IRAN’S MANY DEALS


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COVER

At a Tehran park during 2009 celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the Iranian revolution. (Paolo Pellegrin/Magnus Photos)
January 16 was implementation day for the summer 2015 agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and six world powers known as the P5+1 regarding Iran’s nuclear research program. By the terms of this accord, Iran is to curtail its nuclear activities, soothing Western fears that it aims to acquire an atomic bomb, and the West is to lift the sanctions that have isolated Iran from the global economy. The deal is a major diplomatic achievement that nonetheless throws the sheer scale of the Middle Eastern conflagration into sharp relief.

The P5+1 includes Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, but the breakthrough in negotiations came in late 2012 when Oman hosted quiet direct talks between Iran and the United States. The Obama administration kept the face-to-face meetings going despite the increasingly flustered fulminations of Republicans, as well as Israel, Saudi Arabia and their respective mouthpieces. The Iranian leadership, for its part, looked past the Obama administration’s decision to step up the sanctions, its rejection of a 2010 Brazilian-Turkish initiative that could have brought an earlier resolution and its sabotage of Iran’s research with computer viruses (and perhaps more traditional means as well). At a deeper level, the deal transcended over four decades of mutual hostility springing for Americans from the hostage crisis and for Iranians from the CIA-sponsored coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, subsequent US backing for the hated Shah, the US “tilt” toward Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war and President George W. Bush’s inclusion of Iran in an “axis of evil.”

The US-Iranian rapprochement is only partial, but its portent should not be understated. Prior to the 2012 contacts, the two long-time foes were on a collision course that could well have ended in US bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities and other military confrontation. Such a conflict would have been disastrous for both countries and would have deepened the calamities that have befallen Syria and Yemen, with a high risk of additional proxy warfare elsewhere.

The pact is also a success for nuclear non-proliferation. On January 16 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had undertaken all measures required for sanctions to be lifted. Iran dismantled more than 13,000 centrifuges, the devices that spin uranium ore into reactor fuel, or low-enriched uranium, leaving it with a fraction of its former capacity. The more advanced centrifuges that Iran disabled are in storage under IAEA seal and supervision. The UN’s nuclear watchdog further verified that Iran’s stockpile of low-enriched uranium is far smaller than what Iran would need to enrich further to weapons grade and that Iran poured cement into its heavy-water reactor that could have produced plutonium for a warhead. Iran also agreed not to engage in computer modeling or other simulation of nuclear weapons design. The IAEA will monitor Iran’s nuclear activities on a continuous basis to make sure that these strictures are adhered to.

The Islamic Republic, of course, has always insisted that its nuclear research is for peaceful purposes only. There has never been solid proof to the contrary, but the clandestine origins of the current program gave outsiders reason to be suspicious. With this

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The dominant narrative of the 1979 Iranian revolution granted a pivotal role to a new political actor—the downtrodden masses. Over the past two decades in Iran, a different protagonist gradually replaced them, equally captivating and elusive—the middle class. While neither category fully represented the reality of Iranian society, each idea was deployed as a weapon to reshape the political order.

During the early years of the Islamic Republic, for instance, low-ranking clerks, technicians and nurses in the Ministry of Health joined with janitors, gardeners and kitchen staff to demand that their salaries and privileges be brought level to those of well-paid bureaucrats and doctors. Outward displays of revolutionary commitment boosted claims for inclusion in newly coalescing bodies such as the rural development organization Construction Jihad or the auxiliary militias of the Revolutionary Guards. The tensions within the coalition once united against the Shah turned this upsurge in mobilization into ammunition in bloody internecine battles. Both state and society were restyled, publicly visible in clothing and language. Suits were baggier, neckties removed and chadors

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homogenized into uniforms. The egalitarian address of fellow citizens as “brothers and sisters” superseded the protracted Persian honorifics of the old intelligentsia. The righteous invocation of the category of the masses became obligatory in national politics.

In the wake of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) and subsequent economic reconstruction, the scales of status began to tip. A not-so-subtle makeover occurred, whereby assertions of expertise began to compete alongside existing declarations of revolutionary fervor. In 1992, Revolutionary Guards commander Mohsen Rezai penned a series of newspaper columns in which he argued that maintaining the Islamic Republic’s hard-won independence in a post-Cold War world required the cultivation of technical prowess, economic efficiency and a culture of entrepreneurship. In 1992, Revolutionary Guards commander Mohsen Rezai penned a series of newspaper columns in which he argued that maintaining the Islamic Republic’s hard-won independence in a post-Cold War world required the cultivation of technical prowess, economic efficiency and a culture of entrepreneurship.

The tone of Rezai heralded a more general shift during the 1990s toward a cautious celebration of technocratic expertise and its assumed social carrier, the middle class.

Much like the early years of the revolution, the change in mood could not be understood solely through top-down schemes of social engineering or the needs of the state. It was also an elite response to popular developments. While intricately linked to post-revolutionary government policies, such as the broadening of health care and education into the countryside and new channels of upward mobility for outwardly committed cadres, the social transformations underway were far more sweeping than most politicians realized. In the central province of Kashan in 2010, I was invited to a young friend’s village, where his grandmother hosted us in her newly built two-story house. In the backyard sat her old home, a collapsed sun-dried brick structure where she had raised a family. What about her three sons? I asked. Had they worked as laborers for the local government and received a state loan to build it? “Oh no,” she replied, “two are engineers and one is a doctor, so they gave me this house as a gift.” In Iran, as in many post-revolutionary countries, an expanded professional class sprouted out of a tumultuous process of social leveling.

Like everywhere else, the idea of a singular middle class in Iran has arguably been more coherent than the reality. Economists cannot agree on how to conceptualize, much less measure, the size of middle classes in poorer countries. For some scholars, anyone above the global absolute poverty line of $2 per day is middle-class; by that standard, more than 95 percent of the population of the Islamic Republic would be included. Increasing the definitional threshold will produce, through basic subtraction, a smaller measurement of the middle class. If one uses a consumption basket of goods and services associated with wealthy countries, estimates of middle class size for countries similar to Iran

Playing soccer at a park in Bushehr.

HOSSEIN HEIDARPOUR/A JOURNEY INSIDE
dip near the single digits, especially if the super-wealthy in those countries are excluded.³

Hailing consumption as proof of a unitary middle class—as when visiting journalists goggle at the fashionable Tehran pedestrians—is misleading for another reason. In most countries, poorer people emulate the conspicuous consumption of those above them in social status. When I voted for president in northern Tehran in the summer of 2013, many in the queue dressed similarly, within their own generational boundaries. Yet when I straw-poll those around me after casting ballots, only half supported Hassan Rouhani, the supposed choice of the middle class. One cannot read politics directly off consumption. Indeed, a major reason why individuals consume far beyond their means is to adopt the pretense of middle-class demeanor.

Given this imprecision, educational and occupational status is a preferred criterion of the middle class. Iran’s 2011 census reported that just over 18 percent of the population held higher educational degrees, including theological ones. Half a decade later, the figure is likely 4–6 percent higher. Depending on the classifications used, ranging widely from counting high-status managers and administrators to adding on poorly paid teachers and office clerks, between 15 and 30 percent of the work force is employed in ostensibly middle-class positions.⁴

Inferring a common politics from these status credentials, however, proves a similarly vexed task. Over the past decade, as often reported in the press, Iran’s widening pool of university graduates experienced higher unemployment rates on average than less-skilled job seekers. Poorly functioning labor markets in an oil-drenched economy were usually blamed, but few noticed strikingly similar trends in resource-poor Turkey, Malaysia, Egypt and a host of other middle-income countries.⁵ Even by occupational classification, as Iranian sociologists have noted, the vast heterogeneity within the middle range defies stable predictions of political behavior.⁶ In other words, the mere expansion of middle-class consumption, credentials or employment provides no assurance of reformist political success. Rather than the inevitable vanguard of democratization, middle classes are situationally temperamental: largely pro-Modi in India, both anti-Mubarak and pro-Sisi in Egypt, split between rival Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts in Thailand.

In Iran over the past two decades, philosophers, politicians, activists, clerics, journalists and social scientists on all sides invoked the coherence of a middle class to lay claim to what was desirable or possible through politics. Some did so by asserting the idea as a universal category, open to all comers. Others denied that class divisions existed at all, by dint of a religious or national contrast to conflict-laden Western...
countries. When domestic cleavages were identified, the opposing side sat in the minority and not the mighty middle. At the level of nationalist ideology—the common currency of Iranian politics—competitors increasingly claimed to speak for the middle rather than the masses.  

In sum, the Iranian middle class was assembled, not discovered. It was not inevitable that a war veteran, a female engineering student or a self-identified Arab-Iranian, for example, would vote for, protest against or boycott particular candidates or parties. The reactions and counter-reactions of political mobilization, rather than given economic and social divisions, propelled waves of collective action out of newly forming but indeterminately disparate middling groups. These invocations were successful when coalitions far larger than the actually existing middle class were built, such as in the elections of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 or Hassan Rouhani in 2013. Political mobilization—through elite institutions, quasi-party organizations, civic associations and popular movements alike—was formative, not just reflective.  

If the middle class in Iran is neither naturally occurring nor permanently affixed, two implications follow. First, absent another war or economic collapse, the aspirational universalism that permeates middle-class discourse will increasingly be the reference point of the Iranian public sphere. Political elites may choose to ignore or fight against it, but they do so at their own peril. In reality, this will mean a frequent redrawing or upgrading of civic and economic demands, political identities and social cleavages. Broad popular coalitions extending far beyond the discernible middle classes will have to be mobilized in order to drive forward new agendas, whether liberal reform or conservative retrenchment.  

Second, pushing against this trend is the inherent exclusivism of middle-class politics. Displaying middle-class bona fides gives visibility in Iranian politics, voice in everyday life and empathy in international media. As growing flows of capital, labor and goods pass through the Islamic Republic, not everyone will hold the same capacity to make these claims. While we rightly hold out the promise of politics in Iran, we need to pay heed to the people in danger of being made invisible by those politics.

Endnotes
1 Amir Mehryar, “Shi’ite Teachings, Pragmatism and Fertility Change in Iran,” in Gavin Jones and Mehtab Karim, eds., Islam, the State and Population (London: Hurst, 2005).
2 Ettelaat, August 6–9, 1992.
5 See comparative data on tertiary unemployment, World Bank Development Indicators.
7 For the most recent iteration, see the new business elite discourse emanating from the “modern right” in Mehrnameh 41 (April-May 2015). Thanks to Fatemeh Sadeghi for her input on this section.
Talking Class in Tehroon
Rasmus Christian Elling and Khodadad Rezakhani

Persian, like any other language, is laced with references to class, both blatant and subtle. With idioms and metaphors, Iranians can identify and situate others, and thus themselves, within hierarchies of social status and privilege, both real and imagined. Some class-related terms can be traced back to medieval times, whereas others are of modern vintage, the linguistic legacy of television shows, pop songs, social media memes or street vernacular. Every day, it seems, an infectious set of phrases appears that make yesterday’s seem embarrassingly antiquated.

Some phrases refer directly to occupation or rank, but many operate through gendered, geographic, ethnic or racialized codes or invoke lifestyle, physical appearance, patterns of consumption and behavior in public space. Some terms are self-evident in meaning and others idiosyncratic.

A class-related vocabulary, furthermore, was developed in the oppositional discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, adapted to the rhetoric of the 1979 revolution and then partially transferred into official language under the Islamic Republic. The post-revolutionary reconfiguration of social relations continues to play out in everyday speech. In today’s Iran, as anywhere else, sarcasm and wordplay can be ways to express social critique or ways to reinforce inequality and domination. Every word opens a window for the study of power.

The handful of examples below illuminate the complexities at play. The list is by no means comprehensive and it tilts toward Tehran, or Tehroon, as the name of the capital (and, often, the long a sound in other words) is rendered in colloquial Persian. More research is needed to uncover the context-dependent roles of language in perpetuating class structures in Iranian society, but perhaps this brief glossary is a start.
**PLACE**

**Bacheh** One can add the name of most of Tehran’s neighborhoods to the term bacheh, “child,” to connote class origins. Bacheh-Elahiye (a northern suburb) conjures the image of a spoiled rich kid, and bacheh-Narmak (an eastern district) a picture of someone from the working class. Certain areas are elevated to archetypes: Bacheh-Javadiye (originally meant a native of a rough-and-tumble area in the far south of old Tehran. Javadiye is now part of central Tehran, and is the term is today applied to anyone considered uncouth, unsophisticated and/or criminal.

