manzilat-i ḥaqīqī-i zan)” *Qum*, 26 Urdibihisht 1358/May 16, 1979, *Saḥīfī-yi Imām Khumeini*, vol. 7, 337–40, <http://emam.com/~myMhoH>.

Pahlavi regime had put the dolls it had created either in offices as distractors or “thrown them into the streets” to corrupt the youth.¹⁰⁵

Khomeini thus argued that Iranian women had lost their active, respected, powerful position and became painted dolls – mere aesthetic props in the service of the Pahlavi “modernization.” While Khomeini’s passive voice and suspicion of feminized aesthetics paralleled US diplomatic cables about the empress, his comparison operated in the opposite direction toward an idealized past. Within this nostalgic frame, he was willing to credit Iranian women with robust agency: “Our women were warriors (*jangjū*),” he declared, “they wanted them to become disgraceful (*nangjū*) instead.”¹⁰⁶

Although gharbzadegi rhetoric was most closely associated with opponents of the Pahlavi state, it drew proponents from among Pahlavi elites as well. As Mirsepassi has convincingly argued, and as I extrapolate in Chapter 5, the Pahlavi state and the Iranian elite promoted their own discourses of Iranian authenticity and spirituality amid feverish modernization projects.¹⁰⁷ The shah worked to distance himself from gharbzadegi discourse by aligning with Iranian nationalism and attempting to co-opt the left-wing revolutionary fervor of the era with the “White Revolution,” billed as “the revolution of the people and the shah.”¹⁰⁸ He felt comfortable using mystical language, was quick to criticize Western notions of “human rights,” and increasingly made independent power plays in foreign policy.¹⁰⁹ When he switched the country to a single-party system under the Rastakhiz party in 1975, he also officialized a push against Western liberalism and toward an authentically Persian “Great Civilization” overseen by the monarchy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Ruhollah Khomeini, “Sukhanrānī dar jam‘-i bānuvān-i muassisi-yi 12 farvardīn, Qum va Tehrān (tuṭī‘i-yi kashf-i hijāb),” Tehran, Husseiniye Jamārān, 22 Isfand 1361/March 13, 1983, *Ṣaḥīfī-yi Imām Khumeini*, vol. 17, 359–364, <http://emam.com/~OYf2p2>.

¹⁰⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini, “Sukhanrānī dar jam‘-i bānuvān-i Qum (zan az dīd-gāh-i Islām),” Qum, Madrisi-yi Fiyziyī, 13 Isfand 1357/March 4, 1979, *Ṣaḥīfī-yi Imām Khumeini*, vol. 6, 299–302, <http://emam.com/posts/view/1361/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ali Mirsepassi, *Iran’s Quiet Revolution: The Downfall of the Pahlavi State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ See “dynastic nationalism” in Cyrus Schayegh, “‘Seeing Like a State’: An Essay on the Historiography of Modern Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 1 (2010): 37–61.

¹⁰⁹ Alvandi, Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah.

¹¹⁰ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Bi sū-yi tamaddun-i buzurg* (Tehran: Saltanati-i Pahlavi, 2536[1977]); Zhand Shakibi, “The Rastakhiz Party and Pahlavism: The Beginnings of State anti-Westernism in Iran,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018): 251–68; Cyrus Schayegh, “Iran’s Global Long 1970s: An Empire Project, Civilisational Developmentalism, and the Crisis of the Global North,” in *The Age of Aryamehr: Late Pahlavi Iran and Its Global Entanglements*, ed. Roham Alvandi (London: Gingko, 2018), 260–90.

The shah's much celebrated "granting" of rights to women depended on the hard work and lobbying of Iranian feminists. Iranian politician and women's rights activist Mahnaz Afkhami has noted how, in the lead-up to the 1967 reform of the family law, the shah offered no pressure or guidance but merely warned "that no topic that contradicts the explicit text of the Qur'an should be discussed, especially the topic of inheritance."¹¹¹ As his publications and interview with Fallaci showed, the shah had no problem attacking women's liberation and equality as misguided modern Western concepts.¹¹²

Empress Farah herself warned about the dangers of superficial modernization. She voiced concerns about Iranian youth's admiration for all things Western in her interviews and memoirs.¹¹³ In describing herself as a "soldier" for the revolution and emphasizing her hard work for the country and role as a mother, she pushed against accusations of decadence and superficiality. In an interview with the popular women's magazine *Zan-i Ruz* about a 1968 beauty contest, the empress emphasized that beauty, while indeed a blessing, could never be enough for the modern Iranian woman.¹¹⁴ The magazine editors agreed and pushed against the doll symbolism emanating from opponents of the regime by declaring: "Today's girl wants to be beautiful, but not a painted-up doll (*'arūsak-i bazak kardī*)!"¹¹⁵ The official Raskathiz party organ depicted Farah Pahlavi simultaneously as an empowered working woman actively guiding the nation's development and an average, devoted mother connected to Iranian religious traditions. A September 28, 1976, photo published in the party's journal, for example, depicted the empress holding a Qur'an for the crown prince to walk under as he prepared to start the school year – a common traditional practice.¹¹⁶

Farah Pahlavi also attempted to avoid being a target of *gharbzadegi* critique by signifying her deep connections to Iranian "authenticity" with her style and good works. In 1978, she promoted the traditionalist philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, known for his critiques of Western materialism, as the director of her office, which operated as a significant

¹¹¹ "Sarguzasht-i 'qānūn-i Ḥimāyat az khānivādī': Guft u gū-yi Nūshīn-i Aḥmadī Khurāsānī bā Mahnāz Afkhamī, duvvumīn vazīr-i zan dar Īrān," *Madrisi-yi Fimīnistī*, 5 Mīhr 1387/September 26, 2008, <https://feministschool.com/?p=1392>.

¹¹² Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 90–91.

¹¹³ Impact Staff, "The White Revolution and Iranian Culture, Interview with Farah Pahlavi, Empress of Iran," *Impact of Science on Society* 22, no. 1–2 (1972): 9–28.

¹¹⁴ "Dukhtari mū ṭalāyī az sarzamīnhā-yi sard, bā labkhandī garm va rūḥī ghamangīz," *Zan-i Rūz*, April 1968, no. 162, 5.

¹¹⁵ "Āfarīn bar shumā dukhtarhā," *Zan-i Rūz*, April 1968, no. 162, 3–4.

¹¹⁶ *Rastākhīz*, no. 427, September 28, 1976, 2.

cultural, educational, and philanthropic force in Iran.¹¹⁷ Even the title of her first autobiography, *My Thousand and One Days* (1978), pushed against accusations of superficiality and languorous excess and emphasized industry and modesty. In it, the empress mobilized aesthetics as proof, depicting herself as growing and maturing alongside the developing Iran. For example, she connected the progress in her beauty and style to the nation's development, noting, "Sometimes, I jokingly say to my husband: 'you have a seeing eye. You knew that my looks, like a Kerman rug, would improve with time.'"¹¹⁸ The memoirs depict her maturing alongside Iran and, therefore, becoming more beautiful. Yet, she emphasizes that her appearance is Iranian first and foremost, just as Iran's goal "is to advance towards progress in harmony with 'Iranity.'"¹¹⁹ This balancing act appears in her description of her good works, her art projects combining the local and the global, and how she selected her clothes with an emphasis on local designs.¹²⁰

Despite all her attempts to cut a modest and maternal figure and all official and popular pro-Pahlavi publicity to that effect, Empress Farah was increasingly cast as a westoxicated Marie Antoinette-like figure in the heated political atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s. This shift in her image was hardly self-made. Instead, it reflected transformations in the ascendant ideology of the era from a modernization theory dedicated to images of women's advancement to Third Worldism, which made masculine militarism its icon.¹²¹ In addition, during this period, the shah's authoritarianism came to be discussed more candidly in the US media. He drew ire for benefiting from the 1973 oil crisis, his power plays in the Persian Gulf, and the abuses of human rights associated with the Iranian security state. Similarly, the dogmas underlying modernization theory came to be questioned more openly in the anti-modernist and anti-authoritarian intellectual currents of the age. These political

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 5 for more on Nasr's role in connecting the monarchy to Islamic mysticism.

¹¹⁸ Empress Farah (consort of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran), *My Thousand and One Days: An Autobiography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1978), 42.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92. Keyvan Khosrovani, "The Empress and I: Haute Couture and Iranian Crafts," paper presented at the Sixth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies, The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 2006, London, UK.

¹²¹ Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, 141; Paidar, *Women and the Political Process*, 171; Arielle Gordon, "The Woman with A Gun: A History of the Iranian Revolution's Most Famous Icon" (BA thesis, Brandeis University, 2016); Manijeh Moradian, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), ch. 5; Fatima Tofighi, "Radical Virtues: Practices of the Body Among Iranian Revolutionaries of the 1960s and 1970s," *Middle Eastern Studies* 58, no. 1 (2022): 229–40; Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages*, 261–62. Also see Chapter 3 in this book.

and economic developments negatively shifted the meaning of Farah's beauty, even for Iran's allies.

The aesthetics-focused critique of modernization was transnational and trans-political: In Iran and the diaspora, opponents of the Pahlavi state across the political spectrum critiqued aspects of Iranian modernization using the gendered language of aesthetic superficiality. However, only in the diaspora could the critics directly connect the empress herself to these damning constructions. US government reports were ambivalent on the political efficacy of Farah's appearance. Critics of the Pahlavi state on the left and the right, on the other hand, saw an unambiguously clear "use" for Farah's beauty. In their writings, they constructed beauty as an effective soft power ruse intended to distract the international public from the failures of the White Revolution and the crimes of the Pahlavi monarchy. A 1967 book by Iranian leftist scholar-in-exile Bahman Nirumand, initially published in Germany, played a prominent role in this interpretation.

Translated into English as *Iran: The New Imperialism in Action*, the treatise built on the established discourse of westoxication to attack almost everything associated with the Pahlavis and the White Revolution. Specifically, Nirumand accused the regime of engaging in public diplomacy efforts to come across as modern and democratic while the vast majority of the population struggled to meet the necessities of life and remained subjected to the arbitrary cruelty of SAVAK, the shah's ruthless, CIA-trained security apparatus.¹²² The original German title made this argument clear: *Persia: A Model of a Developing Nation or the Dictatorship of the Free World*.¹²³ Appearing in bookstores slightly ahead of the shah and Empress Farah's protest-rocked June 1967 visit to Germany, the treatise soon gained international attention.

Nirumand's critique of Iran's authoritarian modernization emphasized the role comparative aesthetics played in development schemes. Recounting the removal of the poor from a makeshift shelter in Tehran in 1963, for example, he claimed that "ordinarily, the government leaves such housing untouched, as appropriate dwellings for the populace."¹²⁴ However, what made this shelter unacceptable was its closeness to "the houses of persons whose esthetic sensibilities could no longer be offended by the sight of this eyesore." The comparison was jarring: "The proximity of extreme poverty to the most refined extravagance doesn't

¹²² Bahman Nirumand, *Iran: The New Imperialism in Action* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

¹²³ Bahman Nirumand, *Persien, Modell eines Entwicklungslandes oder Die Diktatur der Freien Welt* (Hamburg: Reinbek, 1967).

¹²⁴ Nirumand, *Iran*, 150.

look good.” Therefore, the Pahlavi police state removed “the eyesore” through the use of most rudimentary violence (“with clubs”). Nirumand thus foregrounded what he saw as the extreme image orientation of the Pahlavi regime and connected this to its implementation of modernization in a superficial and harmful manner.

Unlike the narratives of similitude that permeated the pro-Pahlavi press, Nirumand and other regime opponents emphasized difference and disjuncture in their comparisons. Instead of idly comparing the empress to other famous beauties, they suggested, one would do well to contrast her beauty with the ugliness of Pahlavi rule. The glossy images associated with the Pahlavi White Revolution, with the young and beautiful Empress as its symbol, were nothing but a distraction. The reality on the ground was brutal. “To make up for it,” Nirumand wrote bitterly, “Iran has a beautiful Empress.”¹²⁵ Whereas there was little talk of the repressiveness of the regime and the material struggles of Iran’s masses abroad, everyone knew about “the clothes worn by Farah Diba and the name of her hairdresser.”¹²⁶ The afterword by Hans Magnus Enzensberger cemented the message, mocking the model/copy logic of modernization theory by calling Iran “a model of the big lie.” Enzensberger also argued for the supreme usefulness of Empress Farah’s image: “All questions then are silenced, except one: Is Farah happy?”¹²⁷

A fiery open letter to Empress Farah, written by the militant leftist journalist Ulrike Meinhof and distributed among student protesters in Germany, further popularized Nirumand’s arguments. In her letter, Meinhof compared the description of Farah Pahlavi’s life published in the glossy magazine *Die Neue Revue* with accounts of mismanagement, detachment, and brutality culled from *Iran: The New Imperialism in Action*.¹²⁸ Meinhof pulled no punches about mobilizing metaphors related to Marie Antoinette in depicting the empress as disconnected from the people. Mocking Farah Pahlavi’s claim of missing Iranian sweets after a stay in Paris, for example, she commented, “You see, most Persians aren’t hungry for sweets, but for a piece of bread.”

Ironically, Meinhof chastised Farah Pahlavi for references that the empress likely mobilized to represent her connection to Iran and Iranians,

¹²⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 164.

¹²⁷ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Afterward: Our White Hands,” in *Iran* by Nirumand, 184. See also Annie Pfeifer, “Our White Hands: Iran and Germany’s 1968,” in *Iran and the West: Cultural Perceptions from the Sasanian Empire to the Islamic Republic*, ed. David Bagor and Margaux Whiskin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 104–118.

¹²⁸ Ulrike Meinhof, “Offener Brief an Farah Diba,” *Konkret*, June 1967, https://socialhistoryportal.org/sites/default/files/raf/0019670602_0.pdf. See also Annie Pfeifer, “Our White Hands: Iran and Germany’s 1968,” in *Iran and the West*, 104–18.

including vacations along the Caspian Sea (as opposed to Swiss resorts) and Iranian sweets (as opposed to Maxim's delights). These accusations of being disconnected from the people were quite a sharp contrast to the dominant constructions of the empress. Both US government documents and the sympathetic press had regularly credited her with connecting the shah's regime to the people. However, this negative view of the Pahlavis and the empress herself became more widespread. The extravagant expenses associated with the 1971 celebrations at Persepolis, marking 2,500 years of the Persian dynasty, exacerbated the issue, drawing critical attention even in the capitalist media.

The Pahlavi regime intended the Persepolis celebrations to pay diplomatic and economic dividends, highlight Iran's pre-Islamic roots (thus further differentiating the state from its Arab and Turkish neighbors in line with "the Aryan myth" of Iranian whiteness), and emphasize the necessity of the monarchy.¹²⁹ Prioritizing invitations to royalty over elected leaders, the shah mobilized a frame of comparability to European monarchs, and the sheer amount of international media coverage seemed similar to what "a coronation in England might receive."¹³⁰ However, the tone of the coverage was often condescending and racially inflected. The critical US press freely mobilized Orientalist tropes of decadence and despotism in covering the celebrations, challenging the Pahlavis' aspirational whiteness.¹³¹ Cold War Cosmopolitanism notwithstanding, the mainstream US media claimed a prerogative for judging and ranking other nations, asserting Western superiority. For example, Charlotte Curtis, who covered the event for the *New York Times*, noted that it was far from being a "Congress of Vienna." Falsely labeling 85 percent of Iran's population "illiterate peasants," she mocked Iranians for believing they had "arrived."¹³²

The realm of aesthetics came under particularly sharp scrutiny. Empress Farah recounted the criticism in her memoirs: "Indeed much space was devoted to the latest eyelashes, the hairpieces and the beauty products ... as if these petty details had the slightest importance when one was dealing with twenty-five centuries of history." "And since my gowns were entirely Iranian," she complained, "they were – it goes

¹²⁹ Robert Steele, "Pahlavi Iran on the Global Stage: The Shah's 1971 Persepolis Celebrations," in *The Age of Aryamehr*, 115–16; Motadel, "Iran and the Aryan Myth," 119–46.

¹³⁰ Dorman and Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran*, 118.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 119–20.

¹³² Charlotte Curtis, "After the Ball: Has Shah Achieved Lasting Gains?" *New York Times*, October 19, 1971, 10.

without saying – never mentioned.”¹³³ This account demonstrates how Empress Farah herself mobilized an ambivalent frame when it came to the politics of her own beauty. Wanting to dismiss talk of false eyelashes and hairpieces as “petty details,” she nevertheless insisted on the importance of her “Iranian” clothes.

Farah Pahlavi’s writings and interviews about the celebration reveal a profound frustration over losing control over her image. While it is not true that her gowns were never mentioned – Turkish magazine *Hayat* referenced them as the only Iranian aspect of the celebration – the tides were indeed beginning to turn against the shah’s regime and, therefore, against Empress Farah’s appearance.¹³⁴ There was little she could do to turn them back, no matter how she attempted to adjust her clothing choices. Beauty had become a liability. The November 14, 1975, issue of *The Village Voice* published a picture of the empress and Andy Warhol, standing in front of his iconic portraits of her, titled “Beautiful Butchers: The Shah Serves Up Caviar and Torture.”¹³⁵ The attendant article did not even mention the empress. With the repeating Warhol portraits behind her, she simply served as a symbol of the feminized aesthetic realm, a distraction from and a sharp contrast to sinister realities (Figure 2.3).

Farah Diba Pahlavi remained a popular subject in Turkish tabloids throughout the 1970s. In a 1975 special issue dedicated to the Iranian monarchs’ visit to Türkiye, *Hayat* noted the empress remained popular the world over due to “her measured behavior and modesty which only becomes an Empress,” and reprinted past photos of her being welcomed by loving Turkish fans at the airport.¹³⁶ However, behind closed doors, Türkiye’s ruling elite expressed disdain for what they considered the shah’s “megalomania” (*büyüklik hastalığı*) and his comparative, competitive aspirations to greatness.¹³⁷ Although the shah’s military and economic aid for Türkiye during the US arms embargo (1975–1978) garnered him some positive press, his support for Kurdish guerillas in Iraq further besmirched his image.¹³⁸ The coverage of Iran’s crown family slowly turned less sympathetic in the Turkish news media, as it did in the West.

¹³³ Pahlavi, *My Thousand and One Days*, 95–96.

¹³⁴ “Binbir Gece Masalının Ardındaki Dram,” *Hayat*, November 18, 1971, 18.

¹³⁵ Alexander Cockburn, James Ridgeway, and Jan Albert, “Beautiful Butchers: The Shah Serves Up Caviar and Torture,” *The Village Voice*, November 14, 1977, front page.

¹³⁶ “Sevilen Bir Kraliçe,” *Hayat*, 44, October 30, 1975, n.p.

¹³⁷ Çağlayangil, *Anılarım*, 298; Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Hatıraları*, 19.

¹³⁸ Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Türkiye-İran İlişkileri, 1945–1997,” in *Türk Dış Politikasının Analizi*, ed. Faruk Sönmezoglu (İstanbul: Der, 1998), 147. For more on the embargo, see Chapter 3 of this book.



Figure 2.3 Empress Farah Pahlavi, an art connoisseur, poses alongside the famous American artist Andy Warhol, whose stylized portraits of her can be seen in the background. She is wearing a long-sleeved top featuring traditional Iranian designs. The New York-based left-wing weekly *Village Voice* reprinted this photo on the front page on November 14, 1977, with the caption, “Empress of Iran and Andy Warhol: Wire whips seem very far away.” Emphasizing the contrast between the Pahlavis’ cosmopolitan glamor and the Shah’s police state was a common comparative strategy for dissident activists from the global sixties to the Iranian revolution. Used with permission from Street Media.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Türkiye’s newspaper of record, *Cumhuriyet* had mimicked illustrated magazines like *Hayat*, publishing pictures of the shah and Farah Pahlavi at any opportunity. In the pages of this famously “serious” newspaper, one could repeatedly see the shah and Empress skiing, passing through the Istanbul airport, or enjoying a seaside holiday in casual attire. However, *Cumhuriyet* took a sharp turn against precisely this type of reporting by the end of the decade. In a March 5, 1979, editorial about the Iranian revolution, for example, famous columnist Oktay Akbal criticized a Turkish tabloid that had asked Turkish celebrities whether the divorced Soraya or the dethroned Farah was luckier. Akbal argued the question was irrelevant since it did not make sense to waste time discussing these “two parasitic

women.”¹³⁹ Engaging with rhetorical comparisons like this, according to him, only served to distract the readers from their real-world problems. Calling both ex-queens “decorative dolls” (*süs bebeği*), Akbal demonstrated the transnational purchase of the doll trope. Up to then, comparing Farah (cast as grounded and maternal) to Soraya (cast as flighty and rebellious) in terms of beauty and personality had been a mainstay of the mainstream Turkish press, and the op-ed’s title mimicked the familiar comparative trope: “Farah or Soraya?” Yet, Akbal rejected the terms of comparison, grouping the two women under the same frivolous and superfluous category.

In the June 1988 issue of *Vanity Fair*, radical Australian feminist Germaine Greer published her own memories of the feminist meeting in Tehran that had also featured Betty Friedan. Friedan had called Empress Farah a “feminist,” using aesthetics as proof; in Greer’s construction, feminized aesthetics became the opposite of feminist politics. While reserving her most acerbic commentary for Friedan, Greer claimed their royal Persian hosts had had little substance to contribute since they were “exhausted after a day of having their eyebrows and hair roots bleached and their arms and legs depilated in preparation for the meeting.”¹⁴⁰ Unfounded rumors that she bathed in milk hounded the empress, symbolically linking her to mythic representations of Cleopatra and feminine Oriental decadence. This trope proved long lasting enough to even make it to the deeply stylized opening scenes of the 2013 Hollywood blockbuster *Argo*.¹⁴¹

Aesthetics and Soft Power in Comparison

In her influential article “The Biopower of Beauty,” Mimi Thi Nguyen writes, “The ideas in which we traffic – including that of beauty, which is so often aligned with truth, justice, freedom, and empowerment – must be interrogated not as unambiguous values but as transactional categories that are necessarily implicated and negotiated in relation to national and transnational contests of meaning and power.”¹⁴² The relational, comparative, and deeply political qualities of beauty explain why US government officials struggled to make sense of Empress Farah’s image at every step, even as they could not avoid addressing it. In the international public sphere, comparisons relied heavily on the visual, and

¹³⁹ Oktay Akbal, “Farah mı, Süreyya mı,” *Cumhuriyet*, March 5, 1970, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Germaine Greer, “Women’s Glib,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1988, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/1988/6/womens-glib>.

¹⁴¹ *Argo*, directed by Ben Affleck (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013).

¹⁴² Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty,” 360–61.

soft power claims were bolder. The empress was cast first and foremost as the beautiful symbol of an authentically Iranian modernization and, increasingly, as a shiny distraction from the regime's extravagant failures: a painted doll. The aesthetic could support political claims, but the influence was more robust the other way around.

Debates on the operations of nation-branding and soft power would benefit from paying more attention to beauty and its intersections with gender, race, class, and nation. It does not take a sophomoric imagination to note that the words "soft" and "hard" are thoroughly gendered. In fact, in describing soft power, the term's coiner Nye used the libidinal language of "attraction" and "seduction," claiming "seduction is always more effective than coercion."¹⁴³ At the same time, the concept has come under criticism from "realist" authors who claim soft power barely constitutes power.¹⁴⁴ Central to this discussion are the crucial ways in which soft power maneuvers are backed by the threat of coercion or "hard power."¹⁴⁵ The concept of "soft power" separates and essentializes culture as a singular dimension of foreign policy to be considered alongside the military, the economic, and the political.¹⁴⁶ However, as multiple scholars have shown and this book concurs, ideology and discourse are essential to the very foundations and practice of statecraft.¹⁴⁷ While gender has not been central to the scholarly debate on soft power, in a media environment that regularly personifies politics through the bodies of salient figures, public diplomacy maneuvers (and the pushback against them) will always be gendered, racialized, and classed.

Equally important are the power differentials between states and the outsized impact some polities, such as the United States, have on determining the ideological and discursive field upon which others' soft power maneuvers must occur. A particularly evocative study by Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti examines the conflicting international responses to Qatar's attempts to rebrand as "an ambitious, pioneering,

¹⁴³ Nye, *Soft Power*, x.

¹⁴⁴ For a review, see Pinar Bilgin and Berivan Eliş, "Hard Power, Soft Power: Toward a More Realistic Power Analysis," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 2 (2008): 5–20.

¹⁴⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 19–24; Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583–612.

¹⁴⁶ Philip H. Coombs, *The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Cultural Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

¹⁴⁷ Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*; Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Shibusawa, "Ideology, Culture, and the Cold War"; Christopher Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Also see the introduction to this book.

and vital actor” through high-profile events, particularly in the arena of sports and leisure since the early 2010s.¹⁴⁸ Identifying a “soft power-soft disempowerment nexus,” their research demonstrates how Qatar’s soft power agenda backfired as opponents used the boosted media attention to highlight the state’s less-than-stellar human rights record. The authors’ depiction of soft power as a comparative, “competitive game” is pertinent here.¹⁴⁹ Comparativism, as this chapter has argued, plays a catalytic role in shifting perceptions and rankings of nations and states. Given how much epistemic power the United States and its European allies hold in determining ruling categories and rubrics, it is common for nation-branding attempts of non-Western states to be praised when in alignment with Western goals and mocked as mere window-dressing when not. Even non-state actors’ judgments are amplified as long as they emanate from these power centers.

The politics of beauty are labile because they are gendered and comparative. Aesthetic judgments do important work for national image-building, feeding international comparisons and rankings. Yet, in the field of foreign relations, beauty can easily transform from an asset into a liability due to the gender hierarchies that associate the aesthetic realm with femininity and, therefore, artifice, superficiality, and deceptiveness. The fate of Iranian nation-branding in the late 1960s and 1970s, with Empress Farah as its most visible symbol, demonstrates how critiques of soft power initiatives can be gendered and comparative in so far as they mobilize indictments of the aesthetic.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the images of Iran’s Empress Farah saturated the world’s capitalist media. Before long, her beautiful visage would be replaced by another riveting figure: A stoic Iranian cleric in robes sitting cross-legged under an apple tree in the garden of a French cottage. In exile in the country that had once hosted the empress, Ayatollah Khomeini’s homespun Islamic style communicated what Farah’s ultimately could not: A deep connection to the people and authentic Iranian culture. Back then, no one could doubt that Ayatollah Khomeini’s image, his *charisma*, mattered: In fact, by the time of the revolution, the capitalist media had become as obsessed with him as they had been with Farah Pahlavi.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti, “The Soft Power–Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 1139–57.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1144.

¹⁵⁰ Amanat, *Iran*, 721–23; Cooper, *Fall of Heaven*, 424; Ahmad Ashraf, “Theocracy and Charisma: New Men of Power in Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 4, no. 1 (1990): 113–52.

Yet image-based criteria are inherently unstable. The same Western media that had once helped Khomeini grow his political mystique eventually came to depict him as both physically repellent and out-of-touch. Within Iran and in the diaspora, critics cast the revolutionary regime itself as too focused on appearance over substance. Objecting to rising pressures regarding women's veiling early on in the revolution, Simin Daneshvar, distinguished Iranian academic, novelist, and wife of *Gharbzadegi* author Jalal Al-e Ahmad, argued that the revolutionaries needed to enact deeper changes to improve the lives of millions of Iranians instead of focusing on the hijab: "But in any case, everyone knows that piety is not in outward appearance; piety must be rooted in the mind and soul of a human being, whether a man or a woman."¹⁵¹ Still harboring hope for the Iranian peoples' movement, Daneshvar worded her objections mildly. Soon, however, it would be increasingly common to hear strident critiques of the Islamic Republic that coalesced around the superficiality of its revolutionary Islam: Its symbolic nature, its over-dependence on the aesthetics and performances of devoutness that hide an underlying menace of corruption and greed.

It may be ironic but not surprising that Iran's last Pahlavi Queen and first Supreme Ruler both faced such severe reassessments of their charisma. Beauty is not necessarily "the power of the weak," as has been claimed, but the power of the ascendant, with rankings in the eye of the comparer.¹⁵² The next chapter takes a closer look at the ascendant ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s, which helped bring Khomeini to power, explaining how new comparative rubrics operating at the intersection of race, religion, and gender troubled Turkish and Iranian aspirations to Westernness and whiteness.

¹⁵¹ Simin Daneshvar, "Biyāyīd Irān-i vīrān rā ābād kunīm," *Kiyhān*, 19 Isfand 1357/March 10, 1979, 7.

¹⁵² Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr, *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 20.

3 Aspirational Whiteness and Honorary Blackness Race, Religion, and the Politics of Defiance

In her 1978 autobiography, Empress Farah Pahlavi recounted how the Iranian regime had taken on a goodwill project by sponsoring “four children of every race”: “one small black child from Africa, a small Canadian Indian, a small Iranian white child, a small Japanese.”¹ If the empress’s selection of an Iranian child as the epitome of whiteness strikes one as unusual today, that is just one clue as to the well documented liminal racial construction of “Middle Easterners”: Iranians, Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and so on. Under Reza Shah, the Pahlavi dynasty heavily propagated the myth that Iranians were “Aryans,” that is, the original white people.² Even the global discrediting of white supremacist rhetoric in response to the horrors of Nazism after World War II did not prevent his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, from crowning himself “Aryamehr” or “the light of the Aryans.” Since the nineteenth century, however, Western race scientists, US immigration and naturalization laws, and opinion leaders sometimes declared Iranians to be white and sometimes non-white, depending on the contingencies of the moment.

The first two chapters of this book have demonstrated how comparison and personification, mobilizing ideas about gender, race, and class, became useful to an international cast of scholars, diplomats, and opinion leaders who sought to understand and explain Iran and Türkiye in the twentieth century. The focus was mainly on the two countries’ ruling regimes. Chapter 1 examined how Iran and Türkiye were understood through comparisons targeting their founding fathers, Reza Shah and Atatürk. Chapter 2 analyzed how comparativism linked modernization theory and feminized aesthetics in representations of Iran’s last empress, Farah Diba Pahlavi. This chapter shifts the focus to individuals and groups who did not have control over the state. Specifically, I examine how Islamist dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s in Türkiye, Iran, and the

¹ Pahlavi, *My Thousand and One Days*, 96.

² Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Motadel, “Iran and the Aryan Myth,” 119–46.

United States mobilized race and religion in their comparative critiques of authoritarian modernization and, in so doing, transformed Islamism into a critical interlocutor on racial justice. I use the term Islamism broadly here to describe thinkers and movements advocating a larger role for Islam in the civic sphere. My analysis focuses on state-centered dissidents who sought to influence the political process and reorganize the prevailing regime's relation to Islam, whether by revolution, as in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, or by electoral organizing, as in the case of Necmettin Erbakan in Türkiye.

In the two decades before the Iranian revolution, Islamism's politics were in flux and contradictory across state borders. During this period, US policymakers generally considered the religion an ally against "Godless" Soviet Communism.³ At the same time, a loose network of mostly male intellectuals and activists were paying renewed attention to Islam's racial politics, using theological language to advocate anti-racism and anti-imperialism. The post-World War II proliferation of discourses about racial equality, Third Worldism, and global publicity around Black Power intersected with earlier racialized understandings of Islam as the antagonistic Other to "the West." Islamically oriented thinkers began to conflate Prophet Muhammad's Abyssinian companion Bilal ibn Rabah (c. 580–640), who was the first person to formulate and perform the call to prayer, with anti-imperialist Black Muslim figures such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. By the end of the decade, West Asian aspirations to whiteness, such as those articulated by the empress, were fully strained under an invigorated civilizational understanding of Islam that linked race, religion, and politics. This ascendant ideology was constructed transnationally through strategic comparisons between Iran and Türkiye and in triangulation with the US empire.

The shifting racial politics of Turkish and Iranian Islamism illuminate the unofficial dynamics of comparison under US hegemony and contribute to our understanding of the global long sixties. Published scholarship examining connections forged between Black American Muslim thinkers and Muslim intellectuals and activists outside the United States has largely focused on what Alex Lubin has called the "Afro-Arab Political Imaginary."⁴ This formulation ("Arab") excludes Iran and Türkiye, the

³ I explore this vision of pro-American Islam in depth in Chapter 5. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Double Day, 2004), 120–22; Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005); Jacobs, "The Perils and Promise of Islam," 705–39.

⁴ Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

two counterrevolutionary, pro-US regimes of West Asia. Türkiye and Pahlavi-era Iran are also missing from Sohail Daulatzai's description of "a Muslim International," which denotes the loose revolutionary networks forged between Black American radicals and Third World Muslim activist-intellectuals.⁵

The exclusion of Türkiye and (to a lesser extent) prerevolutionary Iran from global histories of Third Worldist and/or Islamic dissent is not surprising. In the early twentieth century, both Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Reza Shah sought to undo Orientalist visions that racialized their peoples as non-white and argued that they were comparatively different from what Europeans and Americans had come to call "the Middle East."⁶ Despite the serious differences in the two regimes, the ruling classes of both countries partially tethered their aspirations to whiteness to secularization, in this case, the tempering and control of Islam by the state.⁷ Both countries aligned with the United States in the Cold War, joining its defense pacts. Thus, they found themselves transformed, in the shah's colorful metaphor, into "America's wife" and "concubine," competing for the fickle affections of "the leader of the free world." Other analogies were even less flattering. In a 1952 Council of Foreign Relations meeting, for example, Princeton University scholar Lewis Thomas argued Türkiye's staunch pro-Western status had made Arab-majority nations see the country as "a sort of 'White man's n*****.'"⁸

This chapter delineates the forgotten connections between Black American Muslim figures and Turkish and Iranian dissidents, complicating the easy comparativism that pits Türkiye and Iran against Arab-majority states. I begin with a history of relevant racial formations, tracing how Turkish, Iranian, and Arab aspirations to whiteness connected to the racialization of Islam in Europe and the United States. I then examine the politico-religious classifications of West Asians as "nonwhite" in the theology of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an influential African American Muslim group founded in 1930, in contrast to West Asians' de jure whiteness in US law. Tracing the proliferation of Islamist works on racial justice after World War II, I demonstrate how and why references to Bilal ibn Rabah found particular resonance in the texts of devout Turkish, Kurdish, and Iranian intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s.

⁵ Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁶ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 147.

⁷ Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Gharbzadegi, Colonial Capitalism and the Racial State in Iran," *Postcolonial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 173–94, 184.

⁸ Quoted in Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*, 44.

The chapter ends by linking these ideological developments to foreign policy. I demonstrate how gharbzadegi discourses critical of westernization merged with political anti-Americanism, as some devout intellectuals began advocating for dis-alignment from “the West.” Iranian revolutionary thinkers such as Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini used Kemalism and Atatürk as comparative foils to Muslim power, misrepresenting the history of Turkish foreign relations in the process. At the same time, reimagining Islam as a muscular, anti-Western force paved the way for Türkiye’s outreach to America’s Black Muslims following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974) and the resulting US arms embargo (1975–1978). In 1976, under a new coalition government featuring leftists and Islamists, Türkiye hosted the heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali and broadly publicized the famous Muslim boxer’s support for its militant Cyprus policy. This public relations coup pre-saged the better-known outreach from Iranian revolutionaries to Black Americans during the Iranian hostage crisis (1979). The transnational vision of antiracist, anti-imperialist, and confrontational Islam made these policy maneuvers legible across nation-state boundaries.

Maybe White and Likely Not: The Turkish and Persian “Races” under Comparativism

Understanding how a transnational cast of thinkers reconfigured Islam’s racial politics in the 1960s and 1970s requires delineating the liminal space West Asian ethnicities have long held in the European and Euro-American racial imagination. Across the world, few official endeavors have been as dedicated to categorizing and fixing race as the US immigration and naturalization laws, which held that only “free white persons” could become US citizens from 1790 until 1952. Any immigrant applying for naturalization had to pass the whiteness test. Thus, when West Asians began to move to the United States in larger numbers toward the end of the nineteenth century, they generated an archive of court cases discussing their racial status.

Of course, Iranians, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, and so on, are not inherently “white” or “non-white”; no one is. Racial classifications are context-bound cultural constructs. In my “Islam and America” class, I drive this point home by having my students hold a mock trial on whether their professor (yep, that’s me) is white or non-white. First, the students read historical court cases determining whiteness and eligibility for naturalization. I then randomly assign them to support one position or the other and stand there, answering questions as they hold a mock trial, which ends with a closed vote determining my racial status. In addition

to making me feel extremely self-conscious, this interactive lesson elicits several points. First, the students realize that, as a social construct, race intersects with multiple other social formations such as religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and politics.⁹ Second, they learn that while racial categories are “made-up” ideological constructs, racial classification comes with real-world, material, psychological, and societal effects. The shifting positioning of West Asian communities within and outside the boundaries of whiteness demonstrates both the lability of racial categories and the high stakes involved for those who do not make the cut.

Empress Farah Pahlavi’s recounting of four racial categories in her 1978 memoirs largely aligned with internationally accepted anthropological knowledge. Between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, European and US scientists identified four main racial groups of humans (Caucasian or White; Negroid or Black; Mongoloid or Yellow; and American or Red). Many also regularly included a fifth category, called Malay/Brown, to refer to the indigenous peoples of Oceania.¹⁰ According to the linguist and ethnologist A. H. Keane, whose works the US courts occasionally consulted to determine eligibility for naturalization, most West Asians belonged to various divisions within the Caucasian group. “Arabs” were Semitic, and “Persians” were “proto-Aryans.”¹¹ Turkic peoples, as members of “the yellow or Mongolian race,” were an exception to the predominantly Caucasian West Asia. However, Keane and other scholars noted that the Turks of Asia Minor had absorbed so “much Aryan and Semitic blood” in their march westward that they had lost most of their original racial characteristics.¹² Their non-Indo-European language remained the only clue to their “yellow” roots.

Western scientists specializing in race largely agreed on these assessments; however, the US courts did not always stick to supposedly scientific categories when making their decisions. Instead, they mobilized a plethora of religious, political, and “civilizational” arguments, considering whether the applicant would fit well within the imagined US body

⁹ For an accessible introduction to the constructedness of racial categories, see Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016). On intersections of race and other social formations, see Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 139–67, and “Mapping the Margins,” 1241–99.

¹⁰ See, for example, Robert Brown, *The Races of Mankind: Being a Popular Description of the Characteristics, Manners and Customs of the Principal Varieties of the Human Family* (London: Cassell, Peter & Galpin, 1873), 1.

¹¹ A. H. Keane, *The World’s People: A Popular Account of their Bodily & Mental Characters, Beliefs, Traditions, Political and Social Institutions* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1908), 326, 404–05.

¹² *Ibid.*, 174.

politic. This “common man understanding” of Americanness was often narrower than the prevailing scientific consensus.¹³ Therefore, whether experts classified them as “Caucasic” or not, the whiteness of West Asians remained far from settled.

Comparativism suffused US courtrooms as it did race science; however, religion and politics held a much larger role in the comparisons US case law generated. For example, *In re Halladjian* (1909) declared Armenians white, partially because “by reason of their Christianity, they generally ranged themselves against the Persian fire worshippers, and against the Mohammedans, both Saracens and Turks.”¹⁴ In *Dow v. United States*, too, the Syrian applicant’s Christianity gave him an edge, bolstering the comparative scientific categorization that Arabs “belong to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks, who are in origin Mongolian.”¹⁵ In *In re Najour* (1909), the court granted a Christian Syrian applicant whiteness, citing Keane’s work and rejecting the opposing claim that being “a subject of the Sultan of Turkey” had made the applicant “Asiatic.”¹⁶ Thus, Turkishness (i.e., supposedly being of “Mongolian” origin) and Islam as the imagined “enemy” of Western civilization operated as powerful and overlapping racial/political clues.

The comparisons were more complicated for Iranians. While Arab and Armenian Christian applicants contrasted themselves with “Persian fire-worshippers” to prove their whiteness, South Asian applicants connected themselves to Iran to insist on their “Aryan” roots. In such arguments, Iranians figuratively operated as “racial hinges,” to cite the powerful metaphor of Neda Maghbouleh, opening and closing the doors to whiteness.¹⁷

In short, West Asian Christians could become officially white in the United States and gain citizenship benefits through a comparativism that set them apart from the Muslims who may have been from the same town. This “common man understanding” had little support in the era’s race science, but it did cohere with civilizational visions that aligned Christianity, the West, and whiteness.

¹³ Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law,” 84–85.

¹⁴ *In re Halladjian*, 174 F. 834 (1909), December 24, 1909, United States Circuit Court for the District of Massachusetts, 174 F. 834, Case Law Access Project, Harvard Law School, <https://cite.case.law/f/174/834/>.

¹⁵ *Dow v. United States*, 226 F. 145 (1915), September 14, 1915, United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, no. 1345 226 F. 145, Case Law Access Project, Harvard Law School, <https://cite.case.law/f/226/145/>.

¹⁶ *In re Najour*, 174 F. 735 (1909), December 1, 1909, United States Circuit Court for the Northern District of Georgia, 174 F. 735, Case Law Access Project, Harvard Law School, <https://cite.case.law/f/174/735/>.

¹⁷ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 45.

Outside the courtrooms, *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) by white supremacist US historian Lothrop Stoddard epitomized the civilizational merging of race, religion, and politics. In this popular book, Stoddard divided the world into various civilizations and argued that the peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia belonged to the “Brown” race. His categorization allowed for phenotypical and chromatic differences within this group and was built mainly on politics and religion; the Brown world had Islam and long-standing resentment of the White Man in common.¹⁸ On the book’s original cover, a turbaned shadow of a man, wildly waving a rifle and climbing to the top of the earth, represented Brown people, following a stereotypical African man wielding a spear and a stereotypical Chinese man brandishing a sword.

Anthropologists did not broadly adopt Stoddard’s “Brown” categorization based on confrontational religion. However, the designation reflected “the common man understanding” of Muslims. Here, as elsewhere, race operated via “belief in the embodiment of culture,” even though the category referred to a color (“Brown”).¹⁹ This type of civilizational thinking, merging race, religion, and masculine militancy, would manifest repeatedly in understandings of the so-called Middle East throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first.

The apex of Western imperialism and race science coincided with the founding of the modern Turkish and Iranian nation-states.²⁰ Given the European domination in knowledge production, translated categories influenced Iranian and Turkish understandings of race and nationhood. In Iran, the state-aligned elite thoroughly embraced and heavily promoted the “Aryan myth,” claiming Persia as the original home of whiteness. As noted in the introduction, the Aryan myth was influenced by European anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism and connected to the Pahlavi state’s valorization of Iran’s pre-Islamic past. The myth mistakenly extrapolated from language to race, contrasting “Aryan” Persian-speakers with “Semitic” Arabs and “Asiatic” Turks.²¹

¹⁸ Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), reprinted in Project Gutenberg (2011), www.gutenberg.org/files/37408/37408-h/37408-h.htm.

¹⁹ Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 12; John F. Szwed, “Race and the Embodiment of Culture,” *Ethnicity* 2, no. 1 (1975): 19–33; Etienne Balibar, “Is There a Neo-Racism?,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: Verso: 1991), 12–28.

²⁰ Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 145–46.

²¹ Rezakhani, “Pārsгарāyī va buḥrān-i huviyat dar Irān.”

Iranian historians readily reproduced racialized visions of Turks and Mongols as barbaric members of the “yellow” race.²² A 1934 English-language biography produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs drove the myth home by insisting Reza Shah was of “pure” Persian ancestry, in not-so-subtle contrast to the deposed “Turkic” rulers of the Qajar dynasty.²³ The new Iranian state hitched its national identity so firmly to this ethnic contrast that when a French newspaper reported Hitler’s Germany had declared Türkiye an “Aryan” power in 1936, it precipitated a diplomatic crisis.²⁴ The report was a hoax – Germany had identified the country as a “European” power, not an “Aryan” one – and had no policy implications. However, the Iranian regime’s protests demonstrated the comparative and triangulated nature of race thinking in Türkiye–Iran relations, even during this golden age of “blood brotherhood” between Reza Shah and Atatürk (Chapter 1).

In Türkiye, the Kemalist regime had its own racial agenda: Disproving international research that claimed Turks were non-white. Atatürk specifically assigned his adopted daughter, historian Afet İnan, to study and contest the categorization of Turks as “Asiatic.”²⁵ Of course, European and US scholars often acknowledged that the Turks of Asia Minor had mixed too extensively with “Caucasians” to be considered fully “Mongoloid.” This consensus had even entered US case law; the *In re Halladjian* (1909) decision objected to the claim that “the Turks have never comingled with Europeans, nor can it be said with any truth that they are descendants of Europeans.”²⁶ However, relief in hybridity was not enough for a new nation-state that had denounced the pluralist Ottoman past and sought proud, ancient roots.

An obsession with pre-Islamic Turkic culture and anti-Arab sentiments colored Turkish claims to whiteness. Under a new fanciful mythology, nationalist Turkish anthropologists claimed Turks had descended from a white Central Asian race and had been the ancestors of Europeans as well as the creators of “all ancient civilizations.”²⁷ To justify this thesis, Turkish authors cited and incorporated the work of European linguists and anthropologists, who were implicitly considered the arbiters of

²² Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*, 172.

²³ Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages*, 101.

²⁴ Motadel, “Iran and the Aryan Myth,” 134.

²⁵ Murat Ergin, “Turkey’s Hard White Turn,” *Aeon*, April 2, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-fantastic-science-of-turkeys-whiteness-campaign>; see also, Murat Ergin, “*Is the Turk a White Man?*”: Race and Modernity in the Making of Turkish Identity (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

²⁶ *In re Halladjian*, 174 F. 834 (1909).

²⁷ Ergin, “*Is the Turk a White Man?*,” 73.

whiteness. “Whiteness,” as Murat Ergin explains, thus “ended up being a dominant yet silent social category that defined Turkishness and linked Turkey to modernity.”²⁸

Although neither Atatürk nor Reza Shah discarded Islam as their critics have long argued, their secularization measures, bringing religion under state control and supervision to varying degrees, clearly had racial aspects. For Reza Shah and, to a considerable extent, for his heir Mohammad Reza Shah, resurrecting the glories of Aryan Persia meant underplaying the influence of Islam, Arabs, and Turks on Iranian civilization; for Atatürk and his followers, being European meant appearing European in garb, comportment, and, as much as possible, in physiognomy. Explicitly racial language became rarer in Türkiye as elsewhere after World War II; however, colorism and classism remained merged in the middle-class Turkish imagination through the mediating ideology of secular modernity.²⁹ Atatürk’s fair features (“blonde hair, blue eyes,” as countless nationalist poems recount adoringly) have remained a central part of the mythology of Turkish whiteness, along with a continuing preoccupation with “modern” clothes, light skin, hair, and eye color.³⁰

Since the first West Asian applicants had gained the official status of whiteness in the United States on account of their Christianity, the status of Muslim immigrants from the region remained uncertain until later in the century. Given the 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration act, which severely restricted immigration from outside Central and Northwestern Europe, and the US courts’ ability to mobilize “common man understanding” of race, Muslim applications were unlikely to have met with success between the wars. In 1942, the first ever case of a Muslim Arab applying for naturalization declared Arabs to be “non-white” because they were “a part of the Mohammedan world.”³¹ This merger of race, religion, and politics demonstrated the continued purchase held by civilizational theories like Stoddard’s. However, in 1944, the court ruled in favor of another Muslim Arab applicant, arguing that the political interests of the United States “as a world power” required loosening the racial

²⁸ Ibid., 53.

²⁹ Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 90–91; Tanıl Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2–3 (2003): 433–51.

³⁰ Perin Gürel, “Turkey, White Supremacy, and the Clash of Civilizations,” *Contending Modernities*, July 10, 2019, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/turkeyclashofcivs/>; Ergin, “Is the Turk a White Man?,” 7; Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey.”

³¹ Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 64–65.

categories.³² Nazi atrocities had discredited state racism; competition with the USSR over the alliances of decolonizing nations required the US ruling elite to shift away from the open espousal of white supremacist ideology.³³ In 1952, with the African American Civil Rights movement gaining traction and the Cold War in full swing, identifying the race of West Asian Muslims became largely moot in an institutional sense, as a new law stripped the “racial prerequisite” clause for naturalization. The 1965 Hart–Celler Immigration Act then banned racial discrimination in immigration and naturalization.

