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*Al Noor*, the Boston College Undergraduate Middle Eastern Studies Journal, aims to: ◆ Facilitate a nonpartisan, unbiased conversation within the Boston College community and beyond about the Middle East. ◆ Provide a medium for students to publish research on the Middle East and Islam. ◆ Promote diverse opinions and present a comprehensive view of the myriad of cultures, histories, and perspectives that comprise the Middle East. ◆

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## LETTER FROM THE BOARD

As we brainstormed our Fall 2023 edition of *Al Noor* after a year-long hiatus, the board of *Al Noor* created an issue attempting to contextualize the all-familiar debates about the Middle East, namely between the concepts of tradition versus progress in the region. The current tensions regarding Israel-Palestine lead to the temptation of reducing Middle Eastern conversation to a discussion of war and violence. In this edition, we seek to understand how tradition and progress interact: whether each is a distinct entity or if they should be reconciled. From comparing Middle Eastern women's rights today to such rights during the time of Muhammed, to exploring how mosques generate social order in a time of political collapse, our curated essays move beyond a euphemistic understanding of tradition and progress.

In our first essay, "Rights of Muslim Women Then vs. Now: Between Ideal and Real," Azza Abugharsa puts the Prophet Muhammad's first wife in context historically and how that compares to modern Middle Eastern society. By tracing the evolution of women's roles throughout the history of Arabia in conversation with Islamic principles, she argues that women's status in the modern Middle East is highly influenced by the patriarchal, cultural organization of society rather than solely by Quranic precepts.

Kristina Aleksanyan discusses the crossroads between identity and tragedy in her essay "Nationalizing Violence: The Effects of the 1915 Genocide on Modern Armenian National Identity." Her essay uncovers the mechanisms and context that led to the crimes against the Armenian people leveled by the Ottoman government, and how Armenian nationalism has empowered and unified the diaspora. Aleksanyan recognizes how demands for justice drive Armenian nationalism and the ways memories of the tragedies of the genocide have been preserved.

We then move on to a curated interview with Dr. David Patel, a research fellow at the Middle East Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School and author of *Order Out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq*. He describes how mosques and Friday

sermons became normalized as places for local and national coordination in post-2003 Iraq.

Conrad Varhola's essay, "One Civilization, Two States? Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Armenia and the Power of Academic and Multi-Cultural Institutions," reflects on the cultural affinities shared by Iran and Armenia, with insight on the political and social implications of these relations. Varhola delves into the concept of Pan-Turkism and Iran's ethnic conflict with Azerbaijan, connecting them to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and how it has deepened Iranian-Armenian ties.

Lastly, Sindy Amar investigates the links and disconnects between Islamic philosophy and secular psychology in the essay "An Investigation into Islamic Metaphysical Theory and How It Pertains to Psychological Treatment." Amar compares the foundations of Western psychology and metaphysics with the quintessential ideas of Islam, concluding that secular psychology requires an expansion to be more inclusive of Islamic principles and patients.

The Board of *Al Noor* would like to express our gratitude to all those who made *Al Noor* possible after our hiatus. We are extremely excited about this issue, mainly because we can highlight excellent scholarly work by students from all over the United States on Middle Eastern studies. We would like to encourage anyone who enjoyed this issue to check out our website at [bcالنور.org](http://bcالنور.org) where you can find past issues and more information about our journal. Thank you for reading!

The *Al Noor* Board



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# One Civilization, Two States?

IRANIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN  
ARMENIA AND THE POWER OF ACADEMIC  
AND MULTI-CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

*Conrad Varhola*

Conrad Varhola is a Persian language major and member of the Class of 2025 at the United States Military Academy at West Point. This December, Conrad finished a semester study in Yerevan, Armenia, and also completed an intensive Persian language program in the summer of 2023 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Conrad's academic interests focus primarily on Persian literature and history as well as contemporary politics in Iran and the Caucasus.

**A**rmenia lies in the center of a contentious region with unstable borders. In September 2023, the country of Azerbaijan launched an offensive into the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region, thereby reasserting its control and effectively dissolving the Armenian government in the breakaway region. This conflict has historic and contemporary relevance to both Iran and Armenia and has served to strengthen ties between the two countries. The pervasive notion among many Iranians and Armenians alike is that both cultures are part of the same “civilizational sphere” and are facing shared external threats in the form of Turkic expansionism in a larger “Pan-Turkic” agenda. Armenia has historic animosity with Turkey and a tense relationship with Azerbaijan that is punctuated by armed conflict. Iran similarly views Turkey as a large-power competitor and has a tense relationship with Azerbaijan. A significant

facet in the perpetuation of these strengthening bilateral relations, as well as a strategy for survival against a stronger military force, is the role that academic and multicultural institutions are currently exercising in both countries. This paper argues that Iranian cultural diplomacy in Armenia through multicultural and academic institutions is furthering security, political, and economic interests. Likewise, significant cultural differences, such as those of religion between Armenia and Iran, have, to an extent, been downplayed in order to instead focus on commonalities in history and joint academic pursuits. Playing on Armenia's national motto "one nation, one culture" with ideas like "one civilization, two states" or "one civilization, two languages," these institutions are using a shared history rooted in the Persian Empires to strengthen the framework on which economic, military, and political ties can be developed.

### **Modern Pan-Turkism**

A narrative underlying Armenia-Iranian relations is the external threat of Pan-Turkism. Many Armenians believe that the war with Azerbaijan is part of a larger Pan-Turkic agenda on behalf of the government in Ankara. Pan-Turkism advocates for the political unification of all Turkish-speaking people in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, particularly the Turkic states.<sup>1</sup> The six countries of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have a Turkic national language (belonging to the Turkic language group) and a majority of the population has Turkic roots. Save Turkey, each of these states were once part of the Soviet Union. Whereas Pan-Turkism has its origins in political movements of the 19th and 20th century, the fall of the Soviet Union reignited a sense of cultural awareness in central Asia and presented Turkey with the opportunity to compete for regional hegemony. Whereas Russian power and influence in the Caucasus region prior to the invasion of Ukraine was greatly undisputed, Turkey was able to offer cultural similarities to predominantly Turkic countries in background, history, and religion that Russia could not.<sup>2</sup> Moscow's axis of cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus was further challenged in 2021 with the reanimation

of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS is an intergovernmental organization with the overarching priority of strengthening cooperation among the Turkic-speaking countries. Notably, the council that formed this organization was created in Nakhichevan in 2009. The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is Azerbaijan's exclave that shares its western border with Turkey. The exclave is separated from Azerbaijan by Southern Armenia. Today, bilateral relations are founded in a degree of distrust towards the West and loyalty to Turkey and the pursuit of an independent Turkish foreign policy among Turkic countries provides an alternative to Europe and Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, Armenia and Iran are both geographical barriers to increased cooperation among Turkic states with Ankara; Turkey's only shared border with other members of OTS is Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan, the enclave bordering Turkey. Therefore, Turkey's trade with the other member states must go through frequent rival, Iran. Earlier this year, Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed a contract for the construction of the Rasht-Astara rail line, which is expected to go into operation in mid-2024 and connect St. Petersburg with the Shahid Rajaei Port in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Whereas this rail-line has the potential to provide Turkey with a more efficient means of transport, reliance on Iran is still more costly than a direct connection through Armenia. From the Turkish perspective, it is also considered a national security threat. Thus, Greater Azerbaijan seeks to establish a corridor connecting to Nakhichevan that would provide direct access to Turkey. The Zangezur Corridor is one such plan that was proposed in 2020. If implemented, this corridor would give Azerbaijan access to Nakhichevan through Armenia's Syunik province. However, it would sever Armenia's border with Iran. Armenia has been staunchly opposed to such plans because of the perceived Turkish threat, but more importantly, because Armenia heavily relies on direct access to Iranian markets. Iran has stated clearly that it firmly stands against any alteration of international borders in the region.

### **Iranian Ethnic Conflict with Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan is a name for two places, the country of



Azerbaijan as well as the region in northern Iran. Both are occupied predominantly by ethnically Azerbaijani (Azeri) people. The three northwest provinces of Iran (Ardebil, East Azerbaijan, and West Azerbaijan) are contiguous with the country of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh and are often referred to as “Southern Azerbaijan” in the country of Azerbaijan. Though historically part of the Persian Empire, in 1813, swaths of land in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia were ceded to the Russian Empire by the Qajar Persians. These areas of land split into two parts and divided the region historically known as Azerbaijan. The region of Azerbaijan became both the new northern frontier of the Persian Empire and eventually Iran, and while part of the Russian Empire it was part of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic. In 1918, however, a Muslim republic was formed following freedom from the Russian Empire. This republic had a short period of independence from 1918 to 1920, when it was invaded and absorbed into the Soviet Union as the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. This is the region that became the modern country of Azerbaijan following the dissolution of the USSR.

The conflict is deeper than simply the formation and collapse of the Soviet Union: the first signs of ethnic challenge appeared at the end of the Perso-Russian wars (1813) with the creation of a republic in the Muslim part of the former Iranian territories separated by the Russian Empire.<sup>5</sup> The problem developed similarly in 1918, when elites in the Republic of Azerbaijan claimed independence from the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, part of the Russian Empire. Their selected name, the Republic of Azerbaijan, was problematic for Iran because it aroused fear in Tehran that the Republic of Azerbaijan would attempt to annex Tabriz and Iranian Azerbaijan. An additional conflict, and one that the Iranians remember very well, occurred when Iranian Azerbaijan was occupied by the Soviets in the Second World War. In 1941, Great Britain and the Soviet Union jointly invaded Iran with the intent of securing supply lines for the Allied forces and to overthrow Reza Shah for sympathies with Hitler and the Nazi Party.<sup>6</sup> During the evacuation of the Soviet Army

from Azerbaijan, a separatist party backed by the Soviet Union called the Azerbaijan Democrat Party (انجای ابردا کی تارکومد هرف) attempted to claim control over the region on the grounds of common ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> It is believed that the Soviets were behind this event with hopes of Stalin annexing parts of Iran. The Soviet occupation became so involved that in 1945, the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Mir Jafar Bagirov, declared, “If you want to know the truth, Tehran too is an ancient Azerbaijani city.”<sup>8</sup>

From the Iranian perspective, the political elites in the Azerbaijan Republic continue to foster anti-Iranian sentiment in the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Iran with hopes of annexing or creating a breakaway state in the Azerbaijan region. This is spurred by Iranian fears of a larger pan-Turkic agenda. Following autonomy, political elites in Baku made it a top priority to achieve a united Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Iranian nationalism has so far successfully responded to the irredentist challenges presented by Azerbaijan during the past century, Iran nevertheless has tense relations with the nation of Azerbaijan. While this matter alone is cause for friction, Azerbaijan’s relationship with Turkey strengthens the uneasiness felt by Iran concerning a fear of pan-Turkish ambitions. Consequently, both Iranian Azerbaijanis and Iranian nationalist groups have used Iranian and Persian identities to address advances and claims in the region. Iran has also used its own specific variety of Islamic and Shiite nationalism as a countermeasure against Azerbaijan for the promotion of ethnic nationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis.<sup>10</sup> The majority of Azerbaijanis in both countries are followers of Twelver Shiite Islam, and they commemorate Shiite holy days.

Official Iranian relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan are currently complicated and tense. This tension is still mostly influenced by Iranian fears of irredentism associated with the twelve to twenty million Iranian Azerbaijanis living on the border with Azerbaijan (more than double that of Azerbaijan’s ethnic Azerbaijani population). Azerbaijan’s trade with Israel, particularly in the purchase of arms, has also added an adversarial factor to their dealings. Baku’s security trade and their cooperation with Israel, however, are the product of strong security orientations

with Turkey and the United States that were previously existing.<sup>11</sup> There is a common misconception that the heart of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Iran is Israel, but this is not the case. Rather, the conflict is rooted in geopolitical divides (colored with ethno-linguistic conflict). Through methods not uncommon to the Islamic Republic, Iran has given funding to a host of anti-government groups in Azerbaijan with the hopes of altering Baku's position towards the West. These efforts have been focused on Iranian-supported Islamic groups in Azerbaijan and Persian-speaking minorities.<sup>12</sup> Another pervasive Armenian criticism is that Azerbaijan is a dictatorship and only important to Europe because it supplies natural gas. In this regard, Azerbaijan is only nominally a Western and NATO ally because of its relationship with Turkey.

### Iranian Cultural Identity

The Iranian identity is linked to an illustrious past and a profound pride in Persian history and culture. Their two and a half millennium existence, especially in the time of the Shah, is a mechanism to justify foreign policy. It is especially noteworthy that Iranians embrace a pre-Islamic past despite their current theocratic government, and this contrasts with a considerable number of other Islamic entities that make an active effort to destroy their own relics of the pre-Islamic period. A notable example was the destruction of the Buddha of Bamiyan at the hands of the Taliban in 2001. Now, the contemporary government in Iran uses both history and Sharia law to better enable both domestic and foreign policy. A great deal of the historical Iranian uniqueness, however, is viewed through rose-tinted lenses; it is centered on the extent in which the Persians have been able to survive various waves of occupation and absorb cultural influences without themselves becoming absorbed or their own identity submerged.<sup>13</sup>

Before examining Iranian cultural outreach in Armenia, we must first examine the extent to which ethnic identity in Iran is also tied to religion. Though Shiism is not unique to Iran, there is a great deal of emphasis on the differences between the Iranian religion, and therefore the Iranian people, from the rest of the Shiite, Muslim, and Arab world. Azerbaijan represents a prime example of this concept. In my

experience, many Iranians I have spoken with about religion actively make the distinction that they are *Iranian Shiites*. This is also echoed in a story recounted by Robert Graham in his book *Iran: The Illusion of Power*, where an Arab ambassador newly arrived in Tehran brings up shared religion in an attempt to find common ground with an Iranian Senior official. The Iranian official replies, "Ah, but we are Shia."<sup>14</sup> Yet another example of this is the idea that Iran has a long history of supporting different Shiite Muslim groups outside of Iran. For example, the Houthis in Yemen are Zaidi Shiites, but the Iranian government is not receptive to these distinctions of religion in the daily performance of governance.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, though Armenian Orthodox Christianity is recognized in Iran, Armenian Christians and non-Shiites in general are barred from the majority of political offices (except for the minority representatives in the Majles). Hence, in many ways to be Shiite in Iran is to be Iranian. Note that indivisibility between national and religious identity is not uncommon, especially in the Caucasus. For example, Yazidi citizens of Armenia will tell you they are not Armenian, they are Yazidi. Similarly, Alevi in Turkey are Alevi and Adjara in Georgia are Adjara (Sunni Muslim). Consider once more that Armenia's official state motto translates to "One State, One Culture."

The Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Iranian parliament referred to as the Majles (سازمان مجلس شورای اسلامی), is composed of representatives from each major city across the country. Additionally, the Majles has five permanent seats for the representation of recognized religious minorities. These are Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Jews. The role of these chairs in foreign policy comes predominantly through cultural interactions. However, aside from these seats, non-Shiite Iranians are barred from political office and still subject to a variety of discrimination. Therefore, Iranian Islam is a key force in a country that is 90-95% Muslim but still comprised of a range of ethnicities, notably Azerbaijanis.<sup>16</sup> This form of religious nationalism can be in part attributed to Reza Shah Pahlavi. In a similar manner to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, his rule saw a wave of forced Persianization in an attempt to create a united and homogenous nation from one that

## *"Armenia approaches relations with Iran as a political constant, regardless of any potential political developments in the future"*

was very much not homogenous.<sup>17</sup> It makes sense that the minority of Azerbaijanis in Iran who are hopeful for a united Azerbaijan trace their discontent to factors like cultural and language suppression during the Pahlavi dynasty. The point is, the Iranian uniqueness of religion complicates its foreign relations and makes cultural diplomacy through shared history an alternative means, especially with other Muslim countries. Given that there is not a significant Muslim community in Armenia, Iran's soft power supports that religion's role in international relations and is secondary to historical and cultural ties and further demonstrates that Iran's policy revolves around their own security interests rather than solely the exportation of an Islamic Revolution and religious ideals.

### **Armenia and Iran**

The Armenian roots and interest in Iranian culture start in the Persian Empires, for which the modern lands of Armenia had been part of as a Satrapy or an adjacent kingdom. Persia has had a significant influence on Armenia that predates Christianity and has had a lasting impact and relevance in Armenian language, politics, and literature. The late Nina Garsoïan, historian of Armenian and Byzantine history, emphasizes the influence of Persian culture on both history and literature:

*"Armenia approaches relations with Iran as a political constant regardless of any potential political developments in the future. Armenia is absolutely unequivocal in claiming that these two countries are connected by a common ancient culture, civilization, communion, etc. Friendly and impartial attitude towards Iran is one of the most significant elements of Armenian national 'weltanschauung.'"*<sup>18</sup>

Shah Abbas of Safavid Persia is considered to have left one of the most significant and lasting impacts on the Armenian community in Iran. Many present-day Armenian-Iranians are descendants of Armenians

forcibly deported to Iran in the mid-17th century. Whereas this event claimed the lives of thousands of Armenians, it, among many other expulsions, Persian scorched earth campaigns, and devastating wars that crushed Armenia between Persia, Greece, and the Ottomans, is often glossed over by many Armenian academics. As such, these events are not the causes of lingering animosity between the two countries.