**Dahati** Literally “villager, country bumpkin,” this word refers to someone perceived as being from a rural background, having poor or parochial taste in dress or furnishings, or being unexposed to “modern” comforts or fashions. An older term, posht-kahi (“from behind the mountains”), probably originated from the location of the Lur tribes west of the Zagros range, as opposed to those living pish-kah, “this side of the mountains”; kolah-namadi, “one who wears a felt hat” pointed to the headgear favored by villagers. Although archaic, these terms persist in various forms.

**Ghorbati** “Exiled, estranged.” Whereas the term originally signified the Roma tribes, it has also been used to describe the internally displaced of the Iran-Iraq war (1979–1990), many of whom fled from impoverished regions to major cities. The implication is that the ghorbati unfamiliar with urban settings.

**Halabi-abadi** “From Tin City,” a generalized notion referring to the makeshift nature of the shantytowns that sprang up around Tehran as a result of rapid migration during the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite a government policy of razing slums, the term continues to be used to describe the poorest classes and informal laborers. It is similar to the older term zagheh-neshin, “hut dweller,” and to hashiyeh-neshin, “margin dweller.”

**Jonoob-shahri** “From the south of the city,” together with payin-shahri, “downtowner,” refers to the historical poverty of the flatlands south of Tehran. As poor and lower middle-class neighborhoods are today dispersed over the western, eastern and central parts of Tehran, the term refers more to socioeconomic position than to geographic location.

**Shahrestani** “Out-of-towner, provincial,” meaning someone from outside Tehran. The word emphasizes the perceived cultural differences between natives of the capital and migrants from elsewhere, who are seen as less sophisticated or even simpliminded. It originates from the administrative division of the country into counties or shahrestans.

**Shomal-shahri** “From the north of the city,” or bala-shahri (“uptowner”), are terms denoting those inhabiting the slopes of the Alborz Mountains in the north of the capital. This area is dotted with luxury apartment towers that have replaced the villas, large gardens and tree-lined boulevards that were the old markers of money. The term is also used to mock those with pretensions to wealth and education.

**LIFESTYLE**

**Asil** Someone “noble, authentic”—from a lineage of high social standing, often with the connotation of wealth. It can also be used to differentiate “original Tehranis” from perceived outsiders or newcomers.

**Ba-kelas or bi-kelas** Borrowed from English (“classy”) or French, these antonyms carry the same connotations in Tehran as they do elsewhere.

**Farangi(-ma'ab)** “(Wannabe) Westerners,” and earlier, fokoli (from the French faux col, detachable collar), are dandies or mimics of the West presented by critical intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s as agents of cultural imperialism and polar opposites of Iranian authenticity.

**Geda-goshneh** “Hungry beggar,” a general term describing the poor, but recently also describing someone, perhaps of newly acquired means, whose main concern or “hunger” is money.

**Jahel** Literally “ignorant,” such a person is typically imagined as a strong, proud man from the lower classes with staunch traditional values. He is the antithesis of a farangi. Dash-mashti, “Brother Mashhadi” (someone who has performed the pilgrimage to Mashhad), has similar connotations. Kolah-makhmali, “one who wears a velvet hat.” is a term derived from a particular type of bowler hat often worn by the tough but lovable jahel in the films of the 1950s and 1960s.

**Javad** Though it means “unsophisticated” in class-related slang, Javad is in fact a name. The root of its use as a derogatory term for the socially inept might be in the perceived predominance of that name in the lower classes; or perhaps it is a shortened form.
of bacheh-Javadiyeh. Its emphasized form, Javat, points out the same meaning even more strongly, this time by devoicing the final labial, a common feature of Tehrani dialect. Khazz is a more recent synonym that also describes the process of something falling out of favor or fashion—without the Javad registering the fact.

Lat “Thug, ruffian.” An old term, still commonly used to identify someone of lower-class origin or perceived to exhibit “lower-class behavior,” including, possibly, criminal proclivities. It is rooted in an urban institution, a continuation of the vigilantes of the medieval period (luti and javanmard), who were known for their toughness, but also for their moral code, including defense of the honor and chastity of local girls. The line between a lat and a jahel is often blurred. Lat-bazi, “acting like a lat,” is used to denote disrespectful behavior and impolite language.

Soosool and nonor A “dandy,” someone, often upper-class, who places particular emphasis on personal appearance and generally avoids distasteful situations. The related zhigul(i) or “gigolo” is an adaptation of the French term, though with fewer sexual implications. The term was popular in the 1960s and 1970s and is used today mostly to describe someone with old-fashioned ideas of personal comportment. A titish-mamani (“princess,” “goody two-shoes”) is used for someone, often female, who is overly careful about appearance and acts in an exaggerated manner when coming into contact with anything unclean or uncomfortable.

STUFF

(Bacheh) mayeh-dar “Wealthy (kid).” someone from a comfortable background, with mayeh (“means, essence”) being a byword for money and privilege.

Galant-baz, oltima-savar “Galant driver, Ultima rider.” These are references to car models associated with particular classes. Those driving a Mitsubishi Galant are deemed distinctly middle-class, while those riding in a Nissan Ultima sports car must be from the top 1 percent of society. Peykan cars, produced in Iran by Iran-Khodro, or Pride, from Kia Motors, are in turn seen as the vehicle of choice for the average Joe.

Khar-pool “(With a) donkey-load of money.” Khar signifies a huge volume of something, so a khar-pool is someone rich indeed. The term has been in use for decades and can be applied to both old money and the nouveau riche. A similar term is koloff, “thick,” describing someone who has a large financial cushion.

Nadid-badid “Never-seen-before,” someone who has never been exposed to the finer things in life and does not know what to do with them. It also indicates someone who uncritically embraces new commodities and fashions without knowing where they come from.

Pa-pati or pa-berehneh “Barefoot.” Poor. A less pejorative synonym is tohi-dast or khali-dast (“empty-handed”), which is also used in official discourse to praise the hard-working masses who may be “empty in hand but full of faith,” as the slogan goes. Dast-be-dahan (“hand-to-mouth”) is also used to describe those struggling to meet their needs.

Tazeh-be-dowran-resideh “Novus homo; recently made,” among several equivalents of the French nouveau riche, including the more formal now-kiseh (“new pocket”).

JOBS

‘Amaleh “Worker.” A rough-and-ready man often employed in construction or a similar low-paying or hazardous occupation. Although it is an old word, its present-day connotation can be linked to the employment of migrants, particularly single men from the provinces, during Tehran’s 1980s and 1990s construction boom. The term is also associated with catcalling.

Baqqal-chaqqal Literally, “grocer poser.” The term for “grocer” does not carry any particular class connotation. But with such rhyming duplication, it can be used to characterize retailers in a derogatory way, implying a mere trader with less sophistication than the upper classes.

Bazaari The connotation, similar to nouveau riche, is of a wealthy person with poor taste in fashion and goods, or bad manners resulting from having wealth but no education. It appears to have roots in the same disdain held for the mercantile classes in medieval Europe.

Besaz-befroosh A “builder-and-seller,” such a person relies on business acumen and crony networks. Some members of the middle class jumped on the bandwagon of post-war construction in Tehran. Much of the housing was poorly designed and built, and yet sold at high prices, creating a new class of compradors.

Hammal “Coolie, porter,” an old slang term originally denoting those whose carried goods on their backs. Present-day use varies and can convey meanings ranging from “poor” to “uneducated,” or someone who does not follow social conventions. In the latter sense, for example, it could be a well-to-do person who flaunts
his cash. It can also be an insult thrown at someone who elbows others in a crowded area.

**Kolfat** Literally, “maid,” but also used to describe someone with an undesirable occupation or who is deemed unrefined, generally a woman.

**Politics**

**Agha-zadeh** “Progeny of an agha.” Since the 1990s, this word has been a reference to the privileged sons of high-ranking politicians, many of whom are clergymen, usually addressed as agha (“sir”). It should be noted that some of the more renowned agha-zadeh are, in fact, children of non-clerical families with political and economic clout.

**Asib-pazir** “Weak,” a term popularized by certain politicians to designate those “left behind” by the economic redevelopment and general progress after the Iran-Iraq war.

**Kookh-neshin** “Tent dweller” is a rhyming antonym of kakh-neshin, “palace dweller.” In a famous speech, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini said, “Our revolution was one of tent dwellers, not palace dwellers.” The word kookh, rare in colloquial Persian before that speech, originally designated Arab Bedouin tents in the early Islamic period.

**Lompan** “Miscreant, ragamuffin.” The term entered public discourse through socialist groups that had adopted it from Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*. Today, it connotes violent, uneducated but ideologically indoctrinated thugs, who can be of a higher socio-economic status than what was originally meant. In that sense, it is used by certain more liberal segments of society as a synonym for other words—hezbollahi (“of God’s Party”), khodsar (“autonomous”), goruh-e feshar (“the pressure group”)—all terms that are indicative of sociopolitical milieu rather than economic class.

**Moraffah** “Comfortable, wealthy.” Along with the standard compound moraffah-e bi-dard, “painless” affluent or simply bi-dard (“painless”), this term was popular among intellectuals to designate the upper classes before the revolution. In the 1980s and 1990s, it came to designate the post-revolutionary *nouveaux riches*. Many saw this new wealth as directly linked to effortless profiteering in the wartime black-market economy, to the detriment of the poor.

**Mostaz’af** “Downtrodden, oppressed.” Resembling the “oppressed masses” of Marxist thought, this word—like zahmat-kesh (“toiler, proletarian”)—was originally used by socialist groups prior to 1979 and then appropriated by revolutionary ideologists to denote the marginalized segments of society that were supposed to take power after the Shah’s downfall. A Bonyad-e Mostaz’afan (Foundation of the Downtrodden) was established to manage and redistribute assets confiscated from the royal family and millionaire industrialists. It is now one of the biggest conglomerates of commercial enterprise in the Middle East and yet mostaz’af is still used officially in its revolutionary sense. Mostakber (“arrogant oppressor”), is used in official terminology, sometimes in the sense of “capitalist” and thus as the opposite of mostaz’af.

**Sandis-khor** “Sandis drinker,” from the name of a Capri Sun juice concentrate sold in Iran. As the authorities tend to hand out cold drinks during pro-regime rallies, this name is given to regime supporters—some of them perceived to be from the lower classes and thus lured by the promise of free refreshment.

**Taghooti** “Idol worshipper.” Originally a theological and literary term for devotees of the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-Lat, the word taghooti was used by the intellectual fathers of the revolution to signify the rich classes in Pahlavi Iran. Conveying the idea that the wealthy worshipped Mammon rather than God, the word was incorporated into official discourse in the Islamic Republic, particularly to demonize monarchists and perceived reactionaries. As such, it has also been used in legal proceedings.

**Racism**

**Afghani** Iran has received Afghan refugees and immigrants for half a century, and particularly after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Commonly, these Afghans have been employed in construction and menial labor, often toiling under horrible conditions for the lowest wages. Some Iranians accuse Afghans of engaging in criminal activity, including murder, in some places leading to demands for expulsion of Afghan laborers based on hearsay and rumors. Afghans are subject to many kinds of everyday discrimination.

**Johood** As in many other places, in Iran Jews are historically associated with wealth. The racist stereotype of a Jewish “miser” thrives—with its undertones of hidden plenty, conspiracy and hyper-caution. As opposed to yahudi, which is slightly more polite, and kalimi, the official term for the Jews, johood can also be used for non-Jews to indicate stinginess or irrational fear of injury or illness.
The Iran Deal as Social Contract

Arang Keshavarzian

For years discussion of Iran’s nuclear program and how best to address the surrounding impasse focused on international relations—chiefly, the extent to which the United States and the Islamic Republic could and should trust each other to reach a negotiated settlement. Amidst all the conjecture, the domestic Iranian politics of the nuclear issue were often reduced to Kremlinology-style questions about the motives and capacities of hardliners in the Islamic Republic and the unknowable mind of the Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. If Iran’s political economy was spoken of at all, it was only to offer more speculation about whether the economic sanctions imposed by the UN and the US would bring Iran to the negotiating table and, if so, how tough those penalties needed to be.

Sanctions did gnaw at Iran, as Washington hoped, but the debate in the West was nonetheless miscast. Since 2003, after all, decision makers in the Islamic Republic had expressed a willingness to bargain over Iranian nuclear activities safeguarded under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In the last two years, both the administration of President Hassan Rouhani and the Leader have repeatedly explained that the issue was not whether or not to negotiate but if, by the logic of compromise, Iran would receive an economic payoff for doing so. As it happened, the Iranian leadership decided the answer was yes even before Rouhani was elected in 2013, engaging in secret direct discussions with the US in Oman beginning in late 2012. These contacts led to the ultimate agreement between and the P5+1 announced on July 14, 2015.

