The possibility of perfection
Living utopia in contemporary Mashhad

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Statement of Originality

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how overlapping legacies of ancient, medieval, modern, and finally Revolutionary Islamic and Iranian utopianism come to be experienced amidst quotidian social moments in contemporary Mashhad, the second largest city in the Islamic Republic. I argue that this legacy can be defined as a commitment to, a concern for, and a belief in, the possibility of achieving perfection or completion, not as something abstract and remote but instead as a palpable and achievable experience. Struck by my interlocutors pervasive use of the term 'complete' or 'perfect' [*kāmel*], alongside related terminology like 'ideal' [*ideāl*] and 'the best' [*behtarin*], to describe a myriad of social phenomena, these concepts became a window through which to analyse utopia as a social form as it was experienced and expressed in the everyday. Using the organising metaphor of refraction, I hold that we can sense the legacies of utopianism not necessarily as a linear or one-to-one connection to historic precedent, but rather as inheritances that run through the social life of my interlocutors, still very much alive even as they are subtle. Each chapter in this thesis explores a different way in which and is a meditation upon how this utopianism refracted through the social, beginning with cultures of exceptionalism, through wealth creation, education, sound, sincerity, and finally, time.

This thesis responds to two areas of contemporary anthropological debate. The first is material that has analysed what is collectively typically referred to as the anthropology of the good, including content relating to the stuff of virtue, ethics, and the eudaimonic (e.g. Fassin, 2008; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Robbins, 2007a, 2013). My specific intervention is to encourage us as anthropologists to conceptualise not just how our informants understood what a good life was, but what the *best* life was, a seemingly small, but I contend, consequential difference. Secondly, this thesis provides an alternative to pre-existing major anthropological works on Iran over the past decade (e.g. Khosravi, 2008, 2017; Mahdavi, 2009; Varzi, 2006) or so. This corpus of material has focused largely on paradigmatic concerns of resistance to the Islamist polity, particularly among youth populations, and the failure of the government to create Islamic subjects. In contrast, this thesis recognises the limitations of such approaches, and looks to go beyond them. In exploring the theme of utopia and its legacies, I make a comment not on the durability, success, or lack thereof of the Islamist

government, but rather look to the impact of elements that stretch back past the Revolutionary moment into a deeper history.

Drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork over two visits to Mashhad between 2015 and 2018, this thesis is one of the growing body of contemporary ethnographies of Iran based on research conducted outside the country's capital, Tehran, and only the second to be written in Mashhad (cf Olszewska, 2015). I conducted research predominantly among members of the middle class living in Mashhad's developing western suburbs, particularly in those regions to the west and north of Pārk-e Mellat, a major recreation site just to the west of the city's ring road. Much of this research took place in the homes of the families of a handful of key informants who lived in those suburbs, and bridged a gamut of informants from children, to parents, to grandparents. Nonetheless, I prefer not to not to define or delimit my work by a specific sub-community or group, following instead the theme of perfectionism as it spread out in diverse directions.

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Language and transliteration

Throughout this thesis I make use of transliterations of what I refer to as 'Standard Iranian Persian'. By this, I refer to the accent of educated Iranians across the country that is disseminated in news broadcasts and is considered to be the country's *lingua franca*. In saying 'Iranian' I mean to distinguish it from the Persian language spoken in Afghanistan (Dari) and Tajikistan (Tajiki). There are several conventions for transliterating the Perso-Arabic script into the Latin alphabet, such as the system currently used by the *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* or the United Nations. As an anthropologist, my main consideration in transliteration has been simplicity, accuracy, and fidelity to the spoken form of the language.

In doing so I have tried to avoid using diacritics wherever possible. Diacritics are frequently used in Romanisations of Persian, such as ž for the phoneme ʒ or č for tʃ, and so on. In contrast, the only diacritic used continuously throughout this thesis is the 'ā' sign to represent the Persian vowel ɒ. For simplicity's sake, I have not bothered to use any diacritics or special symbols for representing consonants. For instance, the phoneme 'x' representing a voiceless velar fricative in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is instead here represented as 'kh'. Because standard Persian lacks many of the phonemes present in Arabic, including all of the emphatic sounds (t̩ˤ, ð̩ˤ, s̩ˤ, and d̩ˤ) and the voiced and voiceless dental fricatives, I have chosen to represent the ذ, ض, and ظ, all of which are separate phonemes in Arabic, as simply 'z' without distinguishing marks. Similarly, I represent ث and ص, which are again distinct sounds in Arabic, both as 's', and ح and ه as both "h", adhering to the standard Persian pronunciation. In Standard Iranian Persian, unlike Dari where they remain distinct, the phonemes 'q' and 'ɣ' although historically attached to the letters ق and غ respectively, have now merged, the ɣ occurring intervocalically, q elsewhere. Where the phoneme 'q' occurs I have transliterated as 'q', and where 'ɣ' is occurs, I use 'gh'. So the word *qasr* is written with a 'q', but *āghā* is written with the 'gh'.

In Persian, the letter ه at the end of words can be both silent and voiced. In keeping with my effort to be as close as possible to the spoken language, and following the precedent set by *Encyclopedia Iranica,* where it is silent I have elided it, and where it is pronounced it is rendered as a 'h'. So for instance, the word *shenāsnāme* is written without a final 'h', whereas the word *māh* is written with the final 'h', even though in Persian both words end in the same written letter. Because Persian does not distinguish between the glottal stop and the voiced pharyngeal fricative, both are represented as with the diagraph ' in this thesis, unless they start a word, in which case the letter is elided and word begins with the following vowel. So Ali instead of 'Ali and Abbas instead of 'Abbas.

One note of variation is that where words are commonly used in English, I have left them as they are normally transliterated. So for instance, the name of the third Shi'ite Imam is rendered as Hussein, rather *Hossein* which would be closer to Persian pronunciation. So too is the word 'Imam' rendered with an initial 'i', rather than an initial 'e' and a medial 'ā' which would bring it in conformity with Persian pronunciation. Other examples include the name of the current President, Hassan Rouhani, who, in keeping with the transliteration system below, ought to be spelt *Hassan Ruhani*, and yet is kept as 'Rouhani'.

While technically several dialects of Persian were spoken in Mashhad, such as Hazaragi, Mashhadi, Dari, and while it is important to recognise that there was a dialect continuum between Standard Iranian Persian and the various Mashhadi dialects, I have not bothered to provide separate notation systems for each dialect. Most of my informants had some degree of university education, or were sufficiently exposed to national television and radio that they were able to speak in Standard Iranian Persian. Excepting in instances where the presence of an accent or a different dialectical form of Persian was noteworthy, I have not bothered to notate the difference.

There is a very small amount of Arabic transliteration used in this text, i.e. Arabic not already found in Persian. Where I have transliterated it, I have kept the transliteration format provided by the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* which differs somewhat from the simplified system I have used to transliterate Persian.

Perso-Arabic consonants	Romanised equivalent
ب	b
پ	p
ت	t
ث	s
ج	j
چ	ch
ح	h

خ	kh
د	d
ذ	z
ر	r
ز	z
ژ	zh
س	s
ش	sh
ص	s
ض	z
ط	t
ظ	z
ع	' (unless starting a word)
غ	gh (intervocalically)
ف	f
ق	q (at the start and end of words)
ک	k
گ	g
ل	l
م	m

ن	n
ه	h
و	v
ی	y
ء	'

Perso-Arabic vowels and diphthongs	Romanised equivalent
کَ	a
کُ	o
کِ	e
آ	ā
ی	i
و	u
کَی	ai
کَو	aw

Glossary

Āghāzāde – The 'offspring of sirs', the children of those who have done well from the ruling regime in Iran and are understood to live a luxurious lifestyle.

Ārmānshahr – A Persian-origin term for utopia, meaning something like 'the city of aspiration'.

Avesta – The primary collection of Zoroastrian religious texts.

Ayatollah – Literally "sign of God", a high-ranking Shi'ite clergyman.

Āmuzeshgāh – An infrequently used Persian-language term for educational institutes, typically referred to as *mo'assese*.

Bahman – The 11ᵗʰ month of the Solar Hijri calendar used in Iran, and the month in which, in 1979, the Revolution overthrew the Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile

Basij – The pro-government paramilitary militia run as part of the Republican Guards. Basij organisations are present in most parts of society. An individual who is a member is referred to as a '*basiji*'.

Behesht – Heaven.

Bonyād – A foundation. Almost exclusively used in reference to para-governmental religiously-oriented charitable foundations.

Chador – An open cloak worn by some women in Iran, that can be used to cover the whole body excepting the face. Understood in Iran as the most 'complete' hijab.

Cheshm o ham cheshmi – "Keeping up with the Jones'", social competition among Iranian families and friends.

Dahe-ye fajr – Literally the "Ten days of Dawn", used to describe the anniversary of the 10 days of Bahman in which the Revolution was understood to have become successful.

Defā'ye-moqaddas – 'The holy defence', a term used to describe Iran's eight-year long war with Iraq from 1980-1988.

Enghelāb – Revolution. Often used to refer to the Revolution of 1979 that ushered in the current Islamic government.

Fadā'yān-e Eslam – A Shi'ite Islamist group founded in 1946 by Navvāb Safavi that carried out a series of assassinations.

Gharbzadegi – A term, first used by author Jalal Al-Ahmad, to describe individuals who blindly pursued all things Western. The term literally translates as 'West-struckness', and has often been rendered as 'West-toxification'.

Imam – Any one of the Twelve figures in Shi'a theology that are held by the faithful to be chosen by God as perfect exemplars, and the only people capable of leading the Islamic community. Also a term sometimes used to describe Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Kāmel budan – To be complete, to be perfect.

Konkur – The university entrance exam test and a major milestone in the education of many children.

Labaniyāt forushi – A shop that sells dairy products.

Mahdi – The Twelfth Imam and saviour figure in Shi'ite Islam, who is understood to be in occultation currently, and who will return at the end of time to bring righteousness to the world.

Majles – A parliament, often used to refer to the Islamic Consultative Assembly [*majles-e showrā-ye eslāmi*], Iran's unicameral parliament.

Maghna'e – A type of fitted head-covering worn by some women in Iran, usually the minimum requirement for workers at government offices. Considered to be more covering than the *rusari*.

Manteaux – From the French *manteaux*, meaning 'coat'. A long coat that women who do not wear the chador are minimally obliged to wear in public.

Mashhadi/Meshti – An inhabitant of Mashhad, or someone who had made the pilgrimage to Mashhad. The term 'Meshti' is the variant used by speakers of the Mashhadi dialect of Persian.

Madine-ye fāzele – The Arabic term, frequently used in Persian, for utopia.

Meydān – A square, crossroads, or plaza.

Mo'assese – A foundation or institute. A term used to describe the various language teaching institutes found across Mashhad.

Nākojā-ābād – Another Persian origin term for utopia, truer to the original Greek meaning of the term, as a "nowhere place".

Pārk-e Mellat – A major park in Mashhad's western suburbs, and a regular site to meet friends and interlocutors.

Qadamgāh – A shrine to the footprint of Imam Reza, literally meaning "place of the footprint".

Rial – The Iranian currency, and smallest unit thereof, distinct from the superunit *toman.*

Salavāt – A benediction on the family of the Prophet Muhammad, and his descendants, usually read in Shia communities as referring to his daughter Fatemeh, and the twelve Imams who followed Muhammad.

Sampād - Also known as 'NODET', the National Organisation for Development of Exceptional Talents [Pr. *Sāzmān-e Melli-ye Parvaresh-e Este'dādhā-ye Derakhshān – Sampād*], is the Iranian state selective education program.

Sangak – A type of bread baked on hot stones, literally "little stone".

Sarāfi – A currency exchange.

Saoshyant – The Zoroastrian saviour figure.

Sofreh – A cloth spread on the floor, used to eat off.

Toman – A superunit of the Iranian currency, formally ten rials, although in practice the number toman is on a sliding scale depending on the overall cost of the item which is being bought.

Vaqf – An inalienable religious endowment in Islamic law.

Velāyet-e Faqih – The 'Guardianship of the Jurisprudent', a doctrine established by Khomeini that suggested that in the absence of the 12th Imam leading the Muslim community, that honour should

be bestowed on a leading living cleric. This concept came to underpin the form of governance practiced in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Zul-Qarnayn – A legendary Qur'anic figure, often associated with Alexander the Great, particularly in the Alexander romances of Persian literature.

Introduction

"Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living, and as such is braided through human culture" (Levitas, 2013, p. xii)

Today I have perfected for you your religion and completed my favour upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion – Sura 5:3, Qur'an

"For six months after the Revolution, life was perfect."- Mr Najāri, a mid-60s shopkeeper, father, and once-was Revolutionary

"After the revolution they said that our society was perfect, that no further change was necessary. They said our society was like the beginning of Islam. The only change we might need to make was to bring our society closer to the time of Muhammad and Ali" – Bahādor, 27, a university student and sceptic

.1   A complete life

On a Thursday evening in late December, as the winter breeze made it too cold to remain outside any longer, I sat opposite Ali-Reza, a 21-year-old university student with the trade-mark stubble, short hair and long-sleeved shirt that marked him as a member of the *basij*. Over a shared slice of chocolate cake, he complained softly about the other patrons of the café[1], a mixed clientele of older families, women in *chadors*, and independent teenagers and twenty somethings, girls wearing tight manteaus and loose hijabs, boys in skinny jeans with coiffured hairstyles. Across from us, a heavily made-up young woman, probably no more than seventeen, chatted casually with two boys, slightly older. Ali-Reza frowned as the young woman adjusted her manteau. Nodding in her direction, he said "if more people followed Islamic rules, then our society would be complete [*kāmel*]".

"Is that so?" I mulled.

"Yes", he responded sincerely. He continued:

> Muslims believe that Islam is complete, and that all the laws have a purpose. We believe that we can derive all the rules useful to social life, government, people's lives, everything – we say these rules are good, excellent, complete – especially compared to other religions. However, there are very few people [*ta'adād-e kheyli kam*] who follow Islamic rules. And those who do

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[1] Truly, a shop selling cakes, ice cream, juices, not a coffee shop like those described by Khosravi (2016) as places for *kafeneshini* which would have been unacceptable for Ali-Reza.

are really the best people – they are always happy, kind, respectful. Maybe they make a mistake, but it is rare. When you meet them, you get a good energy. Ten per cent of people are perfect, thirty percent of people are in the middle like me, and the rest of people are less than that. But I wish it wasn't like that, I wish that more people, more than 50%, were in the complete category.[2]

Ali-Reza's comments may have been more striking to me had they been made earlier in my fieldwork, or if they had been unusual, but by the end of my time in Mashhad as a second winter closed in, they were markedly pedestrian. I was used to hearing such comments frequently, and not just from Ali-Reza. Over the fifteen months I spent in Iran between 2015 and 2018, on innumerable occasions, I was told that something or someone was either 'complete', or capable of 'completion'. From ageing grandmothers who insisted that Mashhad was "like heaven" [*mesl-e behesht*], to youth who declared that Twelver Shi'ism was the perfect iteration [*kāmeltarin*] of Islam, perfection was a matter of preeminent concern. The Arabic language, women's hijab, human nature, and human society, these were just a handful of the examples that were understood to be perfect or perfectible. Around these concrete examples of perfection clustered a constellation of terms, verbal markers demonstrating that which was 'the best' [*behtarin*], or more abstract concepts like utopia [*ārmānshahr/ madine-ye fāzele*] or the ambiguous 'nowhere place' [*nākojā-ābād*].

The topic of this thesis is the legacy or inheritance of utopia and the concept of 'completion' [*kamāl*] something we might parse into English as perfection or perfectibility[3]. Some have already noticed the tendency among Iranians to presume that they have "the best poetry, the best music, the best philosophy, the best food" (Axworthy, 2013, p. xviii). Fewer have taken that as something more serious than self-aggrandisement. Encountering the concept of 'completion' on an almost daily basis, I was struck by the way it was couched, how it melded the line between those elements of life that, to paraphrase Paul Tillich (1965), were 'questions of ultimate concern', and those that seemed more humdrum, ordinary, and everyday (Cooper, 2014). As I go on to explicate more fully later in this chapter, I situate this research at the intersection of established anthropological debates on the nature of the good life, or what has frequently been glossed as the anthropology of ethics and morality (see e.g. J. Faubion, 2011; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Lambek, 2010a; Robbins, 2004, 2007a, 2013; Zigon, 2007, 2008, 2011), and material on the quotidian or everyday (see e.g. Cook, 2018; Cooper, 2014; Das, 2010; Debevec, 2012; Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Sliwinski, 2016; Soares & Osella, 2009). My intervention here is to suggest not just that we should be concerned with interpreting how a merely 'good' life is

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[2] This quotation was directly transcribed from fieldnotes.
[3] Such a translation is not without some difficulties. Being complete implied a sense of finality, that nothing more could be added. Throughout this thesis I will use the terms interchangeably, even as I recognise that they might not be completely synonymous.

led, but that my Iranian interlocutors encourage us to think on what the *best of all* lives is, what are its contours, how is it made, and what does it mean to try and live up to a model of perfection, especially one that is encoded in patterns that rather than being out of the ordinary, are experienced in a decidedly everyday manner?

That is not to say that I believe that contemporary Mashhad is a perfect society, or that my confidants there thought that they lived in one (although, admittedly infrequently, there were those who said they did). Nor is this thesis an analysis of utopianism as a surviving political position or philosophical current that is adhered to by a particular group. Much (A. Bayat, 1996, 2013; Nu'mani & Behdad, 2006; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2013) has already been written pointing to the contradictions inherent in the Islamist system, and of the "utopian overreach"[4] (Ehsani, 2009, p. 27) that ultimately ensured the extinction of the Revolution's idealism amongst the political elites, although unlike Nu'mani and Behdad (2006) I am not convinced that utopianism was ever totally eradicated. Lastly, this thesis is not an analysis of an intentional community in contemporary Iran. Rather, it is about utopia existing as a broad social inheritance, one that regulates the everyday, and how the idea was 'refracted' throughout the lives of my Mashhadi friends and colleagues as a tangible, realisable perfection, not as some abstraction remote from daily life but as a palpable and productive praxis.

I use this idea of refraction both as a literary metaphor, and as a method for theorising. Just as light refracts and spills out in new patterns, so too does utopia come to us as a lineage, but then as it interacts with the present it separates out in unfamiliar, suprising, and potentially unpredictable ways. Thinking with the concept of refraction saves us the labour of attempting to find the humdrum ways in which utopia is referred to explicitly, something that would ultimately result in little more than a list. It also allows for a particular broad interpretive frame that recognises that perfection does cluster in particular moments, but that these are not necessarily immediately obvious, and must be teased out to render substantive their silhouettes. The most immediate outcome of using such an analytic frame is, I suggest, that we should not attempt to find linear linkages and one-to-one correlations between the utopian moment of the Revolution, or pre-Revolutionary utopian traditions, and contemporary life. Rather than being overt, they infuse a milieu. We may think about refraction then as looking to the ways that these legacies exist as a current, a "tendency" (Khan, 2012, p. 9), or perhaps an "attitude" as Cooper (2014, p. 34), citing Foucault (1984) suggests, in the social, influencing ideas, informing thinking, shaping behaviours in subtle ways, quite literally 'refracting' in unexpected fashions. In this way, I do not want to define a clear-cut utopian vision, but

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[4] By which I take Ehsani to imply that in attemting the utopian, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 overreached what could be feasibly achieved by its political actors.

nor do I want to suggest there is in Mashhad the process of totally open-ended striving that Khan (2012) talks about. At its heart, we might conceive of utopia as informing and being informed by a commitment to, concern for, and belief in, the possibility of perfection, of completion, as something that is tangible and achievable, rather than that which is outside the realm of the possible or a mere abstraction. It is also a thread that draws other stories into it, bringing discourses into the swirling orbit of perfectionism. This does not mean automatically that perfection was always realised, and this thesis is not just about the realisation of perfection, so much as to how the mundane was oriented towards the ideal, the absolute, and the complete. It is positioned against a reading of society as incomplete, failed, or arrested. In writing then, what I am motivated to answer is the question: How do Iran's utopian inheritances refract through the everyday lifeworlds of my Mashhadi informants?

It had not always been my intention to write about utopia and the theme of perfection. When I started this thesis project, I wanted to understand how changes in the system of welfare influenced ethical self-evaluation, and how neo-liberal ideas of the winnowing down of the state's purview clashed with the Revolutionary legacy tinged with socialist ideas. However, after some three months of intensive language training, as my Persian began to pass muster, I soon found that the questions I was asking failed to elicit the responses I was expecting. The people I spoke to seemed disinterested or incredulous that I was asking something like that. Finally, after asking a close informant for what must have been the fourth or fifth time, how she understood herself as an ethical person in relation to her practices of giving, she declared "Simon, we just don't think about charity like that!" While it might seem presumptuous to assume that the colleagues we meet and the friends we make during fieldwork will necessarily understand without some further explanation the logic behind our line of questioning, it seemed imprudent to keep stubbornly attempting to elucidate a point that was frustrating my interlocutors and my relationship with them. In essence, I feared having no project at all if I kept irritating people so thoroughly. I turned to this question of utopia in response not only to the concern that I noted for perfection in Iran, but also in the way that I was questioned while I was there. Chief among these inquiries was "What are Australians looking for?" [*Ostrāliyāyihā donbāl-e che chizi hastan?*] In it I sensed not just an idle sense of comparison, but a deep longing to know and understand how a life, the best life, might be comprehended, organised, and maintained. Without being able to provide my friends in Iran with a concrete declaration of what Australians were in search of, I turned the question on them, and so found a point of entry into their lives.

.2　In this chapter

In this introduction, I explicate three theoretical interventions that form the intellectual foundation upon which this thesis rests. The first of these is an overview of historical utopianism, moving through concentric rings of global, Islamic, and then finally Iranian thought. In my coverage of these topics, I hold that present-day Iranian utopianism and concern for perfectionism has been shaped by several key historical lineages. One is the long history of utopian literature in the Islamic and Iranian traditions that formed an intellectual wellspring and the foundations of a social and cultural milieu that later theorists could draw upon. Another is the moment of the Iranian Revolution, which I understand to be, while not singularly responsible for shaping utopianism in contemporary Iran, still enormously influential, a pivotal moment through which later history and society came to be refracted. Following this, I turn to an analysis of some of the critical literature in anthropology and social sciences. I understand this thesis to exist at the crossroads of research into contemporary Iran (e.g. Behrouzan, 2016; Khosravi, 2008, 2017; Mahdavi, 2009; Olszewska, 2015; Varzi, 2006), the Islamic world (e.g. Schielke, 2015a; Soares & Osella, 2009), and philosophical analysis of the nature of utopianism and perfectionism (Das, 2010; Hébert, 2016; Khan, 2012), which we may read as extensions of the question of the anthropology of morality and ethics. The final section of this chapter reflects on the politics of representation and the method of data collection employed in the writing and researching this thesis.

.2.1　Utopia, Iran, and Islam: A long relationship

In this section I look to the history of utopianism, focusing on utopian ideologies in a global context, before exploring these themes more closely in the Islamic and ultimately Iranian context. Since Thomas More's (1516) rendering of a fictional island commonwealth located somewhere in the "New World", utopia has entered the English lexicon as both a place that is good [*eu-topia*] and a space that is nowhere [*uo-topia*]. The pedigree of ideal places is older, though, than More's work, with deep roots in the Greek classical past. Utopian themes are present in the writing of Hesiod and his Golden Age, the concept of Arcadia, and most notably perhaps, Plato's Republic, where the image of the "ideal city" remained one of the lasting intellectual testaments to both the Western and Islamic intellectual canon. In tandem with that which might be called the Arcadian tradition is a separate, 'Cockaygnian' heritage of utopia. Full of images of material plenty, idleness, and instant gratification, Cockaygne is likely of pre-classical and pre-Christian origin (Kumar, 1987), even as it took on its quintessential form in the imaginations of the medieval peasantry, written down in works like the fourteenth century English poem, The Land of Cockaygne. With the dawning of the Christian era, the notion of the millennium entered the utopian imaginary, adding an "account of how it

[utopia] will be achieved – and the sense of an ordered or preordained history with a beginning, middle, and an end" (Kumar, 1991, p. 9). Yet utopia in this sense existed exclusively as a literary device, a commentary on society, a critique of it, and a window on an alternative, rather than any practical path of action.

As a fiction, the influence of More's Utopia remains outsized. So totalising is its legacy, Masroori (2013) argues, that it has obscured pre-Morian and non-Western utopias. Kumar (1991) goes so far as to suggest that there is no tradition of utopia outside the Western canon. Such statements seem particularistic and limiting, flying in the face of clear evidence of an established tradition of writing in the Islamic world, as well as elsewhere. A comprehensive analysis of utopian literature outside the Western tradition is well beyond the scope of this chapter. So too is formal exposition of the form and content of pre-existing literary utopian traditions, which do not especially help to understand the present reverberations of utopian and perfectionistic thinking in contemporary Iran. None of the images of utopia, of the orientations towards perfectionism, that I intend to illustrate in this thesis are precise reflections of either the Cockaygnian tradition, or of More's.

What I do wish to illuminate below, though, is the existence in the Islamic world, and especially in Iran, of a contemplative tradition that has long meditated on the nature of an ideal social and individual order. Inseparable from this pedigree is, I believe, the emergence of the "Islamic Revival" and many of the contemporary political movements – some violent, many not so – that are usually lumped together in what is at times the vague category of 'Islamism'. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that I believe all of Islamic philosophy to be utopian in its orientation, but I think there is a link between the imaginings of various thinkers who are routinely described as Islamist and particular visions of the "best" society.

.2.2   Early and Medieval Islamic and Iranian utopias

Elements of perfectionism in Muslim traditions are arguably deeply rooted in the early period of the faith. As it gradually cohered into a set of distinct ideologies, Islamic theology offered a radically different understanding of human nature and the possibility of perfection than that which had dominated the classical world since the rise of Christianity. In mainstream Christian belief, Adam and Eve's consumption of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, their fall from grace and their expulsion from Eden left humanity forever imperfect and sinful, ensuring that humans could never obtain perfection, eternally hampered by the error of their primal forefathers. In the Islamic narrative however, although Adam and Eve erred by taking the fruit, they repent and are forgiven by the

divine. As such there is no original sin[5] (see e.g. McDougall, 2009; Nigosian, 2004) that blights and renders unworthy the believer as it does in Christianity. Instead, left open is the possibility of realising perfection. That obviously does not mean however that the tradition of utopia in the West was uncoupled from Christianity[6]. On the contrary, the early modern period, in particular with the 'discovery' of the New World, is replete with examples of Christian attempts at building utopian communities, such as the Oneida Community, the Shakers, and Mormons (Foster, 1991), all of whom in some way attempted to resolve the question of 'perfection'. The utopian tradition also heavily influenced the later socialist movement, despite Engels' (1970 [1880]) critique of utopian socialism in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. And in spite of their reactive vision, so too did fascist movements derive a vision of a perfect new, ordered world from the utopian tradition (see e.g. Burdett, 2003).

Returning to the possibility of perfection in the Islamic world, looking to the progenitor of the faith, we find that in Sufi piety and theology, the Prophet Muhammad is held up as the embodiment of the perfect man [*al-ensān al-kāmil*] (Schimmel, 1985). In the Salafist and Islamist stress on Medinah, it is the early community who lived there that are honoured as an exemplary society (see e.g. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2013). A distinctly Shi'ite concept of perfectionism comes with the emergence of Twelver doctrines of the infallibility [*'ismah*] of the Prophets, angels, and the Imams (Lambton, 1989), which held that a divine light [*nur-e mohammadi*], present in Adam and passed on from one generation to the next until it reached the Twelve Imams, bestowed authority on its bearer and prevented them from sin. Although the original sectarian split between Shi'ites and Sunnis had been based on matters of political legitimacy, it ultimately came to rest on the religious doctrine of the "assumption of human perfection in the Imam" (Lambton, 1989, p. 94). It is hard to underestimate the degree of importance that the figures of the Twelve Imams have in Iranian religious life. Their birthdays and commemorations of their martyrdoms are celebrated in an endless cycle throughout the year, stories from their lives are taught in schools, and although believers would recognise that the Imams represent in most respects super human agents, they are still held up as the supreme objects worthy of emulation, an image of what human perfection in life might look like[7].

By the medieval period, a distinct Arab-Islamic tradition of utopianism had emerged with the "philosophical novels" (Lauri, 2013, p. 23) of the Andalusian polymath Ibn Ṭufayl (early 12th Century

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[5] The normative Jewish perspective on this story differs as well.
[6] Beyond the scope of this thesis is an exegesis of Platonic influences on early Christianity, and especially the concept of perfection in Christian theology, evident particularly in the Roman Catholic, Byzantine, and non-Chalcedonic Orthodox traditions.
[7] The Imams are also held up as figures who transcend the boundaries of Shi'ism and religious particularities in general.

CE-1185CE) and of the Syrian surgeon Ibn Al-Nafīs (1210-1288CE). Both Ibn Ṭufayl's *Treatise of the Alive, son of the Awake, on the Secrets of Oriental Wisdom* [Ar*. Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān fī asrār al-ḥikmat al-mašriqiyya*] and Ibn Al-Nafīs' *Treatise of Kāmil on the Life of the Prophet* [Ar. *Risālat Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*] pertain to feral children spontaneously generated on desert islands who, in their quests for knowledge, reveal, in the case of the former, the highest knowledge of the physical and metaphysical world, and in the latter, the truth of religious epiphany. Such material is germane to this discussion because it demonstrates, despite what Kumar (1991) argues, the existence of a well-established Islamic heritage of utopianism and belief in perfectionism.

This heritage is by no means limited to the Arabic speaking domains of the Islamic world. With the Arab conquest of the Sassanid Empire, Iran entered the Islamic world, bringing with it the established Zoroastrian religious tradition. The cultural interaction between Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions is, Bakhsh (2013) contends, responsible for the existence of two distinct utopian lineages in Iranian history. One, the Zoroastrian, derives its origins from the Avesta, the corpus of ancient Zoroastrian texts[8], and is chiefly concerned with the exploits of mythic heroes like Jamshid, the messianic figure of the Saoshyant and his ushering in the apocalypse, and the sixteen perfect lands said to be created by Ahura Mazda[9]. The second period which introduces an Islamic-Iranian tradition of utopia, begins with what Bakhsh (2013) contends is the work of neo-Platonist philosopher Al-Farabi, to be discussed in more detail below.

While this division may be conceptually useful, such a definitive break belies significant cultural continuity between the two periods. Masroori (2013) suggests the existence of an 'ethical' tradition of utopianism that transcends the division between the post and the pre-Islamic. This tradition begins with the Sanskrit-origin Kalila va Demna[10] texts, a series of animal fables first translated into Middle Persian and then later Arabic that provide advice for a good life and good governance. These in turn influenced a series of later texts extolling proper moral advice to rulers, part of the literary genre popular in the medieval period referred to as "mirrors for princes", including those from the Persianate world like Niẓam al-Mulk's *Political Treatise* [*Siyāsatnāme*] and the *Letter of Qabus* [*Qabusnāme*] by Kaykāvus ibn Eskandar ibn Qabus ibn Vushmgir.[11]

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[8] Bakhsh (2013) mistakenly identifies the Avestan corpus as written in the Old and Middle Persian languages, which they are not. They are rather written in Avestan, a language closely related to but not the direct ancestor of Old, Middle, and modern Persian.

[9] The 'wise lord' and object of worship in the Zoroastrian religion.

[10] I can attest to the continued pervasiveness of these fables. While in the early days of learning Persian, I was presented with an abridged copy written for children as a gift for having reached an elementary level of proficiency.

[11] Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998) also argue that there remains a substratum of pre-Islamic thought that pervades Iranian manifestations of Islam, something that is particularly evident in Iranian Sufism.

Masroori (2013, p. 53) then identifies a further three traditions of Persian utopianism; a philosophical tradition associated with Al-Farabi, the theosophical traditions of Sufism, and lastly that which he refers to as the 'Alexandrian' tradition. In the Sufi-theosophical tradition, Masroori (2013) points to Shehab al-Din Suhravardi (1153-1191CE) and his *Fi Ḥaqiqat al-'Ishq* as being of particular importance, Suhravardi, like al-Farabi, outlining an emanationist cosmology that draws on both Neo-Platonism and elements of Zoroastrian cosmology. The text is also notable for the first reference to *nākojā-ābād*, independently developed from the Greek tradition of *ou-topos*, the nowhere place. The final identified tradition is what Masroori (2013) refers to as the "Alexandrian" tradition. Virtually synonymous with the Quranic figure of Zul-Qarnayn in the Persian Alexander romances[12], the Macedonian prince is depicted as a monotheist and defender of sacred truths, who quests in search of an ideal city. With regard to the Alexander Romances, Masroori suggests they are notable chiefly in that they depict an ideal city prior to Muhammad's governance of Medina, leading to the assumption that the "Alexandrian utopia was superior to the cities managed under Islamic rule" (Masroori, 2013, p. 62).

The work of preeminent importance, that with the most sustained impact and which provided a foundation for later Islamic political theory is Al-Farabi's [870-950CE][13] *The Principles and Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City* [*Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*]. Composed somewhere between 942-3CE as a critique both of the Abbasid Caliphate and its capital in Baghdad, it was also a more general vision of perfection for other states, and ultimately, an iteration of a potential global order in the Islamic mould, making Al-Farabi one of the first universalists (Bakhsh, 2013). As with similar material from the same time, the text closely adheres to models established by Plato's *The Republic*, evincing the strong connection between early Islamic thinkers and their neo-Platonic predecessors (see O'Meara, 2005)[14], although Al-Farabi replaces the philosopher-king with the more appropriately Islamic 'prophet-king'.

In the work, Al-Farabi outlines a cosmology in which the material and immaterial universe emerges as a series of hierarchically arranged emanations descending from the perfect first cause, with the community of emanated things "rooted in the perfection (unity) of the first principle" (O'Meara, 2005, p. 188). With cosmology leading to models of polity, al-Farabi understands the aim of human

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[12] Including works such as *Kashf al-Asrar va 'Uddat al-Abrar* (Unveiling of the Secrets and the Promise of the Pious) by Abdulfazl Rashid al-Din al-Maybudi, *Rawz al-Jennan va Ruh al Jannan fi Tafsir al-Quran* (Garden of Paradise and the Spirit of God in the interpretation of the Qur'an) by Hussein Ibn-Ali al Khaza'I al-Nishaburi, and the poetry of Ilyas Ibn Yusuf Nizami Ganjavi, to name just a few.

[13] The term *madine-ye fāzele* is retained in modern Persian as a synonym for utopia, alongside other words like *Ārmānshahr* and occasionally the adopted European term, *utopia*.

[14] Although Mahdi (2001) observes elements of pre-Neoplatonic philosophy in Al-Farabi's work, including Middle Platonic commentators, and Aristotle and Plato themselves.

existence to be the attainment of "pure intellect" (O'Meara, 2005, p. 189) and assimilation to the divine. These heights can be obtained only through the practice of virtuous actions performed in a social context. As such, Al-Farabi reads an ideal political organisation not only as a method for "human survival and self-preservation, but also as a means for reaching the highest perfection", providing a system of "moral edification" for both individuals and the collective (O'Meara, 2005, pp. 189-190). Structured through the metaphysical principles of community, justice, and hierarchy, the ideal state is marked by its commitment to philosophy as a mechanism for obtaining felicity, elevating its citizens to "true happiness" (Bakhsh, 2013, p. 47).

Al-Farabi's perfect state is hierarchical and monarchical, a political realisation of the metaphysical order of the cosmos. Citizens aim to adopt the moral disposition of their rulers, just as the king attempts to mirror that of the divine. The ruler of such a state is to possess apical moral, natural, and intellectual qualities, providing an object of imitation and a source of providence for lesser citizens. As a source of transmission between the godhead and humanity, the stately ruler can provide practical advice for the achievement of felicity. Al-Farabi locates such a figure historically, in the personages of Islam's holy individuals, potentially including the twelve Shi'ite Imams.[15]

Al-Farabi's influence on Islamic political thought is undeniable. As Rosenthal (1962) notes, the practice of referring to him as the "second teacher" (after Aristotle) by later writers goes some way to underscoring his influence. His work "profoundly" (Rosenthal, 1962, p. 122) influenced all later Islamic political theorists, outlining what Mahdi (2001, p. 8) understands to be a "practical philosophy" of political works. That said, I do not think that we should necessarily be concerned with trying to unearth direct linkages or prefigurations of contemporary utopianism in modern Iran, or even the 19th and 20th century revivalist movements that preceded it. What philosophers like Al-Farabi and the other early Islamic and Iranian utopian thinkers do indicate though is an interest in the themes of an 'ideal society' that existed in the Islamic world prior to the modern era[16], with Iran seemingly a particular hotbed of such Utopian thinking. The Iran of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries is heir to these multiple, overlapping traditions.

.2.3   19th and 20th century utopianism, the Islamic Revival, and the Iranian Revolution

More perhaps than at any other point, it was the arrival of the 19th century, not only in Europe but also in the Americas, that saw emergence of utopia from the realm of pure fiction and into the

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[15] Although living well before the Safavid conversion of Iran to Shi'ism, Al Farabi is believed by many to have been a Shi'ite, albeit potentially a crypto one. See Bakhsh (2013).
[16] Putting to rest the assertion that utopias are an exclusively Western, Christian phenomena.

domain of political action, particularly as the emerging socialist movement sought to put into practice its vision of a new society (see e.g. Levitas, 1990; Wonderley, 2017). There is insufficient space here to dwell in more depth on the trajectory of utopian thought in Europe and the Americas, other than to say that as European colonial empires came increasingly to dominate the fates of Islamic societies in North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Asia, Islamic thinkers likewise were drawn into ever more intimate encounters with European political and social philosophy. This colonial encounter – whether in embrace or in rejection of it – was ultimately to have a profound impact on the contours of thought in the Muslim world. A full treatment of this process of colonial encounter and the Muslim response to it, usually referred to as the 'Islamic Revival', is more comprehensively pursued elsewhere (see e.g. Dabashi, 2006). But I do want to briefly cover some of the key thinkers of this movement in Iran, because I understand them as pivotal in shaping modern Islamist and utopian thought in Iran. Four thinkers stand out as particularly important. These are the 19th and 20th century reformists known in Iran as Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani', Navvab Safavi, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati.

The first of these reformers was Jamal al Din 'al-Afghani' (1838-1897)[17], who despite his name, is considered to have been born in Iran and to have received a Shi'ite education both in Iran and in the shrine cities of Iraq. Educated in the Shaikhi[18] tradition, and familiar with the early Babist movement, al-Afghani spent much of his life travelling across the Muslim world from his home. It was during a stay in Istanbul, Keddie (1994, p. 16) suggests, that he first showed his "lifelong concern with Muslim self-strengthening", encouraging Muslims to emulate the technological and social innovations of Western nations. Leaving Istanbul and taking up residence first in Cairo, then in Hyderabad in India, Afghani developed a reputation for anti-British activism, emerging as a "strong defender of religion in general and Islam in particular against attacks by the unorthodox" (Keddie, 1994, p. 18). After time in London, Paris, Russia, and Iran, Al-Afghani spent the rest of his life living in virtual house arrest in Istanbul under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and agitating in favour of Islamic unity and pan-Islamism.

As Keddie (1994, p. 22) suggests, Al-Afghani's "real fame" was derived from his championing of the causes of "Islamic modernism, militant activism" and "anti-Imperialism", and in many ways he was a pioneer. His life was marked by the attempt to forge Islam into a "political and religious ideology", a "source of solidarity" (Keddie, 1994, p. 23) against the emerging European colonial powers. His pan-

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[17] Known in Iran as Jamal al-Din Asadābādi.
[18] Shaikhism was a school of thought within the Imami tradition of Shi'ism that was founded in the 19th century by Ahmad Ahsā'i, distinct from the *usuli* tradition that came to dominate Twelver Shi'ism. Many adherents would later convert to Babism and Bahaism. See e.g. Bayat (1982).

Islamic vision was met with scepticism by the clergy, and Al-Afghani never specifically stressed Islamic laws or practices, so much as Islam as a force that could prevent further Western encroachment in Muslim lands.[19]

In the 20th century, the figure of Navvab Safavi comes to the fore. The founder of the Fadāʿyān-e Eslām, Mojtaba Mir-Lohi, better known as Navvab Safavi, was born in Tehran into a clerical family. After working briefly at the Anglo-Iranian oil company, Safavi travelled to Najaf in 1943 and became a student of theology. Following his return to Iran, Safavi made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Ahmad Kasravi, a religious reformist and anti-clerical judge, in 1945. The next year however, two followers of Safavi, Seyyed Hosein Emāmi and Seyyed Ali Muhammad Emāmi, attacked and killed Kasravi. Safavi was imprisoned for the crime but shortly released, upon which he began the process of establishing a militant organisation drawn from the ranks of the youth of Tehran's traditional[20] neighbourhoods. The movement that Safavi formed, which ultimately became the Fadāʿyān-e Eslām, attempted a series of assassinations against prominent political leaders of the age, including debating the assassination of nationalist president and democrat Mohammad Mosaddegh. Following the coup d'état against Mossadegh, the Fadāʿyān-e Eslam welcomed the return of the Shah in the belief that he would bring about the Islamisation of Iranian society. He became thoroughly disillusioned by 1955 when it became obvious that the royalists had no intention of pursuing a more religious policy. Further attempts on the life of political characters saw Safavi and several other followers arrested in November and then executed on Christmas Day in 1955.

In his pamphlet *The Revolutionary Programme of Fadāʿyin-e Eslām* [Barnāmeh-e Enqelābi-ye Fadāʿyān-e Eslām], published when he was just 26 years old, Safavi outlined a vision of a society that combined elements of Islamic theology with "a pedestrian vision of the existing society in the 1940s Iran" (Behdad, 1997, p. 52). Alcohol, gambling, drugs were all to be outlawed, music, cinema, and theatres banned, and women compelled to wear hijab. Its vision of state was remarkably conservative and unchanged. The Shah was to remain, so long as he upheld the laws of Islam, with an elected majles comprised of devoted Muslims ensuring that legislation meet the standards of the sharia. Schools were to be segregated, and adulterers whipped. Other than banning interest, the economy was little changed, the ideal society composed of small businessmen who paid charity as a way of ensuring redistribution. Despite this relatively unimaginative vision of the ideal society, and

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[19] Al-Afghani (alongside Rashid Rida and Mohammad Abduh) would also go on to influence the thought of the founding member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, who in turn influenced Safavi's Fadāʿyān-e Eslām, demonstrating the circulation of radical ideas throughout the region.

[20] In using the term traditional, I refer to neighbourhoods that might be understood to adhere to a sociality associated with conservative religion, a stricter segregation of the sexes and distinct gender roles, and more often than not, at least in the pre-revolutionary period, a marked distance from the historical nodes of institutional power.

Safavi's own inglorious career, we should not underestimate the importance of the Fadāy'in in shaping contemporary Iranian utopianism. As Behdad (1997, p. 40) states, Safavi's vision is consequential not because it is intellectual outstanding, so much as because in outlining a "detailed plan of an Islamic utopia", the Fadā'yin established "the vision, discourse and the cultural tone for a popular social movement that led to the Islamisation of the Iranian Revolution"(Behdad, 1997, p. 40).

The third figure of note in the modern period is Ali Shariati, the sociologist, philosopher, university lecturer, and social critic who, second only to Khomeini, probably did the most to shape the intellectual atmosphere of pre-and post-Revolutionary life in Iran. Shariati was born in the village of Kahak in 1933 and educated in both Mashhad and at the Sorbonne in Paris. As with the other three thinkers and activists mentioned here, a fuller account of his life, learning, and legacy can be found elsewhere (Abrahamian, 1982; A. Rahnema, 1994, 1998), and what follows are just the leanest gleanings. Referred to as the "main ideologue of the Iranian Revolution" (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 24), Shariati was influenced by a combination of Western, particularly Marxist theorising, and more traditional Islamic sources. Like Khomeini, his life was occupied with the search for the ideal man, which Shariati found in the personage of Abu Zar-e Ghefari. A companion of the Prophet, Abu Zar became a "signal, code or allegory for the committed, defiant, revolutionary Muslim who preaches equality, fraternity, justice, and liberation" (A. Rahnema, 1994, p. 213) and Shariati's passion for him was a feature of his life. Dabbling with movements like the Movement of God-Worshiping Socialists [Nazhat-e Khodā-Parastān-e Sosialist] during his time in Paris, he became convinced that the "real message" of Islam was one of "liberation, freedom, equality and spiritualism" (A. Rahnema, 1994, p. 220).

With a belief that he was a "twentieth century Messiah" with a mission to free the oppressed of Iran (A. Rahnema, 1994, p. 227), in his writings like *Islamology* [Eslāmshenāsi], Shariati outlined his conviction that the primal form of the religion had been democratic and egalitarian. As Rahnema states:

> Eslāmshenāsi served a triple purpose. First it presented a modern, egalitarian and democratic Islam as the ideal and original form of Islam. Second, it identified the obstacles to the realisation of the ideal Islam. Third, it showed why it was incumbent upon Muslims, as true believers in the most fundamental aspect of their religion, namely monotheism (tawhid) to challenge and overcome these obstacles (A. Rahnema, 1994, pp. 229-230).

In addition to this was the division of Islam into what he described as "Red Shi'ism" and "Black Shi'ism". The former was effectively a doctrine of social egalitarianism and liberation that Shariati

saw as the authentic tradition of the Prophet, and the latter associated with clerical and monarchical hegemony. It was the duty of all good Revolutionaries to side with the forces of "Red Shi'ism" against reactionaries who kept the world unequal, and against capitalism that prevented man from becoming God-like (A. Rahnema, 1994, p. 241). Ultimately, the system that Shariati devised, even though it became ephemeral to Khomeini's more traditionally clerical vision of Islamic government, proved to be "a seminal force in mobilising the people and especially the youth for revolutionary action" (A. Rahnema, 1994, p. 245)

Finally, few have had a more significant impact than Ruhollah Khomeini, the cleric who radically altered the country's social, ethical, and philosophical trajectory, helped to end the monarchy, and propelled Islamist governance into the centre of a global discourse. Much has been written about Khomeini, his ideology, and the state that he built (see e.g. Abrahamian, 1993; Adib-Moghaddam, 2014; Said Amir Arjomand, 2009; Martin, 2007; Moin, 1994, 1999) and I do not want to rehash here what has been written about more fully elsewhere. There are however some elements that I want to point to as being of particular importance in Khomeini's intellectual journey and his vision for the state that he was ultimately to rule for the last ten years of his life. Born in Khomein village to the north-east of Esfahan in 1902, Khomeini showed aptitude and interest in poetry and theology early, moving to the nearby city of Arak at 17 to study under Sheikh Abdolkarim Ha'eri-Yazdi. The student would follow his teacher to Qom in 1921, and completed his clerical studies by the early 1930s.

But it was during this education, Moin (1994) argues, that Khomeini was introduced to unconventional elements of the Islamic canon – erfān (mysticism) and hekmat (wisdom) – that would be critical in establishing his utopian world view. Emerging from this tradition was Khomeini's own mystical vision, characterised by a Manichaean belief in the struggle between diametrically opposed truth and falsehood, and his faith in the possibility of realising the 'perfect man'. Khomeini, Moin (1994) argues, saw himself as the "'Perfector of Man'". In this role, Khomeini understood himself as guiding his people away from blasphemy, polytheism, and disunity, towards unity, faith, tawhid (the unity of God), and above all, from "imperfection to perfection" (Moin, 1994, p. 64). Moin (1994, p. 75) suggests that for Khomeini, in human beings there was, "an aspiration towards absolute and not finite power, absolute and not finite perfection…man's innate nature seeks the reality of absolute perfection…human nature demands absolute perfection". There are debates about the nature of Khomeini's vision, Abrahamian (1993) arguing that Khomeini's ideology was closer to third world populism than it was to 'Islamic fundamentalism', and there has been a recent reappraisal of Khomeini's ideology as more closely paralleling Islamic mystical thought (e.g. Seyed-Gohrab, 2011), but these do not trouble the utopian essence of the ideal that Khomeini envisaged.

As Martin (2007, p. 35) states: "Khomeini's vision, as manifested not only in his mystic works but also in Islamic Government, which in certain respects recalls Plato's Republic, falls in part within this tradition of Islamic utopias".

Khomeini's vision might have remained little more than a fantasy were it not for the pivotal events of 1979. From January 1978 to February 1979, millions of Iranians took to the streets demanding the overthrow of the Shah. Forcing the last Iranian monarch to finally take flight was a critical conjuncture of leftist and Islamists. While each had distinct visions, the coalition of forces that ended the imperial regime shared a teleological and progressivist view of history that ultimately saw the arc of the human story culminate in an ideal society. Rather than reading the overthrow of the previous imperial government and its replacement with an Islamic theocracy as simply the replacement of one government with another, such an attempt is better understood as an effort to substitute a mundane system of government with one that was perfect, or at least preparatory for a perfect society[21]. Rooted in the dual (and often duelling) visions of leftists and Islamists, the Revolution was a process that was meant to usher in a perfect moment, both in the here and now, and forever. Even today when criticism of the Islamic Republic both at home and abroad is vibrant and many have taken to the streets demanding a radical change, if not a total end to the system, that Revolutionary sense, pregnant with meaning and potential, continues to remain and to shape, albeit in subtle ways, contemporary Iranian society.

As the leader of the Islamic Revolution, it is difficult to estimate the enormous impact that Khomeini had on Iran's post-revolutionary history; suffice to say that no individual was more influential. Only the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei comes close, and he lacks anything remotely approaching the charismatic authority that his predecessor had. Some ardent critics of Khamenei remain adulatory of their former ruler, whose omnipresent portrait conveys something of the messiah-like respect that he is accorded. Al-Afghani, Shariati, and Safavi all also continue to be presented as heroes in contemporary Iran[22]. Their names are emblazoned on street signs, appear in books for children, and their lives are re-enacted in miniature dramas that punctuate the gaps between shows on Iranian state television. Shariati remains perhaps the most ambiguous of all four, although his reputation has improved somewhat since the early days of the Revolution, and his

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[21] Adelkhah (2000:176-77) breaks with other scholars and suggests that Khomeini did not see the new Republic as the ideal city, but as a precursor to one.
[22] The obvious difference between Al-Afghani, Shariati, Safavi, and Khomeini, being that Khomeini took on political leadership, whereas the others operated at a theoretical level only. Khomeini's legacy is therefore the most acutely felt.

name is now visible throughout Mashhad[23], both in the school of literature and social sciences that he used to teach at Ferdowsi University, and in the subway station named for him.

What this brief history aims to demonstrate is the long lineage of utopianism in an Islamic context, and Iran's unique contribution to that heritage, all of which, I have suggested, help to shape the milieu that makes for Iran's modern utopian heritage. More than most nations, Iran's history seems to have been particularly marked by utopian thinkers who were eagre to change their world into a perfect place. Whether in the long run such perfectionistic thinking was successful in enacting meaningful difference is ultimately neither here nor there. What matters is that they created the intellectual and cultural springboard from which others have drawn on, and continue to do so.

.3   Positioning this thesis: Areal and theoretical influences

Having outlined the history of utopian influences that continue to shape contemporary Iran, I turn now to those areal and theoretical orbits in anthropology and the social sciences that have helped to structure my own analysis. I understand this thesis as positioned at the confluence of several trajectories. These are, first, areal analysis of post-Revolutionary Iran; second, the complex interplay of writing on the 'good life' and its relationship to what has been referred to by Soares and Osella (2009) as "Islam mondain" or everyday Islam; and finally and most purposefully, ethnographic and theoretical treatments of perfectionism and utopia. I should stress though that when I say "informed", I do mean precisely that. These theories, and the authors mentioned below, have helped to influence where I position myself, but they are not determining. Rather I think of them as intellectual entry-points to a broader conversation, that, as I have suggested, influence how we might intervene in debates on the nature of not just that which constitutes a life well lived, but how the *best of all* lives may be created and oriented.

.3.1   An areal review: Anthropological approaches to post-Revolutionary Iran

Critical in shaping this thesis have been anthropological and ethnographic treatments of Iran in the post-Revolutionary period. A comprehensive analysis of anthropology in Iran is given by M. E. Hegland (2012 [2009]), so here I focus only on those who are in direct dialogue with the work I have done. In distilling a theme, I have looked to the dual issues of resistance and failure[24]. The former

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[23] Not to mention elsewhere in Iran. In Tehran, for example, the Ershad Hosseiniyeh where he taught is located on Shariati Street, and there is a Shariati park across the road, replete with a bust of the deceased sociologist.
[24] While much of the current research on Iran continues to be shaped by the legacy of the Revolution, there has been a shift away from older concerns of resistance towards diversification of interests. Work like Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Professing Selves* (2013) has shed light on the LGBT community in Iran, Orkideh Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries* (2016) on depression and the psychiatric industry in the Islamic Republic, Nahid Siamdoust (2017) on music in the post-

has been the explicit mode of inquiry of many of the major ethnographies over the last decade or so such as Mahdavi (2009), Khosravi (2008), and Varzi (2006), with a fixation on how much of the population, particularly Iran's bulging youth population, are engaged in active projects of resistance to government-imposed norms. Implicit in this is this is the assumption that the 1979 Revolution and the form of government that it birthed have failed to make 'Islamic subjects'. As Motlagh (2011) has noted, this kind of analysis has largely been driven by a Diasporic population of Iranians – often the self-described victims of the revolution – who, in their quest to present a 'correct' image of the Islamic Republic have typically felt the need to stress opposition to the Islamist polity.

In doing so, this viewpoint has assumed a dichotomy between "moral authoritarianism" and "popular liberalism", as Adelkhah says, an "odious, backward and repressive regime on one side and, on the other, kindly civil society representing progress and freedom" (Adelkhah, 2000, p. 3) . It has tended to depict Iranians, and Iranian youth especially, as the victims of a top-down imposition of cultural conservatism. Such an approach presents only a narrowly defined narrative that, Olszewska (2013, p. 844) suggests, posits a "unitary society positioned in irreconcilable opposition to a monolithic state". With a particular focus on urban, wealthy, secular, cosmopolitan middle- and upper-class elites in Tehran, this literature struggles to disaggregate important aspects of social difference, allowing little opportunity to account for diversity on gender, socioeconomic or geographic lines. Instead of presenting a picture of complexity, these depictions suppose a "single fault line of struggle in society" (Olszewska, 2013, p. 844), both overstating the repressive power of the state (cf Nooshin, 2017; Shahrokni, 2014), and lionising the social movements that have resisted theocratic control, a practice often consistent with hegemonic representations of Iran in popular Western presses. In pointing to this work, I aim not to reiterate its conclusions but rather to critique the underlying assumption. In reading the project of Islamist governance since the Revolution of 1979 only through the lens of failure and opposition, we elide much of the ideological and social diversity of the country. My intention then in this thesis is to go beyond "the usual antinomies of domination/resistance, modern/traditional, or secular/religious" (Malekzadeh 2011:8).

Keeping with the topic of Islamist governance, and with an attempt to capture this diversity, is the work of Asef Bayat's (e.g. 1996, 2013) and what he refers to as 'post-Islamism'. Beginning over two

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revolutionary period, and Narges Bajoghli (2017) on pro-regime filmmakers, not to mention many others, go just some short way to evidencing the current flowering of research on contemporary Iran.

decades ago, Bayat (1996) pointed to what he understood to be an emerging trajectory in Islamist thought that saw:

> …following a stage of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters….it is marked by the call to limit the political role of religion. In contemporary Iran, post-Islamism is expressed in the idea of fusion between Islam (as a personalised faith) and individual freedom and choice…It is expressed in the idea that Islam does not have answers to all societies' social, political, and economic problems (A. Bayat, 1996, pp. 45-46).