In 1603, Shah Abbas I led a scorched-earth campaign through the Ararat Valley in an effort to drive the Ottoman Turks out of the Transcaucasian regions captured from the Safavids (encompassing the lands of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Northern Iran); he was successful in recapturing the cities of Tabriz, Marand, Ordubad, Akulis, and the province of Nakhichevan, which included the town of Jolfa.<sup>19</sup> In the early 17th century, Jolfa was a wealthy city on the Silk Road and had a substantial Armenian population. To deny the Ottomans from resupplying and to deprive the region of future economic viability, the Persian army conducted a wholesale destruction of Armenian villages and farms on the Ararat plain. Additionally, the affected population was made to accompany the Persian army in its withdrawal across the Araxes River, and into modern-day Iran. Of the 300,000 Armenians deported, most accounts agree less than half survived the march. Most of the remaining immigrants settled in Isfahan, Arak, Mashad, and Shiraz, consequently accounting for the large Armenian minorities in the modern cities.<sup>20</sup> Parallel to these migrations, many Armenian residents of Nakhichevan also left their homes and moved to Isfahan. Additionally, today a city called Jolfa exists in Iran near the border with Nakhichevan, and a New Jolfa neighborhood exists in Isfahan.<sup>21</sup>

The Armenian diaspora community in Iran provides not only a cultural tie to Armenia, but also an economic one. The minority is also fairly prosperous. The Armenian Apostolic Church of Iran has over 200 churches and is the largest religion outside of Islam in Iran. For this reason, the Armenian Church's



*The Holy Savior Armenian Catholic Cathedral in Isfahan*<sup>22</sup>

image of Iran is also mostly favorable. Note that this year in Tehran, an event for the 34th anniversary of Khomeini's death was held by the Armenian Caliphate Council in Sarkis Church.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, on one occasion while visiting St. Gayane Church in Vagharshapat, Armenia with an Iranian peer, I had an encounter with the bishop of the Church. The bishop made an active effort to thank my friend on behalf of the Armenian Church for the work of Iran protecting Armenian churches and relics. An interesting encounter, but one that emphasizes a degree of friendliness between the two countries across religions.<sup>24</sup>

### **Iranian Cultural Diplomacy and Persian Culture in Armenia**

Arguably, the main element of lasting structure in the international system is fixed borders. However, constructivist elements like culture, history, and ethnic identity seldom perfectly correspond with these international borders, especially when empires dissolve. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this became a key feature of the Caucasus region and can be seen in the Nagorno-Karabakh wars and in Northern Iran. National identity is a way to reconcile conflict, and, in this capacity, Iran has used history and culture rooted in the Persian Empire to establish linkages to other modern countries. Iran's culture is a key factor in how the Islamic Republic exports cordial relations and a friendly image of itself to Armenians by exploiting common features between the states in order to exert influence. In the case of Armenia, a Christian country, such influence takes the form of cultural and

historic ties, literature, and Iran-funded organizations like the Blue Mosque in Yerevan. Phrases like "ancient ties" and "deep-rooted" are routinely cited during official meetings between the two countries and during Iranian-hosted events.<sup>25</sup> For example, in December 2015, the former Iranian ambassador to Armenia, Mohammad Farhad Koleyni, encouraged a strengthening of ties between Armenia and Iran by referring to the two countries as "One Nation, Two States."<sup>26</sup> Armenia has viewed Iran as a friendly and close partner since becoming an independent country, and many Armenians have lived and continue to live in regions that are a part of modern Iran. Consequently, they make up an influential minority and lobby group in Iran. A considerable portion of the friendship hinges on the belief that Armenians and Persians have a common ethnic origin, and more importantly, that Armenia is a piece of the historic Persian and modern pan-Iranian worlds. Both Armenians and Iranians have used this commonality and historic conflicts with Turkey to complement their desire for relations amidst a mutual fear of Turkish and Azerbaijani expansionism. In the case of Armenia's historic Christianity and liberal policies, connections of culture to complement realist security needs become all the more important in the facilitation of relations with a country like Iran.

### **Organizations and Universities**

In 2010, the Armenian population in Iran neared 200,000 and is still the largest non-Muslim community represented in the Majles. The Majles is composed of 290 members serving four-year terms; five seats are occupied by religious minority groups, two of which belong to Iranian-Armenians. The role of Iranian-Armenian Members of Parliament (MP) is to provide representation and act as a voice for Iranian-Armenians within the country. However, the Armenian MPs also serve as an element in Tehran's bilateral relations with Armenia and have a significant involvement in talks between the two countries. For example, in 2022 The Iranian Studies Department in the Armenian National Academy of Sciences hosted a two-day conference titled "Armenia-Iran Historical Past and Present." The meeting was dedicated to the "establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries" and was attended by Iranian-Armenian

MP's Robert Beglarian and Ara Shaverdian. The conference highlighted the geostrategic value of their shared border and the mutual interest in its protection, as well as increasing trade relations.<sup>27</sup>

What this meeting emphasized was threefold. It was in Iran's interest to maintain a status quo with regard to borders, the conflict was a hindrance towards Iranian trade activity and access to markets through which to export goods, and the likelihood of Iran intervening in a border crisis at the time was minimal. However, both parties encouraged the use of hard power as a means of deterrence.<sup>28</sup> What this hard power would entail is a significant implication of the growing relationship and is no doubt being revisited by both parties in the aftermath of the September 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. Iranians did not intervene in September as postulated in this meeting, and currently the border between Iran and Azerbaijan has not changed. It must be noted that too much Iranian involvement against Azerbaijan has the potential to alienate its own ethnically Azerbaijani population and contribute to the myriad of domestic conflicts the country is already facing, including the protests for the one-year anniversary of the killing of Mahsa Amini. However, demonstrations of weakness are often an invitation for violence and both countries are aware of Azerbaijan's capabilities and the country's desire to connect Nakhichevan to greater Azerbaijan. Some of the potential implications will be presented in the final section of this paper.

Another important actor in this form of cultural diplomacy is Iran's Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO, سازمان فرهنگی و گن‌درف نام‌زاس). This organization extends Iranian influence through the promotion of Shia Islam, but also Persian culture and language. The organization was founded in 1995 to capitalize on cultural networks outside of Iran. It is governed by the Iranian Supreme Council, which is directly appointed by the Supreme Leader and under constant scrutiny from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, the organization is composed of cultural personalities, the Chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran's broadcasting network, and the ministers of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Islamic Guidance.<sup>30</sup> The objective of the ICRO, according to the official website, is to "strengthen cultural

relations with diverse nations and ethnic groups, particularly with Islamic countries."<sup>31</sup> Representatives are sent to a host of cultural centers, mosques, and other Iranian cultural institutions around the world. In Armenia, because of the widespread Christian faith the ICRO facilitates and organizes cultural events as well as a host of academic conferences, dialogues, and language courses in place of strictly religious events.<sup>32</sup> Armenia's importance to Iran necessitates a cultural link, as they have two different state religions and thus the emphasis on common history becomes more important. Both the Iranian Embassy in Yerevan and various Iranian and Oriental Studies departments at state accredited universities play an active role in the promulgation of intercultural dialogue and the portrayal of Iran in a "friendlier" light. The embassy's Cultural Center organizes these cultural events; of note are the Nowruz celebration and a variety of commemorative activities of the Iranian Revolution, Ashura, and Imam Khomeini.<sup>33 34</sup>

Immediately evident while walking the streets of Yerevan is the volume of Iranian tourists, many of whom view Yerevan as a weekend getaway and a destination void of the oppressive eye of Iranian law. Iranian tourism in Armenia demonstrates not only the proximity of the two countries, but is also a manifestation of three decades of political warmth. It is important to recognize that Russian soft power is still a dominant force in both the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is noted by use of the Russian language as a lingua franca, commonalities in political and social composition of the countries, and the mass exodus of Russian citizens into these regions following the war in Ukraine. As a side note, Russian immigrants over the past two years have benefitted the Armenian economy, though I have observed a sentiment of resentment in how this migration has led to increased prices, particularly of the housing prices in Yerevan. While there are a number of mosques in Armenia, most in Yerevan cater to Iranians living in and visiting the city. As a result, they are predominantly Shiite. Like the Blue Mosque, many of these mosques receive funding from the Iranian government and are also a tool in the extension of Iranian influence in the city. On Mashtots Avenue in Yerevan, none stand out as much as the Blue Mosque, commonly referred to as

the Persian Mosque. This model of Persian architecture was built between 1765 and 1766 when Yerevan was a khanate in the Afsharid Persian dynasty and remains one of the oldest existing structures in the capital. The mosque was decommissioned during the Soviet period but reconstructed after Armenia gained independence. What is especially noteworthy is that during the first Karabakh war, the mosque was not destroyed by Armenians because it was considered to be Persian and not Azerbaijani. In 1995, the Armenian government gave the usage rights of the Mosque to Iran for restoration.<sup>35</sup> Russian ethnographer Tsypylma Darieva notes that the Blue Mosque has become closely associated with friendly Armenian-Iranian relations and Iranian expatriates living in Yerevan.<sup>36</sup> At a minimum, it is a luxurious example of the presence of Iranians and the extent of both Iran's historical ties and current influence. Similarly, several Persian restaurants and shops are adjacent to and across the road from the structure. There is also an Iranian tourist agency in Yerevan's Republic Square that stands out because its sign is written in Persian. In addition to religious worship, another feature of this mosque is its function as a cultural center; there is a library named for the poet Hafez on the compound and Persian language lessons are offered year-round. The compound also has a gift shop lined with Iranian and Armenian flags, a conference room, and displays with Iranian pottery and art. These details, complemented by the exceedingly friendly staff, aid the more positive image of Iran that is being perpetuated. The way Armenian interests in learning Persian are being advertised, in my understanding, can be likened to the desire to learn Spanish in America: ease of communication with a neighboring country, business, and tourism. Yerevan State University also offers dozens of courses on Islam and Iranian studies across multiple degree programs.

The effort of universities in Armenia towards highlighting common Iranian-Armenian history in conjunction with Iranian studies or history departments is a key factor in strengthening Iran's image as a partner. Three universities in particular, Yerevan State (YSU), the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, and the Russian-Armenian University, have



*The Blue Mosque in Yerevan*<sup>37</sup>

a somewhat Iran-leaning cant on the developing Armenian bilateral relations. This cant becomes more noticeable through a host of multicultural conferences and several publications. Take, for example, an interview published in cooperation with the Armenian Orbelli Center and Iran Daily. Department head of Iranian Studies at YSU, Dr. Vardan Voskanyan, states:

*"If we address the internal impediments, it becomes apparent that further steadfast will is required within Armenia to foster multilateral ties with Iran. This determination must assume a strategic character, effectively endowing relations with Iran with a privileged status within Armenia's security strategy. Elevating this relationship to a level of strategic aspiration or significance across all dimensions is imperative."*<sup>38</sup>

Here, security concerns are the pragmatic basis for a new phase of bilateral relations, underpinned by the existence of common history and threats:

*"...the cornerstone of this people's diplomacy should center on the ideological framework of "one civilization, two nations," "one civilization, two states," "one civilization, two religions," and "one civilization, two languages." Within this framework, gradual deepening of relations and cooperation across scientific, academic, cultural, and broader civilizational spheres should transpire. It is within this cultural realm that a fertile ground for the advancement of political, military-political, and economic ties can be cultivated."*<sup>39</sup>

The concept of “one civilization, two religions” is an allusion to Armenia’s national motto, and it emphasizes that despite borders and differing religions, Armenia and Iran have a broader common identity. What is especially noteworthy is the emphasis Dr. Voskanyan makes on what the responsibilities of the Armenian intellectual community should be. Work towards promoting bilateral relations therefore has not fallen solely on the country’s political heads but is assisted by an environment established in the academic community’s cultural framework. This approach of academic diplomacy is multi-faceted and is facilitated in this context through cooperation among universities in both countries. The work of universities can be a pivotal force towards structuring the human dimension of mutual political interactions. Furthermore, by offering classes in Iranian language, history, and culture, universities encourage comfort towards interaction with Iran that greatly contrasts with the Iranian image in other circles.<sup>40</sup>

Other events worth noting are the annual conferences dedicated to the commemoration of the death of Imam Khomeini. Every year during the 14th of Khordad, (which corresponds with either the second, third, fourth, or fifth of June) the Iranian cultural center in conjunction with its Armenian counterpart organizes one such conference. This event celebrates the Imam’s death, but also presents a variety of Khomeini’s beliefs and theories. Each one of these conferences is covered by Armenian mass media like the Public Television Company of Armenia and Public Radio of Armenia.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, in early February, corresponding to the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, many universities will also hold conferences on a range of Iranian ideological topics. This year on February 6th, Yerevan State University hosted a conference titled “Analysis of the ideas and views of Imam Khomeini.” The event was organized

by the YSU International Cooperation office.<sup>42</sup> Both conferences are generally attended by students, professors, and Iranian embassy representatives. Whereas these conferences do not characteristically have a religious message, they do promote the Imam’s “positive and humanitarian values” and way of thought.<sup>43</sup>

Emphasis on cultural elements in foreign policy resonate emotionally in Armenia. Bilateral relations, supported by cultural elements, have yielded cooperation in education, interprovincial relations, as well as in a host of other domains. The transfer of Iranian cultural knowledge, art, and ideas supports Iranian political ends. This is exemplified by the variety of multicultural conferences hosted in Yerevan annually. Therefore, the two countries and cultures are often seen as proximate, and as the primary cultural tools for developing bilateral relations.<sup>44</sup> What the past two sections have attempted to convey is that the Iranian-Armenian relationship is rooted in the foundations of historical ties that are only subject to deepening due to the academic and political emphasis placed on them. In this relationship, differences in religion are not an obstructive paradigm, but are rather used in a way beneficial to the strengthening relationship.<sup>45</sup> The maintenance of borders and stability are key elements of Iranian foreign policy with Armenia, and it furthers Iran’s security interests to maintain a relationship that encompasses social, economic, and political spheres. The dissolution of the Artsakh government and fears of renewed Azerbaijani/Turkish visions towards creating a corridor or claiming more land will likely increase mutual efforts towards this relationship. While considering the argument of the influence of Iranian cultural diplomacy in Armenia, it must be emphasized that ethnic conflict and historical animosities must and will be balanced with modern state interests. To attribute the causes of modern conflicts entirely to constructivist elements such as religious and ethnic identity, especially in this region of

*“...the cornerstone of this people's diplomacy should center on the ideological framework of 'one civilization, two nations'”*

the world, would be reductionist and faulty. The purpose of this section is to present these ties as a means of better understanding the political environments shared by each country and conflicts that Iran has referenced to pursue relations.