What is the calculus for the Islamic Republic in opting, effectively, to end its decades-long isolation from the global economy? Simply put, the regime’s elite knows it cannot rule by ideological persuasion and targeted coercion alone: If the political system is to be stable, it must have a social base that sees material advantage in that system enduring. To date, the

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efforts of the Islamic Republic to forge a social contract have failed to deliver dependable quiescence, whether in the streets, factories and universities, or on the parliamentary floor and newspaper op-ed pages. At least since the contested 2009 presidential election, it appears, a growing number of the regime’s decision makers, including confidants of the Leader and now President Rouhani, too, have hoped to build a new political economy that will secure the compliance of Iranian citizens, if not their active support. Social contracts are always partial, and come with peril as well as promise for all involved. But, as it enters its thirty-eighth year, the Islamic Republic is employing the nuclear deal as part of a gambit to achieve a new one.

**Revolutionary Brick and Mortar**

In the opening decade of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other regime founders struggled to demobilize a highly politicized society in the aftermath of the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and, at the same time, mobilize specific strata of society in support for their own project. This contestation was shaped, first, by civil war between factions of the broad revolutionary coalition and, then, the strains of the eight-year war with Iraq. The emergent state had to redirect the energies of men and women, and economic resources, to the war effort, but also manage popular dissent and deter the rise of political rivals with revolutionary and military credentials. Violence, both discriminate and indiscriminate, was used to suppress opponents, but so was social policy.

Redress of social inequality was a central demand of the revolution. The regime adopted several policies aimed at leveling society and thus cementing a social base for itself. There were two main pillars of this program: mass employment in the expanding state apparatus and mass housing. Available data shows that public-sector employment as a share of total employment jumped from 19 percent to 31 percent, with the number of state employees in urban areas growing by 80 percent during the same period. In this expansion, many of the rank-and-file personnel of the Pahlavi state and bureaucracy retained their positions; despite the idiom of “cleansing,” there was no purge beyond the upper echelons of the ministries in the 1980s. And additional millions of people gained the job security and benefits that a public-sector job entailed, in keeping with the regime’s claim to be a provider of opportunity and upward mobility to the majority of Iranians who were shunted aside by Pahlavi modernization.

The regime sought to further this claim by legalizing informal housing and privatizing public lands to incorporate the large numbers of rural-to-urban migrants who had been arriving in the major cities—Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan and others—since the late 1960s. Asef Bayat estimates that by 1980 half a million people, or 15 percent of Tehran’s population, were squatting in the capital’s metropolitan area. Together with slum dwellers, the squatters accounted for 35 percent of the population of greater Tehran. While the new regime eventually removed many squatters with evictions and brute force, it also legally recognized the homes of many others. Dozens of settlements inside and around major cities were integrated into municipalities and supplied with city services; by 1990 1.2 million Tehranis were living in these new townships that enhanced their social, legal and economic security. Kaveh Ehsani concludes, “Remarkably, by 1986 urban housing stock had doubled, as Housing Ministry surveys showed that more than half of all urban dwellings in the entire country had been built after the revolution. It was private individuals who built these 2.3 million new units. The state merely transferred the public land into private hands; its share of investment in housing construction (affordable or otherwise) was less than 2 percent of the total after the revolution.” These and like policies may not have produced ideological adherents to Khomeinism, but they did fashion a new social order that was directly and indirectly tied to the new political system.

By the presidency of Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, which began in 1989, this social contract was showing signs of wear. Enduring recession and running up against the limits of the regime’s willingness to accommodate informal housing, in 1991 the urban poor and veterans of the Iran-Iraq war took to the streets to demand accountability from the political elite that claimed to be ruling on behalf of the “disinherited.” The war had ended with no loss of territory, but not before slaughtering and maiming hundreds of thousands, depleting the national treasury, and severely damaging the petroleum and manufacturing sectors. Political insiders, as well as ordinary citizens, routinely aired public, pointed criticism of the regime’s handling of the war. Iran had enjoyed fairly consistently high oil prices since the early 1970s, but from the mid-1980s until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 prices declined dramatically. The symbolic core and unifying force of the regime, Ayatollah Khomeini, died in 1989. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the belief that the US model of liberal capitalism was triumphant, Iran’s rulers faced an ominous new international order. The regime’s authority over the citizenry was vulnerable.

**Reconstruction**

In response, Rafsanjani and his team of advisers and technocrats crafted new policies to nurture a new social base for the regime, making tactical concessions to certain social classes in order to retain strategic control. Again, there was a battery of policies, but two stood out. First, Rafsanjani’s administration ordered a series of budget cuts and established the requirement that state ministries and organizations be financially self-sufficient. As these austerity measures took hold, state organizations and municipalities were forced to balance their budgets by
launching profit-making enterprises that could compete for contracts in construction, manufacturing, commerce and services. Such organizations as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the military and security apparatus founded by Khomeini to shield the regime from the regular army, and the bonyads, foundations charged to serve the poor and disadvantaged, came to be major players in these industries. From this development grew a host of consulting and subcontracting opportunities for private enterprise, which would bid for contracts from ministries, municipalities and state organizations. This manner of reconfiguring the state through quasi-privatization fused together links between small workshops, suit-wearing consultants and state organizations. Those with the right connections were poised to get bigger pieces of the pie, something that was only exacerbated once sanctions were imposed on Iran, expanding the gray economy. As so often, privatization was a vehicle for distributing resources to some and away from others, leading to real and politicized inequality that was manifest in real estate and commerce. Established merchant houses vied with fly-by-night operators to take advantage of Iran’s patchwork of free-trade zones and to do business in ports in the Arabian Peninsula, most famously Dubai.

A second initiative aimed at generating citizens beholden to the new regime came in education. Basic literacy for men and women improved after the 1980s with the addition of more elementary and secondary schools, particularly outside metropolitan areas, but in the 1990s the regime focused on expanding access to higher education. On the one hand, the state created long-distance learning centers (for example, Payam-e Noor) and technical programs to absorb the growing number of high-school graduates. Alongside this state system developed Azad (Open) University, a private (or “non-profit” and “non-state”) national higher educational network that allowed still more students to earn degrees if they were willing to pay tuition. Although the Azad campuses were established in the 1980s, it was only under Rafsanjani that they achieved rapid growth. Between 1991 and 1999 the number of students enrolled at Azad University nearly tripled, and today it has 385 campuses, including several outside of Iran. These diverse degree programs and institutions were particularly notable for extending opportunities to study and teach to small cities and towns. Select universities, such as Imam Sadeq, specialize in training ideological devotees to sustain the regime as bureaucrats. But, for the most part, the expansion of the universities was undertaken to absorb thousands of unemployed youth, and also to create a skilled work force to be employed in the post-war and quasi-privatized “knowledge economy.” Ironically, it was this very stratum
of educated, confident and critically minded middle-class citizens that was the backbone of the reformist movement of the late 1990s and 2000s. An unintended byproduct of the post-war reformulation of the social contract, this cohort challenged the pact’s contradictions and unevenness.

The Search for a New Order

The challenge persisted, in one form or another, throughout the presidencies of reformist Mohammad Khatami and populist conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The conflict-ridden years of 1997–2013 are often understood solely as pitting comparative civil libertarians against revolutionary puritans or democrats against the unelected clerics at the commanding heights of the Islamic Republic. But the conflicts of those years were a product of the inability and unwillingness of Iran’s decision makers either to allow the new social forces to wield meaningful political power or to fashion another social contract that could encompass an increasingly stratified society. A parallel criticism can be made of the reformist opposition that sought to use the ballot box, print media and rights-oriented NGOs to carve out a space within the regime from which to transform it. Citizens were often considered political agents only at election time. Class inequality was ignored, at best, and at worst trivialized by bland agendas of market reform and promises of economic growth.9 Hence, the apotheosis of the reformist current, the Green Movement protesting the result of the 2009 presidential election, was unable to integrate other social struggles. Amidst the chants of “Where is my vote?” the vociferous shop-floor politics of industrial workers and the persistent grievances of school-teachers remained sideshows.

As these battles played out, Ayatollah Khamenei turned to the politics of crisis to maintain his hold on power, cycling through alternative, and seemingly disposable, factions, elites and personalities. As a result, many observers floundered when they sought to interpret Khamenei’s actions through the lens of ideology or the reformist-hardliner binary opposition. It is noteworthy that the nezam, the euphemism used to describe the Leader and his inner circle, increasingly had as little patience for Ahmadinejad’s brand of right-wing populism as it did for Khatami’s aspiration to liberal Islamism.

Instead, in 2013, after Khamenei and the Guardian Council deemed Hassan Rouhani eligible to run for president, he was able to broker a coalition that could generate 73 percent turnout and win over half the vote. Both the robust participation of the electorate and the pragmatist turn that Rouhani represented were significant after the 2009 electoral crisis and the regime clampdown on political activism. Rouhani was a compromise candidate in domestic political terms but a man who had been Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator from 2003–2005, when there was some movement in the talks and, at least in Iran, some hope of eventual rapprochement. Rouhani may have not been the Leader’s favorite, but was clearly not objectionable to him given the debacle of the previous election, the ensuing polarization and the deep economic recession. Khamenei was not categorically opposed to reopening the nuclear file. Even before Rouhani’s election, the Leader approved the testing of waters when he sent his representatives to Oman to meet with US envoys. These initially clandestine encounters, and the subsequently very public negotiations with the P5+1, are indications that the regime’s leadership is seeking to govern anew. A major motivation for détente with the US is to leverage it into structural changes at home, although not necessarily in a more inclusionary or participatory manner.

As before the nuclear deal, the debate about Iran’s political economy afterward is dominated by tired motifs of international relations: “Will Iran use sanctions relief to send weapons to Hamas, Hizballah or Syria?” “Did sanctions work?” For the Islamic Republic—and for Iranian citizens—there is a lot more at stake. It is too soon to say what the new social contract will look like or what classes, new and old, will be elevated or whittled down as the nuclear deal comes to fruition, sanctions disappear and Iran’s economy opens up to the world. But there are some hints.

One open question concerns the cash payments the state began making to Iranian households under Ahmadinejad in 2010. The payments were intended to cushion the blow to consumers of the phased elimination of state subsidies on the prices of bread, electricity, water and gasoline.10 In one stroke, the idea was, the state could address its own budget deficits, ameliorate absolute poverty and relieve the pressures of sanctions on Iranian families. It is noteworthy that, despite meeting with much criticism from Ahmadinejad’s foes at the time it was introduced, this policy has survived under Rouhani. Some small-town entrepreneurs have used these payments to open up home hair salons or other shops geared toward consumption; others have simply built a second floor atop their homes. Yet the cash payments have been eaten away by inflation and continued removal of fuel subsidies. They are insufficient to meet the basic needs of the poor, let alone ameliorate inequality. In fact, as Djavad Salehi-Isfahani has pointed out, the latest round of subsidy reforms is particularly regressive. Salehi-Isfahani, a mainstream economist who regularly participates in Iran’s policy debates, infers that there is little indication that the Rouhani administration will route the cash transfers to those hardest hit by the price hikes.11 Nor have Rouhani’s budgets directed more government spending toward development and job creation than Ahmadinejad’s. The austerity budgets are linked to low oil prices, which may force the state to raise tax revenue and cut deals with the social groups that have the clout to make their objections heard.

In the absence of any real break with austerity, the lifting of sanctions and reintegration into the international economy is viewed as a panacea. One of the goals of the nuclear deal era is to attract foreign investors into joint ventures inside Iran,
rather than simply increase legal commercial interchange with the outside world. Yet to make Iran lucrative for foreign investors and create jobs for the larger college-educated urban population, tax and labor laws have to be rewritten to reduce the tax rate and weaken the protections now in place for Iranian workers. Such is not only the view of business broadsheets in London and New York, but also of Iranian outlets covering economics, such as Eqtesad News and Tejarat-e Farda. It is also the perspective of the former head of the Tehran chamber of commerce and Rouhani’s chief of staff, Mohammad Nahavandian. The state has a long history of repressing labor and civil society activists, but it is hard not to see the late 2015 round of arrests, and even deaths at police hands, in the new shadow of the planeloads of foreign ministers and businessmen landing at Khomeini Airport to discuss contracts with Iran’s petroleum and automobile sectors or to sell airplanes and green technology. It is not at all clear what sort of investment Iran will ultimately attract, but if the economic opening is to do more than simply flood the market with foreign consumer goods, it will surely require a reworking of Iran’s labor, financial and investment laws that will generate more conflict at the level of society and, as in the past, deny Iran’s rulers the compliant citizenry they crave.