With the rise of the Cold War, denizens of Türkiye and Iran came quite close to being considered white in the US public imagination. During this period, Türkiye and Iran experienced increased inclusion within Western structures. Türkiye, for example, attained membership of NATO in 1952. While “the West” in the Cold War diplomatic context operated primarily as a marker of foreign policy alignment, Turkish elites did not ignore the term’s civilizational and racial connotations; many felt NATO membership had made them “a part of the West” in more ways than one.³⁴ Iran’s full alignment with the United States, on the other hand, came after the US-led coup of 1953, which removed the neutralist Prime Minister Mossadegh from power and allowed Mohammad Reza Shah to have complete control over the country. Once again, US foreign policy doctrines influenced the racialization of Türkiye and Iran’s people as the two nation-states became allies of “the West” against “the East,” redefined partially on political terms.

With the 1977 census, the official racial designation of Turks, Iranians, Arabs, and other peoples from West Asia and North Africa residing in the United States became fixed as “White/Caucasian: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.”³⁵ Middle Eastern whiteness, however, could not be taken for granted. It remained liminal, comparative, and

³² *Ex Parte Mohriez*, 54 F. Supp. 941 (D. Mass. 1944), U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, April 13, 1944, *Justia US Law*, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/54/941/1739378/>.

³³ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), introduction; Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Altemur Kılıç, *Turkey and the World* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1959), 159; see also, Eylem Yılmaz and Pinar Bilgin, “Constructing Turkey’s ‘Western’ Identity during the Cold War: Discourses of the Intellectuals of Statecraft,” *International Journal* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2005/2006): 39–59.

³⁵ Karen Humes and Howard Hogan, “Measurement of Race and Ethnicity in a Changing, Multicultural America,” *Race and Social Problems* 1, no. 3 (2009): 111–31.

deeply connected to international relations. While eclipsed by official theorizations of Islam as a friend to the West due to its supposed anti-Communism (Chapter 5), the racialized vision of Islamic civilization as a defiant counterpoint to “the West” continued to circulate in the United States, even influencing Islamic theology among the United States’s urban Black communities.

Muslim/Eastern/Black: West Asia and North Africa in African American Islam

The history of Islam in the United States is deeply interwoven with race and politics. A considerable percentage of the people kidnapped from West and Central Africa and forcefully brought to the United States were Muslims.³⁶ Some, such as the Fula Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said, prince and commander Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori, and the noble hafez Ayyuba Suleiman Diallo captured national and international attention with their intellectual pursuits and freedom struggles.³⁷ The publications of Pan-Africanist educator Edward W. Blyden also popularized the idea of Islam as an African religion. His *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (1887), for example, highlighted Islam’s anti-imperialist potential in comparison to Christianity.³⁸ Blyden praised Islam for inculcating dignity, pride, and “superior manliness,” unlike Christianity, which, he claimed, came infused with white supremacy and stupefying teachings on meekness.³⁹ Referencing Bilal ibn Rabah as well as great Black Muslim scholars and commanders, Blyden popularized the idea of Islam as a defiant, antiracist religion, which “merges all distinctions in one great brotherhood.”⁴⁰

Building on the popularity of Blyden’s ideas, the organized (re)adaptation of Islam by African Americans came in the early twenty-first century with the founding of the Moorish Science Temple (MST) in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali. From the beginning, the MST did not differentiate between race and religion, viewing religion as a racial doctrine and vice versa. MST teachings asserted that African Americans were

³⁶ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 46.

³⁷ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

³⁸ Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classics Press, 1993), 141.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19, 141.

not “negroes” but “Moorish” peoples, “olive-skinned” members of the Asiatic race, which included Asians and Indigenous Americans.⁴¹

This merger of race and religion had political implications at a time when the Sultan/Caliph of the Ottoman Empire claimed the spiritual leadership of all Muslims. In his *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America*, which differed drastically from the Qur’an, Ali urged a spiritual reorientation toward Islam’s founding city of Mecca, then in Ottoman hands: “Turks are the true descendants of Hagar, who are the chief protectors of the Islamic Creed of Mecca; beginning from Mohammed the First, the founding of the uniting of Islam, by the command of the great universal God—Allah.”⁴² Noble Drew Ali thus connected Muslims of African descent in the Americas to Islamic civilization across the ocean. This overlapping of race, religion, and geopolitics through an imagined “Muslim world” was not unique to US-based Black Muslims and could be found in the era’s pan-Islamist thought worldwide.⁴³

The NOI, the most influential Black Muslim organization of the twentieth century, was founded in 1930 as an outgrowth of the MST by the enigmatic Wallace Fard Muhammad (also known as Wallace D. Fard), a traveling salesperson who claimed to be of Arab and Meccan origin. Influenced by earlier Pan-Africanist movements such as Garveyism, the NOI focused on community uplift, encouraging healthy habits, strong families, and economic independence. Under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad (formerly Elijah Poole), who succeeded Fard in 1934, the group developed a unique theology based on the idea that Islam constituted the natural religion of “the original man,” that is, the Black man, out of whom all other races had developed. Clashing with established Islamic doctrine, Elijah Muhammad claimed his teacher Fard had been Allah (God) in human form, which made Elijah Muhammad “the Messenger of Allah.” His role was to awaken and uplift American Blacks, whom he referred to as “the Asiatic Black man.”⁴⁴ Elijah Muhammad’s teachings followed a line of racial/civilizational thinking that saw world affairs as signs of God’s plan. Specifically, NOI theology prophesied the

⁴¹ Judith Weisenfield, “Spiritual Complexions: On Race and the Body in the Moorish Science Temple of America,” in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 413–28.

⁴² Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America: circle 7* [United States: The Moorish Science Temple of America, 1927], Chapter XLV, the Library of Congress, Moorish Science Temple of America, and Omar Ibn Said Collection, Manuscript/Mixed Material, www.loc.gov/item/2018662631/.

⁴³ Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 5.

⁴⁴ Nathaniel Deutsch, “‘The Asiatic Black Man’: An African American Orientalism?,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 193–208.

end of White Christian power, demanded a separate land for those of African descent within the United States, and preached the unity of the darker races.

Multiple religious, political, and scientific developments influenced Elijah Muhammad's teachings. Sherman A. Jackson has convincingly noted their overlap with "Black Religion," that is race-conscious theology that responds to the circumstances of enslavement, white terror, and segregation. "Black Religion," according to Jackson, applies to multiple African American religious formations and is distinguished by its protest orientation: The central and most enduring feature of Black Religion is its sustained and radical opposition to racial oppression."⁴⁵ This vision of confrontational religion, which also colored Western perceptions of Islam as having "spread by the sword," made Islam a likely choice for a defiant religious stance. Ahmadiyya missionaries, who had established active missions in the Midwest in the 1920s and had brought with them claims about Islam's inherent antiracist, antislavery stance, also impacted NOI theology.⁴⁶ NOI teachings turned eugenics – still ascendant in the early twentieth century – on its head, arguing that a Black scientist named Yakub had generated the white race through a series of grafting and breeding experiments. The influence of science fiction, on the other hand, manifested in beliefs that "a Mother Plane" was circling the earth and would wreak vengeance on white oppressors.⁴⁷

NOI avoided electoral politics, but the implications of an influential Black Muslim organization unwilling to swear allegiance to the United States put it on the authorities' radar. J. Edgar Hoover's FBI hounded the NOI, as it did all effective Black organizations and individuals. Elijah Muhammad was imprisoned between 1942 and 1946 for encouraging his followers to evade the draft. He was deeply sympathetic to the Japanese as a non-white people challenging white power – a pattern that would resonate in NOI publications' approach to most of America's non-European antagonists. NOI membership dwindled while its leader was in prison. However, the organization rose to global prominence in the 1950s and 1960s with the help of Malcolm Little, a "hustler turned rebel," who would soon take on the name Malcolm X.⁴⁸ Converting in 1948 while in prison, Malcolm X rose quickly within the NOI ranks as a true believer

⁴⁵ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31.

⁴⁶ Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 10.

⁴⁷ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 77.

⁴⁸ Les Payne and Tamara Payne, *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X* (New York: Liveright, 2021), 398.

and mesmerizing public speaker. He led Harlem's Mosque No. 7, organized multiple other temples nationwide, and set the foundation for the organization's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*.

Elijah Muhammad's claim that the White man's rule was coming to an end built on the popular idea that World War I had exposed the weaknesses of so-called white civilization.⁴⁹ A similar belief – that the demographic superiority of the oppressed non-whites threatened Western dominance – also appeared in alarmist white supremacist tracks, such as Stoddard's *Rising Tide of Color*. While the likes of Stoddard considered this possibility a calamity, Elijah Muhammad interpreted it as a long-overdue divine punishment for Europeans' sins of slavery and imperialism. As an NOI minister, Malcolm X even jotted down a reference to Stoddard in his lecture notes when he explained the apocalyptic elements of NOI theology as not the end of the world per se but of the White, Western, Christian world.⁵⁰ These terms were essentially equivalent in NOI dogma, as were Black, Eastern, and Muslim.

At a time when leaders of the Civil Rights movement were seeking equality and integration within the preexisting structures of the United States, NOI's Black Muslims considered African Americans "a nation within a nation." Therefore, they claimed independence from the United States and sought connections with the rest of the non-white world. NOI doctrine's disdain for race-mixing also differentiated them from the ascendant Civil Rights ideology and led Muhammad to consider cooperating with domestic white supremacist terror organizations, such as the KKK and the American Nazi party.⁵¹

NOI's Black nationalism developed in a complex postwar environment of decolonization and the Cold War. The US Cold War consensus that had cleaved the world into two, imagining no alternatives to USSR-led global Communism and US-led global Capitalism, clashed with the national aspirations of many in the Global South. Third Worldism as a political movement saw peoples who had been the target of Western imperialism seek political, economic, and cultural destinies that were distinct from the East–West conflict in the Cold War.⁵² The 1955 Bandung Conference marked a high point of Third Worldism,

⁴⁹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 251–71.

⁵⁰ Malcolm X, "World of Turmoil," unpublished lecture notes, Religious Teachings (Cont'd), r. 8, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers 1948–1965 [bulk 1961–1964], Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

⁵¹ Payne and Payne, *The Dead Are Arising*, 329.

⁵² Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

also known as Asian–African Internationalism, endorsing the principles of self-determination, antiracism, and mutual collaboration. The non-aligned movement, in turn, advocated for neutrality in the Cold War, and several prominent postcolonial countries, such as India under Jawaharlal Nehru, Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, Indonesia under Sukarno, and Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser connected the two movements.⁵³ Egypt, as a Muslim-majority African nation with an illustrious ancient past and a defiant modern leader who had stood up to “the West” by nationalizing the Suez Canal (1956), held special religious and political symbolism for America’s Black Muslims.⁵⁴ Senegalese Muslim scholar Cheikh Anta Diop’s publications on the Blackness of Ancient Egyptian peoples and their foundational role in human civilization also influenced Malcolm X.⁵⁵

Decolonization in the world coincided with the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States, accelerating “a transnational exchange of liberation discourses.”⁵⁶ The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional, was followed by the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956), challenging segregation in public transportation. Despite parochial depictions of the Civil Rights movement as the long-awaited perfection of the American experiment in democracy, the US ruling class conceded to civil rights demands partly due to concerns about America’s role in the new world order.⁵⁷ As noted, this reasoning allowed a Muslim Arab to naturalize as white in *Ex Parte Mohriez* (1944).

As the 1950s transitioned into the 1960s, disillusionment with the realities of neocolonialism, the violent white backlash to the civil rights movement, and the ravages of the Vietnam War led to the ascendance of radical ideologies questioning the US liberal Cold War consensus. Transnational connections between Third Worldism and aspirations of Black liberation within the United States strengthened.⁵⁸ This period also proved a boon for movements that challenged the

⁵³ Lorenz M. Luthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, The Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 261–328.

⁵⁴ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), ch. 2 and 3; Edward E. Curtis IV, “‘My Heart Is in Cairo’: Malcolm X, the Arab Cold War, and the Making of Islamic Liberation Ethics,” *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 3 (2015): 775–98.

⁵⁵ Regina Jennings, “Cheikh Anta Diop, Malcolm X, and Haki Madhubuti: Claiming and Containing Continuity in Black Language and Institutions,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 126–44.

⁵⁶ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 36.

⁵⁷ Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 126.

⁵⁸ Cornel West, ed., *Radical King* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2015).

Judeo-Christian underpinnings of much Civil Rights activism, such as the NOI. The charismatic NOI minister Malcolm X soon came to represent the defiant Third Worldist spirit of the 1960s in the US and world media.

Minister Malcolm X's fiery speeches reconfigured the African American freedom struggle on global, world-historic terms and closely aligned it with Third Worldism. For example, he explained NOI's separatist doctrine by referencing Algeria's struggle for independence from France: "The Algerian Moslems rejected integration with the French. Throughout Africa and Asia, the cry today is not for integration, but *separation, independence, and freedom*."⁵⁹ In 1959, the young minister had the opportunity to visit multiple Muslim-majority countries as a representative of Elijah Muhammad and forge important connections, particularly with Egypt's Nasser. FBI records show Malcolm X claimed he would visit Türkiye and several European countries as well. However, his short trip included stays in Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, Iran, Syria, and Egypt.⁶⁰ Illness prevented him from proceeding further to complete the Hajj. In describing his experience for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Malcolm X focused on "Muslims in Egypt and Africa," claiming a racial unity based on color, appearance, and defiant religion.⁶¹ In this piece and when showing clips from his travels at a NOI meeting, Malcolm X referred to the lands he visited as "home."⁶²

Malcolm X was becoming a global figure in more ways than one. While he was away, the documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced* propelled him to fame, bringing increased attention to Black Muslims and additional celebrity status and clout to the young minister within and, increasingly, outside the United States.

In 1959, the NOI leader Elijah Muhammad also visited multiple Muslim-majority countries in Africa and Asia, with an itinerary that included stops in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. A meeting with Nasser was particularly significant for his purposes, deepening the connections between the NOI and the nationalist Arab leader. During this trip, Muhammad participated in *Umrah* – an off-season ritual visit to the holy city of Mecca.

⁵⁹ Malcolm X underlined the italicized words in his notes. "Radio Free Africa," Malcolm X Papers, Appendix II, Religious Teachings, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers 1948–1965 [bulk 1961–1964], Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁶⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Malcolm X Little, FBI File no. 100-399321, sec. 5, serials 34–40, <https://bit.ly/4ie6x5d>.

⁶¹ Malcolm X, "Arabs Send Warm Greetings to 'Our Brothers' of Color in the U.S.A.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1959, 1.

⁶² FBI, Malcolm X Little, File no. 100-399321.

Ignoring the timing difference, NOI organs referred to the leader's Umrāh as "Hajj" and used it to confirm Elijah Muhammad's Islamic credentials. Muhammad referenced the Hajj rituals in racialized terms, emphasizing the blackness of the veil covering Islam's holiest site (*Kaaba*) and the black stone that forms the focus of circumambulators' adoration.⁶³

NOI rhetoric overlapped Whiteness, Christianity, and the West as Elijah Muhammad considered the peoples of Muslim-majority nations to be non-whites. When in 1963, the NOI banned all white observers from its meetings, Muhammad included a rather haphazard list of exemptions from the policy: "This does not include the Turkish people, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, those of Pakistan, Arabs, Latin Americans, Egyptians and those of other Asiatic Muslims and non-Muslim nations."⁶⁴ He clearly agreed with a KKK leader, whose letter he later reproduced in his magnum opus, *The Message to the Black Man in America* (1965), that Islam was a "religion for dark people."⁶⁵ By this account and at least partially due to their religion, Turks, Arabs, and Iranians were not white, regardless of their official status in US law.

The political corollary to this expansive non-whiteness was the belief that these nations were all potential allies to the Black American cause – honorary Blacks. The NOI's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, regularly reported on all decolonizing and/or Muslim-majority countries, connecting Black Americans to the world's "darker nations."⁶⁶ Muslim-majority African nations defying "the West," such as Egypt and Algeria, held primacy in the NOI's visions of a muscular Afro-Asian Islam. Saudi Arabia, despite being a political counterweight to Nasser's version of Arab nationalism, was revered as the keeper of Islam's holiest cities. Persia appeared in NOI cosmogony as a legendary place near heaven, once placed on Earth in "the Holy Land of Arabia."⁶⁷ *Muhammad Speaks* also covered Modern Iran as a Muslim-majority land making strides in development.⁶⁸

⁶³ Elijah Muhammad, "This I'll Never Forget," *SALAAM*, July 1960, reprinted in *Muhammad Speaks Website*, www.elijahmuhammadspeaks.com/messenger-in-mecca; Elijah Muhammad, "I Kissed the Black Stone," *Muhammad Speaks*, March 1962, front page.

⁶⁴ Elijah Muhammad, "Open Letter to Whites," *Muhammad Speaks*, November 22, 1963, front page, 3, 9.

⁶⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *Message to The Blackman in America* (Chicago: Muhammad Mosque of Islam No. 2, 1965), reproduced at *New Syllabus Files*, <https://bit.ly/4lwS3QI>.

⁶⁶ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

⁶⁷ Nasir Makr Hakim, *The True History of Elijah Muhammad: The Black Stone* (Phoenix, AZ: MEMPS, 2011), 162.

⁶⁸ For example, "Iran is Persia's New Name but to Most, It's Still Persia," *Muhammad Speaks*, March 11, 1966, 10.

Türkiye also held a unique place in NOI teachings, having once been a great Muslim empire that challenged European power. Here, older ideas about Turks as the warlike swords of Islam found new political purchase. “The Muslims of Turkey were placed at the border with the swords drawn,” explained Malcolm X in one of his religious lectures, “that is not to let the devil out to spoil civilization.”⁶⁹

In another sermon, Malcolm X expanded upon this idea, connecting Ottoman–European relations to the colonization of the Americas:

Turkey was against them, and killed so many of them keeping them out of Asia. They knew that if they could ever get rid of Turkey, they would be free to go back into the East. Thus, on Thanksgiving, they chose that bird because of its pride and its fez-like, red comb. They named this bird after Turkey, because in like manner they wanted to rid Europe of the power of Turkey. At the time the pilgrims came to America, Turkey was a great power in Europe.⁷⁰

This mythology connecting Turks and the Pilgrims via Thanksgiving was, in fact, inaccurate: The Ottomans did not adopt the fez until the early nineteenth century and did so as part of an extensive set of modernization reforms.⁷¹ However, Malcolm X correctly hinted at how the European newcomers conceived of the Americas in Old-World terms. After all, Spain’s so-called discovery of the Americas was preceded by its consolidation of Christian politics with the expulsion of Jews and Muslims and prompted by a perceived need to avoid trade routes controlled by Muslim empires.⁷² Similarly, Captain John Smith, the leader of England’s first successful colony in North America, claimed to have been captured by Turks before his well-known Indian captivity narrative.⁷³ Thus, Malcolm X identified how Europeans translated preexisting ideologies of racial-religious aggression to the indigenous lands they conquered. Within NOI theology, these histories were tightly bound through an overlapping logic of racialized religion.

Unlike modernization theory, which envisioned a tempered role for religion (especially for Islam) on the road to development, NOI’s

⁶⁹ Malcolm X, “Husband: Your Mate Is Not Only a Wife, But a Sister, Believer, Muslim,” Appendix II, Religious Teachings, 15, Malcolm X Manuscripts, Sc MG 951, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁰ Underlined in original. Malcolm X, “He Was the Son of God, Full of Grace and Truth, Divested of Human Prejudices, and the Very Essence of Humility and Every Virtue,” Appendix II, Religious Teachings, r. 7, Malcolm X Manuscripts, Sc MG 951, 15–16, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷¹ Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 39.

⁷² Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9–10.

⁷³ Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2–3.

powerful civilizational vision held on to essentialized religious differences with significant political corollaries. Malcolm X, at least, seemed to keep faith that Türkiye could be realigned and become “the sword of Islam” once again. After his falling out with the NOI, Malcolm X had the opportunity to make the Hajj in 1964, utilizing his significant international contacts within Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Ghana. During his time in the holy city of Mecca, Malcolm X met Kasım Gülek of the Turkish Parliament. A US-educated member of the Atatürk-founded Republican People’s Party (CHP), Gülek was a leading contributor to the Cold War-era tempering of Turkish secularism, which I explore in depth in Chapter 5. According to the full text of Malcolm X’s travel diary in the Schomburg archives, Gülek introduced Malcolm X to Amin al-Husseini, once the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. He also took the opportunity to emphasize the robust Turkish participation in the Hajj: “The Turkish MP was very proud because the contingent from Türkiye (he claimed) was the largest, 50,000 – over 6,000 buses.”⁷⁴

The editors of the published version of the diary gloss over this interchange, summarizing it as a “scrambled note from Malcolm about which he said some people say Turkey is not religious, yet, they had the largest contingent, a diplomat stated, than any other nation or ethnic group.”⁷⁵ Yet Malcolm X considered this fact significant enough to repeat in the first paragraph of a separate letter, arguing that the Turkish participation in the Hajj “refutes the western propaganda that Turkey is turning away from Islam.”⁷⁶ Although X no longer abided by NOI theology at this point, he would not have forgotten his past lectures on Türkiye’s historical significance. With this note, he seemed to assume that turning away from or toward Islam would have political implications for Türkiye’s “Western” alignment.

Malcolm X’s famous open letter from Hajj, reporting how he ate, prayed, and slept next to Muslims who were white in appearance, is often interpreted as his shifting toward a more universalized and less racialized theology.⁷⁷ However, Islam and non-whiteness were clearly still connected in his mind as he wrote his travel diary. Much like his ex-mentor Elijah Muhammad, who had found the color of the Black Stone

⁷⁴ Malcolm X, Roll 9, Travel Diary, April–May 1964, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers 1948–1965 [bulk 1961–1964], Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁵ “Wednesday, April 11,” in *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz*, 1964, ed. Herb Boyd and Ilyasah Shabazz (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2013), n.p.

⁷⁶ Malcolm X, unaddressed letter, April 25, 1964, reproduced in full at *Fikriyat*, February 2, 2021, <https://bit.ly/4ihE3HR>.

⁷⁷ “Malcolm X Pleased by Whites’ Attitude on Trip to Mecca,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1964, 1.

at Kaaba significant, Malcolm X took this parenthetical note on one of the Hajj activities he undertook alongside Gülek and others: “We cast stones at the devil (a white monument).”⁷⁸

It is perhaps ironic that the Black Muslims projected Islam as the arch-enemy of “the West,” utilizing the dominant ideology of an earlier era at a time when the US foreign policy elite was reconceptualizing Islam as a potential ally against “Godless” Communism. Nevertheless, the idea that Islam and the West were distinct civilizations destined to clash due to their essential, racialized differences was far from extinct across the world. In fact, with variations on this theme, devout West Asian intellectuals were beginning to challenge their modernizing ethnonationalist, pro-Western regimes.

(Un)confrontational Religion: Westernization Critique and Cold War Alignments

Devout Turkish intellectuals of the 1960s – whenever they commented on foreign relations – did not see a contradiction between their critiques of Kemalist authoritarian modernization and Türkiye’s political alignment with “the West” in the Cold War.⁷⁹ Within the flourishing Islamist magazine sector, conservative Turkish authors such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983), Nurettin Topçu (1909–1975), and Sezai Karakoç (1933–2021) disseminated extensive critiques of the United States, focusing on racism, economic injustice, and social mores. However, the political prescription emerging out of such critiques was to merely limit cooperation beyond the technical and military arenas.⁸⁰ Through his influential *Büyük Doğu* magazine, famous Islamist intellectual Kısakürek argued that Türkiye must reclaim its Islamic character in order to be able to collaborate as equals with anti-Communist America. Only then, he wrote in 1959, could “the Turkish and American flags, one with so many stars and the other with just a star and crescent, representatives of two separate words, separate but always together ... be drawn to the skies, side by side.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Underlined in original, *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz*, Wednesday, April 11, 1964.

⁷⁹ Cemil Aydın and Burhanettin Duran, “Competing Occidentalisms of Modern Islamist Thought: Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nurettin Topçu on Christianity, the West and Modernity,” *The Muslim World* 103, no. 4 (2014): 479–500, 409.

⁸⁰ For example, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, “Amerika, Dünya ve Biz,” *Büyük Doğu*, July 10, 1959, 1; Kemal Fedai Coşkun, “Amerika ile Olan İttifakımızın da Bir Sınırı Olmalıdır,” *Fedai*, November 1966, 36.

⁸¹ Kısakürek, “Amerika, Dünya ve Biz.”

With the election victory of the Democrat Party (DP) over the Atatürk-founded CHP in 1950, the coexistence of pro-US and pro-Islamic politics in Türkiye became officialized. Although DP did not undo the preestablished structures of state control over religion, maintaining and strengthening the Atatürk-founded Directorate of Religion (Diyanet), its rule opened up additional space for Islam in the public sphere. One of the party's first acts was to revoke the Kemalist decree that the call to prayer be in Turkish instead of Arabic, reconnecting the country to Muslims worldwide. At the same time, the DP regime oversaw Türkiye's entry into the pro-Western Baghdad Pact in 1955.

Even when a 1960 military coup interrupted Turkish democracy, the alignment of pro-Islam and pro-US policies appeared secure. The junta did not change Türkiye's pro-US Cold War stance or reverse DP-era religious policies. Before the military relinquished power to the civilian sphere in 1961, its leaders rewrote the constitution in line with worldwide liberal trends that allowed Turkish Islamist discourse to flourish alongside other non-mainstream ideologies, left and right.⁸² In 1965, the Justice Party (AP), an inheritor of DP policies, came to power. As a pro-US center-right party, it maintained a smaller Islamist contingent within its ranks until the Islamist group split off under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan in 1970.

Despite strong NATO ties, Türkiye's position as a model student of modernization, and a parade of pro-Western elected politicians and military leaders, US-Türkiye relations in the 1960s did have serious hiccups. One central disagreement was over the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, which had gained independence from Britain in 1960. Once under Ottoman rule, Cyprus had a minority Turkish and majority Greek population. Upon independence, an ultra-nationalist Greek faction seeking unity with the Greek mainland began to persecute the Turkish community. Flare-ups of communal violence repeatedly brought Türkiye's military and elected politicians to high alert. On July 5, 1964, President Johnson sent a strongly worded letter against intervening in Cyprus to the Turkish Prime Minister, generating outrage against the United States across the political spectrum. Concerns regarding the hidden strings of US aid packages also marred relations.⁸³ However, throughout the 1960s, militant anti-Americanism remained largely the domain of the secularist left.⁸⁴ Türkiye's Islamist thinkers repeatedly sided with the

⁸² Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 246.

⁸³ Gürel, *The Limits of Westernization*, ch. 2.

⁸⁴ Baskın Oran, "1960-1980: Görelî Özerklik-3," *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, vol. 1: 1919-1980, ed. Baskın Oran (İstanbul: İletişim, 2001), 678.

United States and against Communism, only critiquing select aspects of US culture and foreign policy.

In not challenging Türkiye's pro-US political alignment, Turkish Islamists of the 1960s differed from key Iranian figures, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, who had begun to add anti-US political prescriptions to his anti-westernization critiques. Quiescent during the Anglo-American coup against nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to prominence with the 1963 protests against the shah's "White Revolution" and the 1964 Iran-US Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which gave US personnel rights of extraterritoriality, making them unaccountable to domestic laws. Khomeini's sermons began to combine gharbzadegi critique with political anti-Americanism during this period. In his famous 1964 speech, he rejected comparativism between the capitalist United States and the communist USSR in the forming of Iranian foreign policy, undermining the idea that Islam should be an ally to the former: "America is worse than Britain, Britain is worse than America and the Soviet Union is worse than both of them. Each one is worse than the other; each one is more abominable than the other. But today, we are concerned with this malicious entity, which is America."⁸⁵

Khomeini's fiery speeches inciting people to rebel against the shah's domestic and foreign policies led to his exile to Türkiye in 1964, where he developed deeply negative views about Kemalist secularism. Although Khomeini stayed in Türkiye for only around a year, moving on to exile in Najaf, Iraq (1965–1978), he mentioned the country multiple times as a negative foil to the ideal Islamic society in his speeches. Reports from the era note his discomfort with Turkish women's clothing choices.⁸⁶ A less well-known trope includes his reference to Atatürk statues, which depict the leader with his finger pointing westward. Khomeini insisted this meant the "evil" Atatürk was saying, "all that we have comes from the West."⁸⁷

Atatürk's admiration for French Enlightenment thought notwithstanding, such statues reference the Turkish independence war, in which

⁸⁵ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'-i mardum (mukhālifat bā lāyihī-yi kâpitolāsiyūn va i'lām-i 'azā-yi 'umūmī)," Qum: masjid-i a'zam, 4 Abān 1343/October 26, 1964, *Ṣaḥīfī-yi imām khumīnī*, V.1, 415–24, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220928060418/https://emam.com/posts/view/248>.

⁸⁶ Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, 133–37.

⁸⁷ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'-i asātid-i dānishgāh-i Tihṛān," Qum: masjid-i a'zam, 14 Diy 1358/January 4, 1980, *Ṣaḥīfī-yi imām khumīnī*, V.12, 13–28, <https://emam.com/posts/view/2218>; on "evil Atatürk," see Ruhollah Khomeini, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'-i mardum-i qum (khaṭar-i tuṭī-yi isti'mār dar mamālik-i islāmī)," Qum: masjid-i a'zam (18 Shahrivar 1343/September 9, 1964), *Ṣaḥīfī-yi imām khumīnī*, V.1, 373–95, <https://emam.com/posts/view/235>.



Figure 3.1 A famous statue of Atatürk, built in 1932, stands in the coastal city of İzmir and points to the Aegean as a military target. Khomeini misinterpreted such “first target” statues and referenced them in his speeches to connect early republican secularism to Türkiye’s pro-Western orientation in the Cold War. Photo © iStock Unreleased / Getty Images.

Atatürk, then known as Mustafa Kemal, led the nationalist resistance forces and commanded them to repeal the invading British-sponsored Greek army.⁸⁸ They are commonly known as “first target” (*ilk hedef*) statues due to Mustafa Kemal having given the command, “Armies, your first target is the Mediterranean. Onward!” (Figure 3.1). Khomeini’s reading of this statue almost completely reversed its meaning, as the cleric used a well-known Turkish symbol of anti-imperialism to make a point about West worship. With this interpretive sleight of hand, he was able to connect Kemalist secularism to Türkiye’s contemporary pro-Western political orientation.

Khomeini’s faulty reading of the statute ignored that Türkiye’s dominant foreign policy orientation during Atatürk’s reign had been neutralism. As Amit Bein has convincingly demonstrated, the early Turkish republic did not have an exclusively Western tilt but instead collaborated

⁸⁸ Mehmet Karabel, “Neden İlk Hedef Ege Değil de Akdeniz?,” *Ege’de Son Söz*, March 25, 2018, www.egedesonsoz.com/yazar/Neden-ilk-hedef-Ege-degil-de-Akdeniz/11717/.

closely with the USSR and engaged fully with the rest of West Asia and North Africa. The belief that Atatürk-era diplomacy turned away from the East stems from Cold War-era developments being “projected back to the early republic” and from the careless rhetorical slippages made between Western-facing domestic reform and pro-Western foreign policies.⁸⁹ Ironically, and to different ends, Khomeini’s comparison of confrontational Islam with supposedly subservient secularism took part in these ascendant Cold War-era readings of Kemalist diplomacy. With this rewrite of Turkish history, Khomeini was able to link gharbzadegi to international relations.

For Iranian Third Worldist sociologist Ali Shariati, as well, critiquing Atatürk meant connecting westoxication to foreign policy and attacking the Pahlavi regime. Holding a Ph.D. in sociology from the Sorbonne in Paris, Shariati shared a vision of the Ottoman Empire as “the sword of Islam” with Khomeini, Western Orientalists, and the US-based NOI. “The Ottoman Empire,” he wrote, had once been “the center of the world power of Islam” but came to suffer from the “stinking and monkey-like disease of westernization” in a period of stagnation and defeat.⁹⁰ With the founding of modern Türkiye, its Islamic glory was replaced with the pathetic “epic of being Turk.” Thus, its new points of pride became aping the West in all manners, from the alphabet to bathroom habits. From this state of westoxication, Shariati argued, it was only natural that the Turkish army, which had once made Europe tremble with fear, would turn into “a pawn of Western capitalism and a mercenary guardian of colonial interests in the East.”

While westoxication critique connecting foreign and domestic policy pervaded dissident Iranian thought, it appeared less often in Black Muslim publications. In fact, throughout the 1960s, NOI leaders generally refrained from criticizing Muslim-majority countries, even those aligned with the United States as Türkiye, Iran, and Pakistan were.

Of course, neither Türkiye nor Iran held as much importance for Black Muslims as Egypt, Algeria, or even Saudi Arabia, which was technically neutral in the Cold War but increasingly seen as a US asset. Egypt’s Nasser, in particular, embodied the kind of defiant Muslim leadership NOI leaders idealized, so when he sided with Greece over Türkiye in the Cyprus conflict, *Muhammad Speaks* referenced Nasser’s opinions to signal the correct Black Muslim stance on the issue.⁹¹ The Republic of Cyprus was a crucial player in the non-aligned movement. Türkiye’s

⁸⁹ Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East*, 4.

⁹⁰ Shariati, “Tavallud-i dubāri-yi islām dar nigāhī sarī bar farāz-i yik qarn,” 227–52.

⁹¹ “Egypt Backs Cyprus Greeks,” *Muhammad Speaks*, August 28, 1964, 8.

civilizational past may have held some theological purchase in NOI sermons, but it would not be enough to challenge this political clue for most readers.

In 1964, Khomeini highlighted Turks' participation in the Hajj in "relatively larger numbers," much like Malcolm X had done, but claimed the Turkish government's secularism had foreclosed solidarity with Cypriot Turks.⁹² "They separated religion from the state in Turkey with the result that now, when some of the Turks are killed in Cyprus, there is not one Muslim who expresses sorrow," he argued, "You may only find one person who expresses sorrow, someone like an old *akhound* (cleric) like me." *Muhammad Speaks* gave no such reasoning. Nasser siding against Türkiye implied by shorthand that the conflict would not be read through the Muslim/Eastern/Black versus Christian/Western/White binary that otherwise dominated the newspaper's foreign affairs coverage. Similarly, despite some lip service from a 1965 meeting of the Muslim Congress, Türkiye failed to rally most Muslim-majority nations to its side at the UN General Assembly.⁹³

Malcolm X's September 1962 letter to a Sudanese student who had criticized NOI theology in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier* offers insight into why the NOI's leadership did not openly denounce the Western alignments and secularization policies of Muslim-majority states. In a personal letter to the author, Yahya Hawari, Malcolm X argued that, since all Muslims were brothers, minor disagreements had to stay within the family and not be aired out for "the white man" to exploit.⁹⁴ This corresponded with NOI's racialized view of Islam. In a letter to the *Courier*, however, X accused Hawari of having become "Westernized" as a result of staying too long in the United States.⁹⁵ This was also typical: Black NOI spokespeople sometimes mobilized arguments reminiscent of West Asian gharbzadegi discourse when fielding opposition from immigrant Muslims. When NOI teachings, particularly the status of Elijah Muhammad as a prophet and the group's racialized Islam, were challenged by Muslims from countries that Americans naturally considered to be a part of "the Muslim world," NOI spokespeople, including Malcolm X, noted that they were even more devout than those born to

⁹² Khomeini, "Sukhanrī dar jam'ī mardum-i qum (khaṭar-i tuṭī'ī isti'mār dar mamālik-i islāmī)," 373–95.

⁹³ Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, "Turkey in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference," *Insight Turkey*, no. 7 (August 1997): 93–112, 96.

⁹⁴ Malcolm X, letter to Yahya Hawari, September 1962, Letters Sent 1955–1964, CORRESPONDENCE series, 1948–1965, r.2, The Malcolm X collection: papers 1948–1965 [bulk 1961–1964], Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁹⁵ See also, Malcolm X, "What Courier Readers Think: Muslim Vs. Moslem!," *Pittsburgh Courier* (1955–1966), October 6, 1962.

the religion. Malcolm X, for example, lectured: “Just with the limited knowledge that we now have we can stand the Arabs on their heads: though they are still too proud to recognize us even as their equals.”⁹⁶ In such moments, Black Muslim thinkers came close to critiquing West Asian and North Africans’ aspirational whiteness and connecting it to their neglect of Islam.

Gharbzadegi rhetoric primarily entered NOI publications in the writings of American Muslims with immigrant origins. Abdul Basit Naeem, a Pakistani immigrant and long-time contributor to *Muhammad Speaks*, was vocal on this subject. In his introduction to Elijah Muhammad’s 1954 *Supreme Wisdom*, Naeem wrote:

Much of the world of Islam today has succumbed to the onslaught of Westernism. The trend in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan and many other Muslim lands, in fact, is to continue to “do everything in the West’s fashion,” even if it means the total destruction of their National (Islamic) character and magnificent culture and civilization. So completely has the false but dazzling light of Materialism blinded the eyes of Muslims in the East!⁹⁷

Naeem’s argument was civilizational and essentializing. He posited Islam as “a way of life” clashing with “the West’s fashion.” By adopting Western ways, US-aligned Muslim-majority countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and Pakistan were self-destructing, selling their identities in exchange for foreign aid. In contrast to them, Elijah Muhammad was growing Islam in “the mightiest of Western countries.” According to Naeem, this fact alone proved that Allah was on his side.

Naeem’s chief role in the NOI was to lend Islamic legitimacy to Elijah Muhammad’s claims for a Western audience that still believed, in the evocative words of Zareena Grewal, that Islam was “a foreign country.”⁹⁸ His identity as a Pakistani immigrant was significant and regularly highlighted in his *Muhammad Speaks* columns. He even weighed in on the issue of the Blackness of Islam in a piece he wrote for the newspaper in which he investigated the question, “Are there white Muslims?”⁹⁹ Here, Naeem hedged his bets, noting that Muslims cannot be classified

⁹⁶ Malcolm X, “John F. Kennedy Will Never Bring About Equality between the Negro and the White,” Writings and Notes, Religious Teachings A Box 7, folder 5, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁹⁷ Mr. Abdul Basit Naeem, introduction to Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes Problem*, vol. 2 (Chesapeake, VA: U.B. & U.S. Communications Systems, 1957), 3.

⁹⁸ Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁹⁹ Abdul Basit Naeem, “Takes Up the Question, Are There White Muslims?,” *Muhammad Speaks*, May 26, 1966, 10.

by race as they are all part of the same Islamic brotherhood. At the same time, he noted, if color blindness indeed ruled the world of Muslims, white people attempting to make the Hajj would not be so scrupulously investigated at Mecca. This connected to Elijah Muhammad's own argument that his visit to Mecca had proven his Islamic credentials. It also aligned with the NOI doctrine that connected Muslim/Black/Eastern while setting whiteness in a suspect category apart.

Liberal Cold War integrationism and modernization theory could only provisionally eclipse long-standing racialized understandings of Islam. The transnational idea of Islamic civilization sharply contrasted "Islam" to "the West" and saw it as a potential fount of indigenous knowledge practices and lifeworlds that could counter modern ills. Flourishing rhetoric about Islam's egalitarian racial politics – the focus of the next section – formed a significant part of these claims.

Recalling Bilal: (Re)constructing Antiracist, Anti-Imperialist Islam

The horrors of World War II, worldwide decolonization, the US civil rights struggle, and the plight of Palestinians sparked renewed interest among Muslims on the topics of race and racism. As antiracism gained a boost from UN- and UNESCO-based efforts to discredit racism from a scientific point of view, devout Muslim intellectuals focused on countering racism on Islamic terms. Perhaps one of the most famous early endeavors in this arena was the international bestseller, *The Eternal Message of Muhammad* (1946) by the Egyptian diplomat and founding secretary-general of the Arab League, Abdul Rahman Hassan Azzam (1893–1976). Azzam's book refuted racism with examples from the Qur'an, the Prophet's reported sayings (hadith), and early Islamic history. Notably, however, Azzam did not mention Bilal ibn Rabah (580–640), the once-enslaved Abyssinian companion of the Prophet, who would come to exemplify Islamic antiracism throughout the 1960s and beyond. Translated into multiple languages, the book also made it into the hands of Malcolm X, who had the opportunity to meet its author during his famous 1964 Hajj.

In Türkiye, the American civil rights struggle took up significant space in the news media, with the United States Information Agency (USIA) personnel sending urgent reports about the need to "offset" damaging news about white supremacist terror.¹⁰⁰ For the Islamist

¹⁰⁰ Telegram from USIA Ankara to USIA, Washington, April 13, 1956, Tousi 203, RG 0306 USIA Country Files for Turkey, 1953–1972.

magazine sector, the ascendance of antiracism meant increasing rhetoric about Islam's racial politics, which were imagined as free of race prejudice.

In 1956, for example, the Turkish religious magazine *Din Yolu* published a long-form essay by Ragıp Akyavaş comparing Western racism to the pluralist ethic of Islam and the Ottoman Empire. The piece titled "The Stoned Civilization" responded to the attacks (including stoning) on Autherine Lucy Foster, the first Black student at the University of Alabama. Pointing to white supremacist violence, Akyavaş condemned Western civilization via comparison: "Machine civilization is one thing, and soul civilization is another. On this account, us Easterners are a lot more civilized than they are."¹⁰¹

Significantly, Islam clinched Akyavaş's self-identification as an "Easterner" despite Türkiye's somewhat ambivalent geographic position and political commitment to "the West." His condemnation of American racism built on a long international history of East–West comparativism that cast the East as moral/spiritual and the West as materialist.¹⁰² This argument channeled a Traditionalist view of civilization, explored in depth in Chapter 5, arguing that the East must reclaim its spiritual heritage to heal the damage caused by West-powered modernity.¹⁰³ Of course, Akyavaş's Islamist civilization talk quietly glossed over Muslims' (including Turks') historical participation in racialized slavery and the modern republic's spotty record on questions of race and ethnicity, including its forced assimilation of Kurds.

Authors like Akyavaş regularly referenced Bilal ibn Rabah, often called Bilal Habeşi or Hz. Bilal in Turkish, as proof that Islam was essentially free of racial prejudice. Of course, Hz. Bilal was already well known and respected by the world's Muslims. In Türkiye, a sixteenth-century masjid dedicated to him stands in Mersin, commemorating his visit to Asia Minor with Caliph Omar. However, Islamist reporting on the American Civil Rights movement increased references to Hz. Bilal in the popular press. Editorials highlighted his origins and status as the first enslaved African person to accept Islam.¹⁰⁴ The first ever Turkish language biography of Hz.

¹⁰¹ Ragıp Akyavaş, "Reçmedilen Medeniyet," *Din Yolu*, May 17, 1956, 11.

¹⁰² Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics, and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 79–105; Cemil Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 63–65.

¹⁰³ René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (London: Luzac & Co., 1942); Mark Sedgwick, "René Guénon and Traditionalism," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 308–21.

¹⁰⁴ "Güzel Sesiyle İlk Ezan Okuyan Bilali Habeşi Hazretleri," *Allah Yolu*, April 15, 1953, 9.

Bilal, translated from Arabic, was published in 1967.¹⁰⁵ Original works by Turkish authors – a short play and a biography – followed in the 1970s.¹⁰⁶ The 1976 US-made movie about Prophet Muhammad's life, *The Message*, further boosted the importance of Bilal Habeşi among Islamist circles.¹⁰⁷

Given the interwar-era interruption in Islamic knowledge production in the country, the antiracist Islam of 1960s and 1970s Türkiye often resurrected the works of Muslim scholars of the late Ottoman and early Republican eras, such as Babanzade Ahmet Naim Bey (1872–1934), Mehmed Akif Ersoy (1873–1936) and Said Nursi (1878–March 23, 1960). Part of the Empire's Islamist intelligentsia, these authors had used antiracism to fight separatist and ethnonationalist movements straining Ottoman unity, such as Arab nationalism and, later, pan-Turkism. Inaccessible to a new generation unfamiliar with the Arabic alphabet, these publications found new life in the multiparty era's relatively more relaxed public sphere. In 1963, for example, Babanzade Ahmet Naim Bey's collected articles, "Race Claims in Islam" (1916), were republished as a small booklet titled *Islam Has Banned Racism*.¹⁰⁸

Naim Bey was a learned Islamic scholar of Kurdish origin from Baghdad, then under Ottoman rule. His articles arguing against Arab ethnic nationalism made him one of the first Ottoman intellectuals to speak out against racism and ethnic discrimination from a Muslim perspective. He employed a multipronged approach to attacking racism via Islamic literature, citing the Qur'an, hadith literature, the Prophet's farewell sermon, and early Islamic history. Prominent among the earliest Muslims and close companions of the Prophet, he noted, were Salman-i Farsi (Persian), Suheyb-i Rumi (Roman), and Bilal Habeşi (Abyssinian).¹⁰⁹ The religion of Islam, he claimed, operated like a miracle in mixing into "one dough" various ethnic and racial groups who accepted it. In contrast, racism was a deceptive cancer exported from Europe in the nineteenth century; its manifestation in the Ottoman Empire, therefore, was deeply connected to westernization, specifically, the practice of taking the most harmful things from the West.¹¹⁰ Writing as a Turkish-speaking Kurd, Naim Bey warned that this exported sickness could lead to the death of the *ummah* or the Muslim community.

¹⁰⁵ Abdülhamid Cûde Sahhar, *Peygamberimizin Müezzini Hz. Bilal-i Habeşi*, trans. Mustafa Runyun (Istanbul: Kader, 1967).

¹⁰⁶ Fazlı Karaman, *İlk Mücahitler: Bilal Habeşi* (Ankara: Elif, 1972); Mustafa Necati Bursalı, *Peygamber Bülbülü: Hazret'i Bilal-i Habeşi* (Istanbul: Çile, 1976).

¹⁰⁷ Mehmed Mengüç Yenigün, "Çağrı'nın Yeri," *İslami Hareket*, November 21, 1979, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ahmet Naim, *İslam Irkçılığı Menetmiştir* (Istanbul: Sönmez, 1963).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 38–39.

Bediüzzaman Said-i Nursi, an influential Kurdish cleric and educator whose writings spanned the end of the Ottoman Empire and the first multiparty era, also significantly advanced antiracist Islamist polemics. Much like Naim Bey, Nursi's initial advocacy against racism and ethnonationalism began in an environment in which Ottoman intellectuals sought to counter the influence of nationalist movements among the empire's Arab populations and limit the harmful effects of Pan-Turkism. Nursi used Islamic texts and history to argue against Arab chauvinism, pointing to Hz. Bilal as one of the Prophet's renowned non-Arab companions.¹¹¹ Such arguments held renewed resonance for the early Cold War era, in which Türkiye found itself in political opposition to Arab nationalism, personified by Egypt's Nasser.

Like Naim Bey, Nursi held a civilizational vision of Islam that would be above all national, ethnic, or racial attachments. In 1925, he refused to join the Sheikh Said rebellion against the Kemalist regime, arguing that Turks had been the "flag bearers" of Islam for centuries and that, as Muslims, Turks and Kurds were siblings who should not fight against each other. "The sword" was to be used only for "outside enemies."¹¹²

Nursi also considered racism a Western illness spread by conspiracy: "Nationalism or ethnic differences have been unleashed in this century, particularly by devious European officials following the well-known principle of divide and rule."¹¹³ For all his antiracist rhetoric, Nursi was not above anti-Semitism in blaming Jews for fanning Muslim disunity.¹¹⁴

Although Nursi spoke out against European imperialism in the early twentieth century, his Islamic antiracist, anti-westernization arguments did not imply political anti-Americanism in the mid-century. He was a vocal anti-Communist and staunch supporter of the pro-American DP. He wrote a letter of congratulations to Prime Minister Menderes for signing the Baghdad Pact in 1955. Among other reasons, he believed the pact might counter racism and promote unity among Muslims.¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, he called the United States "a wonderful country working seriously on the side of religion."¹¹⁶ When he passed away in 1960, Nursi represented the general political bent of a new generation of Turkish Islamists, who

¹¹¹ Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Collection, Letters 1928–1932*, vol. 2, trans. Vahide Şükran (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1997), 136.

¹¹² Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar* (Istanbul: Metis, 1990), 80.

¹¹³ Reprinted in Mehmed Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Türkiye'de İslam ve Irkçılık Meselesi* (Istanbul: Cihad Yayınları, 1976), 233.

¹¹⁴ Düzdağ, *Türkiye'de İslam ve Irkçılık*, 256–57.

¹¹⁵ Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, "Reis-i Cumhura ve Başvekil," *Emirdağ Lahikası II* (Istanbul: Sinan, 1959), 194–97.