Post-Islamism denoted a "pragmatic exit" from the "Islamist ideological package" that was defined by its "monopoly of religious truth, exclusivism, and emphasis on obligations, towards acknowledging ambiguity, inclusion, and flexibility in principles and practices" (A. Bayat, 2013, p. 25). Emerging from the "shortcomings and contradictions" of the "Islamist experience in Iran" (A. Bayat, 1996, p. 49), Bayat traces the pedigrees of post-Islamist thought to as early as the end of the war with Iraq and the failure to establish the "utopian ideal" of a "world Islamic government" that pushed students towards a pragmatic political rationality (A. Bayat, 2013, p. 42).

In articulating such a vision, Bayat urges us to observe Islamism not as a static phenomenon, but one that is dynamic and shifting, responding to internal and external dynamics (A. Bayat, 2013, p. x). Covering all potentialities, he makes space for the possibility that post-Islamism portends not so much the end of Islamism, but rather a "critical departure from the Islamist experience…post-Islamism may take the form of a critique of the Islamist self or of the Islamism that others embrace; it may historically come after Islamism or may operate simultaneously alongside of it; it may be observed in contemporary times or in the past" (A. Bayat, 2013, p. 29). Clearly, some forms of Islamism are in the throes of significant change, and Bayat is right to single out the work of thinkers like Abdolkarim Soroush as spearheading a particularly Shi'ite and Iranian movement of reinterpretation, as well as pointing to events like the 2009 Green movement and then the 2011 Arab Spring that followed it. I raise Bayat (1996, 2013) because I understand my work as in dialogue with it, recognising that the new and constantly evolving Islamist dreams are not just a recidivistic hangover from better times, but something that continues to capture the imagination of a certain section of the Iranian populace, of which a utopian orientation remains a pivotal element.

.3.2   The good life and the everyday; utopianism and perfectionism

In this section I focus on the complex interplay between anthropological work on 'the good life', utopia, perfectionism, and the everyday. I begin with the ethnographic treatments of 'the good life'. Much has been written about ethics and morality in anthropology over the past decade (see e.g. Fassin, 2008, 2011; J. Faubion, 2011; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Lambek, 2010a; Robbins, 2007a, 2013; Zigon, 2007, 2008). Rather than focusing on whether there is a distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality' as Laidlaw (2014) does, or on the concept of moral breakdowns (Zigon, 2007), what is of interest to me is how questions about what constitutes a life well lived are suffused throughout mundane encounters. I am inspired by a particular thread within this literature that looks to a shift in anthropological discourse from a focus on what Robbins (2013, p. 448) refers to as the "the suffering subject". This subject lives in "pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression", and is contrasted with attempts to understand notions of the good and efforts to put them into practice. Engaging in such a theme though, my work is geared not just towards how my Mashhadi informants understood what they thought of as 'good' in their lives, but ultimately, what they understood as the 'best', 'complete', or 'perfect'. Such a distinction may seem purely semantic, but I think there is a qualitative difference between aspiration towards something that is prosaically 'good', and something that is sublime.

I take this distinction, between the 'good' and the 'best' as an entry point to thinking about the role of perfection and utopia in anthropology. The topic of perfectionism and utopianism has historically been a marginal area of interest in anthropology. Part of the lack of anthropological interest in such themes has doubtless been the tendency, particularly in Western thought, to think of perfectionism and utopianism as socially problematic (see e.g. Berlin, 2000; Slote, 2011). That is, as something impossible, as contingent on specific periods of time such as the 19th century in the United States with communities like the Shakers or the Oneida community, or finally as belonging in the exclusive realm of literary fiction. However this is changing, and we can now trace the beginning of a more substantial ethnographic engagement with themes of utopia and perfectionism (Cook, 2018; Das, 2010; Flores & Varela, 2016; Hébert, 2016; Khan, 2012; Maskens & Blanes, 2016; Sliwinski, 2016).

Some of this engagement has nonetheless been deeply critical of the concept and the possibility of perfection. In this vein is material from Schielke (2009, 2015a), whose work with Salafist groups in Egypt in the lead up to the 2011 revolution has been at the forefront of efforts to complicate anthropological understandings of the exacting morality of piety movements in the Middle Eastern context and their "problematic tendency to privilege the aim of ethical perfection" (2009:35). In his self-declared effort to write "against Salafism", Schielke (2015b, p. 91) sees his informants' approach

to morality in two ways. One recognises "ambivalence as a key condition of life" while "living up to specific demands and ideals at appropriate moments" (Schielke, 2015a, p. 63). The alternative approach is to posit a morality "based on the revivalist promise of perfection" that rids ambivalence and replaces it with "meticulous clarity" (Schielke, 2015a, p. 63). Cynical of this idealistic certainty, Schielke and others like de Koning (2013) remain adamant that the promise of perfection is a ruse. Morality is always fragmentary, ambiguous, contradictory, and as such subject to rupture. These "tragic pursuits" that Schielke (2015b, p. 91) describes prove themselves to be untenable and unstable, at least in the long run, if not in the short term.

My concern with such an orientation is that in the positioning of ambivalence and ethical contradiction as the only condition of the experience of moral personhood, perfection becomes an "impossible" (Schielke, 2015b, p. 91) state of being. Although Schielke tempers his dismissal by stating that "striving for perfection is possible" (2015:91), if not linear or necessarily predictable, to my mind such a response fails to sufficiently address the potential of perfectionism and its importance to utopian movements. To reduce the various utopian movements – religious and secular – to an inevitable tragedy is to fail to grasp the lifeworlds of those who participate in or experience such campaigns. Further, it continues to sequester utopianism and perfectionism away in the singular world of literary tropes, outside the realm of consequential and ordinary social action (Seligman, 1988). Utopia is not as Flores and Varela (2016, p. 168) suggest, just the parallelism of fiction. We must fracture the perception that utopianism is an element within a larger domain of "unrealism" (Maskens & Blanes, 2016, p. 134) [25]. What I hope to make clear in this thesis, is that the belief that perfection is possible, and the idea that it crystallises in certain forms, remains a potent experiential category for many of my Mashhadi informants.

Taking up this theme in a more positive sense is Das (2010), who in her ethnography of ethical becoming among Indian Muslims, draws on Stanley Cavell (1990 [1988]) to argue for what they referred to as "Emersonian perfectionism", a concept premised not on an "objectively agreed upon idea of the common good towards which we might constantly orient ourselves, but rather, as a moral striving that, in its uncertainty and its attention to the concrete specificity of the other, is simply a dimension of everyday life" (Das, 2010, p. 233). Khan (2012, pp. 8-9) likewise in her study of Muslim being and becoming in Pakistan, speaks of the aspiration to, and striving for, an "ideally Islamic state" not as a certain form but as a process. By this she implies that the Iqbalian imaginary

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[25] Loty (2011) considers this position to be rooted in Christian philosophical opposition to More, advocating instead that the divine creation was the best of all possible worlds, and therefore, societal transformation was neither possible nor desirable.

that she argues shaped Pakistani identity was defined not by the clarity of its end vision, but rather its understanding of perfection as a constant state of striving and self-refinement. Pakistan, she contends, has an open-ended telos which is constantly in the shape of being reformed.

Reading perfection in this manner provides a particularly broad interpretive frame, and while I certainly drawn on the notion of a struggle to achieve perfection, I am not convinced that a totally 'open-ended' perfection provides an appropriate hermeneutic for the Iranian context. Das and Khan both make comment on ethnographic material that draws on specific kinds of plural environments. The very opening of Khan's (2012) ethnography is a fictionalised debate in a library where sectarian ideologues who stand in as idealised representations of their communities (Deobandi, Baralwi, Wahhabi), struggle to define the religio-national ethos. Likewise, Das' (2010) ethnographic material draws from the Muslim experience in India, where the minority population constantly rub up against the Hindu majority. The Mashhadi experience is more difficult to qualify in such terms. In Mashhad, rather than there being a plural society in which contrasting notions jostle among each other, the modality of interaction, particularly in public but still in private, remains very much based on a presumption of a narrowly defined concept of normative identity over which there is limited debate.[26] In essence, it is still defined by a vision that one is normatively a Shia, a Twelver, and to a lesser degree Persian (Fārs), and these identities are only rarely contrasted to more peripheral Afghan and Baluchi (Sunni) populations that ring the outskirts of the city, particularly in the north and south east.[27]

What I think is pertinent though is the attention that Das (2010) in particular pays to the everyday. The everyday has been a growing area of interest, particularly in the anthropology of the Islamic world, since Soares and Osella (2009) wrote their paper articulating the concept of Islam mondain that moved away from a focus on piety movements and ethical self-fashioning (e.g. Mahmood, 2011) to recognising "struggle, ambivalence, incoherence, and failure" (Soares & Osella, 2009, p. 11) as key elements of an anthropology of religion. Such themes have been taken up with gusto by scholars working in the area of contemporary Islam and morality (e.g. Debevec, 2012; Deeb & Harb, 2013; Schielke, 2009, 2015a). This focus on the everyday has nonetheless been critiqued by Fadil and Fernando (2015). They argue that by calling for a study of the "everyday" or "actual" lives of Muslims, revivalist or pious Muslims become marked as "exceptional, and more insidiously, not

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[26] This thesis walks a fine line between wanting to neither exaggerate the hegemony and unitary voice of state, nor to overemphasise an understanding of national politics as being in the midst of some heteroglossic transformation.
[27] The centripetal forces of identity politics likewise subsume smaller identities. It was only at the very end of my fieldwork that two families admitted to me that they were not, or had not until recently been Shia. One family was Ismaili, the other were Turkmen who had converted from Sunnism only within the last generation to live a more comfortable life in the city.

'real'"(Fadil & Fernando, 2015, p. 61). In doing so, the authors argue, those who operate within the conceptual realm of Islam mondain redefine anthropology's "proper object of study in very particular ways" (Fadil & Fernando, 2015, p. 61) arresting serious scholarly analysis of conservative and piety movements. Such an approach, as Fadil and Fernando (2015) suggest, divides the Muslim world into categories of 'authentic' and 'normal' liberal religion vs. the inauthentic and abnormal conservative, fundamentalist, or perfectionist religion. Clarke (2014) argues a somewhat different line of critique in his exploration of the extraordinary amidst the ordinary. Looking at Sufi practices of glass-eating in Lebanon, Clarke (2014, p. 419) suggests that on close inspection, the idea of the ordinary and the extraordinary as discrete concepts begins to break down, "the more one scrutinizes and celebrates the everyday, the less everyday it becomes". I would suggest that it is still useful to look at how fantastic elements manifest in the everyday, even as I recognise that such categories draw upon what are ultimately more slippery ethnographic realities. That utopia (arguably, the fantastic) can be manifest in the quotidian is a theme taken up at greatest length in Davina Cooper's 2014 work, *Everyday Utopias*. In it, Cooper articulates her understanding of what she refers to as "everyday utopias", i.e. "networks and spaces that perform regular daily life, in the global North, in a radically different fashion" (Cooper 2014:2). It is the performance of "prosaic elements of regular life" in "innovative and socially ambitious ways" (Cooper, 2014, p. 6) that Cooper contends, marks these utopias as everyday and "concrete", oriented towards a real, possible future, rather than the "abstract" (see Bloch, 1986). Clearly, there is some difference between my interpretation of the legacies of the utopian in the everyday, and Cooper's definition of everyday utopias. Where we differ is in Cooper's contention that these everyday utopias are "nondominant 'minor stream' social sites" (2014:11) or "hot spots of innovative practice" (2014:9) that go against the grain of the majority society. For me, utopian legacies in Mashhad are less about small groups envisaging a better world outside the purview of the dominant majority, and more about how utopian ideas and ideals enter into the thinking and behaviour of society at a broader level.

In essence, what this short review aims to do is to situate where I understand this thesis as intervening in particular debates in contemporary anthropology. As I have said, I consider this to be at the crux of emergent trends in the anthropology both of the good, and of the everyday. In the case of the former, we have a move away from the 'suffering' subject in anthropology towards analyses that look to what a good life might be, and how it is enacted. Here, I wed this material to sustained scholarly engagement with the idea of the everyday, recognising that for all that this has an elusive character, it remains useful to think with when conceptualising how moral ideas interact with the mundane and ordinary stuff of daily life. The point of distinction with pre-existing works that this thesis asks us to consider, is not just how a good life might be ensconsed in the comings and

goings of the quotidian, but rather to make an effort to understand how something that is proto-typically understood as exceptional, even impossible, in Western thought – i.e. the perfect, the effort at creating the best life – can be read as making that same transition into the realm of the mundane.

.4 Articulating a vision: Parsing utopia and perfection

As I wrote this thesis I was encouraged to disaggregate the concepts of utopia and perfection. The two are, after all, not exactly synonyms for one another, although clearly nor are they totally unrelated. There is a long, developed literature in the corpus of Western philosophy that relates to what perfection is, going back to the ancient Hellenic philosophers. Engaging in such an argument runs the risk of spiralling out of control, and turning this thesis from an ethnography into a philosophical disputation. Nonetheless, it is worth scouting a small engagement, not least because accounts of perfection in Iran are doubtlessly rooted not exclusively in Islamic thought, but also Aristotelean notions of the perfect, a fact not surprising given the pivotal role that the philosopher had in shaping medieval Muslim philosophical tradition (see e.g. Lammer, 1994).[i] In his *Metaphysics,* Aristotle offers a definition of perfection, suggesting that that which is perfect is that:

1. Which is complete – which contains all requisite parts;

2. Which is so good that nothing of the kind could be better;

3. Which has attained its purpose (cited in Tatarkiewicz, 1979, p. 7)

This Aristotelean frame clearly does not delimit our analysis exclusively to the world of ethics, morality, and virtue. On the contrary, as I have suggested, perfection can be a property of things, e.g. objects, as much as it is a property of morals, and this resonates closely with the sense that was used by my interlocutors.

What is important to stress here with this conceptualization of *kamāl,* and where this breaks especially from Emersonian perfection, is the vision of perfection as not open ended but rather as crystallizing in occasional moments that were understood collectively – if among a few – as a realized and realizable instances of completion, ideal modes which might be well thought of as "exemplars". But the concern of objectivity also invites us to extend our thought to the other forms which it might take. For instance, for Hurka, a particular account of objectivity is pivotal to his understanding of perfectionism. Drawing a comparison with other theories of the good, he states:

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if the moralities that are currently most studied have an account of the good, it is *subjective*, holding that whether something is good depends on whether it satisfies someone's desires or answers to positive feelings he has. Such an account cannot support serious self-regarding duties, for it excludes any claims about what humans ought to desire. But perfectionism, either broadly or narrowly understood, has an *objective* theory of the good. It holds that certain states and activities are good, not because of any connection with desire, but in themselves (Hurka, 1993, p. 5).

He continues:

The perfectionist ideal is a moral ideal in the following sense: it is an ideal people ought to pursue regardless of whether they want it or would want it in hypothetical circumstances, and apart from any pleasures it may bring (Hurka, 1993, p. 17).

We should be careful though not to confuse this with a kind of ethical monism. This belief in the objectivity of the good, its existence independently of that which is desirous to humans, does not mean that there is a clear cut, universally shared 'list' as to what constitutes the perfect. I am not presupposing that there is one standard that might be recognized as perfect by all my interlocutors, all Iranians, or all people. What is important to extract from this is twofold. First, I walk the fine line between a totalizing account of the perfect, in which all my interlocutors have a unified vision that they share (not the case), and still allowing for the possibility of shared understandings of perfection as coming together in forms recognized by more than individuals, the aforementioned exemplars. By this I mean to say that we are not talking about as many forms of perfection as there are informants. Second, I suggest that a theory of moral ideals exists independently of the question of what one might desire. Although my interlocutors did *desire perfection*, there was agreement that that which was perfect was not necessarily desirable. For instance, many argued that the tenets of Islam were 'hard to live by' or 'difficult for people', but nonetheless they agreed that their perfection transcended such concerns.

I suggest then that perfection can be understood as something that is momentary, fleeting, and occasional, but nonetheless understood to be a *possible* albeit brief moment of social and moral totality. It is something that can, in *some instances* and for *certain groups,* accrete into concretized agreed-upon forms, and can be a matter of everyday, 'ordinary' life. Even as it does this, we should not read perfection as subject to the overdetermining and illusory teleological, universalizing wholeness that Ewing (1990) describes. Nor does it assume the implicit argument among the aforementioned critiques of ethical perfectionism that such an approach requires all things to be

perfect at all times, or permanently perfect once they have reached that state, to quote Slote, the "general assumption that ethical phenomena can be understood in a *unified harmonious way…*" (2011:4).

But it is also impossible to abstract this from the concept of utopia. I have already mentioned the constellation of terms that were used to describe utopia – *ārmānshahr,* madine-ye fāzele , or rarely, *utopia.* Perfection, as I have said, was usually understood through the frequently deployed adjective kāmel, i.e. complete, free from contradiction, that nothing else might be added[28], although sometimes other terms were deployed as well, like behtarin, 'the best'. While these are distinct phrases, they were also used in reference to each other. Rather than seeing these two as fundamentally separate concepts, I hold that my interlocutors understood them to be intimately entwined in one another, like many elements of this thesis, caught in a cyclical relationship. We may think then of utopia as providing a framework that encourages and drives the struggle for perfection, and the struggle for perfection in turn encouraging an effort to achieve a utopian endpoint.

My main concern though in engaging with this literature on utopianism, is to take seriously the attempts of people who – perhaps against the grain – maintain that social orders are perfectible, and that a real, living utopia is, rather than an abstract fiction, something that can be meaningfully realised. I want to end this section by articulating a vision for the utopianism that is at the heart of the thesis. As a foundation, I take Levitas'(1990) suggestion that utopia:

> embodies more than an image of what the good life would be and becomes a claim about what it could and should be: the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this. Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued (Levitas, 1990, p. 1).

I have already noted that I am not looking for a clearly defined national telos, and I do not want to suggest that Iran possess what Jacoby (2005, p. xiv) describes as a "blue-print", where the perfect society is mapped out in "inches and minutes"**.** After nearly forty years of theocratic governance, state ideology is too fragmented, and life too messy, to provide one. Multiple unresolved debates continue to cloud a determinate picture of the nation. But I do believe that it is at least possible to draw the outline of a series of certain points around which the discourse of perfectionism among my informants in Mashhad rotated, particular nodes in which it clustered. Unlike Das (2010) and Khan (2012), I do not believe that it is necessary to divide form from process, separating them as isolated

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[28] And in this sense, it has an Aristotelian logic to it.

components of a perfectionist becoming. Rather, in Mashhad, form and process unfold in a dialectic, specific articulations and discourses shaping the belief in the possibility of perfection, and likewise, aspirant desires and beliefs birthing new understandings of ideal forms.

By this I mean that not only can there be certain forms of perfection, but that the existence of these specified forms encourages these practices of orienting that Das and Khan speak to, and in orienting themselves towards a perfection as possibility, my informants created new categories of ideal behaviour which they both sought, and which at times they understood to be obligatory. This resonates with Gade's (2004) analysis of Qur'anic recitation instruction and performance in the principle mosque in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Gade (2004) points to how Egyptian recitation practices form an "ideal" against which Indonesian reciters measured and compared their own ability. She states "pious anticipation of stipulated beauty, spontaneity, and emotion open a space of potential that practitioners sought to fill with their own experience, drawing them more deeply into technical and experiential 'horizons' of performance" (Gade, 2004, p. 166).

In outlining some of these forms, my intention is not simply to make a list of the types of perfection, the things that were understood to be perfect, or the moments where it was reached. It is to draw attention to and unpack those moments of clarity, to explicate the language and performance of perfection and those places in which it concretised into meaningful action and behaviour. They are relevant not because they express a clearly articulated framework that is adhered to by all Iranians with exacting clarity, alive in both hearts and minds, but rather because this culture primes a broader receptivity to, and evinces the possibility of, possessing and becoming perfect. They provide points that potentiate perfection not as an abstract, but as an obtainable outcome of social life. This specification of the forms and modalities of utopian desire, and the enumeration of the cultural nodes around which it aggregates and condenses, creates authoritative forms of realisable and realised perfection, establishing points towards which individuals can, and at times, ought to orient themselves. With this in mind, we should not read or presume that perfectionism is something that is exclusively felt as positive. As I hope will become clear, in Chapter Three especially, perfection can also be something that is felt negatively, a weight of obligations that leaves my Mashhadi informants feeling compelled to perform certain actions that are understood to be prescriptions of what a perfect life looks and feels like. Perfection makes a demand on one's self, as well as on others, a weight that is tangible across a multiplicity of domains.

Finally, I should clarify the matter of scale and intensity. This thesis draws on elements at the scale of the nation to evidence forms that are ultimately very local. That is, when I say I understand this

utopianism and the drive towards perfectionism as 'refracted' throughout society, I understand them telescopically, as present both at the scale of the grand (the nation) and at the very small (the individual). In addition to this is the matter of intensity. As utopia refracts amidst the social, it sometimes comes together in moments of exceptional clarity. At other times, it is less clear, and metaphorically speaking 'stalks the background', a hanging presence that imbues the scene, rather than something that is so crystalline. This should not be taken as evidence that it is not felt. Rather, like many discourses and practices, it can be both at times subtle, and at others, pronounced.

.5   Representation and methodology

In September 2017, some significant time after I had returned to Australia from my first long period of fieldwork in Iran, I sat on my couch in suburban Canberra, when my partner called me over. She had been perusing the New York Times' website, and had been directed to a series of photographs they had placed on their Instagram channel by Iranian photographer Newsha Tavakolian. The images were attractive if unremarkable, snapshots of families passing holiday time on the Caspian coast. Women in hijab swimming, a father throwing his child into the air, and a beachside hut illuminated by an incandescent green light. "So what?", was my response. But my partner directed me to the comments littering the right side of the images. In a mix of Persian and English, a screed of angry and incensed Iranians insisted that Tavakolian had misrepresented the nation: "Why does she only show religious people? We aren't like this!"

Some years before, during my fieldwork in Iran, I had interviewed a university student. We had run into each other a number of times in passing, but it had taken some courage for her to speak to me. She was unlike many other students, wrapped not only in a chador (which itself was relatively common on campus), but her face was fringed by a second scarf of near military precision such that not a blade of hair escaped. Talking to her, it became clear that such dress was a function of her ideological commitment to the most conservative aspects of the Islamic state. In a relatively simple conversation about education in Iran, she railed against the US, satellite television, and Israel, promising that, were the US to invade, she would be among the first to lay her body on the line to defend the country. Feeling somewhat shaken as I left, as a departing note, she urged me to "write what you see, don't write what they tell you you should write".

Both these vignettes demonstrate extreme positions on the Iranian contemporary. On the one hand, we have a visceral anti-Republican sentiment. On the other, the genuine believer and advocate of the status quo. Both understand their positions as normative, representative of the entirety of the 'Iranian experience'. Both render the experience of the other as exceptional. How does one navigate

a position between these two extremes? How can one be earnest and fidelitous to both of these positions? I am sure that some Iranians who read this thesis will find the content totally alienating. Let me pre-empt that alienation by saying I am not, and have never, tried to present a holistic and total analysis of Iranian society. Such an attempt would be anathema to the underpinnings of contemporary anthropology, to the reality of what I was able to achieve in the short period that I was in Iran, and to my own informants, who frequently, as will become more evident in Chapter One, saw their lives as exceptional and unusual even within Iran. Saying that, I also do not want to down play the genuineness of the experiences that my informants had. They represent just as legitimate an experience as any in Iran, and although in their plurality they may differ from that of the secular, cosmopolitan communities in northern Tehran or elsewhere in the country in places like Shiraz that have become a fixture of anthropological interest, they are still valid. In representing some of them, I hope that this thesis sheds light on the complexity that is contemporary Iran. For all that this thesis is about the attempt to reach perfection, a complete and uncontradicted life, these processes are not always straight forward; they are loaded with doubt about taken-for-granted certainties and struggles to make sense of a plurality of options that for many seemed bewildering. Trying to escape the morass of confusion and move towards the best life is what this thesis is about.

.5.1   Method

This research in this thesis is based on approximately fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mashhad from 2015−2018. As is often the case in anthropology, it is difficult to delineate a clear boundary around 'who' it is that formed the subject of this ethnographic fieldwork. The friends and colleagues that formed the basis of this research came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds that spanned a range from hyper-precarious Afghan migrants to members of the wealthy elite. Most of my interviewees however, were from families from the middle classes living in the city's western suburbs. This is not then a study of 'youth', as has been common in the anthropology of Iran (e.g. Khosravi, 2008, 2017; Mahdavi, 2009), so much as an intergenerational analysis. Nor is it an attempt to deduce some universal rule that might typify the whole nation. This is rather, a study of their lives, and an attempt to follow an idea as it twists and turns through the social milieu of a specific locale, and therefore rather than focusing on a distinctly demarcated group or community, I went to and spent time in those places that emerged naturally in the pursuit of the concept of perfection. The examples that I draw on in this thesis are then all cases from the lives of those who I interacted with. Some instances are from professional contexts (Chapter 3), others are from their private lives (Chapter 2, 5, and 6), and still others (Chapter 1 and 4) are drawn from my own day to day experiences.

As has been widely noted in anthropological treatments of Iran (M. E. Hegland, 2004; Suzuki, 2004; Tober, 2004), it is quite difficult, sometimes virtually impossible, for non-Iranian passport holders to spend long durations in the Islamic Republic. As such, many of the most substantial ethnographic analyses of the country have been written by first or second-generation Iranian diaspora, or by academics working prior to the 1979 Revolution. For those not holding an Iranian passport, research options are limited by the complicated vicissitudes of Iranian bureaucracy. The response of anthropologists and ethnographers to the difficulty of working in Iran has been mixed. Some have sought greener pastures with diaspora communities or in other Persian-speaking but more easily accessible countries like Tajikistan. Still others have persevered but satisfied themselves with very short trips, what Hegland (2004) refers to as "zip in, zip out" fieldwork. Like Barry (2018) I found that matters were further complicated by the fact that the Iranian government does not issue specific research visas, evidence perhaps of the state's ongoing effort to control any investigatory narrative. Seeking to find a way around this, I applied for an educational visa, and after a complicated period of toing and froing was ultimately issued with a residency permit to stay in Iran for over a year as a student of the Centre for Teaching Persian to non-Persian speakers [markez-e āmuzesh-e zabān-e fārsi be qeyr-e fārsi zabānān] at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. The total period spent in Iran was divided into two periods – a virtually continuous stint of fourteen months from January 2014 to March 2016, and a one-month research follow-up trip from January to February in 2018. This is as such an uncommon case study based on long-term research by someone of non-Iranian heritage. For the first nine months of fieldwork, my partner and I lived on campus in a residential dormitory set aside for married students. In the final five-six months we moved off campus, renting the bottom floor of a multi-storey family home.

Because our presence in the country was linked to our attendance at the Persian teaching centre, typically, our days were divided into classes in the morning and research in the afternoon and evening. As our Persian improved however, increasingly less time was spent with the centre and more time researching. By the end of the trip, it was common for us to spend weeks away from the centre. The method of data collection was consistent with most other anthropological projects. In addition to participant observation, I made frequent use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, some of which were recorded with microphone, while others were written down in note form. It is here that I should note the difficulty of not just getting permission to be in Iran, but also of conducting research. Often my informants were uncomfortable with me putting their opinions "on the record" so to speak, and were unwilling to take part in recorded interviews. Declarations of "put the microphone away, it makes everyone uncomfortable" were legion. Another fundamental tension was access to sufficiently private spaces to conduct interviews. Public spaces in Iran are heavily

monitored, if not formally by agents of state security, then – and perhaps especially this was the case in Mashhad – by the eyes of other civilians surprised at the presence of foreigners.

For example, early on in my fieldwork, I attempted to interview a female colleague on the campus of the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. We were not alone – the park where we had chosen to meet was full of young couples whispering in soft voices – but my appearance obviously set me apart. Making the rounds of campus, a university security car gradually pulled to a stop opposite the small park where we had met, and the driver, a uniformed late middle-aged man, stepped out and, ignoring the handful of other students seated and talking, walked straight towards us. Turning to face me, he said:

Guard: What are you doing here?

Simon Theobald (ST): I'm talking, we're having a conversation.

Guard: Can I see your student card?

ST: Yes. Here, please. I am a foreign student at the university.

Guard: Yes. And you [gesturing to the teacher]?

Teacher: I don't have a card. I am a teacher, but not a student. They do not supply us with cards.

Guard: You cannot be here then. You will have to go somewhere else.

Teacher: Where?

Guard: Off the university.

Teacher: Why? We aren't doing anything. We are just practicing - English and Persian.

Guard: Because I say so. What don't you understand? You don't have the right to speak to a foreigner [*haq nadārin bā khāreji sohbat konin*] – what would people think of you?

Ultimately, our run in was of little meaningful consequence, but its confrontational style, the sense of suspicion, and the insecurity that went with it were pervasive and persistent themes that ran throughout our fieldwork. The private world of family homes was equally fraught, as the rules of Islamic sex segregation often meant that my presence as a "guest" obliged women and men to behave in a far more rigid manner than they would otherwise normally do. Nonetheless, through strong contacts with close friends we were ultimately given significant access to the intimate lives of Iranian families, whose aspirations and concerns form much of the content of this thesis. In the interest of maintaining their security and privacy, I have left most of the characters in this thesis

relatively opaque, preferring instead to concentrate, where possible, on social moments, rather than on lively portraits of individuals. Where I have chosen to use the narratives of individuals, I have tried to anonymise them as much as possible, using pseudonyms and excluding biographical detail that could be identifying.

As a final note, I want to highlight the pivotal role my spouse played in shaping the nature of this research. There is a pre-existing history of theoretical and methodological engagement that concerns the matter of significant others in the field (to make up potentially for the much longer history of ignoring spouses) (e.g. Handler, 2004; Kulick & Willson, 1995). My very minor intervention here is to ponder the thorny methodological questions that emerge when one conducts fieldwork so intimately with one's spouse. In future publications, should I cite her as a co-producer, if not necessarily co-author, of knowledge? Should she be recognised here as co-equal in in the data collection of this thesis? During our time in Iran, Alicia worked conducting research, helping with Persian vocabulary and translation, and especially in getting access to worlds that might otherwise have remained off limits or obscured. That we were an opposite sex couple while in Iran shaped this project in ways that it is hard to fully account for, but I am certain that our position as a young, foreign couple, took us to places that would have been virtually impossible for me to access as a single male, regardless of nominal relationship status. On occasion, she also took some field notes, particularly when attending all female gatherings. I have tried to incorporate as much of her into this thesis as possible, and as such, without any clear resolution to these questions, I have at the very least attempted, wherever we attended together, to refer to "our work" and "us", rather than the just "me" or "I".

.6   Chapter Outline

Each of the chapters in this thesis is an exploration of what I, in conjunction with my interlocutors, understood to be examples or elements of how perfectionism is refracted in the quotidian. I think of each chapter in this thesis as revealing a different nuance of what perfectionism looks like in a Mashhadi context, all chapters united by the concern to realise, or the experience of, the ideal amidst the everyday. There is a broad arc that the chapters follow, earlier chapters exploring these culture of completion in more 'concretised' forms, latter chapters examining it in circumstances that are more abstract, where it appears subtly, rather than as an overwhelming or all pervasive sense. In the final chapter before the conclusion, I take up the theme of utopia somewhat differently than the others, looking at how *critique* of such a utopian system is addressed. Each of these chapters enriches our understanding of how perfectionism manifests as a discourse or a practice, sometimes and often both, in the everyday lives of my Mashhadi interlocutors.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Chapter One has a dual function. It introduces Iran, and Mashhad within it, as the sites of this research, but it also explores how a sense of 'difference' that Iranians feel vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and that which Mashhadis feel with regards to Iran, was constructed by my interlocutors. Using the theme of 'exceptionalism' as a way of understanding such a sense of difference, I argue that exceptionalism is both a product of and a precondition for the utopianism that the thesis is concerned with. Chapters Two and Three, as a set, both explore how behaviours and practices are brought into the orbit of a discourse of perfectionism. Chapter Two examines Mashhad's emerging consumer society, and an ethic of 'fast wealth' that has arisen with it. Drawing on ethnographic examples of a participant in 'get-rich-quick' schemes, I hold that participation in these schemes, is more multilayered than a single-minded desire to pursue wealth. They are also inflected with and pressed into the service of a rhetoric that is concerned with new moral imaginings of the individual, the "will to improve" (Li 2007) and the possibility of self-perfection. Chapter Three explores the education system in Mashhad, and especially private language institutes focusing on English tuition. I look to English learning as one of those ways in which utopianism refracts not necessarily as an always positive legacy, but in this instance, as something that parents feel obliged to compel their children to participate in, a part of socially normative understandings of the ideal life.

Chapters Four and Five explore the concept of utopia as a more subtle thread that runs through the background of ideas and practices. Chapter Four examines the religious invocation known in Iran as the salavāt. I explore how the prayer, a benediction on the Prophet and the Prophetic household, works as a multivalent sonic form. I suggest that it acts as a mechanism for re-orienting attention, breaking down barriers of status, and solemnising geographies and temporalities, and that in doing so, it creates an iteration of an ideal 'perfect' public that briefly transcends the quotidian. Chapter Five explores how the perfectionist legacies of utopianism manifest in kinds of moral exactingness, in this instance a vision of the agent as excised from the quotidian demands that shape everyday sociality. This in turn posits the necessity of an ideal social order in which people should always faithfully and flawlessly externalise their internal states, i.e. they should always be truthful and sincere, rather than being fragmented individuals who live and behave in a manner that is not necessarily consistent but characterised by mutually contradictory ideas and behaviours.

And, as I have said, the final chapter takes up these themes somewhat differently. Chapter Six looks to utopianism manifest as a critique of the chiliastic-remote orientation of time in contemporary Iran. I argue that time and critique are inseparable components of the utopian inheritance bequeathed to the contemporary. These relations are expressed clearly in ongoing scepticism

towards historical forms of charity and the emergence of new philanthropic organisations that, through their orientation to the here and now, offer an implicit critique of such messianic temporalities.

.7   Conclusion

In this introduction I have attempted to provide some overview of the historical context that informs utopianism and perfectionism in Iran. Much more could be said, and this has been an extremely brief overview of just some of the basic contours. It is worth reiterating that while utopia is obviously not unique to Iran, in the pre-Revolutionary period Iran certainly seems to have a particularly strong tradition of utopian writing and ideologues. Such writing may have remained in the realm of text, were it not for the Revolution of 1979, an event that was decidedly utopian in character. I have also attempted to sketch my own theoretical understanding of utopia and how this shapes and is shaped in the Islamic Republic. Uncomfortable with the notion of an too-neat linear linkage between the utopian ideologues and the contemporary – after all, Iran is not exactly Islamic in the model that Khomeini imagined it might be – I think the metaphor of 'refraction' helps us to better understand perfectionism as something that appears in the quotidian without necessarily being wedded to particular ideologies. Refraction, by giving us a particularly diffuse frame of analysis, also allows room to recognise that perfectionism is not only something that is aspirational and forever strived for, but also something that can weigh heavily on the shoulders of my colleagues and friends in Iran. With this framing in mind, we have an intellectual scaffold that can carry us through the rest of this thesis. I hope that in the following pages each chapter will come to demonstrate and unveil some of the ways that utopia is manifest in the Mashhadi present. Those manifestations are sometimes subtle, sometimes more apparent, but there remains a lingering sense that the contemporary is imbued with ramifications of such perfectionist thinking. This does not mean though that this document should be read as an all-inclusive literature of those ways that the philosophy of utopianism is refracted in the contemporary. Rather, just as I have said above, that this chapter is a brief overview of the history and theory of perfectionism in Iran, so too is this thesis merely the beginning, an introductory salvo that provides a small section of gleanings from fieldwork. Nonetheless, they provide us with meaningful insight into the lifeworlds of my interlocutors, and elicit for us some greater awareness of their experiences that intimately weld questions of the everyday to those of the complete and the ideal.

1   Chapter One

'This is Iran':

Ordinary and extraordinary exceptionalism in Iran and Mashhad as a foundation of utopianism

This is Iran, a cat seven thousand years old, that is alive, the difference being that it has raw oil, here there are four seasons, but in the hearts of the people, only the snow of winter has value, here they don't show you your festivals, see, where have they dragged this cat of mine?... – Injā Irān-e, a rap by Bahram Nuraei

1.1   Introduction: Incommensurate cash and the price of milk

Following an interview in Pārk-e Mellat*,* I walked home with my partner through the dark backstreets of Āzādshahr on a winter evening in late 2015. While groceries and shops were usually concentrated on the main streets that intersected suburbs, there were still a handful of businesses located amidst the apartment blocks and remnant houses – a bakery here, sometimes a small chemist, less commonly speciality businesses selling perhaps metalware or eye glasses. Not wanting to make an additional trip out, we stopped at an unfamiliar all-purpose corner store, indistinguishable from the hundreds of other similar family-owned and run business that differed from larger supermarkets in their longer hours and their offering of a combination of staples – plastic packaged bread, eggs, milk, cheese, beans, lentils – or occasionally a more diverse range of 'home-made' offerings like pickles or dried fruit. Our quarry that evening was milk. Often sold fresh, unpasteurised, and in large quantities at dairy shops [*labaniyāt forushi*], buying from a local grocery inevitably meant getting the pasteurised product, pre-packaged in either small, sealed plastic bags (the cheapest) or in rigid one litre bottles (marginally more expensive). Our effort to purchase milk, once a subsidised commodity and still relatively cheap[29], was hampered by the contents of my wallet – a single, 500 000 rial note.

Banknotes in Iran embody in tangible form the country's battle with inflation. Despite having been released as recently as 2004–2009, the series of 50, 100, and 250 rial coins now had such limited purchasing power that they were better kept as curios, a reminder of a time when the rial had more value. Small denomination banknotes were in a similar category – the 1000 and 2000 rial notes were of minimal use. Only once one hit the level of 5000 rials did hard cash come into its own, with the

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[29] A plastic one litre bottle of milk typically cost about 20 000 rial in 2015, or about 40 US cents. A one litre sealed plastic bag of milk cost about 12-15 0000, or about 25-27 cents. Rapid inflation since that time however makes a comparison between contemporary and historical prices difficult.

units of 20 000 and 50 000 rials the most sought after in small transactions, successfully bridging the value gap between units that were useless for being too small, and those that were useless because they were too big. Notes of 100 000 rials could be used at a pinch, while the 500 000 rial and 1 000 000 rial notes, technically "cheques" and not regular currency but which nonetheless circulated freely, were so large that they were useful only for paying for major purchases. In practice, when making small transactions, most people in Mashhad relied on electronic bank cards, avoiding altogether the difficult problem of finding exact change but an option not available to us as foreigners.

As non-Iranians, we had always avoided the banking system, preferring instead to exchange cash at the various currency exchanges [*sarāfi*] across the city. Doing so, however, always resulted in the return of vast quantities of cash, often in million or 500 000 rial denominations that proved difficult to break up. One had to be strategic when making purchases: it was usually a safe bet to assume that a 500 000 rial note would be accepted when undertaking a large shopping trip with many items, because the remainder would be small or easily divisible into smaller denominations. On the other hand, trying to make a minute purchase with a large denomination was often met with grimaces or requests for smaller denominations: "don't you have any change?" [*pul-e naghd nadāri?*] the puzzled shop owner would ask.

Such exchanges reoccurred with predictable reliability. After we had significantly enmeshed ourselves in the comings and goings of the boulevard where we lived, the 'gamble' of whether or not we might be able to get away using larger denominations waned as we both came to know, and came to be known, by the proprietors of the groceries and bakeries along our regular routes. At the local bakery that sold 'little stone' [*sangak*] bread at the subsidised rate of 7000 rial (less than 20 cents), one was guaranteed to be refused service presenting anything other than exact change, while at the bigger *super* (supermarket) at the end of the street, it was almost always possible to break a large note, if begrudgingly. Our grocery store that evening though was an unknown quantity. Rummaging through the fridge to find the most expensive bottle of milk possible, we presented it to the young proprietor behind the counter. Without even looking up, he said "card", and motioned to take something from us, before my partner replied "we don't have one", pressing the pink 500 000 rial note down on the counter. The young man looked up, blinked, and responded in a tone dripping with condescension "this is Iran" [*Injā Irān-e*][30], before pushing the bill back across towards us.

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[30] Another potential translation "here is Iran", or "this place is Iran", but both in English fail to communicate quite the same sense.

Our exchange was disappointing, if predictable. We had at that stage become thoroughly used to the calculated deployment of those three words. Like this, it conveyed a justification for some inconvenience. Arriving at an office in search of a form or someone to fill in some paper work, only to be told that the necessary official is away and won't be coming back any time soon? *This is Iran*. Being told by the police that although the station chief is present, he won't be available to talk until he's had tea and jam? *This is Iran*. A train delayed by eight hours? *This is Iran*. Someone skipping the breadline because they were after only one loaf of bread? *This is Iran*. But so too was it pressed into the service of a vision of Iran as producing, embodying, and defining, an all-encompassing positiveness. A particularly excellent pomegranate? *This is Iran!* Marvelling at the skill and artisanry of painters and craftspeople current and long-deceased? *This is Iran!* Soaking in the atmosphere of ancient ruins at the sites of Persepolis and Pasargadae? *This is Iran!* The breathtaking vistas of the Kalut desert and the misty greenery of the Caspian coast and Alborz Mountains – *This is Iran!*[31]

What those three words communicated, I suggest, was not just some sideways apology for perceived flaws, or a self-aggrandising appraisal of the country. Rather, the unifying thread between these dual meanings was its iteration of a belief that Iran, as a country, a people, a civilizational trend, existed in a state – historically, geographically, ethically, and socially – that was *exceptional*, one that distinguished 'Iran' both from its close neighbours, and from other communities, countries, and cultures across the globe. It argued for a vision of Iranian society that suggested the normal points of reference that might be used to assess other people and other places were not appropriate here; that Iran moved by its own particular and peculiar moods and motivations, outside those that explained other peoples in other places.

1.1.1 Understanding a culture of exceptionalism

The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the 'culture of exceptionalism' in Mashhad specifically, and Iran more broadly, that I understand to be embodied in the paradigmatic phase, "this is Iran".[32] Godin and Chafer (2004, pp. xiii-xiv) suggest that it would be a humdrum task to simply draw up a list of how countries differ from one another – the only purpose of that list would be to evince the adage that each place has its own special history (see also Anderson, 2006 [1983]). My intention then is not to indicate how Iran *is* different from its neighbours, whether it is 'objectively' exceptional. Linguistically, religiously, and historically Iran bares many similarities to its neighbours,

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[31] It is worth noting that not only did my interlocutors make statements of this nature to me as a foreigner, but also made such statements among themselves.

[32] On occasion it took other discursive forms. For example, Iran was sometimes referred to be as being 'heaven like' [mesle-behesht] or incomparable [kam-nazir/bi-nazir].

just as the United States does to its neighbours, and it seems unconscionable to suggest that the US's national obsession with its own exceptionalism has not been at least partially responsible for shaping that country's domestic and foreign policies. What I am interested in is how particular forms and concepts are mobilised and ascribed certain values, and how narratives of exceptionalism act as powerful framing devices. I argue for a recognition of the potency and pervasiveness of such ideologies within the community regardless of how accurate or inaccurate a descriptor they might be. In doing so, I seek to elaborate the forms upon which this ideology of exceptionalism exists, and how it comes to pattern understandings of Iran and Mashhad as places. It might be argued that all places consider themselves 'exceptional', that this is an understanding that pertains more to questions of parochialism, the 'view from the village' as it were. While I recognise that exceptionalism is by no means unique to Iran, I still feel that it is worth explicating, both because it is experienced with a particularly potent intensity, and because, as I will go on to elaborate further below, it provides a foundation for thinking about utopianism and the possibility of perfection within the country's borders.

What, then, is exceptionalism, and how are we to understand it? The context in which exceptionalism as a social philosophy is most familiar is almost certainly in its manifestation as part of the rhetoric of American nationalism. The concept is said to have its origins in the statements of Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1831 noted the United States' apparent unique "origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions"(Hongju Koh, 2003, p. 83)[33]. These have been understood to include 'canonical' US commitments to "liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire economics" (Hongju Koh, 2003, p. 1481). Such framing should not limit this analysis, and the United States is not alone in the list of nations that have at one time or another been referred to as 'exceptional'. Other examples include 'Nordic exceptionalism' which is understood to include a gamut of forms from penal ideologies (Barker, 2012) to cultures of donation (Elgström & Delputte, 2015) to social democratic values (Fochesato & Bowles, 2015), or French exceptionalism, seen through the eyes of the country's long relationship with the revolution that gave birth to the Republic and continues to spread enlightenment ideals globally (Godin & Chafer, 2004), all stand as testimony to the global reach of discourses of exceptionalism.

Such variation in the determiners of exceptionalism ultimately does little to help define the underlying pattern that unifies it as an ideology. Here, I turn to Ceasar (2012, p. 8) in his analysis of American exceptionalism, where he puts the case that an ideology of exceptionalism represents a

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[33] Although (Ceasar, 2012) notes the Tocqueville's reference to 'exceptionalism' is actually quite limited and tenuous.

"claim to uniqueness", while the focus of such content "has varied enormously". As such, Ceasar (2012, p. 8) suggests, exceptionalism is a "family of concepts" that, in the case of the United States, has been used to refer to the idea that America is both somehow different and somehow special. The latter, Ceasar further divides into firstly "the possession of a certain quality" and secondly, "the embrace of a task or mission"(Ceasar, 2012, p. 9). It is though critical to acknowledge that exceptionalism need not be solely positive. Indeed, much of that which goes into shaping Iranian and Mashhadi understandings of their particularism is couched in neutral or even negative terms. The analysis of existence in a state outside the 'normal' order of things was certainly not always approving, and the desire for the end to the state of exception a tangible thread of concern.

This culture of exceptionalism I understand as part of a constant effort at stressing, underlying, and further establishing, Iran's 'difference' not only from its close neighbours, but also as a unique 'civilisation', with a distinct and particular past, present and future. In this chapter, what I hope to demonstrate is that in Mashhad there is a palpable sense that Iranians possess these qualities – both positive and negative – and that through them one might better understand the role that Iran plays in the world. In writing this chapter, it also became clear to me that elements of what my informants earmarked as 'exceptional' were not especially 'out of the ordinary'. Taking my lead from Clarke (2014) in his analysis of the 'ordinariness' of light-bulb consumption among Sufi mystics in Lebanon, I argue that Iranian and Mashhadi exceptionalism cannot be detached from the ordinary, and is ultimately explained through the simultaneity of the two.

1.1.2   Unpacking this chapter

In this chapter, I aim to unpack how my interlocutors deployed narratives of exceptionalism. I begin with the most abstract, exploring how certain historical, religious, and socio-temporal forms accrete to create a backdrop of exceptionalism that defines 'Iran' as not only a country [*melat/vatan/meyhan*], but also as a people [*mardom*] and a 'civilisation' [*tamaddon*] that is both special and bestowed with a particular destiny. In placing 'Iran' as the most abstract unit of analysis, I touch upon material that is more fully explored by other authors. Nonetheless, it is worth reiterating their ideas both because they are so influential in the social psyche of contemporary Iran, and because in my own fieldwork I detected subtle local variations in the narrative that some of these scholars identified that I feel are critical in understanding changing interpretations of Iranian exceptionalism, which, like any aspect of culture, is never static. After this, I point more specifically to the discursive construction of Mashhad as an urban space *within* Iran, and how it too is understood to possess an experiential presence that is different to and distinct from the rest of the country. Although I draw a distinction between Iran broadly and Mashhad specifically, I should note

that much of the material that constitutes the discourses of exceptionalism at both levels overlaps significantly. As a final note, I should say that this chapter has a dual purpose. On the one hand I want to examine this concept of exceptionalism. On the other, I also want to use this chapter to situate my fieldwork, to give some sense of what Mashhad was like experientially, and to explore its history, using this to ground the rest of the fieldwork that appears throughout this thesis.

It is worth briefly pausing here at the beginning to point to the relevance of exceptionalism to the question of utopianism. It is tempting to suggest that a utopian society is inherently one that is exceptional, and therefore the two concepts are natural bedfellows. To assume that is however presumptuous. Arguably, in any hypothetical world in which a utopia spread across the globe from one continent to another, could it not be that societies still differed from one another, and that in that difference, some of them remained exceptional? As such, the critical element here is to think about the ideology of Iranian exceptionalism as something upon which the ground work of a utopian vision might be laid. Iran's particularism then becomes dialectical: In existing outside the normative order that falls upon other peoples and societies, Iran has both the potential for utopia, and in having the potential for utopia, it exists outside the normal orders that define other peoples and societies. This exceptionalism forms a framework that undergirds much of the perfectionist thinking we will see in later chapters in this thesis.

1.2   Part One: Iran in exception

1.2.1   'A rich civilisation'

To the south of Mashhad lies the historic city of Nishapur, once a capital with a history extending back into the pre-Islamic past, and an association with leading cultural figures of the Islamic period. Aside from its famed turquoise, the city is perhaps best known as the resting place of medieval polymath and poet Omar Khayyam, whose tomb lies opposite that of the globally less well-known Attar Neishaburi, author of *The Conference of the Birds*, a work of poetic esotericism. Because the two giants lie in close proximity to each other, and because the site is also not far from the nearby *qadamgāh*[34] of Imam Reza, Nishapur is a popular tourist site in Eastern Iran, and somewhere we visited multiple times during our stay. On a hot summer's day in mid-2015, having already twice visited with friends or as part of a university tour, I sat apart waiting for the rest of the group to take their fill. Taking the opportunity to converse with foreigners, a middle-aged man lowered himself down beside me, and began to extol the virtues of Iranian history.

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[34] A minor shrine.

"Are you familiar with the rich [*ghani*] history of Iran?" he said.

"Yes I am".

"Did you know we have the oldest civilisation [*tamaddon*] in the world?"

In a moment of rebellion, I responded by suggesting that he was wrong. "Actually, Australia has the oldest civilisation in the world", I smiled. "People came to Australia 60,000 years ago. The Aboriginal people of Australia are the oldest continuing culture on earth," I said.

"But they didn't build anything," he said perfunctorily. "Here we built a civilisation".[35]

The concept of 'Iran' as a civilisation is an essential element in the rhetoric of Iranian exceptionalism. Such an analysis is rooted in that which Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) refers to as "dislocative nationalism". Beginning in the late 19th century according to Zia-Ebrahimi, key figures like Qajar prince Jalal el-Din Mirza and social critic Fath'ali Akhundzādeh defined a new vision of Iranian history, quite distinct from those that came before it, that a) premised its work on a '*völkisch*'[36] analysis with the 'Iranian people' at the centre of its analysis, and b) painted this population as heirs to a tradition that was wholly separate from and built in opposition to an Arab, Islamic identity. A response to the "trauma of the encounter with seemingly more advanced Europeans…" that left Iranian intellectuals with a "…a novel and painful sentiment of deficiency" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 6), dislocative nationalism proposed an image of the Iranian nation as "dislodged from its empirical reality as a majority-Muslim society situated – broadly – in the 'East'" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 5). Iran is imagined as an "Aryan nation adrift, by accident…from its fellow Aryans (read: Europeans)" and the further claim is made that Islam, rather than being an integral part of Iranian history since the 7th century, is understood as "fundamentally incompatible" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 5) with Iranian identity. Zia-Ebrahimi maintains that even as the Pahlavis fell and were replaced by the Islamic Republic, dividing Iranians into "two large groups that one could call the devotees of Cyrus the Great and the disciples of Imam Hussein, who have different readings of Iranian history and identity" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 217), dislocative nationalism has persisted as the "main paradigm defining and interpreting Iran, its history, and the identity of its people" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 218).[37]

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[35] Such conversations, and their appeal to an exceptionalist national rhetoric, are by no means unique to Iran. However, in conjunction with other elements, they tend to take on a particularly strong hue in the Islamic Republic.

[36] That is, the unit of historical analysis was not dynastic or kingly, but rather focused on the 'Iranian people' who come to form a distinct community able to trace social continuity from ancient to modern times.

[37] Of course, Zia-Ebrahimi's interpretation of Iranian national identity is not the only one, and is contested by other accounts. Iranian national identity usually is understood to pivot around three poles of ethnicity, religion, and ideology,

Certainly, Zia-Ebrahimi is right in diagnosing a continuing fascination with all things 'Achaemenid' in contemporary Iran. From murals of attendants in the style of Persepolis that guard the hallways and doors of upmarket hotels to the pendants, necklaces, and wallets embroidered with the *faravahar*[38], the legacy of 'ancient Persia' is felt second only to the imagery of Shi'ism. For example, to the north west of Mashhad, now almost within the city limits, is the village of Tus, a town of little note save for its location as the birthplace of Abu al-Qāsem Ferdowsi Tusi (940-1020CE), the author of the national epic of Iran, the *Shāhnāme,* the *Book of Kings*, that tells a mythic history of Iran from creation. The tome and its author are widely credited among Iranians for having saved Persian from extinction and invigorating a sense of Iranian identity which was at peril following the Arab Islamic invasion. His tomb, rebuilt under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi from 1928-1934, is monumental in style, and has "assumed the sanctity of a national shrine"(Shahbazi, 2012 [1999], p. 527), standing in repose opposite a small reflection pond, amidst gardens, with a small museum presenting a range of artworks and artefacts.

While the complex has been rendered more palatable to a Republican sensibility – a short note from the Supreme Leader engraved in marble bridging the two worlds – it is hard to shake off the nationalist connotations of the site that came into existence at the height of Imperial nationalism. Its marble facades, epic proportions, distinctly non-Islamic style of architecture, and *faravahar* symbol all bear testimony to its origins in another time. But it is the museum in the grounds that most draws out the connection between the ancient past and the present. While the museum is full of reconstructed pottery, old weaponry, and artistic renderings of the stories of the *Shāhnāme,* it is a map on the wall that seems to draw most visitors. Depicting the Achaemenid state at the height of its power, the map encompassed much of what is now the Middle East, Central Asia, and southern Europe, its territorial edges lapping against the borders of Macedonia and Egypt in the West, Arabia in the south, the Caucasus and Amu Darya in the north, and the Indus in the West.

Visitors traced their fingers along the names of cities and landmarks from an ancient past which, as they tried to draw imagined connections between historic ruins – *Ecbatana, Susa, Babylon* – and modern cities – Hamedan, Dezful, and Baghdad – attempting to make tangible a continuity between the Achaemenid past and the Republican present. The names of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes bore witnesses to a history that was sensed not as a point of reference almost impossibly remote, but as

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with alternately a tension between the country's pre-Islamic and post-Islamic history (e.g. Holliday, 2011), a balancing act between the two (e.g. Saleh, 2013), or a competition between them (e.g. Hunter, 2014). For a concise summary of debates about the constituent elements of Iranian national identity, see Chapter One of Barry (2018).

[38] A symbol of the Achaemenid Empire closely associated with the ancient state religion of Zoroastrian, but one that has been adopted by Iranians of all stripes today as a symbol of the nation.

though they were still living and breathing figures, perhaps just recently departed uncles and fathers.[39] With grimaces and sighs, fingertips lingered on the once far-flung frontiers of the domains of dead emperors, as they stood in sharp relief to the country's current limits, a forlorn reminder of Iran's perceived decline. "This was all ours," voices muttered, pointing at Anatolia and Afghanistan.

But the ghost of an imperial legacy was contingent not only on ancient history. Among some secular Iranians and others opposed to the Islamic Republic, the image of the late Imperial period under the last Shah had gone through a significant turnaround. He was no longer the wicked tyrant of the early Revolutionary period, but a misunderstood and benevolent leader who had shepherded Iran from feudal backwater to regional superpower while reigniting the flame of the country's pre-Islamic past[40]. Many young people, born well after the Revolution with no recollection of the Shah other than the stories of their parents, spoke fondly of monarchical Iran's military prowess. Accounts of the army's deployment in Oman in support of the Sultan Qabus and against Marxist rebels from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman in Dhufar province in 1972-1975 were radically reimagined and embellished. A mission of, at its height, no more than 4000 Iranian special forces who were sent at the bequest of the Sultan (Goode, 2014) became an Iranian invasion. The power of the Shah was so great, I was told, that the army swept in and took control of the country within a week. For principled supporters of the Republican system, it is the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war, popularly referred to as the Holy Defence [*defāʿye-moghaddas*], or Imposed War [*jang-e tahmili*], that stands out as an expression of Iran's military exceptionalism[41]. Frequent mention is made of the fact that, unlike Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was backed by various European powers and the United States, Iran 'stood alone' and overcame the superpower-backed Iraqi forces to preserve its sovereignty[42]. Iran's unique 'victory'[43] over Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as well as the enormous loss of life, are celebrated and commemorated in a virtually endless cycle of praise for the war dead now reborn as the exalted *shahid*.