Author’s Note: Thanks to Kevan Harris, Mohammad Maljoo and Nazanin Shahrokhni for their comments and suggestions.

Endnotes
3 Ibid., p. 77.
7 See Shervin Malakzadeh, “Keeping the Kids in School, Keeping the Quiet: Accommodation and Demobilization in Iran’s University System,” in Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Fardhi, eds., Power and Change in Iran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).
8 Shervin Malakzadeh kindly provided this Statistical Center of Iran data in personal correspondence.
10 Kevan Harris, “The Politics of Subsidy Reform in Iran,” Middle East Report 254 (Spring 2010).
The Politics of Recognition
The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories

Fatemeh Sadeghi

The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential election of 2005 came as a shock to many segments of Iranian society, particularly the reformists within the Islamic Republic who believed they had pushed aside such arch-conservatives for good. Ahmadinejad prevailed thanks to the massive participation of the urban poor in the election, along with the decision of the majority of the middle and upper classes to boycott the vote with no thought that their abstention would have such a consequence. Whereas conservatives boasted that Ahmadinejad’s triumph proved the allegiance of “the people” to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the reformists explained their failure in an entirely apolitical way. They said that Ahmadinejad won due to economic populism, which, for them, meant that the Iranian majority is culturally unready for democracy.

The 2005 election seemed to be a battle over memory in which hardliners loyal to revolutionary ideals and shaped by the hardships of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) were arrayed against representatives of collective amnesia, particularly, again, the reformists, who looked ahead to a future of economic liberalization and global integration. Those social strata that had been left behind in the post-war reconstruction saw in Ahmadinejad a man of people, as manifest in his simple rhetoric and plain clothing style. In voting for him they were reappropriating
the memory of the past and seeking to recover the political hegemony of the mostaz‘afin (downtrodden) celebrated by the revolution. In return, Ahmadinejad promised “justice shares” (saham-e edalat)—direct apportionment of oil revenue to citizens—as well as various subsidies and cheap housing. In the course of time, the president’s agenda turned out to be crony capitalism taking advantage of the poor to form a new “regime class.” His administration ended with a stagnant economy, unprecedented corruption and high inflation that hit the most vulnerable the hardest.

But the battle over memory was far from over. It raged again in the presidential election of 2009, in which Ahmadinejad’s main opponent, former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, appealed to millions with an inclusive discourse of social justice that had room for the demands of the urban poor, war veterans, youth, women and even dissidents oppressed since the outset of the revolution. Although conservatives pilfered votes to block Mousavi’s election, his campaign showed that social inclusion was not a mere demagogic slogan, as critics of Ahmadinejad occasionally posited.

Social exclusion—and denial that exclusion exists—are familiar across the world. But the unexpected rise of Ahmadinejad made the phenomenon particularly fascinating in Iran. The reformists, and some Iranian intellectuals as well, sought to explain it by reducing politics to “culture,” including lifestyle, ethics, religious belief and personal identity. The 2009 election and the subsequent Green Movement protesting the official result ought to falsify such arguments. Yet, ironically, even these events have been explained as an anti-politics of identity among the Iranian middle class and a reaction of
“secular” parts of society against the religious. Such explanations tend to disparage the opinions of the poor.

To investigate such presumptions, which were embryonic at the time, in 2007 some friends and I gathered life stories and conducted group interviews in a poor district called al-Taymour in the northeastern suburbs of Mashhad, the religious capital of Iran and the second-largest city in the country. We were curious about any changes in the attitudes of the residents, particularly women, two years into Ahmadinejad’s first term. Most of the women we interviewed are religious, but their religiosity seems not to be the cause but rather the effect of sociopolitical and economic conditions. It also has a ritualistic aspect, indicating that it is part of a desperate politics of recognition.

Inclusive Exclusion

Al-Taymour is like a camp ringed with invisible fences. The geographic distance between this district and the central shrine of Imam Reza is not that great, but in every other way al-Taymour and Mashhad are far apart. No one outside officialdom calls the area by its formal name, Panj Tan-e Al-e Aba, or Five Close Relatives of the Prophet.

Its informal designation, al-Taymour, evokes Tamerlane (Taymour-e Lang in Persian), the fourteenth-century Uzbek conqueror who founded a dynasty in Khorasan and central Asia. This name indicates that the neighborhood was taken by force.

Indeed, the area was seized, not by foreign invaders but by Iranian rural migrants, who settled the district in the manner described by Asef Bayat as “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” The migrants took all the land on which their homes are built, along with the water and electricity supply, illegally. For years, the state refused to recognize the neighborhood as part of the city, so as to deny it services, but finally relented after numerous challenges from and some violent encounters with the inhabitants. In the Islamic Republic, naming seals the process of municipal recognition—hence the lofty reference to the Prophet’s family. Al-Taymour is officially included in Mashhad, but remains excluded in many ways.

Al-Taymour is classified by the state as baft-e farsudeh (old texture), an idiom that gradually replaced the word “slum” in bureaucratic language after the revolution. Half-ruined dwellings line both sides of the sole paved street as well as the dirt alleys named after martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. The government has offered loans at 9 percent interest for residents to spruce up their homes on the outside. The people can hardly afford the terms. In any case, al-Taymour has not aged in appearance; it has always looked the same.

In 2007, al-Taymour was inaccessible by public transportation. To get there one had to walk a considerable distance from the bus station on the main highway. A few residents have motorbikes or old cars that they use to carry passengers. There is now a rapid-transit bus line into the Mashhad city center, but its lengthy route and expensive tickets have only made it harder for residents to get around.

Despite the delay in recognition by the state, al-Taymour has always been under careful observation, because of its high unemployment and poverty rates, and because it is thought to be a center of drug trafficking, addiction and prostitution. Many undocumented Afghan migrants are among the residents as well. State agencies conduct regular surveys, censuses, mappings and vaccination campaigns. The birth rate, average income and many other social indices are carefully documented. Al-Taymour is highly visible, and the residents seem accustomed to it. Some of the people we met assumed that we were coming from yet another state organization, probably television, to ask them about their everyday problems. They often prefaced their answers with “in the name of God,” the phrase used in formal conversations in the Islamic Republic.

Inclusive exclusion means that all the official investigations look at each of the neighborhood’s problems in isolation. Each component of the grid of poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and crime, whether petty or organized, is studied separately in the laboratory of policymaking. In this way, the neighborhood’s demand for equality and recognition is kept so fragmented as to be inaudible to the state.

Living the Extraordinary

In a place like al-Taymour, what are elsewhere the activities of ordinary life—reading, travel, study, entertainment, making love, even prayer—are extraordinary indulgences that only a select few can afford.

The living conditions are similar to those of refugees. The large families of the neighborhood live in one-room hovels made of cheap leftover brick. There is a small half-kitchen in the corner. Except for a television set and a faded carpet covering the floor, the room is otherwise almost empty. Some homes have a yard with a bathroom in one corner and a heap of discarded building materials in another.

Most of the men of al-Taymour are temporary workers (kargar-e sar-e gozar)—porters, carpenters, painters, doormen or drivers. Hardly anyone has a steady job, often due to disability, criminal background, drug addiction or mental breakdown. Thus, the women of al-Taymour tend both to manage the household and to contribute to its finances by working as housekeepers, nurses and seamstresses or by shelling nuts, cleaning vegetables or simply receiving alms from charities or passersby. Working women are frequently exposed to sexual harassment on the job or on the street. They rarely report these incidents, however, for fear of losing jobs or inflaming the fury of male relatives or simply out of shame. In part for this reason, and also to save transportation costs, women prefer those jobs that can be done at home. Their access to the job market is very circumscribed.

Al-Taymour has no park or place of public entertainment. The only “amenity” is a half-constructed mosque erected at the inhabitants’ expense. The mosque looks very poor and offers no service except a Game Net set inside a dusty building and a...
gathering place for men and women to participate in occasional prayer sessions and funerals. It has no library. It does not offer the computer classes or other activities that are organized by mosques in richer areas. At mosques elsewhere, the Basij, a mass revolutionary organization, leads inexpensive pilgrimages to other shrine cities like Karbala’ in Iraq. In al-Taymour the mosque has no Basij section.

With no other means of entertainment, young boys hang out on alley corners or play football on a bare field. Young girls are deprived of these activities as well. They either stay at home, where they watch television or listen to music all day, or they go to school. But the rising cost of living and the expense of education induce many young boys and girls to drop out of school or university in search of work or marriage. Despite the infamy of the neighborhood, Islamic piety is the rule. The boys understand it is forbidden to smoke or to chase girls and the girls do not wear the sleek manteaux common in Tehran and other cities, at least not close to home.

Not everyone, however, appears to share the same views about displays of piety. During our visit, Ameneh, an illiterate woman whose husband has gone mad, asked about the manteaux, “What else will these poor kids do, if they are not allowed to even do this?” A heated discussion ensued. Unlike their mothers, many young girls wanted to wear the fashionable manteaux and, in fact, were doing so in secret. Older women rejoined that even not wearing the black chador is bi-hejabi (immodesty).

Tensions between the generations filled the air, though they were repressed by the absolute economic dependence of the youngsters on their parents and the general destitution that leaves little room for lifestyle choices or the expression of personal taste. Nevertheless, many girls were obviously against early marriage and large families. Zahra, a university student in her twenties, who until then had remained silent, contended, “I don’t want to have children at all.” Sensing the gazes of the other women, she corrected herself: “Maybe just one, only for the sake of the elders. That’s all. I wish to continue my studies to be somebody for myself. I don’t like to drag my hand before others (dastamo pish-e digaran deraz konam, i.e., take money from them), even before my own husband.”

The youth of al-Taymour seem to have experienced a quiet but decisive dissociation from the attitudes and ideas of their parents. Whereas the older generation still seems loyal to the egalitarian ideals of the revolution and is searching for that lost idyll, the young seem disillusioned. The aspirations of younger generations in al-Taymour are not substantially different from those of their counterparts in richer neighborhoods of Mashhad or Tehran. They are also looking for personal liberties and material comforts. Yet what is achievable for the middle class is pushed into the realm of imagination in al-Taymour. Many young men here favor action and adventure movies, whereas girls mostly prefer romantic television serials or Bollywood films. Like Zahra, girls might imagine a degree of socio-economic independence, but it is difficult to achieve. Many girls, despite having beautiful dreams, end up getting married early, often compulsorily, in order to decrease the economic burden on the parents.

Imagination, too, is a social construction. In al-Taymour, imagination is an extraordinary zone, a different kind of inclusive exclusion, particularly for the youth who might use it to escape grim everyday reality but find that reality always intrudes. The wall separating the dispossessed from the rest of the society is a challenge that all generations in al-Taymour face. Whether the young will be able to confront this condition in ways extending beyond “quiet encroachment” is yet to be seen.

Searching for Recognition

Khadijeh, a middle-aged woman who looks much older, has long been staying in al-Taymour. Her husband is a construction worker who fell off a scaffold and has been disabled and unemployed ever since. In this neighborhood, she gave birth to her nine children, the majority of whom still live with their parents in a small house thrown up overnight. Frustrated by her frequent pregnancies, she was provided by the government with a cheap tubal ligation, which she welcomed enthusiastically. I asked her about her husband’s attitude toward the procedure. “Our master (aghamun) said nothing. Whatever I say he accepts,” she responded,
while adding smilingly that she even chose the names of her children herself.

Notwithstanding her illiteracy, Khadijeh has a vivid mental picture of the socio-economic shifts that have taken place in post-revolutionary Iran. In a heavy Khorasani accent, she summed it up: “At the beginning [of the revolution], we were told to have more children. Islam needed more soldiers. So we did. Yet everything got expensive afterward, and we were left alone without knowing how to feed our children with the high prices. My husband was a worker; he was disabled and lost his job. Children are unemployed, too…. God knows that we are respectable people (aberudar). We did exactly what we were told [by the authorities]; we have given martyrs (shahid dadim), and yet nobody wants us any more. We are left out.”