¹¹⁶ Nursi, "Demokratlara Büyük Bir Hakikati İhtar," *Emirdağ Lahikası II*, 178.

supported Türkiye's pro-US alignment, even as they used Islamist critiques of racism to score civilizational points over their powerful ally.¹¹⁷

Due to a dedicated group of student followers, Nursi's life and works continued to be influential after his death.¹¹⁸ Moreover, attention paid to Islamist antiracism only increased in the 1970s, a time of immense political instability in Türkiye. Throughout the decade, various splintered and reborn political parties struggled to come to power, forging fraying coalitions, even as the militant left and the fascist right fought their politics out on the streets. In 1970, some followers of Nursi and members of the Naqshbandi Sufi movement split from the leading center-right party, eventually forming the National Salvation Party (MSP) under the Islamist leadership of Necmettin Erbakan.¹¹⁹ Other Nursi followers united under Fethullah Gülen, forming the *hizmet* (service) movement and employing more clandestine methods to build power and influence, as explained in Chapter 5.

A key catalyst keeping racism and antiracism in the limelight was the founding of the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in 1969. MHP's paramilitary wing, nicknamed the Gray Wolves, targeted intellectuals on the left, massacring Kurdish and Alevi communities in bouts of terror. It is, therefore, doubly significant that Naim Bey and Nursi, whose Islamic admonishments against racism found broader publication during this decade, were both Kurdish. By valorizing these thinkers, Türkiye's Islamists stood against MHP-style Turkism, even as they subtly preached accommodation through a vision of Muslim brotherhood to would-be Kurdish revolutionaries.

In Iran, Islamist critiques of the regime's Western aspirations also came to target racism as an imperialist ploy to divide "the Muslim world." In addition, critics attacked pro-Aryan rhetoric as a Pahlavi tool to estrange Iran from Islam. Khomeini's speeches against racism from an Islamic perspective, for example, demonstrated that comparing Türkiye and Iran was not the endpoint of his gharbzadegi polemics. Instead, Khomeini constructed a defiant, imagined "Muslim world" that could withstand attacks on Muslim sovereignty everywhere, from Kashmir to Palestine, by sheer numbers. "There are no Arabs and non-Arabs, Turks and Persians; there is only Islam and unity under Islam," he argued.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ For example, Fâzıl Senâi Sarper, "Amerika'da Zenci Düşmanlığı," *İslam*, November 1964, 59.

¹¹⁸ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, 86.

¹¹⁹ "Siyasete Damgasını Vuran Tarikat," *HaberTürk*, September 9, 2006, www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/478-siyasete-damgasini-vuran-tarikat.

¹²⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'ī 'ulamā-yi Najaf (vaẓīfi-yi sarān-i keshvarhā-yi islāmī- mas'ūliyat-i 'ulamā)," Najaf: masjid-i shaykh anṣārī, 23 Ābān 1344/

Racism in this context was a Western conspiracy aimed at usurping the wealth of Muslim-majority lands.

Khomeini's influential student Morteza Motahhari applied antiracist Islam to the question of Iranian nationalism with his *Mutual Services of Iran and Islam* (1960), attacking the Pahlavi-promoted Aryan myth. His monograph was designed as a rebuttal of a best-selling work of Iranian history, *Two Centuries of Silence* (1957) by Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub, which contrasted an exquisite pre-Islamic Persian culture with "the savage darkness" that followed Iran's conquest by Arab Muslims.¹²¹ Motahhari, in turn, argued that while Iranians were Aryan by "race and heredity," emphasizing this fact would bring them closer to "the imperialist West." Instead, he advocated that Iran's national ideology be grounded in religion and the cultural mores and institutions built over the last centuries, making "Arab, Turk, Indian, Indonesian and Chinese Muslims" Iranians' true relatives.¹²² As such, Motahhari demonstrated how culture and religion could function as technologies of race, forging bonds that did not overlap with biological theories but directly impacted "action and policy."

In arguing against racism, Motahhari used examples of racial and ethnic intermixing from the Prophet's family and companions, mentioning Suhayb al-Rumi, Salman al-Farsi, and Bilal ibn Rabah by name. Like Khomeini, he underplayed Shia–Sunni differences, claiming Shia beliefs were fully embedded in the Qur'an and the hadith – not markers of resistance to Arabs as claimed by many Persian nationalists. Motahhari's message, however, contained its own dose of Shia–Sunni comparison: He claimed that converting Iranians had welcomed "the Islamic message of justice and equality," which, he believed, was most fully realized by Shiism.

Ali Shariati was similarly inclined to find an exceptional striving for justice and equality in Shiism.¹²³ He, too, tempered this sectarianism with a dose of antiracism. In his teachings, which charged early Islamic figures with revolutionary symbolism, Shariati wrote about the Prophet's family and the Shia imams but also foregrounded Salman al-Farsi and Bilal ibn Rabah.

November 14, 1965, *Ṣaḥīfi-yi imām khumīnī*, v. 2, 29–41, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220520182144/https://emam.com/posts/view/285/>.

¹²¹ Shervin Farridnejad, "Two Centuries of Silence," *BiblioIranica*, www.biblioiranica.info/two-centuries-of-silence/.

¹²² Morteza Motahhari, *Islam and Iran: A Historical Study of Mutual Services*, trans. Sayyid Wahid Akhtar, reprinted in *Al-Tawhid Islamic Journal*, <https://bit.ly/3Rghp7R>; Morteza Motahhari, *Khadamāt-i mutiqābil-i Islām va Irān* (Tehran: Ṣadrā, 1366/1987).

¹²³ Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *Middle East Report* 102 (January–February 1982): 24.

In his brief but impactful piece “Yes, That’s How It Was, Brother,” Shariati wrote of a visit to the unmarked graves of the enslaved builders of the pyramids in Egypt and argued that Prophet Muhammad had been different from all leaders because he was the paragon of racial and class justice: “Some of those who became leaders of his followers were: Bilal, a slave and son of a slave whose parents were from Abyssinia, Salman, a homeless person from Persia, owned as a slave, Abu-Zar, the poverty stricken and anonymous fellow from the desert, and lastly, Salim, the slave of the wife of Khudhaida and an unimportant black alien.”¹²⁴

Here as elsewhere, Shariati connected racial and economic oppression and promoted Islam as an indigenous source of knowledge and action against their intersections. It is no accident that the left-wing American journal *Race and Class* picked this essay to republish in 1979 to explain the successes of the Iranian revolution. In the foreword to the piece, Professor Mansour Farhang introduced English-speaking readers to Shariati’s ideas, which combined “western radical thought with Shi’ite tradition and doctrines.”¹²⁵ This connected Iranian opposition to the shah to the struggles of people of color and poor people worldwide.

There was some precedent for this vision of solidarity. As recent works by Ida Yalzadeh and Manijeh Moradian demonstrate, in the late 1960s and 1970s, protesting the US-aligned shah allowed Iranian students to forge interracial collaborations across American campuses, undermining aspirational whiteness and “making Iranians more deportable.”¹²⁶ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has similarly identified an “Anti-Aryan Moment” in Iran and among the diaspora during this period, as a generation of dissident intelligentsia “shunned Aryan discourses and found meaning instead in the stories of dispossessed Blacks in Africa and America and in the anti-colonial struggles of the Third World.”¹²⁷ Although this turn away from state-sponsored Aryan ideology did not need to have an articulated Islamic component, being equally compatible with Marxist Third Worldism, Islam appeared as an indigenous fount of knowledge that

¹²⁴ “Yes, That’s How It Was Brother,” republished in English as “Reflections of a Concerned Muslim on the Plight of Oppressed People,” in Mansour Farhang, “Resisting the Pharaohs: Ali Shariati on Oppression,” *Race and Class* 21, no. 1 (1979): 31–40, 37.

¹²⁵ Farhang, “Resisting the Pharaohs,” 32.

¹²⁶ Ida Yalzadeh, “‘Support the 41’: Iranian Student Activism in Northern California, 1970–1973,” in *American-Iranian Dialogues: From Constitution to White Revolution, 1890s–1960s*, ed. Matthew K. Shannon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 167–82, 171; Moradian, *This Flame Within*.

¹²⁷ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “The Anti-Aryan Moment: Decolonization, Diplomacy, and Race in Late Pahlavi Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 4 (2021): 691–702, 700.

could undo the suspect taint of Westernness found in other ideologies. Of course, this illusion of Islamic authenticity and purity was just that: an illusion. As I explain in depth in Chapter 5, Political Islam had transnational roots transcending any East–West divide.

Orientalists, Islamists, and Black American Muslims were not the only ones constructing Islam as the defiant antithesis to “the West” in all matters. The influential Afro-Caribbean intellectual Franz Fanon wrote in a 1961 letter to Shariati that Islam seemed to hold “both an anti-colonialist capacity and an anti-western character.”¹²⁸ This was the muscular Islam, a religion, a civilization, and a political alignment, that Stoddard had once identified as “Brown.” By the end of the 1970s, Türkiye’s invasion of Cyprus (1974), the resulting US arms embargo (1975–1978), and the Iranian hostage crisis (1979) would demonstrate the political uses of this gendered and racialized construct and link West Asian Islamists to America’s Black Muslims beyond the rhetorical.

Finding Bilal: Muhammad Ali Fights for Türkiye

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian-American activist and journalist Ali Muhammad Baghdadi wrote for the Middle East Report section of *Muhammad Speaks*, criticizing US foreign policy, Zionism, and US-aligned Muslim leaders such as the shah.¹²⁹ In 1973, Baghdadi argued that although Türkiye and Iran “claim to be Muslim states,” they were, in fact, “two strongholds of US imperialism in the Middle East,” collaborating with Israel, “the enemy of all Muslim and African people.”¹³⁰ In a civilizational framework that racialized religion and set “Islam” against “the West,” Turks’ and Iranians’ claim to be Muslim were suspect due to their governments’ pro-US, pro-Israeli foreign policies. This view, equating true Islam with political dealignment from the United States, could already be found in the sermons and speeches of influential Iranian dissidents, including Khomeini and Shariati. It also became more and more common in Turkish Islamism in the 1970s. As the Erbakan-founded National Outlook movement grew, its calls for political and economic dealignment merged with the pre-existing Islamic

¹²⁸ Fanon, “Letter to Ali Shariati” (1961), republished in Franz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, eds. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 667.

¹²⁹ For example, Ali Baghdadi, “Shah of Iran’s Party like Nero’s Fiddle,” *Muhammad Speaks*, October 29, 1971, 2. For other supporters of the NOI from West Asia and North Africa, see Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion*, ch. 2.

¹³⁰ Ali Baghdadi, “U.S., Soviets Conspire to ‘Occupy’ Arab Palestine,” *Muhammad Speaks*, April 6, 1973, 2.

argument that racism was a disease exported from the West.¹³¹ The 1975 Islamist bestseller *Batıllaşma İhaneti* (The Treason of Westernization) also linked West-facing modernization and pro-Western foreign policies.¹³²

The mid-1970s was a period of reorientation for the NOI under the new leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's son and successor. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, W. D. Muhammad brought the organization in line with Sunni doctrine, strengthened connections to West Asia and North Africa, and reemphasized the symbolism of Bilal. The NOI rebranded as "the Bilalian Community" and later "the World Community of Al-Islam in the West" (1976–1977). Its news organ became *Bilalian News*.¹³³ Thus, America's most influential Black Muslim organization and West Asian Islamists found themselves closer than ever regarding theology, doctrine, and symbolism. When the Cyprus crisis turned Türkiye into the *bête noire* of the mainstream American public, Turks found their champion in the new NOI. The climax of this realignment came in October 1976, when the Bilalians' new leader W. D. Muhammad, and the community's most famous celebrity, the world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, visited Türkiye.

After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, Muhammad Ali became the most well-known representative of Black Islam in the United States. Born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. in 1942, Ali converted to Islam in 1961 and announced his new name – given to him by Elijah Muhammad – after his 1964 championship win. In a highly publicized incident, Ali refused induction into the US military in 1966, citing racial and religious reasons for not fighting the Viet Cong. He was stripped of his title and prevented from competing for several years. While a negative campaign against him raged in the mainstream US press, Ali became a hero to critics of US imperialism everywhere. His image was electrifying in Africa's newly independent states and across Muslim-majority communities worldwide. He had become, in the words of a 1974 Turkish book on him, "the symbolic warrior of all Muslims."¹³⁴

Ali's clash with the US government coincided with years of friction between Türkiye and the United States, challenging Türkiye's status as a model modernizing state and acquiescent US ally. In 1964, when Ali first won the title and shed his "slave name," Türkiye was in the news regarding the communal violence in Cyprus, with the infamous "Johnson

¹³¹ Tufan Çorumlu, *Büyük Türkiye'ye Doğru Erbakan Olayı: Batılın Korktuğu Adam* (Istanbul: Selamet, 1974).

¹³² Mehmet Doğan, *Batıllaşma İhaneti* (Istanbul: Dergâh, 1975).

¹³³ W. D. Muhammad, "Bilalian," *Bilalian News*, November 14, 1975, 24.

¹³⁴ Bekir Toprak, *Allaha Adanan Yumruk: Muhammed Ali* (Istanbul: Hareket, 1974), 23.

letter,” warning the country against intervening. When Nixon’s war on drugs kicked into high gear in the 1970s, disagreements on Türkiye’s right to cultivate opium for the medical market rattled the alliance.¹³⁵

Then, on July 20, 1974, the military junta government in Greece organized a coup in Cyprus, intending to absorb the island into its territory. In response, Türkiye rapidly invaded the island, which lay about 43 miles from its shoreline. The resulting war led to the collapse of the right-wing dictatorship in Athens. However, it boosted the domestic popularity of Türkiye’s own beleaguered coalition government, led by the leftist prime minister Bülent Ecevit and the Islamist deputy prime minister Necmettin Erbakan. The Turkish offensive extended into August, with the army capturing around 40 percent of the island. This led to the de facto division of the island between Turkish and Greek portions. It also generated a new refugee crisis and gained Türkiye an enormous amount of ill will in the US public sphere.

The Cyprus invasion shook the Turks’ provisional whiteness, already damaged by the opium debate, to the core, reanimating half-dormant visions of invading Asiatic hordes. The Turkish government had named the extension of the Cyprus campaign “Operation Atilla,” and the Greek-American lobby made much of the name’s connections to the Huns, “the Scourge of God.”¹³⁶ About a century and a half ago, the mainstream American press had rallied support for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire via vivid racial and religious rhetoric.¹³⁷ Once again, a Greek–Turkish conflict over land and political rights appeared as a civilizational battle between Christians symbolically connected to the dawn of white, Western civilization and non-white Muslims, a “savage people” who had “contributed nothing to the human race and its civilization.”¹³⁸ Despite the extensive history of mixing between Greek and Turkish peoples, religion became racialized, and the US public sphere became awash in a new wave of Islamophobia. Cartoons featuring dark, hook-nosed, scimitar-wielding Turks brought to mind older civilizational visions of Turks as “the sword of Islam” and echoed racist anti-Muslim imagery from the 1973 Arab Oil embargo.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Suna Altan, “Demokrat Parti Dönemi Afyon Üretim ve Ticareti,” *Ekonomik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 17, no. 2 (2021): 327–42; James W. Spain, “The United States, Turkey and the Poppy,” *Middle East Journal* 29, no. 3 (1975): 295–309; Philip Robins, “The Opium Crisis and the Iraq War: Historical Parallels in Turkey-US Relations,” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 1 (2007): 17–38, 22.

¹³⁶ Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo*, 24–25.

¹³⁷ Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71.

¹³⁸ Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo*, 25.

¹³⁹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 137.

Türkiye was militarily victorious in Cyprus, and the Kissinger State Department had let its actions stand. Yet, the country instantly lost the publicity war: The US Congress, urged on by large Greek- and Armenian-American lobbies and hoping to wrest foreign policy control away from the executive branch, was organizing to “make Turkey pay.”¹⁴⁰ In October 1974, the US Senate voted to cut off all military aid to Türkiye. President Ford vetoed the decision.¹⁴¹ On February 5, 1975, Congress passed an arms embargo, banning all weapon sales to the country. Meanwhile, Türkiye’s leaders accelerated the search for alternative sources of military equipment and threatened to close US military installations and bases, putting immense pressure on the Cold War security apparatus.¹⁴² On July 25, 1975, Türkiye took control over the twenty-one US bases and military installations in the country and froze their operations.¹⁴³

Kissinger and Ford scrambled to find a way to reverse the embargo, which they considered to be against US foreign policy interests. It was not an easy task: Türkiye lacked an effective lobby or immigrant voting block in the United States.¹⁴⁴ While the non-aligned movement closed ranks behind the Greek Cypriots, Libya and Pakistan expressed support for Türkiye, making the country more likely to lean into the civilizational idea of the Muslim world.¹⁴⁵ Iran’s Mohammad Reza Shah declared he was “steadfast in his support of Turkey.”¹⁴⁶ Fearing a weakened NATO, the shah sent supplies to the Turkish air force and signed a five-year defense industry deal.¹⁴⁷ However, Turkish policymakers sensed he was enjoying the shift in power dynamics, which seemed to confirm his “belief that he and his nation were superior” to all others in the region.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo*, 34–35.

¹⁴¹ Rauf R. Denктаş, *Rauf Denктаş’ın Hatıraları: 1964–74*, vol. 6 (İstanbul: Boğaziçi, 1997), 438–43.

¹⁴² Faruk Sönmezoğlu, *ABD’nin Türkiye Politikası, 1964–1980* (İstanbul: Der, 1995), 99–100; Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950–1970* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 421–23.

¹⁴³ Sinan Kıyanç, “Soğuk Savaş Yıllarında Türkiye’deki ABD Üs ve Tesisleri,” *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 36, no. 101 (2020): 203–52.

¹⁴⁴ Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo*, 53; Sönmezoğlu, *ABD’nin Türkiye Politikası*, 94.

¹⁴⁵ İhsanoğlu, “Turkey in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference,” 103.

¹⁴⁶ Message From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Isfahan, November 3, 1974, 0115Z, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXVII: Iran; Iraq, 1973–1976, 267.

¹⁴⁷ Kayaoğlu, “The Limits of Turkish–Iranian Cooperation,” 464; Michael B. Bishku, “Turkey and Iran during the Cold War,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 16, no. 1 (1999): 13–28, 24.

¹⁴⁸ Çetinsaya, “Türkiye–İran İlişkileri, 1945–1997,” 135–58; Çağlayanlı, *Anılarım*, 298; Mehmet Saray, *Türk–İran İlişkileri* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 1999), 133.

At the urging of Erbakan's Islamist coalition party MSP, Türkiye began reaching out to the Saudi-sponsored Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and US Black Muslims to garner support for its Cyprus operation.¹⁴⁹ According to Minister Hasan Aksay of MSP, the idea of contacting American Muslims originated with the founder and leader of the party, deputy prime minister Necmettin Erbakan.¹⁵⁰ A mechanical engineer with ties to Türkiye's robust Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi community, Erbakan had long argued for de-aligning Türkiye from the West, urging the regime to leave NATO and abandon its attempts to integrate with the European Community.¹⁵¹ Under his directive, Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil traveled to the United States and contacted Warith Deen Muhammad, who was then in the process of reforming the NOI toward mainstream Sunni teachings. Muhammad reportedly told Çağlayangil he and Muhammad Ali would like to visit as Muslims, as opposed to political representatives, and soon accepted an invitation from the Turkish Directorate of Religion.¹⁵²

The NOI organ *Muhammad Speaks* had mostly ignored the bloodshed in Cyprus throughout the 1960s and leaned toward the Greek side in reporting on non-aligned policy and Nasser's stance. The August 23, 1974, issue of the newspaper, however, was sympathetic to Türkiye, quoting "one knowledgeable observer" who argued the country "can hardly be blamed for the tough attitude that gained her most of what she wanted both on the ground and in negotiation – securing ample safeguards for her kinsmen outside her area of operation."¹⁵³ The larger text was more nuanced, but the author's appreciative tone in reporting the quote amounted to celebrating a muscular foreign policy in the name of kinship ties.

A "tough attitude" and success on the battlefield was certainly something Türkiye's leaders believed they shared with Muhammad Ali. On October 30, 1974, Ali defeated heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman in Zaire for the famous "Rumble in the Jungle." During an interview with the popular centrist Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* before the battle, Ali posed with the Turkish flag, accepted the gift of a Qur'an,

¹⁴⁹ On the OIC outreach, see Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The OIC and Turkey's Cyprus Cause," *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* no. 25 (1995): 47–68; and Mustafa Bostancı, "The Attitude of Saudi Arabia on the Cyprus Issue," *Afro Eurasian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2002): 42–60.

¹⁵⁰ "Muhammed Ali'nin Türkiye'de Bir Günü," *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 17, 2022, www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/muhammed-ali-nin-turkiye-de-bir-gunu/2476561.

¹⁵¹ Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic*, 42.

¹⁵² "Aksay: CHP'lilere İnat Ali'yi Davet Ettim," *Yeni Akit*, June 13, 2016, www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/aksay-chplilere-inat-aliyi-davet-ettim-183891.html.

¹⁵³ Joe Walker, "Cyprus Affair Causes Ouster of Greek Junta," *Muhammad Speaks*, August 23, 1974, 20.

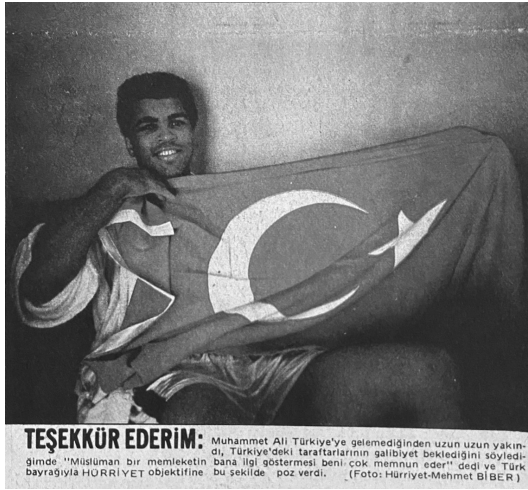


Figure 3.2 World heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali posing with the Turkish flag on the pages of the centrist newspaper *Hürriyet* in June 1974. Photo credit: *Hürriyet* – Mehmet Biber.

and announced he wanted to visit Türkiye (Figure 3.2).¹⁵⁴ Following his victory, he posed with Turkish military officers, who had come to watch him, saying the Turkish flag had brought him good luck. The NOI flag, reportedly modeled on the Turkish one, also sported a white crescent and star over a red background.¹⁵⁵ According to *Hürriyet*, Ali also told his Turkish fans that he “admired” the country’s victories in Cyprus.¹⁵⁶

In a national environment that made anti-Americanism “common sense” across the political spectrum, Turks were readier than ever to de-emphasize aspirational whiteness and see Ali as one of their own. Turkish folk songs praised him for standing against US imperialism, for being “as powerful as a Turk” and “as brave as a Turk,” and connected the Black American sports idol and the Turkish nation through a vision of righteous violence.¹⁵⁷ The Islamist magazine *Yeniden Milli Mücadele* connected Türkiye and the boxer through the trope of confrontational

¹⁵⁴ “Teşekkür Ederim,” *Hürriyet*, October 24, 1974, front page.

¹⁵⁵ Ernest Allen, Jr., “Religious Heterodoxy and Nationalist Tradition: The Continuing Evolution of the Nation of Islam,” *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 3–4 (1996): 2–34, 5.

¹⁵⁶ “Hürriyet’in Hediyesi Türk Bayrağı Bana Uğur Getirdi,” *Hürriyet*, October 31, 1974, 11.

¹⁵⁷ Ahmet Aslan, Zeynel Adakuş, and Hasan Altun, “Muhammed Ali’nin Maçlarını İzleyenlerin Hatıraları (1970–1980),” *Uşak Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 10, no. 4 (2017): 555–84; Erdem Güven, “Vur Muhammed Aşkına, Vur Ali Aşkına: Siyaset ve Spor İkonu Olarak Muhammed Ali İmgesi,” *TRT Akademi* 4, no. 8 (2019): 286–307, 302.

religion: "The sound of Muhammed Ali's fist has a meaning, like the sound of the sword in Turkish raids."¹⁵⁸ It also argued Ali was moving in "the tradition of Bilal Habeşi."

An emphasis on similarity reined in non-Islamist Turkish reporting, as well. A column titled "Our Ali" in *Hürriyet* linked Ali to Turks via religion, politics of masculine defiance, and racialized civilization rhetoric. The author noted that Turks loved heroes, using a word (*kahraman*) associated with the Turkish army, but currently lacked them in the international sports arena. Into this gap had come Muhammad Ali, "who said 'I love Turks,' who had his picture taken with our flag, who gave his heart to our religion, whose name is similar to ours."¹⁵⁹

Ali spoke more extensively about Cyprus to the Turkish press on May 30, 1976, reportedly arguing Türkiye had been right in its actions and that the US Congress was falsely beholden to "a handful of Greeks." Instead, he noted, they should hear the voice of the more numerous "40 million Black Americans."¹⁶⁰ Of course, it was unclear where most Black Americans stood on the Cyprus issue, but Ali constructed them as natural allies to a Muslim Türkiye. Clearly, the old NOI's well-established overlap between race, religion, and political solidarity still held some purchase in this new era.

On October 1, 1976, two days after defending his title against Ken Norton, Muhammad Ali came to Türkiye and met with Turkish leaders, again declaring his support for Turkish actions in Cyprus. His visit renewed rhetoric around Islamic antiracism and Bilal Habeshi.¹⁶¹ The American Embassy noted the attention Turks paid to "Muhammad's statements that the NOI and its large-circulation publications would be exerting their influence in the United States on behalf of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot causes."¹⁶² The report also mocked Erbakan's attempts to score the boxer's visit as a victory for his own political party.

While in Istanbul, Muhammad Ali made international news by announcing his retirement from boxing to dedicate himself to promoting Islam at the urging of his spiritual leader, W. D. Muhammad. Muhammad, who preceded the boxer in holding meetings with high-level Turkish politicians, promised to bring the Cyprus issue to the attention of his congregation.

¹⁵⁸ "Bir Olay Bir Yorum: Muhammed Ali'yi Alkışlamanın Anlamı," *Yeniden Milli Mücadele*, November 12, 1974, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Gündüz Kılıç, "Bizim Ali," *Hürriyet*, November 1, 1974, 10.

¹⁶⁰ "Muhammed Ali: Kıbrıs Konusunda," *Milliyet*, May 30, 1976, 12.

¹⁶¹ For example, Selahaddin E. Çakırgil, "Mehmed Ali'nin Bize Öğrettikleri," *Milli Gazete*, October 2, 1976, front page and 7.

¹⁶² "Turkish Government Hosts Black Muslim Leaders," Amembassy to Secretary of State, October 7, 1976, Central Foreign Policy Files, *Record Group 59*, File Number, D760379-0251, Electronic Telegrams, NARA.

Upon his return to the United States, the leader told *Bilalian News* that Türkiye was “great, in every sense of greatness.”¹⁶³

Türkiye’s outreach to African American Muslims demonstrated how the idea of “the Muslim World” and Islamic anti-racism had become centerpieces of the country’s lobbying efforts as the Cyprus crisis spiraled into warmaking and sanctions. A connected tactic was boosting Türkiye’s participation in international Islamic organizations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Türkiye–OIC relations before the 1970s had been shaky, particularly due to the country’s collaborations with Israel and internal political debates regarding the potential damage to laicism.¹⁶⁴ Soon, however, its diplomats began trying to establish strategic similitude between the Cyprus crisis and Israel/Palestine as issues hinging on racial and religious oppression. The country’s vote favoring the 1975 UN resolution 3379, which declared Zionism “a form of racism and racial discrimination,” symbolized the winds of change.

In May 1976, the MSP organ *Milli Gazete* endorsed Islamic antiracism in preparation for the upcoming Istanbul meeting of the OIC. The newspaper reprinted the 1965 UN resolution on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and prepared informational columns on all member states.¹⁶⁵ The leader of Turkish Cypriots, Rauf Denktaş, spoke at the meeting, drawing parallels between the conflict over the divided island and Palestinian lands.¹⁶⁶ These efforts resulted in an OIC resolution expressing support for the rights of Turkish Cypriots and led to increased Turkish participation at high levels of OIC governance.¹⁶⁷ In the United States, W. D. Muhammad also expressed support for Turkish Cypriots’ demands for political independence, particularly after personally attending the Islamic Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 1979.¹⁶⁸

Race/Religion/Politics in the Iranian Hostage Crisis

The parameters of Türkiye–US–Iran comparativism shifted yet again at the end of the 1970s. As Iran convulsed in revolutionary change,

¹⁶³ “W. D. Muhammad Urges Ali to Fight for the Truth,” *Bilalian News*, October 15, 1976, 7.

¹⁶⁴ İhsanoğlu, “Turkey in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference,” 101.

¹⁶⁵ “İrk ve İrk Ayrımı Üzerine,” *Milli Gazete*, May 11, 1976, 7.

¹⁶⁶ “İslam Konferansı Türkiye’nin Kıbrıs Davasını Kabul Etti,” *Milli Gazete*, May 16, 1976, front page.

¹⁶⁷ İhsanoğlu, “Turkey in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference,” 107–08.

¹⁶⁸ “Special Report: Ministers Islamic Conference,” *Bilalian News*, June 8, 1979, 5.

US leaders became concerned about the potential loss of a comparable ally in the region. The United States quietly lifted its arms embargo against the country in response to the events in Iran, even though the Cyprus crisis still awaited resolution.¹⁶⁹ *Bilalian News*, deeply sympathetic to the Iranian revolution in its early stages, also reported positively on its potential for raising Türkiye's political and economic fortunes.¹⁷⁰

On November 4, 1979, radical Iranian students took over the US embassy in Tehran, demanding the return of all Iranian assets and the shah – then receiving cancer treatment in the United States – and calling for an absolute end to US interference in Iran's internal affairs. The dramatically televised hostage crisis all but ensured that American anti-Muslim racism would hone in on Iran and Iranians. Anti-Iranian discourse and hate crimes flared across the country. The United States implemented its first “Muslim ban” since the repeal of the racist laws of the early twentieth century, halting new visas to Iranians.¹⁷¹

Black Muslim leader W. D. Muhammad maintained nuance as he expressed his opposition to “the capture and holding of US Embassy personnel,” while relating that members of his community were “fraternally supporting the just Islamic reforms of the Iranian people's revolution.”¹⁷² Türkiye's center-right president, Süleyman Demirel, criticized hostage-taking through religious language, arguing, “It is one of Islam's traditions not to harm the envoy.”¹⁷³ The Islamist MSP's organ *Milli Gazete*, however, expressed support for the students' actions and Khomeini's views in its coverage and editorials.¹⁷⁴

Milli Gazete editorials underplayed Sunni–Shia differences and claimed that secularist Turks' support for the ethnically Turkic Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari over Khomeini was a manifestation of the type of racism that had broken up the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷⁵ One of

¹⁶⁹ Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Hatıraları*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Munir Umrani, “Turkey's Instability Alarms West,” *Bilalian News*, May 4, 1979, 6.

¹⁷¹ Jimmy Carter, “Sanctions Against Iran Remarks Announcing U.S. Actions,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250522.

¹⁷² “Iran in Perspective,” *Bilalian News*, December 28, 1979, 3.

¹⁷³ “FULL TEXT OF DEMIREL COMMENTS ON IRAN SITUATION,” December 11, 1979, FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9450, D790570-0525, Central Foreign Policy Files, created 7/1/1973–12/31/1979, documenting the period ca. 1973–12/31/1979 – Record Group 59, NARA.

¹⁷⁴ Ahmet Sağlam, “İran'in Elçilik Harekatı,” *Milli Gazete*, November 19, 1979, 2. See also Osman Tunç, *Çağın Olayı: İran'da İslam'ın Zaferi* (İstanbul: Piran, 1979). For differing Islamist views on the Iranian revolution, see Chapter 4 in this book.

¹⁷⁵ Yasin Hatiboğlu, “İrkçilik Cinneti,” *Milli Gazete*, December 16, 1979, 2; Yasin Hatiboğlu, “Biraz İnsaf Gerek, İnsaf,” *Milli Gazete*, December 20, 1979, 2.

Iran's leading senior clerics and the source of emulation for millions of Iranians of mostly Azeri origin, Shariatmadari had also opposed the shah. However, he stood against Khomeini's plan for the guardianship of Islamic jurists, advocating a more pluralistic system. While the Turkish regime's preference for Shariatmadari over Khomeini had political reasons, belief in ethnic similitude did facilitate contact and boost positive reporting. During his first visit to Tehran after the revolution, Ahmet Gündüz Ökçün, the Turkish minister of foreign affairs affiliated with the laicist Republican People's Party (CHP), followed his meeting with Khomeini with an unscheduled visit to Shariatmadari, then under house arrest in Qum. Turgut Tülümen, Turkish ambassador to Iran, reported that while the first meeting confirmed high-level Türkiye–Iran ties, it subjected Turkish representatives to Khomeini's anti-laicist rhetoric. The second took place over the objections of the Iranian regime but involved hugs, conversation in Turkish, and “a holiday atmosphere” (*bayram havası*).¹⁷⁶

Race thinking was operational in many other ways throughout the Iranian revolution, including in the revolutionary cadres' outreach to Black Americans. The new regime's antiracist credentials gained a boost when it severed diplomatic relations with Apartheid South Africa.¹⁷⁷ On November 18, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered the release of all women and Black hostages at the US embassy. He explained the actions by saying, “Islam reserves special rights for women” and that Black Americans could not be responsible for US imperialism as they lived in the United States “under oppression.”¹⁷⁸ His son Ahmad Khomeini made a speech connecting the Iranian and Black struggles via political similitude as acts standing against oppression.¹⁷⁹ Iranian consulates reported on an outpouring of letters of appreciation from Black Americans in the wake of the decision.¹⁸⁰ The move was also immediately legible to the Turkish Islamist press, with *Hicret* magazine referencing

¹⁷⁶ Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Hatıraları*, 91–92.

¹⁷⁷ “Will Ex-Shah Flee to South Africa,” *Bilalian News*, December 21, 1979, 6; Houchang Chehabi, “South Africa and Iran in the Apartheid Era,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 4 (2016): 687–709.

¹⁷⁸ “Women, Blacks Ordered Freed in Iran,” *Washington Post*, November 18, 1979, <https://bit.ly/4cxQWw0>.

¹⁷⁹ “Taskhīr-i lāni-yi jāsiyi-āmrīkā bi rivāyat-i marhūm Siyyid Aḥmad Khumīnī,” *Imam Khomeini.ir*, www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n119360/.

¹⁸⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Telegram from Tehran, reporting on Telegram No. 267-25-11-1979 of the Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in San Francisco, original document dated November 26, 1979, No. 61, reproduced in *Sedaye Diplomacy-e Iran*, June 5, 2020, <https://sedayediplomacyeiran.ir/>. “Please note that this site cannot be accessed from outside Iran without a VPN.”

Malcolm X's autobiography and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) – also a best-seller in Iran – in its coverage of the events.¹⁸¹

Muhammad Ali was sympathetic to both Iranian demands and the hostages' plight. He offered to exchange places with the hostages and, later, to stage a fight in Iran to help free the remaining captives.¹⁸² The students refused the offer, repeating their demand for the return of the shah. However, this did not mark the beginning or the end of Iranian Islamists' interest in Black Americans or Black Muslims.¹⁸³ The Islamic revolution increased the rate of African American conversion to Shiism, supporting the ascendant belief that Shiism constituted the most protest-oriented interpretation of Islam.¹⁸⁴ American-born Blacks such as journalist Merzieh Hashemi, activist Imam Abdul Alim Musa, and Dawud Salahuddin, the assassin known for murdering Khomeini's opponent Ali Akbar Tabatabai, traveled to postrevolutionary Iran and vocally supported the regime.¹⁸⁵ In 1984, the Islamic Republic of Iran became the first country in the world to issue a stamp of Malcolm X. Produced to honor the fight against racial discrimination, the stamp depicted Malcolm X wearing an old-fashioned white robe and performing the call to prayer, visually merging the US-born Black leader with Bilal ibn Rabah.

In his 1988 *The Satanic Verses*, the diasporic Indian author Salman Rushdie hinted at the complications of this merger. In this infamous post-modern novel, perhaps most well known for drawing the ire of Ayatollah Khomeini, Rushdie constructed a Black American figure called Bilal X. Bilal X works as a muezzin and propagandist, using US technology as well as American-inflected protest to push against "Yankee imperialism":

The explanation of this conundrum is to be heard, at this very moment, on certain surreptitious radio waves, on which the voice of the American convert Bilal is singing the Imam's holy song. Bilal the muezzin: his voice enters a ham radio in Kensington and emerges in dreamed-of Dosh, transmuted into the thunderous speech of the Imam himself ...

¹⁸¹ "Zenci Mes'elesi Amerika'yı Sarsıyor," *Hicret*, December 3, 1979, 13.

¹⁸² Arash Nourizi, "Muhammad Ali and Iran," *The Mossadegh Project*, June 4, 2016, www.mohammadmossadegh.com/news/boxer-muhammad-ali-and-iran-hostages/.

¹⁸³ Moradian, *This Flame Within*.

¹⁸⁴ Liyakat Nathani Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 201; Liyakat Nathani Takim, "Preserving or Extending Boundaries: The Black Shi'is of America," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2010): 237–49.

¹⁸⁵ Ira Silverman, "An American Terrorist," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2002, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/08/05/an-american-terrorist; "From New Orleans to Tehran: Life of Detained Iran Newscaster Marzieh Hashemi," *Arab News*, January 17, 2019, www.arabnews.com/node/1437141/amp; "Abdul Alim Musa," *Discover the Networks*, www.discoverthenetworks.org/individuals/abdul-alim-musa/.

The voice is rich and authoritative, a voice in the habit of being listened to; well-nourished, highly trained, the voice of American confidence, a weapon of the West turned against its makers, whose might upholds the Empress and her tyranny.¹⁸⁶

Rushdie's depiction of Bilal X (a clear Third Worldist merger of Bilal ibn Rabah and Malcolm X) hints at the complex history this chapter has traced. In Rushdie's novel, through the advances of communications technology, Bilal X's voice is "transmuted into the thunderous speech of the Imam himself." Indeed, the idea that Islam was the religion of racial justice and anti-imperialism developed by fits and starts through transculturation and strategic comparativism. In the 1960s and 1970s, unofficial American world-making spread through international media and influenced the racialization of Islamist politics across multiple countries, including within US-allied countries with long traditions of West-facing modernization and aspirational whiteness. Bilal ibn Rabah had long been significant to Muslim antiracist and antinationalist polemics as one of Prophet Muhammad's esteemed non-Arab companions. By the end of the 1970s, however, his image had fully merged with the US Black struggle and Islamist anti-Americanism.

Islam's reconfiguration as the religion of racial justice was theological as well as political, allowing for new interpretations of ancient texts through postcolonial, antiracist lenses. As "a weapon of the West turned against its makers," this ideological formation mirrored the Orientalist racialization of Islam and promised to replace the US-led comparativism of modernization theory with an Asian-African brotherhood imagined on non-hierarchical terms. However, Muslim dissidents' racial blindspots and masculinist commitments complicated the emancipatory vision.

Coeval with the rise of a new brand of muscular, Islamic anti-Americanism was the re-racialization of Turks and Iranians in the American media. Muhammad Ali reportedly claimed that Erbakan was the first "white leader" to embrace him, seemingly breaking from the earlier NOI doctrine that equated Muslim, Eastern, and Black.¹⁸⁷ However, just as the newly reformed World Community of Islam in the West was willing to accept the existence of white Muslims and perhaps count Turks among this group, the US media and public were starting to view "the Middle East" and Islam in increasingly racialized ways.

¹⁸⁶ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1988), 216–17.

¹⁸⁷ Pinar Tremblay, "How Muhammad Ali Became a Hero for Turks," *Al Monitor*, June 9, 2016, <https://bit.ly/42xXg2e>.

Although West Asians retained their official designation as “Caucasian,” Hollywood presented Islam as a racialized, gendered signifier of dangerous Otherness. In the next chapter, I examine how the rise of what some have called “Islamic feminism” sought to counter both anti-Muslim racism and the patriarchal policies of the hardline Islamist and laicist regimes that ruled post-1980 Iran and Türkiye.

4 Veiled Agents

Islamic Feminism, Similitude, and the Limits of Solidarity

Before the Iranian revolution, Empress Farah Pahlavi had personified Iran for the rest of the world. Comparative judgments based on dominant and ascendant ideologies, from modernization theory to *gharbzadegi*, converged on her image. As the Iranian people's revolution coalesced into a theocracy, it became clear that women would, once again, be enlisted for nation-branding – whether they wished to or not. In fact, the first Pahlavi-era law the interim government rescinded was the Family Protection Law of 1967. With the country still under revolutionary fervor and uncertainty, the meager improvements the Pahlavi regime had made to Iranian marriage, divorce, and custody laws in the name of modernization were scrapped.¹ Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers then brushed aside the women's uprising of March 1979, and used the US embassy takeover and hostage crisis (November 1979–May 1980) to consolidate power. Despite the liberatory promises of Khomeini's revolutionary rhetoric and women's active participation in overthrowing the shah, the new regime imposed a series of gender-discriminatory laws based on “*shari'a* as interpreted by the ruling class.”² Among these was a severe requirement for Islamic “modesty”: forced hijab.

Khomeini's Revolutionary Council and, later, the pro-Khomeini Iranian Parliament followed a strategic process reminiscent of Reza Shah's *kashf-i hijāb* (hijab ban) policy to set the ground for mandatory veiling. From his pulpit, the revolutionary Ayatollah gave speeches insulting unveiled women as “naked” and “painted-up” dolls and urged Muslim women to cover up, even as other leading figures offered appeasing statements.³ The regime implemented restrictive clothing rules for government employees first and employed propaganda measures to

¹ Surayyā Sadr Dānish, “Zanān rā farāmūsh nakunīm,” *Kiyhān*, 13 Isfand 1357/March 4, 1979, front page, <https://online.fliphtml5.com/dfks/eqdw/#p=1>.

² Mehrangiz Kar, “Iranian Law and Women's Rights,” *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2007): 1–13, 3.

³ Amīr Ḥusayn Mujīrī, “Hijāb, ijbārī yā ikhtiyārī,” *Nashrīyi Farhangī Dānishjūyi-i Imdād* (1389/2010), excerpted in *Virgool*, <https://vrgl.ir/yJRHt>.

normalize its vision.⁴ Across regime-aligned media, unveiled women were accused of serving the West and the deposed monarchy; they faced threats, street violence, and denial of service with the regime's clear approval.⁵ Then, in 1983, the new Islamic Penal Code officialized mandatory veiling: For women, appearing in public without Islamic hijab – interpreted as covering one's hair and most of the body – became legally punishable.⁶ With these changes, the name Iran became nearly synonymous with the stereotype of the chador-clad woman in the international sphere. A riveting US narrative called *Not Without My Daughter*, which depicted the entrapment of an American woman and her daughter in postrevolutionary Iran, played a crucial role in entrenching this personification worldwide, including in Iran's neighbor and common comparand, Türkiye.

According to the 1987 book memoir and the 1991 movie by the same name, Michigan homemaker Betty Mahmoody agreed to visit Iran in 1984 for a short vacation on the assurances of her doctor husband, a native of Iran whom she had married in the United States. Once in the Islamic Republic, however, Dr. Mahmoody forced her and their four-year-old daughter Mahtob to stay in the country. She was allowed to get a divorce and leave; however, Iranian custody laws meant she would have had to leave Mahtob behind.⁷ She refused: "Not without my daughter." After a year and a half of intense surveillance and physical and mental abuse at the hands of Dr. Mahmoody and his relatives, Betty and Mahtob managed to escape across the mountains into Türkiye with the help of smugglers. Finding refuge in the US embassy in Ankara, the two traveled back to the United States, where Betty Mahmoody became a household name, giving TV interviews, publishing her best-selling memoir, and offering her expertise to the State Department as a consultant.

A first-person narrative about intercultural marriage, border crossings, and linguistic struggles, *Not Without My Daughter* transcended national and linguistic boundaries. As a memoir and a Hollywood movie, the

⁴ Arash Azizi, *What Iranians Want: Women, Life, Freedom* (London: Oneworld, 2024), 24.

⁵ Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, 124–30.

⁶ Nasrin Sotoudeh, *Women, Life, Freedom: Our Fight for Human Rights and Equality in Iran*, trans. Parisa Saranj (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), 17.

⁷ The Iranian Civil Code, based on a dominant interpretation of Shari'a, has long differentiated between *hizanat* (the right to care for the child) and *vilayat* (guardianship over the child). The right to *vilayat* has always rested with the father and the father's family – remaining unchanged even under the Pahlavis. The courts preferred to give *hizanat* to the mother of a daughter under the age of seven, as Mahtob was. However, the law would not have allowed Betty Mahmoody to take her daughter out of the country without the father's permission. Seyed Nasrollah Ebrahimi, "Child Custody (*Hizanat*) under Iranian Law: An Analytical Discussion," *Family Law Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 459–76, 466, fn.41.

story met with both praise and criticism, not just in the United States but also in Europe and Australia, as has been well documented, including by Betty Mahmoody herself in the sequel book, *For the Love of a Child*.⁸ Its negative reception in Iran as yet another bit of “Zionist propaganda” appears predictable and was reflected in the 2002 documentary *Without My Daughter*, which aimed to tell Dr. Mahmoody’s side of the story.⁹

This research constitutes the first scholarly attempt to investigate the text’s reception in Türkiye, which bridged Betty Mahmoody’s escape from Iran to the United States. Here, the book became an immediate bestseller, and the movie was screened repeatedly on TV as one of the most-watched foreign movies of the era. As I explain in depth, Turks’ experience with a similar, anti-Turkish Hollywood film, *Midnight Express* (1978), complicated the movie’s reception but did not halt its popularity. In fact, *Not Without My Daughter* became such a significant motif in the Turkish public sphere that it soon came to suffuse national debates about the country’s post-1980 headscarf ban, its attempts to join the European Union (EU), and Türkiye–Iran relations. The United States played a critical role in these discussions as the champion of a “dual containment” strategy against Iran and Iraq, the exporter of military technology and intelligence to Türkiye, and a high-profile advocate for the country’s European aspirations.¹⁰ Equally important, however, was its ideological role as an agenda-setter in international debates around “women’s rights” and “religious freedom,” and as the world’s leading exporter of cultural products, such as *Not Without My Daughter*.

The first three chapters of this book have touched upon several visions of solidarity coalescing and disintegrating around Iran–Türkiye relations in triangulation with Europe and the United States. The authoritarian nationalist solidarity symbolized by the “brotherhood” of Reza Shah and Atatürk was troubled by comparative racial figurations of Turks and Iranians (Chapter 1). The competitive comparativism of modernization theory belied the pro-US, anti-Communist solidarity Iran and Türkiye institutionalized during the Cold War (Chapter 2). The

⁸ Betty De Hart, “Not Without My Daughter: On Parental Abduction, Orientalism and Maternal Melodrama,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 51–65; Betty Mahmoody with Arnold D. Dunchock, *For the Love of a Child* (New York: St Martins, 1992).

⁹ *Without My Daughter*, directed by Kari Tervo and Alexis Kouros (Helsinki: Dream Catcher, 2002), DVD; Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi’i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 1–2.

¹⁰ Robert Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979–2004: Revolution, Ideology, War, Coups and Geopolitics* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2004). For “dual containment,” see Sasan Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran: Sanctions, Wars and the Policy of Dual Containment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

antiracist, anti-imperialist Muslim solidarity, which hinged on a rejection of westoxication (*gharbzadegi*), sidelined gender justice in counter-ing aspirational whiteness (Chapter 3). This chapter brings the question of solidarity and its intersections with comparison to the foreground. Specifically, I investigate how Iran–Türkiye comparisons influenced the work of Turkish and Iranian women’s activists who sought to expand Muslim women’s political participation and reform repressive clothing codes in the 1980s and 1990s.

A normative commitment to solidarity underlines feminism as “a movement to end sexist oppression.”¹¹ Building on the intellectual heritage of transnational feminist cultural studies, I have organized this chapter around two instances of unrealized solidarity, one seemingly “cultural” and the other more obviously “political.”¹² First, I explain the reasons for the popularity of *Not Without My Daughter* in 1990s Türkiye despite the country’s own harrowing experience with Hollywood’s *Midnight Express* (1978). Second, I analyze a moment of failed outreach from Iranian woman reformists to a devout, US-educated Turkish woman politician called Merve Kavakçı, who was denied her seat in parliament because of her headscarf in 1999. The so-called Kavakçı affair became a cause célèbre to multiple contingencies within Iran, with regime hardliners using the crisis to malign Turkish secularism (also known as laicism) and reformists insinuating similarities between the two states’ repression of women’s civic presence. As the laicist Turkish press accused Kavakçı of being an Iranian asset, Kavakçı herself rejected the outreach of Iranian women, appealing instead to Europe and the United States for support. The strategic use of comparison and the dominant transnational ideologies of the era, depicting Iran and Muslim women in totalizing ways, linked these two events.