### Implications

The reality of ethnic tension and historical relationships exacerbated by the fall of the Soviet Union makes the theories of identity compelling when analyzing Iran's actions regarding Armenia. These concepts are seldom the primary drivers for political ties and should be balanced with the more pragmatic realist and state interests. Iran's foreign policy in support of Armenia, particularly concerning their interests in Nagorno-Karabakh, demonstrate the dominance of economics and security concerns spurring foreign policy, not exclusively the ethnic and religious factors referenced by academic institutions and multicultural organizations. Especially for the Islamic Republic of Iran, ties with a Christian and heavily Westernized country indicate that Tehran will elevate security and economic considerations over their Islamic ideology and historical connections.<sup>46</sup> And it is important to recognize that many devout Muslims in Iran see these ties as a betrayal of the Islamic Revolution. For example, in 1993 during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, after Armenian forces advanced into Kelbajar, students from universities across Tehran gathered in front of the Armenian embassy and demanded the withdrawal of "aggressor" Armenian troops and an increase in military support for Azerbaijan.<sup>47</sup> This section will examine the larger Iranian geostrategic and security-related concerns towards pursuing relations with Armenia and examine some of their implications in the aftermath of the recent Azerbaijani offensive. Despite their cultural ties, future Armenian and Iranian relations should be viewed through a more transactional lens. Both countries use the other as means to certain ends, and that is supported with the usual platitudes about deep "historical and cultural connections." Assuming that the current Pashinyan government is leaning towards the West in the way Moscow and the (pro-Iranian) Armenian opposition claims, then relations with Iran are a security measure

for Russia's continued political disengagement from the Caucasus. An Iran relationship also serves as an alternative means of energy and trade. During the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, Iran supplied Armenia with food and energy throughout the 1990s. Iran also provided Armenia with aid in 2008 when supplies from Russia abruptly stopped. Both examples are routinely cited by pro-Iranian voices in favor of Armenia increasing bilateral relations with Iran. The idea is that Iran has always been a neighbor willing to help the Armenian people. Pro-Iranian voices tend to gravitate towards the potential for military cooperation and an Iranian military presence in Syunik. Many Armenian academics believe that Iran should fill the void Russia created and deploy peacekeepers into the region while also initiating joint military exercises and cooperation. Iran also needs Armenia. Iran desires connections with other global players and access to markets. Additionally, Iran is looking for additional ways to circumvent Western sanctions, and Iran's strong emphasis on its "resistance economy" has resulted in pursuits of energy and non-petrochemical exports from sources other than Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenia is Iran's primary and friendliest entrepôt to western markets and the maintenance of the Armenian-Iranian border, as well as an uninterrupted Syunik region in Armenia is currently an economic necessity for Iran. In spite of their pursuit of energy independence, Iran's dependence on Turkey is largely why Tehran still maintains a lukewarm relationship with Ankara. Iran also aims to be recognized as a regional hegemon, and in order to do so, Iran requires access to foreign trade. This is evidenced by Tehran's effort to join organizations like BRICS, SCO, and the EAEU. However, it is also likely that Iran simply fears being deprived of a meaningful role during Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. Having Western countries and the EU make decisions that negatively affect Iranian interests is also a pervasive fear among many Iranian academics.<sup>48</sup>

Traditionally, Russia has proctored agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan with an Iranian presence in a 3+3 format. Negotiations in this 3+3 format include the three countries of the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and the three



other powerful states in the region (Iran, Russia, and Turkey). This format is important to Iran because it gives Tehran a voice for their own interests. Note that Iran was greatly offended when Russia and Turkey excluded them from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire negotiations. Iran has also pushed its own willingness to hold future peace negotiations in Tehran, and recently they have been successful. On October 23rd, 2023, a 3+3 peace negotiation was held in Tehran.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the Russian foreign minister was present, his role seemed far more passive. The fact that this meeting was held in Tehran is indicative of a shift in regional powers and Armenia's growing reliance on Iran. According to Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the current Foreign Minister of Iran, The Islamic Republic has "always declared its readiness to cooperate in regional peace and stability with its neighbors and the region."<sup>50</sup>

Despite warm relations between Iran and Armenia and the Armenian Church, Christians collectively in Iran face various forms of discrimination, and it is unlikely that Iran will alter their stance towards non-Shiite religious groups. Whereas Armenian Christians are allowed to worship in designated spaces and have representation in the Majles, they are still barred from most political offices and military positions, and face job discrimination. Christians that are not part of an ethnic heritage group do not have Majles representatives, and unrecognized Protestant or evangelical groups that proselytize their faith face a large degree of persecution.<sup>51</sup>

Beginning last spring, groups of Iranian and Armenian political figures began criticizing Russia's inattention to the region due to its invasion of Ukraine. This critique was more bluntly stated on September 3rd when Nikol Pashinyan called Armenia's "99.999%" reliance on Russia for the provision of security in the region "a strategic mistake."<sup>52</sup> It was argued that Russia's Ukraine priority was the reason Russia could not end Azerbaijan's blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh or prevent the recent evacuation of 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Another argument presented was that Russia was punishing Armenia for becoming closer to the West and Iran. However, Russia is a powerful and self-interested

player. Moscow will likely continue to try and play the role of a spoiler in any negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan (in whatever capacity Russia is afforded) in order to protect Russian interests. Armenia still depends heavily on Russian energy and goods, and under these conditions, Russian military bases, trade routes, and lobbying groups to pressure politicians would remain in Armenia, and this is a hindrance to increased Armenian relations with Iran. Aside from Iranian influence, Western diplomatic, security, energy, and economic development assistance are significant threats to Russia in the Caucasus because they counteract Russia's divide and conquer strategy. Russian foreign policy in the Caucasus and varying degree of support for Armenia seeks to keep regional states fractured politically, ethnically, and economically in order that they remain dependent on Russia. Any Western (or Turkish/Iranian) initiative that aids the region in recovering from the unsustainable map-drawing and economic planning of the USSR is seen as a direct threat to Moscow.

Yerevan, for now, maintains a tight security cooperation with Iran and has not supported previous sanctions and other policies meant to further isolate the Islamic Republic. Conversely, Azerbaijan's relations with the United States, Israel, and Turkey, further strain relations with Iran.<sup>53</sup> Armenia, despite its comparatively small GDP, is also one of Iran's most important trade partners. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, Armenia accounts for the purchase of \$406 billion worth of Iranian exports and is the biggest direct purchaser of Iran's natural gas; approximately twenty percent of Armenia's natural gas comes from Iran.<sup>54</sup> There is also a shared interest between the two countries to construct a north-south pipeline starting from Russia and ending in Iran. This pipeline, set to start construction in May 2024, is a potentially significant determining factor in Iran's role in the region and has strengthened talks between Yerevan and Tehran.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Armenia has comparatively low tariffs, 4%, and this is a factor that could facilitate foreign investment from western countries to export Iranian products.<sup>56</sup> These trade relations could take the form of cooperations like Iranian investment in Armenian highways. One

area of current interest is an initiative to increase the capacity of the North-South corridor by widening the highway from Yerevan to the Iranian border city of Norduz.<sup>57</sup>

Though a NATO member, Turkey has a tendency to break ranks with the West and NATO in pursuit of what Erdoğan defines as Turkish interests. After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Erdoğan said in Baku: “We celebrate this glorious victory here today. But Azerbaijan’s liberation of its lands from occupation does not mean that the struggle is over. The struggle, which is waged in the political and military spheres, will continue on many other fronts.”<sup>58</sup> Erdoğan’s words, particularly in Armenia, were taken as an unequivocal readiness to continue securing geostrategic interests. In the South Caucasus, these endeavors are mainly focused on supporting Azerbaijan militarily and establishing a rail link through Armenia to the city of Kars in order to quickly create an east-west trade route - a new Silk Road - with the help of Turkic states. Whether or not this unification constitutes pan-Turkism is subject to further debate, however Erdoğan’s rhetoric appeals to a core audience of supporters and genuine pan-Turkists.

Regarding power relations and geopolitical strategy, Armenia’s territorial integrity benefits Iran because it inhibits Turkey’s ability to trade with Azerbaijan and the rest of central Asia. Without a path through Armenia, Turkey is deprived of a connection to the rest of the Turkic world, consequently limiting a security involvement in the regions.<sup>59</sup> Baku is similarly deprived of connection to its non-contiguous region, Nakhichevan, that shares a border with Turkey, as Armenia has taken a hard stance against the construction of an Azerbaijani rail line or corridor. Moreover, Iran views Armenia as its primary entrepôt to Western markets and this proposed rail line would sever their shared border.

### Conclusion

Historical nations are often misaligned with state borders. This is the case in the Caucasus, where borders were imposed by now-defunct empires, and consequently, national interests, ethnic heterogeneity, religion, economics, and national borders all interact in a

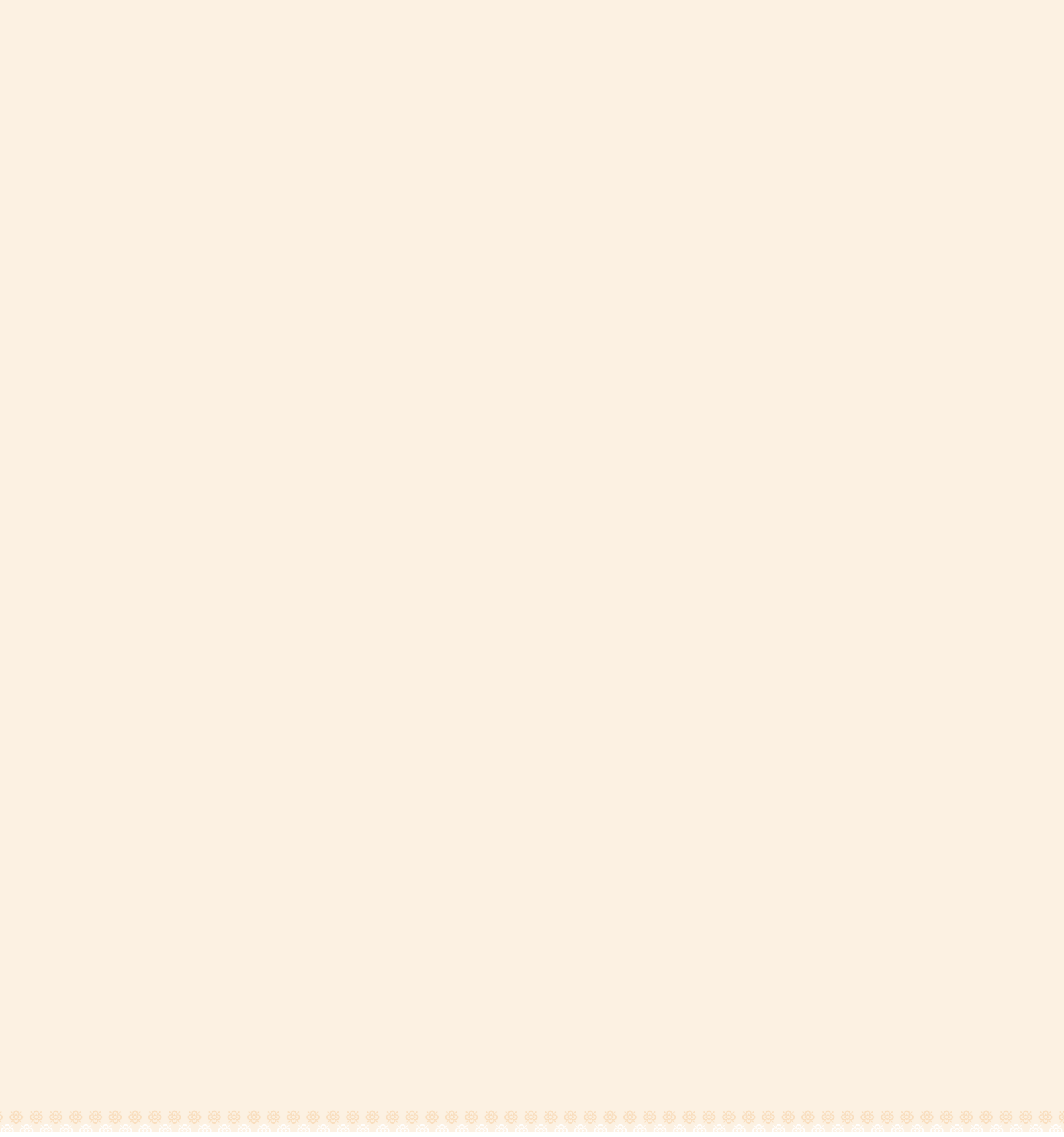
cultural mosaic. Whereas this can be a source of conflict, as is the case with Armenia and Azerbaijan, it can also contribute to positive relations. As such, this paper has attempted to show the interplay of politics and culture between Iran and Armenia and how cultural institutions in each country have become a tool for furthering each country’s respective political, economic, and security interests. This includes a mutual sense of isolation, uniting against a perceived Turkic threat, as well as tolerating significant cultural differences, not the least of which is the dramatically different role that women play in society and the rights that they enjoy in each country. Culture in this sense is used as a means to an end both at the national and sub national levels by a host of institutions. The Blue Mosque, for example, is more than an Islamic religious institution. It does provide religious services, but also has a significant cultural outreach mission to promote and defend the Iranian regime. It is similarly a symbol of a glorified shared history that is also promoted by academic institutions in each country. For instance, the University of Yerevan and other institutions with Iran-leaning camps. The work of these institutions is significant because it shows that history and culture may be selectively utilized to further contemporary interests. Armenia is in a position where the country is searching for a larger geo-political partner that can protect the interests and security of the Armenian people; The Islamic Republic of Iran for many Armenians is the obvious choice. Similarly, Iran looks to Armenia as a strategic partner. Culture and history in this regard are neither objective nor absolute; they are instead pragmatically malleable based on areas of emphasis and omission.

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# The Rights of Muslim Women Then vs. Now

REAL VS. IDEAL

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A question arises: if Khadija bint Khuwaylid, Prophet Muhammad's first wife, returned to this world, would she be able to live in current Mecca the same way she used to live in pre-Islamic Mecca fourteen hundred years ago? I would argue the answer is an unequivocal no. Even though Islam does not emphasize gender preferences and strongly supports equality between males and females,<sup>1</sup> women's status in Islamic societies today is more influenced by the male-dominated structure of the society in which traditional customs, rather than Quranic precepts, affect gender relations. Thus, many privileges provided to Muslim women by Sharia law are abrogated by societal norms.

### Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia (Aljahiliya Era)

During the time in Arabia before the rise of Islam, known as the age of Al Jahiliya, meaning “Ignorance”, the culture was based on concepts of status, power, and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> There was only one rule: those who were strong dominated those who were weak. Society was governed by tribal law because the tribe was considered the essential unit. Commitment to the tribe was the strongest attachment individuals had in their lives; they were even willing to dissolve marriages for the sake of the tribe’s claim.<sup>3</sup>

Khadija lived in this corrupted society, in which habits far removed from the concepts of morality and humanity were widely spread. Among the unjust practices were female infanticide, selling vulnerable women and weak men into slavery, usury, raids on trade caravans and tribes, the captivity of girls as concubines, and a lack of neighborhood rights.<sup>4</sup> It was a crumbling, dilapidated society in which women had no legal status.

Women were deprived of their minimal human rights and treated as personal property, as one of the male’s possessions with limited or no power to decide their destiny.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, women were deprived of receiving an inheritance from their deceased parents or guardians. Inheritance was restricted solely to the individuals of strength and solidarity who carry the word in the war; i.e., men.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, women were considered inheritable objects, as male relatives of deceased spouses frequently inherited their deceased wives.<sup>7</sup> As such, the woman becomes a member of her deceased husband’s family rather than retaining her inherited rights.<sup>8</sup>

Women were consistently treated as inferior to men, a burden rather than an asset to the family and tribe.<sup>9</sup> Unlike girls who married off and stayed away from the tribe’s activities, boys were desired due to their ability to enhance their tribes’ position in their society by contributing to the family’s wealth and power.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, boys displayed the capability to uphold the

tribal traditions; and so they were considered essential assets to their tribes.

This discussion of women in Arabia in the pre-Islamic era leads to drawing a comparison of the life of Muslim women in post-Islamic Arabia, as well as women in modern Muslim societies. I will present this discussion by comparing early Islam’s stance on issues such as marriage rights, inheritance laws, divorce, and polygyny with the state of affairs in contemporary Islamic society.

### Women in the Dawn of Islam

The advent of Islam not only radically changed the plight of women in the region of Arabia, but it sparked a global change for women’s rights across the entire human world. Islam modified existing social behaviors and customary practices in the Arabian region and established others; as the Prophet Muhammad narrates: “I was sent to uphold and complement ethical values.”<sup>11</sup> It also abolished unfair practices against the weak and foregrounded new laws for coexistence in an environment in which all individuals become equal in rights and duties. Although the tribe of Quraysh strongly rejected the new religion and fought it for decades, there is no record in the literature indicating that changing female lives was one of the major reasons for this rejection.

Since the family is the basic unit of Muslim society, family law is essential to Islam. Islam granted women rights that were not known to the region and other parts of the world at that time, concentrating on women’s right to be appreciated and acknowledged as a person and equal life partner.

### Women’s Right to Status, Respect, and Appreciation in Islam

The first right to discuss is a woman’s right to be respected by her family and society as an equal member and a genuine life partner to her spouse. Muslim women during the Prophet’s time had their voices

*"The advent of Islam not only radically changed the plight of women in the region of Arabia, but it sparked a global change for women's rights"*



heard and were involved as a canonical part of the early history of Islam.<sup>12</sup> A woman had the right to express herself openly and share opinions confidently and comfortably without society forcing her to adopt other opinions that could risk her individuality and agency. Additionally, Muslim women in early Islam enjoyed the right to transmit Hadith and tradition. Approximately 20 percent of the hadith is said to be transmitted by women,<sup>13</sup> more specifically, the Prophet's wives Aisha and Umm Salama.<sup>14</sup>

Prophet Muhammad respected his wives' opinions and valued their wisdom: he consulted with them about serious matters, even those related to the prophecy mission.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he charged them with responsibility for the entire Muslim community to serve as consultants and spokespersons in various life expertise and gave them the honorable title "Mothers of the Believers."<sup>16</sup> The Prophet's first wife, Khadija, is one example of a woman who spoke her mind and offered opinions. Khadija was very supportive of her husband and gave him all the help she could give. For example, when the Prophet first received the revelation from the Angel Gabriel, he was fearful of the angel and resented the message. However, it was Khadija who reassured him, taking him to her cousin to consult on the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Aisha was another wife of the Prophet. As the favorite, outspoken wife who practiced religious observances with him, she was able to transmit his hadith traditions and offer logical thinking and insights into analyzing them. The sobriety of her mind and the soundness of her thinking made her an advisor for men and women alike.<sup>18</sup>

Another example is Umm Salama, one of the Prophet's wives, who not only transmitted hadith, but also advised the Prophet. After the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in which the Prophet and his companions were prevented from performing pilgrimage that season, the Prophet commanded them to have their hair cut as part of the worshiping rites, but they showed resistance because they were not satisfied with the unfair terms of the treaty. Umm Salama recommended the Prophet to take the initiative and shave his hair first, followed by a camel sacrifice to mark the end of the pilgrimage season.<sup>19</sup> This compelled his companions to obey the order and carry out the rites.<sup>20</sup> As

observed, Muslim women were active members of the community throughout the Prophet's time, speaking up and engaging in deliberations and decision-making on issues essential to Islam and Muslims.