The “barefoot” who once were supposed to be the standard bearers of the revolution, and its main beneficiaries, have gradually become its enemies in the eyes of various factions of the post-revolutionary state, whether reformists or hardliners. Most of the residents of al-Taymour turned out to vote for Ahmadinejad in 2005. But Ahmadinejad turned out to be a symptom rather than the cure. In 2007, many people in the neighborhood were disappointed, and even felt betrayed. “No matter who we vote for, everything just gets worse—more expensive,” Khadijeh said dejectedly. Others in the room vowed, “We will never vote again.”

Elections are increasingly unrepresentative in today’s Iran. It is not surprising that electoral politics would prove ineffective at transforming the life conditions of the underprivileged, as in al-Taymour, but it is equally unthinkable that the majority of the inhabitants would stop voting. Still, particularly for the older generations, the enduring strategy seems to be the politics of recognition. Strict discipline with regard to ritualistic piety like wearing chador and collecting money for the mosque is the main way to get recognition from the wider society and the government that pretends to track Islamic norms. The question is whether the politics of recognition can ameliorate crippling dispossession, particularly when piety and simplicity has been supplanted in reality by new standards of wealth and power, and the state is increasingly withdrawing from its social responsibilities toward the citizenry.

Is Revolution Useless?

Having listened to the complaints of the people of al-Taymour, I got the feeling that what they wanted to convey above all is that the world does not look at them as it used to. The world, in fact, has turned upside down, and they hardly recognize it. The question underlying all conversations, then, was: “How can we stand this world back on its feet?” In al-Taymour this question is inevitable but also unanswerable.

It is the same question that is stubbornly ignored across Iran today. The more inequality expands, the more it becomes unspeakable and unquestionable. What is at work is inclusive exclusion, wrapped in technocratic jargon that makes power relations harder and harder to see. The anti-politics of identity does it best. Its major role is to normalize the upside-down world, justify stricter policing as a remedy for extreme inequality, discredit legitimate demands and attribute contentious movements to a “chaotic” revolutionary spirit that must be subdued if Iran is to remain stable. All the major political factions—the reformists, the conservatives and the pragmatists in between—as well as the better-off social strata agree on that set of prescriptions.

The well-known reformist political scientist Saeed Hajjarian, for instance, says that “normalization” of Iranian politics and society is the program of the current president, Hassan Rouhani. If so, then the last decade has made clear that systematic social exclusion remains a powerful concern without which “normalization” is impossible. One wonders if Iran is a more ideological society today than it was 30 years ago.

The Iranian revolution seems as exhausted as its barefoot champions. Social exclusion, however, remains a main challenge before contemporary Iran, one that transcends the debates over what is revolutionary or counter-revolutionary and over the meaning of the elusive past.

Endnote

1 The research was conducted with the support of Homa Hoodfar at Concordia University, as well as the crucial assistance of Marjaneh Sekhavati, Molouk Aziz Zadeh and Sonia Ghaffari. Thanks also to Norma Moruzzi and Nazanin Shahrokni for their comments on a draft of this article. I could not have carried out this project, however, without the generosity of the many women who shared their life stories and miseries with us.
Whither Iranian Petrochemical Labor?

Mohammad Maljoo

On November 4, 2012, there were two snapshots of a deeply unequal struggle between labor and capital in Iran—a struggle that had begun two years earlier with a strike of temporary workers at the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex. In Mahshahr, at the head of the Persian Gulf, Faraveresh, one of the five public-sector companies at the Complex, reached an agreement with the strikers, committing to remove the private middleman who had hired the workers and to sign direct contracts with them as soon as possible. In Tehran, however, Parliament voted for the activity of the third-party contractors to be continued, arousing the chairman of the board of a major private employers’ association to offer other firms his sincere congratulations: “We can achieve still more if we stand together, shoulder to shoulder.”

The main object of the struggle was “the triangular employment relationship”—whereby an employee works under the direction of a public-sector employer but is actually employed by a private third party called a human resources contract firm. Mohammad Maljoo is a Tehran-based independent researcher.

The public-sector employer sets the working conditions but the workers receive their remuneration from the third party. The portion of the public-sector budget intended for salaries and wages is delivered to the private contractor, which divides up the amount among the workers. If employees want to bring legal action against the public employer for whatever reason, they have to do so through the private firm. The triangular employment relationship spread gradually in Iran from the early 1990s onward, and the temporary workers of the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex were the pioneers of struggle against it.

The Mahshahr Strikes at a Glance

The Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex with its five subsidiary companies—Besparan, Ab-e Nirou, Kharazmi, Kimia and Faravaresh—is located on a plot of land of almost 270 hectares in the southwestern province of Khuzestan. The first strikes there began in early 2010, when workers at an affiliated contract
company, Iranframeco, demanded six months of unpaid wages. This work stoppage ended in the removal of the managing director of the company. The next wave started in April, extending to almost all of the petrochemical companies in the region. The main demand of the strikers was the removal of the private human resources contract firms so that workers might sign direct contracts with the public-sector employers instead. This strike lasted almost two weeks before the workers gave the public-sector managers three months to meet the strikers’ main demand. When the grace period was over, another wave of strikes started at Kharazmi Company in June, coming to an end after 11 days without spreading much further. The temporary workers of the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex set off the next round on September 25, 2011, holding out until October 8, and making the same demand that had been raised in the previous strike.

On January 21, 2012, the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ordered the entire public sector, including the subsidiary companies of the Oil Ministry, to abrogate the contracts between private human resources firms and workers within 15 days. But Parliament held up the measure. On June 20, Ali Larijani, the speaker of Parliament, sent a formal letter to the president telling him he had one week to address the objections made by parliamentary commissions. Otherwise, the directive would be annulled.

The disagreement between Parliament and the administration was sharp. But Parliament was not alone in paralyzing the attempt to remove the private contract firms. The Oil Ministry and the managers of the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex also put a spoke in the administration’s wheel. It was as if many of the politicians of the Islamic Republic, big business and public-sector employers had entered into a holy alliance to exorcise the demon of the Mahshahr petrochemical workers.

Who were the main combatants in this battle?

Temporary Labor vs. Private Contractors

There are several estimates of the numbers employed at the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex during the labor unrest. According to the official website of the Complex, the number of employees was about 3,385. It seems an imprecise estimate, as the text immediately adds that “a part of activities, including repairs, technical services of packing and administering, is undertaken by subcontracting.” A better estimate comes from the Coordinating Committee to Help Form Workers’ Organization: In 2011 there were 6,900 workers employed in the Complex, of whom 4,300 were temporarily employed by contract firms. Thus, it could have been that 66 percent of the total labor force would demand the removal of these firms.

The workers were nevertheless split between those temporarily employed by the contract firms and those permanently employed by different subsidiaries at the Complex. The former were unable to persuade the latter to join its strikes. On the other hand, the split was not deep enough to arouse the permanent workers to break the strikes.

But the temporary laborers themselves were not so united, either. In the two-week strike in the fall of 2011, according to the Coordinating Committee, only 300 to 400 of the 4,300 temporary workers, that is, 8 percent of the total, participated. Each day some of the temporary workers gathered around the main building of the Complex, marching and shouting slogans, while others went to work as usual. The strikers were all men; none of the 300 women employed in the Complex joined them.

On the other side were the highly organized and well-connected contract firms. The contract firms like those at Mahshahr were born in the first half of the 1990s, achieving mushroom-like growth throughout the reform era of 1997–2005. Selling themselves as experts in collective bargaining, they function as mediators between workers and employers, public, semi-public or private. Many of the owners have close ties with the top echelons of the Ministries of Labor and Oil, as well as with other power centers within the establishment. But the contractors seldom have face-to-face interactions with the workers they hire, except when the workers try to bring legal action against the employers. The contract firms band together in business associations, for instance the Center of the Guild Societies of Employers of Service, Backing, Technical and Engineering Firms, a nationwide apparatus. The Center also has strong ties with the authorities. According to the chair of the board of directors, “The Center enjoys a high position. Those organs of the state that work with us, such as the Social Security Organization, the Ministry of Labor, its provincial offices, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, the National Tax Administration, the Expediency Discernment Council of the System and the Social Commission of the Parliament, have good relations with us…. Our provincial branches can easily contact and negotiate with all these organs.”

Ahmadinejad vs. Parliament

The lobbying capacity of the private contract firms, however formidable, had little impact on the orientation of the Ahmadinejad administration. The January 2012 decree forbade any further contracting to such firms and ordained that the Vice Presidency of Human Resources should henceforth authorize all recruitment of workers in the public sector.

According to the administration, workers were suffering heavy losses by signing contracts with the private firms and having no direct legal relation to their public-sector employers. According to the juridical deputy of the Vice Presidency of Human Resources, “Having studied the temporary workers recruited by the private contract firm, we realized that the expenses of the public sector had increased rather than decreased, on the one hand, and that payments received by temporary workers had decreased, on the other. For example, if workers in a public department had each been allocated a certain amount per month in the state budget, each would receive 50 to 60 percent of the allotted amount. The rest of the money would be channeled into the pockets of private contract
firms…. The business of these firms was to just provide a list of workers every month, receiving the allocated funds from the related public department, paying a part of that to the workers, and securing the rest of the funds for themselves…. Today these firms, which are making huge profits, resist the order of the administration, but the administration is trying to redress this injustice to the temporary work force recruited by the firms.”

The administration’s overall track record with labor was hardly in harmony with its defense of the temporary workers at the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex. It eliminated state subsidies on gasoline and gave Iranian families cash handouts instead, but the payments did not keep pace with inflation. The administration prohibited an increase in the minimum wage. In 2006, it proposed amendments of the 1990 labor law that would give carte blanche to employers seeking to get rid of employees and amendments to the Social Security Law that would raise the retirement age and workers’ contribution to insurance programs. Its Master-Apprentice Act aimed to make youth labor much cheaper. How, then, can one explain the administration’s attempt to eliminate the private contract firms?

Two hypotheses may shed some light. First, most owners of the private contract firms were members of the reformist camp or the military. Ahmadinejad’s hardline administration was hostile to the former, constantly trying to weaken its economic power. Power struggles within the regime also gradually turned Ahmadinejad against the military and the Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, beginning in early 2011. By removing the private contract firms, the administration could kill two birds with one stone. Second, the removal of go-betweens like the private contract firms would allow the administration to insert its own loyalists at different levels of the public sector, including the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex.

It was not just squabbling among conservative factions that led to Parliament’s stubborn opposition to the January 2012 order removing the private contract firms. Parliament had the complete support of Iranian business interests, public and private.

After Larijani’s letter in June rejecting the order, the pro-Ahmadinejad forces in Parliament sprang into action. On September 24, the Social Commission of the Parliament introduced a draft bill, inspired by the administration, reorganizing the activity of the private contract firms rather than removing them entirely. The Vice Presidency of Human Resources, the bill said, should authorize any future contracts with the private human resources firms in the public sector.

But another parliamentary body, the Planning and Budgeting Commission, fought against the draft bill, sending the speaker a report to the effect that “the draft is inconsistent with the Fifth Five-Year Plan approved by the administration,
as well as with Article 75 of the Constitution ordaining that all bills and proposals that entail the reduction of public income or the increase of public expenditure may be introduced in the Assembly only if means for compensating for the decrease in income or for meeting the new expenditure are also specified."

The Islamic Parliament Research Center, while approving the Social Commission’s stands in principle, opposed the draft bill as well, declaring that its implementation would lead to a decrease in productivity as well as to an unintentional increase in the size of the public sector. The various objections made by this Center, the Planning and Budgeting Commission and the speaker himself were consistent with the strongly advice of the owners of the firms themselves: “Lay aside this issue from the agenda of Parliament.” By rejecting the Social Commission’s draft bill and voting for the contract firms’ mandate to be renewed on November 4, 2012, the overwhelming majority of Parliament could win over these influential businessmen.

**The Managers**

In the struggle between the temporary workers and the private contract firms and the parallel disagreement between the administration and Parliament, the managers of the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex were not neutral at all. In the former, they supported the private firms, and in the latter, albeit implicitly, Parliament.

The managers were subordinate to the administration on the organizational chart of the Islamic Republic, but in practice they were not submissive. Differences of interest had appeared from the beginning of the Ahmadinejad presidency. In his 2005 electoral campaign, Ahmadinejad said, “I want to bring Iran’s oil lucre to the dining-room tables of the people” and “I will overthrow the mafia embedded in the Oil Ministry.” “From these statements,” one observer wrote, “it follows that Ahmadinejad had little confidence in the structure of the Oil Ministry…. He had so little confidence that many observers were contemplating a wave of replacements at all levels of the Oil Ministry’s management.”