The intertextual, political resonances established around *Not Without My Daughter* in Türkiye offer a compelling case study for exploring the limits and complications inherent in counter-hegemonic responses to Orientalism when the depictions target other, even neighboring, countries.¹³ Do local contestations of dominant US categorizations of “the

¹¹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 18.

¹² Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/Feminism Divides,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 2, no. 2 (1994): 430–45.

¹³ See Chapters 1 and 3. For a history of these discursive developments, see Ussama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768–96; Selim Deringil, “‘They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery’: The

Middle East” stop at nation-state boundaries? Can exported American narratives, even in modification, get mobilized against neighboring countries and percolate US political influence in previously unnoticed ways? This chapter’s interdisciplinary, multilingual examination of the discursive triangulations between the United States, Türkiye, and Iran around *Not Without My Daughter* and the Kavakçı affair demonstrates that the assumptions of similitude that undergird Orientalism can have multiple domestic and international edges of mobilization.

It is significant that *Not Without My Daughter*’s success in Türkiye occurred during what Mirgün Cabas has called the last years of “Old Turkey,” that is, the last point at which the country’s laicist elite held the reins of power in the military, judiciary, and the government.¹⁴ Shaped by the coups of 1980 and 1997, this era saw the implementation of Türkiye’s first nationwide headscarf ban in spaces associated with the state. The ban was highly controversial: It sparked mass protests, arrests, and counterprotests. This chapter demonstrates how laicist arguments upholding the ban as a measure against radical Islamism built on US mass media such as *Not Without My Daughter*, but also adjusted American figurations of Iran through a logic of imminent contagion. This strategic emphasis on similarity between Iranian and Turkish Islamism helped cast the regime’s trampling of the political, educational, and occupational rights of headscarf-wearing women as part of its forward-looking defense of those rights: part of a plan to prevent Türkiye from “becoming Iran.”

Making a Difference: Türkiye and the Iranian Revolution

With the Iranian revolution, US-led comparativism between Türkiye and Iran came to hinge heavily on religion. Worries regarding the “export” of Islamist revolutionary fervor from next door constituted one of three central foreign policy concerns for Turkish policymakers in the wake of the revolution, alongside concerns about militant Kurdish separatism and a potential Iranian slide toward the Soviet side in the Cold War.¹⁵ However, they thoroughly shaped the oft-repeated question, “Will Turkey become another Iran?” This imagined possibility cut through

Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-colonial Debate,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 311–42; Sabri Ateş, “Oryantalizm ve Bizim Doğumuz,” *doğudan* (September–October 2007): 38–56; Edhem Eldem, “Ottoman and Turkish Orientalism,” *Architectural Design* 80, no. 1 (2010): 26–31; Mohammed S. H. Alsulami, *Iranian Orientalism: Notions of the Other in Modern Iranian Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹⁴ Mirgün Cabas, 2001: *Eski Türkiye’nin Son Yılı* (Istanbul: Can, 2017).

¹⁵ Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations*, 1.

several intersecting and overlapping points of similitude: Türkiye and Iran had shared experiences of authoritarian modernization; Türkiye and Iran were (or had been) Cold War US allies; and Türkiye and Iran were both Muslim-majority nation-states. These pre-established lines of comparability allowed opinion leaders, scholars, and politicians to emphasize selected differences in line with their political agendas.

Newly accented differences between Iranian Islamism and Turkish laicism, or supposedly “radical” Shia Islam and “quietist” Sunnism, formed two critical lines of comparison hinging on religion. (A third theological comparison – between Iranian “fundamentalism” and Turkish “Sufism” – constitutes the focus of Chapter 5.) While some thinkers highlighted religious discrepancies to argue Türkiye could never have an Islamist revolution, others emphasized similarity and plausibility. All of these comparisons were strategic and goal-oriented political constructs.

An opinion piece by famous Turkish journalist Haluk Şahin published in 1979 in the *New York Times* addressed how the lenses of comparison impacted its outcomes. Titled “Turkey is not Iran,” Şahin’s piece categorically rejected the possibility of Türkiye becoming “another Iran” while critiquing the grounds of comparison.¹⁶ “Because the West rediscovered Turkey while fixing its gaze on Iran,” he wrote, “one notes a tendency to seek and find parallels between the two countries.” Tracing the Orientalist legacy in this mode of thinking, which collapsed widely different Muslim-majority societies together, Şahin instead used a materialist analysis to explain Türkiye’s contemporary maladies. His analysis shone in so far as it drew parallels between the woes of capitalism impacting both the United States and Türkiye, foregrounding connections between the so-called West and East instead of letting the United States stay in the background as a normative foil. He argued that “Turkey has faithfully followed Western prescriptions for economic development for more than 30 years. What Turkey is suffering from is not a recurrence of the “old Eastern disease,” but a very acute case of the common Western syndrome whose symptoms are well-known: runaway inflation (60 percent), unemployment (25 percent), oil dependence (80 percent), and foreign debts (\$17.7 billion).”

Given the lingering effects of the 1970s oil crisis, Şahin’s precise materialist analysis connected capitalism and dependency on non-renewable resources and drew parallels between the United States and Türkiye. In addition, it highlighted the international power hierarchies that had contributed to Türkiye’s economic woes in the form of “Western prescriptions”: capitalist modernization theory, now repackaged as “development.”

¹⁶ Haluk Şahin, “Turkey Is Not Iran,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1979, 15.

Despite its commendable focus on world systems, Şahin's op-ed also threatened to move toward a type of Turkish exceptionalism with Orientalist undertones in its disavowal of Iran. Drawing attention to Atatürk's legacy in enforcing "one of the most rigorous and extensive secularization campaigns of this century," Şahin dismissed the possibility of the triumph of political Islam in Türkiye. Thus, he not only cast Islam as an unwelcome pollutant to the public sphere but also ignored the role non-devout Iranians had played in the Iranian revolution. In addition, he misidentified how Islamist movements that emphasize racial and class justice, such as those explored in Chapter 3, could hold transnational appeal as a potential cure against the economic ravages he had just identified.

If comparisons that highlighted the exceptional aspects of Kemalist modernization offered one way of dismissing the possibility of Türkiye becoming Iran, another way was to renew emphasis on the sectarian Shia–Sunni difference.¹⁷ After all, had not Türkiye once been the Ottoman Empire, the seat of the caliph and a Sunni force to rival Iran's Shia Safavid empire? Türkiye's anti-Shia Islamists, for example, regularly mobilized such sectarian readings, arguing that the Iranian revolution was not properly Islamic and instead represented Soviet-induced chaos in the Muslim world.¹⁸

Within the liberal Turkish public sphere, journalist Taha Akyol's *Türkiye ve İran'da Mezhep ve Devlet* [Sect and Government in Türkiye and Iran] epitomized the use of Shia–Sunni comparativism.¹⁹ In his writings, Akyol claimed that the Shia–Sunni contrast demonstrated the fears of an Iran-style Islamic revolution in Türkiye were overblown because, unlike hierarchical Shiism with clerics holding immense sway, Sunnism lacked structures of top-down influence.

Of course, as befits comparison, the newly sharpened difference between "hierarchical" Shiism and power-diffuse Sunnism was too simplistic. It underplayed the considerable flexibility and pluralism inherent to Iranian Shiism and ignored the authoritarian elements of state-sponsored Turkish Sunnism. Shia individuals and families, after all, were free to choose any senior ulema they wished to follow as a source of emulation (*marja'*).²⁰ There was perhaps more truth to the claim

¹⁷ Hazır, "Comparing," 8; Dankwart A. Rustow, "Turkey's Travails," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 1 (1979): 98–99.

¹⁸ More on this line of comparison in Chapter 5. Nail Elhan, "İran Devrimi'ni Okumak: Türkiye'de Basılan İran Devrimi Konulu Kitaplar Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme," *Mülkiye Dergisi* 43, no. 4 (2019): 707–30.

¹⁹ Hazır, "Comparing," 9–10; Taha Akyol, *Türkiye ve İran'da Mezhep ve Devlet* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1998).

²⁰ Vali Nasr, *Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 72.

that, due to Ottoman and Kemalist restructuring, senior Sunni clergy had long been co-opted by the Turkish state. The state Directorate of Religion (Diyanet) held immense influence in Türkiye, promoting quietist interpretations of proregime Islam through the nation's mosques. However, this did not prevent multiple Turkish Sunni movements from finding their leaders and organizing parallel hierarchies.

West Asian ethnoreligious diversity also troubled the binary between "Sunni Turkey" and "Shia Iran." Of course, opinion leaders were well aware that Turkish Alevis practised a form of Islam similar to Shiism in its veneration of Imam Ali. However, they noted that Alevis had long been supporters of Kemalist secularism as well as victims of Islamist mobs and were unlikely to support Iran-style clericalism.²¹ A 1978 report from the US Embassy in Ankara to the Secretary of State argued Alevism lacked a hierarchical structure due to its mystical tendencies. "Alevism" was "inextricably associated with Sufi mysticism, while the Shia clergy in Iran has long waged a battle against Sufism."²² Such comparisons associated Türkiye with Sufism in contrast to Iranian "fundamentalism," ignoring Khomeini's significant grounding in Islamic mysticism.²³

Opposing liberal and Islamist readings of Turkish-Iranian differences were groups of Iran-friendly Islamists who figured their next-door neighbor could serve as inspiration and ally. Idealizing Khomeini as the defender of the oppressed masses, these devout political thinkers underplayed differences between Shiism and Sunnism, casting the revolution as properly Islamic.²⁴ This was not much of a stretch as Khomeini had also de-emphasized sectarian distinctions in his universalist, anti-racist appeals (Chapter 3). Osman Tunç, whose publications praising the Islamic revolution were advertised in the newspaper aligned with Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist "National Outlook" movement, *Millî Gazete*, popularized this line of thinking. According to Tunç, the Iranian revolution represented "a triumph of Islam" (not of one sect) against the forces of imperialism and exploitation.²⁵

As noted in Chapter 3, Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party (MSP) party had gained a position in a government coalition in 1974, overseeing outreach to America's Black Muslims and the larger "Muslim

²¹ Rustow, "Turkey's Travails," 99.

²² Amembassy Ankara to US State Department, "Political Violence in Turkey: Background on the Alevis-Sunni Factor," electronic telegram, December 26, 1978, Central Foreign Policy Files, created 7/1/1973–12/31/1979, documenting the period ca. 1973–12/31/1979 – Record Group 59, NARA.

²³ See Chapter 5 for more on this.

²⁴ Elhan, "İran Devrimi'nin Türkiye'de Yansımaları," 28–57.

²⁵ Osman Tunç, *Çağın Olayı: İran'da İslam'ın Zaferi* (İstanbul: Piran, 1979).

world” to gain support for the country’s controversial invasion of Cyprus. Although “the Cyprus Peace Operation” and the attendant recalibration of Turkish foreign policy had broad non-partisan support in the country, the Kemalist military considered Erbakan’s brand of Islamism too radical. On September 12, 1980, a military junta took control over the country, banning all current political parties as well as some labor unions and momentarily halting electoral Islam’s rise. The coup leaders, led by General Kenan Evren, focused most extensively on punishing the left; however, scholars have argued the coup was also partially initiated to contain revolutionary Islamism given the turmoil in neighboring Iran.²⁶

The repressive strain of Turkish laicism, which sought to deter populist Islam and its public manifestations, had long operated alongside a “productive” strain constructing acceptable pieties. Throughout the early 1980s, as Iran transitioned into a new system based on Ayatollah Khomeini’s theorization of “the rule of jurists,” the Turkish coup leader General Evren pushed for a renewed synthesis of Turkism and Sunni Islam: a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” (TIS).²⁷ Initially conceptualized in the 1960s and 1970s by a group of devout anti-Communist intellectuals, the ideology of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis seemed tailor-made for the era with its message of a supposedly exceptional Turkish Islam that prioritized obedience to the state and embodied religious “moderation.”²⁸ With the junta’s regime, TIS became state policy.

In keeping with the laicist assertion of the modern nation-state’s right to determine the parameters of civic religiosity, the very generals who highlighted Islam as an essential aspect of Turkishness also initiated Türkiye’s first official nationwide ban on headscarves at government institutions. General Evren originated the ban through the National Security Council, and various circulars and decrees appeared, banning the headscarf for students, teachers, government workers, and university students between 1980 and 1982.²⁹ The new law explicitly prevented women with headscarves from attending universities, working at government offices, or serving in the parliament.

²⁶ Süleyman Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979–2011: Conceptualising the Dynamics of Politics, Religion and Security in Middle-Power States* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 37.

²⁷ Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ in Modern Turkish Political Thought,” *Muslim World* 89, no. 3–4 (1999): 350–76; Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93–118.

²⁸ Nail Elhan and Başar Şirin, “Reconsidering the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis: Emergence of Iran and Shi’ism as the Rivals of the Turkish-Islamic Identity,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 27, no. 3 (2023): 303–18; Elisabeth Özdalga, “The Hidden Arab: A Critical Reading of the Notion of ‘Turkish Islam,’” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2006): 551–70.

²⁹ Cihan Aktaş, *Türbannın Yeniden İcadı* (İstanbul: Kapı, 2006), 82–89.

The civic governments that followed the junta prevaricated on the ban, but when a 1997 military memorandum halted another Islamist electoral victory, laicists secured their hold onto key loci of power, including the military, judiciary, and the presidency. Utilizing the giant proregime, centrist press cartels, including the high-circulation newspapers *Hürriyet*, *Sabah*, and *Milliyet*, they generated a moral panic around the headscarf as the symbol of an impending Iranian revolution-style state takeover. Thus, perhaps ironically, they strategically emphasized similitude and linkages between Turkish Islamists and Iranian revolutionaries, underplaying key differences and disconnects. The United States's *Not Without My Daughter* became a significant tool in their rhetorical arsenal despite its similarities and connections with the anti-Turkish movie *Midnight Express*. The following section explores the formation of these two American narratives and their reception in Iran, Türkiye, and the United States, linking them to laicist comparativism around the headscarf ban.

Iran's Midnight Express

A young, naive American gets stuck in a barbarous country where people look, sound, and even smell different. Their food, their toilet habits, and their daily customs are all strange and revolting. The protagonist suffers physical and gendered/sexualized violence in this foreign land; they are stripped of agency, dehumanized, and humiliated. Finally, the American escapes using his or her superior intelligence and bravery, with a little help from luck. The escape scene involves putting on the clothes of the oppressor and “passing” as the native Other to cross the border to safety. The hero then shares the story with compatriots to warn them about the dangers that lurk abroad. This is the plot of *Midnight Express* (1978). It is also the plot of *Not Without My Daughter* (1991). Despite real connections to actual events and their focus on two different countries, the plotlines of these texts are so similar and familiar because they belong to the same literary genre: the captivity narrative.³⁰

Most vividly associated with the British colonization of North America, captivity narratives had their origins in fantastic European tales of religious wars and enslavement at the hands of Muslim enemies. As Timothy Marr notes, these “old world patterns of disdaining ‘others’ were imported into new world spaces,” helping settler colonialists

³⁰ Hossein Nazari, “Not Without My Daughter: Resurrecting the American Captivity Narrative,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2016): 23–48.

make sense of new forms of cultural difference and political violence.³¹ Twentieth-century movies about American captivity in Muslim-majority countries, such as *Midnight Express* and *Not Without My Daughter*, therefore, represent a sort of return to the scene of originary difference, to what Edward Said called some of the “deepest and most recurring images of the Other” to be found in European and North American cultural production.³²

In addition to the captivity plot, the tropes of rape and costume change connect these texts to the long lineage of Orientalist fantasy in the West and, as if by compulsion, appear in the movies even when they are absent in the source text. Based on the memoirs of Billy Hayes and a screenplay by Oliver Stone, *Midnight Express* depicted the nightmarish travails of a young college dropout who got caught attempting to smuggle hashish and was imprisoned in early 1970s Türkiye. Directed by Alan Parker, *Midnight Express* won two Oscars (one for its screenplay and the other for its music) and boosted the notorious “Turkish prison” trope that still thrives in US popular culture.³³

In the movie, Hayes escapes prison in a moment of righteous rage by murdering a prison guard who is attempting to rape him. He puts on the guard's clothes and simply walks out of prison. Hayes's memoirs by the same name, on the other hand, contain no instances of rape by the prison authorities; instead, Hayes notes rape among local inmates is punished severely. There is also no stealing of clothes and identities. The escape scene in Hayes' original account differs drastically from Hollywood's fantasy: Instead of murdering to protect his bodily integrity, Hayes gets transferred to a lower-security island prison and escapes by stealing a dinghy one stormy night. *Not Without My Daughter's* Betty Mahmoody does escape by putting on Iranian (and later, Kurdish) clothes in both the book and the movie; however, unlike the memoir, this movie also adds an attempted rape scene before the border crossing.

Midnight Express operates as an immediate predecessor and intertextual key to *Not Without My Daughter* because, in addition to paralleling each other in plot and repeating key Orientalist tropes, the source materials had a direct connection. William Hoffer, the co-author of Billy Hayes's memoir *Midnight Express* (1977) also co-wrote Betty Mahmoody's memoirs. Moreover, this connection between the two texts was no coincidence, as Betty Mahmoody highlights in *For the Love of a Child*:

³¹ Marr, *Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, 3.

³² Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

³³ *Midnight Express*, directed by Alan Parker (1978; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD; Kent F. Schull, *Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3.

It was time to choose a collaborator for my book. I knew whom I wanted: Bill Hoffer, the co-author of *Midnight Express*, the dramatic account of an American drug smuggler's escape from a Turkish prison. While in Tehran, I'd heard about street demonstrations against *Midnight Express*, though the book and the movie based on it were banned there. I wanted to write with the person who'd had such a profound effect on ordinary people in Iran – the people who'd had such a total control over my own life.

"You know," said my agent, "Bill Hoffer is a pretty big author. Maybe he'll say no."

But I persisted. If this writer could move the Iranian fundamentalists so strongly in absentia, I thought he must be very effective. Perhaps he would say no, but I had to try. Those protestors in Iran would never know just how much they influenced my decision.³⁴

This section is worth quoting at length because of how easily Mahmoody conflates Iran, the scene of her captivity, and Türkiye, the neighboring Muslim-majority country she used to bridge her escape. In response, it is necessary to question her claim that massive protests against *Midnight Express* occurred in Iran during her stay. Despite research involving multiple Iranian and Turkish newspaper archives, neither my research assistant for this chapter, Parisa Akbari, nor I could find evidence of such protests. It is also not clear why any such protest would have happened in 1984–1986 when Betty Mahmoody was in Iran instead of the late 1970s when the movie came out. Indeed, Iran was rocked by protests in 1978–1979, but they did not pertain to *Midnight Express*.

Similarly, it is unlikely that Iranians would have focused too much on protesting a dated movie about Türkiye in the mid-1980s when the country was putting all its energy and resources into fighting Iraq. Of course, the movie would have been banned in postrevolutionary Iran, but that was true for many Hollywood films, not to mention a risqué one like *Midnight Express*, which resembled "a porno fantasy about the sacrifice of a virgin" in the memorable words of Pauline Kael.³⁵ It is more likely that Iranians did not care all that much about *Midnight Express*; the film was not significant there, at least not until after William Hoffer's second infamous output, *Not Without My Daughter*, appeared.

In the United States, the fact that William Hoffer had a hand in both projects was used to market *Not Without My Daughter*, beginning with the cover of the first edition, which announced: "*Not Without My Daughter*. A True Story. By Betty Mahmoody with William Hoffer. Co-author of *Midnight Express*." For Iranian observers, on the other hand, the connection operated as a significant political clue. In the

³⁴ Mahmoody, *For the Love of a Child*, 21.

³⁵ Pauline Kael, "Midnight Express," *The New Yorker*, November 27, 1978, 182.

documentary *Without My Daughter*, which focuses on Dr. Mahmoody's life after the "abduction" of his daughter Mathob, we see the doctor lecturing to an audience of university students. In response to a question about the author of the book, he uses the links between *Midnight Express* and *Not Without My Daughter* to cut off any connection the text had with the real Iran, referring to Hoffer as a "Zionist writer" who "has taken mine and Betty's story and used it to attack Iran and Islam." He attests that this tactic mirrored Hoffer's previous work in *Midnight Express*, a film in which a "smuggler's story" was used to "attack Turkey."³⁶ Similarly, Alexis Kuros, the Iranian-Finnish director of *Without My Daughter*, highlighted the connection between the two films in a 2003 interview to reduce the specificity of the Iranian context: "Such things could be written about any nation, just as they have been written about the Turks."³⁷

William Hoffer, who co-wrote these books with significant help from his spouse Marilyn, has claimed political themes are not central to their work, "First and foremost, we're entertainers. Our intention is to spin a yarn."³⁸ These entertaining yarns, however, were steeped in the dominant ideologies of US imperialism, including Orientalism, and used the established plot devices of mainstream American literature, specifically the captivity narrative.

The popular resonance of neither text was an accident. Each took place in a country with which the United States was experiencing political difficulties at the time of the book's release. As noted in Chapter 3, in the 1970s, US-Türkiye relations were tense because of disagreements over the opium trade and the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus; at this point, Congress had even imposed an arms embargo against this NATO ally. By the early 1980s, these difficulties with Türkiye had been mostly resolved, partially in response to the loss of another key US ally with the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis.³⁹ Therefore, it is not that surprising that the first movie takes place in Türkiye in the 1970s and the other one in Iran in the 1980s. Of course, each movie was filmed mainly outside the country it claimed to depict, and neither contained leading actors from that country, as the accents reveal.

³⁶ Tervo and Kourous, *Without My Daughter*.

³⁷ Hüsüyn Qurbân-Zâdi, "Chirâgh-quvih-yî bi samt-i sharq, guft u gû bâ Alexis Kourous, kârgardân-i film-i bidûn-i dukhtaram hargiz," *Sûri-yi Andishi*, no. 1 (1382/2003): 53-55, 53.

³⁸ Loraine Page, "Not Without Each Other," *Writer's Digest* 74, no. 11 (November 1994): 50.

³⁹ Tülümen, *İran Devrimi Anıları*, 13; Ömer Faruk Görçün, *1979 İran İslam Devrimi Sonrası Türkiye-İran İlişkileri* (İstanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat, 2005), 127.

As foreign relations shift, so do the settings of US bestsellers and blockbusters. Moreover, these cultural products travel, taking their warped accents, costumes, and sets across continents. *Not Without My Daughter* first appeared in Türkiye as a book in the summer of 1991, that is, months after the movie opened in the United States.⁴⁰ It quickly became a bestseller; by December 1991, it ranked third on the best-selling list, following two books by Turkish authors.⁴¹ On November 20, 1994, the movie was shown on the subscription-based private channel CINE 5.⁴² In early October 1995, a screening on the private TV channel Show TV was canceled at the request of the Iranian government; however, at the end of the same month, Show TV ended up broadcasting the movie anyway.⁴³ After that point, Show TV repeatedly screened the movie, and it became one of the most-watched foreign movies of the decade.⁴⁴ In May 1997, Betty Mahmoody visited Türkiye and was a guest on the prestigious talk show *Durum*.⁴⁵

I remember watching the dubbed movie as a teenager sometime in the late 1990s at my grandparents' house, with my cousins. But that hardly captures the extent of my memory of this film. Just as Iran's glamorous queens had once captured our parents' imagination (Chapter 2), *Not Without My Daughter* bizarrely saturated the Turkish popular culture of my youth. Translated as "*Kızım Olmadan Asla*" [lit. Never without My Daughter], the title came to operate as a proverbial expression. Mainstream newspapers printed various unrelated stories with headlines using the formula: "Never without my son," "Never without my cat," "Never without high heels," and so on.⁴⁶ The movie's title was fair play in any game of charades we played.

Given the similarities and connections between the two narratives, it is not surprising that Iranian critiques have often emphasized the overlap between *Midnight Express* and *Not Without My Daughter* or examined the movie alongside other anti-Iranian and Islamophobic Hollywood movies to reduce the story's connections to Iran as well as to reality.⁴⁷ What about

⁴⁰ Betty Mahmudi, "Kızım Olmadan Asla," Book Ad, *Cumhuriyet*, July 25, 1991, 13.

⁴¹ "Zirvedekiler," *Milliyet*, December 29, 1991, 10.

⁴² CINE 5, *Milliyet*, November 20, 1992, 8.

⁴³ "Bu Kez Yayınlanıyor," *Milliyet*, October 30, 1995, 28.

⁴⁴ "1995'de En Çok İzlenen Yabancı Filmlerde Yine Star Önde," Ad, *Milliyet*, January 17, 1996, 14.

⁴⁵ "Büyük Buluşma," *Hürriyet*, May 11, 1997, 24.

⁴⁶ "Oğlum Olmadan Asla," *Milliyet*, April 1, 1994, 28; "Kedim Olmadan Asla," *Sabah*, May 14, 1997, 23; "Yüksek Ökçe Olmadan Asla!" *Sabah*, November 11, 2006, <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/11/11/cp/gnc103-20061111-101.html>.

⁴⁷ For example, 'Alī Fallāhī, "Sinamā-yi hālīvūd va 'amaliyāt-i ravānī 'alayh-i Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-yi Irān," *Muṭālā'āt-i 'Amaliyāt-i Ravānī*, no. 21 (1388/2009): 106–33; Mahsā Māh-Pishāniyān, "Silāḥhā-yi risānī-yī-yi āmrīkā dar jang-i narm bā Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-yi Irān,"

Turks? Were they aware of the similarities and profound connections between the two texts as well? The popular print publications of the era demonstrate that the answer to this question was a resounding “yes.”

Since 1991, when the film first came out in the United States and the book's Turkish translation appeared, newspapers and magazines in Türkiye introduced this new text with references to *Midnight Express*. The book section of *Cumhuriyet*, the country's newspaper of record, introduced the movie as “Iran's Midnight Express.”⁴⁸ A week later, Türkiye's best-selling current affairs magazine *Aktüel* used the same expression: “The Midnight Express is now in Iran.” *Aktüel*'s write-up even mentioned William Hoffer, describing him as an excellent choice as a co-author because he had proven his expertise at “telling the tale of ‘a poor Westerner who finds himself in a third world country.’”⁴⁹ *Aktüel*, a deeply laicist magazine, admitted that the film was one-sided. However, it claimed this one-sidedness was “not exaggerated,” and the image presented was close to the Iranian regime's self-depiction.

Of course, not every Turkish reviewer thought the film's one-sidedness lacked exaggeration or saw such depictions as harmless. After Show TV halted *Not Without My Daughter*'s initial screening, Can Dündar, one of Türkiye's most famous journalists, wrote an op-ed denouncing the film as a “cheap piece of American propaganda and racism up to the neck.” He recalled that he had experienced similar feelings while watching *Midnight Express* for the first time in a Paris theater. That film's “intense, sludgy (*vicik vicik*) racism” had led him to exit the cinema in fear once the lights came on, worrying he might be lynched if his Turkish identity became known. “Now Iranians, too, got a *Midnight Express*,” he wrote, validating Iranian concerns.⁵⁰

As a left-leaning journalist, Dündar confessed no love for either the Iranian regime or the Turkish prison system. His visceral description of watching *Not Without My Daughter* about Iran after having seen *Midnight Express* as a Turk was, therefore, even more remarkable for its capacious

Muṭālīāt-i ‘Amaliyāt-i Ravānī, no. 27 (1389/2010): 173–83; Rubina Ramji and Amīr Yazdīyān, “Bāznamāyī-yi musalmānān dar hālīvūd,” *Taṣvīrnāmi*, no. 3 (2012): 69–91; ‘Abdullāh Bīcharānlū, *Bāznamāyī-yi Irān va Islām dar hālīvūd* (Tehran: Pazhūhishgāh-i Farhang va Hunar va Irībātāt, 1391/2012); Siyyid Husayn Sharafiddīn and Siyyid Maḥdī Ganjīyānī, “Hālīvūd va tuṭī-yi Islām-harāsī bā shigird-i nufūz dar nākhudāgāh,” *Ma‘rifat-i Farhangī Ijtimā‘ī*, no. 16 (2013): 99–124; Sīyāvash Ṣalavātīyān and Siyyid Muḥammad Rīzā Siyyidī, “Tadvīn-i Rāhburdhā-yi sāzmān-i šidā va simā-yi Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-yi Irān dar jang-i narm (Muṭālī‘ī-yi murīdī-yi ḥowzi-yi maḥṣūlāt-i namāyish-i khārijī),” *Faṣḥnāmi-yi ‘Ilmī-yi Risānīhā-yi Dīdārī va Shīmīdārī*, no. 27 (1394/2015): 118–23.

⁴⁸ “Batılı bir Ana-Kız,” *Cumhuriyet*, August 1, 1991, 5.

⁴⁹ “İran’da bir Amerikalı,” *Aktüel*, no.3 (August 6–14, 1999), 89.

⁵⁰ Can Dündar, “Kızım Olmadan Asla,” October 5, 1995; repr. *Büyülü Fener* (İstanbul: Nadir, 2012), 80.

empathy with Iranians in the face of filmic vilification. His liberal political stance manifested in his argument that, despite all this, the film should be screened due to the principle of the freedom of the press, perhaps with some balancing discussion afterward. "Otherwise," he claimed with a pun on the movie's Turkish title, "we would be in the situation of never without permission."

Midnight Express had damaged more than nationalist pride. Operating as one of the most immediate links with the name "Turkey" in the American consciousness, it especially hurt the country's tourism sector.⁵¹ Journalist Haluk Şahin called it a "cursed Hollywood passport" and discussed how every Turk abroad had to deal with the impressions the film had created on Westerners.⁵² However, interestingly, the immediate associations with *Midnight Express* did not prevent *Not Without My Daughter* from becoming popular in Türkiye. Dündar's empathy for the maligned Iran was rarely repeated in other mainstream venues. This largely positive reception was shaped by the privatized, sensational media environment of the 1990s, critical differences between the two texts, and the contingencies of national politics.

First, as the advertising campaigns demonstrate, the parallels and connections with *Midnight Express* worked as a kind of commercial for *Not Without My Daughter*. *Midnight Express* was banned in Türkiye, despite intense curiosity and constant discourse around it. For the Turkish population, who were prevented from watching its antecedent, *Not Without My Daughter* provided an opportunity to see what Hollywood had to say about a similar situation in a neighboring country. Newspapers at the time utilized these censorship threats and various polemics around the movie to increase the buzz around the TV screenings. For example, the centrist newspapers *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* both used negative reactions to the movie to draw in viewers: "The film based on Betty Mahmudi's book attempts to come to screens once again"; "This time it will be broadcast!"; "The sensational film is on screen again! In addition to those who have liked and praised the film, others have protested it with hatred. Now it is your turn to decide."⁵³ In 1993, that is, between the years

⁵¹ Pınar Yanmaz, "The Role of Cinema in Presentation of Tourism," *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Elektronik Dergisi* no. 1–2 (2014): 112–39; Dilek Kaya-Mutlu, "The Midnight Express (1978) Phenomenon and the Image of Turkey," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no. 3 (2005): 475–96.

⁵² Haluk Şahin, "Midnight Express 20 Years Later: A Turkish Nightmare," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 15, no. 5 (1998): 21–22, 21. See also, Dilek Kaya-Mutlu, *The Midnight Express Phenomenon: The International Reception of the Film Midnight Express, 1978–2004* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2005).

⁵³ *Hürriyet*, TV Guide, October 30, 1995, 24; *Milliyet*, October 30, 1995, 28; *Milliyet*, February 7, 1997, 24.

the Turkish translation of the book appeared and the first TV screening of the movie took place, a private TV channel also broadcast *Midnight Express* for the first time.⁵⁴ In other words, in the capitalist media landscape of the turn of the century, the preestablished similitude allowed the two films to become sensation-seeking ads for each other.

If similarity boosted attention, difference helped sustain it. The second reason why Turks did not dismiss *Not Without My Daughter* out of hand might have been that, between the 1970s and 1990s, Hollywood became smarter about concealing its anti-Muslim racism. In *Midnight Express*, every single Turkish character is unequivocally bad, including Billy Hayes's lawyer. As Aslihan Onaran has written, the film does not have a single Turk who is not "barbaric, dirty, corrupt, and sexually and emotionally exploitative."⁵⁵ Oliver Stone's Oscar-winning screenplay confirms this wholesale condemnation of a people with an expletive-packed speech Hayes gives in court, in which he calls Turks "a nation of pigs." The movie's racism was so airtight that Billy Hayes, the author of the memoir, spoke out against it years later: "I loved the movie, but I wish they'd shown some good Turks. You don't see a single one in the movie, and there were a lot of them, even in the prison."⁵⁶

Iranians fared better in *Not Without My Daughter* insofar as a couple were cast as kind and helpful human beings. In the movie, Betty Mahmoody calls Iran "a backward, primitive country" unfit for raising a child. The plot, the mise-en-scène, and the behavior of the main characters repeatedly corroborate these observations. However, given the long-standing strain of "romantic exoticism" in US narratives about "Persia," the movie also taps into the duality of Western Persophilia and Iranophobia, valorizing prerevolutionary Iran with references to its cultural heritage while condemning contemporary Iran by associating it with oppression, filth, and violence.⁵⁷ Thus, the film's "good" Iranians not only embody Western qualities, such as wearing ties and listening to classical music, but also wax poetic about Persian gardens and mystical poetry. In other words, *Not Without My Daughter* follows what Evelyn Alsultany has called a strategy of "simplified complex representations" in which negative stereotypes are both promoted and "balanced" through

⁵⁴ Mutlu, "The Midnight Express (1978) Phenomenon," 490.

⁵⁵ Aslihan Tokgöz Onaran, "Öteki'ne Bakış: Batılı ve 'Öteki' Türk Kimlikleri Arasındaki İlişkinin Amerikan Sinemasında İmgelenmesi," in *Kimlikler Lütfe: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Kültürel Kimlik Arayışı ve Temsili*, ed. Gönül Pultar (Ankara: ODTÜ, 2009), 434–47, 435.

⁵⁶ John Flinn, "The Real Billy Hayes Regrets 'Midnight Express' Cast all Turks in a Bad Light," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, January 9, 2004, <https://bit.ly/44nrQxV>.

⁵⁷ For romantic exoticism, see Marr, *Roots of American Islamicism*, 13; Dabashi, *Persophilia*.

various strategies, such as positive representations of people from the same ethnic group.⁵⁸

Of course, as Alsultany has demonstrated, the presence of sympathetic characters does not necessarily eliminate the problem of racial stereotyping. Instead, it can strengthen ideas about what “good” and “bad” Muslims are and obscure how such representations can boost unjust policies.⁵⁹ However, they do make for an easier defense for the producers. Despite pages and pages of negative generalizations about Iranian clothing, food, and toilet habits – not to mention gender and sexual relations – Betty Mahmoody rejected all accusations of racism by emphasizing the presence of the good Iranians in the source text and the movie. Unlike Billy Hayes, scenarist Oliver Stone, and even director Alan Parker, all of whom eventually expressed some regrets about the excesses of *Midnight Express* and emphasized the fictional nature of the ultimate story depicted, Mahmoody insisted on the direct link between her account and reality to the end: “My life with my husband and our daughter was exactly as I recount in my book. I stand by my story in every detail.”⁶⁰ Thus, it is likely that the different approaches to racial stereotyping, operating alongside the public statements of the texts’ creators, made Turkish audiences less inclined to dismiss *Not Without My Daughter* as a simplistic work of anti-Iranian propaganda.

Perhaps the largest difference explaining the popularity of *Not Without My Daughter* in Türkiye may be the fact that Billy Hayes escaped from Türkiye to Greece and Betty Mahmoody from Iran to Türkiye to get back to the United States. A closer look at the memoirs and the movie muddies the sharp Iran–Türkiye comparison the broad plotline of border-crossing initially seems to establish. Even though the snowy mountain crossing constitutes a climactic moment, in the book, the movie, and Betty Mahmoody’s other accounts, Türkiye is not at all a special or nice place.⁶¹ Its only key significance is that it shares a border with Iran and hosts a US embassy. In fact, Betty initially decides to escape through the Persian Gulf, but her plans change at the last minute due to unforeseen events.

The Türkiye scenes of the movie appear abrupt, and the capital Ankara – best known for its mid-century brutalist architecture – is made to look like a small, dilapidated village. Ultimately, the only difference between Ankara and Tehran is the presence of the Latin alphabet and

⁵⁸ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 21.

⁵⁹ Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*, 28; Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.

⁶⁰ Onaran, “Öteki’ne Bakış,” 439; Mahmoody, *For the Love of a Child*, 268.

⁶¹ Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*, 399.

the fact that Betty Mahmoody can now walk around without a headscarf. The buildings are just like those in Tehran: old, dirty, and about to crumble. However, on the other side of the street stands the US embassy with its Eden-like garden – a visual reference to the beginning scenes of the movie when the family interacted peacefully in the beautiful, green garden of their riverfront home in Michigan.⁶²

Betty Mahmoody herself highlighted the similarity between Türkiye and Iran as foils to the United States in some of her statements. The border between Türkiye and the US embassy was, at least to her, more important than the border between Iran and Türkiye. She noted that she lobbied to have the final scene with the US embassy and the American flag flapping in the wind included in the movie: “I countered that crossing the Iran-Turkish border was not our point of security, that we didn’t feel safe until we could see a symbol of security, our flag.”⁶³

Despite Mahmoody’s ambivalence about the Iran–Türkiye border, Hollywood depicting Türkiye as an “okay” place for the first time in recent memory probably made *Not Without My Daughter* much more attractive to Turkish viewers. Advertising materials underplayed the Orientalist connotations of the text, sometimes even stating Betty Mahmoody had escaped “to Türkiye” from Iran, even though her account made clear that she saw herself as escaping home to the United States (via Türkiye) from Iran.⁶⁴

Even if Türkiye’s mild goodness did not deliver, Iran’s severe “badness” in the film definitely had special resonance for a significant portion of the Turkish public in the political context of the 1990s. The following section focuses on that context and explores how Türkiye’s ruling elite modified and mobilized American visions of Iran against their fellow citizens.

The Headscarf Crisis and Weaponized Similitude

What makes Middle Easterners look at the West decked out in Eastern costumes and say, “This could be us”? In 1990s Türkiye, the answer to this question involved a specific item of clothing: the headscarf. In other words, the final reason *Not Without My Daughter* became so popular in

⁶² Zahra Āqājānī, “Taḥlīl-i nishānī-shinākhtī-yi film-i bidūn-i dukhtaram hargiz,” *Naqd-i Adabī* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1387/2008): 163–89, 171; *Not Without My Daughter*, directed by Brian Gilbert (Hollywood, CA, Pathé, 1991), DVD.

⁶³ Mahmoody, *For the Love of a Child*, 243. See also, Kari Hawkins, “American Flag Was ‘Point of Safety’ For Mother, Daughter Held Prisoner in Iran,” *States News Service*, March 26, 2010, <https://shorturl.at/pUtZ2>.

⁶⁴ See, for example, “Kızım Olmadan Asla,” *Hürriyet TV Guide*, October 30, 1995, 24.

Türkiye relates to the political climate of the era, specifically prevailing debates around laicism, the headscarf ban, and the country's attempts to join the EU.

As Leila Ahmad demonstrates, veiling saw a resurgence in visibility across West Asia and North Africa with the rise of political Islam in the 1970s.⁶⁵ More and more young women took up new forms of modest dress that "signaled at once both the modernity of its wearers and their Islamic commitment."⁶⁶ However, since the Kemalist image of modern Turkish womanhood prioritized European-style clothing, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, women who began to enter educational institutions and the professions with headscarves faced backlash and discrimination. Given the absence of any national laws targeting women's dress, these restrictions operated in a haphazard and localized manner. As noted, Türkiye's first nationwide headscarf ban arrived in the aftermath of the 1980 coup – a time during which the military was reasserting its authority over the political and civilian spheres through murder, torture, and intellectual revisionism.

Throughout the 1980s, as the regimes of Türkiye and Iran solidified new configurations between state and religion, they also experienced pushback and opposition, especially around issues related to women. During the Iran–Iraq War, with vast numbers of men engaged in combat, the need for reforms to the strict interpretations of Islamic law on family matters became undeniable. As a result, the 1980s and 1990s saw multiple reforms expanding women's rights in education, careers, and the domestic sphere. The Iranian women's press led the way in constructing what some have called "Islamic feminism," whereby theological arguments were utilized to expand women's choices and opportunities.⁶⁷ Contesting

⁶⁵ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 68–116.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 83. Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Haleh Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). See also Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post Khomeini Iran," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (London: University of London, 1996), 285–319; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Divorce, Veiling, and Feminism in Post-Khomeini Iran," in *Women and Politics in the Third World*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London: Routledge, 1996), 284–320; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth," in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press, 1998), 59–84; Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: The Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 2 (2004): 375–92; Fereshteh Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (2006): 33–53.

forced veiling, however, remained taboo, even for the reformist press.⁶⁸ During this era, Iranian women's resistance to restrictive clothing laws functioned in an "apolitical," individualized manner, visible in uncoordinated practices of bad-covering. Activists working on expanding women's rights in the country did not focus on dress codes. Even the bold Iranian civic society campaign, One Million Signatures Against Gender Oppression, which was launched a decade later in 2006, contained no open demands regarding compulsory veiling.⁶⁹

In Türkiye, however, clothing rose to the center of national politics after the 1980 ban. During this period, a newly energized feminist movement with laicist commitments challenged Kemalist paternalism and sexual puritanism.⁷⁰ At the same time, Muslim women activists demanded visibility and respect in the public sphere on different terms and regularly found themselves at odds with laicist feminists.⁷¹ Along with protests supporting preacher-prayer leader (*imam-hatip*) schools, headscarf protests constituted the public face of Islamist activism in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1989, the elected government relaxed its position on the headscarf ban by delegating the issue to the universities.⁷² This decree eased the way for some women but not others, and tensions continued to boil over.

In December 1995, Necmettin Erbakan's new Islamist party, Refah (Welfare), came out of the general elections with the largest percentage of votes (21.38%), followed closely by two center-right parties. Earlier that year, Türkiye had signed a Customs Union Agreement with the EU, and the rise of Refah with its anti-Western orientation, signified by its leaders' opposition to joining the EU, rattled the laicist elite. Using their political and media platforms, anti-Refah factions generated a moral panic around headscarves, specifically the modern forms of Islamic dress that included a tightly pinned headscarf. These, they argued, were different from the "traditional" headscarves worn apolitically by "mothers" and "grandmothers" and symbolized a dire threat to the republic.⁷³

⁶⁸ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Conservative – Reformist Conflict over Women's Rights in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 37–53, 41.

⁶⁹ Nüşin Ahmadi Khurāsānī, *Junbish-i yek milyūn imzā: rivāyatī az darūn* (self-pub., Tehran, 1386/2007), <https://bit.ly/3RVP073>.

⁷⁰ Sibel Erol, "Sexual Discourse in Turkish Fiction: Return of the Repressed Female Identity," *Edebiyat* 6, no. 2 (1995): 187–202.

⁷¹ Yeşim Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, 78–83.

⁷² Elisabeth Özdalga, *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 46.

⁷³ Perin Gürel, "Good Headscarf, Bad Headscarf: Drawing the (Hair)lines of Turkishness," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5, no. 2 (2018): 171–93.

Fighting the electoral success of Refah and hoping to keep the headscarf ban in place, the county's laicist elite escalated efforts to find similarities and links between Türkiye's Islamists and the Islamic Republic next door. Laicist slogans singled out Iran: "Türkiye will not become Iran!" "Mollas go to Iran!"⁷⁴ Laicist politicians promising they would not form a coalition with the Refah party exclaimed "Refah ile Asla" (Never with the Welfare Party), echoing *Not Without My Daughter's* Turkish title "Kızım Olmadan Asla" (Never without My Daughter).⁷⁵

The association established between Refah's electoral successes and women's forced veiling in Iran grew so strong that the women politicians of Refah felt the need to hold a press conference to publicly promise that they were not trying to "turn Türkiye into Iran" and that they would not force veiling onto Turkish women.⁷⁶ Such promises had little effect on the toxic political atmosphere, which highlighted similarity. After the formation of a coalition government between Refah and the center-right True Path party (DYP), Prime Minister Erbakan made his first overseas trip to Iran, further allowing laicists to complain that Türkiye was on the way to becoming "another Iran."

Even as Turkish laicists used *Not Without My Daughter's* Iran as a comparative trope, Iran was changing. Taking office in 1989, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had initiated the country's postwar reconstruction period, prioritizing regional trade as part of a policy of economic liberalization.⁷⁷ He welcomed the Turkish PM's outreach in this spirit, unlike Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi, who used Erbakan's visit to his country as an excuse to go on a "fierce anti-Turkish tirade," attacking the country's pro-US and pro-Israel foreign policy.⁷⁸ Following Rafsanjani, the formation of a loose coalition of Islamist and secular intellectuals, activists, and aligned clergy fueled the 1997 election of reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami.⁷⁹ While gathering some positive press, the ascendance of the Iranian reform movement did little to assuage Turkish laicist rhetoric and policy. The same year Khatami was elected, on February 28, 1997, Refah was forced out of government in Türkiye by a military memorandum – labeled a "soft" or "postmodern" coup – and its leaders were banned from participating in politics.

⁷⁴ Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State*, 25.

⁷⁵ Merve Kavakçı İslam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey: A Postcolonial Reading* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 67.

⁷⁶ Nilüfer Arat, "Refahlı Kadınlar: İran Olmayacağız," *Milliyet*, March 8, 1997, 26.

⁷⁷ Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1797*, 346–48.

⁷⁸ Stephen Kinzer, "Tirade by Qaddafi Stuns Turkey's Premier," *New York Times*, October 6, 1996, 6.

⁷⁹ Nikki R. Keddie, "Women in Iran since 1979," *Social Research* 67, no. 2 (2000): 411.

Writing next spring, the editorial team of the Iranian magazine *Naqd-i Sīnamā* blamed the fall of Refah squarely on *Not Without My Daughter*. Their editorial argued the movie had been “built simply with the aim of denigrating the people of Iran and their religious beliefs.” As propaganda, it “was used to prevent the spread of Islamic and revolutionary thoughts among the region’s people.” The mission had been successful, as evinced, among other regional developments, by the fact that “in Türkiye, the Refah Party did not continue after a few months, and its leaders were taken to court.”⁸⁰

Of course, an American movie about Iran did not single handedly spark a coup in Türkiye. *Not Without My Daughter* was only one of many texts establishing connections between the rise of political Islam in Türkiye and the neighboring Islamic Republic. Internationally, the 1990s were marked by an increased focus on militant Islamism, as the end of the Cold War saw a redrawing of global power lines.⁸¹ Türkiye saw a rise in separatist Kurdish militancy after the first Gulf War; unresolved assassinations of left-wing and laicist opinion leaders galvanized public opinion, with the media increasingly pointing fingers at Iran for both.⁸² US and Israeli intelligence reports casting Iran as a leading exporter of terrorism only added fuel to the fire.

During this decade, corruption among the highest echelons of Türkiye’s ruling class became evident; the 1996 Susurluk incident, in particular, revealed that the Turkish intelligence agency (MIT) had recruited the criminal underground and fascist militias to counter the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), sparking intense public discourse about “the deep state.” Manufactured panic around laicism, however, helped shift the tone of the news cycle.⁸³ The rhetoric in state-aligned Turkish and Iranian newspapers soon escalated to what scholars have called a “symbolic Cold War” or the “press war,” highlighting clashing political systems and iconographies.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Dasthā-yi pusht-i pardi (pīsh-gūyihā-yi Nūstir Ādāmūs),” *Naqd-i Sīnamā*, no. 13 (1377/1998): 159–62, 162.

⁸¹ Calabrese, “Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship,” 75–94. The rise of “Clash of Civilizations” rhetoric epitomized this turn in the United States (see Chapter 5).

⁸² Betül Özyılmaz, “Türkiye–İran İlişkilerinde Belirleyici Etmen Olarak Karşılıklı Algılar,” in *İran: Değişen İç Dinamikler ve Türkiye–İran İlişkileri*, ed. Soyalp Tamçelik (Ankara: Gazi, 2014), 296–98; Bayram Sinkaya, “Türkiye – İran İlişkilerinde Çatışma Noktaları ve Analizi,” in *4. Türkiye–İran İşikleri Sempozyumu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2008), 51; Bülent Keneş, *İran: Tehdit mi, Fırsat mı?* (İstanbul: TİMAŞ, 2012), 125–36.

⁸³ Baskın Oran, “‘Derin Devlet’ Tartışması,” in *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, vol. 2: 1980–2001, ed. Baskın Oran (İstanbul: İletişim, 2013), 220.