[39] Compare for instance both the last Shah's speech at the 2500th Anniversary of the Persian monarchy where Reza Pahlavi assured the deceased king Cyrus "you may rest now, for I am awake, and standing in vigil", and to the recent practice of nationalist and royalist protestors visiting Cyrus' tomb during the 'Day of Cyrus'.

[40] Bajoghli (2018) makes the argument that the rehabilitation of the Pahlavi dynasty is largely through the consumption of images of the late imperial period as a time of social and cultural liberalism and flowering, produced uncritically by the London-based Persian language television station *Manoto*.

[41] The emergence of the Omani narrative is certainly less pronounced than the official rhetoric surrounding the war with Iraq, and popular mainly with those of my informants who espoused royalist sentiments. It seems likely that the action in Omani has become embellished as part of ongoing efforts by royalists to rehabilitate the image of the last Shah.

[42] The one-sided nature of the conflict is often exaggerated in official discourse, which has Iran single-handedly defending itself against 17 enemy powers.

[43] While the war is often portrayed as a victory for Iran, it was effectively a stalemate that resulted in a return to the status quo ante bellum.

Unlike Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) and Saleh and Worrall (2015) who argue for an understanding of duelling visions of Iranian history – one Islamic, one pre-Islamic – I am not convinced that they must necessarily be read in contrast to or distinct from one another. During my time in Iran, there seemed to be a clear effort by conservatives to wed Iranian greatness and particularism to the history of Islam in Iran, something more than just an attempt to shore up their "patriotic credentials" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 212). Some of this is old – for instance the Princess Shahrbanu (see Boyce 2008 [1979], pp.150-151) , the daughter of the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd III (632-651), is a critical figure in her role as wife of Hussein, the third Imam, and mother of the fourth Imam Ali ibn Husayn Zayn al-Abidin. In giving birth to the fourth Imam, she takes on the role of maternal progenitor of the nine male saints who would follow, giving her the title "Mother of the Nine Imams". In doing so, she is understand to have embodied the "convergence between pre-Islamic Iran and Imami Shi'ism" (Amir-Moezzi, 2011, p. 92). The association of ambiguous Qur'anic figures like *Dhu-l Qarnayn* 'the one with two horns'[44] with Cyrus the Great, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's referencing of Cyrus the Great as the father of all basijis (Merhavy, 2015) can be read in the same light; so too the adoption of Zoroaster into the canon of prophets that preceded Muhammad and Zoroastrians into the category of 'People of the book' [*ahl-e ketāb*].

Other forms are newer and more radical. During my fieldwork the proposition was put to me by a number of clerics and their acolytes that the Prophet himself could be considered among the ranks of the 'Persians'. While normatively understood to have been an Arab[45] who received the Qur'anic revelation in Arabic, claims of his Persian heritage were made through the elaboration of a somewhat convoluted genealogy based on Muhammad's descent from the Prophet Ibrahim. Because Ibrahim had lived in territory referred to in Arabic and Persian as Bābel, usually rendered in English as Babylonia, and because Babylonian territories fell under the control of the Achaemenid Empire during the rule of Cyrus, ultimately to be incorporated as within the territory of Iranshahr[46], Muhammad could likewise be considered to be 'Iranian', they argued. The positioning of Muhammad as an 'Iranian' was iterated even in a semi-formal capacity by the Young Journalists Club, a conservative media outlet whose work closely aligns with state broadcasting, who declared

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[44] This proposition was first postulated by Indian intellectual and historian Sayyed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898).

[45] Because Muhammad is understood to be part of a prophetic genealogy that descends from Ibrahim, he has long been recognised by theologians as part of a clan that were 'originally Arab' but rather from the Adnanites or Arabs who had at some historical point been Arabised. The co-opting of the ethnic identity of the Prophet might not be so strange were it not for the pivotal role that an 'Arab identity' played in defining the Muslim community both in its inception and still today. For instance, the division in the early Islamic period between Arab and non-Arab Muslims (Arab vs. 'Ajam) and the subordinate position of the latter, as well as the ongoing 'Arabisation' of Islam in various non-Arabic speaking Muslim countries, exemplified in the subcontinental debate over the use of the terms *khoda hafez* (Persian influenced) vs. *Allah hafez* (purely Arabic). See for instance Ghoshal (2010).

[46] Compare Richard N. Frye's declaration that "Iran means all lands and peoples where Iranian languages were and are spoken, and where in the past, multi-faceted Iranian cultures existed" (Frye, 2005, p. x)

that the claim could be avowed "with a little leeway" [*bā andaki-ye tasāmah*] (Bāshgāh-e-Khabarnegārān-e-Javān, 2017).

In the same vein were false etymologies that putatively connected the Persian word for Muslim [*Musalmān*] to the name of the first 'Persian' convert to Islam – *Salmān al-Fārsi*.[47] Such false etymologies were also popular with Shari'ati, especially in his essay *Estekhrāj va tasfiye-e manāb'e-farhangi*, where he argues that Iranians often ignore their own cultural innovations and instead preference foreign innovations, without realising that Iranians had in fact invented them first. Rhetorical practices like these aim to situate 'Iran' not as a passive vessel that merely adopted Islam and in doing so became part of the global *umma,* but rather as an active force. Persian 'genius' becomes the presence that, in engaging with a rude or unpolished form of the religion brought into the world by Arabs, helped Islam reached its fruition, effectively completing it in the form of the artistic and social accomplishment of the Persianate Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman empires[48]. Today this interpretation of history forms the message that is directed at foreigners studying in Iran. Passages from works like Morteza Motahari's (1970/1349) *The Mutual Services of Islam and Iran* [*Khadamāt-e motaghābel-e eslām va irān*] – a book that was written seeking to refute the work of nationalist historian Abdolhossein Zarrinkub (2017 [1957])and his *Two Centuries of Silence* [*Do Qarn Sokut*][49] – were interspersed throughout text books. As a final note on this theme, I want to point to a tandem phenomenon, where even among those who are irreligious or otherwise opposed to the current political order nonetheless maintain that Iran's majority religion is distinct and preferable to other forms of Islam. Premised on a pervasive anti-Sunni, in particular, anti-Saudi sentiment, even the Iranian Shi'ism of the Republic was, I was told, "more easy going" [*rāhattar*], "less strict" [*sakhtgir nist*], not as "fanatical" [*ta'asob nadāshtan*] when compared to the much maligned bogeyman of 'Wahhabism' [*vahābiyat*] both inside and outside of Iran.

What we have here are two narratives. The first attempts to underscore Iran's exceptionalism by taking it out of its Islamic context and placing it within a historical narrative of national pride based on a mythologised Imperial period and its Zoroastrian religion. The second, rather than attempting to excise Iran from the Islamic world, works instead to situate Islam as an *Iranian* phenomenon, Iranian Shi'ism presented as intimately interwoven into the Prophetic dynasty, Iran perfecting the religion that arrived in the country in a rough-and-ready form (see also Barry, 2018). In doing so,

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[47] In fact, the words *Muslim, Salman,* and *Musalmān* all ultimately derive from a single shared Arabic tri-consonantal root, *s-l-m*.

[48] Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) notes that Ernest Renan postulated much the same idea in his work Averroès et l'Averroïsme (Renan, 1882).

[49] Zarrinkub's work argues that Islam was forced upon Iranians to the detriment of Iranian culture and language, which he argues went into 'two centuries of silence' until revived by the Tahirid Dynasty of Iranian origin.

these revisionist narratives, although different from one another, still produce a conception of the Iran as singular and incomparable, historically unique, and imparting matchless gifts to the rest of humanity that other nations or civilisations were not blessed with. What I want to turn to now is how a discourse of geographic and temporal uniqueness was created.

1.2.2   Out of time, out of place: Places and temporalities of exception

While the development of a particular historical narrative about 'Iranian civilisation' has been instrumental in laying the foundation for Iranian exceptionalism, there are other elements at play as well. Here, I want to focus on two salient concerns – place and time. By this, I mean an understanding among my informants that Iran was both a place unlike others, and in a 'time' of its own. Most visitors to Iran will first encounter this in the relation to the city of Esfahan. The former Safavid royal capital, located almost in the geographic heart of the country half way between Tehran and Shiraz, is – excepting Mashhad – almost certainly Iran's most touristed city. With tree-lined streets, covered bazars, the *Si-o-se pol* bridge, and the *naqsh-e jahān* square with its awe-inspiring mosques, visitors will quickly encounter the proverb – *"Esfahān, nesf-e jahān"*, that is, 'Esfahan is half the world'. More than the work of some shrewd propagandist or tourism board, the idea that Esfahan, a city of not more than two million people, might be understood however jokingly to contain within it half of all the things on the face of the globe that are worthy of seeing, goes some way to explaining the cultural biases that determine how Iran as a place is understood.[50] That is, Iran is not just *another space* on the face of the globe, but rather, quintessentially an exceptional space, containing within it sufficient delights and points of interest to satisfy the curiosity and desire of even ardent travellers.

In the same vein is the semi-mythic appraisal of Iran as a country of "four seasons" [*keshvar-e chahār fasl*]. At its most basic, this proverb referred to the diversity of climates and environments in Iran. It suggested that, in any given season, it was always possible to find a region in Iran where it was winter, spring, autumn, or summer. For example, even as winter might grip the north of the country, the further one moved south towards the Persian Gulf, it was possible to encounter spring or summer-like conditions, that for every desert there was a snow-capped mountain, for every deciduous forest, a mangrove swamp. But it spoke also to a sense that the territories of Iran had been preternaturally blessed with material abundance. "We have oil, gas, gold, silver…" so went the list of those resources that Iran had been endowed with. And in contrast to Iran, its neighbours were understood to be places bereft of resources, and natural beauty. "*Hichi nadāre*" – "it doesn't have a

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[50] Babayan (2002, p. 5) notes that Esfahan was understood to be the site of the emergence of messiah in Zoroastrian and Shi'i (Imami) eschatology, the capital city mirroring paradise.

thing" – was a common phrase in response to queries about the wealth of the countries that abutted Iran's borders. Take for example, the stories of pilgrims attending the holy cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Mecca:

> My uncle told me that going overseas is of no use to me [*be dardam nemikhore*]. He's only been out of the country twice – once to Mecca, and once to Iraq – both on a tour. "Both are just wilderness" [*biyābān*]. For him, the best place in the world is Iran, and the best place in Iran is Mashhad, and the best place in Mashhad is the village he grew up in – Maghān. There is nothing outside [Iran] for him (Behrud, 27)[51].

Integral too was the perception that the country was the possessor of a unique multi-structured temporality. It may seem odd to draw attention to something as 'mundane' as the determination of time. Yet it is precisely these small practices of distinction that go into colouring a broader culture of difference. That Iran was metaphorically 'out of time' or even, *out of sync* with its neighbours, my interlocutors argued, added to the sense of the country as existing in a state of exception. This was grounded in a multiplicity of small but, my informants maintained, consequential points of distinction. Defying a global trend, they pointed to the fact that Iran was one of only four countries that did not make use of the Georgian civil calendar as its official method of determining the date[52]. Rather, dates were tabulated on the basis of Iran's own solar *hejri* calendar[53]. In fixing the first day of the year as the vernal equinox, the calendar[54] corrected the annual 'loss' of approximately ten days that occurred because the Islamic lunar calendar disallowed intercalary days, meaning that months did not correspond to seasonal variation but rather constantly drifted through the year. The Islamic flavour was preserved by making year one the date of Muhammad and the early Muslim communities' exodus from Mecca to Medina in 622CE, à la the standard lunar calendar, but by placing the first day of the calendrical year on the vernal equinox, it linked the Islamic present to the Zoroastrian past.[55] That Iran was the possessor of an independent system of calendrical reckoning was a point of pride among the Iranians I encountered during my fieldwork. The calendar was widely

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[51] Compare this to Khosravi's (2017, p. 87) comment that he frequently heard youth in Iran complain that "Inja hichi nist" – here there is nothing. I also came across such sentiments, and there seemed to be a marked tension between those who saw Iran preternaturally blessed, and those who saw it as a cultural and social wasteland.

[52] Neighbouring Afghanistan used the solar calendar as well, while Ethiopia and Nepal also maintained their own non-Georgian calendars.

[53] Supposedly with the "aim of distancing notions of 'Persian' further from the identity of Arabs" (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 88).

[54] The calendar is a legacy of Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah [1053CE-1092], who oversaw the construction of the Esfahan observatory under the authority of Omar Khayyam.

[55] Not made official until 1925 when it was adopted by the *majles,* the nomenclature of the new calendar too drew on ancient precedent, names of the months derived from originally Zoroastrian sources. National experimentation with changing dates did not stop there, however, and for a brief two year period from 1976-1978, the Imperial government under Shah Mohamad Reza Pahlavi adopted a new year one beginning in 559BCE, adopted to coincide with the putative beginning of the Achaemenid Empire, the present representing 2500 years of monarchical continuity in Iran. The change however generated significant public opprobrium, and "wounded the religious sensibilities of the people" (Motahari, 1985, p. 210), and was discontinued even before the Revolution.

praised for its accuracy, informants noting the new year fell not just at midnight, but at the specific hour determined by experts, and it was routinely compared both to the 'disastrous' [*kharāb*] Islamic lunar calendar, and the Western Georgian calendar, my informants noting both that the Iranian calendar was more exact than its European counterpart, and that it had been calculated many centuries before. Jokes were told about the difficulty that Arabs (who were presumed to follow only the lunar calendar) must have in determining their date of birth given the constant shifting of the year.[56]

Other elements of temporal distinction was contested however. Iran remains the only Islamic country whose weekend falls on Thursday-Friday[57], as over the past decades one by one other states in the Middle East and Islamic world, the last being Afghanistan in 2015, have moved to a "Friday-Saturday" weekend so as to better allow for trade and economic contacts between local and Western markets (ISNA, 2016b). Maintaining a Thursday-Friday weekend was simultaneously indicative of the pigheadedness of the regime, the country's calendar "in dire need of reform"(Motamedi, 2018), or testimony to its ongoing commitment to religious purity – keeping Saturday as a day of work ensuring the Republic's ongoing commitment to its Islamic character by refusing to rest on the "Jew's holiday"[58] (Iranian Labour News Agency, 2016). At 3:30 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, Iran likewise is the only country to occupy that time zone, keeping slightly out of sync with all its neighbours in gradations from half an hour to one and a half hours.

Disrupting the flow of 'secular' time however are the rhythms of the religious lunar calendars whose unfixed dates define a waxing and waning course of greater and lesser moments of intensity and sacredness throughout the year. The apogee of this course is always the mourning month of Muharram and the events associated with Karbala and the death of the third Imam Hussein, but other events too are important, like the martyrdom of Imam Reza, and the fasting month of Ramadan. During holidays commemorating the death of saints, the length and breadth of the country was festooned in the black, gold, and green banners, representative of the national mood of mourning. On holy birthdays[59], the streets would fill instead with locals distributing free cakes and sweets [*nazriye*] to those passing by. My less religious and non-religious interlocutors complained that religious holidays were times of particular concern for proper public etiquette, state authorities

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[56] Babayan (2002, p. 73) notes that the "Nuqtavis [a Shi'ite sect] revealed a sense of superiority linked to the solar calendar, measured by way of ethical, moral, and temperamental criteria".

[57] Thursday is a half day however, with offices opening in the morning, and closing at midday for the rest of the day.

[58] Demonstrating, I think, something of the implicit anti-Semitism present in much of state discourse, despite what officials say to the contrary.

[59] By which I refer to anniversaries of the birthdays of the Twelver Shi'ites Fourteen Infallibles, including the Prophet himself, his daughter Fatimah, and the twelve Imams.

taking more seriously [*jedi gereftan*] infractions of an 'ethical' nature, something that Mahdavi (2009, p. 93) also notes in Tehran.

Timekeeping is clearly socially relative, a system devised for ensuring a certain kind of uniformity in relations across both time and space. In adhering to its own calendar(s), I was told, multiple layers of society made a tangible expression of the belief that they would not be cowed into the temporal patterns of other countries. Where Iran's neighbours share, Iran stands alone. There are many other elements that I could reference. The Persian language[60], poetry, Iran's status as one of the only Shi'ite-majority countries in the world, and so on, are all brought into the orbit of elements and forms that are understood to make Iran not just distinct but excepted from its neighbours, who were typically read as being inferior to the Islamic Republic. Of course in many respects, these are fictions. But the narrativisation and discursive construction of Iran as a place not only distinct from, but unlike and exceptional when compared to its neighbours, is a critical element in shaping a sense of national uniqueness and a belief that those norms that define other countries do not apply here in Iran. As I evidence below, a similar sense shapes Mashhadi identity.

1.3   Part Two: Mashhad – The city of exception

"*Azerbaijan and Fars also had a very important role in the history of ancient Iran, but Khorasan had a more valuable part in the history of Iran both before and after Islam, and that point is clear in the early history of the Islamic period*" – An appraisal of Khorasan from historian Ahmad Māhvān (1393/2014, p. 13).

1.3.1   City of Heaven

For the better part of our last six months in Mashhad, I lived with my partner on the bottom floor of a three-storey house in Āzādshahr inhabited by three generations of a single family. The bottom floor was buried three-quarters underground, with a thin slit of windows near the roof allowing just enough light in, and was normally inhabited by 'Uncle Carpet' [*Dāyi-e Farsh*][61], as we affectionately called the septuagenarian bachelor who lived there. Above us, on the ground floor, lived Mr and Mrs Khoshnudiparast, with their youngest daughter (then 28-year-old Anahita) and eldest son (40-year-old Kāmrān). The upper floors were occupied by their second eldest son, his wife, and their child, while a third brother lived elsewhere.

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[60] Whether the sense of Persian as an exceptional language is shared by Iran's large population of speakers of minority languages is worth further consideration.
[61] During our stay, 'Uncle Carpet' stayed with friends or with family upstairs.

Our relations with the family varied between friendly and respectfully reserved. As they were a relatively religious family, my status as a non-*mahram* male always made our presence marginally more problematic. On entering any space outside our own apartment, I was inevitably required to call out "Oh God!" [*yā allāh*], a verbal acknowledgement that a man was entering a space and that any unrelated women should cover up. That said, the family maintained an ongoing presence in our space – our cupboards were stocked with cookware that couldn't be found a home elsewhere, and even our fridge was stocked with dried peaches that family members would come down and retrieve. In response, we were invited upstairs to have lunch with the family, all three generations and us, sitting with our backs against the walls while a plastic sofreh heaving with pickles, meatballs, cheeses, bread, and leafy greens was presented.

On one such occasion shortly after we had moved in, we sat in a post-lunch haze, picking at the remnants of food, shredding bread and worrying pickles sitting brining in their bowls. With a hot late summer's breeze blowing through the open door, a cloud of mid-afternoon lethargy hung in the air, aunts and uncles, children, parents, grandparents gradually readying themselves for the inevitable post-work nap. As though suddenly eager to break the monotony, Kāmrān, jerked his head upwards. "How's Iran?" he asked. "It's good, I like it." "But what do you really think? Which is better, Australia or Iran?" Anahita, looked to him, adjusting the fringes of her headscarf. "Kāmrān, leave them be." "It's a good question though. Which is better? Where would you rather live?" he smiled. Anahita retorted: "Everyone likes their home the most. Leave them be". Mrs Khoshnudiparast, mother, grandmother, matriarch, finally raised herself from the other end of the sofreh, clutching the folds of her chador around her face, one hand beneath its enveloping fabric, pointed: "Yes, everyone likes their country of birth, but some places are just better than others. Iran, compared to the rest of the world, is just better. And Mashhad, compared to the rest of Iran, is better. Mashhad is like heaven [*Mashhad mesle behesht-e*]."

Safely out of the room, Kāmrān and Anahita were quick to inform us that her experience of Iran, let alone the rest of the world, was limited. "She's only lived in Mashhad". Yet I wonder whether the mistake was ours in assuming that what Mrs Khoshnudiparast was just mere hyperbole. She certainly was not alone in holding such a view. The city government of Mashhad had – perhaps in a combination of both piety and astute branding – declared the municipality's motto to be "Mashhad: City of Heaven" [*shahr-e behesht*]. During the rule of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mashhad was officially proclaimed the country's "spiritual capital" [*pāytakht-e ma'anavi*] (Houshmand, 2014), and in 2017 it was declared the "Cultural Capital of the Islamic World".

My aim then in the second half of this chapter is to explore how this sense of particularism was emplaced at the local level in the city of Mashhad, compared with the backdrop of Iran figured more broadly. Linguistically, geographically and culturally diverse, Iran abounds in regional caricatures and stereotypes (see Barry, 2018). Often little more than the result of generations of accreted rumour (see also Abedinifard, 2018; Brookshaw, 2012; Naghdipour, 2014)[62], they nonetheless shine light on how regional difference is constructed in Iran. Tehran, the enormous, unwieldy capital, was routinely described by my interlocutors in Mashhad as "another world", a place so liberal that women and men alike had abandoned all but the bare minimum legal requirements of dress that the Republic demanded, ensuring that chadors were unseen and women tucked their headscarves behind their ears. In discussing previous ethnographies of Iran with my informants, the anecdotes of rebelliousness and defiance, cohabitation without marriage and group sex that comprise some of the material of the work of Khosravi (2008) and Mahdavi (2009) were understood as symptomatic of Tehran, and singularly implausible, if not altogether impossible, in Mashhad. But Mashhad was also the subject of rumour and supposition. Even before I left for fieldwork, I was warned by Iranian academics living in the diaspora that Mashhad was a "deeply conservative" city, a "religious" place[63], and pro-government, unlike the rest of Iran. Reading academic material on the city struck much the same note. In Zuzanna Olszewska's ethnography of Dari poetry in Mashhad, she asserts that:

> …at the time of my research, Mashhad, seemed to be dominated by sacred rather than secular definitions and institutions of culture. This large city boasted no more than a handful of cinemas, and, unlike other major cities, no art galleries or officially approved pop concerts each year… (Olszewska, 2015, p. 25).

In political analysis, Mashhad is also cast as a bastion of orthodoxy, Farhi (2017, p. 36) noting that in the 2017 the principalists lost "even" Mashhad.

To take such portraits as totalising is to buy into homogenising fictions – Tehran is after all, a huge city, and very different across its length and breadth. Much has been written about the capital's north-south divide, a wealthy and less religious north compared against a 'poor and pious' south

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[62] Esfahanis are supposed to be stingy; Shirazis lazy; Rashtis notoriously so carefree that men there are willing to give their wives over to strangers; and the denizens of Qazvin are apparently prone to predatory pederasty and homosexuality. Of Mashhadis, it is said they are *sham' dozd* – 'candle stealers'. Derived from an apocryphal story of a shady *bazāri* who would sell candles to pilgrims to use at the shrine, only to hurriedly run to the holy sanctuary, nab the offering, and then re-sell the sightly blackened wax on to another unsuspecting devotee, the title was symbolic of the apparently predilection of dwellers in the city for dodgy dealing (*kolāh bardāri kardan)*.

[63] Mashhadis often compare their city to Qum as religious exemplars that stood apart from other cities in Iran. In communication with those who had lived, lived, or stayed in Tehran, I was informed that virtually the entire rest of the country, aside from the capital, was "deeply religious", Tehran a secular island amidst a sea of piety. Of course, both views fail to reflect the true diversity of Iran.

(Ehsani, 1999)[64]. Mashhad too has its impoverished, pious corners, and areas of great wealth and liberalism[65]. Yet these stereotypes are important because, even though they are fictions, they reflect beliefs about these urban spaces that were understood to be meaningful by Iranians. Moreover, anthropology needs to explore the diversity of experiences *across* the country, and to complicate the image of the Islamic Republic as a unitary whole. For all that anthropologists like Khosravi (2008), Mahdavi (2009), and Varzi (2006) have spoken of their ethnographies as 'emplaced' in the specificities of their particular field sites, too often I think Tehran becomes the microcosm through which the rest of the country is analysed. But Iran is not the same everywhere, and recognising regional and local variations in the country is an important, arguably critical, part of coming to terms with the complexities of the Islamic Republic.

Popular discourse reflected a map of Iran that was a hodgepodge of differing beliefs and values intimately linked to the 'lay of the land', ethics tied as much to geography as to people. Drawing a clumsy dichotomy across the country, Tehran was understood to constitute a 'cosmopolitan core', along with, though to a lesser degree, cities like Esfahan and Shiraz, against which a rural, and more parochial hinterland might be compared[66]. Mashhad, some 900 kilometres from Tehran, was the seat of that periphery, nestled not far from the national frontier, closer to the Turkmen capital Ashgabat and only marginally further away from Kabul.

1.3.2   The heart of Khorasan

Critical to the representation of the city as a bastion of conservatism was its religious atmosphere, the heart of which is the story of the shrine [*haram-e motahar*]. Mashhad's rise from rural obscurity to exceptional modern metropolis is inextricably bound to the history of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran. Lacking the pre-Islamic historical pedigree normally associated with larger cities in Iran, like Shiraz or

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[64] The city of Esfahan is likewise considered to be divided by the *Zayanderud* into a supposedly culturally conservative north and a more liberal south (Khosravi, 2017, p. 145).

[65] It is with some caution however that I introduce terms like "liberal" or "conservative", as they do not map well onto Persian. What I am attempting to do is to communicate a category of local terms used to describe the various 'environments' [*mohit*] of Mashhad, and Iran at large. My concern lies especially in not wanting to reproduce the "antimonies of domination/resistance, modern/traditional, or secular/religious" (Malekzadeh, 2011, p. 8) that have plagued social scientific scholarship on Iran. The dilemma arises because many of my informants used precisely that terminology to describe difference. Other appellations were even more pejorative: *Aghab mānde* [backwards], *bifarhang/bikelās* [cultureless/classless], *khoshk* ['dry'], *efrāti* ['fundamentalist'] or *khodnemāyi* ['show-off'], *puldār* [rich], and *gharbzade* ['west-struck']. At the same time, the primary political distinction made in Iran, between 'reformists' [*eslāhtalabān*] and 'principalists' [*osulgarān*], seems too abstract, and neither camp would easily fit into the mould of liberal or conservative as it is understood in Western discourse. Thus, the interlocutors I refer to as 'conservative' often spoke of themselves as 'traditional' or 'religious', and compared themselves to those who lived in wealthier parts of the city and "looked down on them". Those I represent as 'liberal' usually referred to themselves as 'intellectual' [*roshanfekr*]. Both tended to read the other as exceptional and their own status as normative. These terms intersect too with the politics of class and status aspiration.

[66] The relationship between centre and periphery in Iran has often been overlooked. As Ehsani (2009) notes however, it was critical in shaping the Revolution.

Esfahan that trace their origins in Persian antiquity, Mashhad came into being only after the Arab-Islamic invasion of Iran in the 7th century. Beginning life as the village of Sanābād, between the more important sites of Tus to the north and Nishapur to the south, it was only thrust into fame by virtue of being the final resting place of the Eighth Shi'ite Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al Riḍa, or as he is known in Persian, Emām Rezā, and referred to elsewhere in this thesis as 'Imam Reza'. Ordered to the town of Merv (now in Turkmenistan) at the behest of the then Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma'mun, the Imam died at Sanābād in 818CE, his death attributed in Shi'ite tradition to poisoning at the hands of the Caliph. Within a century, the resting place was known as Mashhad, 'place of the martyr' in Arabic.

Early beautification projects did take place under Sunni rulers, such as Timurid ruler Shāhrukh Mirza (1377-1477CE) and his wife Gowharshād, who had a mosque built in her name as a congregational mosque [masjed-e jāme'] for the city in 1418. But it was the Safavids who adopted Shi'ism as a national religion that made the haram a critical location of the dissemination of state ideology, especially given the pilgrimage cities of Mecca, Medina, Najaf, and Karbala lay outside Safavid control. Farhat (2014) notes that the Safavids set a precedent followed by later rulers, transforming the holy city into an arena where orchestrated displays of piety, architectural embellishments and the dispensation of charitable acts through the establishment of endowments enhanced the Shahs' spiritual kinship with the Shi'i imams, reinforced their political claims as heirs of the imamate, and strengthened the position of Shi'ism in their realm (Farhat, 2014, pp. 201-202).

Under the second-to-last royal dynasty, the Qajars (1789-1925), Mashhad continued to grow as a locus of national spirituality, even as Iran's imperial domains were whittled away, leaving the city ultimately a frontier town on the eastern border. It was during this period that the centre settled its reputation for reactionary politics and religion, and opposition to the liberalising forces elsewhere in the country. In 1839, in the shadow of a pogrom in Shiraz, the Jewish community of Mashhad was likewise forcibly converted to Islam. Despite permission being given four years later for communities to return to their original faith, the Mashhadi Jewish community, now 'New Muslims' [*Jadid al-Islam*], remained under the scrutiny of their neighbours and survived as a crypto-community hiding all visible forms of Jewish practice (Nissimi, 2003). In the lead up to the Russian assault on the shrine in 1912, European inhabitants and visitors remarked upon the city's inhabitants' hostility to foreigners and those of other religions, and the importance of ritual purity (Matthee, 2018).

Mashhad again was the seat of opposition to a new liberalising Shah, Reza Shah Pahlavi, with military forces from Iranian Azerbaijan bombarding a collection of disgruntled locals who had sought

sanctuary [*bast neshini*] in the Gowharshād mosque (Eshaghi, 2016) in protest at the Shah's anti-hijab laws of 1936 known as the *kashf-e hejāb* "the unveiling" (see Beck & Nashat, 2004). It was, like many other large cities in Iran, a place of major demonstrations during the Revolutionary period, and has consistently voted for conservative candidates against reformists until the Presidency of Hassan Rouhani.

1.3.3   The Shrine now

As home to the Imam Reza shrine, Mashhad is the holiest place in Iran, a fact that lies at the heart of the city's identity. Coming into the city all pilgrims and visitors to Mashhad are greeted by a uniform visage: two grand portraits – one of the deceased Ayatollah Khomeini, the other of current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei[67] waving hands outstretched over an imaginary crowd; beneath them sits an image of the gold dome and minaret of the Shrine of Imam Reza. The sign welcomes pilgrims, declaring "Honourable pilgrims, welcome to the city of heaven, the holy resting place of Imam Reza, peace be upon him*"*. Few aspects of life in Mashhad are not in some manner coloured by their relationship to the shrine. It is the heart of the city, visible, if not always directly, then through the cluster of hotel skyscrapers that cling to its perimeter, a sudden dip in the horizon indicative of its place.

The focus of adoration lies beneath the gold dome that is at the centre of the shrine complex, where the body of the deceased Imam is located. The grave itself is not especially different from that of other Emāmzāde dotted across Iran – a marble sarcophagus inscribed with florid Arabic prose under the golden *zarih*[68], divided into women's and men's sections by a thick plastic partition.[69] What *is* different is the intensity of devotion. As one moves closer to the tomb, the crowds become denser and denser, pilgrims jostling against each other to try and move as close to the *zarih*. The brave amongst the crush will reach out to touch the lattice of the *zarih*, stroking it, touching it, kissing it, rubbing kerchiefs up against it. Amidst the jumble of individual prayers spoken in a whisper is the constant uttering of the salavāt (see Chapter Four)*,* its rhythmic call and response filling the air. Few make it close enough to touch the zarih with anything other than a bare brush with the tips of fingers, *khādems*[70] with lurid green feather dusters in hands gentling hitting pilgrims or offering verbal exultations to ensure that they kept moving along.

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[67]Khamenei also delivers his annual *Nowruz* message at the Shrine.
[68] Ornate, usually gilded, lattice structures that cover the grave of a holy figure in Islam. The *zarih* at the shrine was originally wood, and had been replaced a number of times.
[69] The inner sanctum of the shrine is completely segregated along gender lines, with men and women entering via separate entrances. The rest of the shrine – all the main courtyards – are open to both men and women.
[70] Servants of the shrine.

The saintly character of the deceased Imam means that pilgrims are expected not to turn their back to the *zarih* while in close proximity to it, so as they are ushered out, the assembled turn facing the tomb, moving backwards away from it, hands on heart as they recite prayers. Even with the high ceilings and open space, the halls around the tomb remained a congested press of people reciting devotionals, some sitting cross-legged on carpets, others performing their *namāz*, some even propped up against walls. Bookshelves piled with identical green volumes containing the texts of invocations take up what little remaining space there is. Beyond the central mausoleum space, spilling out from the central shrine, are the seven courtyards [*sahn*], which eventually give way to the city around them. To the immediate south and west of the shrine, old neighbourhoods of the city are in the process of being converted into hotel space, the most expensive all built off Imam Reza Boulevard that runs directly south. North and east of the shrine in the neighbourhood of Nowghān are other crumbling remnants of the old city not yet gentrified, the term "behind the haram/shrine" [*posht-e haram*] synonymous with these supposedly crime-riddled and lower-class regions.

Part of the capacity of the shrine to project an air of authority over the rest of the city, and the province of Khorasan-e Razavi of which Mashhad is the capital, is through the extraordinary degree of power that its governing authority – the Foundation of the Sacred Threshold [*Bonyād-e āstān-e quds-e razavi*]has managed to accumulate. A *vaghf*[71], the *bonyād* is the supra-governmental organisation for various charities, industries, and other organisations across the country, with an estimated income of nearly $US2 billion annually in 2004 (Saeidi, 2004). In addition to this, the bonyād owns property across Mashhad, not to mention Iran, and to drive past a large, vacant, or walled-up but otherwise unused space in the city is to be informed that the land belongs to Imam Reza, i.e. it is owned by the *vaghf*. The leadership of the *bonyād*, until 2016 Ayatollah Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, and from then to the present failed presidential candidate and head of the country's judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, in conjunction with the city's prayer leader Ahmad Alamolhoda (the latter's father-in-law), are largely understood as responsible for stifling any attempts to liberalise the atmosphere of the city, with actions like banning concerts. As a centre of clerical power, training, and of folk piety, Mashhad was also often frequently compared with the other supposedly 'ultra-conservative' city of Qom, just south of Tehran. The power of religious institutions and the holiness of the city were understood as part of both the fabric of the city and responsible for its 'skewed' demographic: many of my informants who were not natives to the city, or whose family had not lived here for generations, said that their parents had arrived or chosen to migrate to the city

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[71] Arabic *waqf*, meaning land, property, or other forms of wealth donated in perpetuity to an Islamic religious foundation for the purpose of the 'public' good.

because of its sacred character. The city was understood to attract the most conservative and religious Iranians.[72]

In pointing to the shrine and to the religious life of the city, again what I want to evidence is the narrativisation of a sense that Mashhad was unlike other major cities (with the exception perhaps of Qom). Although other cities in Iran had small shrines, my informants pointed to the haram-e motahar and its associated institutions suffusing the city with a distinct atmosphere of conservative religion, something supposedly quite unlike the liberal air that was said to pervade northern Tehran or other purportedly less religious cities like Esfahan and Shiraz.

1.4 Conclusion: Narrativising exception

There are two major points I want to conclude on. The first is to say that all social groupings clearly have their own narratives of history, place, identity, etc. that they understand as making them distinct and separate from their neighbours. What I have tried to do in this chapter is to point to those senses of difference that build more than just a sense of distinct identity but create an *exceptional* identity. It is one thing for a country to be different from others, another thing altogether to consider oneself not bound by the same laws and forms that shape the destiny of other countries. Ultimately then it does not matter whether Iran is 'really' different from its neighbours at all, nor would it matter if they were exactly the same. Rather, the importance lies in the fact that a discourse of exceptionalism is *mobilised* by Iranians, and by Mashhadis. In pointing to the various elements that they understand as setting themselves apart from their neighbours, Iranians, and in the case of Mashhad, Mashhadis, are able to say, in effect - we are not like them, the rules that define them do not define us, we must be understood with relationship to our own particularities. Secondly, it is this sense of particularity that I think is essential to understanding how this chapter relates to the broader theme of this thesis – utopianism. What I want to suggest is that in thinking this through we can conceptualise exceptionalism as providing the potential for utopia. An exceptional society (Iran) and an exceptional place (Mashhad) are not subject to the ordered systems that define the limitations of other countries or places. That does not mean that such behaviours were understood as being necessarily 'exceptionally good'. But such a sense of exceptionalism still framed the possibility of reaching some ultimate point of perfection. Such an analysis helps position our understanding of utopia as something that is refracted i.e. experienced very broadly, pervasive in the background of life, sometimes manifest very explicitly, at other moments less so. This undergirds how we will move forward in the coming chapters. In the following

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[72] Rapid urbanisation has seen Mashhad surpass Tabriz, an industrial centre, as the second largest city in the country.

chapter especially, I look to perfectionism as something quite categorical, a powerful centripetal force that brings other discourses into its orbit. We will see this through the lens of how my interlocutors rationalised their participation in fast money schemes. Rather than seeing these as exclusively matters of wealth creation, I look to how, as the dust settled in the aftermath of participation in these schemes, my informants drew them into a story of individual edification that was understood as part of the process of reaching perfection.

2 Chapter Two

Projects of self-betterment and discourses of perfection:

Reckoning with multi-level marketing after the fact

"Everyone wants to be rich here, and they want to have it overnight." - Dr. Rajavi

2.1 Introduction: The network marketer

As we move through this thesis, I want to shine a light on different aspects of the utopian legacy as they refract through life in contemporary Mashhad. If the Introduction to this thesis and Chapter One rooted utopianism as the product of particular historical and cultural trajectories, then Chapter Two picks up this same theme while illuminating the work it does as a metanarrative that insinuates itself in other stories, pulling them into its orbit. In this chapter, our story begins with a tale of multi-level marketing. Almost immediately after we arrived in Iran, while waiting in line to renew our visas, we met Āzar, a 21-year-old female student at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Despite being Iranian-born, as an Afghan she, like us, was technically foreign, her ethnic-Hazara parents having fled the war in Afghanistan and Taliban rule. As an Afghan passport holder, once each year she was required by the Iranian government to renew her residency permit. So it was that we ran into each other, bonding over our shared experience of being 'foreign' through what was at the time deeply broken English and Persian. Over the course of our fieldwork, Āzar and her friends and sisters Sepideh (18) and Parvin (25) would become close informants, routinely meeting just to 'hang out' and providing each other with some relief from Iranian social norms which the young women felt alienated from both by virtue of personal ideology and Afghan nationality.

With little financial and social capital, entertainment opportunities for the young women were limited. Trips overseas, unless to Afghanistan, were out of the question, and even moving around within Iran required permission from local authorities. Most of our socialising was confined to wandering the confines of Pārk-e Mellat or eating ice cream in any of the many stores that ringed its edges. Our catch up in late spring was an exception though. Ringing us out of the blue, Āzar insisted that we come with her to Bāgh-e Vakilābād, a semi-natural, partly artificial, nature reserve on the outskirts of the city towards the west, close to the pleasure towns of Shāndiz and Torghabeh. Accessible by bus from within Mashhad, it was a popular spot for picnicking and relaxing among poorer families and young people without a disposable income[73]. Our afternoon was spent ducking

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[73] Unlike the nearby *Torghabeh* and *Shāndiz*, one did not have to buy a meal or a drink to sit and relax at *Bāgh-e vakilabād*.

in and out of a cold stream, splashing water at each other, and munching on lurid orange *pofak*, small cheese puffs with the texture and consistency of Styrofoam.

Under the dappled sunlight by the riverbank, we went uncomplaining about the heat and the sun, but as soon as we emerged to catch the bus on our return, our pale skin shone almost luminescent in the hot sun. Āzar seized the opportunity: "You should always wear sunscreen, you know. If you don't, you'll get wrinkles faster. I have these products, they're especially discounted, because I work with the company, but you have to buy them within the next month. You can sell them too…" On our trip back to Mashhad, Āzar regaled my partner with the benefits of Avon, a glossy brochure suddenly produced from her bag, Cyrillic writing pointing immediately to origins in Russia. Although we politely declined her offer, Āzar nonetheless rang us in the following week to confirm that we were absolutely certain there was nothing we wanted from her. Although we demurred again, Āzar's marketing prowess would nonetheless become a feature of our time spent with her.

Only a few months later, we were invited out to Golshahr, a mostly Afghan suburb[74] and one-time slum that had now been almost fully incorporated into Mashhad proper. Although we had been invited to spend time with Sepideh and Parvin, Āzar appeared, inviting us to join her at Eram Park, a recreational spot provided by the city government. Sitting down opposite the duck pond and again munching *pofak*, Āzar excused herself to go to another table, where she was shortly greeted by two Iranians, a husband and wife draped in the black chador. Āzar struck an image quite different from her usual, casual wear: having dispensed with her regular shawls, she was dressed in a stylish but conservative manteaux, and a *maghna'e*, the tight, black headscarf that was considered 'professional' wear for women working in government offices or other formal places in Iran. Her immaculately detailed make-up hid her acne and gave an aura of age, as she again pulled out a brochure and began to gesticulate pointedly at the products within. Opposite her, the couple sat engrossed, and although we were too far away to catch the conversation, it was clear that Āzar came across as a model of consummate professionalism, a well-rehearsed dialogue pouring from her lips, a seamlessly interwoven act that she had obviously performed before. "What is she doing?" I asked. Sepideh and Parvin responded "network marketing. She's becoming an expert [*herfiyeh*], no?"[75]

Multi-level-marketing projects, as well as Ponzi and Pyramid schemes, have been typically read as exemplary of Iran's ongoing arc away from the Islamic socialist ethos of the early revolutionary

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[74] Approximately 80-90% as estimated by our informants.
[75] The English term network marketing has been incorporated into colloquial Persian. The formal "*bāzār-yābiye shabakeyi*" was unheard of at a street level, but is used in government documents.

period and towards a broad, albeit not universal, embrace of economic liberalism and wealth. There is an established body of literature that points to the shift from an ethos of pious poverty associated with the Revolution, to a more distinctly consumerist atmosphere, where behaviours of class distinction, ostentatious wealth, and an ethic of 'keeping up with the Jones' [*cheshm o ham cheshmi*] have become typical (see e.g. Adelkhah, 2000; Khosravi, 2008; Olszewska, 2013). Even as they have become normative, so too have they been criticised, by both my own interlocutors and academics (e.g. Khosravi, 2017) alike. Khosravi (2017) cites it as evidence of the viciousness of contemporary Iranian society, a 'social wound' [*āsib-e ejtemā'i*], itself a product of an uncaring and oppressive government.

Like others (e.g. Cox, 2018; Krige, 2012; Musaraj, 2011), I am unconvinced however that explicitly negatively theorising or gloomily moralising these changes provides us with significant insight into how those who actually participate in such practices understand their own behaviour. Rather, it pays greater dividends to look to how my interlocutors positioned themselves. What I found particularly striking was, when asking my interlocutors to reflect on their participation in Avon, themes of wealth, initially at the fore, gave way to what is best summarised by Li (2007) as the "will to improve". Although our scenarios are very different, Li's analysis of projects of development in central Sulawesi, mine of individual projects of 'wealth creation' in north-eastern Iran, I find the metaphor useful, and note certain similarities between the two contexts, a unity of purpose, a shared "benevolent, even utopian" (Li, 2007, p. 5) intention, and to paraphrase, a desire to make the self better than it is. Not only are my interlocutors seeking to improve themselves, but such, as I have stressed earlier, such improvement is couched amidst and brought into the discursive parameters of perfectionism, the belief that through such actions one can, and will, reach a perfect self. In this way, we might think of this particular manifestation of the individual "will to improve" as a subset of the broader utopian arc that is explicated throughout this thesis. This chapter then speaks to the potency of perfectionism as a discourse that is, like I suggested in my Introduction, able to pick up other threads and weave them into a story of its own making. That is not to imply that a motivation for wealth is absent, as we will see. Rather it is to suggest that in their post-hoc rationalisations it is other themes that are primarily engaged. In essence, these stories of participation in fast-money schemes are not fixed narratives, but rather complex, time-contingent assemblages that are pressed into the employ of competing ideologies at different moments. In exploring these themes, I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first part examines the emergence of a consumer society in Iran, and the ethic of ostentatious wealth that frames the rise and rise of multi-level-marketing schemes and the related emergence of other fast money projects. The second part of the chapter looks in depth to a case study of a key informant, referred to here as

Zhāleh, and her participation in two such multi-level-marketing schemes, concentrating particularly on how she rationalised her participation in them.

2.2 A changing society: Genealogies of Iranian consumerism and the emergence of a 'neo-liberal' society

The consumerism that has given rise to mutli-level marketing and fast money schemes in contemporary Iran has old roots. Schayegh (2012) suggests that the origins of this consumerism lie in the 19th century, when goods from Russia, the West, British India, and the Ottoman Empire began entering the country in large quantities. Amin (2004) notes that the 1920s and '30s saw the emergence of a 'beauty culture', [76] heavily influenced by American concepts, and in conjunction with the Women's Awakening Project of 1936-41. Nonetheless the development of such a culture was hampered by political instability following the Constitutional Revolution, World Wars One and Two, and the Great Depression, with Schayegh (2012, p. 613) asserting that the "social class basis for mass consumerism…did not crystallize until the 1950s". By the 1950s and '60s, Tehran had reached a population of some two million, growth particularly strong among the middle classes who benefited from the rise in state employment (Schayegh, 2012). The other significant factor that shaped Iranian consumer habits at this time was the introduction of television. As Sreberny and Mohammadi (1994) note, the earliest commercial station – Television of Iran - run by an American, Vance Hallack, was marketed to an emerging demographic of "status conscious housewives"(Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994, p. 62), its viewer audience increasing from 2.1 million in 1970 to 15 million in 1974, with the majority of air time devoted to serials and movies from the US.

The rise of a consumerist society in the 1950s and '60s was not without opposition. Much has been written about the intellectual opposition to the import of Western culture among particular academic circles, most famously iterated by the likes of Jalal Al-Ahmad, whose work *Gharbzadegi* (1982 [1962]) was a trenchant critique of both European thought and the supposedly pale Iranian-made imitation of the West. Similar critiques of "worldliness" were made by Ali Shari'ati (1979). Khomeini too decried the adoption of Western consumer habits. In his tome *The Unveiling of Secrets* [*Kashf ol-asrār*], he bemoans the adoption of European dress, and chastises intellectuals for "strolling up and down the streets with a chamber-pot-shaped hat…occupied with naked girls, being proud of this state of affairs" (cited in Said Amir Arjomand, 1984, p. 206), a claim he repeats throughout the work.

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[76] In the contemporary, a culture of consumer beauty continues to persist in the noted (Lenehan, 2011; Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, & Coene, 2018) proliferation of rhinoplasties.

It is not surprising then that when Khomeini came to power following the Revolution of 1979, the newly minted regime did much to eradicate and reverse, ideologically and aesthetically, the Western-oriented consumer culture that had emerged throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Often forgotten too is that during the Revolution, the metanarrative of many of those groups instrumental in the overthrow of the Shah was rooted in leftist, radical, and communitarian philosophies that proposed a fundamentally different and egalitarian model of society, rather than exclusively Islamist ones (M. Hegland, 2013; Mirsepassi-Ashtiani & Moghadam, 1991; Moaddel, 1991; S. Rahnema & Moghissi, 2001; Saeidi, 2004). Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Moghadam (1991) suggest that it was the critical conjuncture of communist militants, engineers, teachers, and leftist Kurds and Turkmen that gave Islamists the required impetus and potency to extract the imperial household. This ethic of interventionist economics and welfare provision, even as it strayed from its most radical potential incarnation, has persisted as a key trope of the new 'ethical community' the revolutionaries hoped to forge. Enacting this policy, vast parts of the economy were nationalised, including the country's oil industry, the anniversary of which remains a national holiday.

Where the Pahlavi's imperial period was marked by a particular aesthetic modality, favouring the pre-Islamic, sometimes-Zoroastrian motifs and imperial pomp manifest most famously in the garish 2500th anniversary celebrations of the Persian monarchy, Khomeini's new Islamic state was conspicuous for its nearly monochromatic tableaus of black and green, the colour of Shi'ite mourning in the case of the former and one associated with the Sayyeds, the Prophet himself, and the third Imam in the latter. In tandem, state ideologues pushed a pious image of self-denial, frugality, and asceticism that valorised humility and poverty, particularly as the war with Iraq set in. While famously claiming that the revolution was "not about the price of watermelons", a supposed rebuff to the notion that economic inequality had any foundation in the Revolutionary ethos, rooted in traditional Shi'ite imagery of the 'suffering' Imams, the semi-mendicant lifestyle of the radical clerical classes at the time, and a revolutionary groundswell that drew heavily on egalitarian rhetoric, Ayatollah Khomeini became the embodiment of the new, humble, fakir-like mysticism and asceticism that Iranians were encouraged to imitate (Brumberg, 2001; Moin, 1999; Seyed-Gohrab, 2011). My interlocutors frequently alluded to his home in Jamārān, northern Tehran, as an example of his religious poverty, and even critics and opponents admitted that he lived 'very simply'.

Yet the model of righteous hardship proved unstable as a trope, if it ever was truly hegemonic. By the late 1980s, the centralised economy had been virtually exhausted by the war with Iraq, and under the authority of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the country began a process of

economic liberalisation, with flow-on effects that directly impacted consumer behaviour, such that by the mid-1990s Adelkhah noted that:

> the principle of competition, in Iran's social conditions, is giving rise to solid conformism….The result, despite the severity of the economic crisis, is a feeling of bourgeoisification, a real frenzy of consumption which is in contrast with the revolutionary romanticism of 1978-79 and even with the patriotic austerity of the war years (Adelkhah, 2000, p. 173).

Precisely why this consumer society re-emerged in Iran, and in particular how an ethic of conspicuous consumption originated remains a matter of contention. Goli M. Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam (2011) noted in their work instances of competitiveness and 'envy' among research participants, arguing for antecedents in the specifically 'Islamic' structures of the Republic. They draw a direct correlation between the difficulty for women in obtaining a divorce under Iran's *sharia*, an attempt to strategically 'game' the system by brides cognisant of such potential troubles, and the increasing amount demanded for bride price [*mehriyeh*], citing these as the cause of *cheshm o ham cheshmi* among families. Stearns (2006, p. 133) likewise comments on the emergence of Iranian middle-class urbanites, anxious to keep pace with the latest trends in acquisition as the basis for maintaining a "modern" home.

My own interlocutors were wont to place the blame heavily on the shoulders of satellite television and the internet. Critical literature on the contemporary use of the internet in Iran (e.g. Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) and the use of satellite dishes (e.g. Alikhah, 2008) to receive foreign television stations – both produced in Persian and in other languages – points to the relatively widespread availability of discourses external to Republican institutions, although whether they are 'responsible' for the emergence of such a culture remains an open question. Nonetheless, my interlocutors frequently complained that other Iranians took their cues about what constituted a 'successful life' from the Hollywood movies and soap operas they consumed, falsely correlating the exaggerated wealth of Los Angeles and similar cities with the income of 'typical' American or European communities.

In most of the other material that broaches this question of the genesis of a consumer culture, blame is normally attributed to the adoption of new economic policies by state actors, juxtaposed to the near 'Islamic socialist' model proposed in the early days of the revolution, or in the period of reconstruction following the war with Iraq (1980-1988) (e.g. Houshyar, 2014; Khosravi, 2017). Khosravi (2017), in particular, comparing Iran to work by Allison (2013) on Japan, makes the case this competitive sociality is a by-product of the embrace of global neo-liberalism in Iran. This saw a bleeding through of economic individualism into social values that oversaw a shift from "collectivity,

solidarity, togetherness, and prioritizing a collective social whole towards individual interest" and a "politics of survival" (Abélès, 2010) that is characterised by "insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 231). "In the shadow of the epistemic shift [from collectivism to individualism], desires are replaced by anxieties and hope is replaced with fear", contends Khosravi, individualism turning life into an "arena of competition" (2017, p. 232). The blame in particular ought to be pinned on the last two decades characterised by "the valorisation of the entrepreneurial individual, a preference for the market over rights, the withdrawal of the state from the service sector, and prolonged un(der)employment – all characteristics", he argues, "of what is called neoliberalism"(Khosravi, 2017, p. 9), despite the fact that he maintains Iran is *not* a neoliberal state, but is rather what we see are "fragments of the consequences of neoliberalism" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 9).

I am not convinced however that a reading of the contemporary Iranian economy as typified by precarious neoliberalism does full justice to the complexities of the present. For instance, particular forms of wealth display – like very public declarations of the cost of gifts or the amount of money donated as they are presented to the bride and groom at weddings – were understood by my informants to be an old practice. Furthermore, even after the move towards more supposedly 'free market' policies and the privatisation of some state assets that began under the 'reconstructionist' presidency Hashemi Rafsanjani and continued under Mohammad Khatami, the presidency of firebrand populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is notable for its confusing interweaving of partial cuts to welfare in the form of the end to subsidies on petrol, in conjunction with generous handouts (Harris, 2017). In fact, that post-Revolutionary society can be analysed by a continuous slide away from a welfare state and towards one that is 'neo-liberal-like' has been thoroughly complicated (Harris, 2010b, 2010c, 2013, 2017). Instead, Harris suggests that much of the last twenty years is better characterised not so much by the triumph of the unregulated market, but by "parasitic asset stripping" from the public sector and the expansion of "subcontracted 'new states' under the guise of parastatal and cooperative entities" [77], leading to what he refers to as "pseudo-privatisation" (Harris, 2013, pp. 45, 66-67)[78]. That is to say that we cannot assume contemporary consumerism in

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[77] A pattern not dissimilar to those found in many post-socialist contexts.

[78] The year 2010 saw another attempt at the iteration of an alternative economic model, conservative forces close to the Supreme Leader launching the "the resistance economy" [*eqtesād-e moqāvemati*] (Smyth, 2016). Marking a renewed attempt by elements within the conservative wings of state to establish material autarky under conditions of economic sanction, avoiding the need to strike a deal with Western powers for an end to the nuclear program, the resistance economy was seen as in particular as a rebuff to President Rouhani's ongoing attempt at trade liberalization. Marking the Persian New Year in 2017 with his typical speech in Mashhad, the Supreme Leader declared the post hoc relabeling of the previous year [1395] the "Year of the Resistance Economy, Implementation and Action", the coming one "The Year of the Resistance Economy: Production and Employment", noting in particular his concern that it be accompanied by "security and welfare" (Faghihi, 2017). Similarly, during the 2017 Presidential election season, although ultimately unsuccessful in wresting the presidency, conservative candidate Ebrāhim Raisi campaigned on a platform of a return to economic populism

Iran is exclusively the product of the neo-liberalisation of the Islamic Republic's socio-economic order.

2.2.1 *Poz dādan, pāf va dāf,* and *cheshm o ham cheshmi*: The contemporary ethic of ostentatious wealth

By the time I arrived in Iran in early 2015, public displays of wealth were fully in vogue. In 2014, the Instagram page *Rich Kids of Tehran* exploded into headlines across the globe. Styling itself as revealing a lifestyle that was in stark contrast to images, encouraged by both the state and international media, of Iran as a deeply religious society, the website presented images of scantily clad women, luxury cars and homes, and wild parties, all within the confines of northern Tehran and all valorising conspicuous wealth and consumption. The images directly spurred the creation of a rival Instagram page, *Poor Kids of Tehran*, with images of impoverished Iranians, many of them children, showing the 'other side' obscured in the world of *Rich Kids*. Indirectly, *Rich Kids of Tehran* was seen as symptomatic of the inequality that was read as responsible for the damaging riots that rocked the country at the beginning of 2018 (Bengali & Mostaghim, 2018).