Ahmadinejad’s first nominee for oil minister in 2005, Ali Saeedlou, was not confirmed by Parliament. The second candidate, Sadeq Mahsouli, was forced to withdraw his nomination. The third, Mohsen Tasallotli, was also not confirmed. All of these nominees came from outside the Oil Ministry’s ranks, and were rejected through the machinations of oil industry managers, who finally imposed Kazem Vaziri Hamaneh, a top manager coming from the Ministry, upon Ahmadinejad. Hamaneh’s tenure lasted until August 2007 when Ahmadinejad removed him. The managers were again successful in forcing another replacement candidate from the Ministry, Gholam-Hossein Nozari, upon the president. Up to the end of Nozari’s tenure in 2009, Ahmadinejad was unable to exert control over the oil sector. It was only afterward that he could. But this period witnessed the president’s sharp split with the Leader, who could dominate the new minister, a man from the Revolutionary Guards. Ahmadinejad again lost his sway over the Oil Ministry. The managers did their best to obstruct his wishes.

Their opposition is easily understood apart from resentment of Ahmadinejad’s populist campaign rhetoric. First, they were very friendly with the private contract firms. Second, they could shrink their responsibility toward the workers by putting the private contractors in the position of go-between. As the Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers put it, “The managers of the Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex and the mafia of the private contract firms are trying to retard the implementation of the administration’s decree…. They think that if the implementation is slow, the administration’s tenure will expire, and everything will return to normal.”

**Economists and the Media**

Two major components of the economic agenda proposed by neoliberal economists after the Iran-Iraq war were government downsizing and preparation for capital accumulation with the private sector as pioneer. The spread of the triangular employment relationship was a step toward the labor market flexibility that would hasten progress toward these goals.

Nevertheless, the report of the Islamic Parliament Research Center showed that the triangular employment relationship did not help to achieve those goals and also created more problems. First, the size of public-sector work force increased, because no one was supervising the recruiting of the private contract firms. Second, corruption in the public sector burgeoned, because of the relationship between the public-sector employers and the private contract firms. Third, the discrimination between the temporary workers employed by the private firms and permanent employees gave rise to mounting discontent among the former. Fourth, disparities in pay for the same work led to still more grievances. And fifth, there was a sharp decline of job security among the temporary workers employed by the private firms.

What about the Green Movement, the most visible opposition to the Iranian status quo at the time of the Mahshahr strikes? Where did its media outlets stand? Green Movement media occasionally displayed a disposition toward a coalition of the middle and working classes against the establishment. But they were not homogeneous in attitudes toward the working class—with right-wing and liberal left tendencies being the two most prominent.

The website Neday-e Sabz-e Azadi (Green Voice of Freedom) was an example of the right-wing current. Its approach is clear in one of its mere three news items about the strikes: “The protests of the Mahshahr petrochemical workers have their origins in both mismanagement of the private contract firms and the shortage of liquidity and prosperity in the industry, leading to unemployment and unpaid wages.”

All of the right-wing currents, including those embedded in the Green Movement, traced the workers’ complaints back to poor governance and the insufficient rate of economic growth. Hence their solution was to pave the way for market-oriented policies. Ahmadinejad’s administration was the only party to blame.
Kalameh (Word), the official website of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who was shouldered aside by Ahmadinejad in the 2009 election, was the most important example of the liberal left current in the Green Movement, with substantial coverage of labor and the Mahshahr strikers in particular. According to an important editoral, “The middle class has paid little attention to economic injustices done to labor, though doing its best to struggle against political tyranny. Its inattention to economic injustices is one of the causes preventing the working class from forming a coalition with the middle class in struggling against lawlessness.”

Nevertheless, though the liberal media of the Green Movement approved of cross-class coalitions, its language was deeply colored by the right wing of the movement. The workers’ problems had their roots in the Ahmadinejad era, and not before. It was only the poor governance of Ahmadinejad, rather than structural conditions created in the reform era, that was the culprit. The solution to workers’ problems is to be found in political struggle over the mode of governance rather than economic, social and political structures.

Against this backdrop, the Green Movement media’s discourse on the Mahshahr strikes had four major elements: sympathy for the strikers; antipathy for Parliament and the petrochemical managers who were open allies of the private contract firms; apparent hostility toward the administration, which was the most influential opponent of the private contractors; and absolute silence on the private contract firms themselves, the main subject of the dispute.

**Whither Mahshahr Labor?**

In their struggle against the private contract firms, the Mahshahr petrochemical workers tried to exploit two high-level political fissures as means of pressure. One occurred within the ruling elite with the rise of the Green Movement in 2009; the other, between Ahmadinejad and the Leader, reached its climax in April 2011 when the president engaged in an 11-day walkout from cabinet meetings and all other official functions.

Neither attempt was effective. The Green Movement was too loyal to business to change its mental calculus in favor of labor. The administration was too weak within the establishment to further the workers’ interests even for its own factional purposes.

With the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani, both splits were papered over. If the Green Movement had channeled popular energies into the streets for a while, the 2013 presidential election redirected them toward the ballot box, again posing a constitutionally mandated act as the main form of political participation. But Rouhani is very much part of the Islamic Republic establishment. Now, the Green Movement is regarded not so much as a split within the ruling political class as a threat for the whole political regime. Also, as far as the impact of economic policy upon the popular classes is concerned, there is no basic disagreement between Rouhani’s administration and its hardline opponents, with market-oriented strategy as the main agenda, notwithstanding the growing gap with regard to both foreign and domestic policy.

Meanwhile, there was another structural change. The Mahshahr Petrochemical Complex was transferred to the private sector in three stages. Forty percent of its shares were allocated to provincial investment companies according to the cabinet authorization dated July 2009. In the first stage, 5 percent of its shares were transferred to the Tehran Stock Exchange in January 2013 for price discovery. In the second stage, 17 percent of its shares were transferred by auction to the National Iranian Oil Company’s (NIOC) Pension, Savings and Welfare Fund in May 2013. At that point, Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries (the new name of the Complex) was separated from the public sector as the country’s largest petrochemical holding entered the private sector. In the third stage, another 17 percent block of the company’s shares was released in March 2014. The block was jointly purchased by Tapico and NIOC’s pension fund in a 50-50 partnership. At present, according to the Complex website, the shareholders are as follows: 40 percent “justice shares”; 5 percent general public (through the Tehran Stock Exchange); 25.5 percent NIOC Pension, Savings and Welfare Fund; 8.5 percent Tamin Petroleum and Petrochemical Investment Company; and 21 percent National Petroleum Company. Over half of these shares are under private-sector management.

Now, with no political split over market-oriented policies, as well as the presence of a coherent private petrochemical industry, the Mahshahr workers have set out to renew their struggle. But, this time, not most of, but all of the other combatants in the battle have entered a holy alliance against them. Between Rouhani’s pro-bourgeois administration, on the one hand, and hardliners headed by the Leader, on the other, the Mahshahr petrochemical workers as part of an unmade working class must steer their own course.

**Endnotes**

4. Coordinating Committee to Help Form Workers’ Organization, op. cit.
5. Ibid.
6. Payam-e Karafarinan 32 (October-November 2010), p. 32. [Persian]
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Class Reshuffling Among Afghan Refugees in Iran

Zuzanna Olszewska

When I was interviewing Afghan refugee writers and intellectuals in Iran in the mid-2000s, I soon realized that there was a gulf between their occupations and their aspirations.¹ The young poets who were the subjects of my research in the northeastern city of Mashhad often earned a living as manual laborers, construction or factory workers, or small-time street vendors. Some had woven rugs or made handicrafts as children, or engaged in other piecework in small workshops. They came together to read their poetry and short stories to each other on Fridays, their one precious day off. Most of them—both men and women—had benefited from at least a secondary education in Iranian state schools, and most hoped to continue on to university. Over time, many were able to derive more of their income from knowledge or creative work: as teachers in informal refugee-run schools, or as editors, graphic designers or journalists. Yet in the low-income quarters of Mashhad known as the pa’in-e shahr or downtown where they lived, they continued to rub shoulders with other

refugees working in dangerous, back-breaking jobs. The younger siblings of the family I knew best had the leisure time to excel in poetry, oil painting, music, theater and scholarship, while the two oldest brothers worked in skilled construction jobs to support the rest. Their nearest neighbors, whom they sometimes invited on family outings, were a widow and her four children, all of whom worked together at a brick kiln for a few dollars a day.

Such contrasts and incongruities were also commonplace among the Iranians I met: the taxi drivers with three university degrees but no job prospects; the impoverished family that still remembered distant aristocratic origins; or the many ambitious, secular professionals who had migrated to Tehran from the provinces and whose parents were deeply pious small farmers or shopkeepers.

Iranian society seemed highly stratified, and status was correlated both to wealth and employment status on the one hand, and to a number of spatial, cultural and lifestyle attributes on the other.

Iran has undergone a wholesale “class reshuffling” in the almost four decades since the 1979 revolution.² Indeed, this

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“reshuffling” was the continuation of a reconfiguration of social structure in Iran that has been ongoing for at least the past century. One of the few studies to examine changes in class structure (mostly through the Marxist lens of relations of production) after 1979 found a constantly evolving situation, involving upward mobility for some in some periods with downward mobility for others, and dramatic reversals of fortune. The effects of post-revolutionary policies include an enormous increase in the number of people receiving higher education, coupled with the inability of many university graduates to find good jobs due to the slow growth of the private sector. This gap has led to the emergence of a large group of young, educated, urban and dissatisfied would-be middle-class people; meanwhile, a “regime class” ideologically aligned with the state and dependent on government rents has also developed. The consequences of these contradictory movements seem still to be playing out, both in everyday life and on the national stage, and they are as much cultural as they are economic.

A closer look at educated Afghan refugees in Iran, a group of marginal non-citizens, offers a unique perspective on the opportunities and exclusions the Islamic Republic has created. At the same time, what I interpreted as the beginnings of a process of class differentiation within the Afghan community enabled me to see how the cultivation of certain cultural dispositions can be used as a marker of higher status even when economic capital remains scarce.

Up to 3 million Afghans arrived in Iran in the 1980s. After more than three decades, they have no path to naturalization, and close to 1 million who are documented remain de facto “persons of interest” to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Iran.

Afghan refugees in Iran suffer from two types of exclusion: they are both legally denied citizenship and many other rights, and socially denigrated. They have had a very mixed experience in Iran. When they arrived, revolutionary ideology held great promise for many, particularly Hazaras and other Shi’as who had suffered discrimination in Afghanistan. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the welfare benefits and educational opportunities available to Afghans illustrated the populist revolutionary idealism of the state, and the refugees were welcomed as fellow Muslims in need. Afghan men also filled the labor market gap left by the millions of Iranians who fought in the war with Iraq. As a result of their access to Iranian public services, including free schooling or literacy programs and public health services, hundreds of thousands of Afghan children and adults became newly literate or even well educated. They absorbed “modern” ideas about hygiene, health and reproduction; began to dress, live and eat Iranian-style; and transformed their views and practices of religion, civic participation and the public role of women. Thousands of Shi’i Afghan men completed religious studies in the seminaries of Qom and Mashhad. Women in particular have benefited from a more liberal attitude to their rights than in Afghanistan and tend to be more reluctant to repatriate than men.

From the mid-1990s onward, however, Afghans continued to be needed as a labor force, but their various entitlements began to be scaled back and their precarious legal position helped to ensure that their labor remained cheap and disposable. It was a clear example of “opportunity hoarding” and social closure along citizenship lines, but also a way, whether intentional or not, to guarantee the extraction of maximum profit from Afghans’ labor. Clerics aside, Afghans have been barred from working in all but a handful of menial occupations (notably construction, agriculture and brick-making), leading to pervasive poverty. They have legal restrictions on their mobility and endure onerous and costly bureaucratic requirements to ensure their continued legal residence in Iran. Those who fail to do so or who have never been documented suffer periodic roundups and deportations that have left many in a permanent state of insecurity.

There is a striking level of intellectual and cultural activity and determination to improve one’s lot in Afghan neighborhoods, notably in the more visible communities of Mashhad. Most Afghans migrated to Iran to seek a better life, and they are determined to seize the available opportunities. One way to do so is through adopting a strategy of quiet assent to the indignities of their position, working hard in the available occupations and gradually accumulating economic capital in order to fund the spiraling costs of modern consumerism and social reproduction. The second is to acquire social and cultural capital through education and cultural activism, and here the opening up of literacy programs and state education to Afghans proved truly revolutionary. In Mashhad, it seemed that in every lane there was a tiny backyard computer or English school. There were film clubs, women’s groups, arts schools, private libraries and, most importantly, unofficial refugee-run primary and secondary schools catering to undocumented Afghan children who could not attend state schools—or documented ones who could not afford school fees. The overall sense I got in these communities was of an overwhelming aspiration to upward mobility, and great frustration when such striving was thwarted by restrictions tied to citizenship requirements.