⁸⁴ Süha Bölükbaşı, *Türkiye ve Yakınındaki Ortadoğu* (Ankara: Dış Politika Enstitüsü, 1992), 101–06; Keneş, *İran*, 105–06.

Still, Türkiye's political factions disagreed on the correct policy to follow with Iran. Elected governments alternated their approach from skeptical to warm along a spectrum of laicism–Islamism; the diplomatic corps pushed for stability and balance; and the military security council pursued a confrontational approach short of armed conflict.⁸⁵ With the 1997 “postmodern” coup, the military's perspective would become dominant, overlap with that of the laicist coalition government that had replaced Refah, and boost the hardline rhetoric emanating from the media cartels.

The generals who led the 1997 coup that ousted Refah from power initiated a neo-republican program called “the February 28 Process” aimed at suppressing populist Islam. Reinforcing the headscarf ban more strictly was a key point in their program. Military officials held meetings with laicist opinion leaders, informing them of the severity of the Islamist danger. The national security materials fed to the press by military sources increasingly included candid videos of religious orders, leaders, and groups considered reactionary (*irticacı*), coupled with Kurdish guerrilla training camps.⁸⁶ The images of dark veils, robes, and long beards in these videos were intended to signify danger to the state and national unity, as did images of PKK fighters crouching with assault rifles.

The Turkish military council designated a new Higher Education Council president, who began to enforce the headscarf ban at all universities, investigating reluctant administrators. Students who refused to unveil were harassed and pressured in the notorious “persuasion chambers” established on campuses. As a college student in Istanbul in the 1999–2000 school year, I remember all too vividly the guards placed at university gates to prevent headscarved women from entering. Classmates with headscarves often wore wigs to hide their hair and changed their clothes in the bathrooms. My own punk-inspired clothing choices were probably on the opposite side of what the Turkish authorities considered proper, but once, a security guard even stopped me because I was wearing a beanie in the dead of a cold winter.

In this charged political atmosphere, the Fazilet (Virtue) Party, which had emerged as Refah's successor, began drawing suspicions of pushing for an Iranian-style Islamic Republic. In April 1999, tensions rose when

⁸⁵ Keneş, *İran*, 142.

⁸⁶ Cabas, 2001, 17; Kavakçı İslam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey*, 71. Also see F. Michael Wuthrich, “Commercial Media, the Military, and Society in Turkey during Failed and Successful Interventions,” *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 217–34; Ümit Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Menderes Çınar, “Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism, and Politics in the Light of the February 28 Process,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2–3 (2003): 309–32.

two women wearing headscarves were elected to the Turkish Parliament. When the representative for the right-wing nationalist party MHP agreed to remove her headscarf before entering the parliament, all eyes turned to Merve Kavakçı, the 31-year-old representative for Fazilet. On May 2, 1999, Merve Kavakçı entered the Turkish Parliament wearing a navy blue pantsuit and a headscarf. She was booed and prevented from taking her oath as the representatives of the laicist parties blocked her way to the podium.⁸⁷ The left-leaning Prime Minister Ecevit rose to the podium to condemn Kavakçı, exclaiming, “Please show this lady her place” (*had-dini bildirin*).⁸⁸ That day, Kavakçı left the building without securing her oath to become a verified MP.

From his prestigious column in the best-selling *Hürriyet* newspaper, Ertuğrul Özkök argued that, in blocking Kavakçı, Ecevit had replicated the brave actions of the Spanish parliamentarians who had stopped a Francoist coup attempt in 1981.⁸⁹ Özkök thus likened a single, democratically elected female deputy attempting to take her seat to an armed attack on the republic. The severity of the situation, according to his column, even explained and justified the bullying of Kavakçı’s daughters at their school.

Throughout the Kavakçı crisis, from the top levels of the Turkish government down to the people on the street, Iran-baiting became an important tool for supporters of the Turkish headscarf ban. President Süleyman Demirel stated that the path of Kavakçı, the “agent provocateur,” risked turning the country into Iran.⁹⁰ Prime Minister Ecevit made a speech arguing Iran’s attempts to export its ideology were behind the chaos unleashed by the headscarf crisis.⁹¹ Laicist newspapers began publishing images of Iranian women in black chadors who had gathered to support Kavakçı (Figure 4.1). “Here are her friends!” exclaimed a front-page headline in *Sabah* under one such photo, counting on the black chadors and the photo of the bearded, turbaned Ayatollah Khamenei to make the point that Kavakçı’s behavior had put her beyond the pale of Turkishness.⁹² Provoked by the nationalist rhetoric, Turkish women and men came out in droves to protest Kavakçı, this time yelling, “Merves go to Iran!”

⁸⁷ Richard Peres, *The Day Turkey Stood Still: Merve Kavakçı’s Walk into the Turkish Parliament* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2012).

⁸⁸ “Meclis Devlete Meydan Okunacak Yer Değildir,” *Hürriyet*, May 3, 1999, first page.

⁸⁹ Ertuğrul Özkök, “Ecevit O Gece Neleri Kurtardı,” *Hürriyet*, May 7, 1999, www.hurriyet.com.tr/ertugrul-ozkok-ecevit-o-gece-neleri-kurtardi-39077984.

⁹⁰ “Ajan Provokatörü Bilerek Söyledim,” *Hürriyet*, May 5, 1999, 1.

⁹¹ “İran Kendi İdeolojisini İhraç İçin Çalışıyor,” *Hürriyet*, May 10, 1999, 24.

⁹² “İşte Dostları,” *Sabah*, May 9, 1999, front page.



Figure 4.1 “Support for Merve from Iran,” *Hürriyet*, May 9, 1999, 28. This photograph of Iranian women in black chadors supporting Merve Kavakçı appeared in multiple laicist newspapers, including *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah*, on May 9, 1999.

Turkish feminists associated with KA.DER, a feminist non-profit organization that was founded to support women’s political candidacies, marginalized Kavakçı during this entire process.⁹³ After Kavakçı was denied the oath, KA.DER released a statement in favor of regulations on women’s dress at the parliament, asking for stipulations requiring “an uncovered head” to be made explicit.⁹⁴ KA.DER representatives also minimized Kavakçı’s agency, calling her a “pawn” of Islamist men, such as Erbakan, working behind the scenes.⁹⁵ A year before, the organization had published a book about the electoral rights of women titled *Never Without Women* in allusion to the Turkish title of *Not Without My*

⁹³ Kavakçı Islam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey*, 112.

⁹⁴ Ruhat Mengi, “KA.DER Niye Sessiz?,” *Sabah*, May 14, 1999, 8.

⁹⁵ Stephen Kinzer, “Musings on Freedom, by Wearer of Muslim Scarf,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1999, A4; “Bir Hocanın İnadi,” *Hürriyet*, May 2, 1999, 26.

Daughter.⁹⁶ The collection did include an interview with another female member of Fazilet, Nazlı Ilıcak, who was not wearing a headscarf, which suggested KA.DER's stance against Kavakçı was directly focused on the candidate's appearance as opposed to her party's platform.⁹⁷ Thus, a Hollywood movie that claimed to advocate for women's rights in Iran was used to justify denying the first elected woman representative with a headscarf her seat in parliament in Türkiye.

Given the intensity of the rhetoric against Iran activated by the Kavakçı affair, Tehran called in the Turkish ambassador for an explanation.⁹⁸ On May 11, 1999, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamal Kharazi asked the Turkish government to moderate its rhetoric against Iran: "The events unfolding in Türkiye are not related to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and we hope the Turkish state will evaluate its domestic problems with a realistic outlook and not attribute them to others."⁹⁹ The triangulated politics of representation between Iran, Türkiye, and the United States, however, did not only flow in one direction. As I explore in the next section, Iranians used Türkiye and its connections to the United States as a convenient domestic motif as well.

Islamic Feminism and the Limits of Solidarity

Already in a "symbolic cold war" with Türkiye's post-coup regime, conservative Iranian news outlets used the Kavakçı affair to condemn Turkish laicism, publishing multiple articles, opinion pieces, and editorial cartoons about the headscarf crisis every single day.¹⁰⁰ "In the one-way street of laicism, religion does not have the right to intervene in politics," observed an editorial in the semi-official *Keyhan* newspaper wryly, "however, politics can intervene in all religious affairs."¹⁰¹ Türkiye was a useful foil to prop up Iran's own arrangement of religion and politics.

Although regime-linked news outlets emphasized the spontaneous and voluntary nature of the Iranian support for Kavakçı, a great deal of agitation about Turkish laicism was led by political hardliners. Conservative woman MP Nayereh Akhavan-Bitaraf – a key figure in opposing the

⁹⁶ Yağmur Atsız, "Kadınlar Olmadan Asla," *Milliyet*, March 8, 1999.

⁹⁷ Zeynep Göğüş, ed., *Kadınlar Olmadan Asla* (Istanbul: Sabah, 1998), 194–97.

⁹⁸ "Safir-i Türkiyi dar Tehran bi vizārat-i umūr-i khārijī ihzār shud," *Hamshahrī*, 19 Urdibihisht 1378/May 9, 1999, 2.

⁹⁹ "Pāsukh-i Duktur Kharrāzī bi ihzārāt-i bī-asās-i maqāmāt-i Türkiyi," *Iran*, 19 urdibihisht 1378/May 9, 1999, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Bölükbaşı, *Türkiye ve Yakınındaki Ortadoğu*, 101–06.

¹⁰¹ Younes Shokrkhah, "Khīyābān-i yik tarafi-yi lāyik-hā," *Kiyhān*, 19 Urdibihisht 1378/May 9, 1999, 3.

gains made under Islamic feminism in the 1990s – delivered a speech supporting Kavakçı in the parliament in the name of all-female representatives.¹⁰² The protest at Tehran University was headlined by another conservative woman MP, Dr. Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi.¹⁰³

Just as Turkish visions of Iran was built on American popular culture exports, Iranians saw imperialist fingers behind Turkish laicism. During this period, Iranian media highlighted Türkiye's associations with both the United States and Israel, publicizing political ties and military collaborations alongside articles lionizing Kavakçı and maligning the Turkish state.¹⁰⁴ Although the United States figured as a negative element in Iranian depictions of Türkiye in such news, when groups within the United States criticized Türkiye's headscarf ban, the Iranian media was quick to publicize that as well.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the ruling elite in each country referenced the United States to critique the other's undemocratic structures and justify their own injustices.

For the laicist Turkish newspapers, the images of Iranian women in chadors supporting Kavakçı were enough to argue that Iran's hardliners were behind the chaos Kavakçı had unleashed. However, a significant portion of the support for Kavakçı in Iran came from women reformists, such as Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani and Dr. Zahra Rahnavard. These women were trailblazers in their own right. At the time, Rahnavard was the first woman to lead a university in Iran. She made a speech during the pro-Kavakçı protests at El Zahra University and wrote an open letter of support to Kavakçı, stating, "Sister Merve Kavakçı, you are victorious, and the nation that has produced you and chosen you will last forever."¹⁰⁶ For such statements, the laicist Turkish press accused her of "insolence" (*küstahlık*).¹⁰⁷

Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of former president Rafsanjani and the founder of the reformist women's newspaper *Zan*, which was banned within a year of its founding, was serving in the Iranian Parliament when

¹⁰² "Namāyandigān-i zan-i majlis, barkhurd-i dulat-i Turkīyi bā namāyandih-yi muhajjābi-yi pārlimān-i īn kishvar rā bi shiddat maḥkūm kardand," *Junhūrī-yi Islāmī*, 16 Urdībihisht 1378/May 6, 1999, 12.

¹⁰³ "Himāyat-i zanān-i Irānī az Marvīh Kāvākhī," *Zan-i Ruz*, no. 3, 20 Urdībihisht 1378/May 10, 1999, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Mahdī Guljān, "Lāyikhā, hijāb va dastān-i Āmrīkā," *Kiyhān*, 26 Urdībihisht 1378/May 5, 1999, 16; "Turkiyi panjāh farvand hilikūptir-i nizāmī az Āmrīkā mīkharad," *Hamshahrī*, 28 Urdībihisht 1378/May 18, 1999, 15.

¹⁰⁵ "Salb-i tābi'iyat-i Kāvākhī, lakki-yi nangī dar tārikh-i siyāsī-yi Turkīyi ast," *Kiyhān*, 26 Urdībihisht 1378/May 16, 1999, 16.

¹⁰⁶ "Shakhsīyathā, sāzmānhā va dafātir-i umūr-i zanān mukhālefāt-i dulat-i Turkīyi bā vurūd-i yik namāyandi-yi muhajjābih rā maḥkūm kardand," *Iran*, 16 Urdībihisht 1378/May 6, 1999, 4.

¹⁰⁷ "Çirkin Gösteri," *Sabah*, May 9, 1999, 26.

Kavakçı was ejected from the Turkish one. One of the top MPs in Tehran, she was a long-time advocate for women's rights, with a special focus on sports. As an editorial by the famous Iranian satirist Ebrahim Nabavi put it, Kavakçı's outside appearance was a problem for the Turkish Parliament, but not her political "contents," whereas the reverse had been true for Hashemi, whose reformist views exposed her to criticism, harassment, and, eventually, imprisonment.¹⁰⁸ On May 12, 1999, Hashemi addressed an open letter of support to Merve Kavakçı, asking her not to think of herself as alone in her struggle.¹⁰⁹ Kavakçı, however, rejected all Iranian offers of sisterhood and solidarity wholesale, declaring "there's nothing to be gained from support which comes from a state that curbs freedoms."¹¹⁰

In mentioning the rejected outreach, Robert Olson bemoans that these reformist Muslim women could not unite to battle sexist policies across nation-state boundaries.¹¹¹ The moment of broken solidarity is indeed jarring enough to generate some what-ifs. What would have allowed these women to "recognize" each other as sisters? What structural blocks foreclosed transnational Islamic feminist solidarity? The next few paragraphs delineate how individual, national, and international levels overlapped to foreclose meaningful connections and collaborations between Iranian and Turkish Muslim women activists, despite the similarities in the movements' goals.

The nation-state emerges as an apparent breaking point, impacting multiple factors. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, the hyphen between "nation" and "state" signifies the imperfect overlap between the nation as an "imagined community" of individuals supposedly sharing ethnic, cultural, and religious traits, and the state as the internationally recognized political entity claiming the right to represent and rule this community.¹¹² The imperfect overlap of these two constructions ("nation" and "state") is apparent in the Turkish laicist outcry over Kavakçı's headscarf, in Kavakçı's retort to the laicists, and in her rejection of Iranian women's outreach.

¹⁰⁸ Ebrahim Nabavi, "Dah tafāvut-i asāsi-i Marvīh Kāvākchī va Fā'izi Hāshimī," *Nishāt*, 25 Urdibihisht 1378/May 15, 1999, 3.

¹⁰⁹ "Fā'izi Hāshimī dar nāmi-yi khatāb bi namāyandi-yi bāhijāb-i Turkīyi i'lām kard: "Mudāfi'ān-i huquq-i bashar dar barābar-i raftār-i ghiyr-i insāni-yi lāyikhā sukūt kardi-and," *Īrān*, 22 Urdibihisht 1378/May 12, 1999, 3.

¹¹⁰ "Turkey's Veiled MP Defends Herself Against Secularist Onslaught," *Mideast Mirror* 14, no. 96 (1999), accessed via Nexis Uni. See also, "Kavakçı İran'ı Reddetti," *Milliyet*, May 25, 1999, 17; Nayereh Tohidi, "Piyvand-i jahāni-yi junbish-i zanān-i Irān," *Guft u gū*, no. 38 (1382/2004): 25–50, 32.

¹¹¹ Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations*, 50.

¹¹² Benedict Anderson, introduction to *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), 1–16, 8.

In condemning Kavakçı as an agent provocateur, Türkiye's laicists promoted an overlap between the nation, the regime, and the state. This was apparent when Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit stated that the parliament "is no place to threaten the state" (*devlet*).¹¹³ As a rebuttal, Kavakçı identified a disconnect between the prevailing regime and the people's will and, therefore, between the state and the nation. Pointing out that she campaigned and was democratically elected while wearing a headscarf, she argued that she was sent by the nation (*millet*) to serve in its name.¹¹⁴ In this formulation, the laicist regime was guilty of severing the nation from the state by not allowing democratic representation in parliament.

Her Iranian supporters echoed Kavakçı's reasoning about the wishes of Türkiye's people and even used sympathetic Turkish nationalist language, as when Rahnavard stated in her outreach to Kavakçı, "You are victorious, and the nation that has produced you and chosen you will last forever." Yet, in Kavakçı's response to this outreach, we once again find a presumed overlap between the nation, the state, and the regime, in which all Iranian support emanates from "a state that curbs freedoms."

Certainly, Kavakçı's Turkish detractors, in associating her with the Iranian system of government, had made it very difficult for her to accept any type of positive outreach from that country. However, her published response further erased nuance. In a homogenizing move, her wording collapsed any difference between Iranian reformists and hard-liners, between the people and the regime. The rejection transferred the negative stereotypes her Turkish detractors imposed on her across the nation-state boundary.

It would be all too easy to end the story of failed solidarity here. Transnational feminist critique, however, is most useful when it can be structural and power-conscious instead of focusing inordinately on individual, low-power actors who may willingly or unwittingly further oppressive discourses.¹¹⁵ Going a small step up the power grid would mean noting that the male leaders of Kavakçı's party, fearing for their political futures, did not come to her defense. Türkiye's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was then the past mayor of Istanbul and a rising political star. He remained silent about the crisis. Abdullah Gül, who would become president in 2007, reportedly suggested Kavakçı

¹¹³ "Burası Devlete Meydan Okunacak Yer Değildir," *Nokta*, May 9–15, 1999, front cover.

¹¹⁴ "Gönüllerin Vekili," *Yeni Şafak*, May 4, 1999, front page.

¹¹⁵ Perin E. Gürel, "Broken Solidarities: Retraining Transnational Feminist Critique on 'the Master's House,'" in *Meditations on Religion and Broken Solidarities*, ed. Atalia Omer and Joshua Lupo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 17–44.

change her style of headscarf to minimize the perceived offense to laicism.¹¹⁶ Yet, at the time, their party (Fazilet) was under investigation and barely a year away from being shut down and banned. As a result, its leaders had little maneuvering room to take defiant stances on hot-button issues.

Even more powerful than Fazilet's leaders were the primary wielders of political rhetoric in Türkiye (President Süleyman Demirel, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, the generals, the legislative branch, and the media cartels). They followed a multipronged strategy combining nationalist, universalist, and religious language, further foreclosing avenues for transnational solidarity. The laicist media described Kavakçı's style of a tightly pinned headscarf as a foreign export and, therefore, as a political symbol demanding an Iran-style Islamist regime.¹¹⁷ President Demirel condemned her actions as *fitne* (sedition), mobilizing this Qur'anic concept politically to defend laicism long before the Islamic Republic of Iran popularized its use against the leading figures of the Green movement (c. 2009).¹¹⁸ Using religious language to defend a system of secularism helped construct Kavakçı's appearance as simultaneously constituting a politico-religious assault on Kemalism and failing to abide by the post-coup Turkish-Islamic synthesis. By this formulation, the democratically elected MP was beyond the pale of the state, the nation, the regime, and Islam.

Although I believe it was not the nation-state's sturdiness but its vulnerability as an imperfect construction that primarily contributed to the failure of transnational solidarity, nation-state boundaries also played a role in circumscribing the discursive field. In addition to having contrasting histories of secularist-Islamist feminist collaboration, domestic political reformists in Türkiye and Iran often mobilized different discursive frameworks. In her fieldwork based on the first decade of the twenty-first century, Mona Tajali has demonstrated how Iranian reformist women's arguments for the expansion of women's opportunities referenced sacred sources such as the Qur'an, in contrast to the statements of Turkish Islamist women, who often used the "secular" language of human rights.¹¹⁹ Kavakçı was no exception to this: She exclusively used a liberal, human rights framing in arguing for her right to serve while

¹¹⁶ Peres, *The Day Turkey Stood Still*, 63.

¹¹⁷ Gürel, "Good Headscarf, Bad Headscarf."

¹¹⁸ "Bu Hanım Ajandır," *Sabah*, May 3, 1999, 27.

¹¹⁹ Mona Tajali, "Islamic Women's Groups and the Quest for Political Representation in Turkey and Iran," *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 563–81. Tajali's work examines the first decade of the twentieth century, but her observations hold for this earlier era as well, especially regarding Kavakçı's foregrounding of human rights language.

wearing a headscarf, citing the US Civil Rights movement as precedent and inspiration.¹²⁰

Prominent Iranian observers have suggested these different rhetorical frames contributed to the failed outreach. Writing in the reformist newspaper *Neshat*, progressive cleric Hassan Yusefi Eshkevari blamed Hashemi and Rahnavard for reaching out to Kavakçı through their shared Muslim identity and not on the basis of a universalist discourse of human rights. Calling Kavakçı's rejection an "important message" and a lesson for the Muslim women of Iran, Eshkevari argued, "In today's world, on a global or national level, religious beliefs, and moral values can only be defended through a single logic, and that logic is freedom and democracy and human rights."¹²¹ In her writings, prominent Iranian feminist Nayerreh Tohidi has echoed this assessment, suggesting that the lack of a solid commitment to freedom and democracy served as a critical determinant for the failure of Iranian Islamic feminist outreach abroad.¹²²

The claim that Iran's Islamic feminists failed to properly mobilize a universal human rights framing can lead us another step further up the power grid to examine international human rights organizations. As discussed, Türkiye was attempting to join the EU at the time. A veiled woman representative would have clashed with the "Western" image its leaders sought to project. However, here it appears as if the Turkish elite misunderstood what the EU wanted from Türkiye: a series of human rights reforms and not crackdowns on devout women's public practices of piety. Indeed, in an interview, Merve Kavakçı herself referenced a BBC news piece that had found Türkiye's headscarf law incompatible with its application for membership in the EU.¹²³

Although restricting Muslim women's rights was not a criterion of EU membership, the Kavakçı affair and the headscarf ban ultimately revealed a hidden subtext of articulated EU criteria. Türkiye did receive relatively robust criticism on human rights grounds from the EU, particularly in connection to the extensive anti-PKK military campaign it had been executing in the Southeast. However, no such objection appeared regarding the headscarf ban. When headscarf-wearing women who had suffered educational and career-based discrimination, including Kavakçı, sued the Turkish state at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR),

¹²⁰ "Headscarved Turkish Deputy Calls Incident Breach of Human Rights," *Tehran Times*, May 4, 1999, <https://bit.ly/3XYt3rD>; Kavakçı Islam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey*, 123.

¹²¹ Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, "Difā' az arziesshā bā manṭiq-i dimukrāsī," *Nishāt*, 2 Khurdād 1378/May 23, 1999, 2.

¹²² Nayerreh Tohidi, "Jinsīyat, mudernīyat va dimukrāsī," *Jins-i Duuvum* 3 (Tehran, 1378/1999): 10–23; and Tohidi, "Piyvand-i jahānī-yi junbish-i zanān-i Īrān," 32.

¹²³ "Turkey's Veiled MP Defends Herself."

they not only ran into nationalist accusations that they were “traitors” betraying their country but also revealed breaking points in European human rights rhetoric.

The ECHR’s role in the nation-state formation is itself germane to this discussion: Founded after World War II to protect citizens’ rights against the states to which they belong, the court can be read as a threat to national and cultural sovereignty, especially when the country under investigation appears peripheral to Europe. However, in *Sahin v. Türkiye*, which focused on a medical student who was denied the right to take her final exams because of her headscarf, the ECHR ruled against the right to wear the headscarf in state institutions, agreeing with the Turkish regime.¹²⁴ In 2007, a chamber of seven ECHR judges also heard Kavakçı’s case alongside those of other Fazilet party members. The court dismissed Kavakçı’s claims that her rights to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” had been violated and chose not to consider her case concerning the principles of “anti-discrimination.” The only one of her grievances it validated was the “right to free elections.” On this principle, the court ruled that the Turkish state had not been wrong per se but had taken disproportionate measures. Going further, the court cast laicism as the necessary ingredient to Turkish democracy and claimed the ruling regime’s actions – against both Kavakçı and the party she represented – were motivated by appropriate concerns: “ECHR notes that the temporary restrictions made to the complainant’s political rights are ultimately intended to protect the secular character of the Turkish political regime. Considering the importance of that principle to Turkish democracy, ECHR believes the measure pursued legitimate aims regarding the preservation of the prevailing order and the protection of the rights and liberties of others.”¹²⁵

By what alchemy did this reference to laicism convert undemocratic measures curtailing Turkish women’s rights to education and political participation into “the protection of the rights and liberties of others”? Gendered Islamophobia clearly provided a conceptual breaking point.

¹²⁴ See Angela Wu Howard, “Leveraging Legal Protection for Religious Liberty,” in *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), retrieved April 9, 2019, from <https://academic.oup.com/book/25733/chapter/193244603>; and Amélie Barras, “A Rights-Based Discourse to Contest the Boundaries of State Secularism? The Case of The Headscarf Bans in France and Turkey,” *Democratization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 1237–60. See also *Sahin v. Turkey*, App. No. 44774/98 (Eur. Ct. H.R. June 29, 2004), *aff’d*, App. No. 44774/98 (Eur. Ct. H.R. November 10, 2005) and *Kavakci v. Turkey*, App. No. 71907/01 (Eur. Ct. H.R. April 5, 2007).

¹²⁵ Author’s translation from Turkish. See “*Kavakci v. Turkey; Silay v. Turkey; Ilicak v. Turkey*,” *Human Rights Case Digest*, 17, no. 4, 2006–2007, pp. 743–46.

Saba Mahmood has demonstrated how the principles of “public order” and rhetorical distinctions made between belief and outward manifestations of faith have been used to uphold majoritarian norms in cases involving issues of “religious freedom.”¹²⁶ However, the Turkish headscarf ban was not a minority concern, given the fact that Türkiye boasted an approximately 99% Muslim population, and the headscarf was quite widespread in its various local manifestations. Moreover, it is essential to note that not all devout Turkish Muslims in the public and political spheres were penalized in the same way. Turkish laicism and the Western support for it punished Muslim women especially, even as it claimed to be freeing them specifically. In response to Muslim women’s public piety (read as both a claim upon the state and on the conscience of others), democracy, women’s rights, and even the discourse of individual “choice” – so essential to modern liberalism – could be suspended. These rhetorical conversions are even more striking because Kavakçı herself never once deflected from the liberal language of individual choice, democracy, and civil rights while making her claims.

With the headscarf ban, Turkish laicists, who held the organs of the state at the end of the twentieth century, were defending their right to determine the gendered parameters of the religion–state interaction. The ECHR, in turn, upheld the non-Islamic and patriarchal construction of “modern” civilization in the name of “public order and civil peace.”¹²⁷ In the court of international law, these two endeavors overlapped to stack the deck against Türkiye’s headscarf-wearing Muslim women. The nation-state, in other words, proved inseparable from the unequal world system and the civilizational assumptions that undergird it as a stumbling block for transnational feminist solidarity.

It is surprising that progressive Iranian commentators have been quick to blame reformist Iranian women’s excess of Islamic language for the lost solidarity. This has meant assigning near omniscience to Kavakçı, implying she made the decision consciously after reviewing the outreach rhetoric in detail and finding it unsatisfactory on universalist grounds when there is no evidence that she was interested in the operations of Iranian reformism. Despite laicist allegations, Kavakçı did not have significant ties with Iran. Instead, she was a dual Turkish and US citizen who had completed her higher education in the United States.¹²⁸ Eventually, this strong connection to the West, not her purported ties to

¹²⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹²⁷ Nehal Bhuta, “Two Concepts of Religious Freedom in the European Court of Human Rights,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (2014): 10–36, 23.

¹²⁸ Kavakçı Islam, *Headscarf Politics*, 123.

Iran, would lead to her downfall, allowing the courts to strip her Turkish citizenship through the selective application of a law governing dual citizenship. The critics also seem to expect the impossible from Hashemi Rafsanjani and Rahnavard, who had developed their mixed tactics in a local political context that tolerated only certain types of critique.

Finally, the argument that the Islamic framework was too estranged from universal human rights language to connect to Kavakçı's struggles falsely imagines "human rights" as a unique space free of religion and politics. Instead, as multiple scholars have demonstrated, hegemonic notions of Christianity and civilization are deeply embedded in the genealogy of human rights, shaping the normative secularism of Western institutions like the ECHR.¹²⁹ As noted, laicist Turkish nationalism itself did not involve the "separation" of religion and state. At its most perceptive, Iranian Islamic feminist discourse around the Turkish headscarf crisis came close to revealing these imbrications even as its proponents mobilized for Kavakçı's political rights.

Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani's open letter is a perfect example of the nuanced, multilevel perspective Iranian Islamic feminists brought to bear on the crisis. Highlighting the silence of committed defenders of human rights on the violation of Turkish Muslim women's rights under the headscarf ban, Hashemi noted, "Unfortunately, human rights are being used again as a tool for the continuation of Western imperialist oppression." Then, she continued, "Individuals who cannot tolerate Muslim women's advancement and rising consciousness are working to ensure that their presence in the political and social spheres does not progress beyond superficial and symbolic maneuvers."¹³⁰

This reference could not have been to Türkiye alone, which sought to ban precisely the "symbols" of Muslim women's public presence. Instead, the discerning reader familiar with Iranian political double-speak would have read these as comments about Iranian regime hardliners as well, who sought to contain reformist woman politicians like her. Iranian reformists thus built on the Kavakçı affair to advocate shifts

¹²⁹ Sam Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Human Rights Commitment in Modern Islam," *Human Rights and Responsibilities in the World Religions*, ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 301–64; Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹³⁰ "Fā'izi Hāshimī dar nāmi-yī khaṭāb bi namāyandi-yi bāhijāb-i Turkīyi i'lām kard: 'mudāfi'ān-i huqūq-i bashar dar barābar-i raftār-i ghiyr-i-insāni-yi lāyikhā sukūt kardi-and,' *Īrān*, no. 1229, 22 Urdūbihisht 1378/May 12, 1999, 3.

in the local political imagination, even as they launched transnational critiques toward the Turkish regime and Western entities.¹³¹ They advocated solidarity on a tactical vision of similitude, highlighting the similarity of political struggles. However, it would be incomplete to read Hashemi's words simply as underhanded "resistance" to the dominant national forces; her letter also affirms Islam's role in the public sphere and trains its most direct critique on "Western imperialist oppression."

The declaration of the Organization of Islamic University Students, quoted in the Islamic women's magazine *Zan-i Ruz*, similarly affirmed Merve's choice based on *deen* (religion), even as it called out human rights organizations in a universalist language. "It is astounding that monitors of human rights are ignoring this obvious violation of the rights of a Muslim person," declared the group with a discernable tone of sarcasm. "Have global organizations for the defense of women's rights eliminated the rights of Muslim women and those with headscarves from the foreground of their feminist lexicon?"¹³²

The 1990s were indeed a time when President Bill Clinton and neoliberal Democratic cadres, in association with liberal feminist organizations, elevated concern for Muslim women's rights to a foreign policy priority. Scholars such as Karen Garner and Kelly Shannon have demonstrated that the Clinton administration was "historic" in its willingness to let women's rights concerns override more traditional policy imperatives, in denying recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, for example.¹³³ Adopting a human rights frame emphasizing personal choice in her speeches, Kavakçı likely expected similar solidarity from the neoliberal West. In addition to referencing the US civil rights movement as an analogy, she declared she welcomed support from the United States in general, in contrast to the Iranian support she received and rejected wholesale.¹³⁴ However, the particular breach of Muslim women's rights under Türkiye's headscarf ban was not a foreign-policy deal breaker for the United States.

The Kavakçı crisis touched upon two ascendant US foreign policy concerns of the 1990s: "women's rights" and "religious freedom." Unlike the generally laudatory tone of the scholarship on the elevation of "women's rights as human rights" in the Clinton era, studies of the

¹³¹ For another example of how print commentary on Kavakçı affair was used as indirect criticism of the Iranian regime, see S. H. Pürhusaynî, "Ânci nabâyad itifâq müftâd: darbâri-yi Marvîh Kāvâkchî," *Subh-i Imrûz*, 22 Urdîbihisht 1378/May 19, 1999, 55.

¹³² "Bayânîyi-yi jâmi'i-yi islâmî-yi dânishjüyân nisbat bi mumânî'at-i namâyandi-yi bâhijâb dar Türkiyi," *Zan-i Rûz*, n. 1702 (May 5, 1999): 55.

¹³³ Karen Garner, *Gender and Foreign Policy in the Clinton Administration* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2013); Kelly J. Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 15.

¹³⁴ "Turkey's Veiled MP Defends Herself."

institutionalization of “religious freedom” as a foreign policy tool during the same period via the 1998 US International Freedom Act (IRFA) register skepticism about the role of the religious right in directing foreign policy. They also raise questions about the post-Cold War expansion of US power, and highlight contested definitions of the secular.¹³⁵ Any distinction between the largely liberal-driven push for “women’s rights” and largely conservative instrumentalization of “religious freedom” in US foreign policy, however, disappears when we compare the similar outcomes the two platforms generated concerning Türkiye’s headscarf ban.

The response to the headscarf crisis from both the Republican-controlled US Congress and the Democratic president who had just survived impeachment (albeit with improved approval ratings) was muted. Kavakçı’s plight spurred scattered protests from US-based non-governmental groups and earned a word of condemnation from Robert Seiple, America’s first ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, during a speech he gave at the Los Angeles Islamic Center.¹³⁶ The State Department’s Annual Report on International Religious Freedom noted the controversy in one paragraph. However, Türkiye was not mentioned even once in the Congressional hearings that followed.¹³⁷

The 1999 Country Report on Human Rights allocated a few paragraphs to the human rights abuses associated with the Turkish state’s campaign against Islamic “reactionaries.” Relating Kavakçı’s plight in one paragraph under the “Freedom of Religion” section, the document authors registered something akin to relief that Kavakçı’s dual citizenship had nullified the larger debate over the right to wear a headscarf in the Turkish national assembly. The document described the issue as “the personal controversy over Kavakçı’s right to wear a headscarf

¹³⁵ For example, Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Praying for the Persecuted Church: US Christian Activism in the Global Arena,” *Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 3 (2005): 321–51; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 37–65; Anna Su, *Exporting Freedom: Religious Liberty and American Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, 91–99; Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 159–92; Gregorio Bettiza, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy: Religion and American Diplomacy in a Postsecular World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Allen D. Hertzke offers a more optimistic account in *Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹³⁶ Larry B. Stammer, “An Envoy for All Faiths,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1999, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jun-12-me-45670-story.html.

¹³⁷ 2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000. House Hearing, 106th Congress – State Department Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 2000, Committee on International Relations, Y 4.IN 8/16, September 7, 2000, Serial No. 106–178.

in Parliament.” It noted that the question “became largely moot after Kavakçı was stripped of Turkish citizenship for failing to notify authorities that she had acquired a foreign nationality.”¹³⁸

Of course, the headscarf ban was hardly a “personal controversy” limited to Kavakçı’s unique circumstances but a structural injustice impacting countless women and girls. However, given Kavakçı’s personal circumstances, it is significant that neither report acknowledged that the “foreign nationality” Kavakçı had acquired was that of the United States, which would have made this an abuse of human rights experienced by an American citizen – paralleling Betty Mahmoody’s story.

President Clinton did not make a public speech about the issue. With an ongoing NATO bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, the administration’s “women’s rights” plank during this period was the use of rape as a weapon of war in Kosovo – a concern the United States shared with its NATO ally, Türkiye.¹³⁹ On November 15, 1999, the president got an opportunity to give his first speech to the same Turkish Parliament that had kicked Kavakçı out. The speech did not contain a word on the headscarf crisis. Instead, Clinton commended the government on the “momentum” it had established toward “deepening democracy at home.”¹⁴⁰

Referencing the devastating earthquakes of that year, Clinton also praised the mutual aid efforts between Greece and Türkiye. In response, the laicist Turkish press lionized the US president as one of its own. “Like a Turk!” exclaimed a *Sabah* headline.¹⁴¹ Whatever “Turkishness” Kavakçı had lost through her symbolic association with Iran and her actual ties with the United States, President Clinton seemed to have gained partially by not mentioning Kavakçı.

Official Western declarations underplaying or upholding the headscarf ban thus echoed Hollywood depictions that imagined violations of Muslim women’s rights happened only under Islamic extremism or during times of sectarian violence. They legitimized Türkiye’s own practice of denying millions of women their rights to education and political participation under the guise of protecting the same women from an Iran-like

¹³⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Turkey,” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1999, February 23, 2000, www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/1999/365.htm.

¹³⁹ “Transcript: Clinton Justifies U.S. Involvement in Kosovo,” CNN.com, May 13, 1999, www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1999/05/13/clinton.kosovo/transcript.html; Garner, *Gender and Foreign Policy*, 242–44.

¹⁴⁰ “Remarks to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara, November 15, 1999,” Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, Washington: USGPO, vol. 35, no. 46, November 22, 1999, 2385.

¹⁴¹ Marc Lacey, “In Turkey, Clinton is, for the Moment, the Hero Adored,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1999.

future in which their rights would be trampled. Iran's Islamic feminists targeted these intersecting oppressions in their statements but lacked the platform to be effective against the era's dominant ideologies.¹⁴²

On (Not) Becoming Iran

Media such as *Not Without My Daughter* tapped into real, structural injustices associated with the Iranian dress code and unequal divorce and custody laws, as well as widespread concerns regarding international child abduction cases. In fact, as a divorced mother of two, Kavakçı herself had been involved in a story similar to Betty Mahmoody's: She had spirited her daughters away from Texas to Türkiye and away from her Jordanian-American ex-husband in 1998.¹⁴³

Despite all this, Türkiye's media cartels, the ruling elite, and feminists of various stripes could have certainly drawn a more nuanced picture of Iran than the one offered by Hollywood. As noted, the period between the entry of *Not Without My Daughter* into Türkiye and the expulsion of Merve Kavakçı from the parliament overlapped with the eras of "pragmatism" under President Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and reform under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). In these years, Iranian women made significant gains in literacy, higher education, and employment levels, and their voices were increasingly heard in the press and the parliament, claiming rights to political and civil careers.¹⁴⁴ Contestation and reformation of family laws through pragmatic collaborations and Islamically grounded reinterpretations followed.¹⁴⁵ All this should have confirmed Iran was far from a Hollywood monolith.

The Turkish press acknowledged the significance of Khatami's election and selected reforms. Yet, the years that saw a softening of the

¹⁴² On intersectionality, see Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" and "Mapping the Margins"; Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Gürel, "Broken Solidarities," 17–44.

¹⁴³ For the laicist Turkish media, this incident constituted further evidence of Kavakçı's "duplicity." For conservative Iranian media, it suggested a conspiracy with US-based roots. Compare "Amerika'da Aranyormuş," *Sabah*, May 5, 1999, 2 with "Campaign Against Kavakci: Neglect of Women's Rights," *Tehran Times*, May 10, 1999, <https://bit.ly/4lBfwAw>.

¹⁴⁴ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic"; Keddie, "Women in Iran since 1979," 405–38; Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 76–84; Tara Povey, *Social Movements in Egypt and Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 72–96.

¹⁴⁵ Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits," 285–319; Mir-Hosseini, "Divorce, Veiling, and Feminism," 284–320; Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*; Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms*; Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts," 375–92; Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran," 33–53; Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 245–71.

Islamic Republic's hardline ideological orientation also witnessed the rise of the neo-republican February 28 Process in Türkiye, marked by the primacy of ideologically motivated politics under the shadow of the military. Operating at the intersection of international relations and local politics, turn-of-the-century Turkish Orientalism regularly sacrificed realpolitik with Iran for the maintenance of an unpopular version of laicism and its flagship ban on headscarves.

The localized Turkish Orientalism of the 1990s fed upon US media, such as *Not Without My Daughter*, but also differed from US Orientalisms due to its trope of immanent contagion. As Makdisi points out, in Said's formulation, the Orient represented the antithesis of the Western self; there was not and could not be any genuine overlap between the two.¹⁴⁶ However, just as Ottoman Orientalism had attempted to subdue "the Orient" within the self, late twentieth-century representations of Iran functioned not as complete antitheses to an imagined Turkish reality but as comments on a feared, "backward" Turkish future. Beginning with the first book ads for the Turkish translation, advertising campaigns for *Not Without My Daughter* emphasized the proximity of the events taking place ("neighbor country Iran") and positioned the tale as a "warning" (*ibret*) for Turks.¹⁴⁷ The common trope of "Will Türkiye become like Iran?" demonstrated this deep concern with the risk of metamorphosis through contagion.¹⁴⁸

Kavakçı's ordeal occasioned indirect debates within the Iranian reformist press regarding whether veiling was a divine requirement or a recommendation and whether its reinforcement by worldly authority was justified.¹⁴⁹ The story also served as a reference point for Iranian women representatives who would soon begin lobbying for the right to wear headscarves and long coats instead of chadors under the sixth *majlis*, the 2000-2004 parliament.¹⁵⁰ However, newspaper images of Iranian women in chadors supporting Kavakçı confirmed the existence of a slippery slope of veiling operating in the opposite direction to many Turks. After all, Iranian women had "lost rights and freedoms" as the Iranian revolution had coalesced into an Islamic one.¹⁵¹ Similarly, the small, loose headscarf Betty Mahmoody had put on as she disembarked

¹⁴⁶ Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," 770.

¹⁴⁷ Ad published in *Cumhuriyet* Kitap Eki, July 25, 1991, 13.

¹⁴⁸ Özyılmaz, "Türkiye-İran ilişkilerinde Belirleyici Etmen," 294.

¹⁴⁹ Mir-Hosseini, "The Conservative – Reformist Conflict," 37–53.

¹⁵⁰ "Marzîyi Dabbâgh: Agar namâyandi-yî bidûn-i châdur vârid-i majlis shavad kutak mîkhourad," *Âftâb-i Imrûz*, 17 Isfand 1378/March 7, 2000, 1; Tohidi, "Piyvand-i jahânî-yî junbish-i zanân-i Irân," 31.

¹⁵¹ Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights*, 18. Italics in original.

from the plane in Tehran had transformed into an oversized black chador by the end of *Not Without My Daughter*. Unlike the American captive who could put on the clothes of the Easterner without any risk to his or her essential Western identity, the laicist Turkish public feared the clothes of the proximate other would confirm their own backwardness/Easterness at a time when they were seeking entry into the EU and enjoying a “golden age” in US-Türkiye relations.¹⁵²

Despite such fears of “becoming” Iran, most Turks knew little about the neighboring country. The laicist media’s approach remained as superficial as that of the US media, focused on images of women in chadors, bearded Ayatollahs, and the inscrutable script. Turkish newspapers regularly conflated Arab and Iranian support for Kavakçı; *Sabah* even reprinted a pro-Merve Kavakçı image and headline from an Iranian newspaper and attributed it to the “Arab” press.¹⁵³

This inability to differentiate between Persian and Arabic was a direct result of Türkiye’s alphabet reform of 1928 and the realignment of foreign language education toward French and German (and away from Persian and Arabic) under Atatürk in the early twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ The “threatening” script in the news about Merve Kavakçı would have been symbolic for the portion of the country that fretted about the illegal Qur’an schools teaching Arabic to young kids, deviating from the state-approved, Diyanet-disseminated version of Sunni Islam. Even though the newspaper’s name, *Sabah* (Eng: morning), comes from Arabic and is cognate with the Persian word, the mistake highlighted how far Türkiye was from “becoming” Iran and how little its opinion leaders knew about the neighboring country with which Türkiye was so often compared and conflated.

In the final scene of *Not Without My Daughter*, a bus drops off Betty Mahmoody and her daughter in front of a run-down building in Ankara. A sign advertising a photography shop in capital letters features prominently on the building. Combining Turkish and English, the sign reads, “Gözde Color” (lit. Favorite Color). The presence of a European-looking umlaut (ö) and an English word spelled in the standardized American

¹⁵² “The United States and Turkey: A Model Partnership: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs,” House of Representatives, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, first session, May 14, 2009.

¹⁵³ “İran Tahrik Ediyor,” *Sabah*, May 11, 1999, 20. The original headline, which translates as “The war of hijab in Türkiye has escalated,” appeared on the front page of *Iran* newspaper on May 10, 1999.

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform*.

format (“color”) on top of the grimy, Middle Eastern-style building barely hides the implied “backwardness” of Türkiye, but it does signify the relative safety of the country for Americans. It affirms what *National Geographic* called “a less forbidding environment” to the Western eye in its celebratory coverage of Türkiye’s alphabet reform.¹⁵⁵ Like the Latin alphabet, the ban on headscarves gave Turks something to mark their auxiliary status to Europe on basic visual terms. Many laicists were loath to lose this questionable privilege.

Of course, the fact that *Not Without My Daughter* became so popular in Türkiye does not mean that everyone who watched the movie believed the story was true and liked it. Or that the movie’s fans were all laicists supportive of the headscarf ban. Perhaps many Turks could recall the similarities between *Midnight Express* and its Iranian cousin, watching the film out of interest without a commitment to its politics. Dündar’s essay about watching *Not Without My Daughter* after *Midnight Express*, like the fact that Türkiye resisted sanctions against postrevolutionary Iran after experiencing its own brush with a punitive US embargo in the 1970s, demonstrated the potential for nuance and empathy.¹⁵⁶ Yet, Hollywood’s *Not Without My Daughter* was undoubtedly one of the most readily available sources of “information” about Iran in the 1990s, made all the more potent by the intense emotions it could awaken as a captivity narrative. It operated intertextually to help Turks make sense of crucial political developments, including the electoral rise of Islamism, the headscarf ban, and their shaky prospects for EU membership. Hollywood’s Iran became Türkiye’s Iran, despite the still-fresh memories of *Midnight Express*, because this vision served the domestic policy goal of upholding laicism and the (often-overlapping) foreign policy goal of positioning Türkiye as “Western,” in contrast to its “Islamic” neighbors.¹⁵⁷

Türkiye–Iran comparativism at the turn of the century operated within a complex international atmosphere that made certain forms of solidarity difficult. Hollywood’s captivity narratives about Türkiye and Iran and laicist discourse about Türkiye’s potential for experiencing an Iran-style Islamic revolution both weaponized similitude. On the other hand, Iranian reformists’ progressive articulations of strategic similarity,

¹⁵⁵ Maynard Owen Williams, “Turkey Goes to School,” *National Geographic*, January 1929, www.turkishculture.org/literature/language/turkey-goes-to-821.htm?type=1.

¹⁵⁶ Süha Bölükbaşı, “Turkey Copes with Revolutionary Iran,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 1 (1989): 94–109, 98.

¹⁵⁷ National polls exploring Turkish views on the EU during this period regularly set up an opposition between possible “Islamic” and “European” identifications for the country. See, Ali Çarkoğlu, “Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU Membership,” *Turkish Studies* 4, no. 1 (2003): 171–94.

which focused on the limitations placed on women's civic and political presence, were sidelined. The type of transnational feminist solidarity Iranian activists sought was precluded not just by the Turkish Muslim woman activist they approached and the laicist Turkish state but also by the ideology of liberal modernity promulgated by powerful Western entities such as the ECHR and the White House. However, as the next chapter demonstrates, US leaders proved more than willing to boost other manifestations and uses of political Islam, from the Cold War to the War on Terror.

5 America's Coy Lovers

Claiming Mysticism and Dialogue from the Cold War to the War on Terror

On December 23, 1979, an op-ed in appeared in the Turkish Islamist newspaper *Milli Gazete*, denouncing the recent celebrations held in honor of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (Mevlânâ).¹ Known to most English speakers as Rumi, Mevlânâ was a thirteenth-century Persian-speaking scholar, poet, and the iconic leader of the Mevlevi Sufi order, known for their whirling (*sema*) rituals.² Sufism, simply put, is Islamic mysticism: a diverse set of teachings and practices dedicated to unlocking one's full consciousness of divine truth.³ Born in the historical region known as Great Khorasan in what is now Afghanistan, Mevlânâ lived most of his life in a Turco-Persian sultanate in Konya, a city in modern-day Türkiye. What drew the ire of *Milli Gazete* about the celebrations, as author Yasin Hatiboğlu explained it, was the de-Islamization of Mevlânâ. He was used for tourism purposes and cast as a "humanist," "bard," and "man of the world." The event also included what Hatiboğlu believed was a fake whirling dervish ceremony. Not concealing his disgust, Hatiboğlu estimated that three-fourths of the performers had not performed ablutions and that one-fourth was "without *taḥāra*," that is, unclean due to bodily functions. He argued that "hippie" fans of Mevlânâ had memorized only one of his lines ("Come! Come again! Whoever, whatever you may be, come! Heathen, idolatrous or fire worshiper, come!") as if he had had nothing to say about belief and worship ("*itikad ve ibadet*").