Another issue to discuss is the obligation placed on women as the natural and solitary person in charge of housework. In Islam, women, married or unmarried, are not compelled to do housework, nor are they required to contribute to household expenses. Muslim men, on the other hand, are commanded by God to financially support their families as the principal breadwinners. If the Muslim woman assists with housework and expenses, it is a voluntary effort and a favor on her part that should be acknowledged and appreciated. It is reported that Prophet Muhammad himself used to assist with the house activities such as mending his shoes and stitching his garments,<sup>21</sup> as well as helping with the cooking.<sup>22</sup> This is something rarely noticed among Muslim men in the present day, who claim to be taking the Prophet as a model. Yet, they, or the majority of them, have a strong belief that housework is an obligatory duty on the Muslim woman and that if she falls short in these matters, she commits sin and becomes rebellious.<sup>23</sup>

### **Women's Right to Inheritance in Islam**

In Islam, it was decreed that no one, male or female, weak or strong, young or old, ill or healthy, etc., should be denied inheritance following the demise of their parents. As for women, Islam has given women a dignified status in all aspects of life, including the right to inherit. The nature of inheritance, in particular, is clearly stated in the Quran: "For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much - an obligatory share"<sup>24</sup> Similar to men, Islam grants women the right to inherit although the amount of her share is different. According to Shari'a law, male heirs inherit twice as much as female heirs.<sup>25</sup> This may appear unjust and discriminatory to Muslim women at first look, but when explained, the reasoning behind it becomes evident.

As aforementioned, while Muslim men must be the breadwinners for their families, Muslim women are not required to spend their money on anyone,

including themselves.<sup>26</sup> This entails that men in Islam are required to work, while having a job outside the house is optional for women, unless in specific conditions in which she is the sole supporter of herself and other minors in the household.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Muslim women keep their money for their personal use, but Muslim men carry the burden of providing for their families and managing their expenditures. As a result, men's money is not truly theirs alone, as their families share it with them due to their role as *mahram* or *qawwam*, "male guardian", which is a position of responsibility that is misunderstood these days as being the ultimate commander of the household.<sup>28</sup>

It should be stated that women's share of inheritance is not always half of that of the men's. There are cases in which a woman's share is equal to the man's or exceeds it. In one case, if the deceased individual leaves a daughter, a wife, a father, and a mother, the daughter will receive half of the whole bequest. The wife shall receive one-eighth, and the father and mother will each receive one-sixth: "If only one [daughter] her share is a half and for parents, a sixth share of the inheritance to each."<sup>29</sup> In this situation, the daughter receives a larger portion than the male parent of the deceased.

A final case is a situation in which a man and woman both receive an equal share of the inheritance. For example, if the deceased person left only one maternal brother and one maternal sister, both will receive an equal share of the sixth and if there are more than two, they share a third: "And if a man or woman leaves neither ascendants nor descendants but has a brother or a sister, then for each one of them is a sixth. But if they are more than two, they share a third, after any bequest which was made or debt, as long as there is no detriment [caused]."<sup>30</sup>

It must be stated that the woman's share of the inheritance is hers only; in that no one, including her husband, has the right to share it with her. Moreover, her husband will always remain responsible for providing for her, regardless of the amount of her inheritance.<sup>31</sup> The distribution of the inheritance is based on the nature of the status, roles, and duties of both males and females.

### Women's Marriage Rights In Islam

One more right granted to a Muslim woman is related to the context of marriage and divorce. During the pre-Islamic *Jahiliyyah* time, women were deprived of the right to choose a husband or not to marry or when to marry. In fact, they were often forced into marriage<sup>32</sup> by not seeking her consent. Islam changed this, as *Shari'a* law prohibits forcing a woman into marriage; the marriage contract is considered invalid without her consent. Furthermore, marriage proposals are no longer limited to men because women in Islam can choose their husbands as well.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the best example of the latter case is Prophet Muhammad's first wife, *Khadija*, who chose him as a husband because she admired his manners. *Khadija* enjoyed this right before Islam due to the high degree of autonomy she exercised as an independent businesswoman.<sup>34</sup>

Generally speaking, a married woman in Islam is "a partner to the contract rather than an object of it."<sup>35</sup> Islam specifically draws the relationship between the husband and wife in three major points: community, equality, and reciprocal compassion. First, the wife is the *sakan* "source of *sakina* = tranquility" to her husband. The wife, as described in the Quran, is the source of serenity and tranquility that her husband needs for the health of his heart and soul.<sup>36</sup> Many go through a phase in which they become aware of a sensation of emptiness or loss within themselves that needs to be filled, making the person feel a kind of weakness or loneliness that can only be alleviated by someone who is sincerely committed to them;<sup>37</sup> i.e., the wife.

The second aspect of the relationship between the wife and her husband is described in the Quran as each person being a *lebas* "garment" to each the other, as stated in the following Quranic verse: "They (your wives) are a garment for you (the husbands) and you are a garment for them."<sup>38</sup> This verse emphasizes gender equality in Islam in privileges and obligations. One interpretation of the meaning of the word 'garment' is that it is by getting married, a partner wears a new personality that the new marriage life brings.<sup>39</sup> Another interpretation is that a garment covers parts of the body that need to be honored by protecting them, as the partner's honor in marriage life needs to be covered and protected by both sides who should

## *"While a Muslim women is expected to be obedient, this does not imply that she should become submissive."*

nurture each other emotionally as well as physically.<sup>40</sup> As seen, the husband and wife are expected to act in one togetherness to perpetuate a healthy marriage.

The third point of discussion regarding the relationship between the husband and wife in Islam is the emotional aspect derived from an ethically guided framework of the Quran. Love is not explicitly stated as a pre-conditional factor to marriage in Islam; rather, marriage is based on two prominent Quranic values; namely the *mawada* "affection" and *rahma* "mercy." These pillars are conceptual circles that are interconnected and lead into one another: marriage as a solemn connection can only be constructed on the couple's ontological equality and commitment to moral agency.

Furthermore, such a link can only be sustained by mutual tranquility, love, and compassion.<sup>41</sup> Marriage values are conceptualized as stronger emotional bonds between the married couple rather than sexual encounters. In other words, marriage as an institution may be weakened or risk termination if psychological and social connections between spouses are damaged<sup>42</sup> due to limiting their relationship to mere lust and sexual desire. This mutual compassion results in successful marriages and healthy children to whom this compassion is automatically conveyed.<sup>43</sup>

Islam confers mutual marriage rights and duties, which should always be thoroughly understood and adhered to in order to have a healthy and successful marriage.<sup>44</sup> Both marriage partners are expected to be kind and fair with each other, in that the husband is not regarded as superior to his wife in the Shari'a law.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the husband is responsible for his family's financial expenditures. Even if his wife is financially independent and well-off, he cannot request her assistance with the expenses or take her money without her consent. In other words, a wife's financial needs must be fulfilled by her husband being the *qawwam*; i.e., her legal male guardian.<sup>46</sup>

The notion of *qawwam* needs to be addressed due to binary understandings of this notion which have caused countless problematic issues in many Muslim

households. First and foremost, *qawwam* is not a privilege; it is an obligation.<sup>47</sup> The husband/father/adult brother is the legal provider of his family and the one responsible for their well-being and safety. Since the guardian is obliged to support his family and provide for it, subjecting women to male control and guardianship is not a Quranic precept. This is one of the "juristic constructs that in time became the building blocks of patriarchy in Muslim legal tradition."<sup>48</sup> In this regard, the husband must be protective, and compassionate to his wife, exhibit passion, provide serenity and tranquility, and make her feel safe and secure. This means that she is expected to be treated as an equal marriage partner, not as subordinate or inferior to the husband.<sup>49</sup>

On her part, the Muslim wife is responsible for protecting her husband's honor, guarding his wealth, and spending his money reasonably. Since the wife has the right to protection, safety, suitable clothing, feeding, lodging, and maintenance,<sup>50</sup> she is expected to obey her husband and consult him in decisions relevant to their life together. While a Muslim woman is expected to be obedient, this does not imply that she should become submissive. She has the right to retain her uniqueness and independence. When Quraysh announced a boycott against Aal-Hashim, the Prophet's family, and besieged them in the Alsh'ab region for three years, Quraysh unbelievers told Khadija that she was an exception and that she could be dignified in her house. However, Khadija insisted on joining her husband and his family in the siege of her own free will, rather than being compelled to do so.<sup>51</sup> Khadija was a good wife; she was obedient, but also strong and decisive, which made her reliable and trustworthy. In Islam, marriage is an equal partnership that is based on feeling and caring for each other, equality, and well-being of all the parties involved.<sup>52</sup>

### **Polygyny in Islam**

When considering marriage in Islam, the topic of plural marriage should be addressed. Polygamy, or more specifically polygyny, is a major subject in Islam and

is frequently discussed by Orientalists. This practice of plural marriage is regarded by many Westerners and modern Muslim reformers as disrespectful and demeaning to Muslim women. This is likely due to the way it is tackled in Muslim societies. However, while many modern exegetes “admit to the exploitative abuse of polygyny among some men.”<sup>53</sup> The Shari’as’ understanding of polygyny allows for the protection of women in a society where male guardianship is required. Not only does the Shari’a radically limit male access to polygyny by requiring The Shari’a requires the man to be financially and mentally ready for multiple marriages so he can be equally fair to each of his wives, thus implying that most men are incapable of such a venture.<sup>54</sup> The Quran specifically emphasizes the importance of doing justice in multiple marriages; otherwise, the husband must remain in a monogamous marriage: “And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.”<sup>55</sup> This Quranic verse explicitly states that monogamy is the marital norm, while polygyny is the exception, only permitted to serve certain individuals. Hadia Mubarak<sup>56</sup> cites different premodern commentators such as al-Tabari, who writes that since it is challenging for humans to maintain justice in these matters, men should refrain from taking such a step to begin with. One point added to these interpretations is the fact that the first natural justice in multiple marriages is to inform the first wife the minute the husband’s intention for a second/another marriage is confirmed. This is considered a fundamental right for women; i.e. the right to be recognized and not ignored.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, there were many valid reasons for polygyny despite Western skepticism, or as Mubarak puts it, the “colonial critique”<sup>58</sup> of the institution of polygyny, as benefits from this practice that serve the community’s well-being are observed in times of war or famine, with the increasing scarcity of eligible bachelors, polygyny allowing for more women to get married for protection and security.<sup>59</sup> Another advantage to polygyny is that it fulfills the husband and the second wife’s desire for procreation if such a chance

is not available in the first marriage for any possible reason such as old age and/or health condition.<sup>60</sup> Polygyny also offers divorced and widowed women a second chance to marry and find financial protection for themselves and their children from a society in which this segment of vulnerable women is usually exploited and underappreciated.<sup>61</sup> This positive side of multiple marriages reflects one aspect of the wisdom behind enacting polygyny in Islam. In other words, polygyny can be a way to protect women’s rights to well-being. In this regard, polygyny in Islam is not a privilege free from obligation; rather, it is a responsibility to facilitate the individuals in need of services that can best be given via multiple marriages.

### Divorce in Islam

In addition to the right to marry or not to marry, a Muslim woman is also granted the right to get a divorce and dissolve her marriage. Before the advent of Islam, women had no right to divorce their husbands, as it was only men who had the right to divorce their wives whenever they desired.<sup>62</sup>

The Shari’a law explains three approved forms of divorce. The first case is when the husband repudiates his wife and terminates the marriage by simply declaring the phrase ‘I divorce you’ for one time. Although this is a *talaq raj’i* ‘revocable divorce’,<sup>63</sup> the husband is strongly instructed to refrain from making such a declaration to the best of his ability for there was nothing God hated more than divorce, as stated in the Hadith.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he is advised to seek ways of reconciliation to end the dispute.<sup>65</sup> Reconciliation can still take place during the time of *eddah* “the waiting period”; i.e. the three-month period upon the announcement of divorce during which the wife cannot remarry in case of possible pregnancy<sup>66</sup> and consequently the chance remains for the couple to return to each other. This period of *eddah* is counted in accordance to the Hijri calendar, starting from the day of the first declaration of divorce. During this time, the wife must go through three times of *quruu* “menstrual cycles” as stated in the Quran: “And the divorced women should keep themselves in waiting for three courses [menstrual periods].”<sup>67</sup>

The second case in which the divorce occurs is when the husband pronounces the word once each month

during the period of *eddah*.<sup>68</sup> During this time, the divorce can be nullified by the couple simply by resuming to live together. However, at the end of the *eddah* period, the third divorce becomes final and irreversible; also referred to as *talaq ba'en baynona kubra*<sup>69</sup> 'irrevocable divorce'. For the couple to get back to each other again, the woman must marry a second husband, consummate the marriage, and divorce him before being able to remarry her first husband.

In the third form of divorce, the husband pronounces the word divorce three times at once 'You are divorced, divorced, divorced.' Divorce in this case becomes effective immediately rather than at the end of the period of *eddah*. This divorce is problematic, and many consider it reprehensible despite being legal.<sup>70</sup>

While divorce is permissible in Islam and the right to it is granted to both the husband and the wife, it is not encouraged as the couple considers their decision. Other specific procedures are recommended to reconcile the situation before resorting to divorce<sup>71</sup> as aforementioned above. Nevertheless, divorce does not imply that the marriage should end badly; rather, it should be approached with wisdom, dignity, and consideration as explicitly stated in the Quran, "either you retain her on reasonable terms or release her with kindness."<sup>72</sup>

The wife can initiate the divorce on her part. This female-initiated divorce known as *khul'* "has moved the center of authority within marriage."<sup>73</sup> According to Shari'a law, *khul'* grants the wife the privilege to keep all the money, property, and gifts given to her by her husband. However, if this divorce is demanded over no good reason, or if evidence of bad living conditions is not provided, she must give up everything the husband gave her, and she has to relinquish her right to alimony.<sup>74</sup>

Divorce can be a relief and a good alternative when there is no longer a profit to maintaining the marriage as a result of serious discord,<sup>75</sup> when the wife suffers harm by remaining with her husband, when evidence of the husband's impotence is provided, or when one of the married partners is immoral, defiantly irreligious, or both.<sup>76</sup> In modern-day Muslim countries, more reasons for divorce are added. Such reasons include harmful contagious diseases, drug and/or

alcohol abuse, and domestic violence.<sup>77</sup> In countries such as the United States where Muslim courts are absent, a civil divorce is obtained with religious approval. Muslim women in these countries seek divorce for different reasons such as to fulfill a religious duty, to affirm their cultural identity as Muslims, to meet their families' needs, or to come to a personal closure when the marriage ends.<sup>78</sup>

A Muslim woman can seek divorce if she feels unsatisfied with her life, mistreated, or disrespected. In such a case, the judge grants divorce to the wife in addition to her right to keep her earnings before and during the marriage. Moreover, she is granted full custody of her children and the husband has to pay a respectful alimony to support them. In case the marriage resulted in severe damage to the wife, she can get monetary compensation as well.<sup>79</sup> This financial support is beneficial for the wife, particularly during the divorce proceedings and time of the waiting period.<sup>80</sup>

In Islam, although divorce is legally permitted, it is not encouraged. The recommendation is to regard divorce as the final option and prioritize seeking counseling and assistance to minimize its occurrence. One way to achieve a solution, and the one recommended as the first attempt to reconcile the problem, is stated in a verse in the Quran in *Surat Al-Nesa*:

*"And if you fear dissension between the two, send an arbitrator from his family and an arbitrator from her family. If they both desire reconciliation, Allah will cause it between them. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Acquainted [with all things]."*<sup>81</sup>

The emphasis of the arbitrators being individuals from the couple's families underscores Sharia's keenness to keep the problem within the family so that no one is harmed due to gossip and the spread of rumors. Such practices make divorce more socially problematic than polygyny, to the point that married Muslim women prefer to be co-wives with another woman rather than be an ex-wife.

### *Muslim Women in Contemporary Islam*

The discussion above about the rights granted to Muslim women shows how women during the

Prophet's time enjoyed a life of justice, dignity, respect, and equal opportunities. However, as time passed by, Islam was embraced differently by different cultures. That is, Islam has been heavily affected by cultural norms and traditions that existed prior to its emergence.<sup>82</sup> This resulted in the appearance of fundamental differences between the religious texts and the way they are practiced.

Moreover, Muslim women's roles in society have become marginalized as compared to the time of the Prophet: their rights have been curtailed and women are consequently more vulnerable to oppression and suppression. Below is an explanation of some examples.