The upward push continues nonetheless, and there are several reasons for it. One is that in what is still largely a newly literate population, education confers a rapid jump in prestige and symbolic capital, even if skilled manual workers often earn more than irregularly employed knowledge workers. But it can have economic rewards, too: refugee poets, writers and artists can win cash prizes at state-wide cultural festivals, while those with good English or computer skills

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On Failing to “Get It Together”
Syria’s Opposition Between Idealism and Realism

Ali Nehmé Hamdan

Rain falls thick and heavy outside the window. Shadi sits in the near dark drinking sage tea, fighting the November chill, but more so the pessimistic vantage onto Syria from his refuge in neighboring Jordan. A vocal civil society activist in Homs during the early stages of the Syrian revolution, Shadi fled to Lebanon when it became clear that his pseudonym would no longer protect him from the informants of the regime of Bashar al-Asad. Only there, he feared that Asad’s Lebanese allies Hizballah might pick up where the regime had left off, and so he departed for Jordan’s quiet capital, Amman. A journalist now, he maintains regular contact with the Syrian opposition—inside and outside—but the view is not encouraging. It should be no surprise, Shadi says, for the course of the war has “undone an entire society.”

A few months earlier, Syria’s opposition had experienced a brief upswing of optimism, which seemed justified in the wake of numerous battlefield successes. In the south, the Free Syrian Army was at last consolidating alliances to form the larger Southern Front army, making considerable advances in Dar’a governorate. In the north, extremist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda’s Syrian franchise) managed to capture key cities in the Idlib governorate and push further into the Ghab plains. Coastal regions came under increased opposition attack, while only islands of control remained for the regime in the east. At Kobane, Kurdish forces repelled another enemy of the opposition, the fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, who lost their aura of invincibility. To outside observers, the conflict seemed to be turning in the opposition’s favor.

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But the summer of 2015 took a turn for the worse. First, in late July, a suicide bombing in Suruç, Turkey disrupted that country’s aloof pragmatism, drawing it into military confrontation—not with ISIS, as expected, but with Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria. Then it emerged that the Southern Front may have been reselling weapons purchased with funds supplied by the United States to the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, a small militia in southern Syria with suspected ties to ISIS. The Front is now effectively disbanded. Add news of the harsh and divisive tactics of factions like Jaysh al-Islam, and ISIS’ advance to within 12 miles of the Damascus-Aleppo highway, and the situation began to look bleak.

Meanwhile, overt Russian intervention in late September strengthened Assad’s hand, on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. Discussions in Vienna confirmed that Assad’s ally Iran will be party to plans for Syria’s future, and that Asad would probably last “no more than another two months,” while Asad stated with equal assurance that the opposition was nothing more than gangs of takfiris, as militants who claim the right to excommunicate other Muslims are known. Once violence grew widespread, the regime army’s spotty performance and heavy-handedness suggested that a consolidated opposition movement could prevail in battle and bring to fruition the goals of the revolution. Today the revolution seems almost buried by its failings, foremost among them that such a movement has not consolidated, even after five years of war crimes by the Asad regime. As the opposition struggles to find a voice at Geneva III, it is worth asking why not.

Secret Chambers and Strange Bedfellows

Much of the military progress the opposition made in 2015 was owed to a new form of rebel organization with roots outside of Syria. In 2014, the US, Saudi Arabia and Jordan set up a joint Military Operations Command in Amman. It was a sign of how desperate the rebel situation had become that actors previously bent on autonomy were finally willing to sit in the same room and discuss tactics. Known also as the “operations room” (in Arabic, ghurfat al-amaliyyat or al-ghurfat for short), this secret chamber became the clearinghouse for financial and logistical support to Syrian rebels in the south, bringing funders from the Gulf and the US into direct coordination with rebel brigades and Jordanian authorities anxious about domestic security. As if to prove that the game had changed, the ensuing Southern Storm campaign culminated on April 1 with the rebel capture of the Nasib border crossing near the Jordanian city of Mafraq.

Similar rooms modeled on the Amman example sprang up inside Syria. In the northwest, the Idlib Liberation Operations Room brought together a number of Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and Faylaq al-Sham (the latter partly affiliated with the Syrian Muslim Brothers). This coalition—known as Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest)—successfully wrested control of the Idlib province from the regime. The Conquest of Aleppo Operations Room brought a similar coalition (under a different name, Ansar al-Shari’a) into loose coordination with US-funded brigades from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), in order to counter both the regime army and increasingly frequent incursions by ISIS. Operations rooms in the forested Ghouta region surrounding Damascus and the northern reaches near Kobane have also led to small but strategic victories.

These developments raised hopes that the plethora of opposition groups in Syria might finally “get it together” and be able to end the war. A UN official close to negotiations indicated as much, noting that thanks to the rooms the number of parties working with UN mediator Staffan de Mistura, who is overseeing the Geneva talks, had dropped by half over six months. This shift is reflected in the maps of territorial control that dominate media coverage of Syria, which have since simplified their code to four colors: the regime, ISIS, rebels (loosely defined) and Kurds.

But while operations rooms signify greater rebel coordination on the battlefield, they mask forces that torpedo hopes for a larger, more stable coalition. For one thing, not all operations rooms are alike. That they are called “operations rooms” suggests a copycat tactic more than a coherent organizational strategy among opposition groups. Some are categorically different from one another. For instance, the Amman Operations Room is widely known to be an arm of the US and Gulf states, which exert disproportionate influence over the Southern Front, while those set up in the northwest by Jabhat al-Nusra are locally organized and marred by internal schisms. In Turkey’s capital of Ankara, the existence of another such room is an open secret, but it has so far failed to be as effective as its Jordanian counterpart.

Other rooms simply reflect existing rivalries rather than resolve them. Such is the case in eastern Ghouta. Organized by Jabhat al-Nusra, the new Army of the Epics Operations Room has routinely come into conflict with the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta of Zahran Alloush (assassinated in December 2015), whose Jaysh al-Islam had possessed a near-monopoly over military opposition to Asad in this region. But perhaps no operations room lays bare the trials of rebel cohesion like the one dubbed Euphrates
Volcano, a collaboration of battalions from the FSA and other factions with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria’s northeast. YPG commanders describe the difficulty of working alongside the FSA, which lacks equipment and coherent chains of command. FSA brigades were not even able to transport ammunition from place to place after it was airlifted to them by the US military.

The chambers also widen the gap between the suit-and-tie geopolitics of diplomats and the popular geopolitics of rebels, refugees and revolutionaries. For every militia on the ground inside Syria there is a handful of NGOs run by Syrians sitting across the Turkish border in places like Gaziantep, Antakya and Şanlıurfa. These organizations train the members of local councils in everything from administration and accounting to conflict resolution and community policing—and, importantly, document human rights abuses. Yet the civil society activists are effectively shut out of the operations rooms, about which their opinions are split. Shadi said curtly, “Whatever the room does, it is for us—so we don’t ask [questions].” Foreign diplomats reinforce this division of the opposition into civil-political and military-clientelistic spheres. At talks in Vienna, Riyadh and Geneva, major international actors pass judgment on which elements of the opposition deserve a political voice. All too often, these elements turn out to be older opposition actors with little popular support, many of them widely suspected of ties to the Muslim Brothers. “Gaziantep gives the illusion of a strong opposition,” said a UN official, describing its activist scene. “But it’s through the Syrian National Coalition”—the formal umbrella for the opposition elements favored by the West—“that the real work will get done.”

The operations rooms thus favor realpolitik over the democratic idealism of the revolution’s early stages. Calls for stability dominate the rhetoric of diplomats in an eerie echo of the Asad regime. It should be no surprise, then, that this turn comes at the cost of the opposition’s general legitimacy, such that in 2015, the question shu istafadna? (“what have we gained?”) became a common expression of frustration among ordinary Syrians. And with democratic activists so firmly sidelined it is increasingly implausible for the US to claim that it is supporting democratic change in Syria. Indeed, it is difficult to compose any such narrative tying together the strange bedfellows colluding to remove Asad by force of arms. The Kurdish YPG were accused by Amnesty International of forcibly removing Arab populations in the northeast, while Jaysh al-Islam has paraded families loyal to Asad about suburbs of Damascus under opposition control.
in a desperate bid to avoid regime shelling. The apathy rising among Syrian activists, and the Western aid workers who work alongside them, reflects the feeling that the revolution is entirely out of their hands.

Finally, and most importantly, the operations rooms are locally specific, a sign that collaboration among militias is highly provisional. What is the Army of Conquest in Idlib becomes Ansar al-Shari’a in Aleppo, which in turn becomes the Army of Victory in Ghouta near Damascus. This localization of opposition activity in spite of claims to national scope is a key dynamic shaping the nature and legitimacy of the opposition, inside and outside of Syria.

**Turf Wars, not Ta’ifiyya**

For all the discussion of sectarian violence, the shared accident of being Sunni Muslim has not bound together opposition to Bashar al-Asad’s allegedly ‘Alawi regime any more than it has prevented Sunnis from collaborating with it. Civil wars do not simply release pre-war tensions in such a straightforward way. For this reason, Syria’s managed descent into violence has given rise to new contenders like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham rather than empowering the old guard of the Islamist opposition, the Muslim Brothers, who are accused of watching from the wings in Istanbul. Add the turf wars among foreign donor states, which exacerbate discord within the opposition, and it becomes clear that no single social category or “cleavage” explains the evolution of Syria’s opposition or the course of the ongoing civil war. Indeed, the greatest casualty of this conflict may well be Syrian society, which is growing increasingly unrecognizable.

Nevertheless, patterns can be discerned from the local, regional and geographic dynamics of the conflict. These patterns are partly reflected in the spread of local councils (majalis mahalliyya) throughout opposition-held Syria. Although the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) claims these bodies within its mandate, in effect local councils receive only sporadic funding, are not centrally administered and—with the notable exceptions of provincial councils in Aleppo and Dar’a—are often composed of unelected elites like businessmen, doctors or religious scholars. At their simplest, the local councils coordinate the receipt of international humanitarian aid, but the better-organized ones can boast of providing services such as road repair, drainage maintenance and digging wells, as in the northern town of A’azz. These success stories are few and far between, however, and seem paltry beside the well-organized communities run by the Kurdish YPG, in which coordination between military defense and local councils is far more robust.

Differences among the conflict’s active fronts further keep the opposition from consolidating. These battle lines are often drawn in frontier zones where rebels can get access to materiel, funds and reliable medical treatment outside Syria, but are also determined by local social forces and physical geography. With the entry of Hizballah fighters into Syria, rebels and smugglers who once regularly traversed the Lebanese border to support the FSA were forced to withdraw from the pro-opposition region of Zabadani. Zabadani, like Madaya (the town whose starvation haunted the headlines over the winter), remains under siege by the regime army and is deemed by the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs to be out of reach for all but the most basic forms of humanitarian assistance. Even more significant was Hizballah’s spring 2013 takeover of Qusayr, which lies at the mouth of the Homs gap, a strategic pass through the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. The gap’s capture made rebel defense of Homs—arguably the capital of the revolution—impossible by cutting off its main supply lines. After being starved for months, the last armed rebels left the city’s Wa’rr neighborhood in December 2015 and Homs is now firmly in regime hands.

Armed opposition activity has since relocated along two poles: a diffuse northern front that stretches along the border with Turkey all the way to Iraq, and a far narrower front near the border with Jordan. According to a Syrian journalist based in Amman, the FSA has been able to maintain legitimacy and internal coherence in the south thanks to strong ties among the large extended families (hamulas) of the greater Dar’a area. The north, on the other hand, possesses a more developed civil society presence, but at the same time plays uneasy host to a number of Islamist organizations like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. Activists point to Turkey’s porous border, which allows outside Islamist fighters, aid and weapons to enter the northern front relatively unhindered, while Jordan’s more secure border has kept the southern front a relatively closed system. Setbacks in the south aside, the two fronts are widely seen as different universes.