Hatiboğlu's op-ed gave voice to many devout Turks who saw Mevlânâ's Sufism as inseparable from Islam's laws and ritual dictates, including daily prayers and ablutions. Despite such objections, the history of non-Muslim engagements with Sufism has been lengthy and hefty. In the nineteenth century, Rumi and other mystically inclined Persianate poets

¹ Yasin Hatiboğlu, "Melvana ve Turist Avcıları," *Milli Gazete*, December 23, 1979, 2.

² In this chapter, I will use the names Rumi and Mevlânâ interchangeably.

³ Annmarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4.

such as Hafez and Saadi inspired European Romantics like Goethe and American Transcendentalists like Emerson. The “new age” work of popularizers such as the UK-based author Idries Shah sparked renewed interest in Rumi and Sufism in the 1960s. The 1980s even saw Rumi become the United States’s best-selling poet thanks to the loose, evocative translations of Coleman Barks. Other Anglophone poets jumped on the bandwagon by dreaming up their own contributions to the Hafez canon.⁴ Such decontextualized Western perceptions of Sufism would continue influencing local understandings of Mevlânâ, no matter how bitterly critics like Hatiboğlu complained.

Chapter 3 has examined how the logic of racial justice helped Islamism develop anti-imperialist contours by the 1970s. Chapter 4 focused on the 1980s and 1990s to trace how strategic articulations of similarity to Iran helped boost Türkiye’s headscarf ban. This final chapter takes a step back to follow the trajectory of an early Cold War ideal of a pro-American Islam that could serve US foreign policy goals. I offer a genealogy of the concept influential Egyptian Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb mockingly defined as “American Islam” in 1952: an Islam that would fight Communism, and could be consulted on issues such as birth control, but had nothing to say about imperialism or capitalist exploitation.⁵ Ayatollah Khomeini would develop this critique further, much to US policymakers’ dashed hopes.⁶

If many analysts arguing Türkiye would not become “another Iran” focused their comparativism on the Shia–Sunni binary, others labored the difference between Islamic “mysticism” and “fundamentalism.” Like “fundamentalism,” which has its etymology in early twentieth-century American Protestantism, mysticism is a constructed category, both contested and context-specific.⁷ This chapter asks how and why Islamic mysticism generally, and Sufism specifically, came to be seen as the West-friendly “moderate Islam.” What role did transculturation and comparativism between Türkiye and Iran under US hegemony play in forming this common perception?

⁴ Arash Azizi, “Supposed Hafiz Poem Recited by McGuinty Turns Out to Be Fake,” *Salam Toronto*, April 23, 2009, available at <https://bit.ly/43Pd8j6>.

⁵ Sayyid Qutb, “Islâm Imrîkânî,” *Ar-Risala*, n. 991, June 30, 1952, 713–14.

⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini, “Sukhanrâni dar jam’-i mas’ûlân-i nizâm va aqshâr-i mukhtalif-i mardum (tahzîb-i nufûs),” Tehran, Jamârân, 21 Tir 1362/July 12, 1983, *Şahîfi-yi imam khumiynî*, vol. 17, 23–526, <http://emam.com/posts/view/3279>; Ruhollah Khomeini, “Payâm bi millat-i Îrân dar sâlgard-i kushtâr-i khûnin-i makki (qabûl-i qat’nâmi-yi 598),” Tehran, Jamârân, 29 Tir 1367/July 20, 1988, *Şahîfi-yi imam khumiynî*, vol. 21, 74–100, <http://emam.com/posts/view/4046>.

⁷ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9–10.

After noting the complex approaches Iranian and Turkish authoritarian modernizers took regarding Sufism, the first section of the chapter examines the role Islamic mysticism played in Pahlavi nation-branding of the 1960s and 1970s. Central to this development, I argue, was the malignment of Kemalist laicism as a type of “over-westernization” in both West Asian and US-based critiques. During this period, intellectuals aligned with the Pahlavi regime, as well as prominent regime opponents such as Khomeini, built on European Persophilia and closely linked Iran with Islamic mysticism (often translated as “*irfān*” in the Iranian Islamic context). In the early phases of the revolution, Khomeini’s image blended that of a Third-World revolutionary with that of a holy mystic, generating some favorable – or at least romantically Orientalist – press for his movement in the West. However, the consolidation of the Islamic Republic and the hostage crisis overrode these connotations. US scholars and diplomats began categorizing the regime’s official Shiism as a type of “fundamentalism” – a foil to mysticism. The leaders of the 1980 coup in Türkiye also used Iran as a politico-religious foil, promoting Sufism as part of a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” that could counter radicalism in all its forms.

In the 1990s, international polemics around American political scientist Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory politicized Rumi and Sufism in new ways. For many opinion leaders, Sufism’s universalism offered robust evidence against Huntington’s claims that “Islam” and “the West” were rival civilizations destined to clash. The election of reformist president Khatami in Iran in 1997 saw the second stage of Iranian institution-building on mystical Islam, with a focus on countering the idea of clash of civilizations. Meanwhile, in Türkiye, influential cleric and sect leader Fethullah Gülen also promoted himself on the rising tide of interreligious and inter-civilizational dialogue.

By 2001, dialogue ideology had gone from ascendant to dominant, as large, powerful states and international organizations, including the United States and the United Nations, incorporated the concept into their official platforms. The UN, for example, declared 2001 the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” Although Khatami continued to promote the idea and Iran’s role in it, the second era of his presidency was beset by overwhelming pushback from conservative forces. After 9/11, and following the US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the White House set out to promote a type of “moderate Islam” that would be open to democracy and eschew anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism. It, too, turned to dialogue discourse, Rumi, and his final resting place, the Republic of Türkiye.

Connecting theology to policy, the White House’s comparativism celebrated “moderate Islam” against “Islamic fundamentalism” and

Türkiye against Iran, erasing the complicated, transnational heritage of Sufism. The Bush White House linked Rumi to a supposedly tolerant and democratic Turkish Islam, promoting the country's newly elected Islamist Prime Minister Erdoğan as a "strategic partner" and a model for "moderate Muslim democracy." Meanwhile, the United States was busy bombing Rumi's birthplace (Afghanistan) and labeling the country most associated with Persianate mystical poetry (Iran) as part of "an axis of evil."

Opponents of Erdoğan, however, believed the religio-political trajectories of Türkiye and Iran were not dissimilar. In each country, "green belt" conspiracy theories flourished, accusing the United States of boosting select Islamic movements to serve its imperialist agenda. These theories troubled comparativism around the Islam versus the West and Sufism versus Fundamentalism binaries while constructing Islamism, as opposed to modernization, as the ultimate transnational export of the US empire.

Türkiye as the Anti-model: Islamicizing Persophilia and Westernization Critique

As noted in Chapter 1, Western observers have often viewed Turkish and Iranian authoritarian modernization with sneering skepticism. Worries that Türkiye and Iran were somehow modernizing incorrectly (either too much, too fast, or in all the wrong ways) manifested in comparativism targeting Atatürk and Reza Shah. They also appeared, and continue to appear, in comparisons made between Turkish and Iranian "westernization" and an imaginary, more authentic form of development. With the influence of romantic anti-modernism, many foreign observers have long participated in a kind of "imperialist nostalgia," mourning the reduction of difference between the so-called East and West, faulting non-European states for the very developments that were prompted by Western military and economic encroachment.⁸

From the beginning, Kemalist laicism became the target of praise and critique in US accounts. On the one hand, Kemalist reforms secured the new country considerable acclaim in the public sphere at a time when the perception of Turks as "the sword of Islam" (Chapter 3) remained fresh in many minds. In 1938, for example, *LIFE* magazine confidently declared Atatürk "the world's best dictator."⁹ Although Kemalists blanched at the dictator label, one could easily find the seeds of postwar modernization theory, with Türkiye as a shining model, in such claims.

⁸ Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 107–22, 120.

⁹ "Turkey's Kamal Atatürk Is the World's Best Dictator," *Life*, October 13, 1938, 23–24.

Secularization, particularly reforms targeting women's rights, boosted the country's national brand.

At the same time, US representatives regularly engaged in over-westernization critique when commenting on Turkish laicism. Gardiner Howland Shaw, the chargé d'affaires of the American embassy in Türkiye between 1921 and 1936, for example, produced a 1924 report in which he argued the country was manifesting "intemperate westernization."¹⁰ Turkish secularization measures formed the main target of Shaw's censure. In them, the American diplomat saw the wrong-headed copying of French anticlericalism. Shaw explained Kemalist over-westernization as the result of Turks' racial heritage as "an essentially warlike and nomadic people," who, lacking intellectual sophistication, uncritically absorbed foreign models, from the Iranian to the French.¹¹ The adoption of Persian culture had benefited and enriched these simple-minded brutes. Yet since "rational" Western civilization was far too foreign for the "mystical" East, its imposition had deleterious effects.¹²

Even as Western observers constructed the East as essentially "mystical," by the late nineteenth century, Sufism had become the target of nationalist critique across much of West Asia and North Africa. The Salafi movement taking root in the Arabian Peninsula with British support considered Sufism to be a heretical innovation. Elsewhere, skepticism toward mysticism was spreading, boosted by the Islamic heritage of rationalism and interest in defensive development. Respect for historical Sufi figures remained, but more and more nationalists began to critique contemporary Sufi lodges as dens of ignorance and corruption.¹³ In Iran, modernist intellectuals, along with the mystically inclined ulema, promoted the concept of *'irfān* (lit. "knowledge") as an intellectually robust

¹⁰ G. Howland Shaw, "An Intellectualistic Interpretation of Modern Turkey," RG59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910–1929, document dated September 12, 1924, no. 867.401/8, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, reprinted in Rifat N. Bali, *The First Ten Years of the Turkish Republic Thru [sic] the Reports of American Diplomats* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11–13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ M. Brett Wilson, "The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's *Nur Baba*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 233–53; Hülya Küçük, "Sufi Reactions Against the Reforms After Turkey's National Struggle: How a Nightingale Turned into a Crow," in *The State and The Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 123–42; Yasemin Paçaloğlu, "To Pluck a Rose from Gáf and Lám: On the Dissolution of the Dervish Lodges in Turkey," (PhD diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2019).

form of Shia mysticism distinct from “degenerate” Sufi sects.¹⁴ The early Pahlavi regime repressed some Sufi dervish practices and Sufi groups in the name of centralization.¹⁵

In 1925, the Kemalist regime banned Sufi orders across Türkiye, shutting down centuries-old dervish lodges and sacred shrines. The religiously inspired, Kurdish-led 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion provided the primary impetus; however, dominant modernist discourses had long associated mystical sects with superstition and fatalism. The Kemalists also built on the extensive precedent of various sultans regulating, co-opting, or suppressing different Sufi orders. Particularly relevant was the Ottoman state’s promotion of Mevlevi Sufism, which traced its lineage to Rumi, and its 1826 ban on the Bektashi order associated with the Janissary Corps and Shia influence. Atatürk’s words on Sufi orders were harsh, contrasting the activities of lodges with “knowledge, science, and of the whole extent of radiant civilization.”¹⁶ At the same time, the leader continued the Ottoman tradition of valorizing the Mevlevi. His speeches were respectful toward Rumi, whom he called “a great genius, an innovator for all ages.”¹⁷ While other shrines and lodges fell into disrepair, the regime reopened his shrine as a museum merely a year after the ban.¹⁸

The new Turkish republic incorporated Sufi mystics, including Mevlânâ, Hacı Bektaş Veli (the founder of the Bektashi order), and the famous Bektashi bard Yunus Emre into its educational curriculum as “great Turks,” literary figures, and humanists, while controlling actual Sufi organizing. Overnight, millions-strong Sufi orders went underground. Although the law’s effects on Sufi orders that needed the lodges for their ritual practices, such as Bektashis and Mevlevi, were exceptionally

¹⁴ Ata Anzali, “Mysticism” in *Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 196–228; Matthijs van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), 51.

¹⁵ Van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 74–109; Kathryn Spellman-Poots, *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 106.

¹⁶ Andrew Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2000), 435.

¹⁷ Rose Aslan, “The Museumification of Rumi’s Tomb: Deconstructing Sacred Space at the Mevlânâ Museum,” *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 2, no. 2 (2014): 1–16, 9.

¹⁸ Rabia Harmanşah, Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, and Robert M. Hayden, “Secularizing the Unsecularizable: A Comparative Study of the Hacı Bektaş and Mevlana Museums in Turkey,” in *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics, and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 336–67.

dire, all mystical communities began to keep a lower profile.¹⁹ Kurdish cleric Said Nursi, associated with the large Naqshbandi-Khalidi order, declared the era “not the era of *tariqat* (i.e., the mystical path), but of re-building Islamic knowledge.”²⁰

In Iran, secularist historian Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946) was a significant voice for anti-Sufi modernism, accusing mystical Persian literature of breeding irrationalism and fatalism. In *About Islam* (1944), Kasravi emphasized the necessity of keeping up with the times and pointed to Türkiye as an excellent model to follow.²¹ He even defended the country's alphabet reform as a solid method of countering ignorance.²² Although Kasravi valorized reason over mysticism, he could be critical of what he saw as Western materialism and violence. Denouncing the East for its obsession with the metaphysical and the West for its amoral pursuit of profit and technology, Kasravi promoted something akin to a dialogue among civilizations.²³

However, Kasravi was an outlier, particularly in his harsh view of mystical Persian literature and his praise for Turkish laicism. Instead, calls to resurrect and/or strengthen some ethno-religious essence endangered by Western-style modernization gained a greater hold over the public imagination across the region after World War II. For a rising cohort of postwar Iranian scholars, Shia mysticism became vital to the Iranian search for “a return to self,” coming to color nationalism and marking Turkish secularization as a distinct comparative foil.

It is hard to find a public intellectual who did not critique some aspect of “the West” and “modernization,” often in tandem, in either Türkiye or Iran between the 1950s and 1970s. While previous chapters have focused on dissidents' mobilization of gender (Chapter 2) and race (Chapter 3) in their “westoxication” critiques, this chapter highlights the work of West Asian intellectuals who collaborated with the state in various capacities while stressing religion, particularly Islamic mysticism, as a crucial part of national identity. Of course, this is just an organizational shorthand: As always, these analytical categories intersect and overlap as religion becomes racialized, race gendered, and so on.

¹⁹ Hamid Algar, “Devotional Practices of the Khalidi Naqshbandis of Ottoman Turkey,” in *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, ed. Raymond Lifchez (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 209–27, 222.

²⁰ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, 8.

²¹ Ahmad Kasravi, *Dar pīrāmūn-i Islām* (Tehran: Daftar-i Parcham, 1323/1944), 6 and 10; Ahmad Kasravi, *Dar rāh-i siyāsat* (Tehran: Daftar-i Parcham, 1324/1945), 31–32.

²² Kasravi, *Dar rāh-i siyāsat*, 31–32.

²³ Ahmad Kasravi, *Khudā bā māst* (Tehran: Daftar-i Parcham, 1321/1942), 17–18.

Three points are particularly pertinent to my summary of mystically inclined anti-westernization discourses below. First, the local calls to return to an authentic self were formed transnationally. Particularly influential were contemporary philosophies of counter-modernity, with Heidegger and (later) Sartre playing a central role in conjunction with the romantic Orientalism promulgated by Theosophy.²⁴ Traditionalism or Perennialism, popularized by French Sufi convert René Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1925), also held great sway. Together, these ideologies identified an essentialized Muslim civilization that could offer lessons to heal the wreckage of modern Western materialism. Turkish and Iranian intellectuals regularly referenced these European thinkers as they advocated for a return to ethno-religious authenticity.

Second, Iranians regularly mobilized comparativism in formulating their over-westernization critiques. While Türkiye and Atatürk were positive role models in classical modernization theory, they operated as negative foils in gharbzadegi discourse. Turkish secularism was a common target of counter-westernization arguments, which increasingly pointed to Islam as *the* critical node of authenticity – supplementing and, for some thinkers, replacing the focus on pre-Islamic Persia.

Finally, global anti-Communism boosted Turkish and Iranian discourses emphasizing Islam as a holistic way of life. In other words, anti-westernization rhetoric promoting Islam as the solution to the modern world's ills was transnationally formed, strategically comparativist, and supported by official and unofficial US actors in multiple ways.

As noted in the Introduction, European appreciation of Persian arts and literature stemmed from romantic Orientalism, by which authors used projections of the East to critique their post-Enlightenment societies. At the same time, Persophilia operated to “ethnicize” cultural products stemming from diverse peoples, extrapolating from linguistic differences to construct an essentialized “Aryan” Persian ethnicity to contrast with Turks and Arabs.²⁵ Early European studies of Islamic mysticism also reflected this comparative bias, finding traces of Aryan culture in Sufi literature and considering Sufism “a typically Iranian development.”²⁶ In an era of European hegemony in learning and ascendant ethnonationalisms, Iranian intellectuals were drawn to this comparative vision of ethnolinguistic greatness. Therefore, many progress-oriented nationalists were willing to consider a domesticated

²⁴ Tim Rudbog and Erik Sand, *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁵ Dabashi, *Persophilia*, 23–24; Rezakhani, “Pārsгарāyī va buhrān-i huviyat dar Īrān.”

²⁶ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 9–10.

form of mysticism, often labeled “irfān” and represented by literary figures such as Khayyam, Hafez, Saadi, and Rumi, as a significant part of Iranian national identity with universal appeal.²⁷

Among the early contributors to mystically tinged westernization critique were Seyed Fakhreddin Shadman (1907–1967) and Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994). Their life and educational trajectories epitomized the transnational development of anti-westernization discourse, as both were educated in Europe and manifested the influence of Western “Persophilia” within their writings. Shadman’s book *The Conquest of Western Civilization* (1948), for example, urged a careful adaptation of Western progress, prioritizing the Persian language as a significant linchpin in maintaining Iranian identity. He considered Russia and Japan as positive examples of proper cultural resistance to the West and criticized alphabet reform without naming Türkiye, which had changed its alphabet in 1938.²⁸ Shadman compared “the West” to Iran’s past opponents, the “barefooted, starving, desert-dwelling” Arabs and the “bloodthirsty” Turks and Mongols, deciding that the Europeans and Euro-Americans formed a more formidable challenge. Unlike the latter, who were soon “tamed” by the beauty of Persian culture, the West combined military superiority with pride, arrogance, and deep confidence in their own civilization. This meant learning from the West had to proceed carefully and with a great deal of conscious agency.

Far from a dissident, Shadman worked for the Pahlavi government, and in conjunction with the United States; he represented Iranian interests in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and served as the director of the United States Point Four program in Iran.²⁹ His scholarship was apparently on the radar of American officials. In a report on Iran–Türkiye relations, the American Consulate in Tabriz referenced him to critique Turkish westernization: “The late Seyed Fakhreddin Shadman, who sought to find a philosophical basis for the westernization of Iran, felt that Turkey had thrown away the old culture without forming any new synthesis.”³⁰ Although Shadman’s main emphasis for redemption lay on Persian language and literature, he also criticized as “enemies of our religion” those who would point to Islam as the cause of Iran’s perceived backwardness.³¹

²⁷ Anzali, “Mysticism” in Iran, 196–228.

²⁸ Fakhreddin Shādmān, *Taskhūr-i tamaddun-i farangī* (Tehran: Chāpkhāni Majlis, 1326/1948), 13.

²⁹ Ali Gheissari, “SHADMAN, Sayyed Fakhr-al-Din,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2010, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shadman.

³⁰ AmCon Tabriz to Dept of State, “The Turki-Speaking People of Northwestern Iran,” Tabriz A-4, Pol 13–3 Iran, March 7, 1970, 13, NARA.

³¹ Quoted in Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 57.

Casting Shiism as a type of mysticism allowed Iranian thinkers to Islamicize Persophilia. Ahmad Fardid, the Heideggerian philosopher who coined the term “gharbzadegi” (west-struckness or westoxication), was a leading figure in advocating this line of thinking.³² Fardid’s criticism of the West built on the Orientalist mysticism–rationalism binary and claimed that revealed, eternal Truth had become eclipsed due to the influence of Greek philosophy. This mystical aversion to the valorization of reason over other modes of knowing could be found in classical Sufi texts. It was also an essential aspect of European counter-Enlightenment critique, including Theosophy and Guénonian Traditionalism, which were influenced by Western readings of Asian religious texts.³³ Fardid argued positivism bred a technocratic ethos that undermined morality.³⁴ Atatürk was a negative foil because, according to Fardid, he “believed that the human being should totally follow Western models.”³⁵ Despite collaborating with the monarchy, Fardid would later throw his intellectual weight and celebrity status behind the Islamic revolution.³⁶

Philosophers Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) and Dariush Shayegan (1935–2018) epitomized the flourishing of gharbzadegi discourse and Islamic mysticism within the inner circle of the Pahlavi elite in the 1960s and 1970s. Nasr, the son of a distinguished family with ties to Reza Shah’s palace, was educated in the United States after finishing his primary education in Iran. While earning a bachelor’s degree in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1954, he discovered the Traditionalist school of philosophy. Nasr’s introduction to Traditionalism formed a significant turning point as he pivoted away from science and toward the humanities. Following a master’s degree in geology and geophysics, he earned his doctorate in the history of science from Harvard University, with a thesis focusing on Islamic science.

The Traditionalist or Perennialist school of philosophy argues that eternal, transcendent wisdom resides at the center of all major world religions. This idea of one hidden wisdom – repeatedly revealed and forgotten – coheres with dominant Muslim theology, which views the Qur’an as the perfection of past revelations. The concept of oneness also links Traditionalist philosophy to Islamic mysticism, which holds the

³² Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³³ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 18.

³⁴ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 65.

³⁵ Quoted in Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 276.

³⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “For Fardid, Corbin Was Worthless, but, the Shah Was Great,” in *Iran’s Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmad Fardid’s Legacy*, ed. Ali Mirsepassi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53–324.

all-encompassing oneness of God (*tawhid*) as the essential truth to be unlocked by the Sufi adept. Not surprisingly, among Nasr's influences in the traditional school were European initiates to Sufism, such as René Jean-Marie-Joseph Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. Ceylonese metaphysician Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and French scholar Louis Massignon (1883–1962), both of whom considered the East a bastion of spirituality, were also profoundly influential. This association of the West with materialism and the East with spirituality built on a binary opposition common to both Orientalist and Pan-Asianist thought.³⁷ Traditionalist scholars, however, were not open to all forms of mysticism; they used comparative methodologies to differentiate “true” religion from “misguided” forms of spirituality.

Comparativism also saturated “the world religions paradigm,” which began to dominate the field of religious studies in the United States after World War II. The paradigm presupposes that all religions share common elements, such as beliefs, rituals, myths, and so on, which manifest in different outward forms.³⁸ Thus, instead of contrasting, say, Islam and Christianity, the world religions paradigm begins with an assumption of similitude, generated in comparison to religion's categorical foil, “the secular.”³⁹ This approach has come under critique due to the formation of its analytical categories on “normative” Christianity and its implicit ranking of religions into an evolutionary lineage.⁴⁰ However, at the time, it marked a progressive turn: Scholars following the paradigm underplayed racialized visions of religion and promoted a view of Islam as worthy of study, respect, and dialogue.

The academic emphasis on similitude among religions gained a boost from the ascendent antiracism of the postwar era. Countering the church's history of anti-Semitism, the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate* (1965) emphasized similarities between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and laid the institutional groundwork for interfaith dialogue.⁴¹ These overlapping developments made religious studies a valuable ideological ally as the United States sought to integrate newly independent nations

³⁷ Bonnett, *The Idea of the West*, 79–105.

³⁸ Michael Graziano, *Errand into the Wilderness of Mirrors: Religion and the History of the CIA* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 5.

³⁹ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 10–11.

⁴⁰ Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, “The ‘World Religions’ Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies,” introduction to *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, ed. Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–21, 5.

⁴¹ Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate: Declaration On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Vatican: Vatican Council: 1965), <https://bit.ly/4j36Dhk>.

into Pax Americana through pacts and agreements, advance Cold War cosmopolitanism, and fight “Godless” Communism.

Having reconnected with Islam through Traditionalism in the United States, Nasr returned to Iran and began work as a faculty member and later dean at Tehran University in the late 1950s. During this time, he undertook studies in Islamic mysticism (‘irfān) under the guidance of leading Shia scholar Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai in learning circles that featured other university faculty, such as the famous French Orientalist Henry Corbin and his mentee, philosopher Dariush Shayegan.

With degrees from respected US institutions, Nasr’s rise was rapid; the shah and the empress repeatedly appointed him to important positions. Despite the opposition’s gendered attacks on Farah Pahlavi as the personification of gharbzadegi (Chapter 2), Nasr found the empress very receptive to the Traditionalist view due to her appreciation of Iranian culture and the arts.⁴² In 1974, Nasr established the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy under the directives of the empress and transformed it into a leading organ of Perennialist philosophy. In 1978, he became director of Farah Pahlavi’s private bureau.⁴³

Throughout his time in Iran and beyond, Nasr promoted “tradition,” defined in connection to eternal revelation, as an antidote to the evils of materialist modernity.⁴⁴ He was deeply critical of Reza Shah, whom he considered too influenced by Atatürk.⁴⁵ He believed the Turkish leader formed an anti-model as an extreme modernizer who “sold himself to the West.”⁴⁶ Nasr’s view of tradition was inclusive and ahistorical; he claimed all “true” religions shared an essence of revelation that offered significant guidelines to individual conduct and state policy. This eternal and unchanging truth of revelation, manifesting in diverse contexts, validated comparative religious studies.⁴⁷

Countering psychological and “new age” readings of Rumi, Nasr argued Sufism was inevitably Islamic. He also considered Shiism akin to Sufism. Although Sufism was heavily associated with Sunnism, Nasr found Shiism mystical to its core: “But in matter of fact the esoteric

⁴² Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 116.

⁴³ Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (New York: Anthem Press, 2015), ch. 8.

⁴⁴ See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (New York: Longman, 1975).

⁴⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Hikmat va siyāsat: Khāṭirāt-i Duktur Husiyn Nasr, bi kūshish-i Husiyn Dihbāshī* (Tehran: Sāzmān asnād va kitābkhāni-yi millī-yi Irān, 1393/2014), 23.

⁴⁶ Nasr, *Hikmat va siyāsat*, 126.

⁴⁷ Nasr, *In Search of the Sacred*, 207.

dimension of Islam, which in the Sunni climate is almost totally connected in one way or another with Sufism, colours the whole structure of Shi'ism in both its esoteric and even exoteric aspect."⁴⁸ The ecumenical French Orientalist Henry Corbin, who undertook dialogues with key representatives of Shia thought while teaching in Tehran, shared this theorization of Iranian Shiism as "spiritual Islam."⁴⁹

Having the ear of the royal family meant Nasr could intervene in aspects of the White Revolution. Stating "long before Khomeini attacked the West, I attacked the West in Iran," he has highlighted his role in tempering westernization – whether through promoting Islamic architecture and medicine under the sponsorship of the empress or trying to curb the shah's technocratic impulses in a piecemeal fashion.⁵⁰ In one anecdote, Nasr recounts how, when reforming the Persian alphabet came up during his time in Tehran, he immediately made an appointment with the shah to try to prevent it. His negative model was neighboring Türkiye, where the alphabet reform had made valuable Ottoman texts inaccessible within sixty years. Having established Kemalist Türkiye as a foil, he offered two positive examples of developing while reclaiming tradition: Japan and Israel.⁵¹ Israeli intellectuals, he noted, had managed to revive Hebrew and now gave lectures on "nuclear physics" in the language. This point of comparison was sure to appeal to the shah, who was dedicated to building Iran's own nuclear program.

The ascendancy of Traditionalism easily led to the idea of dialogue among civilizations and religions. In 1976, when Empress Farah charged Dariush Shayegan with founding the Iranian Centre for the Study of Civilizations, the Pahlavi dynasty cemented the concept of civilizational outreach as a critical component of its soft power diplomacy.⁵² Shayegan, who held a doctorate from Sorbonne and was a respected philosopher of Eastern traditions with deep expertise in sacred Indian texts, seemed a perfect choice to lead the center.⁵³ Well versed in Western critics of

⁴⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Shi'ism and Sufism: Their Relationship in Essence and in History," *Religious Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970): 229–42; see also Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1966), 127.

⁴⁹ Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 168; Nasr, *In Search of the Sacred*, 106–08; see also, van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 31–44.

⁵⁰ Nasr, *Hikmat va si yāsāt*, 129.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵² Edward Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy Under Khatami* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 51–52. For more on the spiritual and cultural components of the late Pahlavi vision of "the Great Civilization," see Schayegh, "Iran's Global Long 1970s," 260–89.

⁵³ Amir Dabirimehr, "The Place of Tradition and Modernity in the Works and Thought of Dariush Shayegan before the Islamic Revolution of Iran," *International Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2021): 109–20.

modernity, particularly Heidegger and Carl Jung, Shayegan had attended the religious discussion circle Nasr had organized with Tabatabai and Henry Corbin. He was also a participant in the intellectual community that formed around the work of Ahmad Fardid.⁵⁴

Representative of the dominant anti-materialist currents of the time, Shayegan's work also pointed to mysticism as the essence and potential salvation of Eastern civilization. Like Empress Farah, Shayegan had partial roots in an Azeri Turkic-speaking family but emphasized the Persian language as the essential component of Iranianness. Shayegan's identification of four Eastern cultural hubs as India, China, Japan, and Iran in his 1978 *Asia Facing the West* furthered the idea that Muslims constituted a singular civilization, albeit one in which Iran played a leading cultural role.⁵⁵ His view of dialogue emphasized reclaiming one's core identity and conversations within the Global South. In fact, the first conference sponsored by the Iranian Center for the Study of Civilization questioned whether Western cultural imperialism had rendered East–West dialogue impossible.⁵⁶

Fardid, Nasr, and Shayegan were among the many intellectuals funded and sponsored by the late Pahlavi regime, who promoted Iranian Shiism as the “spiritual Islam.”⁵⁷ Despite accusations of gharbzadegi, “an ecumenical mysticism,” rife with references to Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Rumi, pervaded the monarchs' self-representation and guided Empress Farah's patronage of Iranian arts, culture, and education.⁵⁸ Of course, the couple's valorization of Islamic–Iranian civilization as the apex of Muslim intellectual creativity and sophistication existed alongside their ethnonationalist emphasis on pre-Islamic Persia. However, regime mysticism was prevalent enough that, in 1977, the prominent dissident Reza Baraheni could mock the ruling family's investment in “lukewarm mystical literature” even as he railed against their “Westomania.”⁵⁹

Transnationally constructed and deeply comparativist, Iranian religious nativism nevertheless underplayed the transnational. It marked rationalistic aspects of Islamic intellectual history as inauthentic, de-emphasized the non-European heritage of Enlightenment

⁵⁴ Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Dariush Shayegan (1935–2018), Scholar of Comparative Philosophy and Cultural Critic,” *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 5 (2018): 817–18.

⁵⁵ Dariush Shayegan, *Āsiyā dar barābar-i gharb* (1978) (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1378/1999), 227.

⁵⁶ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 152.

⁵⁷ Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 168.

⁵⁸ Van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 119.

⁵⁹ Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals*, 10, 5.

rationalism, and subtly demonstrated the Orientalism underlying Islamist yearnings for “authenticity.”⁶⁰ With careers boosted by the monarchy, Nasr and his colleagues shared gharbzadegi discourse with diverse regime opponents, including Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati. All pointed to Turkish laicism as the negative example of over-westernization, using comparison to shape and boost a new conservative ideology.⁶¹

Khomeini's Comparative Mysticism and the Islamic Revolution

As Hatiboğlu was railing against the de-Islamicized Rumi celebrations in Türkiye, the Islamic revolution was in full swing next door. The newspaper he wrote for, *Milli Gazete*, was associated with Islamist politician Necmettin Erbakan's National Outlook movement and supported the firebrand revolutionary cleric Ruhollah Khomeini. However, its editors would have found a kindred soul in the leading intellectual figure associated with the deposed empress; in a 1966 book, Seyyed Hossein Nasr had argued that living by Islam's divine law (*sharia*) was a prerequisite to being Muslim and, therefore, a requirement for embarking on the esoteric path (*tariqa*).⁶² Ayatollah Khomeini, who complemented his studies in Islamic law with added training in Islamic mysticism and philosophy, would have agreed.

Khomeini became well versed in Islamic philosophy (*hekmat*) and mysticism (*irfān*) during his seminary training in Islamic law (*sharia*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This was a personal choice; many among Qum's conservative clergy did not consider mysticism and philosophy complementary with Islamic law. Khomeini was careful not to openly antagonize established ulema by taking on too many students on these subjects. However, he still taught and published on the work of the thirteenth-century Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi and others.⁶³ He was also willing to reference Sufi mystics to explain the finer points of fiqh:

⁶⁰ Ahmad Bostani, “Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy and Iranian Nativist Ideologies,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 997–1009.

⁶¹ I have examined Khomeini's and Shariati's views on Türkiye and Atatürk in Chapter 3. For Al-e Ahmad, see Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Kārnāmi-yi sī sāli* (Tehran: Ravāq, 1357/1978), 163, quoted in Abulqāsim Tāhirī and 'Alī jān Murādijū, “Vākunish-i Jalāl āl-e Ahmad dar muvājihī bā gharbzadigī va rāh-i ḥall-i ān,” *Muṭālī'āt-i Siyāsī* 33 (1395/2016): 1–26, 18.

⁶² Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 121.

⁶³ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 29–47.

for example, he quoted fourteenth-century mystic poet Hafez in his book on the rules of prayer and Mevlânâ in his book on the dawn supplication.⁶⁴ While Khomeini could be critical of the heretical practices of various Sufi sects, he defended 'irfân against hardline clerics.⁶⁵ He also wrote poetry in the style and imagery of Hafez, using wine and mystical union with "the beloved" as metaphors for the soul's intoxication with and yearning for God.⁶⁶

Khomeini had no patience for critics of Islamic mysticism, particularly secularists such as Kasravi. In his 1942 *Discovery of Secrets*, he attacked all who refused to understand and accept the value of 'irfân using racialized language. They were, he claimed, no different from the Salafi "camel-grazers, lacking knowledge and civilization." These "savages" of Najd, "camel drivers" of Riyaz, and "illiterate black desert dwellers" made up some of the most uncivilized and shameful groups of humans on Earth.⁶⁷ They were certainly no models for emulation. Neither were Europeans who were "closer to wilderness than civilization," which made following any model set by them *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law).⁶⁸ The book also contained Khomeini's invectives against the "unwise" Reza Khan, who had followed the "stupid Atatürk," deceiving people and playing into Western plans – themes that he would develop further in future sermons.⁶⁹ Although Khomeini would come to advocate antiracism in his sermons (Chapter 3), he was not above associating the contemporary, austere forms of Islam promoted in the Arabian peninsula, with barbarism. He could Islamicize Persophilia via mysticism, much like Nasr and Shayegan.

Khomeini's deep training in and appreciation for 'irfân belies the sharp binary that outside observers would soon identify between his Shia "fundamentalism" and Sufi mysticism. In the lead-up to the revolution, however, the idea that Shiism was akin to Sufism and open

⁶⁴ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Ādāb al-ṣalāt* (Tehran: Mu'assisi-yi Tanzīm va Nashr-i Āsār-i Imam Khumīnī, 1394/2015), 119; Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sharḥ-i du'ā-yi saḥar* (Tehran: Mu'assisi-yi Tanzīm va Nashr-i Āsār-i Imam Khumīnī, 1394/2015), 296.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad Badī, "Ibn 'Arabī az manẓar-i Īmam Khumīnī," *Faṣḥnāmī-yi Huẓūr* 43 (1381/2002): 108–89.

⁶⁶ Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, "Khomeini the Poet Mystic," *Welt Des Islams* 51, no. 3–4 (2011): 438–58.

⁶⁷ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-i asrār* (Tehran: Kitābfurūshī 'Ilmiyi Islāmīyi, 1327/1948), 4–5; Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, 62. For more on stereotypical representations of Arabs in twentieth-century Iran, see Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Colorblind or Blinded by Color? Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Iran," in *Sites of Pluralism: Community Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Fırat Oruç (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 153–80.

⁶⁸ Khomeini, *Kashf-i asrār*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

to ecumenical dialogue prevailed among regime insiders and opponents alike. The rift between monarchists and dissidents did not map onto simplified secular-religious or mystical-fundamentalist binaries. Nasr once knew Khomeini primarily as an interpreter of Ibn Arabi and was close with his student and representative Morteza Motahhari.⁷⁰ Similarly, the idea of “world religions” and the potential for dialogue among them was so commonplace that, according to a CIA report, Khomeini sent a message to President John F. Kennedy emphasizing “his belief in close cooperation between Islam and other world religions, particularly Christendom” in 1963.⁷¹

Ali Mirsepassi convincingly locates a connection between the mystical, counter-modernist yearnings of Iranian intellectuals and the eventual triumph of the Islamic revolution.⁷² Dariush Shayegan's 1977 interview with *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, in which he described Khomeini as “Iran's Gandhi,” epitomizes how Iranian scholars could view Khomeini through romantic Orientalist lenses.⁷³ Shayegan soon came to regret his characterization, but Khomeini's ascetic demeanor and his apparent challenge to secular humanism were fascinating for European intellectuals critical of the Enlightenment tradition as well. Like Michel Foucault, whose writings celebrated the revolution's potential for eclipsing Western modernity “and the spiritless world it instituted,” many counter-establishment figures were willing to romanticize the “politics of spirituality” they identified in revolutionary Iran.⁷⁴

Even the US embassy in Tehran produced a largely positive report of Khomeini's movement, stating its “traditionalism” was popular, “deeply embedded” in the Iranian psyche, and would help Iran resist the foreign influence of Communism.⁷⁵ Ambassador Sullivan's notorious November 9, 1978 cable, “Thinking the Unthinkable,” highlighted Khomeini's anti-Communism. According to Jimmy Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Sullivan also echoed Shayegan in

⁷⁰ Nasr, *Hikmat va siyāsāt*, 183.

⁷¹ “Two Weeks in January: America's Secret Engagement with Khomeini,” *BBC News*, June 2, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36431160.

⁷² Mirsepassi, *Iran's Quiet Revolution*.

⁷³ “Philosopher Discusses Present Crisis,” referenced and translated on February 6, 1979, in *Translations on Near East and North Africa*, no. JPRS-72769 (Arlington, VA: United States Joint Publications Research Service, 1979).

⁷⁴ Zhand Shakibi, *Pahlavi Iran and the Politics of Occidentalism: The Shah and the Rastakhiz Party* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 1; Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 167.

⁷⁵ Amembassy Tehran to State Department, “(U) Iran: Understanding the Shi'ite Islamic Movement,” February 3, 1979, D790052-0997, Central Foreign Policy Files, created 7/1/1973–12/31/1979, documenting the period ca. 1973–12/31/1979 – *Record Group 59*, Electronic Telegrams, 1979.

implying Khomeini's eventual role in a military-religious regime might be "Gandhi-like."⁷⁶ Western-educated spokespeople within Khomeini's inner circle carefully nurtured this semblance of similitude, hoping that Khomeini would primarily be a spiritual figurehead without direct executive power.⁷⁷ Subsuming any debate regarding the negative aspects of Gandhi's legacy in linking Indian national identity to Hinduism, the Khomeini-Gandhi analogy appealed to Western audiences weaned on romantic Orientalism.

The dominant view of the Iranian revolution in the West is that it resulted in the squashing of mysticism by "religious fundamentalism."⁷⁸ The Hollywood hit *Not Without My Daughter* depicted this binary at a popular level: Gone was the good mystical Iranian Islam symbolized by gardens and the poetry of Hafez – to be replaced by a dark, stern legalism, personified by bearded mollahs and women in dark chadors (Chapter 4). However, the initial relationship between the regime, Islamic mysticism, and Iran's Sufi orders was far more complex. The revolution meant that Khomeini's brand of Shia Islam, making space for 'irfān, could become institutionalized in Iran's religious centers. The CIA noted in a 1980 report that Iran's revolutionary leaders continued to brand the revolution as primarily sparked by "a spiritual awakening."⁷⁹ The ravages of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) also furthered regime mysticism, particularly on the theme of martyrdom and losing one's self in God.⁸⁰

Khomeini continued to write and publish mystical poems, some with vivid Sufi imagery, after the revolution. "Oh, sheik (*pīr*), help me reach the dervish lodge (*khānqāh*)," he pleads in a collection published by his daughter-in-law, "Friends [other disciples] have all left; help me reach a road."⁸¹ In this famous outreach letter to Gorbachev, which argued the Soviets should choose the way of Islam over Western capitalism, the Ayatollah recommended the Soviet leader review not only ibn Arabi but also Suhrawardi's illuminationism and "the transcendental philosophy

⁷⁶ Amembassy Tehran to State Department, "Thinking the Unthinkable," Secret, November 9, 1978, available at GWU National Security Archive, <https://bit.ly/4jaMsy7>; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 368–69.

⁷⁷ Arash Azizi, *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran's Global Ambitions* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2020), 42–43.

⁷⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Iran: Exporting the Revolution: An Intelligence Assessment," March 1980, <https://bit.ly/4iejQ5K>.

⁸⁰ Van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 176–78.

⁸¹ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Bādi-yi 'ishq: ash'ār-i 'arīfāni-yi Haẓrat-i Imām Khumīnī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Surūsh, 1368/1989), 77.

of Mulla Sadra" – using mysticism as a foreign policy tool and outraging Qum's orthodox ulema in the process.⁸²

When Khomeini passed away in 1989, President Rafsanjani publicly recounted and celebrated his immense scholarship on 'irfān.⁸³ At the same time, the comparativism between 'irfān "as the true essence of Islam's mystical tradition" and tasavvuf (Sufism), established during the Safavid period, remained in the public imagination and could be mobilized whenever the regime found itself in conflict with established Sufi orders.⁸⁴ In the first decade following the revolution, some Sufi sects, such as the Soltanalishahis, aligned with the new regime, while others, such as the Safialishahis, became the target of investigation and oppression.⁸⁵ A serious crackdown connecting Sufism to Western imperialism started in 2005. As I will explain in the final section of this chapter, this development was connected to the US instrumentalization of "moderate Islam" in the War on Terror.

In sum, from Shadman to Khomeini, mid-century Iranian intellectuals mobilized comparisons with Turks and Arabs to construct Iranian Shiism as essentially mystical. The emphasis on a special Persianate connection to 'irfān, however, did not necessarily imply a specific relationship with the so-called West. The next section examines how, around the same time, Turkish secularism was shifting in conjunction with the country's US alignment, making Turkish leaders more likely to claim Islamic mysticism for their own country.

Cold War Comparativism and the Making of Türkiye's "Moderate" Islam

As Iranian intellectuals were building Kemalist Türkiye into a negative foil in gharbzadeği discourse, the Turkish regime was reorganizing its secularism in response to ascendant post-World War II ideologies and political realities. The country's newfound Western alignment, democratization, and worldwide counter-modernist trends that promoted religion as an antidote to the ravages of the West's so-called machine civilization all led to a softening of laicist rhetoric as the Atatürk-founded CHP worked to meet the challenge of the populist Democrats. Thus, CHP

⁸² Imam Khomeini, letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, January 7, 1989, reproduced in <https://bit.ly/3Y0SXej>; Yuram Abdullah Weiler, "Enduring Epistle: Imam Khomeini's letter to Mikhail Gorbachev," *Tehran Times*, January 8, 2017, <https://bit.ly/4ihwpx0>.

⁸³ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 135.

⁸⁴ Anzali, "Mysticism" in *Iran*, 5.

⁸⁵ Van der Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 24–25.

leaders used increasingly religious language in promoting Atatürk as the “defender of true Islamic faith,” arguing that his secularizing reforms had freed individual conscience.⁸⁶ The party opened prayer leader-preacher (*imam-hatip*) schools to train new cadres of state-approved religious leaders. Kasım Gülek, the CHP parliamentarian who met Malcolm X during his 1964 Hajj and boasted about Turks’ devoutness (Chapter 3), played a key role in these developments.

Sufism had long permeated the public’s religious sensibilities and the intellectual output of Diyanet, the Kemalist state’s Directorate of Religion. It found renewed influence under the Democratic Party (DP), which came to power in 1950. While the law banning Sufi lodges remained intact, in the early 1950s, the Mevlevi order was allowed to publicly resume the sema rituals for “touristic and cultural reasons.”⁸⁷ In his memoirs, famous Sufi musician Ahmed Kudsî Erguner claimed the United States was directly involved in this development. According to Erguner, Turkish representatives had panicked when the wife of a visiting US officer asked to see the whirling dervishes upon visiting the museum in Konya. They quickly put together a makeshift musical group, which included Erguner’s father. Mevlevi music and sema thus became centerpieces in annual Mevlânâ commemoration days.⁸⁸

Democrats also led the way in renovating and opening other Sufi shrines. Revisiting such shrines soon became commonplace again, even for the country’s staunch secularists. I have vivid childhood memories of my family taking me to pray at this or that Sufi saint’s tomb before important exams. At the time, I had no idea they were once banned or even controversial.

The rising Islamist magazine sector marked yet another opening for postwar Islamic discourse, as a new generation of conservative writers began foregrounding Sufism as key to Türkiye’s re-flourishing. Much like their Iranian counterparts, these devout intellectuals incorporated and modified Western anti-modernisms in their publications. In the process, they identified a unique role for their country and a select version of mysticism within a larger “Islamic” civilization.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey*, 212.

⁸⁷ Paçalışoğlu, “To Pluck a Rose from Gâf and Lâf,” 31.

⁸⁸ See, for example, the memoirs of Sufi musician Ahmed Kudsî Erguner, *Ayrılık Çeşmesi: Bir Neyzenin Yolculuğu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2002), 85–86.

⁸⁹ Hakan M. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 115; Jan-Markus Vömel, “Global Intellectual Transfers and the Making of Turkish High Islamism, c. 1960–1995,” in ed. Deniz Kuru and Hazal Papuççular, *The Turkish Connection : Global Intellectual Histories of the Late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 247–70; Cemil Aydın and Burhanettin Duran, “Arnold J. Toynbee and Islamism in Cold War-era Turkey: Civilizationism in

As noted in Chapter 3, Türkiye's Islamist thinkers generally promoted the nation's alignment with the United States during the early Cold War, even as they critiqued select aspects of US culture and policy.⁹⁰ The Sorbonne-educated poet and novelist Necip Fazıl Kısakürek epitomized this position with his influential *Büyük Doğu* magazine. In words reminiscent of the shah's metaphor of the wife and the concubine, he argued the correct role for Türkiye would be that of a "coy lover" (*nazlı sevgili*), asking for more robust rewards from the United States in exchange for the country's political fidelity.⁹¹

US-based observers, by and large, welcomed these shifts in the landscape of Turkish laicism. As noted, the overwhelmingly Christian US policymakers and opinion leaders had long viewed Islam as backward – an impediment to progress – while associating irreligion with Jacobin radicalism. The post-World War II Cold War consensus, which promoted modernization even as it cast "atheistic" Communism as a world-ending evil, accentuated the paradox.⁹² As early as 1948, a *Foreign Affairs* article advocating closer US collaboration with Türkiye suggested that the Kemalist regime let go of its "unreasoning fear of organized Islam."⁹³ In his influential 1953 article on "Communism and Islam," famed Orientalist Bernard Lewis noted Islam had elements that could be compatible with Communism. Yet all was not lost: "Pious Muslims – and most Muslims are pious – will not long tolerate an atheist creed, nor one that violates their traditional religious moral principles."⁹⁴

As Graziano notes, a peculiar intellectual arrogance underlined such presumptions. Western scholars believed they "understood other traditions so well that they hoped other traditions could restore something about themselves in order to inoculate themselves against Communism."⁹⁵ Often, what was to be restored was a diffuse, personalized Sufism – an Islamic mysticism resembling idealized visions of the Protestant faith.

the Writings of Sezai Karakoç," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 2 (2015): 310–23; Murat Turna, "Sezai Karakoç'un Gözüyle Yunus Emre, Mehmet Âkif ve Mevlânâ," *Turkish Studies* 7, no. 1 (2012): 2025–42.

⁹⁰ For example, Şevket Eyyi, "Kiblemize Havlayan Köpekler," *Bugün Gazetesi*, 30 Mart 1969, quoted in Cengiz Özakıncı, *İblisin Kiblesi: United States of İrtica* (Istanbul: Otopsi, 2011), 56.

⁹¹ Kısakürek, "Amerika, Dünya ve Biz."

⁹² Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), ch. 3.

⁹³ Walter Livingston Wright Jr., "Truths about Turkey," *Foreign Affairs* 26, no. 2 (January 1948): 349–59, 358.