Yet as economic and social inequality continued to gnaw into the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, even the clerical elite were coming around to the notion that 'being rich' was not only a potential

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and welfarism, managing to capture nearly 40% of the vote total, indicating a continued appetite for interventionist economic policies. Rouhani himself has not been unamenable to expanding the welfare state, and one of the 'unsung' achievements of his presidency has been the expansion of state healthcare coverage to some 11 million unemployed and impoverished Iranians who were previously unprotected, hardly the act of a government that was pursuing aggressively neo-liberal policies (Dehghan, 2017). Today, Iran's economy is a complex hybrid that exhibits elements of both a free market and state socialism, with a large para-state sector that controls potentially as much as 60% of the economy. The strength of these institutions – the largest of which, *Āstān-e Quds-e Razavi* is based in Mashhad at the Shrine of Imam Reza - ensures that much of that which is privatised nominally by the state ultimately ends up in the hands of "parastatal organizations including banks, cooperatives, pension funds, foundations, and military-linked contractors". Indeed Harris' (2017) work convincingly demonstrates that the post-Revolutionary history of Iran can be characterised by the massive expansion of the welfare state in the country. This is not to propose that there have not been significant changes since the Revolution – after all, forty years is a long time. It is rather to suggest that the story is not just a one-way street, characterised by the inexorable decline of the welfare state and its replacement with a competitive market-based governmental model. In its place we have an almost exquisitely complicated situation where elements of a commitment to a semi-Spartan selfless and ascetic model of life persists in government ideology *even as* competitive, status-oriented, and class-conscious social forms have also emerged (Olszewska, 2013). Khosravi arguably also stretches the concept of 'precarity' to the very limits of meaningful usage. Precarity in his reading becomes a "defining feature of society in general", "one form of insecurity leading to another form, engendering multiple precarities that undermine and de-securitize one's life condition", leading to a situation in which Iranians are hopeless, purposeless, alienated and disconnected from their community (Khosravi, 2008, pp. 4-5). Responding to this, let me note firstly, conversations with my informants who lived through the Revolution and then the war with Iraq demonstrate that a sense of instability has long defined life in Iran, certainly preceding the last twenty years by at least two decades. While definitely high inflation, the collapse of the value of the *rial*, high unemployment and especially youth unemployment all have an impact on how stable Iranians feel their lives to be, in many ways Iran's position vis-à-vis its neighbours and with regards to internal security have improved significantly over the last twenty years, and in comparing themselves to their neighbours, all my informants noted that Iran was at least safe [keshvar-e amn-e]. In his review of Khosravi's work, Beeman (2017) also notes that many of the behaviours that are described in the book are comparable to his own as a youth growing up in America in the 1960s, and are not therefore exclusive to Iran.

but also commendable lifestyle. Where the rhetoric of local sheikhs had once encouraged humility, in a manner reminiscent of Protestant prosperity gospels, now my informants – including those in impoverished parts of Mashhad – pointed to sermons that praised wealth and riches as a sign of God's favour (cf Adelkhah, 2000; Godazgar, 2007; Harris, 2017). Aping the *Rich Kids of Tehran*, albeit within the norms of Islamic modesty promulgated by the state, Instagram accounts like that of Anashid Hoseini, a self-styled 'Islamic fashion model', and Amir Hoseini, the son of the Iranian ambassador to Denmark, amongst others, raised contention among Iranians at home and abroad as symptomatic of an out-of-touch clerical elite whose children – the *Āghāzāde* – had no qualms about displaying their wealth (Taqhazāde, 2018).

The reality is, however, that for all that Rich Kids of Tehran and their religious counterparts were criticised, displays of ostentatious wealth, a preference for brand names and particularly Western brand names, and a spirit of competitiveness, were engrained at multiple levels of society. Throughout our time in Iran, my colleagues and friends regaled us with tales of wealth on show and how the ethic of "*poz dādan*" – 'showing off' or 'striking a pose' – had become something close to omnipresent. Emblematic of this shift were the social archetypes referred to as "*pāf*" and "*dāf*", men and women respectively, whose distinct appearance set them aside as the most obvious consumers of Mashhad's emerging culture of conspicuous consumption. Typically found around Pārk-e Mellat, along Sajjād Boulevard, and close to the shopping districts that followed Malekābād and then Ahmadābād, young men and women with impossibly tall coiffured hair, plastic or chiselled noses, caked on make-up, tight manteaux or skinny jeans, displayed as much flesh as they could. Muscles bulging or with hints of midriff, they scandalised conservative Mashhadis – "their navels are visible" [*nāf-e-shun dide mishe*], our conservative lecturers would cry at the state of such young women – and were figures of envy and desire among others.

Part of their appeal and the focus of aspiration was specifically linked firmly to the possession of brand-name consumer items: Western commercial giants always preferable, all the more so as under sanction quite often they were difficult to come by and had to be illegally smuggled into the country. Muhammad, a 26-year-old lower middle-class salesman complained that when he had gone to buy a new mobile, he had been content with a Chinese-made Huawei, a product that he felt met all the specifications that he required. Yet a soon as he had purchased the item, friends and co-workers questioned why he hadn't bought a more expensive Samsung or iPhone. In both instances, Muhammad said the latter two brands were more expensive, the iPhone not only more expensive but less practical because of sanctions, and yet they remained eminently more desirable. Another friend, Hamed, 32, told a similar story. An engineer, he had once dropped his mobile phone while

working, breaking its screen, but he had continued to use it because the cracks in the glass did not affect its useability. When he and Elhām engaged however, she insisted he dispose of it and purchase a new smart phone, a broken if useable device unacceptable. Likewise, when Hamed had gone to buy Elhām a mobile as a present, she insisted on an iPhone, because "a phone that is not an iPhone, is not a phone".

In a similar vein were the practices of buying new furniture as part of the annual New Year [*Nowruz*] celebrations in March. In a conversation with Leyla, a 32-year-old single woman still living with her parents in the poorer suburbs of Mashhad to the east of the shrine, she stressed the paramount importance of the 'newness' of purchases, even among those who were relatively impoverished:

Simon (S): So at *Nowruz*…lots of Iranians buy new furniture, what happens to the old furniture?

Leyla (L): To the garbage, simple as that.

S: Even if the furniture is not very old?

L: It is not very old! It was bought last year. See, to us…your car, your house, whatever you've got in your house, your clothes, your furniture, your carpets, these are very important to you, and if you want people to think high of you, you have to change them…

S: All the time?

L: All the time, every year. You have to show…you have to show that you are rich. How can you show this? Because you know we are in the habit of inviting people to our houses…and when we enter a person's house, we start thinking, we start looking this way…we just notice things, for instance the carpets, the furniture, the curtains…we pay attention to such things, and then we judge the house on how old or new everything is.

S: Just how old or new it is? Or how expensive?

L: The decoration, the quality, how expensive, everything. Yeah, we pay attention to such things…And that is the reason why we pay a lot of attention to whatever we have got in our house. We pay a lot of attention to the curtains, to the furniture, to the carpet, we change them a lot.

Special honour [*eftekhār*] was bestowed on those who were able to replace the furniture yearly. Leyla's story rang true in the new year, when a flurry of media appeared offering tips on how to make one's 'old furniture' appear new, although when it became known that an individual had purchased second hand goods, they were encouraged to return them as quickly as possible for a new product. The positive appraisal and embrace of wealth resulted not just in conspicuous consumption, but a particularly dogged kind of social competitiveness. Referred to as *cheshm o ham cheshmi*, the practice, Lelya attested, referred to:

Competing with each other. It refers to this competition. For instance, somebody goes to his or her cousin's house, and they see that they're using a new set of furniture, everything is new, they would come back, and they would decide to change everything, just because the cousin did that.

The term has appeared in some of the most recent literature of Iranian sociology and anthropology, and is typically taken to refer to material competition – in plastic surgery and especially rhinoplasty (Lenehan, 2011) , and in bride-price (Goli M Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Goli M. Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). Khosravi (2017, p. 232) summarises *cheshm o ham cheshmi* as "competition between families, neighbours, people who know each other, over being more successful than others", manifest also in educative policies like the school leaving certificate, the *konkur* (see Chapter Three), and metaphorically similar to *jolo zadan*, the practice of trying to outpace other drivers on the road.

These practices were also understood to be inflected by both gender and class. The expectation was that women would stress the cost of purchased goods and the place of purchase – wealthier parts of the city like Sajjād boulevard were ideal – while also deliberately inflating the price so as to evidence the degree of expenditure, the more the better. By comparison, men were expected to 'hunt for bargains', finding high quality goods at discount prices. It was also assumed that such practices were more common among those who had more limited education and were of lower social status, their closer relationships throwing into stronger light the contrasts in wealth between and within families and circles of friends. It had a particularly strong association with housewives [*khānedār*] from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who were said to spend much of their time "on the phone" comparing themselves to others. My interlocutors gave examples of women who saw a friend or colleague's necklace, and insisted that their husband buy a copy; who tried to outdo each other in buying the best dress for a wedding; or of the rural villager who buys a washing machine – even when the town is not connected to water mains – simply because their city cousin had one[79].

Overwhelmingly, practices of *cheshm o ham cheshmi*, and *poz dādan* were the subject of opprobrium by my middle-class interlocutors, who denied participation in such behaviours they saw as unbecoming. Understood as a pathway for the destruction of friendships and the poisoning of relations with in-laws, I remember vividly the condemnation of Dr Rajavi, a lecturer and friend at Ferdowsi University who took it upon himself to introduce us to "Meshti" culture: "Airs and graces" [*tashrifāt*], he said, "are a social wound [*asib-e ejtemāʿi*]. During *Nowruz*, you can't go to your mother-in-law's house on eid with the same clothes you wore last year. "Our honour/face [*āb-e ru*]

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[79] This is only a cursory analysis - wanting is a more comprehensive breakdown of how the practice of *cheshm o ham cheshmi* is inflected by class and gender.

has gone" [80], they would say! "You made it go!"" Or, as our close friend Zahra declared: "It's about showing off, showing to others that you're better than they are, that you're the best, you're the best!"

Yet I think that buying into this kind of broadly negative reading of contemporary consumer culture in Iran runs the risk of clouding our analysis. As they condemn elements of their own society, my interlocutors elided how some of these behaviours were placed within a moral horizon of individual improvement and betterment. In the following section I want to follow precisely those individual analyses and explications of participation in 'get-rich-quick' schemes to demonstrate that rather than being a singular logic of the rapid acquisition of wealth for its own sake, those among my interlocutors who participated in these fast money schemes presented more nuanced explanations. Here, participation in such schemes becomes not just about 'getting rich', but about the desire for self-improvement, and ultimately training oneself and gathering expertise to be a more perfect person.

2.3   Goldquest: Reasoning with fast money

In the final section of this chapter, I want to look more in-depth at the stories of one of my key informants, Zhāleh, who participated in a both a number of 'fast-money' schemes and in multi-level marketing projects, typically forms that are understood to emerge in the context of transitions towards overtly consumer societies (e.g. Musaraj, 2011). As I hope will become clear in the following paragraphs, in talking directly to Zhāleh about her motivations for joining Avon, I am sceptical that they are fully explained by reference just to greed, mania, or occult economies. That does not mean that I subscribe to the notion that dreams of financial success are totally absent from the minds of my participants when they take part, so much as to say that their motivations are multilayered. It is in this layering that I think is the best evidence of how these schemes operate as part of an answer to the question of how life might be improved, bettered, even perfected. Before I begin however, I provide a brief overview of the history of fast money schemes in Iran.

2.3.1   A history of fast money schemes and multi-level marketing in Iran

Predating the turn of the last Gregorian millennium, the first pyramid scheme in Iran was established in 1376/1997, under the name *Pentāgunā,* with a classic business model wherein members placed an initial down payment and in return received 'creditless paper contracts' while attempting to bring in more members to buy the aforementioned contracts. The managers of the company blocked

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[80] Literally "the water of [one's] face".

further sales and fled, thereafter searing the term "'Pyramid Scheme' into the economic vocabulary of Iran" (MashreghNews, 1390/2012). In 1377/1998, a network of companies – Seven Diamonds [*Haft almās*], Goldmine [*Goldmāin*], and ABL [*Ayi bi el*] entered the market, all components of source company Goldquest [*Goldkwest*], based in Hong Kong.

By 1382/2003, Goldquest had attracted some 15000 members and approximately 5 000 000 rial[81] weekly, with a total of some 300 billion rial leaving the country in the course of a month, and an internal turnover of some 240 billion rial per month (MashreghNews, 1390/2012). As the company spread across Iran, it birthed numerous smaller companies with the intention of obscuring the now infamous name of the mother company, and in doing so bringing in funds from participants who were unfamiliar with the secondary names. Over the course of two years, and similar to although perhaps not on quite the same nationwide-scale as in Papua New Guinea (Cox, 2018) and Albania (Musaraj, 2011), Goldquest managed to garner the membership of more than 800 000 Iranians, leading the majles to begin the process of legislating against the organisation. With even a whisper of legal action, the organisation began to collapse, the main leaders of the company fleeing to Dubai. From this point on, Pyramid schemes were rendered illegal in Iran.

Nonetheless, the Goldquest organisation survived and remodelled itself underground, emerging as '*Pul-Patu*' – literally 'money blanket' – they began to circulate mostly in regional cities and towns, avoiding the scrutiny of major centres. Revealed in 1387/2009, the government reiterated its declaration of illegality while religious figures also came out against the schemes. Once again though, the scheme dug further underground, opening up offices in villages. In 1389/2010, state forces under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior launched operation "Great Annihilation" [*enhedām-e bozorg*], implicating some 410 offices and 64 000 people in Tehran and closing locations across the city (MashreghNews, 1390/2012). In 2011, then Vice-President Mohammad-Reza Rahimi estimated that the companies had moved some $US8 billion dollars out of the country, with as many as three million Iranians caught up in the scheme (Khalaj, 2011). While Operation "Great Annihilation" marked effectively the formal end of corporate models that the government considered to be explicit examples of 'Pyramid schemes', similar schemes survived in two ways. First, they continued as they had done previously, as small underground entities – as witness to this, the Iranian media landscape is littered with examples of individuals duped by these unscrupulous organisations or new ones that emerge (FardaNews, 1396/2017; MizanOnline, 1395/2016). Second,

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[81] In 2012 this was significantly more than it is now.

these fast money schemes survive, rebranded as corporate entities operating using 'multi-level marketing' methods.

There is a vexed relationship between fast-money schemes and multi-level marketing. There seem to be significantly different forms of labour, desire, and consumption patterns (Cahn, 2008; Wilson, 2004) involved in multi-level marketing than in Ponzi or pyramid schemes. Yet in in some localities like China, state authorities have cracked down on multi-level marketing companies on the basis that they present a model that is a simple variation of a pyramid scheme (Mcmorrow & Myers, 2018). In Iran, an article by the conservative Young Journalists Club news agency in 2015 decried network marketing as "pyramid schemes in the online sphere" (Bāshgāh-e-Khabarnegarān-e-Javān, 1394/2015). Nonetheless, multi-level-marketing is considered legal in Iran, operating under a model whereby income is created as customers both purchase products from the parent company, selling them on to others, or by recruiting others to sell products and drawing a commission from those sales. It is important to note that even if we render fast money schemes and multi-level marketing distinct conceptual entities, there are slippery participatory boundaries that exist between these projects in practice. Over the course of the last decade, my key informant, Zhāleh, transitioned from one fast money scheme into a multi-level marketing project, and saw the two as being similar to one another. Furthermore, there was a single Persian verb to participate either in multi-level marketing or fast money schemes, *goldkwest kardan*. That does not mean that I am suggesting that they are exacty the same thing, but rather that there is clearly some kind of relationship between the two.

2.3.2 Interpreting fast money schemes and multi-level marketing

Fast money schemes and multi-level marketing have been interpreted in a variety of different ways over the past few decades. In the late 1990s, Jean and John Comaroff (1999) argued that pyramid and other fast money schemes were elements within a broader phenomenon they referred to as "occult economies", part of a magical encounter with emerging neo-liberal markets. Other analyses have focused on these schemes as mediating the transition from state socialism to a free-market economy. Musaraj (2011), for instance, criticises readings of fast money schemes as produced by "mania" or "ignorance", arguing instead that pyramid schemes in post-socialist Albania served to "mediate…the transition from socialism to neoliberalism and to actively shape new business practices that combined socialist forms of entrepreneurship with a particular politics of privatisation of the state" (Musaraj, 2011, p. 86). Her informants, even as they engaged in discourses of irrational contagion in recalling mass participation in the period from 1995-96, nonetheless situated their own participation with regard to "specific materialities", like the "overwhelming presence of *bollëk* [abundance] in cash" (Musaraj, 2011, p. 87). Krige (2012, p. 70), working in South Africa, places these

behaviours as entirely within the normative parameters of a social life filled with risks, suggesting that:

> risk taking in the field of illegal pyramid and Ponzi schemes is entirely in step with its equivalent in the trading of commodities and futures in global financial markets…moreover, such risky economic behaviour is reinforced by public and policy discourses on 'economic empowerment' and 'entrepreneurship' that celebrate risk taking, individual self-help and empowerment.

As for the Iranian example, Khosravi (2017) reads the appearance of such Ponzi schemes by drawing on the Comaroffs' (1999) work. In such an analysis, fast money schemes are just one of a number of responses to "a world gone awry" (Khosravi, 2017 p.239 citing Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) characterised by deep economic uncertainty, including speculation in the property market, gold, cars, and foreign currencies. These occult economies, he argues, emerge from "witnessing the mysterious mechanisms of the market through which some reach unimaginable wealth. Getting rich quickly and effortlessly, in the eyes of Iranians, seems more magical than anything else" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 237).

As I have said earlier in this chapter, unlike Khosravi, I am not fully convinced that the existence of such schemes can be fully ascribed to occult economies. While the heady rush of members into these organisations at the beginning of the 2000s has elements of the fantastic about it, in 2018, nearly twenty-one years since the first Ponzi scheme entered Iran, given the amount of reporting on the issue there can be few who remain completely ignorant of these get-rich-schemes and their methods. As such, they are no longer "full of secrecy and mystery" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 239), but rather relatively mundane. Critical to my inquiry, I feel that such an analysis fails too to encapsulate what are pivotal changes in understandings and motivations that occur over the life course of an individual involved in such schemes. While wealth may have been at the forefront in the early days of participation, as the glimmer of riches fades, they are brought into the service of new and different discourses.

In interpreting my informant's participation in these projects, I have found useful Li's (2007) concept of "the will to improve", an effort of self-betterment, albeit not just in the context of official development narratives. I understand these post-hoc narratives as indicative of how participation in multi-level marketing schemes were brought into the narrative of perfectionism in Mashhad. They articulate, like Cox (2013, 2018) suggests in his analysis of the U-Vistract fast money scheme in Papua New Guinea, "far more than material aspirations of middle class Papua New Guineans", encapsulating, to paraphrase, a "vision" of these programs as catalysts for change (Cox, 2018, p. 3). Or, as Wilson (2004, p. 122) suggests in her study of Avon and Amway in

Thailand, such multi-level marketing projects "offer membership in a larger organisation, a professional identity, a model for action, and in some cases a vocabulary of *self-advancement and self-help* [my stress]". Rather than focusing exclusively on wealth creation, it is an analysis of these schemes as catalysing individual improvement – and ultimately, perfection – that I find captivating.

I should stress however that in my critique of Khosravi's (2017) analysis of neo-liberalism in Iran, I am not trying to suggest that an ideology of self-help is somehow separate from or in opposition to neo-liberalism. On the contrary, self-help and self-improvement have long been recognised as individual manifestations of the broader neo-liberal project, and have been present in Iran to some extent from at least the 2000s (see Adelkhah 2000). Rather, what I point out is twofold. Firstly, that there is a greater *complexity* to contemporary social and economic relations in Iran than simply broadly applying the catch-all label of 'neo-liberal' allows for, and that secondly, if we analyse neo-liberalism as an inherently negative phenomenon we potentially elide some of the complex motivational schemata that go into justifying individual participation into these kind of 'get-rich-quick' schemes. To explore these themes, I focus on a case study from a key informant, Zhāleh, locating changes at key points in the arc of her participation in these fast-money schemes.

2.3.3   Zhāleh

When we first met Zhāleh, she was in her early thirties, relatively recently married and with a young child. Although she had studied architecture, like many Iranian women who were educated, she had never worked in the profession, and when she became pregnant, she stopped working altogether. Her husband continued his work as a civil engineer throughout her pregnancy and, shortly after their son was born, he took up a series of hobbies – dancing, learning French, training for a job in tourism – none of which provided the family with significant additional income but all of which sapped his already stretched time and finances. As such, over a period of about five years, Zhāleh found herself both frequently at home alone, looking after their son, and without much money. When we met her, their son had reached the age where he required less attention and could feasibly be looked after by others, and Zhāleh was now reaching out for employment opportunities. Before her son had been born, she had worked as a teacher tutoring students in English, as a small business owner with a distant family member importing clothes from Turkey into Iran in small quantities, and most recently as a secretary in the small-scale civil engineering company that her husband and his brother ran. Twice a week, Zhāleh would leave the house for two hours to attend teacher training, leaving us in charge of her son, Kiyānush, and, on returning, we would spend the rest of the day working with her – cleaning the house, making meals, organising the family for the coming days.

Over the weeks we spent with her, Zhāleh began to garner our thoughts, inquiring as to our opinions about income generation, and eventually more clearly, about 'network marketing'. "Anahita has started," she said, referring to her husband's sister, who, like herself, had recently given birth to a child and was now looking for opportunities to supplement her husband's income without a return to work outside the home. "She says if we get in now, we'll be the ones who get rich". Anahita had begun buying products from Avon Products Inc., a company with global reach that had recently penetrated Iran's more liberalised private economy. Like similar 'network marketing' programs, it operated through direct selling – customers would buy products from others and then sell them on to friends and family, making a profit from the sale, as opposed to drawing a wage directly from the company itself. Anahita had been recruited through Darius, a distant family member living in Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf in the country's far south, and now she too was encouraging Zhāleh and other members of the family to take part.

Quickly thereafter, Zhāleh joined her sister-in-law, and over the course of a month became actively involved. Afternoons once spent playing with Kiyānush and chatting together were soon dominated by intensive planning sessions, papers spread across the floor, relentless phone calls and meetings with potential new buyers. Gradually a small tower of products – shampoos, makeups, sun creams, etc., began to collect in the corner of the main room, waiting for new owners. Increasingly distant members of the family network were brought in by the Zhāleh's centripetal force, coming in specifically from remote towns like Sarakhs right on the border with Turkmenistan, their arrival heralding a flurry of printing and the transfer of USBs. Teasing her, we used to whisper at her as she worked away, "Zhāleh, are you still doing goldquest? [*hanuz goldkwest mikoni?*]. Throughout Zhāleh would maintain her contention, a mantra-like repetition of the appeal to wealth, "if we get in now, we'll be the ones who get rich. Those who join later will make less money, so we have to get in now". To this end, she took out a loan from a bank for an undisclosed amount, a one-off start-up designed to allow her to purchase the necessary goods. Her husband remained uninvolved, not sufficiently committed to intervene either favourable or negatively, preferring instead to remain aloof, even as his sister and wife conspired over dreams of material prosperity.

And yet, almost as quickly as Zhāleh had applied herself to Avon, and built up a maelstrom of activity around her, she dropped out. Not more than a month after she had first started her 'work' with Avon, we returned to her home to participate in our usually babysitting rituals only to find that the afternoon passed much as it normally did. The papers were gone, no more mention of wealth creation, and instead, we idled the afternoon away making lunch and swapping gossip. Surprised by her sudden withdrawal from what had been a fixture of her recent life, we asked why she had

appeared to have abnegated her previous engagement, and whether she was still involved. "Network marketing? I don't know why I'm a part of it. I'm not active at the moment. I'm following my own field [*reshte*] at the moment. I want to be a language teacher now," she responded, absent-mindedly stirring a pot on the stove, as though the events of the past four weeks were already well in the past.

There seemed to be any number of obvious reasons for her withdrawal. Her recruiting pool of clients and customers was made from family members who constituted a diminishing resource, particularly as she had plumbed the depths of kin who were geographically nearby. As a woman, there were also significant limitations to the expansion of the business outside familial networks, strictly regulated and formulated relations between strangers rendering the possibility of cold calling difficult, if not altogether impossible. But I was keen to understand Zhāleh's own position. Unsatisfied with her initial nonchalant response, I pushed for more information. Finally acquiescing, she offered this:

> I am no longer active [*fa'āl*] because it takes too much work. There's no way you can do any other work if you're active. We've bought all the products, but to reach the level required needs too much work. Of the people [we know] involved, maybe only three are active, the rest aren't [another five individuals in the family]. But the important thing is that there are some people who are active, so they make money [for all of us]. And Anahita, well, it's her job, she's active – but me, I suppose for her I'm active, but I'm not.

During the time that we remained in Iran (approximately two months) Zhāleh never regained her former interest, the mound of products that was huddled in the corner of the room eventually disappearing, presumably appropriated by some other family member either for their personal use, or on for further sale. Two years later though, I returned for a month in January 2018 to do a small number of follow up interviews. I was especially keen to interview Zhāleh about her involvement with Avon, and during my stay with the family I managed to convince her to sit down for an interview. What emerged in our discussion surprised me. Not only had Zhāleh been involved with Avon in 2016, but nearly a decade earlier she had participated in the original GoldQuest phenomenon that had swept particularly Tehran in the late 2000s. What I found most striking of all however was her persistent rejection of the assumption that she was motivated by the desire to get rich. Instead, she positioned herself as a canny operator who was fully cognizant of what she could gain – independently of wealth – from the system.

In our discussion, I had assumed that she had lost money, having spent it on the initial start-up capital that was required to join the company. Instead, she insisted – "I didn't lose any money. I gave 10 5[00 000 rial – approximately $US105], I got the material, the merchandise, I took the stuff to my

home, it was, I dunno, wheat, barley, beans, scrubbing brushes, toothpaste, and on the side, I was learning, for free".

And it is here that the story of her participation begins to change, as the stress on wealth falls away to one on educative benefits. Referring to the company's policy of training its members in the skills necessary to market more products, she credited the educative aspect numerous times throughout our interview, and distinguished it from the money that she gave to make the initial purchase of goods, insisting that the classes were free, and were to her benefit, not the company's. Moreover, she stressed that those who expected to be rich from the sale of goods or from recruiting new members were either ignorant or misinformed, insisting that:

> they've heard something, they heard that if you go to network marketing, if you register there you can earn lots of money, it's not like this, it is worth it…because of your knowledge, because you can have self-confidence, you're ready for your living, you're studying for your social position, you're so powerful, you're so skilful with this…

The real purpose of Goldquest and Avon, Zhāleh maintained as she contradicted her earlier stance, had been not to enrich them, but to train them. At the beginning of our conversation, Zhāleh bragged about her success and what a difference the education she received at Goldquest and Avon had made for her:

> Zhaleh (Zh): And I really, on the basis of the art [*fan*] of expression, the method of speaking, I'm fantastic, meaning, it's not me saying this [*harf nadāram*]. This isn't just something I'm saying. Now when I go to work, my co-workers, they say…and the guy who is the brother of the company I work for, he says I have excellent contact skills. It's a part of the whole, you see, I have to get in contact with clients. I'm getting in contact, I'm marketing. They're coming and they are approving, they confirmed that my situation, that "you are *awesome* in IT".
>
> Simon Theobald (ST): Do you call them?
>
> Zh: *I* call. Part of my work is connection with them, that really, I'm fantastic at. Meaning that the things that I'm saying, that I know myself, in speaking about something, in the art of expression, in advertising something, I'm really influential, I'm really *influential*, it's really impressive.

Like Āzar, with whom we began this chapter, Zhāleh reiterated her contention that the point of multi-level-marketing was not to become rich, but to become 'expert'.

> Zh:From the length and breadth of the time that I spent twelve years ago working for network marketing, that I went to GoldQuest, in Goldmine, I went to Goldmine in two places, the places where I was teaching, and it was the best part of Simorgh[82], I really learnt a lot of things, it really strengthens a person [*ādamo qavi mikone*], network, there is no money, there is no money in its actioning, like you go and you get money, it's absolutely not like this. We give lessons, we learn

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[82] Another multi-level-marketing company.

to be adept at life [*mahārat-e zendegi*], the art of speaking, and we learn how we should behave in society, how to fend for ourselves [*az āb birun keshidan*], you know what you have to do. You are readied for work, you're readied for life. The work of life they teach you. Your confidence goes up. Forever after [*modām*] you're reading books, you're listening to different sales CDs, and they teach you with the videos of the best salespeople in the world. Do you understand?

ST: Yes.

Zh: This is what I loved. Not so that I could go and get money and become rich. No, it's not a place for getting rich. First of all, you have to become a person [*bāyad ādam beshi*]. First you have to go to the lessons. And after you've been to the lessons, and you've become perfect [*perfect shudi*], then you can go and get money [*pul darbiyārin*].

ST: How interesting.

Zh: This was its secret. And this is the thing that many can't do, and they think that network…they've heard something, they heard that if you go to network marketing, if you register there you can earn lots of money, it's not like this, it is worth it…because of your knowledge, because you can have self-confidence, you're ready for your living, you're ready for your social position, you're so powerful, you're so skilful with this…We sold some perfumes, to bankers. To some bankers. We went to the banks. We went to a series of special places [*jāhā-ye khās*]. We didn't sell it to individuals, because we'd remembered the lesson we had. And we were successful. I sold, maybe, 5, or 6 perfumes to the bank. I was really happy that I was so strong [*che qadr man qaviam*], that they're buying from me. This was an honour for me. That I was so *influential*. That I was so impressive that they bought it from me, without even testing it. There was a tester, but they said without testing it, we want it, of course it's going to be something good on the basis of what you've said. We did a manoeuvre on them. "This is good, this is great, so on like this". It's important that you sell…Ok, you can think that it was the truth, that it was cheating [*kalak*], whatever, it's important that you sell. The clients have to be satisfied with their purchase. But we didn't sell *that* much stuff, we sold one, two things…

2.3.4   When wealth fails: Post-hoc rationalisations and the discourse of perfection

There are a number of important elements here that could be drawn out of Zhāleh's anecdote. I recognise that there are important gendered aspects of Zhāleh's work (cf Wilson, 2004): the fact that most of the participants in the schemes were women, the tendency of women to work from home, and how forms of gendered labour are pushed into the service of particular kinds of work and not others. So too do questions of class critically intersect with matters of gender. That the family were lower middle-class, that Zhāleh chafed under her restrictions as a young woman of limited social standing, all of these impact upon the way in which she experienced these fast money schemes. But what I want to highlight to is not so much gender or class, as the narrative arc of Zhāleh's participation with GoldQuest and Avon, how the story becomes reimagined through and brought into line with the discursive parameters of perfection. Zhāleh's story begins with a fairly typical focus on wealth creation. In the initial period of her work with Avon, she iterated her desire to, as she says, "get rich", citing her sister-in-law's belief that if they were the first to get in,

they would reap the benefits. A hive of activity in its early days, as riches failed to materialise, the all-encompassing nature (see Krige, 2012) of the project began to give way to 'normal' life again, and the strength of the wealth-creation argument and insistence upon it too began to fade. In its place, other rationalisations emerge, and we see a shift in the discourse from a focus on wealth or its materialities (see Musaraj, 2011) towards a rhetoric of education and self-edification. It is this shift that drives my analysis.

This is a story transformed. 'Correcting' my reasoning, while the shadow of making a profit is never fully excised, Zhāleh underscored how rather than creating vast quantities of wealth, the story of what little money was made becomes subsidiary to the pedagogical and self-bettering experience that participation in these programs provided her. They transformed her skill set, blessing her with such excellent interpersonal skills that others in the company that she worked for recognised it, describing her as "awesome", "excellent", and "influential". We are told that these programs train an individual and strengthen them, so that rather than relying on the scheme itself to create fast wealth, they are able to individually go forth and use their newfound competence to earn an income.

Where this narrative of self-improvement departs from others though is in the specific language that Zhāleh uses. Explicating her edification through the language of completion, she made it clear that these projects "completed" [*mano kāmel kard*] and "perfected" [*perfect shudi*] her as an individual. In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote that one of the ways in which we may perceive perfection as manifest in Mashhadi society is discursively, as something that shapes language and ideas, bringing other stories into its orbit. Here I think we find this pattern on display. I contend that we ought to take these post-hoc rationalisations as demonstrating the power of perfectionism in Mashhad as a discourse that can be called upon to define, and redefine, behaviours. If we can reveal anything of the utopianism in Mashhad through Zhāleh, it is that as a discourse and a cultural backgrounding, the idea of perfection demonstrates enough strength to almost completely refigure her chronicle of her own account. Where once was the desire for wealth, its faded shadow is rearticulated in terms legible to the utopian backdrop of Mashhadi society. Instead, the 'real' goal of the project becomes the ethical improvement of the individual, their "will to improve", and their desire to reach perfection.

2.4   Conclusion

From its emergence in the 1930s, to a lapse during the early Revolutionary period, and finally with its re-occurrence in the 1980s and 1990s, it is clear that the ethic of consumption and consumerism

has seen significant variation over the last century[83]. However, this chapter should give us pause for thought, reconsidering how in negatively theorising this, particularly the changes of the last ten or twenty years, as a product only of the withdrawal of state and the entrance of neo-liberal values, we obscure the methods by which individuals draw on and create narratives that justify their participation in ways that do not necessarily subscribe to such theories. In this chapter, I have tried to elucidate the sense that I garnered from my interlocutors that participation in these fast-money-schemes, rather than necessarily providing evidence of some dystopic neo-liberal intervention, was in fact complex and multilayered. On the one hand, as Zhāleh demonstrates, the initial headlong rush into multi-level marketing was marked by aspirations to rapid wealth. Yet, once the reality of incommensurate outcomes settled in, there was a shift. Participation was discursively redeployed as something that contributed to the improvement of her person. Zhāleh came to understand her participation in the schemes not exclusively as a matter of making money, but rather as something that aided in the task of self-betterment, couched in the language of individual perfection. And it is here that again our local story joins with the broader arc of this thesis. It is testimony to the pervasiveness and tenacity of the concern for perfectionism that what is in many respects a story of the quest for riches, and one that ultimately failed to produce such a result, can be reworked as evidence of their ethical and social edification. These 'schemes' are pressed into the service of a discourse that evinces perfection as the ultimate goal and situates their participants as sojourners on that road. What we will find in the following chapter follows a similar path. In this case, rather than fast money schemes as the site of a project of self-betterment and individual perfection, we move to education, and especially English-language learning, as nodes around which the discourse of utopianism clustered. But we will also end on a rather different end note. Where here in this chapter we have seen a positive appraisal of perfectionism, as something that lifts up the agent, and as something that is the outcome of a process of striving, in Chapter Three, we see perfectionism as something that is struggled with. As children are sent to language learning institutes, their parents insist on the highest of all possible results, anything less than near-perfect scores indicative of failure. Here, the idea of completion becomes a demand on the individual, narrowing down the window of success to a tiny opening that only the best can achieve, and leaving so many outside in the realm of disappointment.

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[83] How matters of Shia asceticism and the attention to beauty and material well-being etc. inflect one another remains a topic worthy of further investigation.

3   Chapter Three

The English ought:

Parental expectation, educational obligation, and perfection in Mashhad

Parents want their children to learn English. And when you see that the child just doesn't like learning, doesn't like to learn English, I ask them "ok so why do you insist on him or her continuing his or her learning?" And they say he or she "has to do that. Everyone is doing that." – A thirty-year-old Mashhadi English teacher

3.1   Introduction: A linguistic cure-all

Iymān was, by any standard, not the most committed of students. Sixteen years old, in a class of five, he frequently disrupted proceedings, by asking questions outside the scope of the lesson, playing on his mobile phone, or idly listening to music during class. It was widely acknowledged in the institute that teaching him was difficult, and that he was "*guguli*" – cute, if childish. Such sentiment was not shared by Iymān's father, Mr Mirzāi, who was understood to have reached peak frustration with his son. The teachers blamed his lack of ability to control the boy as the source of his anger, and on meeting him, a man of small stature but formidable demeanour, he clearly bristled with frustration at Iymān's lack of seriousness when approaching his language studies. I watched with interest the discussion between Mr Mirzāi and Ms Qorbāni, Iymān's English teacher.

"How's he doing?" Mr Mirzāi asked, a look of resignation on his face.

"He's sharp [*tiz*], you know? He always answers questions first. But he doesn't practice."

"I know. His lack of practice is definitely the problem. And his exam was a disaster. Maybe I should take his phone away from him tonight?"

Iymān, who had until that point been studiously ignoring the conversation, suddenly looked up and took notice of his father. "What?!"

"The phone. Your mobile phone. Finished, get it?!"[84]

Leaving the beleaguered father behind, Ms Qorbāni ushered Iymān and me down the hallway into Room 203 at the far end of the corridor. Lit by the glare of two fluorescent bulbs, walls of a fibrous plaster stained at the base by dirt or by mould were enlivened with three brightly coloured posters

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[84] Translating this utterance into English does it a disservice. What Mr Mirzāei said in Persian was "*Gooshi. Mobaylet. Ta'atil-e*", beginning with the most informal word for a mobile phone, followed by the slightly more formal 'mobile', followed by the exclamatory "*ta'atil-e*" which means implies both a sense of 'closed' and 'stopped'.

with lists of English words and pictures, an informative list of vegetables – corn, pepper, peas, cabbage, broad beans. The hiss of gas fuelling the heater mingled with the sound of flames licking metal gauze and the whistle of wind through cracks in the windows. The polished concrete floor was dented with craters and pockmarks, as though the dropping of heavy objects had punctured its surface, adding to an overall impression of a room much used if not much loved.

Ms Qorbāni sat us both down, me at the desk in front of the class beneath the blackboard, Iymān facing opposite on the other side of the desk. "Today is your oral test, Iymān", she said resolutely. Told to speak only in English to me, Iymān's jaw dropped, ready to argue with Ms Qorbāni, about the fairness of putting himself up against a fluent speaker. A native speaker of English amidst a sea of educators who were all second-language learners, my appearance and attendance at English institutes and classes had been a routine component of my fieldwork in Mashhad, unfolding as much in Persian as it did in English as students and teachers grappled alike with the peculiarities of an unfamiliar Australian accent. This was unusual though, because for the first time I was being asked not just to appear, say some words, and dazzle the class, but to participate in the testing framework.

Closing the door behind her, Ms Qorbāni exited the room, leaving me to eyeball Iymān while the teenager looked back glumly. "Alright", I said in my least accented and clearest English, "let's talk. What did you do today?" "I went to school…and…nothing", he whispered back. "You must have done something? Tell me more about school". "Nothing…I study maths…I go home". Our conversation went on like this for some five minutes, a studious attempt on my part, encouraging Iymān to elaborate and push his English, an equally committed response by the youth to avoid talking as much as possible. As the minutes piled on and the silences between us grew ever lengthier, I resigned to returning to Persian, and asked Iymān:

"Why are you learning English?"

He paused for a briefly, and then looked up. "I don't know…English is…We must learn English. English is useful for everything." [*bāyad englisi yād begirim. Be dard-e ham-e chiz mikhore*].

What I found striking about this utterance was that English should be framed not as a matter of desire, but instead as something that was obligatory, an all-purpose 'usefulness' that demanded obeisance rather than something that one enjoyed or desired to do. It is indicative of how one salient aspect of modern life in Mashhad – learning English – has become a totalising and totalised object, something that is all-encompassing, demanding success and accepting no failure. It is a refraction of a vision that lays out a path towards perfection.

3.1.1   Perfection refracted through education

The heart of my concern throughout this thesis has been Iran's utopian social politics as refracted in various ways, that is touching on different domains in life, something that I have described broadly as a culture of 'completion' [*kamāl*] or perfection. While there is no singular rubric or path that might define what it is that might make a person 'complete' or that provides an all-encompassing definition of perfection. But there are certain places where these processes and values come to crystallise with particular intensity. Education, and especially English-language learning, is one of those, a site of and method for achieving a "a better way of being" (Levitas, 1990, p. 8), a form brought into the orbit of the discourse of utopia and 'completion' or perfection, just as we saw in Chapter Two with the rationalisation of participation in fast money schemes. While my ethnographic experience was principally with private[85] English-language institutes, my interviews with interlocutors covered the full gamut of their educational experiences, English language institutes being a microcosm of broader forces that were described as applicable to Iran's educational system at large.[86]

In analysing this, I am indebted to the work of Andrew Kipnis (2011), whose book on the governance of educational desire in Zouping County, Shandong province, has proved instrumental in shaping my understanding. Unlike Kipnis however, my interest is not to focus exclusively on the desire for education, as much as how my informants, particularly parents, felt *obliged* to have their children participate in the educational system. Where parents and students in Zouping desired educational achievement, or spoke about education as "good" in and of itself, those in Mashhad rarely spoke of desire [*alāghe*] and more frequently spoke of duty [*vazife*] or compulsion [*ejbār*]. This does not mean however that education was universally despised and committed to only under duress, but it was seen as a 'must' [*bāyad*], and a social pressure [*feshār-e ejtemā'i*] (cf Khosravi, 2017). Academic success was imperative, something to be taken seriously [*jedi gereftan*], and children ought not just be high achievers, but constantly compete with their classmates to ensure that they were 'objectively' the best. When thinking about the connection between perfection and obligation, and in keeping with the thematic links to China, I take note of Bakken's (2000, p. 1) assertion that what he refers to as the exemplary society in contemporary China is both "educative and disciplinary".

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[85] I use this term with some hesitation because although these institutes are referred to as private [*khosusi*] in practice they remain still heavily under the influence of state central planning. Harris (2013) refers to this process broadly as the politics of 'pseudo-privatisation' in Iran, while (2015) has pointed specifically to the 'marketisation' of fees without the actual privatisation of the education sector.

[86] It is worth noting that the origins of the drive for educational success are related not only to the pre-and post-revolutionary utopianism, but also to a history of a relationship between restricted literacy and power in this region, something analogous to that which Olszewska (2015:65-67) notes in her research on Afghan poets in Mashhad.

As I said in my introduction, just as these legacies of utopianism open up avenues through which Iranians search for perfection, so it creates scenarios that insist upon particular actions. The nexus of obligation is crucial to understanding the content of this chapter. Its outcome tends to be an approach to education that is totalising and exacting, reifying success while condemning failure. This is particularly a position derived from parental expectations. Although I began this chapter with a vignette that includes the position of Iymān, a child and student, my concern here is primarily with what parents and adults came to expect and understand as necessary of their children, rather than the subjective experiences of the child participants themselves. As I touch on briefly here, students themselves often seem to be ambivalent about participating in such behaviour. Whether this is a product of teenage disinterest, rebelliousness, or a sign that the perfectionistic thinking of a previous generation is not so pronounced among youth populations, will have to wait for further research.

Very briefly, let me say that this chapter does not specifically address the Islamisation of education in Iran. Much of what has been written about the state of Iran's educational system over the past fifteen to twenty years, has been shaped by questions about the degree to which we can measure the 'success' or 'failure' of the state in Islamising its young population. In this thesis, I am not concerned with the attempts to instil an Islamic ethos, nor the content of textbooks – education as ideological battleground or the forge of basijis is not my interest here. What I am attentive to is the way education was understood by my informants as a process that enacted perfection, why it was felt to be both essential to success and a cross that must be borne. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is a short exegesis on the history of education, and English education in particular, in Iran. In the second part, I turn to the ethnographic specifics of private English institutions [*mo'assese*], presenting a fine-grained exploration of the academic environment within one of these institutions, before returning to this question of educational 'obligation'.

3.2   Part One: Educating Iran

3.2.1   A tidal wave of education

My interest in education in Iran was piqued not just by my experiences of fieldwork at university, or by my contacts with educated English speakers, but by what I quickly came to realise was a pervasive culture of academic expectation backed by a vast industry of state and para-state institutions. Just as Kipnis (2011) found that the desire for education was a nearly universal feature of the social landscape of Zouping, so too was it inescapable in Mashhad, where it was compared to a 'tsunami'

[*sunāmi*] by my informants, or an "insatiable mania" (Malekzadeh, 2015). This formidable instructional prospect is built on the back of a remarkable academic transformation in Iran. At the eve of the revolution, barely a third of Iran's population was literate (Mehran, 1992), with fewer than 234 higher education institutes of any kind catering for a paltry 67 268 students (Kazemi & Dehnavi, 2017). In 2015 however, there were 2640 higher education centres, up from 741 just six years earlier, with the total number of enrolled students standing at nearly 4 700 000 (Kazemi & Dehnavi, 2017). This represents an increase from 0.77% of over-25s possessing a university degree in 1970 to 12.85% in 2010 (Habibi, 2015).

In 2015, more than half the population aged 18-24 were in higher education, with a government-set aim of 60% by 2025 (Malekzadeh, 2015). A vast number of these students attend the private *Islamic Azad* University set up by the late President and veteran revolutionary Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, or the public distance education university *Payām-e Nur*, both of which have some of the largest student bodies in the world. Today, even in the smallest cities and regional centres in Iran it is possible to find branches of *Islamic Azad* or *Payām-e Nur*. The growth of the state and non-state higher education sector is in tandem with the wildfire expansion of private sector institutes that specialise in a range of subjects from maths to foreign languages and are now an ingrained feature of the landscape of Iranian cities of virtually any size.

3.2.2   Economic realities

The taken-for-granted assumption that tertiary education offers material prosperity is belied by the reality that economic difficulties over the past years have significantly impacted the capacity of the educated classes to turn skills and academic knowledge into financial or material gain. Despite the rapid expansion of the sector, personal investment in education rarely translates into guaranteed returns. A feature generally of the post-revolutionary landscape, Iran's economy has especially floundered over the past ten years, as sanctions designed to cripple the Republic's nuclear program bit into all aspects of life. Iran experienced recession in 2012, 2013, and then again in 2015, with wage growth unable to keep up with the country's hyperinflation over the past 10 years. Inflation I 2015 sat at approximately 10%, a marked improvement from 40% at the beginning of the current presidency (Bozorgmehr, 2018)[87]. Iranians were 15% poorer in real terms in 2016 than they were in 2006 (Tajdin, 2018).

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[87] Since I began writing this thesis, rapid inflation has once again become a major cause for concern.

In tandem with inflation, educational costs have continued to rise. While high-achieving students can access state universities with either a total or part scholarship, most students – 85% - continue to pay for higher education out of their own pockets (Malekzadeh, 2015). Iranians spent roughly six billion US dollars on higher education in 2013 (Khandedān, 2013). Private institutes' fees are usually negotiable to some degree, and based on the fame of the teacher or the number of students in a class, costs can vary from as low as 2 million rial for twenty classes (approximately $2 per class in March 2018) to easily $US30 for an hour and a half of class time, a significant amount given that students routinely attend class multiple times per week and that the average income in Iran is roughly $US5000 per year.

Moreover, educational expenditure does not necessarily guarantee employment. General unemployment ran at roughly 12% across the country in 2016, although the Minister of the Interior, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli admitted that in some cities that rate grew as high as 60%. Perhaps more striking though is the large number of graduates who are out of work. In 2017 the Statistical Centre of Iran estimated that at 21.2%, unemployment was *highest* among individuals who possessed bachelors' degrees, with those holding masters degrees coming second at 15.5% unemployment (BBCPersian, 2017)[88]. In terms of employment, one is more likely to hold a job if one is illiterate than if one holds any kind of higher degree, excepting a doctorate[89]. The issue is so pronounced that Kazemi and Dehnavi (2017) refer to the emergence of an "academic proletariat" in Iran. Their work dovetails with my own anecdotal experience of lecturing staff who decried the 'topsy-turvy' result of the Revolution that had left the literate classes supposedly more impoverished than the working class, or complaints (real and imagined) from young university students about the impediments to wealth and the domination of *Āghā-zādes* in prime jobs. To get a job at a university, for instance, one either was said to have to be the child of a professor, or in the basij. Such statistics also obscure the reality of even higher levels of underemployment and employment[90] outside of field of study, which, Habibi (2015) notes, remain significantly higher for those who hold degrees.

Education in English did not necessarily guarantee an improvement either. As part of the global expansion of English as an international *lingua franca*, learning English holds out "promises of social and economic development to all those who learn it" (Borjian, 2013, p. 25). Or, as Probyn (2002)

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[88] Only among holders of doctoral degrees was there a notable decline in unemployment, with 2% of degree holders without work according to the same article.

[89] For more detail on labour market categories in Iran (good to 2002), see Salehi-Isfahani (2005).

[90] Unemployment and underemployment had alternatively driven the development of categories of work – *shoghl-e kāzeb* or "spurious jobs" – that provided a potential income, but were socially maligned and deemed 'valueless'. A broad category, spurious jobs at their most extreme end included professions such as drawing an income from minding empty parking spaces, or being paid to wait in a queue, but also more widely referred to jobs that were simply understood to be not meaningful.

more succinctly suggests, learning English puts bread on the table. But in Iran, despite aspirational dreams of connecting the Islamic Republic to the global economy through English via the massive expansion of trade and tourism, the language remains of little practical use. Iran's export economy remains remarkably uniform, dependent on natural resource extraction almost solely managed through the state-owned petroleum industry and related subsidiaries, that provided nearly 80% of export income in 2010, for example (Hidalgo, 2011). Trade relations are dominated by a handful of mostly non-English speaking partners[91], China being the largest with slightly less than 50% of the total exports and imports (Hidalgo, 2011). Even in tourism, where hopes[92] of expansion have yet to be realised, the industry remains dominated by the Arabic speaking pilgrimage market, with visitors from English-speaking[93] backgrounds forming a tiny minority of an already limited pool.

Moreover, many of my informants seemed acutely aware that seeking further education was 'unproductive'. That education was not "necessarily a good investment" (Kipnis, 2011, p. 2) was a widely acknowledged fact, a great number of my informants condemning higher education in Iran as "pointless" [*bi-fāyede/bi-hadaf*]. For a many of my interlocutors, it was a given that they were unlikely to find employment in their desired field, especially among women for whom the prospect of underemployment loomed especially large. Yet there was unanimous agreement that it was necessary to pursue education. That they should continue to do so points to the fact that such behaviour is more complex than a simple search for material improvement, something that Kipnis (2011) notes also featured in Zouping. Where the educational experience of Mashhad departs critically from that of Zouping however is in the accord between the state and English education.

3.2.3 The unusual history of Republican English

Where English breaks ranks with the rest of the educational tsunami that has engulfed Iran is in it institutional relationship with government. Since the Revolution, the Islamic Republic's attitude towards English education has swung between ambivalence and outright hostility. At the heart of this is a debate about the role and place of English – a language of "hegemony, arrogance, and exploitation"(Borjian, 2013, p. 5) intimately associated with both British and later American interference in Iranian domestic affairs – in a Republic that was supposed to have swept aside

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[91] India being a notable exception.

[92] The Rouhani administration has declared its intent to attract 20 million tourists by 2025 (O'Toole, 2017). Such forecasts seem wildly optimistic, especially if the target is European tourists. This is not only because Iran only had 5.2 million tourists in 2015, with a mere 51 000 European-origin tourists in 2014 (Khodadadi, 2016), but because the tourism industry is subject to the domestic volatility of capricious local law enforcement and behind-the-scenes fights between factional groupings.

[93]Access to the market of English-speaking and especially English-first-language tourists is additionally curtailed by the limitations that are placed upon tourists visiting Iran from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, all major English-speaking nations whose citizens are not allowed to visit Iran *without* an official government-provided guide.

colonialism and ended the nation's dependence on international powers. Changes began with the 'cultural revolution' [*enghelāb-e farhangi*] in 1980, a project of purification and Islamisation of the country's education system that aimed to replace the secularist Pahlavi model with a theocratically appropriate version. Initial hopes that English could be replaced altogether with Esperanto proved abortive when its association with the now officially maligned Baha'i faith was noted (Borjian, 2013). As such, English survived, alongside Arabic, as the two main 'foreign'[94] languages taught in the school system. Yet the language persisted not without change. English in the Islamic Republic was rebranded as a "bottom-up, localised, indigenised" (Borjian, 2013, p. 5) version stripped of all cultural associations, leaving only its "phonological, morphological, and syntactical" forms (Borjian, 2013, p. 73), required at both university and high school, albeit in an extremely limited capacity.

In 1989, following the end of the war with Iraq and the beginning of the "Era of Reconstruction", growing population pressures and school overcrowding saw the establishment of private investment into what had been since the Revolution wholly state run. Private schools [*qeyr-e entefā'i*] and private institutes teaching foreign languages proliferated on an "unprecedented scale nationwide"

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[94] 'Foreign' language education in modern Iran begins under the rule of Safavid Shah Abbas (1588-1629CE), who gave the Carmelite order permission to establish two schools in Esfahan for the teaching of European languages (Armajani, 1991). It was not however until the 19th century that sustained interaction with and education in non-native languages became a feature of the pedagogical landscape in Iran. Framing this interaction is, as Borjian (2013) notes, Iran's experience of colonialism. As Iran was one of a handful of countries across the globe that was never directly ruled by European powers (although Qajar Iran shed territory to Russia and Britain and remained heavily influenced by both), Persian was never replaced or usurped by a European language as a domestic lingua franca. Beginning with an edict from Mohammad Shah Qajar (1808-1848CE) in 1841, Christian missionaries from a number of denominations (British Anglicans, American Presbyterians, German Lutherans, French Catholics, etc.) were given permission to open educative institutes with the intention of bringing 'Western development' to Iran (Borjian, 2013). Limited to proselytising among extant Christian minorities, overwhelmingly Armenians and Assyrians concentrated in the north-west of the country, the first schools opened in the Urmia, teaching foreign languages alongside Christianity. The popularity of these schools saw their reach spread beyond Christians, and they rapidly expanded across the country. By 1925, there were some 48 French schools, 25 American schools, 9 British schools, and 2 Russian schools, with a combined student population of 8400 (Hadidi, 2012 [2000]). Despite drawing on both Italian and Australian academics, French was the only European language taught at the first natively developed secular higher education institute, *Dar-ol Fonun* (est.1851CE) and continued to dominate in higher education throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, with the first German teaching school only opening in 1923 (Catanzaro, 2012). With the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty and the elevation of the reformist Reza Shah Pahlavi, the newly nationalist and secularising regime over saw the precipitous decline in the fortunes of most of the foreign schools in Iran. In 1928, the Ministry of Education forced all American schools in the country to teach only the approved state curriculum, and banned education in any language other than Persian for the first four years of school (Shahvar, 2009). Following this, in 1933, all pre-high school education in foreign schools was forcibly closed, with the government taking over the German school in 1937, and the British schools in Yazd and Esfahan (Shahvar, 2009). Reza Shah Pahlavi's closeness to the Third Reich ultimately precipitated a joint invasion by the UK and the USSR, installing his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in his place. English language programs expanded under the auspices of the British Council, and by the eve of the Revolution, the Council had offices in Tehran, Ahvaz, Esfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, and Tabriz, with some 53 native English teachers working across the country (Borjian, 2013). These developments were paralleled by the rival influence of the US, English teaching a major part of American technical assistance, and the Iran-American Cultural Society, originally instituted in 1925, was revitalised under new leadership. Throughout the 1950s, English gradually began to replace French as the main foreign language taught in high schools. The establishment for the Pahlavi University in Shiraz in 1962 with the support of USAID and the University of Pennsylvania saw the formal institutionalisation of the first English language only higher education institute. A final component of the trio of English language education came in the form of the private Shokuh English institutes, the first opened in 1948 in Tehran, with nearly 60 branches across the country by 1979, all of which were closed during the revolutionary period, only to be opened again later on

(Borjian, 2013, p. 103) even as they remained obliged to teach a centralised, national curriculum. At the same time, English teaching in state schools was pushed to an increasingly marginal position (Borjian, 2013, pp. 95-96). Under reformist Prime Minister Mohammad Khatami, private language institutes continued to grow, with Borjian citing a figure of 2200 institutes (including branches) across Iran by 2003 (Borjian, 2013, p. 127). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 saw a return to the policies of Islamisation and purification, and private language institutes were officially prohibited from organising relations with foreign educational establishments unless the Ministry of Higher Education approved it (Borjian, 2013, p. 145).