### Male-Female Status in Modern Islam

Overall, Modern Muslim countries are male-dominated patriarchal societies in which the male is the absolute authority over all the females in the household. In other words, women in Muslim societies are eclipsed by men's shadows. A man's commands are considered final and binding on the woman, who must implement them without the slightest objection. One explanation is that the scripture of the Quran is misinterpreted so Shari'a law is manipulated to consolidate men's power over women<sup>83</sup> and maintain their hegemonic presumptions of superiority and dominance. These male-dominated interpretations are gradually embedded into society to the point that they become viewed as integral to religion.<sup>84</sup>

Today, females in the Middle East hardly enjoy their rights due to the restrictions imposed on them, which have nothing or little to do with the teachings and instructions of Islam. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran, women do not hold high positions in the government, and cannot appear in public without completely covering themselves from head to toe.<sup>85</sup> Although the Saudi government has made some law amendments in recent years and permitted women to drive cars, social restrictions, known as culture family law, still exist. Men do not allow their female relatives to drive, arguing that this behavior brings shame because female drivers are stigmatized with moral degeneration and lack of modesty.<sup>86</sup> In other words, the restrictions on female drivers stem out of social attitudes and have nothing to do with



*A gender-segregated train car in Tehran<sup>87</sup>*

Islam.

Women who are privileged and courageous enough to fight for their rights frequently pay a heavy price. A woman who fights for her rights is charged with recalcitrance, disobedience, and rebellion against religion and society. This damages her reputation and may lead to the destruction of her life and the lives of other females in her family.<sup>88</sup> These societies reflect one of the worst examples of a pervasive gender-based social gap and disparity in rights and freedoms.<sup>89</sup>

One major reason for this situation in the Middle East can be attributed to the lack of knowledge of religious rights, one of the main safeguards for female freedom. This ignorance is interwoven into their cultures and mentalities, and so may be unconscious to most of the population in the Middle East.<sup>90</sup> However, a close look at those societies shows that this ignorance of women's rights is systematic, and the attempts to correct the course of life are commonly resisted and met with rejection.

Though Islam gives equal rights, responsibilities, and penalties to males and females, it is only males who seem to enjoy the privileges while females are not treated as equal.<sup>91</sup> Females, as well as males in Middle Eastern societies, are raised by the indoctrinating belief that males are superior to females and therefore must always be revered. Since childhood, girls are raised to fear masculine authority instead of being aware of the nonstop presence of divine supervision. As a result, females are expected to step back and give priority to males in most of the essentials that

contribute to personality-building and self-confidence such as owning a vehicle, going to the finest schools, and participating in sports.<sup>92</sup>

In some Middle Eastern countries, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, the government enforces complete gender segregation in most public places such as educational institutes and workplaces. In some cases, these societies relegate women to a secondary position in privileges such as business owning, job opportunities, and even marriage.<sup>93</sup> In other words, Middle Eastern women are expected to maintain the limited roles they used to have in Aljahilya time before Islam in which “woman’s status largely revolved around her role as a mother, daughter, or sister.”<sup>94</sup>

In addition to enjoying religious, political, and social privileges women are deprived of, males in the Middle East can get away with almost any violence they practice against their female relatives. Society and the law exempts them from severe penalties under the pretext that their actions are done for the best interest of their women. Even if the aggression escalates to the point of severe physical abuse, the penalty will be for a limited length of time, or, in most situations, the male is exempt from any legal consequences.<sup>95</sup> In fact, the crime is called an ‘honor crime’; i.e., the aggression of the male toward women is regarded as a defense of his own honor. This adds a sense of pride among the males who have the reins of everything, including their female relatives, their honor, and their fate.

Although movements toward a serious change have been increasingly taking place with the aim of achieving gender equality, some of the approaches employed were not appropriate or thoroughly studied. Moreover, certain Quranic exegesis needs to be reviewed because they are seriously misleading due to male-based bias. It is observed that the verses in the Quran emphasizing gender equalitarianism are almost exclusively interpreted and discussed by female scholars.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, verses such as the one that describes the husband as guilty of *nushuz* “male abandonment and/or disinterest” are entirely ignored.<sup>97</sup>

As observed, despite efforts to bridge the gap, the issue of gender equality in the Middle East continues to pique the interest of both advocates and opponents. This will surely result in considerable changes in the upcoming years.

### Marriage in Modern Islam

Although marriage in Islam is a holy commitment known as *Methaqan Ghaleedhan*, “a solemn covenant”<sup>98</sup> that is based on mutual respect and kindness, marriage is not always enacted as stipulated in the Shari’a law. In other words, the effect of cultural traditions are powerful enough that it might be favored over Islamic marriage rules, thereby depriving women of their rights. For example, marriage is not always fully consensual: in some rural areas where less supervision is put on the enforcement of the personal status law, it is customary that females get married at a very young age, sometimes before they reach eighteen.<sup>99</sup> This happens either by forcing the girls into the marriage or by raising them to subconsciously embrace the thoughts about the importance of having a husband as early in life as possible. Deteriorating economic conditions could be a leading factor that some families give their daughters in marriage at an early age to reduce the size of the family and the number of mouths to feed. In bigger cities, as in the case of Syria, the law prevents female underage marriage unless it is approved by the consent of a legal male guardian.<sup>100</sup> Although a Muslim woman is instructed to obey her husband and take his permission before making a major decision such as having a job or starting a business, the couple is expected to live as a united cooperative team in which the two give and receive mutual respect and kindness. In other words, the fact that the husband is the head of the household does not entitle him to become an arbitrary tyrant. Rather, Shari’a law requires him to support his family with all available means, to treat them with compassion and sympathy, and to maintain a safe and secure environment at home.

However, this husband hardly ever exists in these masculine-dominant societies in which males have full power and absolute freedom to do whatever they want with little or no social accountability, legal prosecution, or even the feeling of guilt.

In regards to polygyny, the strict rules advocated by Islam to limit polygynyism are defied. Since it is customary for males in Muslim countries to have absolute freedom, the decision to have multiple marriages is taken with little reference to Islamic principles and with almost no consideration of the first wife’s rights

or feelings. Islam clearly states that a Muslim man who wants to have more than one wife must notify the first wife of his intention to remarry before he takes any action.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, this is not the case in reality. In most polygyny cases, the second, and sometimes plus, marriages are done without the knowledge of the first wife, in that the husband marries again discreetly, or informs his wife after he makes all the arrangements for the second marriage. This represents one example of the many contradictions to the Shari'a law that these societies exhibit.

Additionally, studies have shown that men who are involved in polygamous relationships tend to neglect the first wife and her children, and hardly visit them or take care of them. This has a negative impact on the lives of the children and their feelings. The effect may have an impact on their academic achievement as well as their psychological and mental health. Although first wives have the right to divorce in case of polygyny, they mostly refrain from that for the sake of their children and choose to suffer the emotional pain so that their children can have at least one parent.<sup>102</sup> The reason is that in Islam, there is no concept of joint custody; as a result, women become hesitant to pursue divorce for fear of losing custody of their children.<sup>103</sup>

### Divorce in Modern Islam

Due to misinterpretations of Shari'a family law or more specifically, manipulations of the exegesis of the Quran and the Shari'a law, certain practices observed among men indicate a major tendency to treat women as a personal possession.

Accordingly, men have become able to practice multiple marriages with no restrictions and choose to divorce their wives by repudiation regardless of the law, and additionally women do not leave abusive situations due to social pressure.<sup>104</sup>

According to Islam, there are specific rules for repudiation,<sup>105</sup> the most important of which is that the husband does not take anything from his wife, including what he gave her, no matter how valuable it is.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, a wife in Islam can initiate divorce because she has the right to dissolve the marriage if irreconcilable differences exist due to marital discord, and after all attempts to reconcile the situation fail. However, the actual practice of divorce rights in present-day

Islamic states has been notably distorted, with men being the absolute party that takes such the decision, if ever.<sup>107</sup> Generally, the sanctity of marriage has always been emphasized in Muslim societies due to the significance of conjugal life for family stability, which is always prioritized over each party's individual preferences. Therefore, Muslim women whose marriages are not stable refrain from seeking a divorce for fear of being accused of destroying the household and dispersing the children. Additionally, those women in some cases are obliged to tolerate their failed marriages in which they are exposed to physical violence and/or sexual harassment so that they do not lose custody of their children.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, many husbands are aware that their wives prefer to stay in unhealthy and unstable marriages because those wives have no financial providers other than their husbands, and hence terminating the marriage will leave those women with absolutely no financial resources. As a result, husbands use this point of weakness to display their patriarchal power over their wives by constantly threatening with divorce for any or no reason.<sup>109</sup> This is a flagrant breach of Shari'a law which puts clear and straightforward rules for both marriage and divorce without offending, exploiting, or compromising any party's rights.

In addition to the reasons discussed above, indirect messages sent via popular culture media have increased the stigmatization of divorce in Muslim societies. In Egypt, movies and comic cartoons dealing with the problem of unilateral divorce, *khul'*, paint unfavorable stereotypes of divorced women and portray women seeking *khul'* as rebellious wives who prioritize Westernization and modernism.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, such media emphasizes the body and dress code of women in a way that insinuates gender reversal, working to enhance the perceived threat on men's manhood and status as the figures with the upper-hand authority in society. In sum, the understanding of the concept of *khul'* is shifted to be "perceived as a serious blow to male supremacy."<sup>111</sup>

Women in the Middle East do not fully practice the right to choose their future spouses. Marriages are mostly arranged and done by the intervention of the family;<sup>112</sup> thus, a wife is required to live up to the expectations of the two families even if that is done



*"Islam, after all, has no voice. Only Muslims have voices. Only they speak in the name of Islam, and Muslims speak from distinct social and political contexts that shape how they practice and represent their religious tradition."*

at the expense of her mental health, personal interest, and comfort. In most failed marriages that never ended in divorce, the cost is the wife's dignity, self-respect, individuality, peace of mind, and physical and mental health. This, again, is a violation of the Shari'a law which strictly emphasizes the importance of respecting women, treating them well, and appreciating their status in Islam and society.

#### **Inheritance in Modern Islam**

As discussed above, Islam has granted women the right to inherit, though the portion is not equal. It is explained that the man is responsible for providing for the female relatives and hence he receives double the share of the inheritance as his share is not actually 'his' alone.<sup>113</sup> The women's portion, on the other hand, is completely and purely theirs and no one has the right to share it with them.

However, Muslim women do not always have full access to this right in today's Muslim countries. Oftentimes, the right to inherit has been circumvented by the male relatives, most likely the older brothers,<sup>114</sup> who are socially and culturally more powerful than women and consequently have authority over them. Even worse, sometimes women, are forced by their brothers to turn their inheritance share over to those male siblings.<sup>115</sup> Examples are found in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan where women are blackmailed or coerced into giving up their share of the inheritance to their brothers.<sup>116</sup> In some cases, socio-cultural systems and traditional customs in Bangladesh discourage women from inheriting property on the grounds that it is considered humiliating for them to inquire about their inheritance until and unless it is offered to them.<sup>117</sup> In Turkey, only 20 percent of women own property because most women renounce their right to inherit from their male relatives.<sup>118</sup>

There is another danger that lurks for those women:

their husbands who wait for the opportunity to pounce on their wives' inheritance portion, or other men in the city who propose to the woman after knowing that she has received a decent inheritance.<sup>119</sup> There are cases in which the woman's male relatives, mostly the brothers, arrange her marriage to her cousin in order to retain her inheritance within the family's male bloodline.<sup>120</sup>

This is one consequence of the prevailing mentality entrenched by the traditional norms and socio-cultural system in these masculine societies that put women in an inferior position to men and deny them their natural and religious rights. This way of living opposes Islamic teachings, which never supports mistreatment or societal discrimination against women. However, Muslim societies are mostly driven by tradition rather than religion in that "Islam, after all, has no voice. Only Muslims have voices. Only they speak in the name of Islam, and Muslims speak from distinct social and political contexts that shape how they practice and represent their religious tradition."<sup>121</sup> with the unfortunate result that original precepts are defied.

#### **Conclusion**

The family is an important institution in society, as is it socializes the younger generations into society's conventional values and implant fair status expectations. Furthermore, the family contributes to the creation of a stable emotional environment, which decreases the psychological harm produced by the alienating workplace, learning institutions, and other stresses. In other words, the family's role is to embrace everyone and give a warm haven for them to seek comfort and safety. Islam promotes these fundamental ideals by creating an atmosphere in which the family can thrive and by strengthening the links that bind members to one another and to society.

However, reality displays a different scenario. The acts of the vast majority of Muslims do not always

correspond to what Islam teaches.<sup>122</sup> In modern time, Islamic law is highly influenced by the prevailing socioeconomic, political, and even indigenous values. Although it can be challenging to distinguish between culture and religion in Middle Eastern countries, women happen to be the product of both, and therefore it is inevitable to regard her from the cultural point of view and treat her accordingly.

If the privileges guaranteed to Muslim women during the Prophet's time were practiced now, Muslim women in the Middle East would be substantially better off. Although Islam came to change the male-dominant mentality and improve life at all levels, most men in Muslim societies assume an "inherent God-given superiority and authority over women."<sup>123</sup> Other unjust pre-Islamic practices against women are still observed in modern life though may take different forms across centuries and cultures.

These practices have called for the reformation of the Shari'a law enforcement as well as the reconsideration of the exegesis of the Quranic interpretations to ensure gender just and equality that Islam calls for. Such attempts have played influential roles in supporting Muslim female rights and independence. Based on the pace of recent events, it is predicted that Muslim women in the Middle East will, at some point in the future, be able to enjoy more rights that are granted to them by Islam to a greater degree as compared to contemporary times.

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# Exploring Islamic Institutions and State Collapse

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PATEL

*Caroline Ahn and Grace Snell*

David Siddhartha Patel is a research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and a former senior fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University. His research focuses on religious authority and state-building in the Middle East. His most recent book, *Order out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq* chronicles the role of mosques and clerics in building a new state after the collapse of the Baathist regime.

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avid Siddhartha Patel employs an interdisciplinary approach, merging game theory, ethnography, and GIS technology to investigate the impact of Islamic institutions on social order. His research explores how these institutions facilitate a conversation in the role of mosques and clerical networks post-state collapse. His book, *Order out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq* (Cornell University Press, 2022) received recognition as the Best Book by the APSA MENA Politics section and earned an honorable mention for the Political Network's Best Book Award. Patel elucidates the intricate relationship between rational choice methodologies, ethnographic comprehension, and GIS analysis in *Order out of Chaos*. Through this integration, he unveils the persistent challenge of establishing social order within stateless settings. Additionally, he explores the genesis and constraints of political

authority and leadership, while also delving into the significance of collective identity in social and political realms.

*What sparked your interest in the role of religious authority and clerical networking pre and post-state collapse in the Middle East?*

**Dr. Patel:** I was always interested in clerics in the Middle East because my Arabic training is a hodgepodge, so I studied for graduate school at Stanford University for three or four years, and then I studied at the American University of Beirut, and then I studied in Morocco, then in Jordan, and then went to Iraq. Usually, you learn one colloquial [dialect] really well, but I studied in so many different places. I think my interest in clerics really came from Morocco. It was 2003, or 2002 maybe; I was studying advanced Arabic in Tangier, and I do not speak a word of French. Moroccan colloquial [Arabic] is so different from any other Arabic [colloquial dialects] I know. There are so many French words thrown in, and everything is condensed. I think I ended up spending a lot of time sitting around Friday sermons in Tangier because it was the one place where I could hear and practice my formal Arabic, my *Fusha*. I was always attuned to *Fusha* in some way in sermons, so when I got to Iraq, I saw the role of Friday sermons, which were a new institution after the invasion.

Remember, this is 2003, there were no cell phones available in Iraq. And this was before the iPhone was invented. Iraqis didn't have the internet. The internet was something new to Iraq, it wasn't there before the invasion. And post-invasion, there were a few internet cafés just being set up, but they were immediately being overrun by porn and popups, and people did not have other good ways to get information. Television networks were just starting, people were getting satellite dishes to get international media. But mosques became really important ways for people to not just get information but get information in a way that they knew everyone else in [their] area heard it. And that is what I say was key for most local coordination and for national level coordination. So maybe I was predisposed to kind of focus on mosques, but I saw them being really important in ways I never

expected in Iraq.

*How would you say tensions between Sunnis and Shias influence the role of the government in Iraq today?*

**Dr. Patel:** So, that's a big question. Sunni and Shia identities have become more important in Iraq since the invasion. People will give you all sorts of reasons [for this]: Some argue that it was there from the founding. They say that it was the fault of the Ottomans or the fault of the British, who empowered the Sunnis. Some people want to blame Saddam Hussein, while a lot of people want to blame the Americans for institutionalizing sectarianism in the sense that they allocated the positions on the governing council according to sectarian quotas. From 2003 until now, Iraq has changed over time, though. There was a lot of sectarian violence in Iraq, especially after 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009. Over time, nobody disputes sectarianism, the fact that this is a Shia-centric government running Iraq. Everyone accepts that: as the former speaker of Parliament says: "We know how many seats and positions the Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds are going to get." Interestingly, Faili Kurds end up voting with the United Iraqi Alliance in most of the elections, they do not vote for the Kurdish parties, at least from what we know, [as] we do not have completely disaggregated data. This divide in Iraq between Sunni, Shia, and Kurd, actually is two cleavages: one is sectarianism, and the other is linguistic. So it is there; it has become a more prominent part. One of the challenges of post-invasion in Iraq is that before the war, the Ba'ath party never used the phrase "Shia" to talk about Iraqis; the only time they used the phrase "Shia" was when they used to talk about Shia in other countries, especially those connected with Iran. The real salient cleavage to the Ba'ath party was Arab and non-Arab, so Arabs and Persians. They cared about which Shia were speaking Farsi at home, not the percentage of all Shias. But after the invasion, all of these public expressions of Shi'ism suddenly became extremely prominent. So Saddam's pictures, which used to be on every corner, were torn down, and they were often replaced with pictures of clerics. Shia processions and Shia rituals became much more prominent. It was a very public expression of belief and rituals that I think



## *"Religion is infused into Iraq, it's part of the political landscape."*

for a lot of Sunnis felt very threatening since it felt like their country was suddenly occupied by something that they were unfamiliar with.