⁹⁴ Bernard Lewis, "Communism and Islam," *International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (1954): 1–12.

⁹⁵ Graziano, *Errand into the Wilderness of Mirrors*, 160.

John Kingsley Birge, a missionary and a scholar of the Bektashi order, for example, told the Fifth Annual Conference on Middle East Affairs in 1951 that Western books on returning to religion, once translated, had become “the mediums through which the religious emphasis of the West is reinforcing the religious faith of Islam.”⁹⁶ Birge believed the impact of this Eastward infusion of religiosity would be to boost “religious faith, in a spiritual sense,” which he contrasted with “religious law” and saw as “the very heart of Islam.” Comparing Islamic law and spiritual understanding had roots in classical Sufi thought but also clearly resonated with Birge’s protestant ideology.

Birge also echoed the world religions paradigm by noting that parts of the Qur’an could hold “universal religious meaning” for everyone.⁹⁷ Thus, Birge wished for Türkiye to become more Islamic under the influence of the United States, albeit in a way that would be similar to, and inspirational for, Protestant Christianity. The sentiment was echoed in a July 26, 1960, report from the American Consulate General in Istanbul on “Religion and the New Regime,” which identified Western-educated officers as those recognizing that “religion is a necessary part of Turkish life, and should be reformed rather than excised.”⁹⁸

By the 1960s, the scholarly debate on whether Islam would be more compatible with Communism or Capitalism had given way to a tacit understanding that collaborating with Islamic actors and movements of various stripes could aid the fight against Communism. From the pro-Western Muslim-majority block that formed at the 1955 Bandung Conference, which featured Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Lebanon, the US State Department drew the lesson that the foil provided by Communism could soften the age-old West versus Islam dichotomy: “Islam, when face to face with the rest of Asia is likely to feel with the West; while when shut up with the West alone, it is restless.”⁹⁹

As the rubrics shifted, so did the policies. Casting the Cold War as a conflict between Freedom and Godless evil, US elites encouraged religious discourse in the international political sphere, as they did in the

⁹⁶ John Kingsley Birge, “Islam in Modern Turkey,” in *Islam in the Modern World: A Series of Addresses Presented at the Fifth Annual Conference on Middle East Affairs Sponsored by the Middle East Institute March 9–10, 1951*, ed. Dorothea Seelye Franck and Middle East Institute (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1951), 41–46, 46.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ From American Consulate General, Istanbul to the US Department of State, “Religion and the New Regime,” July 26, 1960, RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal File, 1960–63, Box 2792, Folder 882.41/1-2860.

⁹⁹ Memorandum of a Conversation Between the Lebanese Ambassador (Malik) and the Secretary of State, Department of State, Washington, DC, May 5, 1955, *FRUS 1955–1957*, Vol. XXI: East Asian Security; Camboia; Laos.

domestic sphere.¹⁰⁰ This connected US diplomats, spies, and scholars to Islamists across the world in new ways. Although American scholars were inclined toward mystical and individualized forms of Islam, no such distinction muddled the actions of the newly founded CIA and President Eisenhower. Instead, the United States boosted the Muslim Brotherhood against Egypt's Nasser and his brand of Arab nationalism, aligning with the Salafi king of Saudi Arabia in the process.¹⁰¹ King Saud, Eisenhower wrote in his diary in March 1956, "could be built up, possibly, as a spiritual leader."¹⁰² The CIA reached out to disgruntled Islamic actors, such as Khomeini's mentor Ayatollah Kashani, alongside criminal elements, in its 1953 coup against the Iranian nationalist Premier Mossadegh.¹⁰³

US representatives also proved ready to celebrate and support the Turkish Democrats' "more liberal interpretation of the policy of secularism" as in line with popular and global trends and apropos of the fight against Communism.¹⁰⁴ Of course, some Western Orientalists, such as Bernard Lewis, were concerned about the increasing public presence of Islam; however, he and like-minded observers still approved of Türkiye's DP-sponsored religious revival, hoping the trend might prevent more confrontational versions of political Islam.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the 1950s, the US Consul General regularly reported on Turkish worries about reactionary religion, with a particular focus on the Nurcu

¹⁰⁰ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 43–84.

¹⁰¹ Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, 65–147; "U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE NEAR EAST," National Security Council Report NSC 5820/1, Washington, DC, November 4, 1958, *FRUS 1958–1960*, Vol. XII: Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v12/d51>.

¹⁰² Diary Entry by the President, March 28, 1956, *FRUS 1955–1957*, Vol. XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1–July 26, 1956, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v15/d226>.

¹⁰³ Central Intelligence Agency internal history *The Battle for Iran*, by Claud H. Corrigan, undated (c. mid-1970s), available at GW National Security Archive, 65; "New Findings on Clerical Involvement in the 1953 Coup in Iran," National Security Archive, March 7, 2018, <https://bit.ly/4ihx7KG>.

¹⁰⁴ AmConsul General to Department of State, "Developments in Religious Freedom in Turkey," June 14, 1950, NARA, Central Decimal Files, RGG 59, Box 5431, 882.413/6-1450; see also, AmCon General to Department of State, "Religious Developments in Turkey," August 1, 1950, NARA, Central Decimal Files, RGG 59, Box 5431, 882.413/8-150; AmConGen to Department of State, "Opposition to Secular Policies," June 13, 1951, NARA, Central Decimal Files, RGG 59, Box 5431, 882.413/6-1351; From Amembassy Ankara to the Department of State, "Religion in Turkey – A Survey and a Commentary," Washington, DC, July 16, 1958, NARA RG 59, 1955–1959 Central Decimal Files, Box 4918, 882.413/7-1658; Danforth, ch. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Bernard Lewis, "Islamic Revival in Turkey," *International Affairs* 28, no. 1 (1952): 29–37; From Amcongen to Department of State, Washington, "Transmitting Translation of Article 'Religion and Religious Reaction' in Turkey and Istanbul's Comments Thereon," February 27, 1956, Despatch No. 321, RG 59, 1955–1959 Central Decimal Files, 882.413/2-2756.

movement associated with Said Nursi.¹⁰⁶ American Council General in Istanbul noted the anti-Communism of the Nurcus but also viewed them negatively as part of “the darker corners of Islam.”¹⁰⁷ However, US diplomatic dispatches also contained disclaimers about Turkish sources the Americans saw as “maintaining an extremist position on the subject of secularism.”¹⁰⁸

US officials believed that the country’s supposed reconciliation with its Islamic Ottoman heritage could make Türkiye a more helpful ally in the Middle East.¹⁰⁹ As Cemil Aydın has noted, a paradox saturated US visions of Turkish Islam in the mid-century: “American modernization theory praised the achievements of Turkish Westernization but also wanted Turkey squarely in the imagined Muslim world, where it could influence fellow Muslim societies.”¹¹⁰ Turks were willing to sing the same tune to an extent. In a discussion with Professor Thomas Lewis of Princeton, for example, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Fuad Köprülü suggested that “a peculiarly Turkish brand of Islam” could spearhead religious reform and spread it to the region, boosting unity among Muslims.¹¹¹

Having already enlisted Islam as an ally against Mossadegh and Nasser, the United States also rewarded its Turkish coy paramours, however indirectly. A 1968 Turkish intelligence report leaked to the leftist press connected the rise of Islamism in Türkiye with the Saudi-funded Muslim World League and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – key US allies in America’s struggle against Arab nationalism.¹¹² Two Islamist movements, in particular, flourished and came to play critical roles in Türkiye’s Cold War politics and social life in the 1960s and 1970s. The Naqshbandi-Khalidis, Turkey’s largest Sufi sect, found strength in the

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 3 for more on Nursi and his views.

¹⁰⁷ From AmConGen Istanbul to Department of State, “Some Notes on the Influence of Religion on Turkish Attitudes Toward the West,” June 25, 1958, NARA RG 59, 1955–1959 Central Decimal Files, 882.413/6-2558, 9; From Amembassy Ankara to the Department of State, “Religion in Turkey – A Survey and a Commentary,” Washington, DC, July 16, 1958, NARA RG 59, 1955–1959 Central Decimal Files, Box 4918, 882.413/7-1658, 2.

¹⁰⁸ From Amcongen, Istanbul to Department of State, Washington, “FORUM Article on Participation of Enlightened Elements in Reactionary Movements,” July 16, 1958, NARA, RG, General Records of the Department of State, 1955–1959 Central Decimal File, Box. No 4918, 882.413/7-1158, page 2.

¹⁰⁹ Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey*, 150.

¹¹⁰ Aydın, *Idea of the Muslim World*, 200.

¹¹¹ “Professor Thomas’s Conversations with Koprulu and Agaoglu,” Ankara Despatch No. 63, August 8, 1951, NARA, NARA, RG, General Records of the Department of State, 1955–1959 Central Decimal File, Box. No 4918, 882.413/8-851.

¹¹² Behlül Özkan, “The Cold War-era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and its Rise to Power,” *Hudson Institute*, November 5, 2017, <https://bit.ly/4jxRch2>.

politically engaged leadership of Şeyh Mehmet Zahid Kotku (1897–1980). Another group formed under the charismatic leadership of Fethullah Gülen (1941–2024). The Naqshbandi-Khalidis came to play significant roles in Turkey's multiparty politics, sometimes in alignment with the United States and sometimes against it. An outgrowth of the Nurcu movement, the Gülenists initially focused on gaining influence in the educational sphere. Soon they proved to be rather uncloy lovers of the United States and critics of postrevolutionary Iran.

Fethullah Gülen, an Anatolian preacher known for his emotionally charged sermons, shared Nursi's accommodationist stance toward the Kemalist regime and positive attitude toward the United States. In 1961, he led the way in founding a Struggle Against Communism Association (Komunizm ile Mücadele Derneği) in his hometown of Erzurum.¹¹³ Gülen's sermons obscured his intellectual debt to the Kurdish Nursi, whose students and followers were under constant investigation. Instead, his early life experiences in the Eastern frontier city of Erzurum and readings of conservative nationalist intellectuals gave Gülen's version of Islam a distinctly ethnonationalist emphasis.¹¹⁴ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he amassed following and resources by founding a highly secretive, vertical organization, which grew by offering subsidized housing to underprivileged students. Although technically not a Sufi brotherhood, Gülen's movement adopted elements of Nursi's Naqshbandi-inspired teachings, and held Gülen at its center as a respected teacher and spiritual guide who directed the adherents' worldly affairs.

Gülen's pro-state, pro-army stance, his harsh critiques of anti-American Islamists, and his rapid ascent soon led to speculations of his being a CIA asset. A leading scholar of Turkish Sufism, Hakan Yavuz notes that many assume his founding of an organization of defense against Communism earned him the attention (if not the direct sponsorship) of the US spy and diplomatic networks in the 1960s.¹¹⁵ Graham Fuller, who was a junior CIA officer based in Istanbul and served as a liaison with Turkish intelligence at the time, recalled that in the mid-1960s, American officials were in awe of Kemalism, in line with modernization theory. However, he noted in our interview that he "would not be surprised" if some developed contacts with Gülen and other Turkish Islamist leaders in their anti-Communist crusade due to the "typical American obsession with

¹¹³ Fethullah Gülen and Erdoğan Latif, *Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi: "Küçük Dünyam"* (Istanbul: AD, 1995), 78.

¹¹⁴ Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 181.

¹¹⁵ M. Hakan Yavuz, "Neo-Nurcular: Gülen Hareketi," in Murat Belge, Tanıl Bora, and Murat Gültekinçil, ed. *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasî Düşünce: İslamcılık*, 1st ed. (Istanbul: İletişim, 2004), 295–307, 297.

finding the enemy of your enemy.”¹¹⁶ My comb through the relevant files at the National Archives and Records Administration failed to turn out any mention of Gülen from the 1960s and 1970s, although the case is far from closed, as I extrapolate later in this chapter.

Naqshbandis, Turkey’s largest Sufi sect, also benefited from the US-sponsored realignment of Turkish secularism. Their relationship with the United States, however, has been ambivalent, shifting throughout history. It is well known that the Naqshbandi sheikh Kotku encouraged Necmettin Erbakan to found Turkey’s first openly Islamist party in 1970. Erbakan’s Milli Görüş movement adopted deeply anti-imperialist rhetoric, openly maligning the United States. Subjected to repeated investigations and bans under laws intended to protect laicism, Erbakan found a place in the coalition government in 1974, organizing the outreach to Black Muslims detailed in Chapter 3. Yet the Naqshbandis would also find influence within conservative governments aligned with the United States, particularly after the 1980 military coup.

In addition to the transition to the multiparty period, the main turning point for Türkiye’s Islamist communities came with the 1980 coup. As noted in Chapter 4, the coup leader General Kenan Evren promoted a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” to attack leftist radicalism and the forms of Islam he considered militant and influenced by Iran. As developed by the devout intellectuals of the 1970s, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis revised the dominant vision of Turks as “the sword of Islam.” Scholars advocating this point of view conceded that Sufi orders had played a key role in spreading Islam, including with a sword in hand when necessary. However, they argued these devout Turks had developed an open-minded frontier Islam along the borders of the empire; their experiences with different peoples had made them more open to cultural exchange, more progressive, and more obedient to worldly political authority.¹¹⁷ This ideology proved a perfect fit for General Evren’s post-coup vision for the country; he even quoted Rumi to offer Islamic justification for his 1980 headscarf ban.¹¹⁸

The return to multiparty democracy under Turgut Özal’s premiership brought a flow of Saudi petrodollars and emphasis on free enterprise,

¹¹⁶ Author’s Interview with Graham Fuller, Wednesday, February 15, 2023, conducted on Zoom.

¹¹⁷ Özdalga, “The Hidden Arab,” 556–58; Elhan and Şirin, “Reconsidering the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,” 303–18. Bernard Lewis had argued more or less the same thing in his hugely influential *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961), even forming an unusual analogy between the Turks’ and Euro-Americans’ westward expansion. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26–27.

¹¹⁸ Gürel, “Good Headscarf, Bad Headscarf,” 180.

which allowed religious organizations and communities to gain even more capital and influence.¹¹⁹ The neoliberal post-coup regime also established a rapprochement between the United States and Turkey's Naqshbandis. Prime Minister Turgut Özal and his brother Korkut Özal had strong ties to the Sufi order. They had both been educated in the United States – a fact that further connected Islamization with US influence in many critics' minds. Indeed, in his memoirs and musings on Sufism, Korkut Özal noted how the contemporary forms of religiosity he observed from Mormons during his stay in Utah (1955–1957) influenced his decision to “live Islam” properly upon his return to Türkiye. Unable to progress in his studies of the Qur'an, he gave his alliance to the Naqshbandi sheik Kotku, further connecting the order to right-wing multiparty politics.¹²⁰

The Gülen movement also made significant gains under Özal's privatization policies, particularly flourishing in the private education and media sectors.¹²¹ As the movement grew through investments and charitable donations, it founded multiple nonprofit organizations with cloaked, “non-Islamic” names, such as the Turkish Teachers Organization and Turkish Journalists and Writers Organization. Through the rhetoric of “service” (*hizmet*), the Gülenists linked Said Nursi's interest in education with the rising nonprofit sector. Relatively free from criminal investigation under Özal's neoliberal regime, Gülen and his cadres worked toward forming his young followers into a “golden generation” that would shape the country's direction.¹²² The movement's schools and study centers reached millions of young citizens, training a Gülenist cadre that would take up key positions in the state bureaucracy, including within the judiciary and the police.

As Gülen's profile rose, the whispers that had developed around his pro-American Islam got louder.¹²³ In 1990, writing in the hardline Islamist magazine *Ak-Doğuş*, M. Halis Turan summarized the suspicions swirling around Gülen's American connections among Islamist radicals. Noting the United States had a policy of using “moderate and positive Muslims” (*ılımlı ve olumlu Müslümanlar*) against revolutionary Muslim

¹¹⁹ Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam*, 113.

¹²⁰ A. Korkut Özal and Nurettin Keleşoğlu, eds., *İslam ve Tasavvuf Üzerine bir Derleme* (Istanbul: AKÖZ Vakfı, 2009), 5–6; Korkut Özal with Nail Güreli, *Gerçek Tanık: Korkut Özal Anlatıyor* (Istanbul: Milliyet Gazetesi, 1994), 16–20.

¹²¹ Hakan M. Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ch. 4.

¹²² Yavuz Çobanoğlu, “Altın Nesil”in Peşinde: Fethullah Gülen’de Toplum, Devlet, Ahlak, Otorite (Istanbul: İletişim, 2012).

¹²³ Osman N. Gündeş, *İhtilallerin ve Anarşinin Yakın Tanığı* (Istanbul: VPA Grup, 2010), 205.

organizations, Turan insisted Gülen could easily serve as “the chief of the CIA’s moderate and positive Muslims desk” or lead the state’s accommodationist Directorate of Religion.¹²⁴

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gülen’s movement expanded its reach: Gülenists began opening schools in newly independent, Turkic-speaking nations, such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan.¹²⁵ Russia, which sought to hold on to its hegemony in the region, protested that Türkiye was serving “as Washington’s chosen instrument” in the region.¹²⁶ In a 1997 interview, Gülen admitted that running schools in different parts of the world would not be possible if one did not have good relations with the United States.¹²⁷ Retired Turkish intelligence officer Osman Nuri Gündeş corroborated suspicions in his 2010 memoirs, which stated that the Turkish intelligence organization MIT believed the Gülen schools in the new Turkic republics had allowed CIA infiltration.¹²⁸

Türkiye’s relations with Iran proved a point of divergence between the Gülenists and the Naqshbandis in the 1990s and beyond. Naqshbandi-associated leaders, such as Erbakan, were often warmer toward Iran and the regime’s anti-US stance. In fact, upon coming to power in a coalition government after the 1994 election, Erbakan made his first official state trip to Iran, followed by Qaddafi’s Libya, two key bastions of Islamic anti-Americanism. The Gülen movement, on the other hand, held a stronger ethnonationalist tint, emphasizing “Turkish Islam” in comparison to Iranian and Arab traditions. Weighing in on the post-coup “will Turkey become Iran” debates, Gülen maligned Iran and Shiism, warning against “the export of a sect and fanatical Islamic understanding in the name of religion and Islamic revolution.”¹²⁹

True to form, Gülen was also vocally supportive of the February 28, 1997, “postmodern” coup, which forced Erbakan’s Refah Party out of government. However, his conciliatory tone did not prevent the laicist regime from viewing him and his growing network with suspicion during the February 28 Process, which involved monitoring and criminalizing non-state religious activity and networks (Chapter 4). With a trial pending against him, Gülen escaped to the United States in 1999, and settled in

¹²⁴ M. Halis Turan, “İhaneti Anlamak,” *Ak Doğuş*, no. 7–8 (June–July 1990), 29.

¹²⁵ Jean-Christophe Peuch, “Azerbaijan: Authorities Strive to Keep Islam Under Control,” *Radio Free Europe*, June 24, 2004, www.rferl.org/a/1053509.html.

¹²⁶ Graham Fuller, *Turkey’s New Geopolitics: From the Balkans to Western China* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 76.

¹²⁷ Nevval Sevindi, *Fethullah Gülen ile New York Sohbeti* (Istanbul: Sabah, 1997), 39.

¹²⁸ Gündeş, *İhtilallerin ve Anarşinin*, 206.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Enis Erdem Aydın, “Why are Gülenists Hostile toward Iran?,” *Al Monitor*, August 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/42fgKKb>.

Pennsylvania. He soon became a significant player in the charter school movement and interfaith organizing, as explained in the next section.¹³⁰

The fact that Türkiye's Islamization proceeded in ways favorable to capitalism and the United States only accentuated the comparisons made between Türkiye and Iran and Shiism and Sufism in the 1980s and 1990s. In the transition from the Cold War to the War on Terror, this doctrinal mode of Türkiye–Iran comparativism would find new adherents and suffuse US and international policy documents on “Islamic radicalism” and “moderate Islam.”

The Clash of, and Dialogue among, Civilizations: From the Cold War to the War on Terror

In a 1978 report to President Carter, national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski identified “an arc of crisis” that demonstrated vulnerability in the US Cold War position: “All at once, difficulties are surfacing in Iran and Pakistan, and they are thinly below the surface in India and are very manifest in Bangladesh, and there is reason to believe that the political structure of Saudi Arabia is beginning to creak. Turkey is also becoming more wobbly.”¹³¹

As Brzezinski's vocabulary of structural engineering made clear, the revolutionary shifts in Iran seemed to destabilize the “Northern Tier,” the buffer zone the United States had established along the southern border of the USSR. When the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support a troubled pro-Soviet government, US policymakers perceived the USSR to be truly “on a roll.”¹³² Although Brzezinski's “arc of crisis” contained many Muslim-majority regions, his vision of trouble was not tied to Islamism. On the contrary, the fact that the Iranian revolution was “Islamic” initially heartened US officials, who attempted to use common opposition to Communism in their outreach to the new regime.¹³³

Writing from exile, Iran's deposed shah speculated about the CIA's role in his demise and the Americans' thinking: “Their strategy, if indeed they have one, appears to assume that Islam is capable of thwarting

¹³⁰ Stephanie Saul, “Charter Schools Tied to Turkey Grow in Texas,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/education/07charter.html.

¹³¹ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter 1, Washington, DC, December 2, 1978, *FRUS 1977–1980*, Vol. I: Foundations of Foreign Policy, 100.

¹³² Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 120.

¹³³ Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, 237.

Soviet ambitions in the region.”¹³⁴ Despite his dominant image as an over-westernizing technophile, the shah sought to personify moderate Islam in this book as he had done throughout his rule: “I am a religious man, a believer,” he wrote, “I follow the precepts of the sacred Book of Islam, precepts of balance, justice, and moderation.”¹³⁵ He also credited himself and the empress with tempering immoderate westernization in Iran.¹³⁶

Even when the Iranian hostage crisis demonstrated that Muslim anti-Communism did not equal pro-Americanism, the State Department and CIA analysts declared the Iranian revolution to be a special case due to Shia militancy.¹³⁷ The CIA continued its collaborations with Islamists elsewhere, hoping “an arc of Islam” could contain “the arc of crisis,” which they read exclusively on Cold War terms.¹³⁸ “The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made it more important to mobilize Islamic resistance against the Soviets,” recalled Brzezinski in *Power and Principle* (1983).¹³⁹ He and President Reagan’s CIA director, Bill Casey, were the chief architects of this Islam strategy, which furthered precedents established during the early Cold War under Eisenhower. Thus, the CIA provided arms and training to the fighters (*mujahideen*) in Afghanistan as they battled the Soviets throughout the 1980s. Afghanistan, as the birthplace of Rumi, also had a legitimate claim to the heritage of Mevlevi Sufism; however, with their proxy war, the Americans empowered the most militant Islamists.¹⁴⁰ Aided by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, Muslim fighters poured into the country from across the world, forging terror networks and imbibing and exporting a modern, transnational ideology of armed jihad that would long outlive the Soviet withdrawal of 1988–1989. America’s Islam strategy embraced theological opportunism: In a 1987 presentation to the CIA, Brzezinski also cited Sufi networks as a potentially helpful challenge to the Soviet Union.¹⁴¹

Even as the CIA continued to prioritize the Communist versus non-Communist binary in its day-to-day operations, US policymakers sought

¹³⁴ Pahlavi, *Answer to History*, 23.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 148.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 117.

¹³⁷ Graziano, *Errand into the Wilderness of Mirrors*, 153–54, 164–75; “Islam in Iran” (Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, March 1980), CIA-RDP81B00401R000400110013–5, National Archives (CREST Database), 23.

¹³⁸ Dreyfuss, *Devil’s Game*, 240.

¹³⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 485.

¹⁴⁰ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 143.

¹⁴¹ “Presentation by Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski to the Central Intelligence Agency,” September 24, 1987, www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90G00152R001102310003-9.pdf.

to identify connections between Islam and anti-Americanism. The issue held popular purchase: As Edward Said noted in his 1981 book *Covering Islam*, the Iranian hostage crisis had reanimated racialized visions of a civilizational clash between Islam and the West.¹⁴² The June 24–25, 1985, hearings on *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs* featured multiple experts who were asked to comment on “the nature of Islamic fundamentalism and why it has some radical and extreme expressions,” and “about why this movement seems to be anti-American.”¹⁴³ Fresh on the committee’s agenda was Iran’s Islamic revolution and hostage crisis, a recent slew of terror attacks and hijackings associated with Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and Qaddafi’s Libya.

The scholar experts summoned before the committee primarily urged policymakers away from lumping all Islamic groups together and advocated for increased dialogue and cultural exchange. Through their testimonies, the hearings officially entered the comparison between radical and moderate Islam, interpreted on political terms, into the state lexicon.¹⁴⁴

Speaking first, Religious Studies Professor John Esposito of the College of the Holy Cross encouraged differentiating between violent movements and Islamic revivalism at large and argued for “informal contacts” with more moderate, “popular and authentically representative forces in Moslem societies.”¹⁴⁵ Esposito pointed to US foreign policy in breeding resentment within specific Muslim-majority contexts. The United States’s overbearing presence in Iran and support for the shah was one example.

In addition to the radical–moderate binary, the hearings furthered comparativism around Shia versus Sunni Islam and Shiism versus Sufism. In response to the chairperson’s request for help differentiating among Islamist groups, Esposito explained that the US penchant for viewing Islam through the lenses of Roman Catholicism had led to “false conclusions.” Given the fragmented, diverse, and contentious relations between various parts of the Islamic revival, Khomeini could serve as an inspiration, but he had “no authority” over Sunnis.

¹⁴² Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

¹⁴³ *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, House of Representatives, Ninety-Ninth Congress, First Session, June 24, July 15, and September 30, 1985. District of Columbia: U.S. G.P.O., 1985, 1985.

¹⁴⁴ Emin Değer, “Fethullah Gülen’in Derin Misyonu,” in *Batı ve İrtica*, ed. Komisyon (Istanbul: Kaynak, 1999), 418–43, 426.

¹⁴⁵ *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism: Hearings*, 6.

Dr. Hermann F. Eilts, director of the Center for International Relations at Boston University, also emphasized diversity and difference, praising Sufism in contrast to revolutionary Shiism. Sufism, he argued, was “anathema to the whole doctrine of Khomeini.”¹⁴⁶ “The Shi’ite sense of martyrdom” could help explain recent hijackings and suicide bombings.¹⁴⁷ Speaking on the second day, Johns Hopkins University’s Fouad Ajami simplified the comparison: “The Sunnis are homicidal and the Shiites are suicidal.” His Islamophobic soundbite carried the day. In an online conversation with me, Esposito recalled that “the only coverage on TV that night was Ajami’s statement.”¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, members of the subcommittee proved open to comparativism based on Islamic theology in distinguishing Muslim extremists from moderates but pushed back on the experts’ recommendations that the United States rethink its foreign policies, including unconditional support for Israel.¹⁴⁹

The liberal calls to differentiate between different Islams (Shia versus Sufi, radical versus moderate, etc.) and increase “dialogue” with Muslim reformists gained more urgency in the 1990s. The dissolution of the USSR brought increased attention to the fallout of the Afghan jihad: As the Taliban took over Afghanistan, a series of terror attacks on Western targets organized by transnational veterans of the Afghan war captured the attention of the media. Why did “they” hate “us”?

In September 1990, Bernard Lewis offered one easy answer by publishing “The Roots of Muslim Rage” in *The Atlantic*. His main argument was that Muslims “resent the West” due to a sense of civilizational inferiority. *The Atlantic* cover featured the cartoon of a frowning, turbaned, black-bearded, hooked-nosed, Asiatic Muslim man with the American flag in his eyes. Although Lewis made sure to differentiate between different Islamic doctrines and traditions in his opening caveat, his article’s personification of “the Muslim” was male and essentially violent. Having “suffered multiple stages of defeat,” including challenges to patriarchy “from emancipated women and rebellious children,” the Muslim’s rage was “inevitable.” Also inevitable was the fact that this rage would be directed at the Muslim’s primal, civilizational enemy: “the West.” This was a “Clash of Civilizations,” wrote Lewis in conclusion, unironically promoting a concept that Said had used critically in *Covering Islam*. The

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 99. Of course as Cook notes the theme of martyrdom also permeates Sufism, including Rumi’s writings. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63–73.

¹⁴⁸ *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism: Hearings*, 155. John Esposito, personal email to the author, March 23, 2023; Zoom interview with author, April 4, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism: Hearings*, 144.

term would get picked up, simplified, and popularized again, this time by American political scientist Samuel Huntington in a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article and 1996 book.

Unlike the polyglot Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington had no training in Islamic history or the main languages associated with West Asia and North Africa. This did not prevent his "Clash of Civilizations" thesis – a simplified version of Lewis's concluding argument – from becoming hugely influential. Rejecting comparativism between "Islamic fundamentalism" and "moderate Muslims," Huntington's article and book laid out a contrast between "Islam" and "the West" in the simplest possible terms, resurrecting old, racialized tropes about civilization in the process. "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism," he wrote, "It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." Similarly, Huntington argued that the actions of "the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense" were largely irrelevant to Muslim resentment. The problem for Islam was "the West"; Muslims resented not Western policies but Western attempts to export values that were essentially incompatible with the rival civilization of Islam.¹⁵⁰

Such crude declarations helped popularize Huntington's argument, but they also made the clash of civilizations thesis all too easy to disprove. Detractors could quickly point out social science data demonstrating how US foreign policy brewed anger and resentment, rehash instances of collaboration across so-called civilizations, and critique Huntington on theoretical grounds for his clunky use of anthropological terms like "culture" and "civilization." To provide a counterpoint to the clash of civilizations thesis, multiple thinkers and political figures began to push for "dialogue." Among them was Pope John Paul II, who had emphasized the necessity of "inter-religious dialogue" in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). He expanded outreach to Muslims and, with the 1998 formation of the Catholic Muslim Commission, implemented a channel for dialogue.

Arguing against the West versus Islam binary, however, all too often fueled another line of comparativism Lewis had furthered in "The Roots of Muslim Rage": the one between the "good," moderate Muslims and "bad" militant fundamentalists.¹⁵¹ As Mamdani has shown, the search for "the good Muslim" all too often collapsed religion and politics,

¹⁵⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 217–18.

¹⁵¹ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.

implying that “fundamentalist” theologies – as opposed to political and economic grievances – were responsible for political violence committed by Muslims.¹⁵² Thus, moderate Islam discourse, while a tempting rebuttal to more hawkish views on Islam, tended to collapse religion and politics in similar ways. Both the binary opposition “Islam vs. the West” and the dialogue formula of “Islam and the West” implied that “the West” had transcended its dominant religion (Christianity), whereas Islam had remained a totalizing force, explaining Muslim lifeways and politics.¹⁵³ This renewed emphasis on religion *as* politics imposed new theological classifications (Islamic fundamentalism, moderate Islam, etc.) on Muslim-majority countries and communities from Morocco to Indonesia in the service of the US empire.

Turkish laicism proved a stumbling point for Huntington as well as his opponents. As a NATO ally and applicant for EU membership, the Muslim-majority country appeared as an inconvenient exception in Huntington’s writings. His 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article called Türkiye “the most obvious and prototypical torn country,” which could not decide whether it belonged within “Islamic” or “Western” civilization. His 1996 book turned prescriptive, suggesting Turkish leaders might soon be ready to stop their “frustrating and humiliating” attempts to join “Western civilization.” Instead of acting like “beggars,” he predicted, the country would do well to “resume its much more impressive and elevated historical role as the principal Islamic interlocutor and antagonist of the West.”¹⁵⁴

A similar ambivalence toward Türkiye appeared in publications opposing Huntington’s thesis. In some ways, the country proved an excellent touch point for “moderate Islam.” In his *Islam and the West* (1993), Lewis promoted it as a model for Muslim democracy.¹⁵⁵ Yet, Graham Fuller argued in his 1993 book *Turkey’s New Geopolitics from the Balkans to Western China* that Türkiye’s current version of secularism appeared to make it a less-than-ideal model for other Muslim-majority nations.¹⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, both Huntington and his detractors wished to see the country fit their abstract schemata better. Huntington implied Türkiye should pick a side in the clash of civilizations and, being Muslim-majority, joining “the West” would be “humiliating.”

¹⁵² Ibid., 62.

¹⁵³ Said, *Covering Islam*, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 178.

¹⁵⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153; Michael Gibson, “Treacherous Friends: The Uncomfortable Legacy of Bernard Lewis,” *Daily Sabah*, May 31, 2018, <https://bit.ly/42mFKO8>.

¹⁵⁶ Fuller, *Turkey’s New Geopolitics*, 167.

Fuller, on the other hand, wished the country to integrate with the West while being “more flexible” (but “not like Iran”) toward Islam in public life.¹⁵⁷ Ironically, as conspiracy-inclined thinkers noted with some urgency, both recommendations hinged on the country's further Islamicization.

For a while, the Iranian regime appeared to fit dominant Western categorizations, whether one considered “Islam” to be the main problem as Huntington did or “the bad Muslims,” as more nuanced thinkers implied. In “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” Lewis pointed to “Iranian mullahs and their disciples elsewhere” to mark the most “virulent” form of anti-Western hatred. Of course, this vision of “Iranian fundamentalism” was a caricature, and it became more challenging to maintain as the Iranian political scene shifted in the late twentieth century. With the election of reformist president Muhammad Khatami in 1997, the vision of dialogue became a significant part of Iran's foreign policy, and Khatami appeared on the world stage as a new personification of the “Good Muslim.”

Under President Khatami, Iran began an outreach program to end the country's political and economic isolation. A learned, revolutionary cleric with a background in philosophy, Khatami had worked as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, overseeing a policy of relaxed censorship and a boost in publications and the film industry.¹⁵⁸ His lectures and interviews in Western media showcased a calm, scholarly demeanor and connected this self-presentation to Iran's rich literary and artistic heritage. In his January 7, 1998, interview with Christian Amanpour, Khatami called out the clash of civilizations thesis and critiqued attempts to find a new global enemy in “Islam” following the end of the Cold War. Painting a picture of “peace and moderation,” according to the *New York Times*, Khatami personified the wise, mystical Eastern philosopher at the United Nations, as well. His opening words echoed Traditionalist philosophy and the world religions paradigm: “Allow me to speak here as a man from the East, the origin of brilliant civilizations and the birthplace of Divine Prophets: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, peace be upon them all.”¹⁵⁹

Institutionalizing his vision for dialogue, Khatami founded the Iranian Foundation for Dialogue among Civilizations in 1998, effectively

¹⁵⁷ See Ufuk Güldemir interview with Graham Fuller, “Türkiye'nin Rolu Ortadoğu'da,” *Cumhuriyet*, February 26, 1990, reprinted in Sabri Sayari, *Amerikan Gizli Raporlarında Türkiye'deki İslamcı Akımlar* (Istanbul: Beyan, 1990), 99.

¹⁵⁸ Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran*, 26–27.

¹⁵⁹ Elaine Sciolino, “The United Nations: Iranian President Paints a Picture of Peace and Moderation,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1998, <https://bit.ly/4lnpjdc>.

resurrecting the Pahlavis' soft power program. The two eras were linked by the continuing influence of key figures and ideologies as well. According to Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Khatami told him he had been inspired to pursue life as a cleric by Nasr's work.¹⁶⁰ Regardless of the extent of Nasr's individual influence, the Traditionalist paradigm, which identified the presence of the same divine truth at the heart of all "true" world religions, appeared regularly in Khatami's speeches. In his 2000 lecture to UNESCO, for example, the Iranian president claimed mysticism could be a foundation for a dialogue among civilizations because of how it connected the world's religious traditions:

In addition to poetic and artistic experience, mysticism also provides us with a graceful, profound and universal language for dialogue. Mystical experience, constituted of the revelation and countenance of the sacred in the heart and soul of the mystic, opens new existential pathways onto the human spirit. A study of mystical achievements of various nations reveals to us the deepest layers of their experience in the most universal sense.¹⁶¹

In 1999, Khatami met with Pope John Paul II, with both leaders emphasizing similarities and connections between Islam and Christianity in their statements.¹⁶² In 2001, Khatami's efforts led to the United Nations declaring "the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations," marking international consensus around dialogue ideology.

In contrast to the caricature of the enraged Muslim man found in "The Roots of Muslim Rage," the figure of the Good Muslim was soft-spoken, tolerant, open to dialogue, and mystically inclined. Khatami's chocolate-colored robe, instead of the usual clerical black, became a symbol of this approachable, warm persona.¹⁶³ Turkish sect leader Fethullah Gülen was also ready to embody the reformed masculinity promoted by moderate Islam discourse. In an ethnonationalist twist, however, he mobilized comparativism to sideline Iran and claim mysticism for Türkiye.

In a 1997 interview from New York City, Gülen argued against Huntington's thesis as well as Iranian "extremism."¹⁶⁴ "Iranian Islam is fundamentalist," read a pull quote from the published interview,

¹⁶⁰ Nasr, *Hikmat va siyāsat*, 155–56.

¹⁶¹ UNESCO, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: The Round Table on the Eve of the United Nations Millennium Summit Conference*, New York, 2000, 29, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000123890>.

¹⁶² New York Times News Service, "Pope Meets with Iranian Leader," *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1999, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-03-12-9903120274-story.html.

¹⁶³ Wikipedia Contributors, "The Man with the Chocolate Robe," *Wikipedia*, The Free Encyclopedia, <https://bit.ly/4ieuR7f>.

¹⁶⁴ Sevinç, *Fethullah Gülen ile New York Sohbeti*, 24–25, 37.

"Turkish Islam is tolerant."¹⁶⁵ According to Gülen, Iranian Shiism was kept alive through the hatred of the Sunni caliph Omar. The interviewer concurred and added that Iranian mysticism was "death-facing," echoing dominant Western discourses about the supposed Shia will to martyrdom, as opposed to the "life-loving" Turkish Islam. Weighing on the "Will Türkiye become Iran" debates of the 1990s, Gülen and the interviewer agreed that the country would not "become Iran" because they had different theological traditions. Mobilizing what Mamdani calls "culture talk," Türkiye's signature "Good Muslim" Gülen thus drew political conjectures from newly sharpened ethno-sectarian differences.

Interreligious dialogue proved another area for growth for Gülen. According to documents revealed by Wikileaks, he developed a "beneficial" relationship with Turkey's Jewish community and the Ecumenical Patriarch in the 1990s.¹⁶⁶ Gülen also met the Pope in 1998. The latter public relations coup helped promote him as a critical Islamic representative, analogous to the status of the Pope, although he had little popularity among non-Turkish-speaking Muslims. Similarly, he remained deeply controversial in his home country among laicists and Islamists alike.

While Gülen appeared as a leading player in dialogue talk with his "Turkish Islam" in the late 1990s, Türkiye itself was still under the sway of the neo-republican February 28 Process. Prickly about anything challenging the prevailing configuration of secularism, the country's leaders were not ready to serve the cause of "moderate Islam" in any official capacity. As for the Islamist opponents of the laicist regime, Gülen's brand of so-called moderate, civil, tolerant Islam appeared "castrated."¹⁶⁷ Many Turkish Islamists claimed "interreligious dialogue" itself to be a missionary plot, citing *Redemptoris Missio*, in which the Pope justified dialogue among religions as "a part of the Church's evangelizing mission."¹⁶⁸ Thus, while agreeing on little else, Türkiye's hardline laicists and Islamists condemned Gülen as part of an American plot to push "moderate Islam" onto the Middle East and thus reduce resistance to US goals for the region. Collectively, these arguments came to be known as the green belt (*yeşil kuşak*) theory in the country.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶⁶ From Amconsul Istanbul to Ruehzl/European Political Collective Priority, "Jewish Community Discusses Armenia, Anti-Semitism, and Fethullah Gulen," July 21, 2008, 08ISTANBUL387_a, Public Library of U.S. Diplomacy, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ISTANBUL387_a.html.

¹⁶⁷ Fatih Çayabatmaz, "28 Şubat'ın Etkileri ve Fethullah Gülen Cemaati," *Haksöz*, no. 143 (Şubat 2003): 62.

¹⁶⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1990), <https://bit.ly/4irVk1i>.

Despite broadly shared mistrust regarding his motives among Muslims hostile to his movement, Gülen's role in interfaith dialogue only increased after 1999, when a judicial investigation led to his exile in the United States. The same year, Gülen founded the Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding in Washington, DC. Thus, when the 9/11 terror attacks put Islamic "fundamentalism" irrevocably on the political map, launching a seemingly boundless "War on Terror," Gülen was poised to play an even more prominent role as the personification of moderate Islam in the West, this time alongside Turkey's newly elected Naqshbandi Islamists.

After 9/11: AKP, Moderate Islam, and "Green Belt" Theories

To many, the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on US soil confirmed Huntington's thesis of an inevitable war between "Islam" and "the West." They also initiated a "never-ending war on terror," which led to the US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) and the increased employment of extrajudicial drone assassinations across multiple countries.¹⁶⁹ "This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while," noted Bush on September 16, 2001.¹⁷⁰ As the government instituted a new form of racial profiling by selectively registering, interviewing, fingerprinting, and deporting Muslim men who were in the United States on visas, some individuals took anti-Muslim racism into their own hands by committing hate crimes against people they perceived to be Muslim.

Seeking to expand the War on Terror into Iraq, Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech leaned further into Manichean language as he declared that "Iran, Iraq, and North Korea" formed "an axis of evil," threatening humanity. The statement shocked the State Department as well as Iranian officials, who had been collaborating with the United States in the fight against Afghanistan's Taliban.¹⁷¹

At the same time, the Bush administration took pains to establish that the United States was not at war with Islam itself.¹⁷² His speeches were

¹⁶⁹ Alex Lubin, *Never-Ending War on Terror* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).

¹⁷⁰ "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival," *George W. Bush White House Archives*, September 16, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

¹⁷¹ Azizi, *Shadow Commander*, 146–81; see also, Frontline Staff, "Analysis: The Long Reach of a Speech," *Frontline*, PBS, n.d., www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/axis/axis.html.

¹⁷² Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist," *UCLA Law Review* 49, no. 5 (2002): 1575–600, 1576; Evelyn Alsultany, "Selling American Diversity and Muslim American

full of praise for Islam, which he characterized as a religion of peace that "made brothers and sisters out of every race."¹⁷³ Under these conditions, moderate Islam discourse not only flourished in academia and the media but also became institutionalized within US foreign policy.

Comparativism allowed policy-oriented scholars and think tanks to generate theologically tinted recommendations for the War on Terror era. The emerging consensus echoed one of the suggestions Professor Esposito and others had put forth at the 1985 Congressional hearings: Moderate Muslims were to be supported by US foreign policy-makers instead of being lumped together with radicals.¹⁷⁴ A series of RAND Corporation studies, such as "Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies" (2003) and "The Muslim World after 9.11" (2004), recommended outreach and dialogue with "moderate Muslims" to increase democratization. "Civil Democratic Islam" identified an ally in Fethullah Gülen, described as a "modernist" who "puts forward a version of Islamic modernity that is strongly influenced by Sufism and stresses diversity, tolerance, and nonviolence."¹⁷⁵ While the Iranian regime appeared as a negative example as usual, the author Cheryl Benard also supported highlighting the activities of "modernist" dissidents. Another recommendation was to "build up the stature of Sufism" by encouraging cultural exchange and education.¹⁷⁶ RAND's "The Muslim World After 9.11" booklet similarly called on the US government to "foster madrassa and mosque reform," support "Muslim civil society groups that advocate moderation and modernity," and promote "moderate Muslim networks."

Such recommendations implied that US foreign policy had to have a religious dimension when it came to Muslim-majority states and non-state actors. While the CIA had long-practiced theological interventions into Islam and other religions, the suggestion that the White House and the State Department boost "moderate Islam" meant the United States government would come to "espouse a particular religious position" about a specific religion, in clear violation of the first amendment.¹⁷⁷

Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-9/11," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 593–622.

¹⁷³ "'Islam is Peace' Says President": Remarks by the President at Islamic Center of Washington, DC," *White House Archives*, September 17, 2001, <https://bit.ly/3RNCzdt>.

¹⁷⁴ John L. Esposito, "Political Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (1996): 119–32.

¹⁷⁵ Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), 54.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁷ Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47.

This could have been President Khatami's moment – arguably, no world politician had done more to counter the clash of civilizations ideology and personify moderation, tolerance, and dialogue. However, Iran's president was beleaguered by the conservative opposition within his country, and, with US hawks classifying the country as part of an “axis of evil,” collaborations with the United States appeared increasingly unlikely. Meanwhile, in Türkiye, a reformed wing of Erbakan's deposed Fazilet (Virtue) Party, called the Justice and Development Party (AKP), won the general elections of 2002. With connections to Turkey's Khalidi-Naqshbandi order, AKP's cadres were visibly devout. Yet, in a remarkable change from Erbakan's thundering anti-Western approach, the new government adopted neoliberal policies, seeking integration with the European Union and friendly relations with the United States.¹⁷⁸

AKP's leading cadres formed an alliance of convenience with Gülen's followers to weaken Kemalist laicism and end the February 28 Process. Pushing through the democratization and liberalization criteria needed for membership in the EU increased civilian control over the military and also gained the new regime Western goodwill. Mainstream US and European media outlets began promoting Türkiye as a model for all Muslim-majority countries. Even when their reporting expressed uncertainty about the AKP rule, Türkiye–Iran comparisons, using the Iranian revolutions' “bad Muslims” as foil, helped subsume concerns. From the beginning, as Cihan Tugal explains, “Turkey was offered as the path to follow not in abstract terms, but in subtle contradistinction to Iran.”¹⁷⁹

The vision of Turkish Sufi Islam, at peace with the West and operating as a positive influence for other Muslim-majority countries, was not one-sided. Dialogue discourse appeared as an AKP foreign policy plank as well. In his writings and speeches, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu promoted a doctrine of “strategic depth,” which sought to improve the country's relations with the West and Muslim-majority countries and build upon historical connections dating back to the Ottoman Era.¹⁸⁰ AKP's founding member, interim Prime Minister (2002–2003), and later President Abdullah Gül (2007–2011) explained, “At a time that people are talking of a clash of civilizations, Turkey is a natural bridge of civilizations. All we are trying to do is to use our position to bring

¹⁷⁸ Erbakan himself did not join this reformed wing and founded the rival Saadet Party instead.

¹⁷⁹ Cihan Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (New York: Verso, 2016), 11.

¹⁸⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (İstanbul: Küre, 2001), 584.

Islam and the West closer.”¹⁸¹ On May 28, 2003, Gül also gave a speech advocating for religious reform at the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers meeting in Tehran, drawing further attention as the face of liberal Turkish Islam.¹⁸²

Although AKP had declared its foreign policy motto would be “zero problems with neighbors,” 2003 was a year of many problems in foreign relations, as the invading US army became an unwanted neighbor in Iraq. The Turkish parliament refused US demands to open a new front against Saddam Hussein from Turkish soil, frustrating the Bush administration. On July 4, 2003, US soldiers in Iraq arrested and hooded Turkish soldiers – accidentally, according to some, and as retribution, according to others. Anti-Americanism became the status quo across all political leanings. Thus, as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prepared to visit the United States for a series of high-profile meetings and engagements in late January 2004, he had a tough job. He was getting ready to become an active agent in improving US–Türkiye relations at a time when Turkish public opinion, laicist and otherwise, had thoroughly soured against the United States.

In the United States, Erdoğan sought assurances that the Iraq War would not lead to an independent Kurdistan threatening Türkiye's established boundaries and would not impede continued US support for the country's EU bid.¹⁸³ While courting the goodwill of US policy-makers and opinion leaders, he became the face of the United States's moderate Islam. In particular, Erdoğan was recruited into an ambitious, underfunded, and largely defunct project, which came to be known as the “Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI).”

At its core, GMEI was a public diplomacy effort to present the Iraq War as part of a more extensive program to bring democracy to a Muslim-majority region sloppily defined as “the Greater Middle East.” This attempt to insert ideals into a controversial war and its chaotic aftermath intended to counter critics who noted the war had been launched based on lies regarding weapons of mass destruction and for oil, profiteering, and revenge. Although the Bush–Cheney administration's concept of “the Greater Middle East” looked a lot like Huntington's map of “Islam,” the administration's claim that this region could and should embrace Western liberalism was deeply informed by Lewis and contemporary figurations of the Good Muslim.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic*, 51.

¹⁸² “Biyografi,” Abdullah Gül, n.d., www.abdullahgul.gen.tr/sayfa/cumhurbaskani/biyografi/.

¹⁸³ “Türkiye İstedigini Aldı,” *Radikal*, January 29, 2004, front cover.

¹⁸⁴ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, concluding chapter.