In Iran today, none of the country's private or public universities offer immersive English, with fewer than 29 state and 35 distance universities, plus a larger number of private universities, offering the minimum of degrees in English Language Teaching, English Translation, or English Language and Literature (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). This makes Iran unusual in the region. With very few exceptions, English has become the most desirable second or third language in most of the Middle East. For example, in Turkey, Doğançay-Aktuna and Kiziltepe (2005) note that English is, sometimes at the expense of Turkish, the language of choice in the higher educational sphere, with some 20 of 21 private universities teaching purely in English, and some 23 of 53 state universities. In the secondary sector, English is less pervasive, but in both the state run 'Anatolian' (academically selective) high schools, and in the overwhelming majority of private high schools, English is the language of instruction. Standard state high schools offer eight periods per week of English, while most state primary schools over three to four periods in the first grade, increasing to eight to ten in the fourth. In Israel, children are expected to have a working knowledge of English sufficient for university level study as part of their matriculation certificate, even though most university courses are still taught in Hebrew, albeit using English texts (Shohamy, 2014).

3.2.4   The official position now

The arrival of Hassan Rouhani's 'moderate' government in 2013 marked an end to the isolationist policies of the Ahmadinejad period, and an official reembrace of relations with the West. The cultural move towards engagement with the West was best embodied by Javad Zarif, Rouhani's charismatic foreign minister, whose command of English was showcased in multiple interviews and a series of slick videos putting Iran's position on nuclear negotiations that were produced in English. Rouhani himself produced somewhat more faltering English in an interview with CNN host Christiane Amanpour in which he declared "I would like to say to American people: I bring peace and friendship from Iranians to Americans". Yet such cosmopolitan and auspicious beginnings met a cool response

from the taciturn Supreme Leader, who despite his noted enjoyment of foreign literature[95], became increasingly opposed to foreign language – and especially English language – education prior to high school.

Sparking a war of words with a speech on May 2nd 2016, Khamenei lamented the "preference for English over Persian" and the extension of English language education to kindergartens. He suggested "English isn't the only language of science…the persistence of English's preferential monopoly is unhealthy…other languages like Spanish, French, German, and languages in eastern countries, are also languages of science" (BBCPersian, 2016), while nonetheless indicating that this did not mean a total clampdown on English education. Responding to these criticisms, in an address to a meeting of Iranian teachers, Rouhani stressed the need to teach languages that were useful for securing youth employment and familiarising students with science, singling out India in particular as having been "exceptionally successful in IT by virtue of its command of English"(ISNA, 2016a). The Supreme Leader hit back the following day, citing Jawaharlal Nehru in defence of the position that pre-colonial India had an "advanced civilisation" [*tamaddon-e pishrafte*] that had been set back [*aghab bargardāndand*] by English colonialism (BBCPersian, 2016), not dissimilar to the argument made by Shariati about Iran's historic greatness that I alluded to in Chapter One.

Such comments stood as little more than bluster between President and Supreme Leader until early 2018, when foreign language education, and especially English language education, was formally banned for all students in primary education, regardless of whether they were studying in state or non-state schools, or whether the lessons took place outside of formal school hours. Mehdi Navid-Adham, head of the Supreme Teaching and Training Council of Iran made the declaration on the 7th of January 2018, on the basis that primary school was the stage that laid the foundations of understanding Persian[96] literature, and the country's "Islamic Iranian culture" (BBCPersian, 2018). While of limited impact to state schools where formal education in a second language begins only

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[95] In an English language twitter exchange, the Supreme Leader noted he was an "avid reader" who enjoyed the work of Soviet writers Mikhail Sholokhov and Alexei Tolstoy (Flood, 2015), while in a speech quoted on his formal website, he cited an enjoyment of French authors Michel Zevaco, and Victor Hugo, especially "Les Miserables"(Khamenei, 2016) .

[96]Despite a century of centralisation, in parts of the country, including in Iranian Kurdistan, parts of Baluchistan, and Iranian Azerbaijan, Persian is very much still a "foreign" language, learnt in school, but otherwise limited in daily life, even if most are functionally fluent in the language. Tabriz and Ardabil, the capitals of East Azerbaijan and Ardabil provinces respectively are famed (or arguably, maligned) across Iran for the difficulty of finding people willing to speak Persian. In minority regions, finding fluent Persian speakers can be difficult in the rural hinterland, something I experienced myself along the Iraqi border in Kurdistan province. Making a pit stop at small café selling local yoghurt, fried eggs, and bread somewhere between the villages of Negel and Sarvābād on the road to the remote Howraman region, our guide – an educated Sorani-speaker from the capital of Sanandaj - joked with the waiter, a young man wearing the large and loose *pātul* pants that are symbols of Kurdish identity. Pointing to us, and switching from Sorani to Persian, he said to the waiter "Practice your Persian with them". Laughing, our guide declared "they're foreigners and their Persian is better than yours". Abashed, the young waiter looked down and mumbled in Persian "it's pointless [speaking Persian] here".

with the start of high school, the proclamation would permanently impede the possibility of English teaching in non-state primary schools where language classes are often taught outside of mandatory hours. It remains to be seen how seriously the government intends to take action, and whether the promise of Navid-Adham to "confront" [*bar-khord*] those schools that continue to teach English is little more than an empty threat.

What I believe is most important to draw from this is that the duty-bound commitment to English education that I demonstrate later in this chapter cannot be explained exclusively through or in response to state policies. For example, because of the complexity of Iran's factionally driven politics, with reformists typically supporting English-medium education, and conservatives opposing it, we cannot definitively say that the rapid pace of growth in private English institutions is either politically-driven resistance to the state, or the result of careful state planning. While the growth of the broader tertiary sector is certainly connected to state efforts to expand education, because English is not officially or formally favoured, it makes comparisons with Kipnis' (2011) model of government regulation of desire problematic. My Mashhadi informants pursued English with a single-minded determination despite the fragmentation of state ideology. Certainly part of this was shaped by an undeniable sense that knowledge of English both offered a pathway to migration, and greater ability to communicate with the outside world. Sadeghi and Richards (2016) suggest that knowledge of English is closely correlated with being "cool" and a sense of cosmopolitanism. But, just as we saw in Chapter Two with the potency of perfectionism as a discourse, I also think that English language education and the ability to speak fluent English were brought into and shaped by conversations about what one simply had to do if one wanted to ensure that one's child or oneself were participating in the process of attaining individual and collective perfection. And this is where I think we have to look deeper to how the sense that education, and English education in particular, emerges and is shaped in tandem with these understandings.

3.3   Part 2: An educational utopia

3.3.1   The 'educative' atmosphere

A culture of education was woven into the fabric of Mashhad's streetscape. Within a twenty-minute walk of our accommodation were at least half a dozen establishments, from one-room classes teaching English behind a tarpaulin just off the street, to local branches of nation-wide vocational training centres, to major public national universities. With a population of only 3 million people, the city was home to twenty major tertiary education institutes, not to mention the hyper-abundance of private education centres [*mo'assese*] that dotted almost every corner of every major street. Major

streets, squares, and crossroads took names like 'school student' [*dāneshāmuz*], 'university student' [*dāneshju*], 'university' [*dāneshgāh*], 'graduates' [*fāregh ol-tahsilān*], 'teacher' [*mo'alem*]; suburbs, names like 'research' [*pazhuhesh*]. A standard introductory conversation between ourselves and new familiars would first require an inquiry about our country of origin, our age, our religion, and then inevitably, "what are you studying?" or "what did you study?", even without my first indicating that we were students.

Mashhad was likewise a riot of signage that incorporated English at all levels. All directional signage on major roads in Iran bore twin Persian and English inscription, often even on minor streets. Businesses had increasingly taken to advertising in English, often alongside Persian, in some rare instances with the Persian replaced altogether, leaving English alone, or just the Latin transliteration of a Persian name (c.f. Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). Corner stores located in suburban settings away from the main streets, would similarly paste the words "welcome to your shop" alongside the Persian "*khosh āmādid*". Nearly every bookshop of any size provided at least some material for self-directed learning, and often English language 'toys' for children. Even in the bastions of conservatism in the city, places that would otherwise define themselves as fundamentally opposed to Westernisation and the culture of gharbzadegi or 'West-toxification' that I referred to in the Introduction to this thesis, could English be found. At the Shrine of Imam Reza under the patronage of *Ostān-e Quds-e Razavi* (see Chapter One), in the *bonyād's* bookshop I found a small collection of books in pride of place offering training to 'teach yourself English'.

3.3.2   'Private' institutions

But the culture of education is most clearly realised in the extraordinary proliferation of private institutes - '*mo'assese*' [Ar. 'institution'] or less commonly 'teaching place' [*āmuzeshgāh*]. These ranged from large, nation-wide governmental institutions like the prestigious Iran Language Institute [*Kānun-Zabān-e Irān*], originally the Iran-America society prior to the Revolution, to large institutes with several branches within a single city like the Mahan Language College in Mashhad, through to smaller single branch institutes that nonetheless maintain multiple class rooms, to very small suburban outfits that may only have possessed one or two classrooms, to individual lessons with well-known private tutors[97]. The largest of these institutes often taught several languages, drawing from a typical repertoire of English, French, German, Spanish, Turkish, and Arabic, with the occasional addition of Russian or Italian, and may have had several thousand students. In 2012, the *Kānun-Zabān-e Irān* was estimated to have approximately 175 000 students enrolled per term across

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[97] Sadeghi and Richards (2016) cite an average student population at private institutes ranging from 50 to 2000 in Urmia.

the nation (Amjadi, 2012) in several hundred branches. Across Iran, Amjadi (2012) suggested that there were over 5000 foreign language schools and institutes.

Definite statistics on the number of language teaching institutes in Mashhad are difficult to gather given both the sheer number and the lack of a formal register[98]. I was nonetheless quoted figures that suggested as many as 60% of school age children in the city currently attended some sort of non-school based second language training[99]. In conversation with teachers and administrative staff at various centres in the city, a general estimate of some 200 to 300 institutes was given for a city of approximately 3 million. Large centres in Mashhad like the Māhān Language College in the southern suburb of Kowsar occupy several floors, have hundreds of classrooms, and potentially cater to tens of thousands of students on any given day. Even the staff at the relatively small institute that is the focus of the detailed ethnographic study below informed me that its most recent audit had indicated some 3000 students across its six class rooms.

While these private institutes tend to concentrate in wealthier suburbs in Mashhad, particularly along the periphery of the wealthy Vakilābād Boulevard in the city's west, it would be wrong to interpret English education as an exclusively middle or upper-class phenomenon. Institutes were found *across* Mashhad, certainly most densely in the wealthier southern parts of the old city that fringed the southern mountain range, but also in the newer and less prestigious Qāsemābād districts to the north-west, and small locally based institutes, perhaps little more than one teacher, existed even in the most impoverished sections to the north-east of the shrine in neighbourhoods like Shahrak-e Shahid Beheshti and the mostly Afghan Golshahr. Likewise, the expectation to learn English and a willingness to undertake formal training were not the sole purview of the middle and upper classes, but were rather common among both Iranian informants from lower social strata and among 'Afghan'[100] informants who generally form the poorest section of contemporary Iranian society. Among the regular attendees I became familiar with while teaching at the institute in Sajjād that I describe below, a number came from relatively remote locations like Eqbāl-e Lāhuri, a lower-

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[98] Borjian (2013, p. 103) likewise notes in an interview with Ministry of Culture and Guidance in 2008 that there was "no estimate" of the number of private institutes teaching English in Iran.

[99] Sadeghi and Richards (2016) note that there were 60 language institutes in Urmia, a city with a population of roughly one million two hundred thousand.

[100] By this I refer to the mostly Hazara Shi'ite population living in Mashhad, although I use the term 'Afghan' loosely both because a) most of my informants of Hazara background were born in Iran even if they lacked official Iranian identity papers, and b) because of their own preference not to be referred as 'Afghan', a label that they considered to relate to Pashtun, not Hazara, identity.

middle class neighbourhood at the furthest western fringe of the city, the city's extremely cheap public transport making commuting to class feasible for most.[101]

Staff in the institutes showed various ranges of aptitudes and abilities at English. While all the staff that I met were required to undertake tests to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency at English, in practice there seemed to be no centrally administered institution that determined the quality of an individual's ability. On the contrary, my interlocutors who taught English mostly said that they had undertaken TOEFL or IELTS tests in order to qualify for their position at work. Others were themselves simply former students who had stayed long enough at the institution and demonstrated enough aptitude that they were invited to come back to teach. Some teachers I spoke to during my time in Mashhad demonstrated a real command of English, and could express themselves fluently. Others were much less able, and would have struggled to articulate themselves well in an immersive setting. For teachers with lesser abilities, there seemed to me to be elements of a culture of keeping 'one-step ahead' of the students, and I saw much hurried revision taking place in the staff spaces of language centres (see Figure 1).

It was unclear to me in whether poorer members of Iranian society could afford the cost over the long term. Relatively high levels of competition among smaller institutes for students, the flexibility in pay for teachers, and varying costs of lessons would suggest however that managers and employers tailored their classes to be affordable in an effort to retain as many students for as long as possible, at least among the smallest of institutes, if not in the larger and more prestigious ones. The most prestigious private and quasi-governmental institutions like *Kanun-Zabān* are far more expensive, given the prestige attached to them, and my interlocutors who worked there vouched that most of their classes were full of children from wealthy backgrounds. Although private institutions in Iran are often associated with more liberal practices[102], and learning English is more widely interpreted as a sign of political liberalism and affiliation with the 'West', as far as I could see there was relatively little differentiation in religious affiliation in the institutes, most reflecting the general make-up of society at large. That is, in almost every institute, there seemed to be a mix of religious and non-religious students, evidenced by their commitment to prayer or their wearing of hijab (although these are themselves imperfect markers). The next section of this chapter describes in detail an 'everyday' situation in one of these private institutes.

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[101] Olszewska (2013) speaks to the pervasiveness of English institutes in the Afghan neighbourhood of Golshahr in Mashhad, while Hashemi (2015) cites experiences teaching English to lower class youth in Sari and Tehran.
[102] For instance, friends of mine working at a private engineering company had debated about the need for women to wear *any* kind of hijab inside the office space.

Figure 1: Getting ready for class in the institute kitchen (Author's image)

3.3.3   A day in the life of a mo'assese

Sajjād Boulevard, running from Pārk-e Mellat in the west to Khayyam Boulevard in the east, is one of Mashhad's most desirable pieces of real estate. Lined with upmarket clothes stores (selling knock-off brands from Europe and America), banks, travel stores, cafes, cash exchanges, and the hulk of the now closed Saudi consulate, the suburb was bounded on the north by the megamalls of Proma and Hyperme, selling 'foreign' goods – ground coffee, French cheeses, Turkish tea, American breakfast cereal. It was not surprising then that Sajjādshahr had an established reputation as a liberal heartland and a home to Mashhad's 'rich kids' [*bachehāye-puldār*]. It was also home to a number of language institutes.

At the westernmost end of the boulevard, opposite Park-e Mellat, was a non-descript four-storey building, wedged between a bank on one side, and a walled courtyard on the other. Downstairs and below street level was a children's bookshop. Above it were three further flights. The first came off the street and into an unoccupied space, the only indication of its purpose a solitary sign in the far corner proclaiming "ENGLISH" in vertical font. On the third floor was the office of the Pāsdārān Centre for Foreign Languages [*Āmouzeshgāh-e Zabān-e Khāreje-ye Pāsdārān*], a yellow pull-up banner announcing its specialities, qualifications, and quality insurance. Beneath the seals of Oxford, Cambridge, and two logos of Quay Audit – one international, one UK specific, the text proclaimed the following:

- English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Turkish, Arabic
- Presenters holding international QAL certificates from Britain
- Organiser of specialist terms
- IELTS – TOEFL – FCE – CAE – CPE – DELF – Free Discussion[103]
- Organiser of useful conversation terms

Day	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
4:30pm-6pm	Solutions [Pre-intermediate]	Family & Friends [Elementary]	No class	Family & Friends	Solutions Pre-intermediate	Weekend	Weekend
6pm-7:30pm	Solutions [Pre-intermediate]	Family & Friends	No class	Family & Friends	Solutions Pre-intermediate		
Pay per one and a half hour session	200 000 rials (around $US4.75 in May 2019)						

Inside the centre, a single corridor lined with chairs ran down to two rooms on the left, one directly opposite at the far end of the hallway, and then three on the right. On the left of the office at the entrance was the registry and administration desk, serviced by the young Mrs Jahromi and a rotating offsider. The view from in front of the desk was one of seamless administration and organisation. Behind the desk however was a jumble of folders, piles of papers, reports stacked one upon the other, and perennial cups of tea, half drunk, sugar cubes [*qand*] scattered about.

Behind the desk and to the right was the staff office. On one side in a small alcove, learning material was rigidly organised, a printed sign on the wall ordering staff to "keep your books tidy and return them when they finished class!" On one shelf, a mountain of multi-coloured pencil cases sat piled high on each other, facing onto a glass cabinet stuffed with books. Around the corner and out of site

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[103] A typographical error had meant that the word "Free Discussion" were in fact spelt "Free Discuion" – the two additional 's's drawn in with a blue marker.

was the institute's kitchen, a testament to haste. Empty cups of half-drunk tea sat waiting to be washed and put away, scattered pieces of dried-out bread lay on the kitchen bench next to the sink that had clearly been crudely welded into place (see Figure 1).

Opening shortly after the school day finished at 2:00PM, most classes began in earnest at 3:00PM, running in hour and a half slots. The institute typically shut between 8:00 and 9:00PM, depending on the number students. The vast majority of students who attend classes later in the day (i.e. after 6:00PM) were adult learners, coming after work. Earlier classes (3-6PM) were primarily for school-aged children. In the five or ten minutes between classes, the overwhelmingly female staff of teachers bustled in and out of the kitchen, greeting each other with hugs and kisses, fixing their *maghna'es*, grabbing books from shelves or slotting them back, reaching for pencil cases. The interlude was a moment to complain about students – their lack of progress, absence or absent attention, ill-discipline – and to bemoan the difficulty of the texts they were tasked to teach. The staff taught English through two different sets of text books, both published by Oxford University Press. 'American File', a series geared towards American English, was considered the easier of the two, compared with the formidable 'Solutions', a course designed to teach British English[104] (see Figure 4). "If you haven't prepared [for 'Solutions'], don't bother coming to class", the teachers echoed.

The majority of my time spent in the classroom was with Ms Qorbāni, first mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a key informant and 32-year-old mother of one married to a civil engineer who supplemented the family income by working in information technology during the day, and as an English teacher at night. Her lessons always followed a set format. Classes began with introductions in English – "Hi, how are you?" she would call out to her students in her best lilting American accent. The students would always groan in response, seemingly stumped by the sudden obligation to speak English. The first fifteen minutes to half an hour of the class would pass in this manner, Ms Qorbāni quizzing the students one by one in English about what they had done since she had last seen them. The students always responded sheepishly, with a mix of English and Persian as they struggled to find words to fill the gaps in their knowledge.

After this, the focus of the class turned to material from the core written material for the term. Ms Qorbāni rarely checked in great detail that any homework had been done, preferring instead to make sure that the class moved along at a rapid pace. Iranian pedagogical methods were typically grounded in rote learning. Students were expected to memorise vast quantities of material, with

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[104] It was rumoured that American English was phonetically closer to Iranian Persian, and therefore easier to learn.

little room for creative analysis or play. Even the exegesis on work like poetry or stories was grounded in particular set analytical forms with limited space to manoeuvre. Moreover, parents largely expected and encouraged it to be so. Once during my fieldwork I was accosted by a university lecturer whose colleague had lived in Australia at some point, bringing his family with him. During his stay, his children had studied in Australian schools, but had "learnt nothing", he complained, instead spending the day playing. By this he meant, the school had not forced the children to learn facts and information that could be replicated at a later point.

The rest of the lesson was usually set by the content of the book and where the class had reached. Typically this meant covering a section on English grammar, which was demonstrated with examples from the text that students had to either fill in as written tasks, or listen to as aural ones. Normally the listening component of class was done with the aid of a computer, and staff would often run in and out of rooms looking for Daewoo monitors, a lack of funds preventing all rooms from having their own. When I was present however, I was routinely called upon to read aloud for students. Although Ms Qorbāni did her best to teach only in English, students rarely fully understood, and she routinely had to switch to Persian in order to explain the finer points of English grammar.

While the classes were nominally meant to run for a minimum of one and a half hours, it was common for students to ask to leave early – out of a combination of boredom and frustration. Usually Ms Qorbāni obliged, shrugging her shoulders, as she informed them that ultimate responsibility for their learning lay with them. Depending on whether another class followed, Ms Qorbāni would then rush off to the kitchen, greet her colleagues who emerged from their own rooms, and take the five or ten-minute break to gulp down some tea or water, and cram a brief revision of the content for the next lesson. If the classes were finished for the day, we would return home. Work continued at home though. On a typical day, Ms Qorbāni would come home at 8:00-8:30PM, make a light dinner, put her five-year-old son to bed at 9:00PM, and then spend the rest of the evening revising for the next class, or marking student tests.

3.4   20 out of 20 –the "obligation of success", narrow fields, and educational 'glory'

In the final part of this chapter, I want to focus specifically on the obligation of educational achievement. On a long car ride home from Mashhad's rural hinterland, Mohsen and Dunyā, a civil engineer and high school teacher with two small children of their own, first introduced me to what they framed as a culture of obligation, or "must" [bāyad]. Discussing the upcoming school holidays, they asked us what they thought they should do with their son – twelve-year old Rāmin. Typically, they argued, during the three months of summer, students were sent to institutes to engage in

extracurricular study – learning languages, instruments, or being drilled in subjects that they had done poorly in the previous year. Asking them what the conflict was, the couple suggested they were debating whether or not to keep Rāmin at home to study, or to send him to his grandparent's rural property to work on the farm. To me, the choice seemed clear, it was better for a child to have a break from school. They both tutted in response. To keep Rāmin out of education over the summer would be a fundamental break with normative practice. Children in Mashhad *"must go"* to institutes, they said [*bāyad beran*]. Not only that, they argued, but they had to be constantly engaged in a competition with their classmates to prove that they were 'objectively' the "best" [*bāyad behtarin bāshan*].

The belief that educational obtainment, and especially outstanding scores, were not just desirable outcomes, but effectively necessary and obligatory for children was not limited just to the *Sampād*[105] system, but pervaded the 'atmosphere' of education at all levels. From a young age, children were immersed in a dichotomising discourse that distinguished between *absolute success* and *total failure,* divided often by only the smallest of margins. The expectations placed on children were extremely high. Profound importance was placed on academic achievement and high marks. From a young age, babies, toddlers, sometimes even newborns, were praised as "intelligent" by parents and extended family. As adults, one of the highest forms of praise meted out to friends and colleagues was to call them "literate" [*bāsavād*], but more generally taken to refer to familiarity with the canon of classical Persian literary works and poetry**.** It is difficult to quantify the esteem with which knowledge of these texts was held among my interlocutors. Praise of those who could recite them was effusive, and their recitation was a constant feature of life in Mashhad.

Kipnis (2011) notes that in Zouping, there was a culture of 'educational glory', i.e. a culture in which students were constantly praised for academic success, with public accolades given to high achieving students indicative of government efforts to encourage the desire for education. Similar forms of public 'glory' were evident in Mashhad, although they were largely understood as fostering competition and that sense of obligation, rather than encouraging desire. The most obvious parallel was the annual university entrance exam [*konkur*]. The *konkur* is extremely competitive (Sakurai, 2004), students scored by ranking them against each other out of the annual cohort of participants, making it possible for a student to quite literally be both 'first' and 'the worst'[106]. With fewer than 10% of applicants going on to the prestigious state universities (Sakurai, 2004), the konkur is the

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[105] Also known as 'NODET', the National Organisation for Development of Exceptional Talents [Pr. *Sāzmān-e Melli-ye Parvaresh-e Este'dādhā-ye Derakhshān – Sampād*], is the Iranian state academically selective education program.
[106] Although below a certain score, results were grouped into categories rather than individual numbers.

focus of significant amounts of pressure. Once the annual results are published, the top ten highest achieving students in each of the subject areas are interviewed on national television.

The konkur however only occurs once a year, and is then a relatively small aspect of the total cycle of praise meted out to student during their education. This was not always exclusively academic. On numerous occasions I was invited to lengthy events [*marāsem*] honouring individuals who had distinguished themselves in cultural fields (like dancing, singing, Qur'an recitation), or sporting events, alongside scholastic achievement. Events like this were routine, and tended to be exceedingly long with four, five, even six hours per presentation not unheard of.
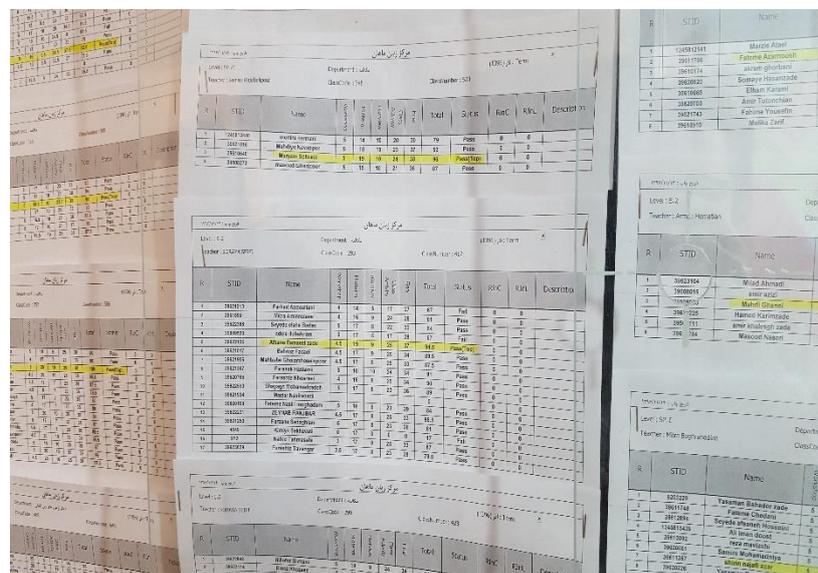
Figure 2: Student results from Mahan Language Institute. The results are posted in corridors for public view. Top students are highlighted with yellow marker and the word "top".

3.4.1   Fearing failure

Rather than a culture of praise for high-achievers, the academic culture would be better described as working on an assumption that excellence was natural, while simultaneously cultivating contempt for low-achievers and failure. To do well was a demonstration of one's perfection, to do poorly evidence of an inability to live up to the ideal social order. This arrangement was displayed at a micro-level, where students at institutes across the city were caught in a perennial cycle of testing, the results of which were always made public, rather than given to individual students and their families. In Iran the standard method of grade apportionment is a result out of 20, 20/20 a perfect score. But alongside this, students are also ranked against each other out of the total number of students in the class. In all of the language institutes that I visited, as well as early on in my research when I was undertaking intensive Persian classes at Ferdowsi University, routine exam results were

displayed publicly. At the entrance to mo'asseses, in waiting rooms fully visible to parents, teachers and students, results alongside with the full name of the student would be printed and ranked (see Figure 2, 3). The highest achieving, or sometimes a number of high achieving students, were often underscored with highlighters. Students' results were open to critical scrutiny not only by themselves or by their parents, but by other students and parents. In effect, all students were placed in a system that transparently encouraged comparison of scores between classmates, and fostered a hypercompetitive sociality[107].

It does not necessarily follow that just because class results were published so conspicuously that parents or students should therefore embrace a competitive ethos. But because of the stress placed on 'objective' achievement and being the best or perfect within the system [*behtarin budan*], the culture of comparison was difficult to escape. Sitting in on an English class, I observed the teacher asking students about the "last time they felt stressed", to which a young woman replied "the last time I was stressed was during the day of the konkur. But I realised that everyone else was stressed too. So long as I could rank higher than them…" Even relatively high marks were considered insufficient guarantees of success, with the gradation between what was considered success and failure exceptionally small, often as little as two marks, between 20 and 18. Families constantly struggled to 'keep up with the Joneses' [*cheshm o ham cheshmi*], not least because failure [*rad shudan/kardan*] in Mashhad among my informants was rarely understood to be character-building or a learning opportunity, but rather something to be avoided at all costs. When it did occur, it became a matter of social opprobrium, something to be both ashamed of, or to be corrected by repetition until an appropriate result was reached, so as to avoid the judgement [*bad bin/qezāvat*] of others. Bad results reflected poorly not only on the child, but on the family as well, something that potentially impacted kinship ties and relationships in unpredictable ways, so linked was the prestige of family to the success of all its members. For instance, the failure of one child might lower the marriage prospects of their sister or brother. Failure was linked to illiteracy [*bisavādi*], implying not just an inability to read, but almost an abnegation of moral and ethical responsibility, and a lack of concern with the fundamentals of Persian culture[108]. To be *bisavād* was to be pejoratively understood as lacking class [*bikelās*] and culture [*bifarhang*], to be placed on the margins of a society that so privileged and valued the written word.

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[107] Although not apparent in any of the institutes I attended, I noticed that elsewhere schools often placed headshots and names of high achievers on banners in front of the schools.
[108] On asking how people who were illiterate learnt poetry, I was told they simply used old-fashioned methods of aural memorisation.

Figure 3: Students crowd into a hallway and chat amongst each other while they wait for a class. To the right lie the exam results. [Source – author].

3.4.2   A case of failure: *Nilufar's konkur*

During the 2016 Iranian school year, we came to know one of the lecturers at Ferdowsi University, Mrs. Jānfedā and her husband (also an academic at another university). The family, despite coming from an agricultural background a generation prior, had quickly gone on to integrate themselves into the educated middle class. A cluster of brothers, sisters, and spouses, their jobs included lecturers, lawyers, and engineers. The eldest daughter of the pair, Nilufar, was a precocious 17-year-old, constantly praised by her parents for her good looks, charm, and outstanding intellectual output. In the period that we knew and spent time with the family, she was preparing for her *konkur*, and was routinely the subject of conversation as her parents again commended her and predicted her outstanding success in the coming exams. With the end of the summer and the return of the university year, we gradually saw less and less of the family until one November day, we came across Mrs. Jānfedā. Unlike previous meetings where she had always smiled on seeing us, now she looked downcast and gaunt, a harried expression worn across her brow. When we asked why the sudden change of demeanour, she looked askance, and drawing us in so as to whisper under her breath. "It's Nilufar, she didn't do well on her *konkur*, she wasn't accepted to any of the universities that she wanted. We're making her sit it again this coming year, and this time, all she's going to do is study, nothing else".

The idea that one would repeat the *konkur* until such a time as a 'perfect' mark was achieved demonstrates something of the sense of pressure [*feshār*] that many of my interlocutors found

themselves under when trying to live up to the demands of a utopian sociality[109]. Whether the *konkur* was indefinitely repeatable is an open question, but the fact that one would repeat it even once goes someway to evince how seriously these matters were taken, especially given the relative effort that was required in studying for the exam. Parental dissapointment also attests to the damage that individual failure did to the collective, and how fear of loss of face [*āberu*] impacted on family decision making. That is, the failure of one within a family demonstrated not just a singular case without ramifications for others, but instead something that damaged the standing of the domestic unit as a whole.

3.4.3   Ideal educative pathways

This culture of educational obligation also manifests as the narrow, ideal set of majors and career choices that were deemed to be not only desirable but minimally acceptable to parents for their children[110]. In the academic culture of Mashhad, the notion that an individual might pursue a personal preference in higher education out of love for the subject was almost completely absent from parents' expectations. In popular discourse, the *konkur* streams of empirical sciences [*olum-e tajrobi*][111] and maths and technology [*riyāzi va fani*] far outranked social sciences [*olum-e ensāni*], fine arts [*honar*] and, ironically given the stress placed on English learning, foreign languages [*zabānhā-ye khāreji*][112] as the most valued majors. In interviews with students of education and teachers at Ferdowsi University, it was generally agreed that educative models and parents' expectations stressed not the unique nature of individual talent and aptitude for particular subjects, but rather a belief that all children were ultimately capable of excelling in any field so long as they studied hard. "No one ever says you might not have been built for this particular thing [subject]" was how it was described to me.

This manifests as a rarely subtle, more frequently overt pressure and direction from parents on children towards an ideal trio of subjects – medicine [*pezeshki*], engineering [*mohandasi*] and law [*hoquq*][113] – that were the object and focus of primary obligation. Zainab, an informant in her early

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[109] What precisely a 'perfect' *konkur* would look like, given that the *konkur* is ranked competitively and comparatively, is an open question.

[110] Obviously this is not totally exceptional globally, but it was experienced with a particular exactingness in Mashhad.

[111] In practice, this means that the courses are designed to prepare students for a higher degree in medical school, dentistry, pharmacology, and biological sciences.

[112] The worst of all possible educative outcomes – excepting not studying at all – seemed to be becoming a cleric, a career which, excepting graduates of a small group of esteemed clerical schools [*howze-ye 'elmi*] that produced leading theological thinkers, was largely understood as the option of last resort, a job for 'dummies'. This seems all the more remarkable in the context of what was supposedly an Islamic Republic, i.e. a society oriented toward the appraisal of religious values.

[113] The only subject from the humanities considered worthy of study. These subjects were also considered to be politically 'safe' subjects, unencumbered by the potential dangers associated with studying the humanities and social sciences.

thirties who worked as a doctor, described it thus: "They [parents] say it like this: Being a doctor is good, being an engineer is good. They don't say it straight, but indirectly. And this is exactly what happened in my family. They said "my son, my daughter, being a doctor is good." And so it was always my wish to be a doctor". The result of this narrowing of field was that most university students studied degrees that they were only marginally interested in. As such it was relatively common to pursue first degrees of limited interest with good grades in those subjects allowing greater mobility in second degrees more tailored to specific interests. The percentage of my informants who had pursued first degrees that they enjoyed or wanted to study would have been in the minority, stories of want-to-be artists studying agricultural engineering or part-time directors whose major had been civil engineering, common. Those who did follow particular passions and studied in fields outside of the ideal three were rarely praised for doing so. For example, while in general a doctoral degree was considered prestigious, to research in the field of social sciences was to create a product that was of limited value[114].

The culture of educational obligation encourages not only the funnelling of students towards particular degrees, but also raises expectations about how well they would perform within those degrees. Children are frequently encouraged not just to excel at school, but to be 'the best' in their field. I think it is important here to draw the distinction between discursive systems that encourage children to be the 'best that they can be', and the educational atmosphere in Mashhad, where children are urged to be quite literally be the pinnacle of a discipline. Such an orientation was pervasive in Mashhad, something spoken about routinely by my informants, including both those who worked in the field of teaching/lecturing, and those who recalled their own experiences of childhood. This produces a culture in which success and failure are rendered starkly dichotomous, even relatively 'high' but 'imperfect' scores unthinkable.

3.4.4   Armān Qahremān – the champion who was not

The son of rural migrants who had made the move from villages on the border with Turkmenistan to Mashhad as the city grew, Armān was one of ten children[115], and part of the enormous baby boom that occurred following the enactment of pro-natalist policies during the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Like countless others, neither of his parents had completed more than primary school education, but chose to invest significant social and economic capital in the academic life of their children. Of his

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[114] Which raises the question of how my own fieldwork and research was interpreted. Generally, it seems, an exception was made for foreign researchers of the humanities, so long as they were communicating important cultural insights about Iranian society to the outside world.

[115] Six of whom survived to adulthood.

educational experiences in youth, Armān said: "From childhood, we're raised with the idea that it's not possible to be anything other than great or terrible. The idea of being medium, just doesn't exist. If it's not the best, it has to be the worst." The matter came to a head during his final school year as he studied for the *konkur*, self-imposing a strict regime of study. Describing the expectations placed upon him by his parents, he said "My mother believed I would be first, or maybe second, if I had been 10th it would have been bad". Yet when his results were released, Armān was given a ranking of 5434 out of a total participating population of approximately 14000[116]. He stressed "When I got my result, she [his mother] thought that they'd made a mistake, that I hadn't studied enough, even though I had really studied. I was 5434, not just out of all Iranians, but just out of those in my year cohort".

The result sparked a minor crisis in the family. Armān's father determined that his failure clearly indicated that he "did not have the temperament for academic work", and that he should begin to train as a truck driver, "that's how seriously he believed we had to be the best". Armān himself fell into a funk, isolating himself from his family, routinely spending evenings alone in his room, meditating on his relationship with the divine. "I thought I was a Prophet. I thought I was better than being the 5434th. I thought I was made for something else. I used to sit upstairs in the dark with my eyes closed for half an hour, establishing a mental relationship with God." He did ultimately attend university however, accepted into a degree in civil engineering far from Mashhad in the port city of Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf. Even then, when his father visited him some time later, he reported that he still bemoaned his lack of educational success: "My father once came to me, when I was at university, and said "I gave you all the opportunities in life, why aren't you the equivalent of Einstein?""

3.4.5   Academic labour and generational expectations

Among my informants there was a clear generational disconnect between parents' expectations of their children, the structure of the education system in the country, and children's own willingness to participate in the culture of educational success. While certainly the private education sector has expanded, I found little evidence of the kind of hyper-intensive 'cram industries' that "tend to have large classes, emphasize drilling as the teaching mode, and have a wholly examination-targeted orientation" (Fung, 2003, p. 183) that are common in parts of East Asia like South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, despite what Kamyab (2008) suggests about the growth of such a sector.

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[116] This number seems relatively low, even when broken up into different tracks (maths and physics, pre-medicine, human sciences, etc.) and different 'zones', but nonetheless was the number cited by Armān. It is possible that he underestimated the number of participants.

Certainly, the nearly super-human feats of educational intensity that Kipnis (2011) describes in Zouping were unknown. Students normally attend school for six hours per day, from 8:00AM to 2:00PM, returning to have lunch at home, while classes at institutes usually began from 3:30-4:00PM, and rarely lasted more than an hour and a half.

The disconnect between parents and children sometimes resulted in adults 'stepping in' to personally manage a child's results. Parents would fastidiously check not only how their children were performing, but how they performed *relative* to other children in the class rooms. Educators in Mashhad, both in the private sector and at schools, complained that combination of children's disengagement with learning and parental expectation meant that it had become routine for parents to do homework for their children, just to make sure they would achieve the highest possible results. One English teacher who worked at a prestigious parastate language institute complained that:

> Parents here don't tell their kids to be as good as others, they tell them to be the best. In my class at the end of last session, I gave out marks to the parents. If the child gets 18/20, they will ask whether any other children got 19, or 20, they are always comparing. If they haven't done well, they try to vindicate what they have done by saying that so and so had a headache, or we went on a holiday. But they just won't accept it. Sometimes I think that these classes are more for parents than it is for the children[117].

In the English classes that I attended, students were rarely studious. Very small amounts of homework prescribed by teachers (anywhere from as little as half a page of work to two pages) were usually complained about, and often left incomplete. Nonetheless, as I mentioned above, students were regularly tested on their work in oral and written exams, usually once every two weeks, if not more frequently. Cheating was commonplace – students using dictionaries on mobile applications, sharing answers with one another, or asking each other the correct response to questions. Rarely were such actions punished. There were also clear ambiguities in the system, and the culture of parental pressure obviously encouraged teachers as much as students to create 'positive' results. During my fieldwork, I was routinely asked to mark exams of students, usually written but sometimes oral as well. Like the other teachers, I was never given a clear rubric through which to determine the standard against which students were to be marked. Rather I was told simply to give whatever results I "felt they deserved", while being encouraged to "go easy" on the students. Poor marks, I was told, inevitably led to complaints, that would likely be adjusted in favour of the student anyway, so it was better to save time and give the students good results from the start. Clearly, what

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[117] I was also informed that parents, usually fathers, would stand over the shoulders of children and shout at them or hit them when they got an answer incorrect, although I never observed this myself.

was at play here was not the internalisation of knowledge at any great depth, but rather mutually agreed upon appearances of what constituted 'success' that were narrowly defined.

3.4.6   Absolute forms: The 'perfect' accent as case study

It is important to stress that, while in contrast to Khan's (2012) Pakistani case study that suggests that we thinking of the struggle for perfection as an open-ended effort, in Iran, such an effort is not similarly completely unrestricted. That said, the nexus of desire and obligation neither falls consistently nor evenly, nor is it static. During my fieldwork, in my work in English language institutes, in my conversations with English speakers, and in my own experience learning Persian[118], accent played a unique role both as marker of success and a platform through which individual perfection might be realised. My first experience with the degree to which a 'native' accent was held as an ideal outcome of language was personal. In the summer of 2015, visiting Mashhad's international fairground for an exhibition on handicrafts, I encountered three young women, one an Iranian girl of fourteen or fifteen, the other two Iraqi university students studying English at Ferdowsi University, engaging in a halting conversation in English. The young Iranian woman was in the processs of asking the two Iraqi girls whether they would help improve her English. They faltered, so seizing the opportunity, I (perhaps somewhat arrogantly) offered to teach her. She demurred. "I'd be too embarrassed to speak in front of a native speaker", she responded. Somewhat surprised, I said "We're all learning, don't worry. Everyone makes mistakes". "No", she said firmly "the problem is, I don't want to sound like *you* when you speak Persian!"

As time went on, and my Persian improved, I found that more and more frequently I was complimented not on my proficiency, but on my accent. Students of Persian learning at Ferdowsi University routinely complained that their dealings with native speakers where shaped not so much on their conversational fluency but on how closely they managed to adhere to a 'native' accent, fluent or near-fluent speakers with poor accents derided, while those with more limited speaking abilities but an ear for accents were often praised. My partner, whose memory of rules of grammar and vocabulary far exceeded my own, but who was less comfortable in speaking and less concerned with reaching a native-like sound, found herself embarrassed by informants on a number of

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[118] Although 'Persian' is the official language of the Islamic Republic, this is a position it has only held since 1906 when the new constitution made it an official language, supplanting Azeri as the language of camp and Arabic as the liturgical language. Today, the Tehran accent remains the prestige form of the tongue across the country, in practice the territorial expanse of modern day Iran encompasses an array of dialects and languages from at least four if not more language families (Including the Indo-European, Turkic, Semitic, and Kartvelian languages).

occasions as they took her lack of sonic acuity as indicative of total linguistic failure[119]. "Doesn't she understand Persian?" they would say in front of her as she gritted her teeth ignoring the insult.

And it was not just Persian that was the subject of intense scrutiny[120]. Accent in *English* was a fixation of students and teachers alike throughout Mashhad. While the pedagogical ideology of the classroom may have in theory situated grammatical proficiency and communicative fluency as core outcomes, in practice both in and outside institutes and schools, it was accent, and especially the ability to speak with what was determined to be a 'native' [*naytiv,* rarely *bumi*], a 'good' accent synonymous with the ability to replicate a native accent. Although learners claimed that it was the ability to sound *native* that was ideal, the reality was that, just as Persian dialects were alternately disparaged or understood to be praiseworthy, so too were the various accents of English both a) homogenised and b) hierarchically valued. Accent discrimination was rooted into the fabric of Iranian status differentiation. Regional differentiation in the national language is frequently remarked upon (Wellman 2015). Educated Tehrani Persian remains the national prestige register. Some local variants are widely understood to be 'attractive', e.g. Shirazi or Esfahani, while others carry significantly less social capital, and are frequently the butt of jokes, e.g. Qazvini. The native Mashhadi dialect was broadly disparaged by educated speakers in Mashhad, who associated it with lower socio-economic status, and rural backwardness. Educated Persian speakers across the country could usually converse in something approaching the educated Tehrani accent, a product no doubt of both the centralised education system and national broadcasting. When speaking about English accents, English learners in Mashhad maintained a fundamental division of the Anglosphere between those who spoke with an 'American' accent [*lahje-ye āmrikāyi*], General American, and those who spoke with a 'British' accent [*lahje-ye beritish*], or Received Pronunciation.[121]

This distinction was based on an idealised core accent – "General American" – that was distinguished from British primarily by its rhoticity – any non-rhotic English accent was lumped in as 'British', any rhotic accent as 'American' – and variation between the *a*ː and *æ* vowels. Variation of native accents outside this foundation was rarely recognised, learners at institutes across Mashhad asking whether, for example, Australians spoke English with an "American" or a "British"[122] accent. On a number of occasions during sessions where I was asked to speak to a class, I was asked not to speak with my own native accent, but to instead choose either British or American. Curiously, there was a greater

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[119] The stress on accent acuity may not be unique to Iran, but the sense that it a failure to perfectly replicate the national tongue was equivalent to not having learnt it was certainly pronounced.
[120] Barry (2018) notes the stress that Armenian Christians living in Tehran placed on their youth having a 'good' Persian accent, by which they meant the ability to replicate a native-sounding Tehrani accent.
[121] No one showed any interest in learning regional iterations of British or American English.
[122] Saying neither was usually met with confused looks.

recognition of the diversity in outside-of-core English first-language speaking countries, students admitting to the existence of both Indian English and a 'Chinese accent' in English, both of which were frequently derided as 'ugly'.

When learners spoke about having a 'good' accent [*lahje-ye khub*]*,* what they referred to then was the capacity of individuals to replicate one of these two accents. English teachers with 'good' accents were preferred and sought after by employers and students alike. Although teachers sometimes complained that speaking ability did not necessarily translate into teaching skills, a good accent was often synonymous with excellence. During a class at the Mahān Institute in the south of the city, students and teachers alike spoke glowingly of a Mr Akbari, famed as one of the best, if not the best teacher in Mashhad. When pressed to answer why he was so good, they always responded "because his accent is so good". As a native speaker, I was frequently asked to comment and critique English-speaker's capability. Over time I realised that if I wanted to praise someone's English speaking ability, telling them that they 'spoke well', or 'had a large vocabulary', or even 'speak very fluently' were all irrelevant compared to the accolades of saying someone 'had a good accent'. A dense lexicon was more often a source of derision or mirth than the basis of envy or pride. In preparing for his IELTS Arsalān, a regular attendee at free discussion events that I attended throughout my fieldwork, would often ask for the meaning of uncommon words or unusual synonyms, but always in private and after a session, to avoid the opprobrium that was otherwise directed at his questioning.
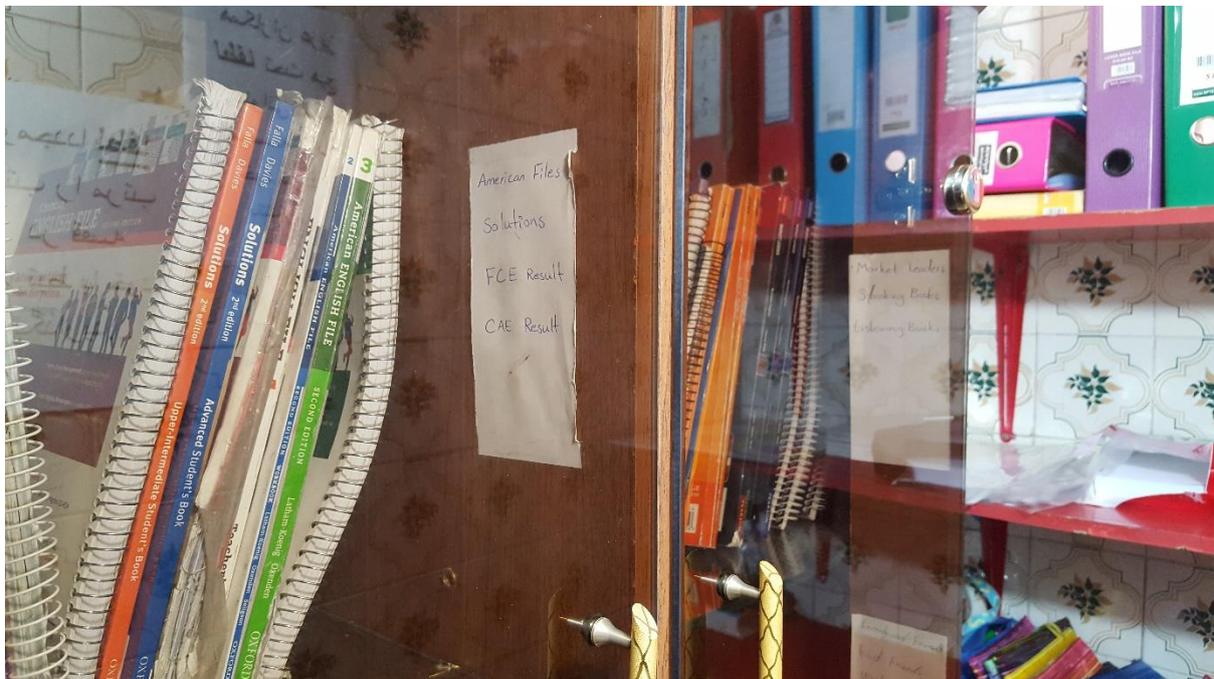
Figure 4: English teaching material awaiting use. [Source – author].

The preference for these forms was, as I have stated above, in no way static. During my initial period of fieldwork from 2015-2016, what was interpreted as the 'American' accent remained the prestige dialect of English in the country. Talking to students in classes about which accent they most wanted to learn, to a ratio of almost 2-3 to 1, all said they preferred to learn the 'American' accent. American television shows like the sitcoms *The Big Bang Theory* or *How I Met Your Mother* were among the most popular foreign video content, and I was routinely asked my opinion of both shows. Few learners had any interest in mastering 'British English', which was understood to be phonologically more difficult and significantly less desirable[123]. When I returned however in 2018, a wholescale shift was underway. A key informant who had been training to be an English teacher and had previously stressed her efforts to learn 'American English' now asked me how 'British' I thought her accent was. In institutes where textbooks and materials from the United States had previously been favoured, a series provided by Cambridge University was now in vogue. Where 'British English' had once been criticised for its greater difficulty, now that same level of hardship was understood to be positive, and mastery of the accent indicative of both the skill and hard work of the student. In pointing to accent as a case study, I mean to demonstrate again how the culture of perfectionism ensures that particular forms come to be the object of intense focus, shadowed by a belief that in attaining them one will be able to demonstrate total mastery of the subject. The shift between 'American' and 'British' English during the three-year period that this research spans confirms the fact that such perfectionism need not be read as stable, i.e. something that consistently falls on the same point. Instead, over time it shifts, even as it retains the original intensity.

3.5   Conclusion

I want to finish this chapter by returning to the institute in the opening vignette. Shortly after I finished testing Iymān, I sat with a cup of tea in the kitchen-cum-waiting room at the *mo'assese*. As the teachers bustled in and out, a number of them stopped to talk with me. I asked them how their own English was progressing, and one teacher replied that she had *finished* learning English. "*Tamum shud*", she said – "done". Initially I was struck by what I thought to be the overconfident boast of proud learner. After all, education, I thought to myself, is an unending process. On reflection though, rather than seeing her behaviour as purely idiosyncratic, I believe it goes someway to evidencing how English education was brought into the culture of perfection/completion. While it may seem counterintuitive, in Mashhad, it was certainly possible to

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[123] I wonder also if the preference for 'American' English over 'British' English was at least in part related to the ongoing positioning of the United Kingdom vis-à-vis the USA in the Iranian experience of colonialism. For all that America was the most common subject of government (and popular) scorn, there remained a sense that behind Uncle Sam lay British conniving, with BBC's Persian service far more regularly pilloried than VOA or RadioFardā.

consider learning finite, complete-able. Just as orators who memorised the works of Sa'adi, Hafez, and Ferdowsi might convincingly be understood as having completed training in classical Persian literature, so too could one arguably be considered to have 'completed' one's English training.

What I have described in this chapter has clear parallels with ethnographic examples elsewhere in the world. The pressure for education is a feature not just of Iran, but of many countries across the world. What is unique though is the particular conceptual arrangement that orbits around English education, and arguably education more broadly, and its absorption into the maelstrom of meanings and concerns that is the culture of perfectionism in Mashhad. The competitive culture of learning, the fixation on excellent results, the narrow margin between success and failure, and the condemnation of 'failure' as antithetical to success, are all influenced by the belief not only in the possibility of perfection as something socially realisable, but in the recognition that these are demonstrative of the attainment of an ideal form. The result of this has been a pervasive sense that education, and especially English education, are not just something that can be lightly entered into, but rather obligatory demands upon students and parents alike. And here we reveal a little more of how perfection manifests itself. If in Chapter Two, I demonstrated that perfection comes into being as a discourse with positive connotations, the will to improve the individual that Li (2007) speaks to, or to the striving that Das (2010) and Khan (2012) speak of, then here what I have done is exhibited how the legacy of perfectionistic thinking can weigh heavily on the shoulders of those who are attempting to put it into practice, that it can be felt of as a demand as much as something aspirational. The following chapter continues with our theme of unpack the way that perfection evidences itself in everyday life albeit in a rather different form. Here, I want to explore the *salavāt*, a sonic invocation of blessing upon the Prophetic family, as a social phenomenon that briefly manifests the idea of a perfect public in contemporary Mashhad. In doing so, we unveil perfection not just as a discourse or as a process, but as a practice, a hope even, for something better than that which presently is.

4 Chapter Four

Blessings upon the prophet, and the family of the prophet:

The sound of ideal publics

"The proclamation of the salavāt is performed at whatever time and whatever mood, is a recommended act, and is a verse of blessing without distinction to a particular time or place, that is ordered especially at the time that people hear or recite the azān, read the Qur'an, or hear or utter the name of the prophet." – Ayatollah Ja'afar Sobahāni

"There's always someone saying a salavāt. It's like a mantra…their prayer beads [tasbih] are always in their hand, and [they use the tasbih to] order the salavāt. Each bead of the tasbih is one salavāt. For oblations. They want something from God, and so they say a salavāt as an oblation [nazri]. Or, in the same way, they say a salavāt for divine reward [savāb]. Sometimes when they're afraid they say the salavāt. And sometimes it's used like "cheers". Sometimes they say the salavāt for health. Or when they hear the name of the Prophet [Muhammad] they say the salavāt. In formal and religious ceremonies, at the beginning and the end of the meeting, they say the salavāt. And at a whole lot of other times…" – Bahador (27).

4.1   Introduction: Sounds on the bus

On a mid-week evening, commuters catching the bus along Vakilābād boulevard towards Āzādi express way and then Cherāqhchi, two portions of the ring-road that looped Mashhad and kept the impoverished outer-suburban regions separate from the wealthier inner-city core, struggled to climb onto the already overloaded public transport. Divided front and back – front for men, back for women – they entered through both the rear and main doors, a single metal bar, easily crossed, nominally dividing the sexes from one another. Old men in dusty suits and women in chadors studiously avoided accidently touching hands as they reached to tap Mashhad's own electronic transport card, the 'Mankart', on the single reader between them at the entrance, before women piled left, men right. Those who only had cash were obliged to enter through the front, giving the driver his fee, although for women this inevitably meant depositing coins into the hands of a good-natured male passenger who took it as duty to deliver the money upfront. To make space for the divider separating men and women, two rows of seats were always left empty at the centre of the

bus, creating a void into which luggage, shopping, and standing bodies were crammed. The pandemonium of getting on and off the bus, especially at busy stops, was made worse by passengers trying to both exit and enter simultaneously, and when the gender scale tipped heavily towards one sex, usually men, forcing older gentlemen[124] over the line into the women's zone, the pragmatic politics of space superseded the edict of separation.

At the front of the bus, an elderly man picked up a small boy by the wrist, holding his hand high over his head as he was raised over the threshold of the vehicle. Oblivious to the crush around him and the clamour of women and men juggling shopping, wallets, the long hems of chadors, the boy cried out to the assembly: "*Khānomā va Āghāyun, boland salavāt beferestin!*", "ladies and gentlemen, raise your voices for the Prophet!" Despite his age and the tumult of boarding, he roused a response from the overcrowded bus as it tore along Mashhad's ring road, the passengers from the semi-industrial fringes of the city, men and women alike, raising their voices to just a *mezzo piano*, enough so that their intonation could be heard, not so loud that it might be a shout*: Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad -* "Oh Allah, bless Muhammad, and the family [and descendants] of Muhammad", they echoed back to the boy. "*Do bāre begin! Salavāt beferestin!",* "Say it again! Say the *salavāt*!" wailed the boy a second time as he and his grandfather now passed into the overflowing aisle, struggling to find a space. This time, the assembled passengers responded more loudly, their voices breaking over the rumble of the bus's engine as it attempted to pull away from the kerb and into the flow of traffic trip – *Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad*. "*Āfarin*, *āfarin*, *ahsant*", they mumbled as a final note, "great, excellent, well done", as the commuters settled back into the absent-minded routines of travel.