Fanar Haddad has this nice book on sectarianism in Iraq, where he talks about different types of sectarianism, some of which are confrontational and aggressive and some of which are not. But oftentimes, these public expressions of your belief may seem threatening to other groups. So sectarianism is part of the landscape in Iraq, but it is not the thing that drives Iraqi politics today. Iraqi politics is not about Sunni vs. Shia vs. Kurds. The electoral competition is between Shia parties. Right now, in Iraqi politics, there are two big blocs after the elections. One of them is led by these Shia Islamists, who are dominated by the Popular Mobilization Front and are closely allied with Iran. The other bloc is led by Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shia Islamist who some say used to be allied with Iran. So it is two Shia Islamist groups that dominate the two blocs, and they each have Sunni and Kurdish allies.

*On the topic of freedom of religion, in the US, it is often argued over whether it is freedom of religion or freedom from religion. Which should Iraq implement, what are they implementing right now, and how should the Iraqi government respect the religious freedom and power of the imams?*

**Dr. Patel:** That's a difficult question. Right after the invasion, there were people who were part of the Coalition Provisional Authority who brought a very American idea of, "here is how we should make sure judges do not get involved in things," and they were [also] bringing a very American idea of the separation of church and state. Religion is infused into Iraq, it's part of the political landscape. The big question early on was what role clerics should play in governing Iraq, and there was a lot of fear that Iraq would end up looking a lot more like the Iranian system, where clerics actually take up the role of governing. I think [with regard to] the role of religion and

state in Iraq, Iran is always foremost in people's minds. But almost every Arab country does try to oversee the regulation of clerics and preachers. What is interesting about Iraq is that the Shia were never in power in Iraq up until 2003 or 2005 really. Iraq was dominated by the Ottoman Empire for centuries before the British came, and so the Shia always had a very hands-off connection with the government. So even though it is Shia Islamists who run the government, the Shia clergy do not want the government interfering in them and their affairs; Najaf and Karbala do not want the government meddling in their religious endowments: they collect these *khums* taxes— one-fifth taxes to pay for mosques and designate things as charitable endowments. The clerics want to control that. They do not want it to go through the government. So even though the Shia are in power in many ways in Iraq, that does not mean that the Shia clerics become part of the government. In fact, the Shia clerics in Iraq very much want to maintain separation between them and the government.

*In chapter one of your book, "Order out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq," you note the limitations of Sistani's power. For the future restabilization of Iraq, what should the role of the Imams be? And should they try to address larger issues or let the state regain control?*

**Dr. Patel:** The Shia clergy are very hierarchical. The way Shia Islam works, and this is probably the biggest difference between Sunni and Shia Islam, is how structured the clergy are. For the Usuli, Twelver Shia, which is what we're talking about here, it is very hierarchical. You are supposed to pick the senior-most Grand Ayatollah and emulate them blindly on what they say, as they are supposed to guide all sorts of affairs. And remember, in Islam, law, *sharia* does not just mean how to pray; it encompasses all aspects of human behavior. *Sharia's* root word connotes "the road, the path," so it relates to how one treats their

parents, marriage law, transactions, business, everything. It is a comprehensive guide to human life. And so one is supposed to look to a *marja*, a cleric, a reference, literally, as a guide to all these aspects of life, so it is extremely hierarchical. There are multiple Grand Ayatollahs, and they are in competition with one another for followers. The challenging thing about understanding the limitations of somebody like Sistani's authority is, if you ask somebody, they will probably just say, "Whatever Sistani says, I will do." I argue in my book [that] Sistani only commands things he knows his followers will follow. His authority over people is limited to what I call "coordination games" or "coordination dilemmas"—not to ones that are actually costly. When I lived in Iraq, there was a Shi'i man whom I was good friends with, and he was a devout follower of Sistani. And we would sit there and play chess all the time. And I once asked him, I was like, "You know, chess is religiously forbidden by Sistani." For him, it is a form of gambling and strictly forbidden. And he responded, "Well, I am not doing it in public. It is not hurting the community, so checkmate." Grand Ayatollahs seem to have infinite power, but in reality, we saw Sistani's power was quite limited in certain circumstances. He told people, "Do not retaliate" in February 2006, "Do not start a civil war", and they did anyway. He made a number of other pronouncements that we have conveniently forgotten about, where he was disobeyed. And I argue that he learned over time not to say things that would be disobeyed, because his authority is not just between him and a believer, but is based on the believer's expectation that other followers will actually follow the things that he says. And so when people see other people not following him, their willingness to follow him also goes down. He is kind of smelling the wind a little bit. He never leaves the house, but his son does and gets a feel for what opinions on the outside are like. So, the Grand Ayatollahs are not all-powerful; there are limits.

And I think I am the first person who's really kind of deductively restricted, "Here's the set of things he should be influential on; here are the things he is limited on." And with Sistani, the big question is: he is clearly the first among equals of the Grand Ayatollahs of Iraq. He is 93, he hasn't been in good health for



*Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani*<sup>1</sup>

a while, so everyone understands he is going to pass away soon. And it's very unclear, like it always is, what will happen after him, and how much of the authority that is concentrated in him will be dispersed over a number of competing clerics, and what religious authority will look like. The other most prominent Grand Ayatollah in the Shia world is Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and he is in his late 80s. So I think there is going to be this transition in the next several years with the two major figures, and again, there is no institutionalized system of choosing the next one. It's really a giant coordination game that goes on.

*What are your thoughts on the future of the Middle East? Do you see a promotion of stability and prosperity, or some sort of stagnation and future tensions?*

**Dr. Patel:** First, the Middle East is not in constant conflict. Peace is the norm, like always. The vast majority of the time, people live side-by-side in relative peace. It is not as bad as it can be painted in a certain way. Let me say two things about the Middle East. So, the US has paid a tremendous amount of attention to the Middle East since 9/11, right? And the Middle East is now...it's not that the US is leaving the region or retreating from the region; I would say the US is right-sizing its attention to the Middle East. We had too much of a focus on it because of what happened, and you know, there are other challenges that

the United States faces going forward: how to respond to the economic and military rise of China, how to deal with Russia and its current expansionist behavior. There are all sorts of other challenges—and rebuilding the United States itself, its infrastructure, and its politics. The US faces all sorts of challenges, but the US has been focused on the Middle East for so long. The Middle East is trying to figure out a balance of power and deterrence and who's going to have influence, whereas the US has played less of a prominent role relative to how it is for the past 20 years. So that is kind of the big challenge, not that the US is getting out of the region. If anything, the US has a tremendous number of military forces in the region. Think about all the bases that are all over the region, right, from Bahrain—the US Fifth Fleet—to Kuwait. The question is, under what conditions will the US military use that military might? That's not obvious to leaders in the region. And the past administrations have made that more difficult. President Obama talked about, 'It will be a red line if you use chemical weapons in Syria,' and Assad used them. He said, 'No, bunches and bunches: that would be a red line.' Then he used them. Under the Trump administration, it looks like the Iranians directly attacked one of the Saudi oil fields and attacked an Aramco facility, and the U.S. did not respond. A lot of what people see now about these shifting alliances in the region, Saudi Arabia perhaps reaching out to Israel, but certainly the UAE and other countries reaching out to Israel; part of that is trying to figure out when the U.S. will and will not use military force and what the balance of power is going to be. The challenge in the Middle East today is places where the central government does not govern the territory of the country. So, up until 10 to 15 years ago, in 2003, there were a couple of places that were historically weak states; when I say weak states, the central government could not govern the whole territory. What happened is after 2003, Iraq became this massive, in Greg Gause's terms, playing field. Iraq went from being a player in other countries' domestic politics to a playing field where other people were meddling. But then the Arab Spring happened, and some other countries basically became playing fields: Syria, Yemen, and Libya. And so what's happening is these interstate rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia,

between the UAE and a whole bunch of countries, between Qatar, the other Gulf States, are playing out in domestic politics of historically and suddenly post-Arab Spring weak states. So that is the big challenge in the Middle East: how do you stabilize these weakly governed places? What the U.S. has learned the hard way over the past 20-some years is that it is not good at state building. State building is really, really hard. We somewhat failed at it in Iraq and certainly failed at it in Afghanistan. And so these [in] places, it is going to be a long time before Baghdad has control over its territory, right? And there are militias. It is going to be a long time until San'a governs all of Yemen. It is going to be a long time until there is real central authority in Libya. Those are ongoing challenges, and there are no good answers for them.

*Can you tell us about your two projects about the defunct states of the Middle East and the market for the Ayatollahs?*

**Dr. Patel:** So one of them is looking at defunct states in the Middle East. By defunct states, I mean that 30 to 40 polities existed after WW1 and disappeared from the map. Things like the Kingdom of the Hejaz, the Rif Republic, and the Emirate of Asir. So, the first 1/3 of the book is just showing that the map of the Middle East was not written by Sykes and Picot. It was dynamic. It evolved over time; some nascent states survived, and some did not. The middle part of the book does a series of paired comparisons between states that survived and states that died, and I make the argument that we can learn from Jordan by comparing it to the Emirate of Asir, which looks very similar and in a whole bunch of ways. One lived, and one died. You can learn about Kuwait by comparing it to Hatay. They are both new littoral states with multiethnic, multi-religious populations, but the difference is that in Kuwait, the plurality group, the Arab Sunnis, ally with Arab and Persian Shias to fend off their Arab Sunni coethnics, the Saudis trying to annex them. The exact opposite happens in Hatay. The Turks of Hatay ally with the Turks to annex. I think we can learn new things about those countries that survive by comparing them to states that did not, and this is the methodological point. If you do not, you

are selecting on the dependent variable. If you are just looking at state building, it is like trying to understand the effects of smoking on the elderly by looking at old people who smoke and are still alive. You are missing a big part of the story. The third part of the book is about memories of stateness, how the symbols, memories, and histories of these places live on and can be used for mobilization, but the extent also of how they have been incorporated into identities and national narratives. It is like the symbols of these places, the buildings that were associated with them. That is the *Defunct States* book. It is fun, and I tell people that I am working on failed states in the Middle East, and their eyes glaze over. They think about Yemen and Lebanon, but then I start talking about these places I mentioned, the Kingdom of Kurdistan, and suddenly, my professor colleagues get very excited. No one has written on this, so it is brand-new material. The problem is that there are not many sources; we're obsessed with polygons. We think about Syria and Iraq, but these things existed within them or sometimes across borders. Asir is now divided today between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. There are few good books regarding most of these places; if there are books, they tend to be very polemical. Marxists explain why the Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic is a good example. So, it is a fun project, but the sources are very difficult, but it is a fascinating project, and I am learning a lot about places that no one else has studied in a comparative way.

## ENDNOTES

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# Nationalizing Violence

THE EFFECTS OF THE 1915 GENOCIDE ON  
ARMENIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

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In September 1916, the US consul in Aleppo, Syria, witnessed a large number of motorized convoys carrying displaced Armenians from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup> Horrified by the scene he witnessed, the American consul sent a cable to Washington, DC. In the message, he detailed the burial ground in the northern part of modern-day Syria, specifically in the town of Maskanah, where over 60,000 Armenians were interred. The consul's description emphasized the vastness of the burial site, with mounds stretching as far as the eye could see. Within these mounds, 200 to 300 corpses were haphazardly buried, including women, children, and elderly individuals from various families.<sup>2</sup> This was not an isolated incident or eyewitness account. Dozens of international diplomats and missionaries remained in the Ottoman Empire during World War I and documented the horrific events as they were taking place. As the news of these

atrocities spread, even former United States president Theodore Roosevelt argued in a letter to philanthropist Cleveland Dodge that the United States should go to war with the Ottoman Empire “because the Armenian massacre was the greatest crime of war, and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the world powers were busy fighting their own wars and politics. Thus, no one was able to stop the Ottoman officials.

Between the onset of World War I in 1914 and the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, approximately one and a half million Armenians, more than half of the Ottoman Empire’s Armenian population, died as a result of deportations, starvation, serial massacres, and mass executions.<sup>4</sup> After World War II, this phenomenon came to be known in international law by the newly coined term *genocide*, defined as “...the deliberate, sustained mass killing of a designated ethnic or national community with the aim of reducing or eliminating its political, social, or cultural potential.”<sup>5</sup> While massacres and genocides are generally carried out by powerful elites and dominant groups to suppress and eliminate certain communities, their genocidal actions rarely have the desired effect, particularly in the long run. In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, survivors and those at risk of future violence collaborated to establish a unified alliance based on a shared national identity. This alliance aimed to pursue justice for the lives lost and safeguard against potential future violence and oppression.

In what follows, I will first detail the complex social and political landscape of the Ottoman Empire at the onset of World War I, and the triggers that led to the systematic deportation and annihilation of the Armenian population. The second section will cover the creation of Armenian diaspora identity, focusing on the romanticization of “home” as a pillar of nationalism. The third section will discuss the history of denial in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide and the creation of a common Armenian national goal to demand recognition and justice as a driving force of twentieth-century Armenian nationalism. The final section will concentrate on the means of preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide in the current age through education, museums, memorials, and commemoration events.

### History, Context, and Triggers

In 1906, the Ottoman Empire spanned vast regions of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa, boasting a population exceeding 20 million people. About three-fourths of this population identified as Muslim, with the remainder comprising Christians, Jews, and adherents of smaller religions.<sup>6</sup> Notably, over two million Armenians were residents within the Ottoman Empire at that time.<sup>7</sup> The Armenian community was mainly Orthodox Christian and had a distinct language and alphabet—Armenian. Under the rule of a large and powerful Ottoman Empire, Armenians had turned to various myths and stories of shared historical, religious, and linguistic origin in order to separate themselves from other groups. Within the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian community was generally more economically advanced than other ethno-religious communities;<sup>8</sup> consequently, it was able to invest in religious infrastructure and strengthen communal ties: “Eventually, the Armenians’ geographic clattering and religious identity led to a stronger sense of nationhood and common identity than among other groups.”<sup>9</sup> Still, like other minorities, Armenians were subjected to discrimination and unequal treatment under the law within the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman *millet* system allowed the Islamic state to manage other religious communities by granting them limited autonomy.<sup>10</sup> However, as a unified community, they could present demands of security, property, and taxes to the Ottoman government. In the second half of the 19th century, there was a degree of cooperation between the Ottoman leadership and the Armenian community. The Armenians were even considered to be the “most loyal community” among Ottoman Christian citizens.<sup>11</sup>

The empires of the pre-modern period, including the Ottoman Empire, incorporated different groups of people who spoke multiple languages and possessed distinct cultural and historical backgrounds. Such empires did not view ethnic and cultural differences as a threat to their existence. Nevertheless, the gradual breakdown of empires during the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Age of Revolutions and the later emergence of modern nation-states gradually divided the world into culturally homogenous territories.





*Destruction in the Armenian quarter of Adana*<sup>12</sup>

As Eric Hobsbawm argues in his book *Nations and Nations Since 1780*, these new states became primary agents in building nationalism.<sup>13</sup> The Ottoman Empire felt the pressure of the changing times, which led to a political group known as the Young Turks led by Mehmed Talat Pasha to seize power in the revolution in 1908.<sup>14</sup> Soon, the Ottoman Empire started to pursue a policy of Turkish nationalism and a process of Turkification of the region of Anatolia, where “as a result of which Armenian identity assumed a much more sinister and threatening shape.”<sup>15</sup> Two particular events had a great impact on the distrust and hatred that would fall on the Armenian community over the next half-decade. First was the Ottoman’s defeat in the Balkan wars of 1912.<sup>16</sup> The Empire lost its European territories and, as a result, became weakened and more scared of rebellions and revolutions. The second was the war between the Russian and the Ottoman Empire and the 1914 Mandelstam Plan, which called for the guarantee of Armenian autonomy.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Ottoman officials began to see the Armenians as a threat to the security and integrity of their empire, especially as World War I broke out.