The administration workshopped and launched GMEI in a series of high-profile international meetings in 2004, which confirmed that the White House considered a key role for Erdoğan and Türkiye in this endeavor. The ground was set at the January 21–25, 2004, DAVOS meeting. Iran's Khatami gave the opening keynote speech on January 21. As usual, he “projected a genial, reasonable image” and offered scholarly thoughts on dialogue and cross-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production.¹⁸⁵ However, Dick Cheney's speech three days later unequivocally vilified Iran, using comparativism with Türkiye. Iran's leaders, the US vice president claimed, “must follow the example being set by others throughout the greater Middle East.” Türkiye was “the premier example” of Muslim democracy.¹⁸⁶ Further hinting at the fact that the White House was betting on Türkiye and Erdoğan to personify reformist, democratic, Sufi Islam, American Ambassador to Türkiye, Eric Edelman, visited the Mevlânâ Museum, giving a speech about the increased need for Mevlânâ's ideas in the contemporary world on the same day as Cheney's speech.¹⁸⁷ Erdoğan, for his part, underlined Türkiye's EU bid at DAVOS and also referenced the peace- and tolerance-oriented teachings of Mevlânâ and Yunus Emre in his January 29 speech at the American Enterprise for Public Policy Research (AEI).

DAVOS was followed by a June 2004 G-8 meeting and a June 28–29 NATO summit in Istanbul, where the United States again promoted Türkiye as its preferred model. By then, the April 2004 revelations about US prisoner abuse and torture at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison had spent whatever moral capital the White House still claimed to hold. In addition, Türkiye's laicists were seething over Colin Powell's characterization of the country as a moderate “Republic of Islam,” as opposed to a secular republic as stated by its constitution.¹⁸⁸ Even AKP supporters were skeptical. “There is a paradox,” noted conservative author Ahmet Taşgetiren in the pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Şafak* on January 22, 2004: “[the United States] does not want Turkey to be ‘an Islamist regime’ but also wants it to be ‘an Islamist regime’ to take on the role of changing

¹⁸⁵ For lingering American perceptions of Khatami's tone, see Mark Landler, “Iran's Message at Davos Has Eerie Echo,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2014, <https://bit.ly/4lw9fWH>.

¹⁸⁶ “Remarks by the Vice President to the World Economic Forum,” *White House Archives*, January 24, 2004, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040124-1.html>.

¹⁸⁷ “Mevlânâ'ya Kulak Verelim,” *Yeni Şafak*, January 24, 2004, 13.

¹⁸⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, “The Anatomy of Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” *Brookings Project on Turkey*, November 16, 2005, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/taspinar20051116.pdf; Altuğ Günel, “Büyük Ortadoğu Projesi ve Türkiye,” *Ege Academic Review* 4 (2004): 156–64.

Islam and the world of Islam.”¹⁸⁹ This was a familiar paradox, echoing a long-standing American ambivalence about Kemalist laicism. US politicians and opinion leaders now sought to resolve the paradox with the idea of moderate Islam, sometimes coded as “Liberal Islam,” “Turkish Sufi Islam,” or “Islamic liberalism,” with limited success.¹⁹⁰

Still seeking to consolidate power within the country by pointing to Western support, the young AKP regime was warm to collaborating with the United States on this pet project. Sure, AKP's leaders did voice concerns: Uncomfortable with the terms of comparativism, Davutoğlu claimed “example country” would be a more fitting designation than “model country.”¹⁹¹ Erdoğan spoke out against the terms “moderate Islam” and “Islamist terror” at a meeting featuring Bernard Lewis and argued that the United States must first stop Israel's “politics of violence” and stabilize Iraq to realize Middle East reform.¹⁹² In addition, AKP cadres were largely sympathetic to Iran, marking another ideological distinction between them and the United States.¹⁹³ However, at the 2004 G-8 meeting, Erdoğan accepted the position of “democratic partner” and GMEI co-chair, thus becoming permanently linked to the United States's questionable project of bringing “democracy” to the world's Muslims.¹⁹⁴

Whereas once the intellectual cadres associated with the Pahlavi regime had sought to cast Iran as the home of mystical Islam, now the Turkish government was taking steps to link Türkiye, Rumi, and Sufism irrevocably. In 2005, Erdoğan became the co-sponsor of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) initiative.¹⁹⁵ Khatami, who

¹⁸⁹ Ahmet Taşgetiren, “Türkiye-İslam Dünyası,” *Yeni Şafak*, January 22, 2004, front page and 13. For more on the largely negative press reactions to GMEP in Turkey, see Özgün Erler Bayır, “Büyük Ortadoğu Projesi'nin Başarısına İlişkin Değerlendirmeler,” *Eğitim, Bilim, Toplum* 4, no. 16 (2006): 56–69.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas W. Smith, “Between Allah and Atatürk: Liberal Islam in Turkey,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 3 (2005): 307–25; Ömer F. Ertürk, “The Myth of Turkish Islam: The Influence of Naqshbandi-Gümüşhanevi Thought in Turkish Islamic Orthodoxy,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2020): 223–47; Cihan Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, 4.

¹⁹¹ M. Güngör Uras, “Ortadoğu için Türkiye ‘Model’ Değil Örnek Olabilir,” *Milliyet*, April 15, 2004, <https://bit.ly/42uXI1f>.

¹⁹² “Erdoğan: BOP İçin Önce İsrail'i Durdurun,” *Yeni Şafak*, June 9, 2004, front page and 13; “İlmimli İslam Sözü Erdoğan'ı Kızdırdı,” *Radikal*, June 14, 2004, front page and 11; “Oryantalist'e İslam Dersi,” *Yeni Şafak*, June 14, 2004, front page and 12.

¹⁹³ Elhan, “İran Devrimi'nin Türkiye'de Yansımaları,” 32.

¹⁹⁴ “Türkiye'ye Eşbaşkanlık,” *Hürriyet*, June 4, 2005, www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/turkiye-ye-esbaskanlik-38613885

¹⁹⁵ Ash Işsız, “From Alliance of Civilizations to Branding the Nation: Turkish Studies, Image Wars, and Politics of Comparison in an Age of Neoliberalism,” *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 4 (2014): 684–704.

had set intercivilizational dialogue on the UN agenda, was one of the advisors of the new initiative, but it was clear Iran's ex-president had lost the spotlight to Türkiye's charismatic rising star. The same year, Türkiye secured the UNESCO "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" designation for the Mevlevi whirling ritual.¹⁹⁶ When UNESCO declared 2007 as the international year of Rumi, the country took the lead in organizing multiple cultural events and whirling dervish performances worldwide, labeling Rumi "Turkish" in the process.¹⁹⁷

Although the US-led GMEI was hard to stomach, some Iranian progressives seemed open to considering Erdoğan and AKP as good models for the region. In his August 2007 editorial for the reformist *Shahrvand-e Emruz*, Mohammad Ghoochani credited Atatürk with founding a solid party system despite being a dictator, mobilizing a standard Atatürk–Reza Shah comparison explored in Chapter 1. Instead of contrasting Atatürk and Erdoğan, however, he connected the two as Türkiye's two founding fathers. According to Ghoochani, the electoral victory of Erdoğan showed that "in developed societies like Türkiye, Islamism can appear even more liberal than laicism."¹⁹⁸ Erdoğan's revision of Kemalist laicism into "true secularism" meant Türkiye could now lead the way for other Muslim-majority countries to transition from state Islamism to civic Islam. Ghoochani's editorial ended in a deeply optimistic tone, revising Mohammad Reza Shah's famous words to Cyrus the Great: "Atatürk, rest easy because Erdoğan is awake."

Not everyone was as optimistic. In his criticism of the editorial, Babak Mehdizadeh highlighted Shia–Sunni differences and emphasized that Erdoğan's "Islamism" was just another form of secularism that could not be compared to Iranian reformism.¹⁹⁹ Veteran journalist Masoud Behnoud, on the other hand, noted the similarities and connections between the AKP's political language and the thoughts of Iranian Islamic reformist and Rumi scholar Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) but did not weigh in on the implications of the Türkiye model for Iran.²⁰⁰ Arab-speaking intelligentsia and lay people, according to fieldwork and

¹⁹⁶ UNESCO inscribed the designation in 2008. "Mevlevi Sema Ceremony," UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/mevlevi-sema-ceremony-00100>.

¹⁹⁷ c.f. Mary-Jane Deeb, "Celebrating Rumi: An Evening of Music and Poetry Honors Turkish Poet," *Library of Congress*, May 2007 – vol. 66, no. 5, www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0705/rumi.html.

¹⁹⁸ Mohammad Ghoochani, "Ātātürk-i Musalmān," *Shahrvand-e-Emrooz*, 2 Shahrivar 1386/August 24, 2007. I am grateful to Arash Azizi for sharing this piece with me.

¹⁹⁹ Babak Mehdizadeh, "Naqdi bar sarmaqāli-yi Muḥammad Qūchāni," *Kafe Utopia*, August 28, 2007, <http://babak-m.blogfa.com/post/121>.

²⁰⁰ Masoud Behnoud, "Khāndanī az bāb-i pīrūzi-yi islāmgarāhā," *Masoud Behnoud*, August 30, 2007, <https://bit.ly/3RNGAyy>.

opinion polls conducted around the same time, were also intrigued by the applicability of the so-called Turkish model to their own countries.²⁰¹

The debates proved largely moot in Iran as the tide turned against dialog and reform with the election of regime hardliner Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in 2005. In 2006, Tehran University honored Coleman Barks, the American poet whose loose translations of Rumi had drawn much criticism for de-Islamicizing Sufism, with an honorary doctorate in Persian literature. However, the regime responded to the US promotion of Islamic mysticism as the West-friendly moderate Islam with a renewed crackdown on Iran's own Sufi networks, arguing that the "creation of deviant sects" was a long-standing tool for imperialist penetration.²⁰² Leading religious voices combed through Khomeini's sermons, resurrecting anything that smacked of anti-mysticism, and issued anti-Sufi fatwas.²⁰³ As *Radio Free Europe* reported on Iranian crackdowns on Sufism and the Council on Foreign Relations organ *Foreign Affairs* dubbed Fethullah Gülen "the Muslim Martin Luther," Türkiye and Iran again found themselves compared and ranked, this time with the United States operating as the arbiter of true Islam.²⁰⁴

Categories of comparison, however, were different for those who promoted green belt conspiracy theories, among them Turkish laicists, many Turkish Islamists, and Iranian opponents of the Islamic Republic. The latter blamed the Islamization of Iran and the removal of the shah on the United States, citing Mohammad Reza Shah's 1980 memoirs and the CIA outreach to high-profile clerics in the 1953 coup.²⁰⁵ For Turkish critics, the story involved the promotion of "a moderate Islam" in Türkiye to counter the USSR and, later, Iranian radicalism, with Gülen and Erdoğan appearing as leading agents. In an interview on the late Pahlavi regime, Brzezinski denied ever having heard of a "green belt" of

²⁰¹ Mensur Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, Jonathan Levack, and Gökçe Perçinoglu, "The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2010," *Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, February 2, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3EoFbLQ>; Sadik J. al-Azm, "The 'Turkish Model': A View from Damascus," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 4 (2011): 633–41.

²⁰² "Pishnahād-i namāyandigān barāyi tashdīd-i mujāzāt-i fa'āliyat dar gurūhhā-yi inḥirāfī," *Kiyhān*, April 21, 2013 (1392.02.01), 10.

²⁰³ "Barkhī az fatāwā-yi marājī-i 'izām-i taqlīd dar murid-i taṣāvvuf va khānqāh," *Ravāq-i Andīshī* (Markaz Pazhūhishhā-yi islāmī-yi sidā va sīmā, sal-i panjum, Ābān 1384/November 2005), available at <https://bit.ly/4j7vpwL>.

²⁰⁴ Golnaz Esfandiari, "Sufism under Attack in Iran," *Radio Free Europe*, February 26, 2009, www.rferl.org/a/Sufism_Under_Attack_In_Iran/1499990.html; Victor Gaetan, "The Muslim Martin Luther," *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2014, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2014-02-20/muslim-martin-luther; see also Benny Ziffer, "What Turkey's Celebration of Rumi Teaches Us About Iran," *Haaretz*, December 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/42MJU3e>.

²⁰⁵ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 127–30.

Islam, but the theory was clearly an extrapolation from his “arc of crisis” formula and real-world examples of US collaboration with Islamists.²⁰⁶

Was there ever a widespread conspiracy on the part of the US government to Islamicize Türkiye? There is no doubt that the United States government under Bush and Cheney promoted Erdoğan’s AKP, at least until the party had a falling out with the Gülenists and increased its criticism of Israel. While it is challenging to prove that supporting Gülen was official US policy, his pro-Western and pro-Israeli stance – helpfully sanitized of his history of anti-Semitic utterances – made the elderly cleric a popular candidate for US officials and scholars seeking a real-life personification of moderate Islam.²⁰⁷ When the US Citizenship and Immigration Service rejected Gülen’s green card application in 2008, a who-is-who slate of experts on Türkiye, Islam, and interfaith dialogue wrote letters of support contesting the ruling. Among them were Morton Abramowitz, United States Ambassador to Turkey (1989–1991), and ex-CIA officers Graham Fuller and George Fidas. In our interview and elsewhere, Graham Fuller argued that he only met Gülen while researching his book on political Islam and wrote the letter as an independent researcher familiar with Gülen’s peace- and service-oriented teachings.²⁰⁸ If true, he would not be the first or only American observer to search for an authentic antidote to Muslim militancy and find a perfectly crafted model of “moderate Islam” in the Gülenists and early AKP cadres.

Like moderate Islam discourse, green belt conspiracy theories resonated due to the power of gendered personification and comparison. Although the Qur’an describes believers as “the community of the middle way” (2:143) and urges restraint and moderation in multiple passages, “moderate Islam” is a neologism. Its most common Turkish translation has been “ılımlı İslam,” with an adjective that means “mild” as well as “compliant.” These connotations have led to a negative gendering of the term as weak and docile and have connected it to the loss of national autonomy and power.

In the early 2000s Türkiye, a whole cottage industry of political paperbacks flourished, making connections between the United States and Türkiye’s new Islamists and their “capitalism with ablutions.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Cooper, *Fall of Heaven*, 12.

²⁰⁷ Economist Dani Rodrik offers a thought-provoking analysis of the first question in “Is the U.S. Behind Fethullah Gulen?” *Dani Rodrik’s Weblog*, July 30, 2016, <https://bit.ly/42MKQ7K>.

²⁰⁸ Dexter Filkins, “Turkey’s Thirty-Year Coup,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup.

²⁰⁹ Eren Erdem, *Abdestli Kapitalizm* (Istanbul: Ozan, 2011).

Collectively, the books argued that the United States, in alliance with Israel, had sought to undermine Turkish nationalism and independence by pushing “moderate” Islam onto the secular country through the leadership of the AKP and Gülen, thus making Türkiye a perverse “model” for the rest of the Middle East. Their evocative covers and provocative titles depicted Gülen and Erdoğan as America’s “coy lovers.”²¹⁰ If gendered personification gave the theory fuel, its plausibility rested on the fact that, as this chapter has argued, Islamism was born of East–West encounters and shaped by US Cold War policy, as opposed to springing wholesale from ancient religious texts.

The road from the Cold War to the War on Terror saw Iran and Türkiye compared multiple times in revised and often contradictory rubrics. US opinion leaders, diplomats, and politicians did not just promote “modernization” in the region; they also critiqued perceived “over-westernization,” whether by Turkish Kemalists or the Pahlavis. The categories of “Islamic fundamentalism” and “moderate Islam” were, likewise, transnationally constructed through Türkiye–Iran comparisons and fueled by international power differentials. With Iran and Türkiye both able to claim the legacy of Rumi and Islamic mysticism, the United States picked sides and promoted models and foils. In the epilogue, I examine what the twilight of the US empire and the rise of regionalism might mean for the triangulated politics of comparison.

²¹⁰ The list of Turkish paperbacks connecting AKP and Gülen to America’s “moderate Islam” is too extensive to cover in a single footnote. Some I have consulted for this chapter include the following: Hikmet Çetinkaya, *Fethullah Gülen, ABD, ve AKP* (Istanbul: Günizi, 2007); Alev Coşkun, *Yeni Mandacılar* (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet, 2008); Hikmet Çetinkaya, *Amerikan Mızıkacıları* (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet, 2009); Metin Aydoğan, *Bitmeyen Oyun: Türkiye’yi Bekleyen Tehlikeler* (Istanbul: Umay, 2010); Aydın Batu, *Yeni Osmanlı Cumhuriyeti* (Istanbul: Toplumsal Dönüşüm, 2010); Ahmet Akgül, *ABD’li Siyonistlerin AKP’li Piyonistleri* (Istanbul: Togan, 2011); Cengiz Özakıncı, *İblisin Kiblesi: United States of İrtica* (Istanbul: Otopsi, 2011); Serdar Özer Öztürk, *AKP ve Gülen’i Kurtarma Planı: Made in CIA* (Istanbul: Togan, 2011); Emin M. Değer, *Emperyalizmin Tuzağındaki Ülke: Oltadaki Balık Türkiye* (Istanbul: Kilit, 2012); Ahmet Akgül, *Tuz Kokarsa* (Istanbul: Togan, 2012); Ahmet Şık, *Paralel Yürüdük Biz Bu Yollarda: AKP-Cemaat İttifakı Nasıl Dağıldı?* (Istanbul: Postacı, 2014).

Epilogue

The Forbidden Lovers – Beyond the Triangulation?

On the night of July 15, 2016, Turkish army officers aligned with the Gülen movement launched a coup d'état attempt against the Erdoğan government. A faction of the armed forces calling themselves the Peace at Home Council took over parts of Ankara and Istanbul, bombed the parliament and the presidential palace, and forced news outlets to read a statement announcing the seizure of control to protect the constitution, rule of law, and secularism.¹ The coup plotters, however, failed to extend or secure their hold on the country as civilian masses responded to the elected government's call to resist. When the dust settled, 300 people had been murdered and more than 2,000 injured, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was secure in his seat. The foiled coup came after about a decade of power struggle between the AKP and Gülenists, who had once allied to undermine Türkiye's laicist elites as US opinion leaders waxed poetic about their brand of "moderate Islam" (Chapter 5). While the theory that the coup attempt had been a false flag operation became popular among Erdoğan's opponents, another rumor pointed to Iran. Many Turks and Iranians claimed that, on that night, with military jets attacking his plane, Erdoğan had flown to Iran to seek assistance.

Iranian spokespeople denied that Erdoğan had absconded to Iran on the night of the coup, but the rumor hinted at a political common sense.² Iran had immediately and unambiguously sided with the Erdoğan government in their public statements during the coup attempt, despite serious and ongoing disagreements regarding the Syrian War.³ The Iranian government was well aware of Gülen's vocal anti-Iran stance and the history of strained Türkiye–Iran relations under Erdoğan's now-defanged laicist opponents (Chapter 4). The United States, on the other hand, reportedly

¹ "2016 Türkiye Askerî Darbe Girişimi Bildirisi," available at *VikiKaynak*, <https://bit.ly/4igoTCA>.

² "İran'ın En Yetkili Askeri Ağzından 15 Temmuz'da Erdoğan İran'a Geldi Mi Açıklaması/İŞİD'i Vurduk," *Tesnim Haber*, November 5, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/36j2s8uy>.

³ "Why Was Iran So Quick to Rally Behind Erdogan?," *Al Monitor*, July 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3GcAQw4>.

“failed the coup test,” with many major news outlets appearing supportive of the coup attempt.⁴ The country refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen from his compound in Pennsylvania, further fueling rumors that the United States had planned or encouraged the coup. When Rep. Mike Pompeo tweeted that both Iran and Türkiye were “totalitarian Islamist dictatorships” that year, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif clapped back for Erdoğan: “Turkish people’s brave defense of democracy & their elected government proves that coups have no place in our region and are doomed to fail.” While Pompeo counted on anti-Muslim racism to efface the differences between the two country’s regimes, Zarif constructed a vision of political solidarity that legitimated the Turkish government’s claim that 2016 had been a US-sponsored coup attempt, just like 1953 in Iran.⁵

As Türkiye–US relations dipped into a new low in the aftermath of the coup, Türkiye–Iran links appeared more vigorous than ever, signified by the persistence of the rumor that Erdoğan had sought Iranian help on that fateful night. Although I have chosen to end the book in the immediate War on Terror era, this epilogue offers some musings on how the triangulation of Türkiye–Iran relations through the United States may have changed after 2007. Defined by the chaos unleashed by the United States’s “imperial overreach” in the disastrous invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the drone bombings of multiple countries and regions, the squashed promises of the Arab Spring, the Syrian war and the refugee crisis, global economic upheaval, and a pandemic, this period saw increased polemics about the waning of US influence in the region. With the rise of new technologies, Turks and Iranians began consuming each other’s media more than ever, as exemplified by the popularity of Turkish TV series in Iran and Iranian movies in Turkey. At the same time, secret deals influential Turkish and Iranian figures made to violate US sanctions against Iran became public.

For some observers, instances of Türkiye–Iran friendliness will always be doomed to flounder on sectarian grounds, forever replicating the competition between the Shi’a Safavids and the Sunni Ottomans for regional supremacy. As noted in Chapter 1, however, Atatürk and Reza Shah had employed the rhetoric of brotherly love, blocked by imperialist intrigues and *ancien régime* intransigence, in rebuilding Türkiye–Iran relations. From this perspective, the broad historical trajectory of Türkiye–Iran

⁴ Ayse Yircali and Sabiha Senyucel, “The West Fails the ‘Coup Test’ in Turkey,” *Al Jazeera*, July 15, 2016, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/7/25/the-west-fails-the-coup-test-in-turkey.

⁵ “Iran’ın 15 Temmuz Darbesinde Türkiye’yi Desteklemesinin 3 Ana Nedeni,” *IRNA*, n.d., <https://bit.ly/42fhndx>.

relations in triangulation with the United States itself resembles a Turkish soap opera: Pressured into Cold War trade and security pacts before the Iranian revolution, they are now pressured away from collaboration, despite significant cultural and economic ties.

In the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, a radical break from the decades-long triangulation of discourses and policies through the United States seemed more plausible than ever. To belabor the shah's metaphor, perhaps America's estranged wife and ex-concubine could defy the husband and shack up together after the so-called American Century. Personifying foreign relations with such libidinal analogies is compelling. However, in this instance, as in the others explored throughout this book, aspirations for Türkiye–Iran solidarity against US imperialism come with huge caveats. Below I muse on the complications underlying the popularity of Turkish TV series in Iran and the secret gold-for-oil deals made in defiance of US sanctions as touchpoints in a vision beyond triangulation and comparativism. Taking a cue from the Muslim feminists explored in Chapter 4, I argue that, as long as patriarchal authoritarianism and ethnonationalisms reign, improved cultural, economic, and political relations between Iran and Türkiye will be limited in their liberatory effects.

Forbidden Love I: *Aşk-ı Memnu*

Over the walls of the old US embassy in Tehran, protestors painted a stunning mural. In the image, a satellite dish stands by a beautiful flower garden depicted in the traditional Iranian style, as a gray, withered hand emerges out of it. The decrepit hand holds a lit match, preparing to incinerate the beautiful Iranian culture represented by vibrant, stylized flowers (Figure E.1). As this book has demonstrated, this is an image with which Iran's last empress, Farah Pahlavi, might have agreed, as well as a host of regime proponents and opponents who worried about Western cultural imperialism and gharbzadeği. However, it cannot quite capture a relatively new concern about media in Iran. These days, the most popular media imports among Iranians of all backgrounds is less likely to be the latest Hollywood hit than a Turkish TV series, or *dizi*. If the clash between Western audiovisual propaganda and local culture seemed evident to the original mural's painter, the effects of a Turkish *dizi* in neighboring Iran seem a bit murkier. After all, the flowers representing Iranian culture in this mural would not be out of place in a Turkish folk art museum either.

In *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971), a groundbreaking analysis of the impact of US popular culture on Latin America, Ariel Dorfman and



Figure E.1 A protest mural in front of the old U.S. embassy in Tehran (currently a museum) depicts the dangers of Western cultural imperialism. In 2019, the Iranian government painted over the murals to update the public art surrounding the museum. Photo by Parisa Akbari, 2017.

Armand Mattelart noted how, by the late twentieth century, even countries in the same region had come to view each other mainly through imported, stereotypical US representations: “The only means that the Mexican has of knowing Peru is through caricature.”⁶ My analysis of the Turkish reception and utilization of the anti-Iranian Hollywood movie *Not Without My Daughter* (Chapter 4) demonstrates the validity of this claim, albeit with important caveats about the strategic aspects of comparison. As noted, not all Turks felt the same way about the film’s representation of Iran; however, the sheer popularity of the movie turned it into a ubiquitous cultural icon at a time when bestselling Turkish newspapers made little attempt to differentiate between the Persian and Arabic languages.

⁶ Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1984), 54.

It would be an overstatement to claim that regionalism has now eclipsed the overwhelming dominance of the English language and American culture industry. Yet, the worldwide triumph of Turkish TV series seems a fascinating Muslim underdog story when viewed against the foil of US media exports. Scholars cite the appearance of *Gümüş* (Noor) in the Saudi-owned MBC in 2008 as the beginning of the reign of Turkish TV series in Arabic-speaking countries.⁷ However, the first blockbuster for Iran came in 2011, when the 2008 Turkish TV series *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) appeared on the Iranian satellite network Gem TV. Headquartered in Istanbul, GemTV also began broadcasting the hugely popular *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (The Magnificent Century) the following year, securing the hegemony of Turkish dizi in Iran. These days, audiences can choose from countless options every season.

Whether dubbed into Persian or subtitled, dizi are primarily available via the technically banned but still ubiquitous private satellite networks like Gem TV and all over the Internet. Even the Iranian government television networks have picked up a conservative Turkish dizi from the Islamist TV station *Samanyolu*.⁸ At the same time, Turkish TV series have become popular throughout the region and beyond, including in South and East Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even the English-speaking world. Dizi are now reportedly second only to US TV exports in their worldwide ubiquity.⁹ This is quite a triumph for a national media industry previously known for depressing, social-realist art films (e.g., *Yol*, 1982) and low-budget Hollywood knockoffs with cult followings (e.g., *Dünyayı Kurtaran Adam*, 1982). Like many successful Hollywood exports, dizi boast high production values. They feature beautiful or charming locations and well-lit, impeccably dressed lead actors with captivating looks, hooking the viewers with new on-screen crushes.¹⁰ No wonder Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi have argued that the regional popularity of Turkish TV series symbolizes “the promise of literally de-centering Western power in the Middle East.”¹¹

⁷ Marwan Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, “Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere,” *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): 17–29, 20.

⁸ “Pä-yi siryalhâ-yi turki ham bi simâ bâz shod,” *Mashriqnews*, 21 Mîhr 1391/ November 11, 2023, www.mashregnews.ir/news/169890.

⁹ Izzet Pinto, “Turkish TV Series Export Race to the Top,” *Business Diplomacy*, January 29, 2021, <https://businessdiplomacy.net/turkish-tv-series-export-race-to-the-top/>.

¹⁰ Nick Vivarelli, “Why Turkish Dramas Are Conquering Hispanic Audiences in the U.S. on Univision (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, March 21, 2010, <https://bit.ly/42vqTB1>; Aina J. Khan, “Ertuğrul: How an Epic TV Series Became the ‘Muslim Game of Thrones,’” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/26pmnecv>.

¹¹ Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, “Neo-Ottoman Cool,” 27.

Think pieces explaining the worldwide popularity of Turkish TV series often contrast them with a stereotypical vision of US media as individualistic, violent, hyper-sexualized, and cynical. It is easy to run through the main lines of comparison, starting with the fact that dizi are less likely to engage in anti-Muslim plotlines. Dizi that have found worldwide success are also unerringly woman-centric. The action often centers around everyday family drama; female characters drive the narrative and exhibit the whole spectrum of human moral conundra. With their lingering musical scores and close-ups of welled-up eyes, dizi place heavy (and earnest) emphasis on emotional turmoil and communal conflict, which make them “moving” – a purported contrast to the merely “entertaining” American sitcoms.¹² Many are class-conscious, again in contrast to the largely middle-class settings of mainstream American broadcast TV.

One way of understanding the popularity of Turkish TV series in Iran is through the lens of similitude. “Common history and cultural proximity” is a regular explanation for the popularity of these serials across West Asia and North Africa.¹³ *Aşk-ı Memnu*, for example, was based on a famous Ottoman novel from the turn of the century, and the producers did not even have to change the show’s title since the Ottoman Turkish and Persian phrases were nearly identical. Of course, Azeri-Turkic-speaking Iranians, who comprise a significant portion of Iran’s population, can watch any dizi in the original language.

A lengthy opinion piece published in the regime hardliner *Fars News* cited similarities ranging from food and social customs to physical appearance between Iranians and Turks, identifying a commercially successful mixture of similarities and differences driving dizi consumption.¹⁴ What Iranians find in dizi is “*ham khudā, ham khurmā*” (lit. both God and eating), explained the author with some discomfort: The people in the series are familiar enough, but also partake in behaviors one would never see on Iranian television networks – such as a sympathetic character drinking alcohol.¹⁵

An optimistic reading might suggest the possibility of dizi mending frayed cultural ties between Turks and Iranians, challenging heavily sectarian or ethnonationalist ideologies. However, as this book has

¹² Fatima Bhutto, “How Turkish TV Is Taking over the World,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2019, <https://bit.ly/4iflQL6>.

¹³ Priyanka Navani, “What’s Behind the Meteoric Rise of Turkish Dramas in the Middle East,” *TRT World Magazine*, n.d., <https://tinyurl.com/dujjpd9h>.

¹⁴ “Dālīl-i girāyish bi siryālā-yi turkī chīst? 120 kishvar siryāl-i turkī mibīnand,” *Fars*, 15 Bahman 1400/February 4, 2022, <https://farsnews.ir/FarsNews/1644003077000459384>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

demonstrated, an emphasis on similarity does not guarantee solidarity. In addition, since Turkish dizi have a much broader audience in Iran than Iranian films have in Türkiye, any increase in familiarity will be somewhat one-sided. The Turkish citizenry's ignorance of Iran and the Persian language already constitutes a problem for scholarship and diplomacy, as Chapters 1 and 4 have emphasized.

News reports often construct exported TV series as a significant soft power boost for Türkiye. Building on another vision of similitude, this argument hinges on the ever-persistent idea that Türkiye can form a good model of Muslim modernity. Positive press in Türkiye emphasizes the role Turkish TV series have played in improving Turkish language acquisition, alongside the Yunus Emre Institutes the Erdoğan government has sponsored worldwide to boost education in the Turkish language and culture.¹⁶ The perception that Turkish dizi constitute a soft power play has even led some Middle Eastern leaders to urge caution, initiate boycotts, or institute bans.¹⁷ When GEM TV founder and chairman Saeed Karimian was shot and killed in Istanbul in 2017, fingers immediately pointed at the Iranian regime, which had previously condemned Karimian for disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic. The subsequent Turkish investigation ruled out any regime ties and suggested financial trouble as the motive, yet the murder remains ripe for conspiracy theorizing.¹⁸

The current Turkish regime, moreover, has a somewhat ambivalent view of dizi and their potential use in public diplomacy. Some of the controversy hinges on whether these texts are all that “Turkish.” According to one Islamist line of critique, dizi do not represent “authentic” Turkish culture but operate as a trojan horse for “other cultures” defined by materialism and moral turpitude.¹⁹ Erdoğan’s disdain for the hugely successful *Magnificent Century*, which depicts the era of Süleyman the Magnificent with a focus on the delights and intrigues of the harem, made international news in 2012. “A sultan on horseback is fine,” quipped *Time* magazine, “A sultan on a bender is not.”²⁰ Soon two

¹⁶ Muhammet Kurşun, “İranlı Gençler Arasında Yükselen Trend: Türk Dizileri ve Oyuncuları,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, November 15, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/yp3yy883>.

¹⁷ Marwan M. Kraidy, “Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt-Turkey Row Over Television Drama,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 12, no. 2 (2019): 149–65.

¹⁸ “Who Killed Exiled Iranian TV Executive in Istanbul?,” *Al Monitor*, May 1, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/3jpf88es>.

¹⁹ “Türk Dizileri İran’da Kültürlerarası Yakınlığın Aracı değil, Başka Kültürlerin Taşıyıcı Nesnesi,” *İslami Analiz*, April 30, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/2a8w2mu7>.

²⁰ Piotr Zalewski, “Why Is Turkey’s Prime Minister at War with a Soap Opera?,” *TIME*, December 26, 2012, <https://bit.ly/4jbPeTS>.

new Turkish series appeared on the state television network TRT, fulfilling Erdoğan's criteria for proper Turkish Muslim representation. *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* (2014–), which focuses on the founding years of the Ottoman empire, gained fame as the Muslim answer to the “Game of Thrones,” and *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* (2017–) worked to clean up the reputation of the so-called red sultan, Abdul Hamid II. However, other popular TV series have continued with their usual plotlines centering on adultery, backbiting, and filial disobedience.

Undoubtedly, dizi, whether devout or irreverent, offer a warped version of Turkish society up for consumption. This is true about media representations in general, but the comparison with US media has given Turkish serials an unearned reputation for truthfulness. During a 2017 visit to Shiraz – often seen as the cultural capital of the Persianate world – I was jarred by a kiosk worker's question whether, in Türkiye, we all live in *yalı* or waterfront mansions. I could not tell whether the inquiry was in jest, but the question made me realize that *Aşk-ı Memnu* and its descendants were selling a bizarre Turkish dream across the world. Although many Turkish TV series, such as the widely popular *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne* (2010), highlight the intersections of gender and class injustice in Türkiye, others, like *Aşk-ı Memnu*, glorify wealth and privilege, differentiating merely between the crass and classy behaviors of the high-society elite. The Turkish tourism industry has benefited handsomely from selling tours of the magnificent historical mansions featured in these shows. The Turkish government subsidizes tourism to the country, and the fact that dizi-inspired tourism to Türkiye is less expensive than a devotional pilgrimage to holy Shia cities recently made front page news in Iran, prompting government action.²¹

The actors that populate the imaginary worlds of Türkiye's model Muslim modernity are even more famous than the unattainable homes in which they dwell. Iranian opinion pieces bring up the similarity in appearance between the people of the two countries as one of the reasons for the popularity of dizi in the country.²² However, there is a clear tempering of “Middle Eastern” features among dizi stars, most evident in the preponderance of button noses and blue eyes. While some (mainly male) actors such as Burak Özçivit epitomize a darker beauty ideal, colorism reigns in the Turkish dizi industry, as elsewhere. Kivanç Tatlıtuğ (the male lead in *Aşk-ı Memnu*) and Meyrem Üzerli (the female lead in *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*) owe at least some of their fame to being natural

²¹ “Safar bi Turkiyi arzāntar az safar-i dākhili,” *Taadolnews*, 29 Shahrivar 1401/September 20, 2022, www.taadolnews.com/fa/news/192773.

²² “Dālil-i girāyish bi siryālāhā-yi turkī chīst?”

blondes. Except for devout and/or historical programming, dizi are also likely to have a significantly lower percentage of women in hijab than one would find in most Turkish streets.

As with all media products, audience reception complicates the analysis of dizi messages. A sociological study of Tehran-based women fans of Turkish TV found that they were well aware of the prevailing critiques of dizi as harbingers of consumerism and questionable morals. Many approached their consumption with a deeply critical mindset. Yet, even ambivalent viewers chose to watch select series, citing “entertainment” and “dissatisfaction with local offerings” as the two main reasons.²³ Given the current range of dizi offerings, it is difficult to generalize about key messages. There is also never one way of enjoying any given dizi.

Ultimately, no matter the attractiveness of the Turkish (or neo-Ottoman) dream, it holds little power against continuing ethnonationalisms and modern nation-state borders. The relative flexibility of the Türkiye–Iran border (no visas required) makes Türkiye a top initial destination for Iranian refugees. At the same time, refugees may feel less safe because those intent on pursuing them enjoy the same ease of access. Iranian dissidents residing in the country, particularly those from vulnerable communities, live in fear of being deported or assassinated.²⁴ Complicating any rosy vision of Türkiye–Iran solidarity is the fact that deportation of political refugees back to Iran becomes more likely whenever Turkish and Iranian regimes improve relations.²⁵

Regardless of their mother language, Iranian immigrants face discrimination in Türkiye, as do others from the region. As I write this, in the summer of 2023, xenophobic rhetoric targeting Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees seems to have reached a fever pitch. In the 2023 election, Erdoğan’s chief rival Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu attempted to get votes by promising to deport all refugees from the country. If anyone had hoped the leader’s Alevi heritage and willingness to align with the pro-Kurdish Green Left Party for this election would temper his party’s brand of Kemalist Turkism, they were severely disappointed. Erdoğan and the AKP, on the other hand, continued to hold up an antiracist vision of

²³ Mahdī Muntazir al-Qā’im and Ruyā Sharīfī, “Maşraf va khānīsh-i zanān-i Tīhrānī az siryāl-hā-yi nimūnī-yi Turkī-yi-yī,” *Faṣḥnāmi-yi Muṭālī’āt-i Farhangī va Irībātāt* 54, no. 15 (1398/2019): 127–84.

²⁴ Bethan McKernan, “Iranian Activists at Increasing Risk in Former Haven Turkey,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5n8bmve>; “Exclusive: Iranian Diplomats Instigated Killing of Dissident in Istanbul, Turkish officials Say,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2mzn28>.

²⁵ c.f. “Parliamentary Subcommittee Must Convene for the Iranian Anti-Hijab Activist,” *Bianet*, November 20, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4r2u7j3>.

Muslim unity in their statements (Chapter 3) while taking Türkiye's never-ending war against Kurdish nationalism across the border, deep into the chaos left by the US interventions in Iraq and Syria.

Ultimately, the election ended up being a triumph for the country's fascists, as some aligned with the victorious Erdoğan and others with the defeated Kılıçdaroğlu and made gains from the economic crisis and rising anti-refugee sentiments.²⁶ Whether Iranians, Arabs, Afghans, and others enjoy made-for-TV Turkish narratives and contribute to the country's tourism sector due to their warm feelings is unlikely to temper xenophobic sentiments and increasing calls for exclusionary laws targeting the regions' people.

Forbidden Love II: The Reza Zarrab Incident

Turks following pop culture news first came to know Reza Zarrab, an Iranian-born gold trader from a Turkic-speaking family, when he married one of Türkiye's most famous pop stars, Ebru Gündeş, in 2010. Society pages publicized his courting of Gündeş with expensive gifts before and after the marriage. Among Zarrab's purchases were three *yalı* – the type of waterfront mansions made internationally famous by *dizi* – one of which he gifted to Gündeş when she gave birth to their daughter in 2011. Magazine news about Zarrab's lavish spending reached such a fever pitch that Gündeş joked in 2012 that her husband would soon buy her the planet Mars.²⁷ While even a cursory read of the interview demonstrates that Gündeş intended this as an indictment of the media's exaggerated reporting, the joke played as a confirmation of the couple's extravagance.

In December 2013, a high-profile case carried questions regarding Zarrab's wealth from the tabloids to newspaper columns, as prosecutors charged him with corruption and bribery. According to the indictment, Zarrab had bribed the sons of multiple cabinet ministers to further his business prospects. In response, AKP officials immediately closed ranks. Erdoğan blamed Gülenists in the justice department for launching a fake case, and, in February 2014, Zarrab and the ministers' sons were released.²⁸ The ministers resigned from their positions, but the majority AKP parliament protected them from facing charges. Opposition

²⁶ Abubakr Al-Shamahi, "In Turkey's Elections, Nationalism is the Real Winner," *Al Jazeera*, May 16, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/48x4rmbp>.

²⁷ "Eşim Bana Mars'ı Alacak," *Hürriyet*, Kelebek section, May 21, 2012, www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/esim-bana-mars-i-alacak-20592551.

²⁸ "Reza Zarrab ve Bakan Çocukları Tahliye Edildi," *Hürriyet*, February 28, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9htku8>.

news noted that Zarrab appeared immune to prosecution under the Erdoğan government.²⁹

In 2016, Zarrab was arrested in the United States while on a family trip to Disney World. He was charged with conspiring with the Turkish government to evade US sanctions against Iran.³⁰ According to the prosecution, officials associated with the highest cadres of the Erdoğan government had made an oil-for-gold deal with Zarrab in exchange for bribes. Working with the billionaire Iranian businessman Babak Zanjani and using Turkish banks, including the state bank Halkbank, Zarrab had reportedly overseen a vast money-laundering operation, moving billions of dollars “on behalf of the Government of Iran and other Iranian entities, which were barred by U.S. sanctions.”³¹

With AKP ministers and state officials implicated, President Erdoğan depicted the prosecution as a continuation of the coup attempt, yet another plot by Gülenists in cohesion with the United States. The September 14, 2017, cover of the Turkish humor magazine *Uykusuz* pictured the president looking yearningly at an autographed poster of Reza Zarrab (Figure E.2).

The poster depicts Zarrab in the style of a famous heartthrob, framed with sparkling stars and hearts like a singer or dizi actor. In response to Zarrab’s arrest, the heartbroken cartoon president sobs, “We lose our brightest minds to the West.” This is the familiar trope of *aşk-ı memnu*, or forbidden love, referencing the commonplace belief that Türkiye and Iran cannot get closer because of Western interference. The poster personifies and subversively queers the US-imposed rift in Türkiye–Iran relations. Erdoğan’s reference to “minds” is a joke on concerns about brain drain from the country, fueled by AKP policies targeting academics in the wake of the coup. The cartoonist, of course, bets on the readers recognizing Zarrab as not one of Türkiye’s greatest minds but biggest spenders.

The cartoon president need not have worried. Imaginary tears for Zarrab were unnecessary in a political and economic system designed to protect the super-wealthy. Reza Zarrab soon took a plea deal and began enjoying a lavish life in Miami under fake, non-Muslim-sounding

²⁹ “Reza Zarrab Satın Aldığı Yalıya Kaçak Kat Çıktı,” *Oda TV*, May 31, 2015, www.odatv4.com/guncel/bir-reza-vakasi-daha-3105151200-76559.

³⁰ Carlotta Gall and Benjamin Weiser, “The Talk of Turkey? A Politically Charged Trial in New York,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/world/europe/erdogan-reza-zarrab-trial.html.

³¹ “Turkish Banker Convicted of Conspiring to Evade U.S. Sanctions Against Iran and Other Offenses,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, USAO – New York, Southern, Press Release Number: 18–003, Wednesday, January 3, 2018, <https://bit.ly/4ihF6aL>.



Figure E.2 A Turkish cartoon president sobs for an Iranian-Turkish gold trader prosecuted by the United States: “We lose our brightest minds to the West.” *Uykusuz*, September 14, 2017. Used with permission from *Uykusuz* Magazine.

names: John Kaplan, Richard Ferrari, and the US government-approved Aaron Goldsmith.³² In addition to further obscuring connections to his real identity, Zarrab’s preference for Ashkenazi Jewish or Italian surnames demonstrates a subtle awareness that “brownness” as a political category does not apply to non-Muslim Eastern and Southern Europeans, no matter their coloration (Chapter 3). A longtime horse racing fan, he owns and runs a shiny new equestrian facility in Florida as of this writing.

Not everyone has come out so unscathed in the wake of the scandal. Zarrab’s now-ex-wife Ebru Gündeş was ridiculed as her Mars joke recirculated in a new context marked by *schadenfreude* and gendered

³² OCCRP, Law & Crime, and Miami Herald Staff, “Notorious Money Launderer Reza Zarrab’s Lavish Life and New Business in Miami,” *LAW & CRIME*, December 7, 2021, <https://bit.ly/4ikLYnM>.

class antagonism. After she divorced Zarrab, the news depicted a contrite Turkish woman, a single mother, learning to live within her (still considerable) means. Like a hard-on-its luck dizi family, she and her daughter reportedly even had to sell the yalı.³³ While Gündeş suffered psychological and financial damage in being cast as a haughty, out-of-touch, rich woman humbled by her husband's downfall, the Turkish Halkbank official associated with the case was sentenced to 32 months in prison.

As usual, the actual victims of the Reza Zarrab scandal were the people of Türkiye and Iran. Neither population had gotten any say in the deals cut between Zarrab, AKP officials, and Halkbank. Although Iran prosecuted Zanjani, the billionaire businessman involved in the money laundering operation, his connections with regime insiders remained hidden.³⁴ If Iranians benefited from these deals, which moved their country's wealth across borders, we do not know when and how. Iran's people continue to face economic hardship, despite their country's considerable natural resources. Türkiye's once-thriving economy has also tanked, partially due to Erdoğan's frayed relations with the United States and partially due to the AKP government's unorthodox economic policies. The political and financial elite who benefited from the scandal have likely only gotten richer.

A power-conscious transnational feminist analysis should note that the Reza Zarrab crisis was made possible by a fundamental injustice connected to US imperialism: sanctions against Iran. Marketed as a way to target the Iranian regime and bring about democracy by sparking a popular uprising, sanctions hurt the Iranian people and embolden regime hardliners.³⁵ Much like the War on Terror, US sanctions against Iran endanger women and children while claiming to usher in an era of liberal feminist freedom for them.³⁶

In addition to the harmful effects of sanctions on Iranians, which must be the primary focus of any critique, one can note a breach of national sovereignty for Türkiye in this case. What legal and economic structures made it possible for one nation-state, that is, the United States,

³³ "Ebru Gündeş Lüks Yaşamı Bıraktı Son Haline Bakın!" *Memurlar*, n.d., <https://bit.ly/3G9Ryw1>.

³⁴ Sadegh Zibakalam, "Bābak Zanjānī chun dastmāl muchālī shod, yaqī sifidhā-yi dulatī fisād kardand," *Eghtesadnews*, 13 Mihr 1393/October 5, 2014, www.eghtesadnews.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-2/104366-.

³⁵ George Lopes, "It's Time to End Senseless, Endless Sanctions," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Gb94zP>.

³⁶ Samira Damavandi, "Why Iranian Women are Among the Most Vulnerable to US Sanctions," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2018, <https://bit.ly/4ikqdVf>.

to dictate to another independent nation-state how it may or may not trade with its neighbor? The issue hinges on “secondary sanctions,” by which the United States seeks to control other countries’ economic relations with Iran. Unlike “primary sanctions,” which punish participation by US persons or companies, “secondary sanctions” seek to isolate Iran from the global economy even in the absence of direct US involvement. To quote the American Iranian Council, “due to US ‘secondary sanctions,’ even foreign companies that may technically be able to service sanctioned countries often choose not to in order to avoid the hassle of navigating complex OFAC regulations or losing access to a large market like the US.”³⁷ Iranian people lose vital healthcare services due to secondary sanctions, which make it difficult to even extend humanitarian aid to the country.³⁸ Similarly, although US sanctions against Iran are deeply unpopular in Türkiye, the world economy’s dependence on the dollar makes it nearly impossible for the country to trade freely with its neighbor. The overwhelming financial influence of the United States on the economic policies of other countries and global companies should make anyone question whether the supposed waning of US power in the new century has been oversold.

From one perspective, any policy of Iran–Türkiye collaboration that skirts US sanctions reclaims national sovereignty, opposing an inequitable global financial system. “The world is not only about the U.S.,” Erdoğan snapped in response to the Reza Zarrab trial, standing by his government’s actions in furthering “trade and energy relations with Iran.”³⁹ While we may celebrate the offense to US economic imperialism, the way to justice appears blocked, not just by the continuing power of the United States but also by the prevailing patriarchal authoritarianism in the two countries. The two forms of coercive politics are, of course, linked. Hawkish US policies in West Asia and North Africa and global economic injustice boost the political careers of the harshest nationalists. They also make it unlikely that the Turkish and Iranian regimes will expose further bilateral deals to popular scrutiny and parliamentary oversight.

³⁷ Stephanie Lester, “Italki Goes Dark in Iran: Language-learners Are the Latest Casualty of Sanctions,” AUC, May 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/43O9Yw2>.

³⁸ “‘Maximum Pressure’: US Economic Sanctions Harm Iranians’ Right to Health,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 29, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3GbotjE>.

³⁹ Shahîr shahîd sâlis, “Rizâ Zarâb, parvandi-yî ki mitâvânad bi nazdîkî-yî Irân va Türkiyi biyanjâmad,” *BBC Persian*, June 11, 2017, www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-42255744; “Erdoğan Helped Turks Evade Iran Sanctions, Reza Zarrab Says,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-iran-sanctions.html.

If there is an equitable way out of the Türkiye–Iran–US triangulation after the American century, it will have to include a multipronged, transnational feminist challenge to global capitalism, racism, imperialism, and local authoritarianism. This is one dizi for which a happy ending cannot be guaranteed.

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