This vignette is just one of hundreds of similar events that took place virtually every day I was living in Mashhad. I raise it not just because it was remarkably common (and surprisingly understudied) but because it seemed to mark a break in the order of daily events that was not tied to the normal social processes that defined the everyday in Mashhad. While I have written about Mashhad as being in a state of exception in Chapter Two, there seemed to be something about the *salavāt* that was exceptional within the pre-existing social atmosphere of Mashhad. As it was articulated, it fostered a sense of shared space, a type of solidarity or emotional unity, something that Mazzarella parses as a "single buzzing block of unified affect" (Mazzarella, 2010, p. 717) that transcended the various differences that otherwise shaped the interaction between Iranians of various social

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[124] It was extremely rare, if not unheard of, for younger men and teenagers to 'slip' into the women's section. Older men by comparison were usually considered less of a cause for concern, although even nonagenarians were prohibited from using the women's only carriages on the metro line.

statuses, ages, ranks, and even religions, as well as non-Iranians, and gathered them all together in a moment which brought them together in an ideal social order.

4.1.1   This chapter

This chapter focuses on the auditory phenomenon referred to in Persian as the *salavāt*.[125] If chapters Two and Three introduced us to perfection as a discourse that draws other narratives into it, this chapter unveils the utopian for us as something that is manifest in the world of practice. My analysis is based on a reading of the *salavāt* as a sonic form that while produced in multivalent contexts acts as a process of and mechanism for reordering and refocusing attention and intention, and for heightening emotion. In doing so, it both presumes and creates a particular kind of ideal social order, a unified, singular, *perfect* public. As I have said above, there is such a diversity of contexts in which the *salavāt* takes place that it is difficult to encapsulate them in a single sentence, but what these sonic invocations share, I argue, is their capacity to evoke an ideal social ordering, an iteration of how things *ought* to be, characterized by a unity of purpose that cuts across different societal categories. In this chapter, I am concerned with unpacking those moments in which the *salavāt* occurs, under what circumstances it occurs, how it acts in such instances. In writing, I find it useful to frame my research in relation to the work of Warner (2002) and Hirschkind (2006) whose writing has been extremely influential in shaping the debate around what constitutes 'publics' and 'counterpublics'. The *salavāt* as an auditory phenomenon certainly creates a particular public *sense*, in that it creates a relationship between people that binds them in a kind of solidarity that is not otherwise encapsulated by the parameters of "nations, races, professions, or any other groups…that saturate identity" (Warner, 2002, p. 53). The *salavāt* is not limited to any of these categories, its iteration can even be understood to encompass the otherwise totally foreign non-Muslim non-Iranian non-Persian ethnographic interloper – me.

But it also creates a kind of social solidarity that is nonetheless quite different to other types of publics that have been written about by others. It does not, for instance, evoke the kind of deliberative public spaces that Habermas (1991 [1962]) speaks of. If anything, it is quite the opposite, and the *salavāt* can be used to *end* public debate if the conversation is considered to be straying into 'dangerous' territory. Neither does it totally echo Warner's articulation of a counterpublic as the actions of a "dominated group" aspiring to "recreate itself as a public, and in doing so, find[ing] itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public" (Warner, 2002, p. 80), nor as Hirschkind states in

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[125] For a fascinating study of a similar social phenomenon, see Salomon's (2016) work on the madih in Sudan.

his work on the culture of Egyptian religious cassette listening, "sentiments, loyalties, and styles of public conduct that stood in tension with the moral and political exigencies and modes of self-identification of national citizenship"(Hirschkind, 2001, p. 18). It is a similar breed of Islamists that Hirschkind identifies as creating a counterpublic that shapes the *public* in Iran, the *salavāt* very much an iteration of that dominant mode. But I do believe that as with Hirschkind's example of the sermon tapes, the *salavāt* creates an "acoustic architecture of a distinct moral vision"(Hirschkind, 2006, p. 8). It is this vision of an egalitarian social relationship, heightened in emotional intensity and solemnising of both time and space in character that unifies attention and intention, i.e. an ideal public, that I am particularly cognisant of in this chapter.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of the auditory mechanics of the *salavāt*. This is followed by a brief discussion of the acoustic backdrop of Mashhad, exploring the sounds that form the everyday auditory experiences of life there. The rest of the chapter is concerned with looking to the production of the *salavāt* in different contexts through a series of ethnographic vignettes. I appropriate Marcus' (1995) methodology for multi-sited ethnography that looks to "following the thing" as a means of data collection. In doing so, I do not leave Mashhad, but rather pursue the *salavāt* as it is enacted in a variety of contexts across the city at different points in the duration of my fieldwork. My aim is to explicate a reading of the *salavāt* as, as I have said, a process for reordering attention and intention, while also heightening the affective aspect of the moment. But in doing so, I want to point to the nature of the kind of public that this process of reordering presumes and creates. The chapter therefore draws on a series of events that explicate the varied contexts in which the *salavāt* occurs to show how it transcends the normative social barriers and parameters that otherwise define life in Mashhad.

4.2   The mechanics of the *salavāt*

The *salavāt*, on occasion referred to as the *dorud*, is an omnipresent sonic feature of life in Mashhad, as noticeable as the *azān* if on a smaller scale. It is part of the symphonic and acoustic backdrop to life in the city, enunciated in both celebration and anxiety, at moments mundane and extraordinary (cf Clarke, 2014). It is one of a number of benedictions on the Prophet, part of a series of common supplications throughout the Muslim world, spoken in Arabic, that are not necessarily specific to denomination or sect[126]. In Iran however, as with elsewhere in the Shi'a world, the particular form of recitation is extended to include the holy family and their descendants, the twelve Imams who, in conjunction with Fatemeh and Muhammad, Twelver Shia understand to constitute the fourteen

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[126] Compare Sultanova's (2011) discussion of Uzbek Sufi women's salavāt rituals.

infallibles [*chahārdah ma'sum*]. This ensures that the *salavāt* is associated with, and takes on, a characteristically Shi'a hue, one of those elements of praxis that delineates Shi'ism from Sunnism (D'Souza, 2004; Hyder, 2006; Moir, 2010; Szanto, 2013).

Daily religious ritual in Iran takes essentially three forms – *namāz, du'ā,* and *zekr. Namāz* refers to the obligatory thrice[127] daily prayers that are performed with formulaic prostrations and repetitions of set phases. Unlike other forms of prayer, the *namāz* is temporally and spatially delimited, observed three times daily based on the position of the sun, confined usually to mosques, *namāzkhāne*[128], the home, or on rarer occasions, particular public locales that have been specifically established for that purpose[129]. The *du'ā,* petitionary prayers or supplications, are optional, not formulaic, and although not as bound to place as the *namāz*, nonetheless tend more often to take place at shrines or in the home. The final form, the *zekr* (also *dhikr,* sometimes *zikr*) takes the form of recitation of particular phrases as acts of worship, performances that are often accompanied by exclamatory utterances used in ecstatic moments of prayer, called *dād* (Hyder, 2006, p. 42). *Zekr* is most common among Sufi orders (see e.g. Shannon, 2004; Werbner, 1996), but can be found throughout the Muslim world (e.g. Flaskerud, 2015). In Iran, the *salavāt* is sometimes understood as a *zekr,* referred to as the "best *zekr*", although the salavāt remains distinct from other forms of *zekr.*

4.2.1 The performance of salavāt

The performance of the *salavāt* takes two forms. The most common, and the focus of this chapter, is the *salavāt* as a 'dialogue', taking the form of call and response between two or more speakers. The first speaker produces the initial invocation by uttering an evocative refrain. This invocation follows a basic structure:

Salavāt beferest! – "Say the *salavāt*!"

The initial statement does exhibit some variation – grammatical considerations define whether the plural or singular conjugation of the verb is necessary. While in theory, and as I elaborate more fully below, regard for the formality of the occasion would determine whether colloquial or ceremonial

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[127] Shia Muslims do pray five prayers per day, but they do it in three sessions, combining the *Dhur* and *'Asr* prayers at Midday, and the *Maghreb* and *'Isha* prayers in the evening, unlike Sunnis who pray all five separately.

[128] Literally a "house for prayer", sometimes purpose built spaces that smaller than mosques, or alternatively, rooms that are put aside for the purpose of prayer in buildings that are not mosques. Equivalent to what is typically called a *musalla* in Sunni parlance.

[129] Prayer in public is made problematic in part because of the difficulty of ascertaining that the surface for *namāz* is clean, that water for *vozu* is available, and the availability of *mohr,* clay tablets that Iranian Shia place their heads on during prostration. Nonetheless, during major public events that coincide with the obligatory prayer times, public *namāz* is relatively common, for instance, al-Quds day, or *22 Bahman*.

forms are used, and choices can be made about whether to use the Persian *ferestādan*, or the Arabic loan *khatam* in conjunction with the native auxiliary *kardan* meaning 'to do', in practice I never once heard this distinction made. Some additional variation occurs in the use of adverbs – e.g. '*boland*' – "loudly". The initial utterance is always imperative, though, a command and exhortation made of others. In response to this, addressees provide the necessary antiphon, a fixed repetition of:

Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad – The blessings of God on Muhammad and the family/progeny of Muhammad.

Although more elaborate forms do exist[130], in practice they are less commonly articulated. After this there can be frequent, albeit not universal moments of mutual self-congratulatory utterances. Infrequently the *salavāt* can be performed without a human audience, in cases where the speaker addresses the divine. Spoken in the presence of the 'self' [*khod*] and *Khodā/Allah,* and most common when one reads the Qur'an or participates in other ritual prayers[131], this form is not dialogic, as the speaker does not expect, nor can they demand to 'hear' a 'verbal' response from the deity. In this sense, the *salavāt* performed in petition of the supernatural bears more in common with other forms of ritual and religious invocation, such as the *namāz*[132]*,* which is likewise unidirectional. Despite some shared use of the final antiphon, the *salavāt* in this form lacks the catalysing utterance that creates the dialogical loop through which both speaker and audience are addressed.

4.2.2   As an auditory experience

In its verbal iteration, rendered in Iranian Persian, the semantic meaning and intent of the utterance collapse into irrelevance. As it is spoken, phonological distinctions made in standard or Quranic Arabic disappear[133], and the phonetic boundaries between words collapses[134]. As such, the *salavāt* is distinguished from other forms of ritual and religious speech not only by its repetition and ubiquity, but also by its characteristic prosody and intonation, stress on and the lengthening of particular

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[130]The most common variant being the addition of the final phrase "*va 'ajjel farajahum val-'an a'da'ahum*", i.e. "hasten their relief, and damn their enemies". The return of the Mahdi is covertly figured as the relief of the Prophet's family .

[131] For instance, one may say the *salavāt* at specific points during *namāz*, after bowing, prostrations, and sitting.

[132] In Arabic, the term *ṣalawaat* is the plural form of the noun *ṣalah* referring to the specific ritual prostrations required for the obligatory form of Islamic prayer. In Farsi, this proscriptive form is translated as *namāz. Salavāt* by comparison refers specifically to the greeting [*dorud*] upon the Prophet and his family. See (Haeri, 2017) for more on the distinction between different types of prayer.

[133] Iranian Persian lacks MSA's voiced and unvoiced dental fricatives, a distinction between plain and emphatic consonants, and the pharyngeal voiced and unvoiced fricatives, the former represented instead by a glottal stop. Where Arabic distinguishes the vowels /a/, /i/, and /u/ only in length, Iranian Persian distinguishes the long /a/ vowel in Arabic is rendered as /ɒ/ in Persian.

[134] As a second-language Persian speaker, it took me many months before I was able to grasp quite how the written form of the *salavāt* was produced in its common spoken iteration.

vowels in recitation a hallmark of its vocalisation. Hirschkind (2006) notes that that which is glossed as Islamic rhetoric [*ilm-e al-balāgha*] focused not on rules of oratory as in the Greco-Roman, and ultimately Christian tradition, but rather on the eloquence of the Qur'an as the central domain of research, and in particular, its perceived inimitableness. In doing so, Islamic scholars "gave priority to the task of listening", the Qur'an persuading not through the adeptness of the speaker, but through its own "perfect unification of beauty and truth"(Hirschkind, 2006, p. 34). The *salavāt* is not however a sermon [*khotbe*], and it is difficult to classify the *salavāt* as a form of rhetoric, not least because the pattern of its utterance is so formulaic – there is no significant variation. What is relevant though is the notion of sound as a moral salve, what Hirschkind refers to as "ethical" therapy, that is with the act of listening to a *khotbe*, the voice of God echoes through the listener, affording opportunity to orient the senses to "a divinely ordered world"(Hirschkind, 2006, p. 36). Although it lacks that explicatory characteristic of sermons – one neither propounds nor elucidates the meaning of the *salavāt* – I would suggest it nonetheless possesses similar ethical characteristics, particularly in its capacity to reorient[135] .

4.2.3   The acoustic backdrop

Like any large city, Mashhad is a pastiche of sounds, an "aurally saturated environment" as Hirschkind (2006, p. 10) suggests. Which sounds are salient and which fall into abeyance at any given moment is determined by a combination of temporal and spatial rhythms that shape when, where and why they are heard. If there is a foundation to Mashhad's acoustic palate it is the drone of traffic. Locally made engines, built to be cheap rather than quiet, ensures a constant hum throughout the city, silenced only in the depths of night. The city's chaotic, untamed, and rebellious traffic is considered uniquely bad even by Iranian standards, drivers from elsewhere in the country refusing to take on the raucous flow of cars, trucks, and motorcycles. Despite the best efforts of electronic signage imploring drivers to stay within the lines, in practice predicting the movement of vehicles on the road is a gamble that even seasoned motorists find difficult to manage, as one-way streets become three lanes, and highways a virtual sea of constant, weaving motion. As a result, the roads are a symphony of the constant beeping of horns – appropriately rendered in Persian as the onomatopoeic "*buq"* – and the occasional scraping of metal on metal as cars do collide, or, less commonly, a proper crunch in a more serious accident. Even in suburban streets, a major thoroughfare is never far away, and fear of a potential accident means that whenever a car crosses a

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[135] For a fuller treatment on this kind of performative speech, see for example Agha (2003), Austin (2013 [1956]), Bakhtin (1981), Bauman and Briggs (1990), Butler (1997), Goffman (1981), Schieffelin (1985), and Searle (1989).

junction, another blast of the horn goes out. At major intersections, taxi drivers call out to passing pedestrians offering cheap fares and destinations on their routes.

In suburban streets, bakeries are distinguished by their particular noises. With thin *sangak*, a triangular, whole wheat bread, it is the sound of hot gravel being raked in the oven, the slap of pieces of bread on metal frames, and the *flick-flick* noise of little stones being removed from the cooling dough that predominates. In bakeries that sell *barbari*, the thicker refined-flour bread, instead it is the noise of industrial ovens, the rotating whirr of trestles that take the wet dough in and out of the heat, and the squelch of flour and water coming together that punctuates the air. What is rarely heard is music, the exception being lyrical sound of metal collectors, who play *Greensleeves* as they hunt the streets during the day looking for scrap or housewives who might know where any would be. Finally, certainly the most striking sound of the day is the repetition of the *azān*, three times a day calling the faithful to prayer. Unlike elsewhere in the Muslim world, it was uncommon for individual mosques to have a muezzin of their own, and most mosques in Iran played pre-recorded versions by famous muezzins. Particularly beloved was the sound of Rahim Muezzin-Zāde Ardabili, a now deceased muezzin famous across Iran for his unique and powerful recitation method, beloved even by this who do not consider themselves religious, and his voice now is almost singularly associated with the *azān* in the country.

4.3   Forms of the *Salavāt*

4.3.1   Re-ordering attention and intention

In the following vignette, I concentrate on the *salavāt* as an invocation that reorders the attention and intention of its listeners. In doing so, I draw on an experience at a mosque during *Muharram.* At the beginning of the sacred month, I attended a *rowze khāni* – a religious ceremony in commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussein and other victims of the Battle of Karbala – with two students – Muhammad and Mohsen - from the School of Medicine at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Both Muhammad and Mohsen were Persian speakers, but also of Pakistani and specifically Urdu-speaking descent on one side, and I took the opportunity to join them for a *rowze khāni*[136] specifically for the resident Pakistani migrant population living in Mashhad. Clerics led the ceremony with special lamentations, referred to as the 'reading of the elegy' [*nowheh khāni*]. Particular clerics were understood to be especially skilled at the practice of *nowheh khāni*, the

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[136] *Rowze khāni* can take place anywhere, from the micro (living rooms) to the macro (massive halls specifically designed for mass spectacle), and can take place at any time of the year, although in practice the ten days that begin the month of *Muharram* and lead up to *ashura* are particularly bus with the ceremonies, which become more focused around neighbourhood mosques.

capacity to elicit an affective response during the lamentations understood as an indication of the *sheikh's* ability.[137]

The Pakistani mosque was a multistorey white building, nestled amid the now increasingly fractured alleyways of old Mashhad around the periphery of the shrine, consumed on both sides by the expanding territory of the *haram* and by the need for new hotels and straight roads to cater for the ever-growing flood of pilgrims. The non-descript street bore the signs of change all around, a corrugated iron fence at one end separating a huge pit waiting to be filled by some new construction, hotels leaning in, the remaining residents usually poor Mashhadis who had lived there for generations. Outside the front of the mosque, men in *shalwār kamez* sat on stilled motorbikes talking to each other in Urdu or Pashto, their garb immediately setting them apart from Iranians. At the entry portico, stairs ran both up and down, men and women talking in the foyer, beyond which were the two doors to the devotional section of the mosque – one door for women, one for men. At the time of our arrival, a Pashto ceremony was already in full swing, the sounds of men slapping their chests spilling out onto the street, the foyer so overflowing with shoes and sandals it was difficult to walk past. We headed upstairs for Mohsen and Muhammad to perform their *vuzu*, washing their feet and hands awkwardly in a small kitchenette provided in conjunction with accommodation for passing Pakistani Shi'ites in need of a cheap place to stay. Downstairs, the odour of rice and meat wafted up the communal kitchens, almost overwhelmed by the humid cloud of sweat that hung in the air as a tidal wave of men and women emerged from inside the mosque's hall, scrambling over one another to find lost shoes.

Pushing over the crowd of men, shoes off, we entered the green carpeted prayer hall [*namāzkhāne*][138]*,* as a hundred other men clamoured into the small space with us. Unlike other mosques that I had visited elsewhere in the city, which usually had a binary division of space – women on the top level looking down, men on the bottom floor facing the cleric at the dais [*minbar*] – this one was a single floor, partitioned down the middle by relatively flimsy loose framing, such that it could be removed and reinserted with ease. Behind the partition, obscured from view, sat the women and children, the younger of whom especially never hesitated to duck out and run around to find their fathers or elder brothers on the other side. Inside the *namāzkhāne*, the men divided themselves off into rows, typically younger men or at least those who were more active taking the

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[137] A sheikh of limited talent was usually dismissed by the barb "he can't even make anyone cry".
[138] The term *namāzkhāne* was also used generally for any space that was formally demarcated for the *namāz.* In practice, it usually referred to specifically delineated rooms in public areas like airports, hotels, train stations, bus stations, etc., that were used for prayer. They were typically smaller than mosques and rarely as grand.

centre of the mosque, the older or more timid moving to the outer edges, leaning against walls and pillars for support.

By the minbar in the north-western corner of the building, men lugged a speaker to a power point at the base of the podium, and began the rhythmic intonations characteristic of the *Ashura* lamentation ceremonies [*azādāri*]. Unlike typical Persian mosques, in which the pulsating beat, and heavy use of reverb on behalf of the singer always rendered an effect something akin to a Western rave, the Urdu-speaking Pakistani forms were slower and more sombre, although still exhibiting the same cycles of greater and lesser performative intensity. At the ecstatic peak, facing one another in lines, dispersed at angles such that they would not collide with their opposite, men threw their arms high up in their air with such ferocity that their hands were almost flung from their wrists, before bringing them smashing back down on their chests in a punctuated rhythm, before moments of rest, where the hands would not be lifted above the neckline. At the edges of the *namāzkhāne,* men who could not be persuaded to participate sat in a more staid manner, gently tapping their hands against their breast.

The ecstasy of chest beating [*sine-zani*] finally gave way to the calmer *nowheh khāni*, the sermon. The *sheikh*, speaking in Urdu[139], took his place at the top of the *minbar*, and began the long process of retelling the story of the battle. In the crowded mosque however, people fidgeted. Men, overheated from their exertions, and itching to stretch out, were hemmed in by the press of flesh around them. Ceiling fans struggled to deal with the heat, and the smell of hot meals being cooked in the kitchens below broke the attention of those gathered. Eyes began to flit up at the ceiling, and then back down at the floor. Congregants picked at loose threads of carpet, while boys took out their mobile phones, previously used to record the exertions of sine-zani, entertained themselves in lieu of the rowze*. The *sheikh* on the *minbar*, having gazed over the assembly, stroked his short beard. Able to see the men in front of him, under his watchful eyes they kept relatively silent, but beyond the partition, screened off from the stares of men, the women and children suspended the solemnity of the occasion. Children ran, and the chatter of wives and daughters became audible, such that it was no longer simply part of the ritual, but objectionable. While at his feet, the pious remained engaged, at the far ends of the hall, lolling heads and closed eyes pointed to a shift in focus, and oncoming torpor.

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[139] I do not speak Urdu, and despite the assertions of my informants that night that Persian was similar enough that I would understand, I remained oblivious to the meaning of all but certain words. Thanks are due to Mohsen, who, despite us only having just met, took me in arms and whispered a translation into my ear even as Muhammad abandoned me to perform *sine-zani*.

His dramatic retelling, no matter the passion in his voice, had yet to reach its climax – the apogee of the battle and the defeat of the pious at Karbala, the murder of much of the saintly family and the enslavement of the rest. This is typically the moment when tears fall from eyes, the wails of men are thrown into the air, and shouts of *yā Hussein, yā Zahrā* punctuate the space already heaving with emotion. To hasten to that moment in an attempt to resolve the tenuous grip he maintained on the audience's attention was to risk a potential failure to draw tears. A rushed story that simply rehashed old history, devoid of its affective dimensions, was useless, vandalising the resonance of Karbala not just as some moment in time, but as the acme of Shia civilisation through which Islam and its divine mission was refracted. Its *azādāri* therefore required patience, that it be performed right, that the underlying, indispensable, and pivotal emotional effect was not lost or wasted on simply getting a crowd full stomachs and home early in time for a good sleep.

Breaking from his sermon, the *sheikh* leaned forward, 'ladies and gentlemen, say the *salavāt*!". Ingrained deep within the flesh, like some twitching fibre lodged in the muscle that suddenly, pressed against a hot needle, spasmed to life, the response rose out the audience with a deep melancholy that befit the gloomy *Ashura* setting. "*Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad*". Insufficient thought the sheikh. Unthinking, automatic, an autonomic response, still not enough to raise them to a state of readiness for the caterwauling that would soon be demanded. "Say the *salavāt*, loudly!" This time, they cried out: "*Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad*" – blessings upon the prophet and the house of the prophet! Phones dropped back into pockets, children stopped crying, wives and daughters shushed, all faces turned back towards that of the *sheikh,* even the smell of the kitchens seemed to dutifully absent itself, such that all might return in full focus and devotion, the authority of the sheikh as the conveyor of bad tidings – already known but constantly in need of reiteration – reaffirmed. Pressing his back up against the wooden panel, the cleric looked over his congregation, satisfied with the response, and continued on to the rest of the sermon.

There are two elements that I want to draw out here. The first is the matter of correct attention. Despite the supposed emotional intensity of the evening, the *sheikh* was unable to hold the attention of the audience to a degree that was, perhaps universally understood, or perhaps just felt by the cleric himself, to be sufficiently intense and appropriately focused. In invoking the *salavāt,* not once but twice, the *sheikh* redirected the attention of the audience which had wandered, and in doing so also ensured that the audience had the appropriate intention for the moment. Attending *rowze*, one is expected to weep at the climactic moment of the performance, and failure to do so reflects poorly on the *sheikh*, but also on the audience whose attention may have lapsed, or who

potentially had incorrect or suspect intention [*neyyat*], visible tears a sign of having the right intention. By reaffirming the attention of the audience, the *sheikh* was also able to ensure that his audience was also prepared to display the correct intention.

4.3.2 Uncoupling status, class, and gender

In this section, I want to draw attention to the *salavāt* as a mechanism that transcends the normative parameters and boundaries that structure Iranian sociality. The social life of Iranians is normally highly marked by relations of class, gender, status, and perhaps to a lesser degree ethnic and religious identity. Status-marking is fully integrated into the Persian language, described at length by Beeman (1976), and gender relations are likewise marked by complicated rules of dress and etiquette that aim to minimise interaction between the sexes. Less well known perhaps, class relations also heavily structure if not exactly *to whom* one can speak then certainly the manner in which relations are carried out and the nature of speech between those of different classes (Hashemi, 2015; Olszewska, 2013). What is noteworthy about the *salavāt* is that it is not subject to these same limitations. These were evidenced in the vignette above – a *sheikh* would not normally direct commands to women in the context of a sermon, but the *salavāt* transcends this – but I want to bring it out this element more fully in the vignette bellow.

Well after the peak hour rush to get home, often late in the evening, the streets of Mashhad remained congested, Mashhadis making the most of the time off work, leaving the house, driving to eat out, window-shop, or to simply 'take in the air' [*havā-khordan*]. At Sāheb-ol-Zamān square, close to the shrine and the shopping precincts on its periphery, the flow of cars coming into the city on a Wednesday evening[140] invariably ground up against the already clogged roads. At the roundabout, the flow of traffic in and out became so obscured that cars drove in one another's lane, hoping to exit the knot of other vehicles. Seeking relief, a driver behind our taxi pulled directly into the oncoming traffic, only to collide with another car, splitting the glass of the front window and crumpling the bonnet. The two male drivers jumped out, gesticulating as their then completely stationary vehicles brought everyone else to a halt. Pointing fingers and yelling loudly, the pair pushed up into each other's faces, as a small crowd gathered around them, formed mainly from passengers and drivers who found themselves unable to move.

As the words grew more heated, one man reached out to punch the face of the other, landing a blow squarely on the side of the temple and pushing his rival off balance. The crowd surrounding

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[140] The social equivalent of a Friday evening in Iran, i.e. the next day is a day of rest for many Iranians.

them moved to respond even as he lunged forward. From the back of the damaged car, a woman swathed in black leapt out, hitching the folds of her *chador* up and clasping two sides firmly in her teeth as she ran toward the two men. Reaching the closest young man, the two having been pulled apart by the assembly, the woman in the *chador* pressed an index finger up against his face, scolding him for the loss of temper, before turning to menace the other. "*Da'avā nakonin, bāshe? Salavāt beferstin!*" "Don't fight, ok? Say the *salavāt!*", her Mashhadi accent indicating her relatively lower class background.[141] The two men regained their composure, an abashed look on their faces, the tense atmosphere having rapidly dissolved. As those restraining them slackened their hold, the crowd let up a low rumble "*Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad*". The sparring partners shook hands, and the knot of people dissipated, getting back into cars or walking away, as the traffic likewise untangled and continued to move off into the night.

Here, as in the earlier vignette at the mosque, the *salavāt* reorders the attention of those present. But what I find of particular interest is how in this instance the normal parameters of interaction that would define the relations between men and women fall into abeyance. Interactions between unrelated men and women *do* take place in Iran, frequently, but they are usually marked by a certain degree of rigidity and formality, a kind of social minimalism that falls within normative Iranian Muslim understanding of the 'proper' performance of cross-gender relations. It is, for example, rare at least in Mashhad for a woman to order an unrelated man to perform any kind of action. Yet the *salavāt* does just that. It is not just the *men* who are pulling apart the fighting pair who can say the *salavāt*, but a woman, and not just any woman but one who – in wearing a chador – presents an image of herself as adhering to the strictest dictates of gender relations. It would also be unusual for people of lower status to speak up against those of a higher social class and status than their own, and even less common for them to make a demand or order them. In this way the *salavāt* both exists outside the bounds of 'normal' sociality in Iran, creating briefly an egalitarian public in which the both the initiator of the *salavāt* and the respondents are rendered socially equivalent. This is not durable however, and exists virtually only for the moment of the sound itself, before it evaporates and those present return to the pre-established order.

The other element that is worth bringing attention to is the issue of age. Although in this vignette it is not so clear, I would draw your attention back to the start of this chapter and the child on the bus. Typically, Iranian children are at the bottom of the social pecking order, with elders afforded

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[141] In Mashhad, typically those who are educated to a high school or tertiary level speak Persian with an "Iranian standard", or a mild Tehrani accent. The Mashhadi/Meshti dialect was considered to be particularly uncouth, and spoken only by those with minimal education.

particular prestige. In Mashhad, the epithet *hajji* or *hajj-khanom/hajj-āghā* [literally, Mrs and Mr Hajj] are used – irrespective of whether one is known to actually have performed hajj – to refer to elders as a sign of respect. While still shaped by class, arguably an elder of any status is always afforded more respect than someone within the same community of a younger age. Youth are expected to wait on elders, and children are relatively quickly socialised into using appropriate and respectful terminology and grammatical forms[142] for their elders. As such, the conveying of a demand for the *salavāt* is virtually the only instance in which a child can make a claim of authority and insist on the obeisance of its elders. In practice, it may still seem 'strange' for a child to utter the refrain, and yet, as the example at the beginning of the chapter would suggests, elders still typically respond with the correct refrain.

4.3.3   Heightening emotion and a 'serious' atmosphere

In this section I bring attention particularly to the *salavāt* as a heightener of emotional intensity and a marker of the 'seriousness' [*jedi budan*] of the occasion. During my time in Iran, I was routinely informed by colleagues and friends that Iranians were an "emotional people" [*ātefi*] compared to 'Westerners' who were understood to be more "rational". This should in no way be read as agreement on my behalf that such boundaries are necessarily true or binding, so much as to point to the relatively esteemed place of emotions in Iranian sociality. I have already pointed to the importance of having the right emotional intent during the heights of *azādāri,* and the capacity of poetry to effect moods and conjure up strong emotional states was widely recognised as part of their unique social power. Likewise, the *salavāt* was used in particular contexts as a mechanism of accentuating the emotional and affective elements of a particular moment, as I hope to make clear in the following vignette:

The hulking frame of Mashhad's Homā Hotel sits on Taleghāni square, the junction of Ahmadābād, Mollāsadrā, and Kolāhdoz boulevards. Only six stories tall, but many times wider and longer, its almost skeletal white frame gives nods to its origins in a time before the Revolution, a previous incarnation as Mashhad's Hyatt during the high-modernism of the late Shah. Originally located at the fringes of the city, now solidly embedded in the ongoing sprawl, the Homā reborn still carries some of the airs and graces of the old name, even if plenty of new lodgings along the route to the shrine now thoroughly outcompete it. The once-sprawling gardens, now hemmed in by rows of houses at the back and polluted streets out the front, nonetheless maintain a certain sense of privacy. It was

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[142] So, for example, someone who is older will overwhelmingly be referred to using the plural/respectful second person pronoun *shomā,* and its necessary grammatical conjugation.

here, at the back of the garden in a non-descript beige building that fringed the walls of the garden, that one of the last functioning *zurkhaneh* of Mashhad stood.

The *zurkhaneh* or "house of strength" and the "heroic exercises" [*varzesh-e pahlevāni*] that take place inside them are increasingly an anachronism, despite the stress that is placed on the performance as a 'quintessential' element of Iranian culture. Our attendance that evening was happenstance, an accident following the opening of Mr Momen's new café, in an attempt on his behalf to find a source of revenue that might compliment his teacher's salary. Our discussion over thick sweet coffees poured straight from the sachet roamed the 'constituent elements' of the "culture and civilisation of Iran" [*farhang va tamaddon-e Irān*]. Only when it emerged that we had not thus far seen the zurkhaneh were we invited to go, 'a friend of a friend' of Mr Momen saying "yes, just tonight, a performance, come quick to the Homa". From the fringes of the city to Taleghani, we skirted the back of the hotel, pouring out of Mr Momen's car, well-dressed men in suits and white shirts taking us by the hand over the threshold of the building, cypresses swaying in the breeze above. Inside, soft lights and well-appointed panelled floors, a space to put shoes, and the crush of attendants pressed home the rarity of that night's performance, and the esteem in which it was held.

We were ushered through a rounded door, the room widening out to form a large hall, the portico of which had been deliberately sealed with wooden frame compelling those entering to stoop in a bow and show due deference to the space and those within it. At the front, there was an octagonal pit [*gawd*]; to the right, a dais; on the left, a low bench; and on the far side, tiered seating for a larger audience. The walls to the right and left bore framed pictures, black and white photos of muscular men, or letters of note, awards, and Quranic inscriptions, their *nasta'aliq* calligraphy a shimmering wave of ink on paper, legible only up close and with skill. On the low bench sat a dozen elderly men, esteemed former heroes [*pahlevānhā*] who in their old age came to watch the feats of the younger generation. As we walked past, people bowed to the heroes, their honour and seniority obligating only that they place their hands on their hearts in return, rather than the usual rising that was expected of the seated when new guests entered a room.

Across the threshold and at the far side of the room were the four of tiers of seating for public spectators. Ushered over to the far side, we negotiated the collection of *mils,* the heavy clubs the athletes swung over their shoulders in rhythmic rotation, resting on their bases, handles pointing vertically to the ceiling, each a humble brown or black, numbered by weight, and inscribed with the name "Ali". Further to the right, heavy wooden shields [*sang*] with small square holes for hands

waited to be likewise lifted high over heads. Taking our seats, we were told that tonight was a special occasion – not only had the zurkhaneh been recently restored and opened again for use, but we were to be guests to other pahlevāns from Kish island in the Persian Gulf. As the athletes made their entrance, they likewise bowed to the aged former wrestlers, their muscular frames bulging in white shirts with the Homā brand inscribed on the back, thick thighs forced into leather shorts decorated with plain paisley [*botehjeghe*] designs embroidered into them.

Stepping into the square, two *morshed* took their place on the dais overlooking the *gawd,* climbing past the edge of the platform fringed by a small bollard in the same of the *mil.* A master of ceremonies of sorts, the *morshed* oversaw the musical accompaniment to the exercises, the tone and tempo of the music dictating which and how the calisthenics were to be enacted. With a drum [*zarb*] resting on the knee, the two men sang into the microphone, the mournful voices interspersed with beats and the ringing of a bell [*zang*]. As the warm-ups began, the heroes, all male, made circuits of the gawd, before reaching for the mil, pulling them up and over their shoulders in a persistent rotation. They then lay on the floor, heads all facing into the centre of the *gawd*, carefully positioning themselves to avoid hitting one another, arching their backs up and down in a stylised 'push-up'. Those who could not fit into the circle piled onto the outer edge, taking up the space between the seating and the ring itself. As the pace of the drum quickened, the morshed shouted out to all assembled, "*yā Ali, yā Hussein, yā shahid",* their cries punctuating the rhythm of the exercise, a flow of sounds travelling from morshed to audience as both reiterate the cry of the other.

Functionaries brought out small plates of incense, their smouldering ashes mingling with the almost metallic odour of sweat that hung in the air, unable to escape the closed tiled windows and into the already hot summer evening. The smells lingered, a pall of warm spices and sudor descending on the room, as the pahlavāns began to jump into the air, each ring of the bell a jump. "*Ali! Zahra!*", they cried, heads rolling, "*yek, do, seh!*" "One, two, three!*" bellowed the *morshed*. The performance began to reach a crescendo, the ecstasy of the heroes now obvious as they spun, one foot planted on the spot, their heads held against their shoulders, like dervishes but much faster, twirling until they stumbled to the ground. With each whirl, all shouted: "*barakallah, ahsant, mashallah, āfarin!*" The *morshed* slapped his bell and cheered: "*Salavāt beferestin, boland salavāt beferestin!*" "*Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad",* the crowd echoed back.

Again and again the demand rang out, beneath drawings of the Supreme Leaders, Imam Ali's sword *zulfiqar,* and Imam Hussein's helmet, as if their adulation might pass directly through the images and to the saints, no longer in the realm of the living, but still very much alive in the spirit of the

zurkhāneh. The intonations, performed in constant repetition, became mantra-like, agitating emotions, response to the *salavāt* now not so much obligatory, as involuntary. Like the others there, I found the words spilling out of my lips, the natural response to the heat of the moment, until Mr Momen assured me it was not necessary for foreigners. The evening finally reached its apogee, and the last of the athletes, having exhausted themselves, faced their elders and the dignitaries of Kish, daubing their faces with towels. All turned now towards Mecca, the *morshed* reminding us that just the night before had been the birthday of Imam Reza. "…this night is for all those who accept the Imams, Imam Reza brother of Masumeh[143] and the whole family of the prophet". With one last *salavāt*, the assembled bowed towards Mecca, and left the room.

Where this vignette differs from the previous instances is that I do not think correct 'attention' is a matter of importance here. The *zurkhaneh* is highly energetic and engaging, commanding such attention that it would be difficult to for attentiveness to 'break'. But attentiveness and the emotional intensity of the occasion can still be whipped up to higher cadences. The *salavāt* provides a mechanism through which to increase the dramatic and impassioned sensitivities of the occasion, a practice for the exultation of the moment. Additionally, as a form of worship and a spiritual exercise, being aware of such a state and the associated correct intent ought to be critical. What I would argue more broadly though is that the iteration of the *salavāt* as a reminder of correct intentionality need not be limited to events like the *zurkhāneh*. In the Islamic Republic, any given moment is latent with the potential for recognition of the divine nature of governance and the blessings of God on the Iranian people. An invocation of the *salavāt* is a reminder and a recognition of existence in that state.

4.3.4   Scale, solemnity, and the authoritative moment

Thus far I have spoken about the *salavāt* as a device for reorienting attention, heightening emotion, and creating a 'serious' atmosphere. In this section, I want to follow in that vein by drawing attention to how the *salavāt* solemnized occasions. But I also want to point to the important role of scale, and how the *salavāt* acts a different levels of scale. Thus far, all the vignettes that I have focused on have taken place at a very small scale – featuring not more than a handful of people. What I am concerned with here is how the *salavāt* can be 'scaled up' to speak to increasingly large

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[143] Masumeh, Fatemeh Masumeh, or formally, *Fātemeh bint Musa al Kāzim*, was the brother of Imam Reza, and is the only other major figure in the pantheon of Shia saints whose grave is in Iran, where it is located in the clerical city of Qum. Like the grave of Imam Reza, it is a significant site of pilgrimage in the country. All other key figures of Shi'ism are buried elsewhere in the Middle East, in Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, although both Iran and Iraq are dotted with *Emāmzādeh* – smaller places of local pilgrimage built over the graves of descendants of Imams who did not go on to hold such important positions.

numbers, and in doing so, reach out to a 'public' at ever broader levels. As I have suggested above, at the smallest level, the *salavāt* can be an individual prayer in a fully private context, i.e. the believer alone and in isolation from others, however such action obviously does not constitute a 'public'. The next stage up would be between two or three individuals, like the kind I observed when travelling by taxi or driving with friends in Mashhad – it was common, before beginning to drive, for the driver to utter a *salavāt* and those present to respond[144]. Beyond this, we have the kind of scene in the previous vignettes – anywhere from five to potentially a hundred people. What I want to turn to now is the *salavāt* at the greatest levels of distance and with the most potential 'speakers'.

For the first seven months of fieldwork, my partner and I lived in university accommodation, in a small studio apartment. Amid the accoutrements provided to us was a boxy television, almost certainly a decade old, that broadcast only two channels – *Shabake-ye-yek* the national channel, and *Shabake-ye Do*, 'Channel Two', that seemed to broadcast almost nothing but religious talk shows[145]. Without access to the infamous satellite dishes that many Iranians have, our options were extremely limited, and we rarely used the television. The exception was to watch the 7:00pm national news bulletin[146]. Although initially part of our language practice, sitting down to watch ultimately became something of a ritual. Like most news broadcasts across the world, the introduction to the bulletin followed a set format that never varied. For the past two decades, the 7:00pm bulletin had begun with the anthem "We are armed with God", a tune from Revolutionary days with lyrics that ran:

> "*We are armed with God the Greatest, We bring war to the lines of the enemy, We are all followers of the line of the leader, We bring war on the lines of the idolaters, There is no God but God, There is no God but God, alone, alone, alone, alone, achieve, achieve, achieve, the promise of being victorious, victorious, victorious, the slaves of he who has no peers, he who has no peers, accomplishing the promise of victory, accomplishing the promise, and the slave of victory, God is the Greatest, Khomeini is the leader!*"

Accompanying this were the following visuals:

> *Frame pans out from blue tiled traditional mosque with two minarets, to a man, hands raised in supplication, in front of it. This merges to images from the war – young basij, soldiers on tanks, Iranian flags, and the recaptured grand mosque of Khorramshahr during its reoccupation by Iranian troops. This is then replaced by a scene from a battlefield plain, four rocket launchers shooting missiles into a clouded sky. The image now pans to deceased Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant greeting to a crowd of supporters, rendered black and white to point to its origins in*

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[144] There are other performative speech acts that are worth flagging. In addition to the use of "*yā allāh*" my interlocutors also frequently made use of exclamatory phrases like "*yā hossein*" and *"yā ali"*.

[145] Eventually we were given a digital set top box that gave us access to the remaining 12 or so digital stations

[146] The television usually took pride of place in most Iranian homes, even though relatively few of our interlocutors watched the domestic news, preferring instead to watch satellite channels. In the handful of families who only had the domestic television stations, watching the news at 7:00pm seemed to take on a relatively important role in family relations, a moment to pause and take stock of the day's events.

the early days of the revolution. Khomeini's connection with Khamenei suddenly becomes apparent as the black and white image pans out to frame Khomeini as a picture next to the Iranian flag, dutifully looking over Khamenei as he waves – very much alive – to his own assembled masses below. The camera blurs to show raised fists, teenagers and young men in jumpers, jeans, with scarves over their faces, a reference to Palestinian resistance, before the black cube of the Ka'ba in Mecca, a close of up pilgrims grasping at the door that enters the Ka'ba. A blue glow then engulfs the screen, the Islamic profession of faith consuming, the emphasis on the word 'Allah', merging with an image of a ballot being dropped into a voting box as a long line gathers to vote. We are then presented with images of protesters holding up pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei, before a return to a broader picture of Mecca, the Ka'ba within the haram flanked on either side by two minarets. A sparkling cut takes us to Iranian wheat fields, a farmer riding a combine harvester as the camera pans to other men, threshes of wheat held over their heads and on their backs. Wheat gives way to an industrial scene, a combination of an oil refinery and a launch station for Iran's safir-e omid satellite, before we are taken to images of the Prophet's mosque with its green dome in Madinah, a grill giving way to pious Muslims once again in prayer, before an image of an enormous hydro-electric dam, assumed to be in Iran, takes centre screen. The final shots show first women in their black chadors protesting for Khamenei and Khomeini, and then in front of the crowd, are bearded members of the Basij, fists raised in the air. We are then given recorded imagery of a younger Khamenei in conversation with Khomeini, presumably at the beginning of the revolution.

The crescendo of the bulletin and the opening line of the news was uttered by presenter Reza Hossein-Zāde, his short-cropped hair, slightly-greying, round-wire glasses, moustachioed upper lip, shirt and suit without tie, making him instantly recognisable as the face of *Shabake-ye yek's* news. His words follow "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. Greetings [*salavāt*] upon the Prophet Muhammad, and his respected family. Hello ladies and Gentlemen, welcome"*.* What I think is noteworthy here is how with this iteration of the salavāt*,* the issues of scale, solemnity, and authority all come together. I do not believe that this authority is attached particularly to the initial utterer, but that rather, by invoking the *salavāt*, he makes the *moment* authoritative. It is a moment that *ought* to be paid attention here (and here of course we see the same re-ordering of the attentive field). But by virtue of its being broadcast on the 7:00PM news, already a time of 'national' coming together, the *salavāt* is pitched at the broadest possible scale – the whole nation. In doing so, it presumes not a heterodoxy of different voices, but a unity of national purpose and a state whose people and government speak in one voice. This of course does not mean that this is actually the case or, or that the intensity of such unity remains consistent at different scales. The newsreader cannot observe whether or not his viewers actually respond, and in my experience, few did. But it is the *assumption* of response, the role that the *salavāt* is 'meant' to occupy, that is important. In just the same way that the newsreader refers to his or her viewers with the words "co-national" [*hamvatan*], and to Iran as "our country" [*keshvar-e mā*], so too here does the *salavāt* at this scale create a unified 'national' public. In doing so, it alludes to the same themes that I mentioned in my discussion of the overlap between religion, nationalism, and Iranian exceptionalism, in Chapter One.

4.3.5 Solemnising geographies

The *salavāt* is also intimately connected to place. In locales that are understood to be particularly solemn places, like mosques, *qadamgāh*, and major and minor shrines, one is much more likely to hear the *salavāt* proclaimed. However that is not to imply that the *salavāt* is limited to these particular places. Rather the act of saying the *salavāt* works both to affirm the solemnity of a place, and to solemnise it, a kind of performative dialectic where both the call and the response constantly work to iterate the importance of the space in way that never conclusively ends. Here I want to point to an example from the *qadamgāh* south of Mashhad. Qadamgāh, literally "place of the footprint", is a ramshackle village of 3000, facing on the dasht-e neishābur, noteworthy only for its shrine – a qadamgāh of Imam Reza, supposedly laid as he made his journey through Khorasan before ultimately being poisoned in what was to become Mashhad. Although nowhere near as significant as the tomb itself, the shrine is one of hundreds of *emāmzāde* that dot the countries, local sites of devotion to the offspring of the Fourteen Infallibles, or in the case of the *qadamgāhs,* sites where the footstep of the saint[147] is said to have touched the ground and left an indelible mark. The *emāmzādes* and the *qadamgāh* are a bedrock of popular piety in Iran, saturating the countryside, rural areas, even the suburbs of major cities, the pillars of a sacred geography that criss-crosses the country.

We visited the site at the apogee of summer, the ferocity of the sun beating down upon the old clay bricks. Located at a small crossroads, the shrine is nestled into the mountain foothills, surrounded on all sides by a high wall. At the entranceway, a *bāzārche* had opened, providing pilgrims the common fare of popcorn, *tokhme* (salted seeds), *lavāshak* (pressed dried fruit), *dugh* (yoghurt drink), and soft drinks. The *bāzārche* fronted onto an outer courtyard that was ringed on three sides by walls, but open in the direction of the plains. In the alcoves of the walls, and along the fringes of the path, pilgrims, or sometimes just travellers, stopped, laid out carpets and *sofreh*, and sat, taking in hot tea from thermoses, spitting out the shells of *tokhme* into the path or onto the garden below. The inner courtyard of the shrine was a few metres back, hidden behind a gatehouse that operated both as a hinge for the heavy wooden door and as a space to hang hundreds of *chadors*, to be worn by women only in possession of a manteaux and hijab as they passed. Past the gatehouse, was the garden, a combination of manicured pines, bushes, and grass lawns, carefully watered even in summer to keep them lush and green. On the western side, a collection of houses, little more than impoverished mudbrick enclosures with windows at one side, overlooked the site.

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[147] This tends to be Imam Reza because of his noted travels across Iran.

At the centre of the garden stood the *gonbad*, the dome which covered the footprints themselves. Typical of Iranian architecture, the dome was capped with turquoise tiles, with lines of the vivid blue running down and fringing the *evans* of the building, trailing right to the floor. On the brick veranda of the shrine, an old man, black-cap on his head, sat agitated by the laxity with which Iranians and foreigners alike were taking their hijab, barking orders at them to carry their *chadors* over their heads, not just under their arms as many had chosen to do. "*Hejābetuno ra'āyat konin*!" "Fix your hijabs!*"* he cried, his growling operatic doing little to persuade the crowd, who ripped off their floral coverings as soon as they had left the interior of the shrine. Inside, the building was diagonally partitioned by a plastic wall, one side for women, the other for men, a gold lattice and thick glass frame covering two indents of feet pressed into cold stone. Men kissed and patted the lattice and the glass, wrapping small straps of ribbon around the gold work, before taking it again and strapping it across their wrists. The footprints played a diminished role to the sacred spring within the complex. We were told:

> When the Imam was wandering the wastes of Khorasan, he reached the then empty side of the *qadamgāh* to pray, only to find no water to perform the necessary *vuzu*. As his companions searched desperately to find some, the Imam was preparing to use sand to make the *namāz*, a practice known as *tayammum*, only to find that a spring [*cheshme*] had miraculously opened up, allowing him and his caravan to perform the *vuzu*. Since that day, the *cheshme* had been reputed for its miraculous properties.

The spring itself lay under the shrine, the entrance a concrete 'bubble', welled-up over a staircase that led steeply down into an underground grotto. As pilgrims in enormous throngs forced themselves down the steep steps into the small enclosure of the shrine, each aimed to reach the clay pipe that spewed out the blessed water. Two metres underground, the humidity was intense, the clothes of pilgrims clinging to them as they pushed up against each other in the tiny enclosure, nearly 20-30 at a time in a space not more than two metres square, hoping to splash their faces and fill water bottles with the liquid. On the mantel of the entrance, was the inscription "*Bā salavāt vāred shavid*" – "Enter with the *salavāt*" (see Figure 5), pilgrims reaching up to touch the sign and utter the phrase under their breaths as they stooped to make way for the entrance – "*Allāhoma sal-e alā Mohammad va āl-e Mohammad*".

It is noteworthy that here there is no human caller, a metal plaque taking that role. In that way, they ensure that, so long as pilgrims are in attendance at the shrine, there will always be a *salavāt* in recitation. The *salavāt* is then totally temporally unbound, and thus its role becomes to turn attention to the solemnity of the space that one is entering. As pilgrims go in, they place their

hands on the sign that calls for the *salavāt* while whispering the correct response under their breaths, making tangible in physical form the gravity of both the occasion and of the place.

Figure 5: The sign to the top left of the doorway reads *"Enter with the salavāt"* at the qadamgāh of Imam Reza near Nishapur.

4.4   Conclusion

While I have only been able to write a very brief summary of some of the potential iterations of the salavāt, the examples I have chosen represent to my understanding the *salavāt* as it is heard and iterated most typically. In thinking about what the salavāt means and does, it is difficult to draw a single or conclusive answer, but what I have tried to do is bring out a constellation of interpretations that cluster together closely. Firstly, I believe the most important aspect in interpreting the *salavāt* is to recognise its role as a device for reorienting and concentrating attention. To say the *salavāt* is to compel one's audience to briefly leave whatever mundane thought or action they were involved in, and to demonstrate a new attention to that moment. By uncoupling relations of class, gender, age, and other social status, the *salavāt* not only floats unmoored from the normative proscriptions of social engagement in Iran, but briefly creates those same conditions. So too does the *salavāt* work to solemnise occasions and spaces, turning the mundane into the special. This brings me ultimately to my main argument which is to suggest that despite the diverse, arguably hyper-diverse contexts in which the *salavāt* can be uttered, these forms work to produce a unified outcome – a public typified not by its variety but by unity, all oriented within it towards the production of a singular voice. This

does not necessarily mean that this public is, in the long or even medium term, a durable possibility. But in the very short term, the *salavāt* works, or is pushed into the service of an attempt to transcend the mundanities of worldly distinction that make up the reality of life, and remind the speakers/listeners of their place in a perfect state of being, one that transforms them into those whose very being exudes praise for the Prophet. In pointing to this example, I continue to open up how the refractions of perfection manifest in different forms across Mashhad. Thus far in this thesis we have seen perfection manifest as a discourse, here in this chapter we have seen it as a practice, as a sonic attempt to iterate an ideal public. In the following chapter I want to again reveal new insights into the nature of perfectionism by taking up the theme of moral personhood that we saw in Chapter Two, albeit in a somewhat different context. In Chapter Five we will see how the possibility of moral perfection is taken on with regards to notions of truthful speech and sincerity, the ideal actor conceived of as one who is free from the social ties that necessitate some degree of untruth and instead imagined as an agent who is always honest and constantly speaks the truth.

5 Chapter Five:

'Virtuous' states:

Ethical (im)perfection in a heightened moral landscape

5.1 Introduction

One of my initial inspirations in studying Iran was to apply what we might describe as "the ethical turn" in anthropology towards the question of Islamic governance and everyday life in a society guided by the principles of a theocratic state. As I mentioned in my introduction to this thesis, the last two decades or so have seen a flowering of work on moral and ethical concerns in anthropology (e.g. J. D. Faubion, 2011; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Lambek, 2010b; Robbins, 2007b; Robbins, 2013; Zigon, 2008). It struck me as pre-eminently sensible then, and altogether surprising, that more had not been written on the question of virtue, the good life, ethical and moral deliberation, in post-Revolutionary Iran, given that the Republican system featured at its heart an effort to insert the question of Islamic values into everyday life in a way that, its ideologues held, had been sidelined under the Pahlavis. Like Salomon's (2016) quest for the Islamic state in Sudan however, I found that searching for the ethical in the everyday proved a more difficult task. My early forays into trying to pin down the meaning of terms like "ethics" or "morality" [both rendered into Persian as *akhlāq*] usually turned up furrowed brows and quizzical smiles. Asking people whether they ever faced the kind of ethical conundrums or "moral breakdowns" that Zigon (2008) referred to in his work proved similarly fruitless. These questions seemed so remote from the lives of my informants that at one point I considered giving up on the matter altogether, assuming that my interlocutors simply did not think about morals or ethics in a way that was amenable to study through the frameworks that anthropologists had hitherto provided.

It was only after some time that I realised that looking for morality and ethics in its formal, institutional manifestations was the problem. It was not that the Islamic Republic was an amoral landscape. On the contrary, social interaction was littered with evidence of the importance of moral decision making, and ethical deliberation was infused into the everyday in a way that I think is almost unimaginable to a Western audience. But it was because it was so quotidian, not just the stuff of debates between philosophers and clerics (which admittedly, was part of the same landscape), and outside the language of formal dialogue, that I was able to first miss its ramifications. My first realisation that I had been looking in the wrong place, came in a heated debate with someone with whom I had only the briefest of encounters with. On a night sipping

coffees in the outer suburban reaches of Mashhad with three interlocutors, an acquaintance of the men present stopped by, and upon seeing a foreigner in their midst, took it upon himself to rail against the evils (as he saw them) of the Islamic Republic, and to praise the pre-Islamic Achaemenids for their moral upstandingness. His *coup de grace* though was his declaration that the Iranians[148] of that era had ensured not only near universal literacy, but had been a "people of creation who did not tell lies".

Such a statement initial stood out to me as deeply unusual – after all, who would make such a grandiose claim about an entire people, given the fundamentally pervasive, almost 'universal' reality of lie-telling as part of the human experience. Yet I make the case that this statement was symptomatic of a broader trend, a concern with ethical norms and moral values that is wrapped up in the same utopianism that this thesis treats. We will circle back to the particulars of truth and falsehood later in this chapter, but I want to turn to further layer evidence for this concern with morality with another example from my fieldwork first. On another night, among the same group of over-caffeinated men, such matters came once again to the fore: "Hypocrite!" [*Do-ru*] [149] Ahmad spat and rolled his eyes. Referring to an anecdote I had just told him, he and the other men present were unable to restrain their contempt for its protagonist. The story concerned a man none of them knew, but whose apparent hypocrisy touched a nerve. Its chief character, Hassan, was another interlocutor of mine. He was deeply conservative, a member of the *basij*, and committed to a vision of the Islamic Republic that closely aligned with the principalist forces. He also liked to watch pornography. Once on a train trip into the city centre, he had bailed me up, asking me whether I had heard of the American porn star Alexis Texas. Apparently one of Iran's more popular American pornographic actresses, Alexis Texas featured prominently on the social horizon of many young Iranian men I spoke to, but as a member of the *basij*, Hassan was 'meant' to stay away from these kinds of pleasures of the flesh. Even I was taken aback by his awareness of Alexis Texas, and so I pressed him on how he justified the seemingly contradictory behaviours that he juggled. There was nothing contradictory, he pushed back, suggesting that what he was doing was necessary and 'educational'. In re-telling this story to others, I found a generally consistent response – Hassan's behaviour was evidence of the kind of hypocrisy, insincerity, and lies that many considered to be the

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[148] It seems a stretch that we might think of an 'Iranian' identity so earlier in the mists of history, especially at a time so well before nationalism as we now know it had raised its head.