To solve the “Armenian problem,” the Young Turks initiated a horrific genocide against the entire Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, which they tried to hide under the chaos of World War I as an operation to relocate Armenians to safer territories; “Formally, the genocide was initiated on the nights of April 24 and 25, 1915, when several hundred Armenian political, financial, and intellectual leaders were arrested in Constantinople, deported to Anatolia, and murdered.”<sup>19</sup> However, even a few months before,

the Armenian soldiers serving in the Ottoman army were disarmed and enlisted as laborers and later murdered in batches.<sup>19</sup> Ottoman officials made resilience nearly impossible and began the next stage of their plan—the deportation. As a result, Armenians were driven out of their homes. Adult males were separated and killed a few miles away while the children and women were sent on death marches through the Syrian desert, where they were eventually murdered.<sup>20</sup> By 1923, at least one and a half million Armenians were killed, while about half a million managed to escape to various countries in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

Over a century has passed since the beginning of the Armenian Genocide. In this short period, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and the modern Turkish state was established. Armenians who were left in the Caucasus became absorbed into the Soviet Union, and after its collapse, the Republic of Armenia was born. Modern-day Armenia is a small nation of approximately three million people which neighbors Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Georgia. Nevertheless, today, more people who identify as Armenian live outside of Armenia than inside its territorial boundaries. Partially due to the Armenian Genocide, an estimated seven million Armenians live scattered around more than 100 countries, forming one of the largest diaspora communities in the world.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the last century, significant progress has been made in the study of the genocide. Many governments, international organizations, religious bodies, and leaders have formally recognized the Armenian Genocide. However, Turkey—the successor state of the Ottoman Empire—has paralleled the Armenian success with highlighted resourcefulness and sophistication in their denial of the horrific events that happened at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Despite many setbacks, Armenians inside and outside the nation-state continue to keep the memory of the genocide alive through various means, which in turn unites and strengthens their nationalistic sentiments.

### **The Significance of Armenian Diaspora Identity**

Drawing on the work of Anthony Smith, ethnic communities, or what he terms *ethnies*, are “human populations whom at least some outsiders consider

to constitute a separate cultural and historical grouping.”<sup>24</sup> The Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire are an example of an *ethnie*. After the Armenian Genocide, the overwhelming majority of this *ethnie* left its historic homeland and scattered around the world. Nevertheless, as Smith suggests, “an *ethnie* may persist, even when long divorced from its homeland, through an intense nostalgia and spiritual attachment.”<sup>25</sup> Most of the Armenian diaspora communities who left their homes over a century ago preserve their Armenian identity to this day. As Smith explains, despite changes in location, economic activities, social organization and parts of their culture over the centuries, a sense of common Armenian identity has remained throughout their diaspora, and the forms of their antecedent culture, notably in the sphere of religion and language/script, have ensured a subjective attachment to their cultural identity and separation from their surroundings.<sup>26</sup>

Generally, individual members of the Armenian diaspora tend to establish strong connections with one another and continue to exercise their culture outside their historic territory. However, they do not reject their host culture; more often they become integrated into host societies and form a second identity, which is maintained alongside their crystallized ethnic Armenian identity. Such a dynamic of identity preservation in the Armenian diaspora fuels a shared sense of belonging, as well as nationalistic sentiments tied back to the modern Republic of Armenia. The large, powerful, and influential diaspora communities often promote and advocate for the interests of the Republic of Armenia in their respective host countries. In other words, each diaspora community shares a common sense of loyalty to Armenia that can be considered an ultimate expression of diaspora nationalism.

Besides a shared culture, religion, language, and ethnicity, in the case of Armenians, diaspora nationalism also arises from the group’s political disadvantage that is inherent to its minority status. Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism can be explained in terms of an “economically and politically disadvantaged population, able to distinguish itself culturally, and thus impelled towards the nationalist option.”<sup>27</sup> While the Armenian population is generally not economically disadvantaged, it has historically found itself to be at

a political disadvantage for long periods of time. The Armenian Genocide exposed the worst consequence of the political disadvantage of the Armenians. Thus, Armenians who escaped from the Ottoman Empire retained a degree of suspicion and cautiousness towards their host communities. Some scholars, like Eric Hobsbawm, believe that “within certain groups, it may even be a piece of political wisdom to see it that there be some enemies in order for the unity of the members to be effective and for the group to remain conscious of this unity as its vital interest.”<sup>28</sup> Such opposition to the outside in turn historically fueled an increasingly stronger sense of nationalism inside the Armenian diaspora communities.

The diaspora status of Armenians can be understood not only through their location outside their homeland or through the fact that most of its individual members were born in dispersal but also through what Kim Butler has described as “differentiating between symbolic, ethnic identity of ‘being’ and a more active, ‘diasporan’ identity requiring involvement.”<sup>29</sup> This concept of diaspora calls attention to the relationship between identity and active participation in the politics of the homeland. In order to better understand the active nature of Armenian diaspora communities, we once again turn to Smith. For individual members of the Armenian diaspora, whether they stayed in their community or emigrated to another, they remained “ineluctably, organically, a member of the community of their birth, and are forever stamped by it.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, in order to fit in and meet social expectations, the members of the Armenian diaspora get actively involved in the affairs of the modern Republic of Armenia. Such involvement can take the form of donations, formation of Armenian organizations abroad, publication of research topics relating to Armenia, posting Armenian news on their social media accounts, and so on. In turn, the “diasporan” identity requiring constant involvement with the homeland fuels nationalism inside and outside the homeland.

Finally, many scholars have attributed the ambition to ‘return to the homeland’ as a crucial aspect of the nationalistic sentiments that prevail in displaced societies. As scholar Susan P. Pattie has observed, “the question of return is ambiguous, as people have been haunted by memories of the smells and sights of their

*"...each diaspora community shares a common sense of loyalty to Armenia that can be considered an ultimate expression of diaspora nationalism."*

old village or town while gradually becoming more at home in their new spaces, in the diaspora."<sup>31</sup> In addition, the modern Republic of Armenia has been in existence as an official state only for the last forty years and is situated east of the lands that the diaspora community members originally escaped from. Despite this, the emergence of a new homeland was important for strengthening Armenian nationalism in diaspora communities. The Republic of Armenia represented a utopian vision where you could hear the Armenian language spoken on the streets, read signs written in Armenian letters, attend Armenian schools, watch Armenian shows on television, and so on. As Hobsbawm discusses, "the equation nation = state = people, and especially sovereign people, undoubtedly linked nation to territory."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the non-state nationality of diaspora Armenians transitioned towards a new territorial identity. Armenian political, religious, and intellectual leaders continue to urge the members of the Armenian diaspora community to behave as potential citizens of the homeland—the Republic of Armenia.<sup>33</sup> Even though it seems unrealistic for many members of the Armenian diaspora to return to the homeland after living in a different country for multiple generations, the hybrid identity of Armenians is a great example "for both the 'homeland' and 'hostland' nation-states, of the possibility of living, even thriving in the regimes of multiplicity which are increasingly the global condition."<sup>34</sup> With the rise of globalization and international migration, many individuals in diaspora communities identify themselves with two "homes:" their historic homeland and their current country of residence.

### **Genocide Denial as a Driving Force Behind Armenian Nationalism**

As previously mentioned, Turkey—the successor state of the Ottoman Empire—fully denies the Armenian Genocide that happened in the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, the Turkish state and those few historians who reject the notion of the genocide argue

that "the tragedy was the result of a reasonable and understandable response by a government to a rebellious and seditious population in time of war and mortal danger to the state's survival."<sup>35</sup> Armenians and those who recognize the genocide call this position "denialist." Despite many powerful nations acknowledging the genocide and condemning Turkey, efforts of denialist movements towards the Armenian Genocide make it far from universally recognized. Thus, as the historian Richard Hovannisian has advocated, "the quest for worldwide acknowledgment of the "Great Crime" requires continued, resolute efforts in the face of powerful international political, economic, and military deterrents."<sup>36</sup> As a result, the Armenians living inside and outside the homeland share a common goal to not only achieve a universal recognition of the genocide but also to demand reparations and restitution. Every year around April 24th—the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, hundreds of recognition rallies and protests happen around the world in order to bring attention to the recognition issue of the genocide. For example, on April 24, 2015, several thousands of Armenians gathered in Times Square in New York to raise awareness about the genocide, as well as demand the United States government to acknowledge the genocide formally. These protests resulted in multiple media outlets reporting on the issue and making it more pressing, such as an article published by the *New York Post* titled, "Thousands rally in Times Square to Mark the Centennial of the Armenian genocide."<sup>37</sup> In addition to rallies and protests, Armenians all over the world form interest groups and associations whose main purpose revolves around activities such as academic research on the Armenian Genocide, media outreach about the issue of genocide recognition, and organization of international conferences on Armenian issues. Such widespread efforts by Armenian organizations unite the people, regardless of their current country of residence, around a collective identity and a shared sense of Armenian nationalism.

*"...a feeling of injustice, anger, and sadness motivates and connects the Armenian people, thus making Armenian national identity more powerful and long-lasting."*

Furthermore, the active involvement of the members of the Armenian community in the fight for justice and recognition of the Armenian Genocide form the psychological conditions that help to produce strong national identities — forming what Anderson describes as an “imagined community.” Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>38</sup> A nation is “imagined” because most members will never meet one another face-to-face. Still, they see themselves as being part of the same “political community” that is like a family, with shared origins, mutual interests, and “a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>39</sup> Anderson’s definition is radical because it claims that the nation is an *idea* that connects people rather than a natural political unit. The *idea* of injustice that has been perpetrated towards a certain group of people is a powerful one that unites Armenians around a social purpose of recognition and provides a source of national cohesion. Anderson’s work gives an exceptional view of nationalism as a collective psychological phenomenon which carries a wide range of human emotions. In the case of Armenian nationalism, a feeling of injustice, anger, and sadness motivates and connects the Armenian people, thus making Armenian national identity more powerful and long-lasting.

In addition to Anderson’s notion of nationalism as a shared psychological phenomenon, Anthony Smith offers a useful angle for understanding how the denial of the Armenian Genocide and the fight against injustice act as a driving force behind Armenian nationalism. Smith coined the term “shared historical memories”<sup>40</sup>, that is, the “historical consciousness” of a particular group of people. In many cases, shared historical memories involve traumatic events of the past, which can serve present and future purposes. The Armenian Genocide constitutes a traumatic historical event that unites all the Armenians living in the twenty-first century to collectively achieve the present purposes of recognition, reparations, and restitution

for the injustices committed against their ancestors. For example, motivated by the transferred memory of the horrors of the genocide, the Armenians inside and outside the homeland are fighting for the Right to Justice and the Guarantee of Non-Recurrence specified by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. This legislation “refers to the right of victims to have the perpetrators tried and legally prosecuted, and the need for institutional change for a state to deal with, condemn, and distance itself from its violent institutional legacy, thereby preventing the reinsurance of the crime.”<sup>41</sup> The international laws condemning human rights abuses provide justice-seeking Armenians with a pillar for institutionalizing their present demands on a global scale. This process separates Armenians as a distinct group on a legal level while also strengthening Armenian nationalistic aspirations.

### **Memory and the Politics of Nationalism in the Republic of Armenia**

The modern Republic of Armenia is committed to preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide for the current and future generations through various strategies such as education in public schools, museums, memorials, and commemoration events. These strategies fuel and keep nationalistic sentiments from decreasing, thus strengthening national cohesion inside modern Armenia. The 1990 Declaration on the Independence of Armenia states: “The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition on the 1915 genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia.”<sup>42</sup> This declaration explicitly demonstrates how, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Armenian politicians invoked nationalism through the memory of the Armenian Genocide to help promote the state-building of a new country—the Republic of Armenia. The Armenian Genocide was one of the few strategies that fueled nationalistic aspirations in the newly founded republic, which in turn allowed the state to



*The Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan*<sup>43</sup>

unite its people. In addition, after the dissolution of Soviet rule that had suppressed Armenian voices, and with the establishment of the Armenian Republic in 1991, Armenians began to revive the memory of the genocide at a more active rate. This relates to Rogers Brubaker's discussion of the "return of the repressed" view on nationalism. This view states that "national identities and conflicts were deeply rooted in the pre-communist history of Eastern Europe, but then frozen or repressed by ruthlessly anti-national communist regimes."<sup>44</sup> However, with the collapse of communism, these pre-communist national identities have returned with redoubled force. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, the massacre occurred right before Armenia was incorporated into the USSR and its national identity became repackaged in Soviet terms. During the next seventy years of the Soviet regime, to preserve peace and cohesion in the Soviet Union, the Armenian people had limited opportunities to raise the issue of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. However, once the Soviets were gone, the Armenian national identity broke free from the constraints of the previous regime and the issue of genocide recognition became more prevalent in Armenian politics than ever before. While there are several issues with the "return of the repressed" view, such as the lack of distinction between nationalism and nationhood,<sup>45</sup> in general, it can be successfully applied to the rise of nationalism surrounding the Armenian Genocide after the collapse of the USSR.

Another important mechanism for spreading nationalism in the newly formed Republic of Armenia was through public education. As Ernest Gellner argues, nationalism spreads as a result of education and the school-transmitted culture imposed by the state.<sup>46</sup> Education that is rooted in strongly defined ideas and values allows for a greater homogenization of society. In all Armenian schools, it is mandatory to teach about the Armenian Genocide. However, oftentimes this requirement goes beyond learning, as it can invoke personal and collective feelings of anger, injustice, and sadness, which in turn fuel nationalism. Beyond education in schools, the memory of the Armenian Genocide is preserved through national symbols, museums, and memorials. The Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex is the central location for commemorating the victims of the Armenian Genocide. The website of the memorial complex explicitly states:

Yerevan's Tsitsernakaberd Memorial complex is dedicated to the memory of the 1.5 million Armenians who perished in the first genocide of the 20th century at the hands of the Turkish government. Completed in 1967, the Genocide Monument has since become an integral part of Yerevan's architecture and a pilgrimage site. Set on a hill and dominating the landscape, it is in perfect harmony with its surroundings. Its austere outlines convey the spirit of the nation that survived a ruthless campaign of extermination.<sup>47</sup>

This memorial complex can be equated to Anderson's discussion of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.<sup>48</sup> As Anderson argues, such memorials are meaningful only because they stand for the efforts of a community. They also reveal the obsessive interest that nationalism takes in death and immortality—much like religion does. Everyone dies, but nationalism as a large cultural system gives meaning to people's death and suffering.<sup>49</sup> Thus, every year on April 24th Armenians in Yerevan—the capital city of Armenia, march to lay flowers in memory of the victims of the genocide. Through their respect towards the past, Armenians have built a sense of strong nationalism that will dictate their national goals in the future.

Finally, an appeal to national symbols played an important role in reinforcing nationalism in the Republic of Armenia and, by extension, in the

Armenian diaspora communities. As Anthony Smith argues, “lakes, mountains, rivers and valleys can all be turned into symbols of popular virtues and ‘authentic’ national experience.”<sup>50</sup> This nature and its “poetic spaces”—as Smith calls them—constitute the historic home of the people and the sacred repository of their memories.<sup>51</sup> For Armenians, Mount Ararat became a symbol of the Armenian homeland and marked the land below it as Armenian. Despite the fact that Mount Ararat is presently located within Turkish borders, it is clearly visible from most corners of the Republic of Armenia and acts as a reminder of what Armenians lost at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is located on the lands that were historically populated by Armenians during the Ottoman Empire—who either escaped or were killed during the Armenian Genocide. Every day, when going to school or to work, Armenians living in the homeland glance at Mount Ararat and remember that while it seems so close, it is actually not theirs. Moreover, they recognize that it has been taken from them through a horrific genocide. This symbol stretches upon the whole country of Armenia, and each day it steers up a feeling of belonging to the land, reinforces Armenian national identity, and motivates Armenians to keep pursuing their national aspirations.

### Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, many individuals of the Armenian ethnicity became divorced from their historic homeland. Nevertheless, the Armenian ethnic group has persisted through space and time. While the members of the Armenian ethnic group integrated into the host countries, they also preserved their unique national identity. This became possible because of the historical political disadvantages endured by the Armenian communities and the opposition of the group to the outside, which fueled nationalism among the diaspora communities. Moreover, the official establishment of an Armenian sovereign state in 1991 not only reinforced the hybrid identity of the Armenian diaspora but also generated a new wave of Armenian diaspora nationalism. In addition, the denial of the Armenian Genocide by Turkey and the fight for the universal recognition of the genocide united people of Armenian descent

around a common purpose and a shared sense of Armenian nationalism. The idea of injustice contributed to forming a shared psychological phenomenon that encouraged an atmosphere of collective national action and provided a platform for sharing nationalistic ideas. Finally, the modern Armenian Republic has used the nationalistic sentiments that arise from the discussion of the Armenian Genocide as a tool for state-building. There is a strong socially transmitted culture inside and outside the country that revolves around genocide recognition efforts. This culture has been supported through public education, memorials, museums, and natural symbols found in Armenia. Ultimately, the active Armenian diaspora identity, the ongoing fight for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, and the nationalistic aspirations that arise in the social and political life of the modern Armenia in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide demonstrate that the genocidal actions committed by the Ottoman Empire against its Armenian population failed to produce their intended effects, especially in the long run. The Young Turks thought that through massacres and killings of the Armenian people, they would eliminate Armenian nationalistic sentiments and would be able to maintain their imperial and ethno-national dominance. Nevertheless, the genocide had the opposite effect; instead of suppressing Armenian nationalism, it resulted in increased nationalist rhetoric inside and outside the historic Armenian lands and helped the Armenian community to mobilize national sentiments necessary for building the new Republic of Armenia. In general, this case study demonstrates that massacres and genocides, which are carried out by powerful elites and dominant groups to suppress and eliminate nationalism of minority communities, not only fail to reach their desired effects but also act as a strong incentive for the emergence and maintenance of new nationalistic ideals.