[149] *Do-ru* literally means "two-face", and is used in a manner similar to English. The Arabic *monāfegh*, which also exists in Persian, was never used by my informants, and was apparently more closely associated with Islamic matters, referring to the person who outwardly pretended to be Muslim, but internally held to blasphemous thoughts or secretly engaged in anti-Islamic activities. In contemporary government rhetoric, it refers most regularly to Islamic dissident groups in the diaspora, including and especially the *Mojāhadin-e Khalq* (Abrahamian, 1989).

hallmarks of the *basij*. But what I ultimately found to be more striking was not so much Ali's apparent hypocrisy as my other informants' frustration with it.

Certainly, as a *basiji*, employed to practice the Islamic dictates of *amr be ma'aruf va nahy az monkar,* or "enjoining the good and forbidding the bad", the sin of watching pornography was one thing. It was even more egregious that he was flaunted his sin, brazenly maintaining one virtuous face for his Iranian social circles, quite another for a foreign anthropologist. But there was something in the vituperative tone of Ahmad's derision that hinted that Hassan's hypocrisy impinged upon a broader moral world. After all, that a figure who held themselves up as the enforcer of public virtue might in private be less than pious struck me not only as singularly plausible, but almost quotidian, part of the jumble of competing ethical demands and assemblages that make up what authors like Schielke (2009; 2015) describe as the essentially fragmentary nature of the moral quest. Yet for my interlocutors, this kind of (admittedly fairly rank) hypocrisy hit in a particularly profound way. It was as though they expected more from their co-nationals, an assumption and demand of ethical consistency. It is not only that as a member of the *basij*, that Hassan was held to a more exacting standard, but that the whole system of interpersonal relations between my Mashhadi interlocutors that was brought subject under a system that stressed ethical excellence. It was, to paraphrase Mazzarella (2015, p. 92), an in itch in their imagination, a concern that took on great proportions. Unravelling this story is the aim of this chapter.

5.1.1   This chapter

Chapters Two and Three have already introduced us to the relevance of perfection to particular kinds of economic and educative personages, and here I want to extend that metaphor to explore what 'perfection' looks like in a very explicitly moral context. In this chapter I argue that one of the outcomes of the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of an *Islamic* (by which we made read, a 'virtuous') state has been reification of a perfectionist ethical position that is marked not by its fragmentary nature or its lapses, as authors like Schielke (2009) would suggest is the 'natural' human disposition, but rather by its ability to consistently uphold a moral utopia. It is as though the idea of ethical perfection, instead of an impossibility, was presented as within the grasp of my interlocutors. This does not mean that my interlocutors were necessarily always capable of living in such a perfect manner, or that this chapter is about 'actually existing' ethical perfection, so much as it is about the dilemma and the perils of living with the belief in such a condition, an analysis of how their passions were particularly exercised by rank examples of failure to live up to this uncontradicted virtuous comportment expounded to them by the utopian ethical philosophy of the state. The irony is that in its attempt to elaborate this vision of moral excellence, the Islamic state was in effect caught in a

bind of its own making. As it encouraged its citizens to lead a virtuous life, it had reified the ideal of individual and collective moral perfection as a possible project – not merely as striving, but something that was actually achievable. But this heightening of ethical awareness now meant that any lapse of judgement, any failure to live up to the ideal, rather than being brushed away as part of an inevitably imperfect moral reality, took on outsized proportions. It became indicative of the ultimately hypocritical, essentially 'unethical' nature of the supposedly virtuous state.

In unpacking these themes, I have divided this chapter into three parts. The first part concerns the theoretical influences that have helped shape my understanding of this obsession with building a morally consistent life. I draw on work by Schielke (2009, 2015) on the concept (or, arguably, impossibility) of ethical perfection, and to a lesser degree on Berliner et.al (2016) on the idea of contradiction. I then provide a brief overview of the moral history of Iran, looking particularly to the heightened ethical atmosphere that emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution. The remaining two portions of this chapter are ethnographic case studies. I begin with the Revolution Day parade [*rāhpaymāyi-ye bistodovum-e bahman*] and the response of my ethnographic interlocutors to it. The second example looks explicitly to ideas of 'lying' as experienced by my interlocutors. Both examples I suggest are important points through which – as in the rest of this thesis – the idea of perfection refracts with a particular salience.

5.1.2   Theoretical framing:

I have already mentioned the work of Schielke in the Introduction of this thesis, but I draw on him again because I think his articulation of moral exactingness is useful for our understanding of what is happening in Mashhad particularly as it relates to the examples I draw on below. As I said earlier, in his fieldwork in Egypt, especially with Salafist groups in the lead up to the 2011 Revolution, Schielke has been highly critical of piety movements in the Middle Eastern context and their "problematic tendency to privilege the aim of ethical perfection" (2009:35). Schielke sees his interlocutors' approach to morality in two ways: one manifestation that recognises "ambivalence as a key condition of life" while "living up to specific demands and ideals at appropriate moments". The other is "based on the revivalist promise of perfection" that rids ambivalence and replaces it with "meticulous clarity" (Schielke 2015:63). I have already mentioned some of my concerns with Schielke's work in my introduction, so I do not wish to rehash them here. Rather my interest lies in taking seriously this notion of what we can refer to as the meticulous clarity of the ethical, as something that is more than an exclusive feature of piety movements, and something that becomes a part of society at large.

Germane to this is the idea of contradiction.[150] If we try and define this "clarity of the ethical", I would suggest that it has at its core the notion of ridding moral behaviour of contradictory alignments. Anthropological treatment of contradictions as a specific subtopic of research is a relatively recent phenomenon, much of it focusing on the naturalisation of contradiction as something inherent to the human experience. In a (2016) edited collection on contradictions in the journal *Hau*, David Berliner states "contradictions constitute one fundamental aspect of human life. Human beings are steeped in contradictory thoughts, feelings, and attitudes…Yes, humans are full of contradictions" (2016:1-2). Furthermore, Berliner maintains that not only are humans contradicted, but that they can live quite comfortably with contradictions. Ultimately my concern is not with whether people can live comfortably with contradictions, nor do I intend to naturalise one form and de-naturalise another. That is, unlike Schielke and Berliner, whether we understand contradictions to be a 'natural' element of life, or to be aberrant, I consider to be a culturally bound question. But investigating the question of which view predominates, how it is articulated, and what it means, seems like a pivotal question for anthropology. My intention then is to look to the origin and manifestations of the triumph of the idea that one ought not to live with contradictions, that they constitute a social evil, and that the ideal state of being and one that we are led to believe is achievable is the complete [*kāmel*] and uncontradicted one. Certainly, for many of my informants, this was the case. And unpacking their concern with an ethical life uncontradicted is the essence of this chapter.

5.1.3   A moral history of Iran

This all raises the question of where this idea of moral perfection came from. The origins of this notion, I believe, can be pinpointed to much of the material that I refer to in my introduction, e.g. a history encumbered firstly with Zoroastrian notions of the sixteen perfect lands created by Ahura Mazda, later by Islamic notions of the perfection of both the Prophetic person in Muhammad and the community in his rule over Medina, and then of course the model provided through the twelve Imams in the particular Shi'ite tradition that has predominated in Iran since the Safavid conversion of the country. But if there is a very particular reflexion point, it is the Revolution of 1979. The victory of the Revolution, and especially the period of Islamisation of cultural institutions like universities in its aftermath, marked a turning point in a particular mode of the *public* cultivation of an ethical disposition. This is not to suggest that the Pahlavi period, or the periods before it, were

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[150] There is something of a byzantine debate about what constitutes a 'true' contradiction, whether inconsistencies are the same as contradictions, and whether people can truly believe that contradictions are in fact *not* contradictory, etc. (see Berliner et al., 2016). For my part, I take heed of the Persian term *tanāqhoz,* another Arabic loan, meaning 'to disagree or to contradict', largely parsable with the English term, i.e. deeds, behaviours, words, that are understood to be in opposition to one another.

unconcerned with moral decision making, and the kind of high-modernism of the Pahlavi monarchs represents in itself a specific kind of ethical discourse. But certainly, the advent of a self-proclaimed Islamic government, in combination with the increasing power of a centralised state, marked the intrusion of political institutions into the realm of virtue in a way that had largely been unthinkable previously. Like Salomon notes with the *Inqadh* regime in Sudan, the Islamic Republic was not the first government to "base its strength on Islamic legitimacy", but "never before had any government so comprehensively utilised the legal, law enforcement, media, and military tools of a modern state in the service not only of government reform but of the moral reform of individuals as well" (Salomon, 2016, pp. 72-73).

The period of Islamisation in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1979 is more comprehensively covered elsewhere (see e.g. Shorish, 1988), so I here I wish only to chart some of the most salient aspects. In the period following the Revolution, the newly formed state and its ideologues became pre-eminently concerned with matters of public comportment assuring that it adhered to their exacting standards of what they understood as the constituent forms of Islamic piety. This was demonstrated in a host of changes from the specifically legal – changes to the constitution outlining specific moral duties like *amr be ma'ruf va nahy az monkar* (Golkar, 2011), women's and men's dress, inheritance rights, divorce rights (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 1993) – to more abstract or less mandatory manifestations like the exhortation to give charity or for regular prayer. Much of the policing of morality was performed by the *basij* in their role as the enforcers of public virtue (Golkar, 2011). Often cited examples of the policing of ethical comportment during this period include female members of the *basij* or teaching staff who would wipe the faces of women with too much make-up on at the entrance to high schools and universities.

Although this rigid and highly invasive public moralising has ebbed and flowed, often contingent on whether reformists or conservatives hold the reigns of the Presidency and *majles*, government efforts imploring the cultivation of pious dispositions and ethical values remains an evidentiary feature of the urban landscape, suffusing all aspects of the everyday. Not only on holy days and weeks, but throughout the year, admonitions to prayer [i.e. *namāz*] bedecked the signage across Mashhad and other cities and towns in the Islamic Republic. During the summer months in particular, campaigns equating undressed or less than immaculately clad women to sweets unwrapped and buzzing with flies served to underscore the government's commitment to a mode of virtuous attire. These physical reminders served alongside verbal pleas and scoldings to adhere to such ethical dressing. Others (e.g. Mahdavi, 2009; Varzi, 2006) have noted police efforts to enforce the rules of obligatory hijab, something I observed myself on occasion, but such punitive measures

were far less common than oral rebukes – by both women and men among the general population – who remind (typically young) women of their duty to 'obey' [*ra'āyat*] the laws of hijab.

None of this means however that Iran was a moral utopia in which citizens carried out their ethical obligations unreflexively and automatically. On the contrary, many of my interlocutors did not necessarily believe that Islamic comportment was *truly* ethical or virtuous, and those who were opposed to the regime often made reference or appealed to some kind of transcendent pan-human and pre-cultural ethical position as evidence of the Republic's own moral failings. Even among those who did think Islamic values *were* ethical, it did not mean that they believed the state had necessarily achieved the aim of moral perfection. On the contrary, as we will see in more detail later on in this chapter, it was entirely common to complain about both the *failings* of the state with regards to its ethical duties towards citizens, and also the failure of citizens in their duties to one another. What the Islamic state had achieved rather was a heightened ethical expectation, a greater attunement to matters moral. In the explication of a sense that it might be possible to live a life that was free from ethical ambivalences and with an exacting clarity, it had fostered the withering away of any notion that an individual ethical assemblage might include moments of lapse, relapse, or otherwise forms of contradiction. Again, we ought to be careful of blanket statements, and I do not wish to suggest that there was a universal belief in the possibility of moral perfection. But as the state promulgated a reified vision of the perfectly moral man and woman, so it primed its citizens to be especially sensitive to questions and performances of the ethical. It is the dilemma of this kind of provocation that the rest of this chapter attends to.

5.2   The 'hypocrites' of the 22nd of Bahman

I want to turn now to the first of the ethnographic vignettes that form the core content of this chapter. Here I focus on the lead up to an annual parade that commemorated the anniversary of the Revolution. I have chosen this subject because the parade marked a moment of sensitivity to these questions of moral excellence that are central to this chapter. The 1st of February marked a change in Mashhad's normally grey and earthy horizon. Although the succession of holy birthdays and deathdays in the lunar calendric cycle (time as always important, see Chapter One) was always portended by the festooning of public space with the black and gold flags and banners, names of the relevant Imam swaying in the breeze, the celebrations of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution [*ruz-e piruzi-e enghelāb-e eslāmi*] contended only with *Ashura* and *Tāsu'ā* for quantity and quality of decoration, and out-rivalled them all for colour. University gates, highway billboards, pedestrian bridges and streetlights – any and all public spaces and objects – were draped or bedecked by bunting and posters, a riot of fluorescent green, dark reds, and pink fringing in the hues of the

national flag. The state radio stations switched from the typical diet of news and Persian traditional music to re-live the great anthems and choruses that had aroused passions as protesters had spilled into the street some thirty-five years earlier to demand the end of the monarchy. The fevered pairing of the refrain 'Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic!' [*esteghlāl, āzādi, jomhūriye-eslāmi*] with potent imagery and cries of blood! [*khun*], death! [*marg*]*,* and God is the greatest! [*allāh-u akbar*]*,* formed the symphonic backdrop[151] to the celebrations and memorials.

These frenzied celebrations marked the annual anniversary of the return from exile of Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual and then actual leader of first the Islamic Revolution, and later the Islamic Republic, and the final collapse of Shāpur Bakhtiyār's provisional republican administration that administered the country in the brief interlude following the Shah's flight from Tehran. The Ten Days of Dawn [*Dahe-ye fajr*] was one of the few, if not the only, truly exuberant state-sponsored and sanctioned festivities in the Republic, despite being in the depths of winter, cold winds tugging at the edges of posters. The exuberant nature of the celebrations was noteworthy, in particular because most holidays in Iran tend to be muted affairs – the celebration of specifically Shia holidays that follow the lunar calendar typically fall into step with mourning practices, while other secular holidays that mark, say, the New Year [*Nowruz*] or the 13th day of the New Year [*Sizdah Bedar*] are never celebrated with the same state-supported vigour that the Ten Days of Dawn are. I was told that, second only to the Prophet's birthday, the 22nd of Bahman was the nation's 'happiest' celebration. Even in the normally more relaxed satellite villages of Shāndiz and Torghabeh, best known for their dining and entertainment options, women in bad hijab and men with coiffured hair were now obliged to contend with more than just the omnipresent imagery of martyrs from the war with Iraq.

As the sun set on the evening of the 21st of Bahman[152]*,* bathing our dormitory in the late winter's darkness, the festivities began their long road to climax. At about 9:00PM, the thin glass of our windows began to rattle in their ill-fitting frames as the boom of fireworks heralded the coming public holiday in honour of the final acquiescence of the Imperial Army under Abbas Qarabāghi to revolutionary forces on the 22nd of Bahman, 1979. With each bang and muffled pyrotechnic thud, a chorus of shouts went out from the rooms above us. Soft at first, but increasingly louder, the girls on the second and third floors of our dormitory called into the night – "*Allah-u akbar*!" "God is the greatest!", carried into the night air over Ferdowsi University campus, a modern reprise of the

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[151] A notable variation from the acoustic backdrop described in Chapter 4.
[152] *Bahman* is the 11th month of the Iranian solar (*Shamsi*) calendar that roughly coincides with January-February of the Georgian calendar. Iran, as I mentioned in Chapter One, makes use of two calendars – the domestic *Shamsi* which, although tabulated from Muhammad's *hijra* from Mecca, is solar and keeps 365 odd days, using its own months of varying lengths (29-31 days), and the lunar *Qamari* or Islamic calendar that is consistent with the global Muslim calendar.

refrain that likewise met the heavens thirty-five odd years before across the cities of Iran just before the Shah fell[153].

With dawn arriving, we set out early, walking from our dormitory to the metro station at Pārk-e Mellat, already busy despite the public holiday and the early hour. Two old men, bedecked in tweed caps and suit jackets, gestured towards us, encouraging us to sit next to them as we waited for the train to whisk us away. Reaching into their jacket pockets, they each produced a miniature Qur'an, replete with red print to distinguish particularly efficacious and felicitous prayers, and Persian commentary, which were then pressed into our hands with an insistence that we ponder them and their meaning on this auspicious occasion. With the arrival of the subway, thanking our benefactors, we stepped into the carriage, already full with a mass of women enveloped in their dark chadors, some wearing headscarves or shawls in the colour of the national flag, small children likewise smeared with face paint of green, red and white.

By the time we had arrived at the Meydān-e Basij station, the metro was packed, and as the doors opened passengers spilled out, virtually emptying the once-chocked carriage. At street level, the roundabout was likewise swollen with marchers, buses disgorging passengers, trinkets being distributed, TV crews readying their equipment, broadcasters fixing their make-up and photographers putting on lenses and reaching for the best vantage points. Travellers in turn went right, walking towards the Pānzdah-e Khordād square, before looping back and marching towards the Meydān-e Āb, either the golden dome of Imam Reza's shrine or the snowy peaks of Mashhad's hills the backdrop to their drama. At Meydān-e Basij, the centre of the parade route, opposite an inflated model of the *Māhvāre-bar-e safir-e fajr* satellite launcher, a stall provided a seemingly endless supply of paper flags and placards, inscribed with the slogans of the day "Death to America! Death to Israel! Oh, if Khomeini had given the order for Jihad! We stand up till the end! We submit to the will of the leader! We are all revolutionaries like our leader!" written in English, Persian, and Arabic. In addition to mass-produced banners were the countless home-made signs, families carrying pictures of martyrs from the war with Iraq, men in combat fatigues and women in chadors draped alike in the iconic black and white *chafiyeh* scarves of the basij.

Effigies of Barak Obama, or Uncle Sam, scarecrow-like, were waved above the crowd on wooden poles, while others had created grotesque puppets that merged the Saudi monarch, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Obama into a single hideous creature. As it approached mid-morning, the crowd

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[153] The declaration of "*allah-u akbar*" was also appropriated by critics of the disputed 2009 presidential election results when participants in the *Green Wave* movement (*mawj-e sabz*) were encouraged to use the call to stress the *Islamic* nature of their protest against conservative forces (Harris, 2012).

began to surge, segregating across genders as two human waves began their march towards the shrine, the dark black of the women's chadors clearly marking them out. Cars and pickups kitted out with speakers and megaphones screamed patriotic slogans into the air, the chorus of call and response animating the crowd. From his megaphone, a *basiji* in requisite combat gear and five-day stubble shouted "*marg bar āmrikā!*" [154] to which the assembled below would cry back "*marg bar āmrikā!*" "*marg bar Isrā-el*" "*marg bar Isrā-el*", their clamour so loud it strained the electronic equipment which would then crackle and whine, its feedback pumping electricity into the air.

We attended the revolution day parades three times – once at the very beginning of the main period of our fieldwork, once near to its conclusion (in 2016), and then again in 2018 – enough to garner the response of the supporters of the revolution to international themes, and subtle variations in tenor of both the mood of protestors and the direction of conservative anger. In 2015, in the lead up to nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 grouping, individual protesters provided reminders that the Rouhani administration, and in particular Foreign Minister Javād Zarif, were *on watch* as far as conservatives were concerned. Shouts of 'Death to England' and 'Death to France' pointed to the continued suspicion towards other key players in the negotiations. A year later, following the détente and the beginning of much needed relief from sanctions, conservatives and traditionalists – now on the back foot – responded by cutting references to France and England, while stressing their undying enmity and suspicion of the United States. A naval incident some month earlier that saw 10 members of the US Riverine Command Squad captured by Republican Guard units was relished, posters of the sailors and dramatic recreations with teenage boys dressed in khaki jumpers and blond wigs, hands behind their heads in submission, mocking the super power (see Figure 6).

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[154] *Marg* is the Persian word for 'death', although official English translations provided by the Iranian government universally substitute the slogan "*marg bar Āmrikā*" for the less evocative "down with America". As Rezaian notes, the difference is "subtle, but…noticeable"(2013).

Figure 6: A poster depicting the capture of US sailors from the 2016 Bahman parade blows in the breeze above Imam Reza Boulevard, the route of the parade. The small text in the poster reads "It was the work of God..." [Source: author].

Returning to our first attendance, as the masses of people moved closer and closer towards the shrine, so the emotional intensity grew, saturating the crowd. Not only the proximity to the divine, but a camaraderie drawn from that sense of transcendent fraternity electrified the assembled. By the time the gates of the shrine had come fully into view, it seemed altogether natural to throw a fist in the air, and shout with the crowd "*marg bar āmrikā, marg bar ingelis*", blows pummelling the sky and the imagined face of a distant enemy, with a regular cadence that provided necessary catharsis. Having reached the limits of the haram, the crowd was suddenly placated, men and women bowed and made minor prostrations before the deceased saint, then spilled off either way – some turning in circles to make a second run, others simply out into the side streets, off to the bazaar or away for other shopping, jumping into the many taxis lined up. What was moments ago a mass of humans at the edge of exultation was suddenly a disaggregated mass of families and individuals running for groceries and hoping to make it back home before the traffic got too bad.

For all its charged political atmosphere and orchestrated displays of rage against the perceived enemies of Iran, the rallies of the 22nd of Bahman usually proved to be a family affair, hospitable, domestic, friendly. Young couples pushed children in strollers, grandparents raised babes in arms on their shoulders, school children giggled, university students flashed toothy smiles and made "v" signs with their fingers.[155] Obviously foreign, my partner and I were embraced by the crowd, who welcomed us to Iran, asking: "Who is your favourite Imam? Mine's Imam Reza! Do Christians have Imams?", "Have you become a Muslim yet? No? Well, god-willing, while you're here, you will

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[155] How this sign was to be interpreted remained elusive – was it "v" for victory, or a peace offering?

become a Muslim", and "take our photo!" In the woman's section, my partner was bundled up in the hugs and kisses of older women, even as they gently reminded her to correct her loose hijab, younger girls begging her to appear in selfies with them. "Where are you from? Are you American? We love America! You're Australian? Even better! Welcome to Iran!" they echoed. Such was the familiar atmosphere that, as we stood taking amidst a gaggle of onlookers cooing over our presence, a young man ran up to me, leapt up, grabbed the side of my face, and planted a kiss on my cheek, to the hails of laughter from women and men alike. Rare displays of aggression in our presence were met with disapproval from others in the crowd, an elderly woman who made an act of stamping on an American flag and screaming her frustration, dragged away and scolded for embarrassing others in front of foreigners.

In the days and weeks following the parade, our participation in the rally took on a new life as a point of discussion among our predominantly anti-regime friends in Mashhad. As I regaled them with tales of the sense of excitement [hayejān] that I had felt, and in particular my interest in what I understood to be the altogether contradictory behaviour that in one breath might call for death, and in the next would embrace strangers, particularly Western ones, to their bosoms, they recoiled. The following excerpt, redacted from my fieldnotes transcribing a conversation with a number of interlocutors, is indicative of the tenor of their response:

> It's not protest [eterāz] it's performance [namāyesh]. The movement is political, the majority are….look, the state organises it, they [the protesters] can't spontaneously gather. Those who go probably don't comprise more than 30-40% of the population. We think you're playing with us, being ironic [maskhare], when you say you find the 22 of Bahman interesting[156]. The people who go, they're mostly students from high school, who are forced to go, there are those government workers, and there was those who are in the *Basij*, all of whom are given some kind of positive [mosbat] reward and then there are some percentage of the population, who are like us, and – despite their lack of understanding – still go [nafahmidan va miran]. Here Islam is business. All those who say down with America…I saw a photo from the 22nd of Bahman, where the interviewee was speaking to the camera man, and below they were holding a script to read from. They're not free to say what they want.

My fumbled defences and rationalisations of the behaviour of the 'protestors' at this time was almost always met with a uniform retort: "Don't you see? These are our lives. These people are hypocrites."

There is much to be unpacked here, a clear intertwining of concerns about the ethical code and positioning of state and society. Firstly, I want to point to the attempt among my liberal interlocutors to distance themselves from the underlying 'message' of the parade. In stating that the

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[156] By this I believe they meant to imply, how could I take this matter seriously?

protestations were little more than "performance", that those present were "forced to go", or that those shouting slogans comprised no more than "30-40" percent of the population, my liberal interlocutors were able to both distance themselves from its message and to deny the authenticity of it. *Iranians* did not sincerely shout 'death to America', rather they had been financially incentivised or compelled to be there, or some combination thereof that ensured that the message was illegitimate.

Wedded to this was an underlying assumption of a kind of double immorality at play. One is encapsulated in the statement "here, Islam is business". The underlying assertion is that the government, despite its claims to the ethical high ground, had in fact diluted the moral message behind Islam[157], sullying it by bringing it into interaction with the immoral world of politics and economics. It was as though the Republic had produced an Islam that was stripped of its ethical core, little more than a vehicle now for the preservation of power. Such immorality was displayed by the very act of 'forcing' people to attend to the parades, to act against their own values and beliefs and come out in support of a system that they did not 'truly' believe in.

But the protestors themselves did not escape unscathed from the castigation of my interlocutors. Their sin was hypocrisy, and dually so. Not only did they embrace Western strangers even as they called for "death to America", but they almost certainly did not believe the slogans that they were shouting. They had been bribed [*reshve dāde shudan*], or offered food, a day off, or perhaps they had been threatened to attend, but at any rate, the twin evils of incentivisation and compulsion hung over their actions. "Death to America" then was little more than an insincere shout, the cry both of a government whose actions were immoral, and 'protestors' whose words could not be believed.

This leaves lingering questions though. I turn again to the final refrain that so many of elicited – "these are our lives. These people are hypocrites". Why was it so pivotal for my interlocutors to stress the immoral nature of both state and society, and why particularly at the moment of the 22nd of Bahman? Although the two are not fully separable, let me postulate an answer for the second question first. That they should have been so attuned to it on an event like the 22nd of Bahman is no

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[157] This of course assumes that one believes Islam *has* a 'moral message' for humankind. As I have said earlier in this chapter, this was not universally agreed upon by all my interlocutors, and those at the more radical fringe of what we might call liberal or progressive certainly believed that it was Islam itself, not just an Islamic state, that was the source of immorality in the country. This points also to the difficulty of using terms like "conservative" and "liberal" in the Iranian context, when one has to recognise that these in fact cover a vast spectrum of political and social beliefs, from anti-government Islamists, to those who merely wanted to reform the system, right through to those who fully opposed any kind of mixing of state and religion.

surprise. Afterall, it and its catch phrase, encapsulated in microcosm much of the ideological and ethical message that the Islamic Republic had sought to instil in its citizens and more broadly the world, since its inception. This polysemic event was for state ideologues the expression of the triumph of a moral order over an immoral one, the (re)-insertion of Islamic values into a society where they had been sorely missing, the recurring apogee of a new social movement that promised virtuous perfection. For my opposition-aligned interlocutors though, it was the mirror opposite, a stain on Iranian society that revealed the fundamentally contradictory nature of the Islamic Republic that promised ethics and delivered only hypocrisy. "These are our lives, these people are hypocrites", so they continue to echo.

Why this concern though with the immoral nature of state and society, why the vituperative tone and the opprobrium? Why was it so important for my interlocutors that we understood that these were unethical, bad faith actors? That the protestors might be living with jostling moral considerations – their contempt for American politics on the one hand, the necessity of kindness to strangers – did not seem to cross my interlocutors' minds. Like I have said throughout this chapter, if Schielke and others are right, these kind of contradictory ethical assemblages are just part of the moral bricolage that make up the inevitably tenuous and fragmentary quest for virtue. After all, what is so alien about saying one thing, and doing another? I suggest then that we might re-evaluate Schielke's claim that this fragmentary ethics is natural[158], and assert instead that it is very much a culturally-bounded question. For my interlocutors, the 'problem' at the heart of the 22nd of Bahman parades, and their sensitivity to it, had been primed precisely by the object of their loathing, and what they saw as the source of immorality. It was the utopian vision of the state and its promise that one might live a life of virtue, uncontradicted by the ramifications of everyday inconsistency, that had instilled an expectation, perhaps, or at very least the belief in the possibility of a system of exacting ethical clarity. It offered the promise of the perfection of virtue, and in doing so had created a Manichaean standard of right and wrong where any paradox or deviation from unerring consistency took on outlandish proportions. To do one thing and say another then was then not just a small matter of the reality of life, but an ethical lapse of the most egregious kind.

5.3   The truth tension: Lies and moral absolutism

"We can see that our lives are entwined with lies…"*Shirin*

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[158] Whatever that means.

In the second half of this chapter, I want to return to my opening foray into the question of truth and falsehood. As I have suggested, any ethnography of the moral landscape of Iran would be incomplete without making some reference to the importance of 'truth' and its opposite[159]. Lying was, like the 22nd of Bahman parade, a source of apparent constant ethical concern, regularly brought up by my friends and colleagues in Iran, not to mention other sources as well. Lying was a corruption of morals [*fesād-e akhlāqi*], a crossing of red lines, a potential source of punishment in the afterlife. But I was equally told that in Iran, lying was the fundamental constitutive element of politics, that Iranians told barefaced lies to one another, and that if one wanted to be Iranian, not only did one have to tell lies, but one had to be *good* at telling them too. Journalist Ramita Navai prefaces the opening of her book *City of Lies* with the sentence "Let's get one thing straight, in order to live in Tehran, you have to lie" (Navai 2014:XX). While not an anthropological work, Navai's text is exemplary of the appetite that exists for material that promises to show the 'truth' about Iran by (ironically) evidencing the degree to which Iranians are 'compelled' to lie, revealing tales of sordid corruption by members of society who are supposedly beyond reproach. In her work, Tehran is presented as a space where:

> tiny children are instructed to deny that daddy has any booze at home…shopkeepers allow customers to surreptitiously eat, drink and smoke in their back rooms during the fasting months…all these lies breed new lies, mushrooming in every crack in society…the truth has become a secret, a rare and dangerous commodity, highly prized and to be handled with great care…The lies are, above all, a consequence of surviving in an oppressive regime, of being ruled by a government that believes it should be able to interfere in even the most intimate affairs of its citizens (Navai 2014:xx).

Much could be made of the assumptions in this work, the implicit tendency to naturalise Western liberalism and de-naturalise Iranian authoritarianism as incommensurate with the way 'people actually are'. But what I am most concerned with is the obsession with the idea of lying and moral irritation that came with it. Let me stress, I do not think Iranians are exceptional liars, or that lying is more common in Iran than it is elsewhere. Nothing in my fieldwork convinced me that this was the case, and there is nothing in Navai's work that would be out of place in any other major metropolis –

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[159] As Adelkhah (2000) has noted in the fine gradations of distinction and meaning in particular word choices that surround the concept of charity, especially the distinction between Arabic and Persian origin words, there are a plethora of terms used for 'truth'. *Sādegh, haqiqat,* both Arabic words, echo their religious origins, communicating a more existential sense of truth, such as that used by Iranian Sufi orders in their devotions. The Persian *rāst,* or *dorost*, more commonly used, communicated a more quotidian sense. The more universal and totalising *dorugh* [lie] derives from an Indo-European root it shares with many other languages, the term as *druj* crops up as a fundamental element of cosmic disturbance in Zoroastrian cosmology. Much has been written about the historical pedigree of these concepts, particularly in ancient Iran and Zoroastrian thought. *Asha* (Avestan) and its Old Persian equivalent, *Arta,* Boyce argues, constitutes both a 'natural law' which preordains the movement of heavenly bodies and the transition from one season to another, and an ethical one, encompassing "truth, honesty, loyalty, and courage" which were understood to be proper natural virtues for mankind. In turn, the Avestan *drug* (in modern Persian, *dorugh*, was the "principle of falsehood or distortion" (Boyce, 2008 [1979], pp. 6-7) .

lying is common to many, perhaps even all, societies globally. Nor was there anything in what my interlocutors in Mashhad told me that struck me as 'unusual'. They lied at work, to get jobs, in their relationship with friends and with others, in much the same way that countless others inside and outside of Iran and Mashhad do.

But there was an unusual concern with lying in Mashhad. In answering the question "why is it the case that lying was such a site of ethical concern?" I believe ultimately that we must return to the issue at the heart of this chapter, i.e. the heightened sense of moral expectation that Iran's utopian legacy, most potently manifest in the Revolutionary moment, had fostered. The presumption was that in order to live a moral life, one ought to do so fastidiously and with a kind of punctilious exactingness, such that there was no room for contradictory behaviours. The dilemma, or tension, with living in Mashhad (and, my interlocutors argued, Iran more broadly) was that the kind of circumstances that allowed for the exacting moral ideal that my interlocutors wanted, did not exist. Rather, they were obliged to lie in order to 'get by'. Despite its aim of fostering a virtuous society, the Islamic state had not only failed to live up to its initial vision – they argued – but had actually encouraged the kind of duplicity that it decried. In demonstrating this, I want to turn to the story of Shirin. Her account is demonstrative of the bind that those of my Mashhadi interlocutors who subscribe to such an exacting moral ethos find themselves in, and the difficulty of negotiating between the desire on one hand to be truthful, and the 'reality' of living in a social milieu that is understood to necessitate moments of duplicity.

5.3.1   Shirin

"Telling a lie in Islam is a deadly sin", Shirin said, "one of the great sins" [gonāh-e kabireh]. I first met Shirin at university. A teacher in her early thirties, she came from a pious background and had been raised in an environment steeped in conservative religiosity. All the women in her family wore the chador and prayed regularly. Growing up, her father had owned a shop close to the haram selling religious paraphernalia – prayer mats, banners, blessed sugar [nabāt], etc., to pilgrims. Her mother, in keeping with the traditions of most conservative families, had never worked, and was described by her daughter as deeply religious. The two sons worked together in a co-owned carpentry business, while their younger daughter worked in bridal store selling wedding dresses. By the time we met, she was in something of an existential crisis however. Previously taken-for-granted certainties, particularly religious ones, had collapsed in the face of what she understood to be the revelation of dissembling on the part of political figures, and especially Iran's Supreme Leader. Recalling her loss of confidence, she stated:

It happened gradually. I can't distinguish a particular…or I can't mark a particular moment, because it never happens this way. It is not like waking up and feeling that you are doubtful. Everything happens step by step. But, what happened in the Presidential elections in 2009 was very, very important. Really important….my presence in University [was important], meeting other people, especially the most important of which [was] what happened during the presidential elections during 2009. That was very important, I mean it changed my will. Before that, I really trusted the religious leaders. But after that I realised they could be good liars, although they pretended to be very good people, but still they could tell lies. Because of their own wishes, because they want to remain in office and power…I couldn't believe people who encouraged other people to live a moral life could do wrong things. I couldn't believe…till I…until I heard him [Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei] telling lies. I could hear the leader telling lies on TV. I couldn't believe that… Everything, the whole thing, happened when I doubted the system. When I saw that they were lying on TV, the supreme leader. I could hear him telling lies on TV. Yeah, I lost all my trust in that… Because of power they could do anything. And lots of people, scholars, especially among scholars, they ended up in gaol, just because they let people know the truth about these liars… Since then, maybe I had these doubts, but after the presidential elections in that year, everything became more serious, and I started thinking more seriously about such issues.

In Shirin's analysis, there was no recognition that any of those in leadership positions who 'lied' were themselves morally complex beings, compelled to lie by virtue of the constraints of social forces outside their control, or simply because they were subject to the vagaries of lives that were ethical mosaics, assemblages of different, sometimes contradictory components. Rather, the assumption was that these actors should be truthful or sincere to a fault. Through this, we get some sense of the bind that the ideologues within the Republican system found themselves, what might be described as a crisis of ethics. Having encouraged a belief in the possibility of moral perfection, the Islamic system was a victim of its own success. Those in positions of power were now held to a standard so exacting that any slippage was not written off as a product of the contingencies of power, but as indicative of the moral rot at the heart of the system.

Such indignation was not exclusively reserved for those in the echelons of power however. Despite her concern for lying, and the lies of political leaders, Shirin believed it 'necessary' to lie and required of her both in her social life and her work life. Take the example of her work. Employees in all branches of government in Iran are subject to stricter implementation of religious codes than those who work in the private sector. Each and every state institution (including universities) is monitored by a body referred to as the *Herāsat* ('Guardianship' or 'Security'), whose role is to ensure the religio-ideological orthodoxy of potential workers, as well as maintaining that of those who are already employed. Current employees are interviewed and queried about their knowledge of the foundational principals of religion, the state (especially the *velāyet-e faqih*), and their own devotional practice, with a particular stress placed on conforming to standards that go above and beyond that which would be considered routine on the street. Questions are never fixed, and are

somewhat capricious[160], ensuring that they cannot be 'studied for', but require a habitual familiarity with modern Iranian Shi'ism in its governmental mode. They aim in effect to police a model of the ideal Republican bureaucrat. In mid-September, as we sat waiting for the late summer sun to depart, Shirin complained about her upcoming interview with the Herāsat.

> They have started this process [of interviewing employees] two or three months ago. And I'm supposed to go through that process. Some of my colleagues have gone to this Herāsat and answered these questions, and I've asked them what type of questions do they ask you, they said for instance, how do you...whether the say their prayers, for women whether they wear make-up, whether they wear chador, whether they have satellite TV at home. Question like this. Or they ask some of them…the type of questions they ask each person might change, for instance one of my other colleagues, they asked her to read Qur'an…

> Simon: Why?

> Shirin: To see whether or not she can read Qur'an in Arabic [i.e. with the correct intonation].

> S: If she can't, what?

> Sh: This is a bad point…

> S: Do you get a mark?

> Sh: Yeah, they evaluate you. They've got a check list, and they just put check marks on the list.

> S: So what happens if you do badly?

> Sh: Yeah, you might lose your job if you do not qualify.

Between our meeting in September, and then later in October, Shirin was obliged to attend her meeting with the *herāsat*. She grumbled about her experience:

> I played the role of an idiot. I just told her that it was necessary to have a leader. Why is a Supreme Leader necessary in Islam, and if it is necessary, how do you show your loyalty? She asked me about the prayers and what can ruin them, whether I wear a chador, I said I always do – whether I wear makeup – never – and…the relationship between Islam and the necessity of the *velāyet-e faqih*. They like it when you lie to them. They like you to play a role. It's enough for them that you play the role of a good Muslim. I'm ready to tell lies, because I don't…the interview I have with those *basiji*… I have to tell lots of lies. I have to tell them that I always listen to the supreme leader, that I respect his ideas, I support him, I think he's the best, I have to tell the big lie that I do fast, I do say my prayers, I attend *namāz jom'e* (Friday prayers). If I don't tell these lies, I will lose my job. They justify this. They say "I have to tell lies, I don't want to tell lies, but I have to tell lies." When it comes to the matter of law… sometimes I feel that Iranian people are forced to tell lies. For instance my brother had applied for a job in a bank many many years ago. And he had to go for an interview, and in the interview they asked if he

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[160] That is, some individuals will have 'easy' interviews, others will be given 'hard' ones that plumb the depths of their knowledge.

listened to music, and he said "yeah, I do listen to music" and he even mentioned the name of one of the singers who is right now living in the United States, and who sings anti-government songs, Daryush Eghbāli…but he mentioned them, and they said goodbye to him. My father later said to him "you could simply tell a lie". His friend told a lie and got the job. Or for instance, where I am working, we have to…they call us and ask us, "do you wear chador?" for instance, "do you fast, do you say your prayers, do you go to *namāz jom'e* for instance, if you are not doing these things, you will…if they do not tell lies, they are very likely to lose their jobs. So you see, in most cases, you're forced to tell lies… And I think this is the reason why they mention, just like me why I mentioned telling lies when you asked me what is good or what is bad, we directly go to lies because can see our lives are intertwined with lies. Every day we are telling lies, we tell lies but we don't feel good about that. So to be good is not to ….not to tell lies. Especially when you have to tell lies about your ideas, about our beliefs. It is really difficult. I myself can't tolerate it when somebody tells me lies. I mean I will stop having any relationship with them. That is my reaction towards it. I can't tolerate it.

Again we see the core thematic concerns with a government that had reified the promise of moral perfection and then failed to live up to its own aspirations. Citizens are encouraged to be truthful, a moral virtue in Islam, but are punished when they do so and admit to their own lack of fidelity to certain aspects of ideal Islamic comportment. Here though, in a particularly perverse re-organisation of the moral ideal, the state and its advocates are *so* immoral that they garner pleasure from the act of compelling Iranians to lie in order to live up to the standards that they (i.e. state apparatchiks) have set as normative -"They [the *Herāsat*] like it when you lie to them. They like it when you play a role", Shirin states. What is also apparent here I think is the sense of tension. As in Chapter Three where we saw perfection manifest as a concern for exacting standards of success, with very limited room to manoeuvre between success and failure, so here do we find that one of the outcomes of such a demanding moral ideal is that there is very little space to negotiate between the ideal (never lying, always being sincere) and what is perceived to be a social reality (one needs to lie to get a job, to maintain a job, to get ahead, etc.). One is left with a singular path that *ought* to be taken, irrespective of the various impediments or obstacles that might make doing so difficult. The tension is that the reality of interaction with other persons in the Mashhadi social milieu (not to mention other places in Iran, and other societies across the globe) requires a certain level of duplicity, or expedience with the truth, in order to get by. And yet by stressing this utopian ideal of moral perfection, Shirin finds herself bound to the ethical dilemma of a system she cannot hope to successfully adhere to, mobilising competing moral discourses that are virtually impossible to reconcile.

5.4   Conclusion

There are two intertwined thematic concerns that have been at the heart of this chapter. One is the matter of an insistence upon ethical perfectionism as the ideal – and perhaps only – acceptable form

of moral behaviour. Rather than accepting that everyday life contains a certain level of 'ethical static', we might say, my interlocutors insisted upon unerring moral perfection, free from contradiction, that ought to be manifest at all times. Why the emergence and salience of such a heightened response? The answer here brings us to the next thematic, that is the role of the state in articulating this moral form. It is the Islamic state that is responsible, having so thoroughly pursued the question of virtue in everyday life. Yet it now finds itself caught in the bind of having convinced its citizens that ethical absolutism is possible, such that any failure or incoherence in the moral program of governance comes to be seen as not as part of a naturally diffuse and sometimes haphazard reality of the cultivation of virtue, but as evidence of its own fundamentally immoral nature. So where does this leave us with the broader question of utopianism? I want to suggest, as a concluding note that we might think then of perfection as per chapter three, not exclusively as something that edifies but as something that comes to be felt as a source of pressure – a weight on the shoulders of individuals, concerned in this instance with a very specific image of what constitutes moral personhood. In the following chapter, I evince this culture of utopian perfection as something that manifests in perceptions of time. I argue that, in its chiliastic mode, time is both a refraction of utopianism but also an object of the critique which lies latent in the perfectionist ideology. We will see this critique evidenced through the lens of charitable organisations which have increasingly come to challenge a normative view of time and the object of progress as oriented in some remote future, attempting to instead practice change in the here and now.

6   Chapter 6

In the here and now

Utopian temporalities and their critique through the lens of charity

6.1   Introduction: Of boxes and walls

If we have thus far seen utopia as something positively manifest (Chapter 2) or negatively attested (Chapters 3 and 5), but largely uncritiqued, in this penultimate chapter I point to precisely that – criticism of the country's utopian inheritance. As an entry point though, I start with an ethnographic vignette, juxtaposing two features of the social landscape of contemporary Mashhad. The first are *boxes* [*sanduq*]. Blue, yellow, white, transparent, metal, cardboard, plastic, they are an unmissible element in the city's streetscape[161].The most visible of these many boxes are the octagonal blue and yellow metal containers for the *Komiteh-e-Emdād-e Emām* – the Imam's Relief Committee*, a parastate charity founded in the early days of the Revolution. The committee is the largest and most well-know of the many parastatal welfare institutions begun during the Revolution and the following war with Iraq, established by the late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, himself, to ease the suffering of the "deprived and excluded" (Harris, 2010a). As part of its recruitment drive for public funds, the boxes of the committee are found on street corners and in government offices and places of worship, from the smallest and most remote villages to the back streets of all major cities, collecting *sadagheh* – small voluntary charitable donations, typically loose change.

And yet despite their omnipresence, they remained curiously unloved. Shortly after we arrived in Iran and moved into our dormitory, one such box, for the *Komiteh*, was attached to the exterior wall of the accommodation bloc. I made a point of keenly observing it throughout the nine months that we lived there, checking how often Iranian students placed money in its slot, and how often it was emptied by staff. At the end of the nine months, as we made to leave the dormitory for new accommodation elsewhere in the city, I had counted a single instance of someone placing money in it, and had never observed it being emptied[162]. Speaking to other students, they sceptically observed

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[161] Mapping the distribution of boxes in the suburbs next to Ferdowsi University of Mashhad where we were initially based during this research, I counted some 24 boxes in a suburban area of 1km by 500 metres. In effect, there was virtually a box on every street corner.

[162] Obviously, this does not mean that the box was never emptied, nor that it was never filled. Rather, it is more the fact that it was not regularly used that I take as symptomatic of a broader neglect and distrust in the institutional system of

"it probably doesn't even pay for itself". The one forlorn and unloved box was by no means an isolated event. Conferring with my interlocutors outside the university, not a single one admitted to regularly making use of the charitable boxes. Even Ali-Reza, my most pro-status quo colleague, confessed to deep scepticism about where the money that was donated ended up.

Then, late in autumn in 2015 as Mashhad wound slowly down to the cold months of winter, the city was flung into the media spotlight – domestic and global – by the presence of a message painted on a number of walls around the wealthier suburbs just north of Ferdowsi University. Rather than sloganeering political graffiti or the like, the walls proclaimed a simple message: "If you don't have need, put it, if you do have need, take it" [*niyāzi nadārid, bezārid, niyāzi dārid, bardārid*], beneath which a series of clothing hooks had been embedded into the wall, a small subscript reading "Wall of kindness*" [*divār-e mehrabāni*]. On the hooks, coats, jackets, scarves, and other items of clothing were hung. The origin of the walls remained obscure, but it was widely understood to be a private initiative. Anonymous individuals would place the items of clothing, leaving no evidence of their action. During the period that we conducted fieldwork in Iran, the walls spread from Mashhad to other major and minor cities in Iran, and even overseas to places like Pakistan (Ghani, 2016), India (Dhillon, 2016), and China (Huaxia, 2016).

With the arrival of the 'walls of kindness', my interlocutors expressed great excitement. Even where some of them were surprised that such a phenomenon was taking place, they nonetheless looked upon these 'walls of kindness' positively, and soon began to donate clothes, food, and other goods to the walls themselves. For me though, there remained an outstanding question. Why were the boxes of the *Komiteh-e Emdād* and related charities so despised, while the 'wall of kindness' was so loved?

Ostensibly, there was much that was similar about the two. Both were part of a redistributive apparatus designed to redirect money and goods to the poor and needy. Both were anonymous. Both operated, formally at least, outside the direct auspices of state. And yet they clearly were perceived to be qualitatively altogether different from one another. One was a source of pride, readily attracting donations, the other was much maligned and a cause for suspicion. In attempting to answer this question of why one form of charitable giving would be so distinctly elevated over another on a preferential scale, I want to suggest that part of the answer lies in understanding the interplay between utopia, time, and its critique. In unpacking these relations, I draw attention to

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charitable donations established by the *Komiteh-e Emdād*. Contempt for and suspicion of the *Komiteh-Emdād's* boxes has been noted elsewhere, including cases of their destruction. See DeutscheWelle (N/A).

how these issues intersect with Mashhad's utopian inheritance. Let me begin by exploring what I mean by the utopian critique.

6.1.1   Critique of utopia, utopia as critique

Like Levitas (1990), I believe that utopia serves not simply to envisage a better world, but to offer a critique of the contemporary. It is, as she says, an "attempt not just to imagine, but to make, the world otherwise" (Levitas, 2013, p. xiii). Inverting Seligman's (1988) suggestion, we may recognise that just as utopia can be positioned as an element in a system of domination, so too can it be a critique of an existing social order and an effort to transform it. This theme of 'critical utopias' is taken up by Moylan in his (2014 [1986]) work, where he suggests that critical utopias emerged in response to the formal utopias of the earlier 20th century, "rejecting domination, hierarchy, and 'identity-thinking'" (Gardiner, 1992, p. 25) so as to look for more emancipatory modes of utopian desire. Such utopias focus not on ideal cities or societies, but are linked to specific historical movements, incorporating ambiguity into their structure so as to "disrupt the unified and homogeneous narrative of the traditional utopia and demonstrate the multiplicity of possible futures" (Gardiner, 1992, p. 25). We need not read these critical utopias as exclusively a literary phenomenon. As I have said in my Introduction to this thesis, my aim is to free utopia from its written cocoon. I believe then that we can take the intellectual insights and gleanings from critical literary utopias, and apply them to the 'real world' scenario of contemporary Mashhad. In essence, what I argue is that just as utopia refracts through Mashhadi society, it encompasses its counter-current, i.e. the critique of the established and normative patterning of the city's utopian inheritance, and an effort to build something that is a tangible alternative to it.

Which brings us to the question of what precisely is being critiqued here? Which element of the legacy of utopianism in Mashhad is juxtaposed by its critical opposite, and what is doing the critiquing? I maintain that the point of contention, at least in the particular case study that I evince below, is another element of the city's utopian inheritance, that of a chiliastic-remote orientation of time and societal improvement[163]. That is, particularly in the rhetoric of state but also in demotic narratives, there is a positioning of advancement and the amelioration of collective ills as something that will take place in a messianic and probably distant future. Challenging this are, I argue, the implicit critique of charitable organisations that orient themselves in time in a manner that focuses not on the *long durée* but rather on immediate acts. These 'charitable projects of the here and now' that I refer to, make a critique of the utopian inheritance that places the realisation of perfection at

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[163] How this interacts with the utopianism present in development narratives (see Moyn, 2012) is beyond the scope of this chapter, but remains a question worth further research.

some point in the unknowable or remote future by fixating instead on projects that can be seen to be immediately actionable.

In order to fully grasp this subject, I begin first with an overview of interpretations of time in Iran, and its relationship to utopia. Just as I have argued that critique is an essential element in utopianism, so too does utopia engage considerations of time as *euchronia*, or 'the best of times' (usually understood as a point in the future). The rest of the chapter is then occupied with three ethnographic vignettes from two separate charities that I use to draw out my contention that their orientation is towards acts that are infused with a sense of immediacy, rather than acts with unknown and unforeseeable goals.

6.1.2   Utopia and time, time and Mashhad

Time as an inseperable component of the utopian has been noted in the literature of utopianism (Kumar, 1987, 1991; Levitas, 1990; Vieira, 2010). This is, however, a comparatively recent phenomenon. Whereas the literature of the 15th and 16th century, including More's original *Utopia,* all placed an ideal society geographically remote but nonetheless within the same temporal dimension as the reader, it was only following the enlightenment that the time of utopia began to shift. By the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries most literary utopias instead put the object of expectation at some point in the future, usually one that is distant (Vieira, 2010). As such, utopia as the 'good place' gave way to euchronia as the 'good time'. The term euchronia first appears in the work of French writer Louis-Sebastien Mercier in 1771 under the title *L'An 2440: Un reve s'il en fut jamais*, Vieira (2010) suggesting that the work offered a vision of a speculative future happiness, with history envisaged:

> as a process of infinite improvement, and utopia, in the spirit of euchronia, was presented as a synchronic representation of one of the rings in the chain of progress…by projecting the ideal society in the future, the utopian discourse enunciated a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions…might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true (Vieira, 2010, p. 10).

This intersects most clearly with millenarian understandings of time in Iran. But before I focus on that, I want to detour briefly to cover some of the major analyses of time in the Islamic and Iranian traditions.

I note that there is a kind of essentialism that guides analysis here that I do not wish to participate in. Rather than there being a multiplicity of times, *time* as singular is presented as a unified temporal narrative with all adhering to its particular pattern. So, for instance, Islamic theologies have

traditionally been conceptualised as presenting a linear reading of time, with events progressing from creation to apocalypse and the day of judgement (Böwering, 1997)[164]. Where the euchronic moment is remains subject to greater variation. For instance, a school typically associated with Islamist thought (see e.g. Zubaida, 1987) lionises the original Muslim community at Madinah during the period of Prophetic rule as a euchronic period and the return to that original moral society the ideal outcome of contemporary Islamic governance. In this view, the arc of history after Madinah becomes a matter of how closely following generations are understood to deviate from or live up to the virtuous community. All politics essentially becomes a matter of return, the object of progress fixed firmly on a specific moment of historic time. In the theorisation of key Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, virtually all of history post the Four Rightly Guided (Sunni) Caliphs has been *jahilliyah*[165], "ignorance" associated with the pre-Islamic period prior to divine revelation.

While often associated with an Islamist positionality, Mahdi argues for a broader application to Islamic theology in its totality, stating:

 If there is a single attitude that has characterised the entire Muslim community throughout the centuries, it is…commitment to the exemplary deeds and sayings of the Prophet, the vehicle of that revelation; adherence to the way of life of the Prophet and his companions as the correct way, which the community must preserve and imitate and to which it must return; and the conviction that deviation from the way of these pious ancestors is wrong and constitutes a rebellion that leads to…forsaking God's command…and exile to a world of infidelity, from which the Muslim community must return and again finds it home. No amount of interpretation, legal devices, reliance on the consensus of the community and its common interest, or justification based on necessity and the change of times can undermine the fundamental belief that genuine progress requires a return. There is no rainbow on the horizon, no golden age at the end of man's time whether resulting from the perfection of human sciences and arts or from man's controlling or conquering of nature. Progress consists in resisting estrangement and false paths and in returning to one's origins by completing the circle: in their end is their beginning…. It looks to the future, but only insofar as it is called upon to bring about the revolution that will suppress its own rebellion, and beyond all this, as it must think of the final end and of the final accounting. Beyond the return to the right way of pious ancestors is the final return of all men to their Maker, to the other world, the world beyond this world… (Mahdi, 2001, p. 18)

By comparison, typically Shi'ite doctrines of time have been soteriological (Keddie, 1985), focusing on the return of the 12th Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi, who lies in occultation, and will ultimately usher in the end of days. This reading of time, alongside the events of Karbala, is one of the two "dominant themes of Shi'i history" (Nasr, Dabashi, & Nasr, 1989, p. x). With the Iranian Revolution of 1979 though, Abrahamian (1993) argues that Khomeini initiated a radical revisioning of Shi'ite

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[164] Different sects interpret this matter in a variety of different ways. The Ismailis, for instance, understand there to be series of cycles of time before the coming of the apocalypse. See Corbin (2010 [1983]).
[165] Khomeini also used the concept of *jahilliyah* in his writings, especially while in exile, to refer to both the dark ages before Islam, and to the rule of the Pahlavis.

notions of temporality. While in his earlier years the Supreme Leader had situated the model of societal emulation with Mohammad's Mecca and Ali's Caliphate, as the Revolution triumphed, Khomeini increasingly came to view those periods as beset by insurmountable problems. As Abrahamian states, in the:

> euphoria of revolutionary success, he [Khomeini] boasted that the Islamic Republic of Iran had surpassed all previous Muslim societies, including that of the Prophet, in implementing true religion "in all spheres of life, particularly in the material and spiritual spheres". In short, the Islamic Republic of Iran had supplanted Mohammad's Mecca and Imam Ali's caliphate as the Muslim Golden Age (Abrahamian 1993:14-15)[166].

With his promise of utopia, Khomeini, Abrahamian (1993) asserts, discarded two important theological tenets of Shi'ism; the longing for Muhammad and Ali's time as a Golden Age of Islam, and the belief that the Mahdi would come when the world was awash with tyranny and injustice. Instead, Khomeini suggested, Iran has surpassed the realms of Muhammad and Ali, and the Mahdi would appear when Muslims themselves had created justice on earth (Abrahamian 1993:32).