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# An Investigation Into Islamic Metaphysical Theory

AND HOW IT PERTAINS PSYCHOLOGICAL  
TREATMENT



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or hundreds of years, states have gradually secularized their governments and institutions. From supplanting the Christian golden rule with self-care routines to teaching Confucian doctrines as moral philosophy rather than theological insights, societies around the globe have been supplementing religious instruction with secular moral advice. With the rise of social services in Western nations, best practices in the field of psychology and treatment frameworks have been created based on a similarly atheistic assumption of material reality. For religious individuals with a different understanding of metaphysical reality—for example, those with faith-based answers to the questions of why human beings were created or where human beings depart to when they die—, these whole-sale methods may not be as effective. Contemporary treatments have specifically atheistic or agnostic values, and the method for understanding the

human person is guided by secular norms rather than a religious moral framework. After analyzing specific pitfalls of contemporary psychological methodologies when treating Islamic patients, a connection will be drawn between Western philosophy and Islamic philosophy in order to outline two Islamic perceptions of the soul: first, I will analyze responses from a group of contemporary, multidisciplinary Islamic scholars heavily influenced by 11th-12th century scholar al-Ghazali and compare that with the emanationist cosmology of 9th century philosopher and scribe al-Farabi. When compared, I will argue that secular psychological methods must be expanded to account for a wider variety of metaphysical beliefs, including those in Islam.

### What is at Stake?

Although Western psychology appropriately deals with some issues of the soul identified by contemporary Muslims, secular psychology does not extend far enough as to capture the ultimate priority of most Muslim patients. Since the 1970s, Western clinical psychology frameworks have been applied to Islamic culture and religion to harmonize the field with Muslim psychologists and patients.<sup>1</sup> Although Islamic philosophy was significantly impacted by Aristotelian philosophy, Western psychology has been based on concepts of the soul, human nature, and metaphysics that are often different from those promoted by Islam. The human 'self' can generally be defined as an individual's typical character or as the union of all elements that form to make an individual;<sup>2</sup> However, Western psychologists define the 'self' specifically as an immaterial entity, an arguably unreal concept for that which rules the body. In contrast to the general and psychological definition, Islam utilizes the term *nafs*, a possible synonym to 'self,' to refer to a material and spiritual being which is part of an embodied soul.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the *nafs* do not fully comprise the soul, which definitely includes a reminder of human beings' divine parenthood. Because of the *nafs* connection to the physical world, the *nafs* are antithetical to the theocentricity of Islam, which promotes total prostration to God and a life aligned towards God rather than material pleasures.<sup>4</sup> Although Western psychology identifies the *nafs*—human appetites—as the root

of suffering and primarily treats issues of these appetites, Western psychology is oriented towards creating a functional human being that can be materially productive and moderate, rather than eliminate, these appetites. To many Islamic scholars, studying the *nafs* should not exist merely for the purpose of removing the *nafs*, but for the sake of making the *ruh*, the divine speck in a human soul, shine. Human nature can only shine if God's light inside humanity is uncovered, the proposed method of doing so being *tazkiyat an nafs*.<sup>5</sup> Translated as 'the purification of the soul,' this is a process of inner work to perfect the human soul's reflection of divine light, the only light which actually shines. Western psychology conducts a *jihad an nafs*, or a struggle of the soul to control the *nafs*; perfecting the *nafs* for the sake of the *nafs* is not actual purification, and only increases internal feelings of disequilibrium and therefore psychological distress. Unable to connect with many Muslims' ultimate soul of being—the aspect of the divine inside a soul that is covered and diminished by the *nafs*, whatever that may mean subjectively to the individual—Muslims may be dissuaded from accessing psychological help that would ignore the more important aspect of their soul regardless. Additionally, many Muslims may not find relief through Western therapies if they do not feel that their souls are being directed towards God through purification, and, rather, that their psychologist is merely attempting to change bad habits. The disposition of Muslims seeking treatment cannot be elevated if Muslim patients and non-Muslim or secular-based psychologists do not prioritize the same aspects of personhood, including religious inclination.

### Historic Commonalities and al-Farabi's Conception of the Soul

Due to different historic traditions and far-reaching geographical locations, it is difficult to neatly connect what is regarded as Islamic philosophy with Western philosophy. An analysis of the first Western philosopher to be widely adopted in Islamic philosophy, Aristotle, will be conducted to draw out similarities between the two traditions and conceptualize a more accommodating psychological model for Muslims living in diaspora. Aristotle is praised as 'The First Master' in Islamic philosophy because of his focus on

epistemology: what is true, and how does one know it is true based on observations.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle introduced logical categories, causality, and form-matter-substance theory to the Muslim world, with substance becoming *jawhar*—an individual entity that survives the accidental changes of the material world and the metaphysical universe—and redefinitions of substance properties such as *kulli*, the universality of an individual essence\*. The ‘Second Master,’ al-Farabi used Aristotelean logic to create a new metaphysical outline of the universe, leading to Islamic interventions in Western and Quranic understandings of cosmology and political science.<sup>7</sup> He began by translating Greek texts into Arabic, and then used Aristotelian frameworks to compose original texts on divine science.<sup>8</sup> Divine science can be defined as al-Farabi’s reimagination of Aristotle’s vague, unguided universe and philosophy of universals into a philosophy of God as metaphysics. al-Farabi argues that God, Allah, is Being in general, rather than any particular being, while still existing as an entity more personable than the universal void Aristotle credited with the order of the universe. By personifying the void into Allah, al-Farabi give Aristotelian metaphysics an intentionality that it lacked. The universe is not random; it is Allah, a Being that has acted intentionally in human history such as when delivering the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. Regarding determinism—the question of free will or predetermined destiny—, al-Farabi—in favor of determinism—and Aristotle oppose each other on the basis of divine science, emphasizing the different conclusions one can draw from either philosopher’s metaphysical program. Aristotle denies that true propositions regarding the future necessitates future events because Aristotle claims the future is not necessary. al-Farabi, alternatively, insists that God already knows what will happen despite cases of there being multiple terminal possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Although al Farabi’s divine science Islamicized Aristotle’s secular metaphysical program, he still retains Western logical patterns within his philosophy, making these theories regarding human purpose a valuable middle-ground between mainstream agnostic philosophy and Islamic philosophy.

Al-Farabi was intentional in his efforts to translate Western philosophy into Islamic philosophy,

delineating him as a crucial example of how to appropriately relate the different cultures: by relating all philosophy to the soul directly in touch with Allah. Because of the particularities of al-Farabi’s metaphysical system, it is necessary to further differentiate his philosophy with that of Aristotle.



Depiction of al-Farabi on an Iranian postage stamp<sup>10</sup>

In his political theory, al-Farabi most fully departs from Aristotelian frameworks by promoting a theory of emanationism. According to Western dictionaries, emanationism can be defined as the theory that material reality is a necessary, unwilled, and spontaneous outflow of beings with variable levels of perfection stemming from an infinite, unchanging, and primary perfect substance.<sup>11</sup> Al-Farabi introduces the concept in the first half of *The Political Regime* as a way of soothing religious anxieties towards adopting secular philosophy; this contextual note mirrors the anxieties of many modern Muslims in seeking Western psychological help but fearing that doing so would only separate them further from God. Because al-Farabi is aware that emanationism is non-Aristotelian, he thinks that Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* limits its ordering of investigation and its discovery of principles, necessitating divine science to fully describe the universe.<sup>12</sup> In translating Aristotelian texts, al-Farabi substitutes the Greek philosophy of *kinesis* – that existence is constantly changing due to a primary mover towards a final cause –<sup>13</sup> with a discussion of the principle of existence in general. Aristotle theorized distinct material, formal, efficient, and final causes, or ways of knowing what an object is, for every object; al-Farabi, while maintaining that the material cause of humanity is the human body, summarizes the formal, efficient, and final cause into his conception of the soul.<sup>14</sup> al-Farabi’s emanationist

## "If psychologists do not account for different expectations on perfection, then the effectiveness of treatment for Muslims is reduced."

cosmology that includes the soul as such, and, notably, with faculties such as intellect or *aql*, the human soul to al-Farabi is reliant on a mover of the human movers – that which puts the human drama into action by inspiring human actions –, termed the Agent Intellect. His emanationism cosmology begins with a hierarchy of celestial spheres – or, intermediaries between reality and human reality – that operate on matter but do not serve the Agent Intellect's purpose. In *The Political Regime*, the Agent Intellect is one of humanity's second causes that, despite being pure intellect, acts as a celestial sphere humanity uses to actualize intellect and materialize the existence of the first causes, including God.<sup>15</sup> When discussing the First Cause, that which creates all natural beings by giving them existence, al-Farabi fully embraces the idea of *faydh*, emanation, and argues that nothing can add or redact from the first. Many contemporary societies are eliminating the concept of true perfection in favor of promoting objectively flawed human subjectivity in lifestyle, unlike al-Farabi who argues that perfection is a real entity within the universe – if not the entire universe itself.

If psychologists do not account for different expectations on perfection, then the effectiveness of treatment for Muslims is reduced. Through developing a philosophy of emanationism that allows for authentic and achievable perfection, al-Farabi was able to manipulate Aristotelian literature so that it does not contradict Islamic religious thought, posing Aristotle's metaphysics in a uniquely Islamic fashion.

### Contemporary Departure and Historic Disagreement

Islamic philosophy has continued into the contemporary era, moving far beyond al-Farabi's cosmology. Because of later Islamic philosophers and constant recitations of the Qur'an for many Muslims, contemporary research on the Islamic soul departs from the metaphysical conclusions of al-Farabi, making it necessary to analyze recent research into Islamic psychology. In their research toward creating an Islamic

psychological framework, Rothman et. al. developed a multidisciplinary model of the soul based on Islamic philosophy by interviewing eighteen Islamic scholars across different fields.<sup>16</sup> These key informants included religious and academic experts studying Islam, and members were both Muslim and non-Muslim; if members identified as Muslim, they were either noted as either practicing or non-practicing. The experts were asked open-ended questions concerning the influence of Islam on psychology and contrariwise, as well as more specific questions regarding generally understood Islamic conceptions of the soul. After analyzing the data, Rothman deduced eight theoretical categories that comprise a holistic model of the soul based on Islamic philosophers from ancient to modern times and the participants' own knowledge of the Qur'an and hadith.

The first category concerned the *fitrah*: humanity's natural disposition after being made in God's image and born with the same pure nature arising from God.<sup>17</sup> Participants shared that a psychological problem is typically understood by Muslims to be the equivalent of a disequilibrium between a person and their originally sound nature. As people move through the trials of material existence, their pure nature is corrupted. Because God is central to Islamic philosophy, the Islamic perspective depends on knowing God; the only way to align human nature is to realign it to God by discovering what God wants from humanity. Although God cannot be added to a secular methodology, Islam's theocentricity unmistakably influences both religious practice and self-conception, as there is no Islamic consensus on what exactly God desires for humanity, making recognition of a God-oriented soul crucial for creating psychological treatment plans for Muslims.

In addition to directly asking Islamic scholars for their opinions on what the soul is for Muslims, Rothman's research addresses the impact of al-Ghazali on participant responses.

al-Ghazali maintained an anti-emanationist

metaphysics, separating him from al-Farabi's school of thought.<sup>18</sup> Instead, al-Ghazali was part of the Ashari Islamic creed which was concerned with an interactive God rather than a God that acts as a First Cause to emanate the universe without necessarily interacting with what has been created. With Western psychologists emphasizing a human's need to save themselves rather than rely on others completely for help, al-Ghazali's metaphysical program soothes feelings of helplessness by reassuring believers that God is active in material reality, highlighting an important disparity between Western psychological methods and Islamic philosophy. al-Ghazali argued that philosophers like al-Farabi committed hubris when they created overarching metaphysical systems. According to al-Ghazali, all philosophers are destined to make logical errors because they are flawed human authors, unlike the Prophet Muhammed who received divine revelation.<sup>19</sup> Because of this, logical errors in metaphysical frameworks link in a causal chain that innovates to the point of heresy. al-Ghazali also believes that many philosophers' metaphysics are not accurate representations of existential reality because philosophers typically deny that God's omnipotence rules the universe rather than natural laws, which God can uphold rationally or subvert irrationally at any moment.<sup>20</sup> This assertion makes logic insufficient for metaphysics, and al-Ghazali introduces the concept of *dhawq*, a taste of divine presence naturally felt by humanity without rationality.<sup>21</sup> Like al-Farabi, al-Ghazali insists on an existentially real example of perfection, an insistence largely ignored by secular society.

Synthesizing al-Ghazali's philosophy and contemporary opinions on the soul according to Muslims, more disparities between Western psychology and Islamic philosophy can be identified. The categories titled, "Nature of the Soul," "Structure of the Soul," "Stages of the Soul," and "Development of the Soul," were cited as most relevant for developing Islamic psychotherapies.<sup>22</sup> Most interviewed experts agreed with al-Ghazali that the soul is structured by the *nafs*, *qalb*, *aql*, and *ruh*. These different parts work together to define how each of them balance the internal human struggle between forces of good and evil. al-Ghazali defines the *ruh* as the part of the soul where God's imprint on humanity resides, making it a direct access

point to God. For Muslims seeking mental health assistance, this direct access point could be the key intervention point for treatment. Significantly, the soul to al-Ghazali is constantly evolving. A human soul undergoes stages of development in every part of itself except for the *ruh*.<sup>23</sup> According to the Qur'an, the soul is first inclined to evil and then changes into a self-reproaching soul as a person tries to resist temptation through self-awareness oriented towards God. Western psychological models focus on this stage of the soul inclined to evil in order to lead the soul to rest; to Western psychologists, individuals can find inner harmony by building self-restraint against bad habits. For Muslims, the final stage of a soul at rest is difficult to achieve and temporary; it is only necessary to strive for a soul at rest rather than to achieve it, although this final development is identified as the most integral aspect of the soul.<sup>24</sup> The soul does not need to be fixed, but it does need to be pushed in an appropriate direction in order to be at rest or in order for the afflicted to find mental relief. Western psychologists emphasize the typically lifelong struggle of mental illness that requires constant maintenance, aligning with al-Ghazali's model, however they also contend that some mental distress is completely treatable.<sup>25</sup> If Western psychologists—arguing that mental health requires life-long maintenance—reject that the soul can be at rest during periods of striving, the most important part of Islamic soul-development is neglected and finding mental relief through striving alone is treated as an impossibility.

Returning to the issue of Western psychologies over-emphasizing *jihad an nafs*, it is necessary to determine the purpose of life according to Muslims, as that identification is the key to successful psychological treatment and cannot simply be the ousting of bad habits. Rothman found that human life – according to most Muslims, as understood by Islamic scholars – is the opportunity to purify the soul and uncover pure humanity through the purification of the *nafs*.<sup>26</sup> They write, "From the viewpoint of an Islamic paradigm of psychology, the religious obligations and advice from the Qur'an along with the example of the Prophet Muhammed were represented by all participants as the treatment for the *nafs* in the process of reform."<sup>27</sup> Western psychology tends to ignore

the process of reform associated with *naf* treatment. *Tazkiyat an nafs* is impossible to maintain throughout a lifetime, and the process feels unnatural because it challenges an inherent part of the human soul, making it necessary for psychological professionals to promote patients' space for normal discomfort during the process. Rothman's identified Islamic psychology necessarily involves a moral framework, the Qur'an, as the benchmark for human ideals. They argue that in order to reform one's moral character, a person must be directed away from desires that do not promote the person's happiness; what promotes a person's happiness can be discovered through psychotherapy and does not necessarily mean the same thing for all Muslims, despite Muslims being familiar with the Qur'an. Negative desires lie at the heart of psychological distress, although Islam emphasizes that they are not necessarily psychological deficiencies, rather characteristics of unruly *nafs*.<sup>28</sup> This definition of mental illness dissuades patients from identifying their entire soul with their diagnosis and instead allows them to see their illness as a passing state with a known treatment. To conclude their findings, Rothman highlights that according to al-Ghazali and many other Islamic scholars and believers, the soul has an inherent inclination towards growth closer to God stemming from humanity's primordial nature of knowing God, constant growth being a commonality between secular mottos and Islamic philosophy. While Western psychology reflects many aspects of the Islamic soul, such as the necessity of life-long treatment and the need to moderate material appetites, it fails to appreciate that the human aspects of the soul are not self-serving but exist to serve an identifiable purpose to exalt God and bring Allah's light to the material world.

### Conclusion

As displayed by the comparison of Farabian and Ghazalian cosmologies, there is no universally accepted Islamic metaphysical program. Regardless, many secular Western psychological frameworks fail to account for alternative metaphysics in their treatment plans, reducing their effectiveness on Muslim populations, particularly those in diaspora. Analyzing both al-Farabi's and al-Ghazali's metaphysics in conjunction with a discussion of recent research in

Islamic philosophy conducted by Rothman uncovered numerous discrepancies between Islamic expectations for treatment based on differing understandings of the human soul and Western treatment options, calling for a revision of Western psychology.

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