Ultimately, as I pointed to in my Introduction, this utopianism did not last as a political position, and I would suggest that conceptualisations of time in Iran have largely returned to a kind of 'standard' eschatological narrative in which waiting for the ultimate return of the Mahdi becomes something of a default backdrop. This millenarian temporality was clear in much of the material culture of Shi'ism in Mashhad, not surprisingly given the city's focal position as the resting place of the eighth Imam. Stickers on the back of cars urging people to "be ready" [*āmāde bāsh*] or offering reminders that the Mahdi could return at any moment were commonplace. So too were more overt pieces of government propaganda, signs reminding Iranians that "our Revolution stands until the Mahdi returns" (echoing the rarely spoken final portion of the salavāt referred to in Chapter Four).

It also manifests, as Khosravi (2017) argues, as a culture of "culture of waiting (*farhang-e entezar*)" that reifies patience [*sabr*] as a supreme virtue. For Khosravi, the outcome of such a culture is profoundly negative. Citing Jeffrey's (2010) work on 'waithood' in India, the culture of waiting in Iran is used to justify the "protracted liminality" or *belataklifi* ('without task/duty') that results in extended periods of waithood for employment, *mo'āfi* (exemption from military service), marriage,

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[166] This is related to Khomeini's concept of figh ol-maslaha ('expedient jurisprudence'), specifically that "the Islamic state is allowed to overlook Islamic principles, both worshipping and non-worshipping precepts, if it so decrees"(Ghobadzadeh, 2015, p. 5).

emigration, a good business, or political change…Iranian youth imagine themselves to be 'just waiting'"(Khosravi, 2017, p. 78). He continues:

> Young Iranians are caught in a radical precarity. Political and social chaos, financial hardship, violence against women (verbal and physical harassment in public places, domestic violence, gang rapes), police brutality, corruption, social injustice, threats of war, living in a "state of exception" since the Revolution – all these problems more or less make the present unbearable. Not surprisingly, people find themselves between a nostalgic past and a utopian future. For young Iranians, the present is absent, forgotten. They are both waiting for something to happen in the future and looking nostalgically back to find relief in accounts of the past (Khosravi, 2017, p. 86).

This precarious and unstructured time leaves Iranians aimlessly waiting, caught in a world of 'lack' without a hope for a future (Khosravi, 2017). Iran is "backwards [*aqab mānde*]…compared with the *kharej* where everything is associated with progress", migration out of Iran associated not only with a geographical move but a "temporal journey forward" (Khosravi, 2017, pp. 87-88). Iranian youth are, Khosravi says, hopeless, or subject to a hope that is constantly "interrupted, supressed, and deferred" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 15). I hope by now that this thesis has made clear that such an analysis is not so clear cut. There is a wealth of evidence that would suggest that the present can be a point of improvement as well. State discourse, which as we will see is often directed towards a bright future, does also emphasise past and present accomplishments like the spread of education and literacy, public health advancements, improving infrastructure in rural areas, and recently, scientific and military success. Nonetheless, ultimate success and the total amelioration of ills is usually positioned as a matter for the future, rather than the present.

Such a conceptualisation is woven into the rhetoric of state, which explicitly creates and produces a discourse of a "bright future" [*āyande-ye/ātye-ye roshan*] for the Iranian people, and especially for the country's youth, rarely pointing to the present. Speeches in this vein come from the mouths of the highest clerical figures in Iran. For instance, the country's current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has a long history of referring to the country's 'bright future' at 'youth events', either in the form of visitations to the regional *basij* centres or to universities, and records of his speeches are littered with references to such a positive destiny. In October 2015, during my fieldwork, in a visit to high achieving university students and academically talented individuals, the Leader underscored his belief that the country's youth had a future that was "bright", ensuring the "progress, dominion and penetration of spiritual growth in the region and the world", adding that those who aimed to "disappoint the youth, either now or in the future, commit treachery to the honour [*nāmus*] of the nation" (Abāsgholi, 1394/2015).

Such proclamations come with greater regularity during moments of national stress, even as they rarely refer to the present political ills, but rather continue to address 'hope' and success as something positioned in the future. In a series of speeches in the lead up to and subsequent withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA], the Supreme Leader went to great lengths to guarantee the future of the Islamic Republic. Statements like these have been reiterated both by the President, referring to Iran and other Muslim nations broadly (MashreghNews, 1394/2016), and from the Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif (cf Khabargozāri-ye-jomhuri-ye-eslāmi, 1397/2018), who like the Supreme Leader, made remarks only a week before America withdrew from the JCPOA. On rare occasions, official organs also make use of the statements of those who would nominally be understood as regime opponents. To take an example, the *Iranian Student News Agency* [*Bāshgāh-e khabarnegārān-e javān*], an institution theoretically semi-independent but closely associated with the government and drawing on state funding, published the contents of an effusive interview with former Pahlavi Foreign Minister Ardeshir Zāhedi in which he praised the Republican regime for having brought power, water, and literacy to the vast majority of the country, and foresaw an "especially excellent future" for Iran (*Bāshgāh-e-Khabarnegārān-e-Javān*, 1396/2017).

There are two points to make. One is that these examples typically locate time as something oriented towards the future, particularly one at an unclarified distance, rather than the present. But I should also note that such interpretations of time all share a tendency towards hegemonic readings, such that a particular reading of time becomes a singular all-encompassing temporality, without allowing for the possibility of the experience of multiple times. In the following pages, I want to point to how time(s) are represented not exclusively in the millenarian mode, but also with an orientation towards the here and the now.

6.2   Projects of the here and now

To begin, I want to stress again that I am not making an essentialist claim to millenarianism as the exclusive and only temporal frame in contemporary Iran. On the contrary, as we will see below, perceptions of time are varied, and in particular, time oriented towards an indefinite futurity rubs up against time presented as relevant in its presentism[167]. In this section of the chapter, what I want to explore is how particular constructions of time, evidenced through charitable organisations, can be read as a partial critique of chiliasm. I look at how both those organisations in the penumbra of state and those outside it, are 'presentist' in orientation, turning towards projects that look to achieve

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[167] For a comparative study of the shift from the near future towards long-term horizons, see Guyer (2007).

results in the here and now or at least in the very short-term future, rather than a distant or remote one. I present two different case studies – one of the shifting state discourses of charity, and the second of an emerging 'civil society' charitable ethos, both of which are oriented towards the here and now. With this, I note that there is a second story here too, one of the ongoing emergence of an Iranian civil society in the post-Revolutionary period, and the individuation of Iranian society. However, in keeping with the focus of this chapter, my interest is primarily in how these charitable ventures constructed and were organised around conceptions of time that critiqued the predominant chiliastic and millenarian temporal mode. I should note that this phenomenon of charitable projects oriented towards a temporality that is presentist is not altogether new. There is a great deal of historical evidence of this worldly social reformism, social intervention, and social work that began in the late nineteenth century and gathered pace throughout the Pahlavi period, and as Adelkhah (2000) indicates, did not die altogether in Revolutionary times. My aim in this chapter then is not to demonstrate the 'newness' of these projects, so much as to evidence how we might read them as a critique of the temporal deferment that has become one of the major ways of interpreting time in the aftermath of the Revolution. I begin this section though with a conceptual grounding of charity in the post-Revolutionary period.

6.2.1   Charity in Iran

Charity in contemporary Iran is interwoven with the Islamic religion and the country's post-Revolutionary theocracy. Two pivotal concepts, *zakāt* and *khoms,* provide the foundation of the redistributive system in Shia theology and the basis of the new system of philanthropy in the post-Revolutionary period. *Zakāt* in jurisprudential understanding pertained to the quantity of certain naturally derived materials e.g. gold, wheat, dates[168]. Distinguishing them from Sunnis, the Shia community also paid the *khoms,* "the fifth", a historically specific taxation system on particular categories (Calder, 1982) of income that gradually developed into a more general 'tithe' in which believers would pay a fifth of their income from the previous year on a day self-designated. In the division of the *khoms,* two-thirds was to go to the office of the *marja'-e taqlid*, half of which was for the poor of the prophetic family (the Sayyeds), the other for the clergy themselves. By distributing wealth for the propagation of the faith, *khoms* proved instrumental in the iteration of clerical status and power. The remaining third was open to individual distribution. Amongst our interlocutors who paid the *khoms,* it was typically distributed to poor members of their own family. Traditionally, there

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[168] In practice the Shia analysis of *zakāt* provided a highly complicated system of analysis of determining which materials were eligible largely dependent on the degree to which 'nature' vs. the agent was perceived to have laboured to provide it. In Mashhad today, even among families who were knowledgeable in the detailed specifics of jurisprudential debate were not familiar with the ins and outs of *zakāt* provision, deferring the matter as the province of 'farmers'.

had been a consensus among the Shia *olemā* (clergy) that it was religiously incumbent [*vājeb*] upon Muslims to provide certain forms of charitable donation, forming part of the ten obligatory components that make up the Twelver ancillaries of the faith [*furūʿad-dīn*], and are part of the voluntary 'Islamic' taxation regime that the Iranian government runs in tandem with its civil taxation programme. Despite being an 'obligatory' tax, in the Islamic Republic payment of *zakāt* and *khoms* remained voluntary. Indeed, for a government deeply involved in the politics of piety of its subjects, the taxation regime did *not* deduct wealth on a religious basis, distinguishing the voluntary *zakāt* and *khoms* from the obligatory *māliyāt,* the state-run taxation system. Rather, the powers that be left autonomous subject free to make their own choice as to whether to supply *zakāt* or not.

In addition to *zakāt* and *khoms*, Muslims were also enjoined to pay *sadagheh* – a voluntary (non-*vājeb*) monetary donation, used to expiate sins and gather divine reward (*savāb*), which provided foundation for both the 'blue boxes' referred to previously, and the revenue sources for the large *vaghf*, religious foundations [*bonyad*] that through both individual financial largesse and the donation of land have evolved immense networks of privilege and power. Amongst the largest of these, the *Imam Reza Foundation* [*bonyād-e āstān-e quds-e razavi*] previously mentioned in Chapter One, based at the shrine in Mashhad, was estimated to have an income of $US 2billion in 2000 (Maloney, 2000, p. 149), controlling vast swathes of land in the city, both developed and undeveloped. These parastatal *bonyāds* that pay no tax, reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, are instrumental in the provisioning of welfare and the grooming of alternative avenues of power within the political system (Saeidi, 2004).

More than legal abstractions, *zakāt, khoms,* and *sadegheh* constituted integral components of routine sociality in Mashhad. All of our informants were aware of their 'duties' to pay, having learnt of them through the government education system, although the percentage of those who paid them was relatively low. Rather, the real importance of the terminology lay elsewhere. First, because they functioned as markers of what were perceived to be Shi'ism's theoretical commitment to social justice and monetary redistribution, the sacral basis for an ethical logic of welfare, charity, and giving in contemporary Iran and a tangible, visible landscape that perpetuated these same moral ideals. Second, by providing ideological backing and justification for one half of the Iranian welfare system, they engrained what Harris (2010b) refers to as the 'dual institutionalism' of Iranian welfare that operates throughout the polity.

6.2.2   A history of 'state' welfare in Iran

Iran's present welfare state has roots in the history of its monarchical predecessor. Harris (2010b, p. 728) writes that from its inception, the Pahlavi state (1925-1979CE) had been committed to "industrial transformation, oil cartelization, and social engineering to catch up to the club of wealthy states and return Iran to its former glory". Beginning in the 1960s, the state established an ambitious program of land, welfare and administrative reforms known as the "White Revolution of the Shah and the People". Intended to rid Iran of 'feudalism', it was to include land reform, forest and pasture nationalization, sale of state-owned factories for land reform, profit sharing in industry, electoral law reform, literacy corps, health corps, development corps, rural courts of justice, the nationalization of waterways, nation building, and administrative and educational "revolution"(Bill, 1970, pp. 31-32).Despite its far reaching scope and lofty ambitions, overall rises in material prosperity failed to arrest increasing income inequality, with a growing gap between urban and rural dwellers (Harris, 2010b). The program nonetheless bequeathed an already entrenched bureaucratic social security apparatus to the triumphant revolutionary groups (Harris, 2010b).

Despite its ultimately Islamist turn, the Iranian Revolution in its earliest period was a truly populist movement. Islamist forces, together with a collection of leftist elements espousing radical, communitarian philosophies, provided the critical impetus necessary to oust the imperial household. Khomeini and his allies, both in exile and upon their return to Iran, deployed leftist rhetoric, highlighting specifically the pro-poor policies of an imagined future Islamic polity. Ayatollah Beheshti, second in command of the clerical forces, opined "the line of the revolution is anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and anti-feudalism" (Moaddel, 1992, p. 370). The socializing aspects of the revolutionary period were, and continue to be, ingrained elements of the rhetoric used by state ideologues in forging a 'new and ethical community'.

At this same early period what Harris (2010b) calls the "dual institutionalism" of welfare began to emerge. In the administrative paralysis of the period immediately after the departure of the Shah, the Revolutionary Council, a para-state body of clerics opposed to the Pahlavis and under the thumb of Khomeini, provided recognition and authority for a variety of charitable bodies that emerged during this period. Coming from mosque networks and vaghfs, all were para-governmental, and all "actively competed against pre-existing social welfare institutions in both the implementation of policy and in the ideological field" (Harris, 2010b, p. 731). In effect, a dual set of social institutions emerged: one part technocratic, trained, and experienced at administering services to the population becoming a "corporatist welfare system", rooted in Pahlavi developmentalism; the other "unplanned in structure, ideological rhetoric and [perceiving itself] as the real social auxiliary of the

new regime" (Harris, 2010b, p. 732). By the eve of Khomeini's death, Abrahamian (1989) maintains that an elite clique now presided over a polity best interpreted as a "huge martyr's welfare state" .

Yet, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, in the decades that followed, Iran was to pursue a profound turnaround in economic consensus. As early as the mid-1980s, elements within the government began agitating against largely state-driven economic planning. With the blessing of the Supreme Leader, the decision was made to embrace market reforms. The decade or so that followed under the tenure of President Rafsanjani saw the breakup of much of the corporate and property assets of the state that had been nationalized at the time of the revolution, as well as the lessening of restrictions on private ownership, moves to terminate subsidies etc. These changes in orientation did not open the domestic market to unfettered capitalism, as in some post-statist economies, but rather that saw the transition of most assets into the possession of the para-state bonyāds. Throughout the 1990s, the *bonyāds* became some of the largest landowners in the country with diversified corporate portfolios and minimal government oversight that provided wealth and patronage to a clientele of conservative members of society.

By the early 2000s, suggests Adelkhah (2000), approaches to charitable donation could be divided into two interpretations, marked by the words *nikukāri* and *kheyrieh,* both terms used in modern Persian to refer to good works. The latter, with its roots in Arabic and Islamic theology, represented good works that were ascetic, transcendental or concerned post-mortem reward; the former was Zoroastrian and Persian*,* and was centred upon those elements that were typically *worldly*, concerned with social relations and the tangible domain. By the time I arrived in Mashhad, such saliences seemed to have vanished, if they were ever present outside of Tehran, and all of my interlocutors referred to charitable works as *kheyrieh,* showing only a peripheral awareness of these apparently different moral epistemologies. Nonetheless, I think Adelkhah's (2000) analysis of the difference between the two conceptions, in evincing the different understandings of worldliness vs. other-worldliness, draws us tantalisingly close to the critique that is made of conceptions of charity that are long term. It is to these that I now turn.

6.2.3   Charity at the periphery of state

As I will make clear later, this critique of the millenarian or chiliastic temporal sense in Iran is perhaps most evident in those projects that exist at the true margins of state or in the world of civil society. Nonetheless, even as some elements within Iran's diffuse and faction-driven state system continue to posit a millenarian vision of the future, it is clear that there are figures and institutions who either have caught wind of changing societal attitudes, or are helping to direct it, towards more

obviously presentist charitable articulations that better capture the imagination of the Iranian street. One such attempt was launched by the program *Khandevāne*. A portmanteau of the Persian words for "laughter" [*khande*] and watermelon [*hendevāne*], *Khandevāne* was launched in June 2014 by the state media conglomerate 'Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting' (IRIB)[169] as part of its expanding digital reach on the channel *Nasim*, devoted primarily to entertainment. Presented and established by well-known director and comedian Rāmbod Javān, the show's 'variety-style entertainment' featuring stand-up comedy, live music, and interviews, was understood as part of an ongoing change in Iranian television that begun in the 1990s with the rise of shows like "*Sā'at-e khosh*" and that marked the continued turnaround from a culture of mourning that had been associated with media in the Islamic Republic in the early days following the Revolution. The show proved to be extremely popular, one of the few domestic productions that could compete with satellite television broadcasts from London, Los Angeles, or other centres of the diaspora. With the explicit mission of engaging with and encouraging Iranians to laugh more, the 'family friendly' show was extremely well received among many of my respondents, who would sit down to watch the show together, even with starting times as late as 12:00AM[170]. The lyrics of the show's opening musical overture declared: 'Laugh, laugh, loudly from the bottom of your heart, undo your frown!' [*Khand khand, az tah-e del boland, akhmāt rā vā kon*]. Part of its appeal lay not only in its commitment to humour, but also in the capacity of the host to garner the appearance of high-profile figures in contemporary Iranian society, including politicians.

In conjunction with its comedy performances and interviews, the show also took a serious note, advocating for and on behalf of a variety of issues that were understood as social ills that had failed to attract serious attention from the Iranian population at large. For example, in 2015 during our fieldwork, in the peak of summer in July, just as the incessant hot weather and dryness once again served as a reminder of Iran's increasingly perilous lack of water, Javān launched the 'drop by drop' campaign [*kāmpayn-e qatre qatre*] in conjunction with the Iran-based payment mobile phone application '*780#'. The campaign specifically aimed to decrease consumption of water in the country by targeting individuals rather than society broadly, with each individual implored to use just 'one less drop per day'. Quoting him from his nightly program, he stated:

Take out your mobile phone, ok …we've started a campaign to reduce water on *Khandevāne*…we're inviting everyone, all of the people of Iran who are presently watching *Khandevāne*, please, take out your mobile phone…for all of us our country is important, for all of

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[169] The IRIB is commonly referred to in Persian as *sedā-yo simā* – "sound and vision"
[170] The popularity of the show usually saw it repeated three times the following day.

us our natural resources are important, for all of us our planet is important, and compared to everything else, we have a responsibility to it. Now, our responsibility is *one* drop of water, per day, per person. One drop. Every person should, every day, agree to use *one less* drop of water. Ok? We want to enter the *Drop by Drop Campaign…*It doesn't even cost *one rial,* it doesn't cost *one rial*, we're just going to join together, and see what we can do. What we're doing is announcing our readiness and our commitment…Guys, please do this yourself. God willing, everyone together will do something good for our country, the future generation will say, "God forgive them", they won't curse or damn us, and this, all of us together, will make our country more prosperous [*ābādtar*][171]. I'm really happy now that we're all in this campaign, we should encourage ourselves and each other (Javān, 1394/2015b).

The first of a series of campaigns that the show was to launch, it marked a critical turning point in the way that state charities were organised and presented in Iran. There are at least two important points of change.

First is the orientation towards individual action as a step to collective change[172]. Previous exhortations for charitable donation were largely directed anonymously, as a matter of religious duty, without reference to individual conscience. *Khandevāne* reoriented this to focus on what it is that the agent can contribute to a larger whole, in this instance the nation. Such a specific change should be recognised as part of a broader shift in social relations in the post-Revolutionary period. As early as the late 1990s, Adelkhah (2000) noted a trend towards a more individuated social organisation, particularly within the newly emerging Islamist nuclear family. This theme is again picked up, in a more negative light, in Khosravi's (2017) work. Charitable institutions in the West (organisations like World Vision come to mind) have for some time oriented their production values towards the creation of a kind of individuated social proximity between the donor and the recipient, stressing their personality, interest, hobbies, etc. While further research would be necessary to firmly determine whether changes in thinking on charity and relations of proximity in Iran were linked to the influence of Western models of charitable giving, I am inclined to at least consider the possibility that the emergence of these forms in Iran owes something to interaction with and awareness of what is going on elsewhere in the world.

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[171] The use of the word *ābādtar* is important because of the similarity with the word *ābād* carries with it not just a sense of prosperity but also the notion of cultivation, and an ability to be inhabited. The first syllable of *ābād* is also phonetically identical to the word for "water" [*āb*].

[172] Such an exhortation certainly has elements of the neo-liberal to it, even as I have already complicated too readily applying such a gloss to the whole of Iranian modernity.

Second, is the attempt to bridge the gap between the present and the future. As much as Javān iterated this as a matter that will potentially save or at least spare future generations from a degraded environment, he also makes the case for the necessity of action immediately, to save "a drop of water" *now*. These entreaties to activity were both positively appraised and rapidly acted upon by my interlocutors. Those who came from large families with young children, or who had children of their own, noted how significantly the campaign from Khandevāne had impacted upon the consumption habits of the family. One of our interlocutors, Leylā, declared that her seven-year-old niece, Serena, who lived on the bottom floor of their three-storey house and spent much of her time with her grandparents and aunt, had become "especially sensitive" to the use of water in the house, and would now go from room to room ensuring that the taps were turned off without leaks, chastising anyone in the household who failed to take action. The success of the campaign was noted by Iranian political figures: Mohammad Dāmādi, a member of the national majles, singled out the success of Khanevāne's 'Drop by Drop' campaign, compared against government sponsored campaigns that had been running for years, as indicative of the capacity of popular media to have an impact on broad social behaviours.

Two months later, in Shahrivar 1394/September 2015, the program launched *'Hamsofreh'* (Same Tablecloth). The program addressed the topic of childhood malnutrition in Iran, estimating that there were some 800, 000 children under the age of six who were classified as malnourished. Nearly half of these were as a result of poor awareness and a lack of education, but the remaining half was primarily due to an inability to buy sufficient or sufficiently nutritious food. With the Ministry of Sanitation providing education to the families of the 400 000 children[173] who lacked the necessary information, the remaining impoverished population was left under the auspices of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation[174]. In conjunction with the foundation, *Khandevāne* launched *Hamsofreh* to target the remaining 300 000 or so children who were missing out vital nutrition. Quoting Javād:

> In our beloved Iran, there are 800 000 children who are malnourished, from their birthday to under six years. Guys, one thing everywhere on earth, one thing that doesn't have any relationship to the government, not to institutions, not to ministries, it's something that exists in every country and for every government, that *really*, getting it done, bit by bit, is really difficult. And we're making a real mistake [*qalat*] when we say "government, do this, make it happen, make an institution, make a ministry", I don't know what. We have a role in our country. Our country is our property. We choose the governments, and we want them to work for us. But

[173] The website for *Hamsofreh, Hamsofreh.ir* cites a smaller figure of 200 000 children, however.
[174] It is noteworthy that the charity estimated that under its present funding arrangements only 85,000 of the 400 000 children who suffer from finance-related malnutrition would be covered, evidence potentially of its failure to attract the attention and funds of Iranians despite the *overwhelming* presence of charitable donation boxes.

that doesn't mean that from the moment that whichever government is chosen, we go home and sleep, and just think about ourselves…One extremely important activity has started, called "Same Tablecloth". Together, we'll sit at the same table. And this has long roots in our culture. We put the tablecloth down, and say "please sit at the head of the tablecloth". This we understand. We understand hosting guests and kindness. Listen, I want to bring you in, reach out and implore upon your wisdom, and upon our heart, that you choose now [alān] and become a partner. *Khandevāne* is a partner. You all should, one by one, become members…Fourteen news websites have come and are in agreement that they will supervise the roll-out of this program. And every month or every week, they will give formal news related to this to everyone, so that not one person for one moment will doubt that they've helped, that they've given monetary help, that this will be correctly spent…You can go to the site, and choose a basket of food, choose which province and which city you want, and you can choose the basket…and say "I'm going to go there and help"…here, you can choose yourself, and say, "I'm going to choose a basket for a child that is at a town I've chosen". There's another way. You can say "I'm going to go to a child that I've chosen, and I'm giving this basket of food specifically to them". The first cost that I spoke about, that goes to a card for families, and this card, under that authority they can go and spend money on food, they can't go and spend money elsewhere with it. They just go and get food for the house, and consume it. This is so we don't worry, so that the mother and father, God forbid, spend this money on their children. Every month, that child that is under the authority of the Ministry of Sanitation, will get tested again to check whether that child is being properly nourished or not…(Javān, 1394/2015a)

Here, even as it goes through the *Komiteh*, what *Khandevāne* is offering is effectively both temporal accountability and temporal proximity. Rather than a paean on the virtues of waithood, *Khandevāne's* charitable project demanded action with a sense of immediacy and a promise of rapid results. With checks and balances so that the results could be seen to be carried out, donors are thus transformed from passive recipients of the end of days into active participants to change the present, to realise a better world forthwith. And in doing so, they make an implicit critique of and encourage change to the messianic waiting that has defined relationships between time and action in Iran for at least the past two or three decades.

6.3   Outside the state

In the following section, I want to focus on charitable institutions less directly exposed to or within the auspices of state. Unlike state institutions, the 'pull' towards eschatological renderings of time is less strong, and they are freer to reorient and to critique the temporal aspects of the utopian inheritance in Mashhad. Projects like these were just the beginnings of an effort to take charity out of the sole auspices of government and temporalities of unknowable duration, and into to the realm of more immediate effect. During my time in Iran, it became clear that there was a broader effort afoot to shift the discourse around charity away from obscure state or para-state organisations whose projects were understood as infrequently realised or temporally deferred, to actions that could be tangibly perceived in the here and now. In the final section of this chapter, I want to

explore these themes at the micro-level, examining the experiences of two different 'charitable' organisations in Mashhad.

6.3.1   Thank you for your kindness

Launched in September 2015, the campaign "Thank you for your kindness' [*Mamnun ke mehrabāni* – perhaps literally 'thank you for being kind'] built on the back of the 'wall of kindness' campaign earlier in the year. Free from corporate branding, the organisers of the campaign bought some 30 billboard spaces in prime positions across Mashhad (such as Chahārrāh-e āzādi, etc.), as well as some 80 smaller tableaus and pictures across the city, at a cost of some 20 billion rial (approximately 60-80 thousand US dollars in 2015/16). Oriented towards changing relations between citizens with immediate effect, the slogans of the campaign included quotes like "thank you for your kindness", "I never forget your kindness", "may I be sacrificed for your kindness "[175], and "I'm not giving your kindness to the world, it started itself". Unlike state propaganda, the campaign rarely deployed religious content (Kohandel, 1394/2015), with the only evidence of a specifically religious slogan on the day of martyrdom [*ruz-e shahādat*] of the eighth Imam, where a sign with white and pink writing on a black backdrop declared "Imam of kindness, condolences". The London-based anti-Islamic Republic news site, Manoto, noted that it was the first "emotional message" [*paygham-e ehsāsi*] in Iranian history that received permission to appear on public billboards, inspiring the city government to begin its own effort – 'it comes back to us' [*be khodemān bāz migardad*] (Otāgh-e-khabar-e-manoto, 1395/2016).

Talking to my informants about the appearance of the campaign, many expressed surprise that something of its ilk could, and had, taken shape in Mashhad. The source of their consternation was double. First, because the message – effectively encouraging small acts of kindness – was a break from the typical propagandist narrative of state that focused on the paradigmatic Republican imagery of sacrifice and mourning, its pink colours and light-hearted slogans almost 'kawaii'-esque[176] in comparison. And second, of course, with its focus on the present, it ruptured the teleological and millenarian narrative of progress as something located in the remote future. "I can't believe we're in Iran", said one 26-year-old medical student, in response to the slogans.

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[175] This plays on a common piece of *ta'ārof* in Iranian society where strangers and friends promise to be the 'sacrifice' [*qorbān*] of one another. Literally translated as something like "may I be sacrificed for your kindness", it could be rendered loosely into English once again as "thank you for your kindness", a variant on the other slogans.

[176] A Japanese word literally meaning "cute", often referring to cartoon animals in pastel pinks and blues.

6.4   Friends of the Children

These indicators of change were not limited to such abstract formulations or entreaties as loving kindness. They were also written in the explosion of 'civil society' non-state charitable organisations and institutions that proliferated during our time in Mashhad. I was first introduced to groups like this when an interlocutor noted that he and his wife had spent their Friday weekend cleaning rubbish from the mountains around Torghabeh and Shāndiz to the west of Mashhad. The pleasure gardens were perennially coated in a layer of discarded plastics and other waste, something that the state failed to manage or take care of, the army of street sweepers whose job it was to keep the roads clean seemingly clear that their work ended with the kerb. As such, various groups, usually organised around messaging apps like Telegram or WhatsApp, would meet occasionally (there seemed to be no fixed pattern, some met monthly, others bi-weekly, etc.) to tidy and remove garbage. When I asked why they bothered (especially as it was something of a Sisyphean task), they replied "well, it's good to do something where you can see the results".

A similar ethos was deployed by Hamed. A one-off visitor at the discussion group that we attended throughout our fieldwork in Mashhad, our relationship grew independently of the group, largely through his charitable work. The son of a retired member of the internal security forces [*niru-hā-ye entezāmi*], and not quite of the class of young adults whose parents had done financially well from the Revolution, the *āghā-zādes* that I have referred to in Chapter Two, Hamed was nonetheless more comfortable than most, his father having provided him with a stipend so that not only could he continue to study his masters of engineering without looking for a job, but he was also able to get married[177]. With time and money to spend, Hamed attended events like the discussion group seemingly in search of something to fill the hours in his day. Driving us home that September evening, he promised to take us that weekend to another pet-project – 'Friends of the Children' [*kudak yārān*].

'Friends of the Children' was a loosely defined and - at that stage - an unregistered charitable organisation that drew support from a coalition of 50 or so members drawn from the echelons of Mashhad's middle or upper middle-classes, all educated, wealthy and with time to spare. The group coalesced around a few key individuals of which Hamed was one, providing charitable support to children without identity papers [*shenāsnāme*], many of whom were the offspring of mixed Afghan-Iranian marriages, as well as their families, usually single mothers. With an original

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[177] Getting married in Iran usually requires a significant amount of capital to buy both the white goods and other home furnishings expected of a newlywed couple, as well as the house. Thus, couples frequently get married and yet continue to live separately, deferring moving in together, until they have built sufficient savings.

grant first provided by a wealthy Kuwaiti hotel owner living in Mashhad, the group ran a series of projects including a small school, as well as providing theatre lessons, outdoor excursions to parks in the nearby mountains, and designated 'food drive' days [*jashn-e ghazāyi*]. Their main project though was the small school that the group managed. Situated on the far south-eastern fringe of Mashhad in the suburb of Qal'e-Sākhtemān, the area was one of the poorest in Mashhad. To the north it abutted the more well-known and better established suburb of Golshahr (cf Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2007; Olszewska, 2007, 2015), sharing with it a significant Afghan population, albeit different in one critical way: Golshahr was mostly Shia and Hazara[178], while Qal'e-Sākhtemān was Sunni[179] and mostly Baloch[180], the latter doubly marginalised by being both a) of Afghan origin and b) for not adhering to the dominant faith in Iran.

Driving to Qal'e-Sākhtemān, we broke out of the ordered city environment, past patches of fields filled with leafy greens, and into the world of haphazard squatter developments and token municipal intervention. Quintessentially a squatter settlement [*hāshiye neshin*], the suburb was a mottled sea of single or two-storey houses, homes fashioned only from un-rendered brick or cinderblock veneers, built overnight [*shab-sākhte*] and without permit, only infrequently connected to electricity, gas, and water. Unlike the rest of the city that was mostly built on straight lines, Qal'e-Sākhtemān was a helter-skelter maze of buildings, roads and lanes disappearing as if into a warren. Occasional punitive acts by the mayoralty saw homes destroyed or disconnected, but as soon as the job had been done, the local community rallied together, remaking that which had been destroyed. Deeply impoverished, the suburb was synonymous in the minds of wealthier Mashhadis with crime, drugs, homelessness, and malnutrition, stories of raids on opium dens and hauls of weapons and cash frequently making the local news.

Friends of the Children provided support overwhelmingly to young, school-aged girls from both Qal'e-Sākhtemān and the even poorer Qal'e-Khiyabān, a suburb just slightly further out and separated from the rest of Mashhad by fallow fields, owned by *Āstān-e Quds-e Razavi,* that hemmed in the jostling urban sprawl. The school run by Friends of the Children lay just off the main

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[178] Afghan Shi'ite Hazaras are the largest religious minority in Afghanistan, and have long suffered discrimination in Afghanistan. Despite sharing a confession with their co-religionists in Iran, Afghan Hazaras, many of whom were born in Iran and still do not hold citizenship, are likewise the victims of significant anti-migrant sentiment.

[179] We were told by the support staff of Kudak Yārān that the population of the region was mostly Sunni, however all the established mosque in the area were Shi'ite. The refusal to construct Sunni mosques, and the placing of Shi'ite mosques in Sunni neighbourhoods, is a source of ongoing discontent among Sunni populations.

[180] The region of Balochistan traverses the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, parts of southern Afghanistan, and the south-west of Pakistan. In addition, there are a cluster of Baloch villages in Khorasan near to Mashhad. The Baloch who inhabited this tri-border region were overwhelmingly Sunni, and in Iran, unofficially discriminated against. While my interlocutors suggested that the population of Ghal'e-sākhtemān was mostly Afghan Baloch, it seems equally likely to me that the population were a combination of Iranian and Afghan Baloch.

boulevard, hidden behind a large corrugated iron fence, and was configured in the typical style of Iranian homes, a courtyard leading into a two-storey building (see Figure 7). The school itself was located on the top floor of the building, Friends of the Children using the space above the branch of the para-state charity *Ābshār-e ātefehhā*[181] (Waterfall of Emotions). Founded in 1389 (2010/11), and originally based in Tehran, *Ābshār-e ātefehhā* provided support – usually food aid – to the poorest in the country.

On that morning the bottom floor was busy. Women in chadors sat crossed legged on the floor, with large, silver platters in front of them, busily picking through mountains of leafy greens – *sabzijāt* – for use in *ghormeh sabzi*, a rich meat and vegetable stew. Announcing his entrance with the typically shout of "*yā allāh*" (as in Chapter One), giving any women present time to avail themselves of the requisite head-covering, Hamed crossed the threshold and we turned upstairs to the space occupied by Friends of the Children. The informal relationship between the two institutions allowed the dual purpose use of the building, girls attending classes above, mothers and women making meals below. Open to those without a *shenāsnāme*, the downstairs cooking space allowed the impoverished women access to virtually their only nutritional variety in a week. There was some suspicion that even poor Iranians with identity cards made use of its services, pretending that they did not possess one, although as Hamed noted, they would be unlikely to ever "kick anyone out on the street" for duplicity. Men however never attended. Despite being hungry, the loss of face [*āberu*], something of paramount value as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, associated with being unable to provide and being required to rely on the charity of others prevented an insurmountable social obstacle. As such, wives were delegated to do the job of gathering food. Draped in *chadors*, they were more anonymous, and as women, carried none of the social expectations of provision with them.

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[181] As Adelkhah (2000, p. 53) notes, the "network of institutions for public generosity has become very diverse, and its relations with the wielders of power and state institutions are all the more complex…". Exactly what relationship *Ābshār-e 'ātefehhā* had with the government was opaque to me and unspoken by those who knew about it. Nonetheless, as Adelkhah suggests, these institutions were increasingly autonomous, and it is likely that *Ābshār-e 'ātefehhā* maintained a strong degree of independence as well.

Figure 7: The location of the school in Qal'e-Sākhtemān. Its relatively straight streets, tinted windows, and marble facades were evidence that it was more 'bā kelāss' than Qal'e-Khiyābān. [Source - author].

The upper floor was divided into three rooms – a small administrative office, a small classroom (see Figure 8, a large multipurpose kitchen and open-space area, allocated for arts, craft, and theatre. There were approximately twelve girls aged 7-15, all without the *shenāsnāme* – the children of unions of Afghan fathers and Iranian mothers, said to have been abandoned by their fathers. Without the identity card, access to education was patchy and uncertain, despite recent undertakings by the Supreme Leader that all Afghan children should be able to enrol in school in Iran[182]. In addition to the children, there were three adult women present. One of them, Mrs Mirzāyi, drew a small salary from her work with Friends of the Children, having previously been unemployed. The other two volunteered their time to administer the centre and teach the children. Like the services provided, much of the material for the school – notebooks, seats, educational materials, etc. had been provided by donation from members of Friends of the Children. Donation of such material was largely unorganised, members supplying what they could, when they had the opportunity.

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[182] There is now more substantial evidence that Afghan children in Iran are being educated, and in 2017, the Supreme Leader insisted that all Afghan children, regardless whether they were documented or not, should be educated.

Figure 8: The classroom. [Author's photo].

That day's lesson was being run by Mrs Hessābi, a retired school teacher from Qāsemābād, on the far side of Mashhad. Framing her commitment as a matter of love [*eshq*], she was quick to point to the distance she had to travel to reach the school, stressing there was no financial incentive or reward for her participation. Rather, she took part, she said, out of sheer devotion to helping those in need. Her project today for the girls was embroidery. The girls attended art classes twice a week – Thursday and Tuesday – including theatrical classes with Hamed. The rest of the week, they attended regular lessons in the small adjacent classroom.

The girls were told to finish their embroidery, and to show to us and their teacher what they had achieved, our presence providing the opportunity to examine their handicraft. Mrs Hessābi told one of the girls to sit forward, "sit nicely", she said. The girls, either in their teenage years or approaching it, rolled their eyes at her. Taking us aside, Mrs Hessābi said: "I have to be really strict [*jedi*] with them, because they don't know how to sit and be still. At home they don't get that kind of instruction. Here I started two weeks ago, and we agreed from the start that in class, they weren't allowed to talk to each other. Over time, they've gotten good at being quiet. Mrs Mirzāyi was shocked by how quiet they were." She then pointed us to some of their previous work, demonstrating how the quality of the weave and the skill of the girls had improved over the relatively limited time she had been present (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: A girl from the school run by Friends of the Children points to her embroidery. [Author's photo].

As the *azān* rang out for midday prayers, it signalled the end of the lesson and the wrap up of procedures for the school. The girls were to stop for lunch, funding from Friends of the Children providing enough for the basic *adasi* – a lentil soup popular as a comfort dish, but increasingly perceived as poverty food lacking meat, bread, or rice.[183] Nonetheless, Mrs Hessābi was keen to point out that the meal provided vitamins that they were otherwise lacking in their poor diet. We left, making our goodbyes and following the girls down the stairs. As they piled out onto the street, and then headed towards Boulevār-e Horr, they waved and shouted to us. On our way back into town, Hamed received a call. There was a young girl preparing for her *konkur*, the graduating test Iranian students who intend to go on to university are required to undertake. She was unable to afford the textbook necessary to study. The caller had found someone willing to donate the book, and was calling Hamed to see if he would pick it up and deliver it to her. He obliged: "After all, I'm not working."

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[183] The emergence of middle class prosperity has certainly rapidly changed Iranian dietary practices. Although old habits die hard, bread – *nān* – has given way to rice, once a luxury grain, such that now meals without rice are often considered to be 'not meals'. Similarly, a diet once with protein sourced principally from pulses and dairy has been replaced with one in which meat takes centre stage. Red meats remain prestige item, with the all-meat *kabāb* or Mashhadi speciality *sheshlik* particularly popular, with poorer families still trying to consume chicken. Although Iranian shops are awash with soy protein, used to make mince go further, it remains something consumed only among family, never presented to guests.

There are a few elements I want to tease out of this. My initial assumption when working with Hamed and the community involved with Friends of the Children was that they must have had a clear long-term goal of lifting these children out of poverty and into something approaching a life comparable to lower class, if not middle class, Iranians. And yet, in spending time with the members of the group it became clear that such long-term temporal ambitions were outside the scope of what they hoped to achieve. Food drives, amateur dramatics, film making, painting, even crocheting, were all designed with the goal of providing an immediate sense of satisfaction – both to the recipients of charity, and to its providers. In fact, the short-term vision of the charity was encoded even into the educational pathways that the school provided. Both Hamed and Mrs Hessābi stressed that the school – which only ran three days a week – worked mostly to provide immediate relief to families in poverty, i.e. providing nutritious food, activities to allay boredom, and basic skills in literacy and numeracy that were likely to provide quick benefit to the family. The disorganised nature of the charity, its almost 'helter-skelter' distribution of aid only when organisers were able to provide, the haphazard approach to organising events and to service provision, are likewise testament to the fact that focus of the group was very much on the present rather than necessarily establishing durable foundations for the long term. Work in these charitable activities presents a counter example to Khosravi's (2017) assertion that all young Iranians are caught in a cycle of *belataklif* and interminable waiting. Rather, in this instance, the teachers and donors involved in 'Friends of the Children' make an active attempt to change their country according to their own modellings. 'Friends of the Children' allowed for a relationship that was free from remote institutional trappings, instead enabling far more intimate and proximate relations to be enacted.

This does not mean that an orientation towards the longer-term future was totally absent. On the contrary, all of those who participated expressed hope that by providing the girls with some education they might improve their social standing [*ham-kofv/sath-e ejtemā'i*] and 'marry up', lifting them out of the poverty. Hamed likewise declared that he was motivated by the hope that such charitable interventions might lift children out of a life of crime. But both Mrs Hessābi and Hamed underscored that their work was not for any kind of 'divine satisfaction' [*rezāyat-e khodā*], that there was no millenarian effort in the work. Ultimately, they adhered to the belief that the girls' long-term future was an unknown quantum, and that as such their focus was on providing events in the here and now that appealed to the interests of both students and teachers/volunteers. Talking to us afterwards, Hamed described the activities that he provided as effectively hobbies, short-term pleasurable activities that were geared to the talents and interests of the providers that made them "feel good" in immediately in the short term without a stressing a particular concern for the distant future.

6.5   Conclusion

Like so much of sociality in contemporary Mashhad, time carries with it the imprint, and is an inseparable part of, the country's utopian inheritance. It is dominated by an understanding, produced partly by elements within the state but also as a broader product of Shi'ite traditionalism, that fixes progress remotely, the path to it defined eschatologically. Success is ensured, but the present is devalued in favour of a longue durée future. In contrast, the charitable programmes that I have focused on in this chapter, whether coming from partly within the auspices of state, or whether independent of it, present an altogether different understanding of success, as something that rather than distant, can be realised in the here and now. Through their works aimed at helping people immediately, we can interpret their activities both as an attempt to change, and as an implicit critique of, the orientation towards time writ chiliastically. It is a cry against distant time, and a demand for a more presentist temporality. In exploring this theme, what we reveal is dual. Firstly, we see how utopia acts not only as an imaginary of a different world, but a vision of a better one and a criticism of the one that exists. But this criticism is also a product of the same utopian legacy that it rails against, for utopia holds in it the seeds of the critique of the status quo, and a vision for a different life.

7 Conclusion

Much had changed since I first arrived in Iran, and when I returned to the country for follow up research in January 2018. I left Australia to arrive in the country in the aftermath of what were widely understood to be the most significant protests against the government since the disputed returns of the 2009 Presidential election and the 'Green wave' [*mawj-e sabz*] that followed in its wake. Beginning in late December and continuing into January, pundits, commentators and opposition forces living in exile invariably read the demonstrations as heralding the death of the Islamic Republic, variously calling on the security forces to join those who came out onto the street, and on now US President Donald Trump to back regime change supposedly in the defence of the Iranian people. Both at the time and until now, such analysis struck me as wildly inaccurate and indicative of both the ongoing ignorance of all things Iranian that exists within the halls of US diplomacy, and also how out of touch opposition groups like Maryam Rajavi's *Mujāhedin-e Khalq* are with Iranian street sentiment. Nonetheless, that the protests were seemingly leaderless, and drew on predominantly working class and regional populations for support, clearly indicated that some change was afoot.

The lives of my interlocutors had changed, and continue to change. Ali-Reza, the *basiji* who I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis and who introduced us to the topic at the heart of my research, had abandoned the *basij*. When I pushed him on why, in his description of leaving the organisation, his memory lingered over a trip organised for students to visit the battle sites of the Holy Defence. As their train carriage made a stop overnight at in the desert on the way to Khuzestan, a young woman in immaculate manteaux and hijab, not a wisp of hair showing, had made the mistake of leaving the carriage without her *chador*. The attendant militia member had screamed at her for the infraction, and Ali-Reza recalled – "had they not been not *mahram*, I am sure he would have hit her". On his return to Mashhad, he submitted his notice of resignation, and had had nothing to do with the organisation since.

But somethings persisted. On a night at the end of my second stay, we lingered at Pārk-e Mellat, the place that has been central to so much of my data collection. That night we were waiting for a colleague from his class to arrive so he could return a book to her. As we sat there pending her arrival, he asked continued to ask me questions about life in Australia. Before he went into the night though, he asked a question that has stayed with me ever since that moment: "I don't understand how is it that you don't want to be the best?"

Once, the obvious answer would have been "I don't understand how it is that you want to, could even conceive, of being the best?", betraying my own Western origins coloured by a belief in the impossibility of perfection. My aim in this thesis has been to try and abnegate that sense. Reflecting on my own work, I have tried to think about Iranian, and specifically Mashhadi society, in a lateral way, as much as possible outside of the parameters that have defined a previous generation of anthropology in the hope of illuminating aspects of society that are obscured by a particular concentration on failure, success, etc. If I have achieved anything in this thesis it is the hope that perfection, which may to a Western audience seem like a strange, almost improbable desire, is manifest in Mashhad in ways that for my Iranian informants were familiar, pervasive in the everyday, sometimes difficult to put a finger on, often recognisable as such.

7.2   Themes in this thesis

As I have written in the Introduction and throughout this thesis, my chief concern in crafting this this work has been to explicate a sense of the utopian amidst the everyday in the lives of my Mashhadi informants. Throughout this thesis I have held that such utopianism is best not defined by a single, universalising telos or a unitary grand narrative that can be easily articulated and that is shared by all Iranians, let alone all Mashhadis. It is on the contrary, something more opaque and fragmented, or, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, something that "refracts". In trying to define this, I have argued for an understanding of utopia as typified by a belief that a 'complete' life is possible to live, that the perfect and perfection, instead of existing in the realm of the impossible, are not only distinctly achievable, but are also enmeshed in concerns that are not just highly philosophical and abstract but also resolutely quotidian.

The organising metaphor for this thesis has been then the concept of refraction, that is how this sense of completion spills out into the world in ways that may not seem immediately obvious. Rather, the idea of perfection ebbs and flows, as a current amidst the social, influencing behaviours and beliefs in subtle ways. My aim in writing has been to pick up on those threads. In the final pages here, I want to reiterate the themes of the preceding chapters, rearticulate the arguments they make, and to clarify the role that I see this work playing in the broader literature.

Each of the chapters in this thesis has been a meditation on how utopian and perfectionist ideals, visions, and concepts are refracted in some form, how they infuse particular aspects of the social. The question of perfection and its presence is multivalent, impossible to pin down to a linear correlation between cause and effect, but rather something that floats, at times almost out of grasp. My multifaceted examples should demonstrate, if anything, the vast variety of forms in which

perfection touches on everyday life, and the varied ways in which it is felt. Despite its almost ineffable nature, there are still a number of fundamental themes, or visions, of utopia that emerge from the work that I have done. In this following section I want to pause to linger on how those themes were manifest in particular chapters.

7.2.1   Perfection as edification

We have seen the legacy of utopia refracted as something positive (Chapter Two). In evidencing the idea that utopia can be read as a positive legacy, something responsible for the edification and self-improvement of individuals, I looked to the post-hoc rationalisation of participation in fast money schemes. I argued that while the emergence of such a culture has been interpreted as a negative phenomenon, indicative of the mal-ordered society that the Islamic regime is supposed to have fostered (Khosravi, 2017), I am keen to eschew judgement about the 'correct' way that a society ought to run. What is more interesting to my mind, and the focus of this chapter, was how, given the emergence of Ponzi schemes and multi-level marketing, such programs were assimilated into the discourse of perfectionism. I argue that not only was participation in such schemes an attempt to inherit wealth with a minimum of effort in the shortest of periods, but that they also became ensconced in the discourse of personal improvement and individual perfection, part of the "will to improve" that Li (2007) has spoken to. Participation in one of these schemes became a pathway for completing and perfecting oneself.

Related to this was the effort to realise a perfect social order through acoustic means that we saw in Chapter Four. Here, we looked to the salavāt prayer, a multivalent sonic benediction on the Prophet and his household, that worked variously to re-orient attention and intention, to solemnise time and space, and to break down the normative social order. In doing so, I suggested, it acted as a mechanism to create a public that was typified not by variety but by its unity, those present oriented together towards the production of a single voice. This does not mean that the *salavāt* is able to create such conditions in the long term, but rather that, however briefly, it serves as a reminder and a mechanism for the experience of a public existing in a state of shared intention, a brief, perfect iteration of an ideal social order.

7.2.2   Perfection as a social encumbrance

If Chapter Two and Four looked towards the positive appraisal of perfection as something that could edify the individual, elsewhere in this thesis we encountered themes that were more difficult to pair with such an aspirational view. Rather than a kind of striving (Khan 2012; Das 2010), perfection refracts as something that weighed heavily on the minds of my informants, obliging them, insisting

of them, demanding that they behaved in certain ways. We saw this first in Chapter Three, where I argued the utopian legacy refracted in the sense of obligation that parents felt towards their children and their participation in the city's educational system. Education became a site of obligation, something that that the lower-middle class understand as being part of a process that 'completes' children, perfects them, and as such is not only something that they desire for their children, but something they feel compelled to insist upon. Such themes also emerge in Chapter Five where perfectionism again comes as something that troubles the minds of my informants, this time as a concern for exacting sincerity and truthfulness in social relations.

7.2.3   Perfection as critique and the critique of perfection

And finally, we see the legacies of utopia emerge as a critique of the status quo. This theme emerges most clearly in Chapter Six, where I argued we looked to charitable organisations that acted in the here and now as critiquing the chiliastic orientation of time that was a characteristic manifestation of the utopian legacy found in Mashhad. I held also that this critique was part of the city's perfectionism, the idea of utopia casting a critical vision over contemporary society.

7.3   Broader significance of thesis

Each chapter in this work contributes in some small way to a particular body of theory or literature, but at the end of this thesis I want to look at the significance and some of the broader implications of my research. My analysis contributes to two main areas. The first is a collection of interrelated theoretical threads that come together as what might be best referred to as anthropologies of the good and, as this thesis suggests, the perfect. The second relates to the more specific, regionally focused field of Iranian anthropology. If I reveal anything of contemporary Mashhad, I hope it is that my Mashhadi informants live in a world in which the question of 'completion', of perfection, remain deeply encoded in and shapes prosaic concerns. In doing so, I have asserted that we need not limit our understanding of utopia and utopianism in Iran as something belonging exclusively to the textual domain of philosophical literature, or to the ideology of political groups (A. Bayat, 1996, 2013; Ehsani, 2009; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2013). Such an argument sits within a movement over the past decade to shift the analytical focus on utopia away from the exclusive domain of literary fiction (Cook, 2018) and into the domain of the 'real world'. Yet when exploring these 'real utopias', much of the research continues to be on intentional communities (e.g. Sargisson & Sargent, 2004), sometimes outside and sometimes within a broader society (Cooper, 2014).

In this thesis, what I present is the legacy of utopianism as an idea and a practice that percolated through a society at a larger level, becoming a thread detectable in something more than just a

micro-section thereof. In taking such a position, I believe my analysis contributes to the ongoing effort to reposition the utopian and the perfect as something worthy of anthropological study. We have already seen the foundational work exploring these ideas, both as an area of ethnographic interest (e.g. Das, 2010; Khan, 2012) and also as a refractive prism through which to view the anthropological exercise (e.g. Maskens & Blanes, 2016). Yet much more can be said, and I think if we are to move beyond contention that the perfect is somehow in the aberrant or problematic (e.g. Schielke, 2009), more *should* be said. In situating utopia as something that is refracted in the quotidian, I hope to also add to literature on the everyday. While recognising the elusive nature of such terminology (see Clarke, 2014), it is my belief that by embedding something as supposedly exceptional as the utopic amidst the mundane and the ordinary we are better able to understand both. This thesis also adds to the by now large and still growing body of material on the constituent forms of the good life, a concern first elaborated by Robbins (2013) and followed up in a plethora of material. Questions of utopia and perfection are impossible to separate from the ethico-moral concern of finding, making, and interpreting the purpose of life and how it can be lived well. Utopia grows out of these concerns, another kind of imagining, providing us with insights into how we might best experience that life, while also demonstrating the pressures of such awareness.

This thesis contributes very explicitly to the anthropology of contemporary Iran. One of my initial and major concerns in doing ethnographic fieldwork in Iran was to go some way to problematizing the assumptions and foci of the pre-existing anthropological literature. As I have said throughout this thesis, much of the material written in the decade of the 2000s on Iran looked to what might be called a set of conflicting dualisms – resistance vs. oppression, failure vs. success, tradition vs. modernity, religion vs. secularism, Islamism vs. liberalism, before vs. after the Revolution of 1979 – which have come to define a genre of writing on Iran. Although not all ethnographic work in Iran was focused on this (e.g. Nadjmabadi, 2012), and though there is now an emerging body of scholarship which challenges this focus (eg Bajoghli, 2017; Behrouzan, 2016; Hashemi, 2015; Najmbadi, 2013; Olszewska, 2015) there is plenty of room for further analysis that looks outside of these schemata.

What I sought to do throughout this thesis was to paint a detailed and nuanced picture of a small slice of post-Revolutionary Iran, particularly those parts that had thus far remained largely obscured in previous writing. In writing about utopianism in Mashhad, I wanted to recognise the importance of a historical lineage that extends not just to the Revolution of 1979, but one that has threads that bind the present to an older past. This is not to underplay the importance of the Revolution. Rather it is to recognise the Revolution as an event within an ongoing historical trajectory, one that is shaped by and connected to influences from the medieval, early modern, and 20th century periods. I

also wanted to provide an analysis that moved away from a singular focus analysis on youth, and on liberal sub-communities (Khosravi, 2008, 2017; Mahdavi, 2009; Varzi, 2006). Although Iran is a young society, youth are not the sole demographic, and in this thesis I have more deeply evidenced how inter-generational dynamics enrich our understanding of how Mashhadi society works vertically. The focus on youth in Iran has also typically come alongside an interest in liberal communities within Iran, groups defined by their opposition and resistance to the Islamic strictures of the state. While many of my interlocutors would have fallen into this category, I was careful to make sure that resistance did not become the singular framing device, and I sought to balance such opinions by also giving voice to those within Mashhad society who, for whatever reason, remained supportive, or at least not especially critical of the status quo.

And finally, this study helps to break away from an ethnographic focus on Tehran that has been common in many of the ethnographies produced recently (Barry, 2018; Khosravi, 2008; Mahdavi, 2009). This does not mean that the national capital is not worthy of study, but rather that only reading about the experiences of Tehran elides significant regional differences across the country. In this thesis, particularly in Chapter One, I have noted how my Mashhadi informants understood their city as distinct from and unlike Tehran, as well as other major cities in the country. Studying the separate cultures that cities and regions in Iran have saves us from proscriptive judgements about the uniformity of particular values across the country, allowing us a glimpse into the lives of Iranians living outside the orbit of the national capital, and in this particular case into the self-declared 'distinctive' world that is Mashhad.

7.4   Final matters: Utopia as a path to be followed

While visions of a perfect place are arguably something present in many cultures and societies (Bakken, 2000; Levitas, 2013; Sargent, 1994; Sargisson & Sargent, 2004), and while there are multiple traditions of millennialism in the Islamic world (Werbner, 2004) the cadence – its manifestation as something that is quotidian rather than abstract, palpable rather than remote – is what sets Mashhad apart. As a final point, I make a call for further research on this topic. How might we understand the appearance of utopia, not as a millennialism understood in thousand year durations, but as a backdrop to everyday sociality, reflected in other communities? Does Mashhad stand alone in this respect, or are these more general forms that can be detected in other times and places? How does utopia continue to ripple out and shape societies, presenting us with more than just a dream, but a path to be followed?

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