Even the exile activities of Syrians are shaped by local factors. In Jordan, the vast majority of Syrians involved in activism, journalism or humanitarian work hail from the southern Hawran region around Dar’a or the Damascus and Qunaytra governorates. It is not uncommon to find former classmates from Damascus University reunited in Amman and engaged in such work. But Jordan’s harsh refugee policies have led many Syrians with means to seek opportunities elsewhere—primarily in Europe, by way of Turkey. By contrast, the Turkish border city of Gaziantep has become a kind of “exile capital” hosting a robust ecology of NGOs, militants, humanitarian organizations and (increasingly) private contractors. One finds people from Dayr al-Zawr, Palmyra, Damascus, Homs and even Dar’a traveling to Gaziantep to continue the revolution. But, above all, the Turkish city attracts people from Aleppo—it is known as Little Aleppo or, not without affection, “an uglier Aleppo.”

To cap it all off, activists and former militants repeatedly stress how damaging personal divisions and rivalries...
are even within the more formal opposition institutions. Based in Gaziantep, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) was formed as an executive body of the SNC, but its various branches have neither the will nor the capacity to effect change inside opposition-controlled regions of Syria. Within these areas, local councils compete for resources from the SIG, described in an interview with a former employee as highly unprofessional, petty and itself riven by interdepartmental conflicts. Even humanitarian work suffers unduly from internal distrust and (as a result) low capacity. After leaving a position as an FSA medic, Mahmoud began smuggling medicine and winter jackets to children in besieged Homs. He received nothing but criticism and ill will from neighbors, who perhaps viewed his efforts as self-aggrandizing. When asked why, he hazarded, “Sometimes people just can’t stand seeing another person doing good.”

In this way there remains a disjuncture between the tendency of opposition actors to use all-inclusive civic language and their ability to act in concert even when circumstances permit. It illustrates what Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur argued so pointedly: The Asad regime has been able to transform a countrywide movement for reform and regime change into highly localized struggles for survival. In this engineered Hobbesian environment, local, personal and, indeed, sectarian divisions grow claws not present before the war.4

Bending Not to Break

One analyst has likened efforts to explain Syria’s opposition to “nailing jello to a wall.”5 One need only peruse the various guides to the Syrian opposition to appreciate the truth of this statement. In contrast to conventional understandings of civil war, in which two well-defined parties square off, as many as 500 distinct militias are fighting against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. International intervention further stretches the boundaries of who is a relevant actor in Syria’s theater of violence.
But the shifting nature of the war has still allowed Syria’s opposition—its armed and civic components—to survive for much longer than it otherwise would have. Too often, rebel forces are seen as an organizational template or an ideology abstracted from the physical infrastructures, geographic constraints and economic networks in which they are embedded. But these material realities matter. The ongoing barrel bombing of rebel-held zones like Aleppo makes the consolidation of stable opposition institutions nearly impossible inside Syria. At the same time, makeshift militias with few commitments to rooted constituents are better able to survive such aerial assaults. Kurdish areas of the northeast have been relatively unaffected by barrel bombing, with most such strikes hitting cities like Aleppo and Dar’a. The scale required to foster a unified chain of command among rebels and provide secondary services like logistics and medical care, as well as ensure the welfare of civilians in these zones, would require massive investment not only in rebuilding cities destroyed by war but in aerial defenses as well—the very sort that the FSA has consistently requested from the beginning.

In the absence of such support from the “friends of Syria,” the opposition has been forced to withdraw key functions to cities close to the front lines but protected by host states like Turkey and Jordan. Thus, Gaziantep and Amman have taken on significant (if not very dramatic) positions as key nodes for the opposition. In such places operations rooms have flourished—first outside Syria, then eventually in consolidated opposition-held areas of the north like Iddlib. But neither Jordan nor Turkey will abide a fully armed, well-organized insurgent group with roots in its territory. For this very reason, among others, Turkey has hamstring efforts to empower the already well-organized YPG.

Nevertheless, Amman and Gaziantep (as well as Istanbul and Antakya in Turkey and Irbid in Jordan) function—legally or not—as provisional staging grounds and meeting spaces for opposition factions to mix with donors, diplomats and one another. These “exile capitals” are large enough to hide in but relatively open, unlike the operations rooms, and not subject to the whims of funder states. Negotiations between activists and armed factions in Gaziantep have secured safety from random violence and kidnapping for many activists making regular trips inside. Similarly, FSA officers are allowed to house their families in Amman and visit them regularly provided they maintain a strict code of silence. The SIG has offices and representatives in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt; its Hajj Committee negotiates agreements between host states and Saudi Arabia to facilitate the pilgrimage; and it has tried to print passports that are recognized in a limited number of countries, making residency, work and migration easier for exiled Syrians.

But these cities’ status as safe havens remains a double-edged sword. Although Amman and Gaziantep protect the political and civil opposition, relations with the armed opposition “inside” are strained. In November 2015 the Levant Front, a member of the Conquest of Aleppo Operations Room (which administers the Bab al-Salama border crossing from Turkey) denied entry to an SIG delegation bound for rebel territory. Prominent in the delegation was the SIG prime minister, Ahmad Tu’ma, who was visiting rebel-held Syria for the first time after two years in office. According to one member of the delegation, the politicians were taunted by armed members of the Levant Front as “infidel apostates” and not so subtly encouraged to return to Gaziantep. A formal statement issued later by the Levant Front expressed disapproval at Tu’ma’s aloofness and called for his immediate resignation, a request echoed by other SIG figures. According to the Levant Front communiqué, the prime minister’s public humiliation was intended to “emphasize the need for the interim government to engage with revolutionary forces on the ground so that, especially in these trying times, it can become a government for the people and the revolution.” The director of the SIG’s telecommunications sector announced his own resignation and vented his bitter frustration: “I will be of [better] service forming a new government or alternative body in place of this broken-down, unrefordable one.”

**Asad’s Syria?**

With five years of faulty predictions, many continue to grapple with the unpredictability of Syria’s conflict—and no one more than Syrians themselves. Analysts attempting to deduce the outcomes of the war from pre- or early-war variables will fail in light of the extreme disruption of social ties that has taken place since 2011. After years of violence and decades with the regime “killing” civil politics, it should be no surprise that Syria’s diverse opposition has faced enormous obstacles to getting it together.

Yet despite this unpredictability, one stable principle remains: From the very beginning, the actor most capable of shaping the contours of political struggle in Syria has been the regime, personified by Bashar al-Assad. And so it will continue to be. Through a combination of sieges, bombings, massacres and pragmatic truces, the regime has effectively transformed the territory of Syria into a giant mechanism for sorting out the “missing middle” from Syria’s opposition landscape. The cumulative effect has been that even the most rudimentary calls for democracy may now seem utopian, and long-term reconciliation is trumped by geopolitical bargaining. Finishing his tea, Shadi morosely summarized the increasingly complex situation. “I think the SNC is caught between the Syrian people and what the world wants—America, Great Britain…the West.” The SNC’s representative in Amman is a useless appendage, he continues. For Syrians in exile, there is astoundingly little contact between the armed factions, institutional bodies and far-flung individuals that purport to represent them under the banner of the revolution.
And it is an increasingly frayed banner at that. On February 3, the Geneva III talks were suspended for fear that there were not enough relevant participants, and that those who arrived in Geneva did not take the talks seriously enough. But the fighting has not followed suit. At the time of writing, regime soldiers had reached the outskirts of opposition-held Aleppo thanks to Russian aerial support. Within days, thousands of residents had fled across the border into Turkey, certain of a brutal siege to follow. A meeting on February 11 of the pro-opposition International Syria Support Group pushed member states to step up aid to such besieged areas in an effort to keep opposition alive, literally, and was complemented by a brittle ceasefire agreement signed in Munich to take effect a week later. But with Bashar al-Asad confidently asserting his intention to retake the whole of Syria, and Russia openly expressing a desire to “proxy” relationships. Russia’s aggressive battlefield efforts certainly aid the regime in Damascus, but President Vladimir Putin’s rapid push for negotiations nevertheless shakes regime assurances that, at the end of the day, it will remain Asad’s Syria. Tension is such that during a surprise visit to Moscow on October 20, 2015, Asad sat alone with Russian officials, evidently lacking even the company of a Syrian flag. Meanwhile, Russia has established “coordination mechanisms” with Jordan and Turkey, to regularize its presence in the region.

Paradoxically, opposition activists have become pragmatic about the international nature of Syria’s conflict. “It is unsolvable without Iran…or Bashar or Hizballah or Russia,” says Shadi without hesitation. “Speaking logically? It just isn’t. Speaking in revolutionary terms? We don’t want any of them. But I want to speak logically.” Shadi’s realist turn is emblematic of the dimming idealism of activists in exile, who feel cut off from a revolution for which they suffered so much in 2011. The irony is that somewhere nearby in Amman is a hidden room where the revolution’s outcome will likely be decided. The activists are not invited.

Endnotes
1 Interview with UN official, Gaziantep, Turkey, July 20, 2015.
2 Interview with Munzir, opposition activist and Kurdish resident of Afrin, July 28, 2015.
3 Interview with Ahmad, pro-opposition journalist, Amman, September 30, 2015.
8 Radio al-Kull, November 12, 2015. [Arabic]

Olszewska continued from page 27.

...can hope to obtain lucrative NGO jobs in the event of a return to Afghanistan. Indeed, I witnessed what I identified as the beginnings of a micro-process of class differentiation taking place between those Afghans who were deprived of both cultural and economic capital, and those who at least managed to gain cultural capital. Such differentiation would explain the dedication with which the latter group cultivated their newly acquired cultural dispositions as they aspired to become a new Afghan proto-bourgeoisie. The forms of cultural capital cultivated by these young people in their aspiration to improve their status were not unlike those pursued by middle-class Iranians: literary, musical and artistic activities; sports and outdoor recreation; blogging and social networking; a taste for consumer goods and information technologies; and a preference for romantic love and companionate marriage rather than family-arranged marriage, signifying a greater sense of individualism.

The case of Afghan refugees is therefore an interesting one with which to track the “class reshuffling” of post-revolutionary Iran. The educational successes of many Afghans—many of whose forebears were illiterate peasants in rural Afghanistan—are evidence of the truly revolutionary opportunities for social mobility that a heavy investment in mass public education has created in Iran. But, in a situation of economic crisis and unemployment, the state has chosen to use legal exclusions to protect the interests of middle-class Iranians in particular. At least two sub-classes have emerged in this non-citizen class: a poor “precariat” that continues to be exploited for its manual labor with few social benefits, and a proto-bourgeoisie with high levels of cultural capital but low levels of economic capital, who cannot hope to work legally in their professions in Iran. The disaffections of both these groups and the lack of a positive outlook for the future are helping to fuel the enormous increase in Afghan migration to Europe that we are presently witnessing.

Endnotes
1 For background, see Zuzanna Olszewska, The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood Among Young Afghans in Iran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015). For more reflections on class and status in Iran, see Zuzanna Olszewska, “Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran,” Iraninan Studies 46/6 (2013).
5 Charles Tilly, Durable Inequality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
Garbage Politics
Ziad Abu-Rish

In late July 2015, mounds of garbage began piling up across Beirut and the towns of Mount Lebanon to the capital’s east. While not without precedent in poorer neighborhoods, such heaps of rubbish had never appeared in more affluent areas. By mid-August, Lebanese government officials, businessmen, activists, residents and media outlets were all speaking about a garbage crisis. Some observers took a benign view of the accumulating trash, seeing it as one more symptom of the alleged absence of a state in Lebanon. For those inclined to more sinister interpretations, the crisis was the logical outcome of the purported strain that more than 1 million Syrian refugees have placed on Lebanese infrastructure. As the refuse rotted in the streets and political debates remained stuck in the above terms, a broad protest movement consolidated itself. Popular mobilizations challenged both benign and sinister accounts and called into question the conventional wisdom about the state, social order and politics in Lebanon.1

The protest movement began in late July and early August as a series of small demonstrations organized by a group called You Stink. The group established an online repository for digital video and photographs documenting the garbage crisis. You Stink also engaged in creative actions such as delivering bags of trash to the homes and offices of various ministers. Yet the initial rallies drew no more than a hundred people. A protest on August 19 was a turning point, as the government cracked down hard. Video of security forces violently confronting protesters went viral, leading family, friends and allies of the You Stink organizers to join the next demonstration on August 22. But You Stink supporters were not the only ones who took to the streets. The participants now included formal

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groupings of feminists, queer activists, leftists and environmentalists, as well as residents of neighborhoods that have borne the brunt of the state’s withdrawal of services and its routine repression. Security forces tried to disperse the crowds with batons, sound grenades, water cannons and rubber bullets.

On August 23, there were more clashes between protesters, now numbering approximately a thousand, and the riot police and army. The You Stink network withdrew, claiming that provocateurs had infiltrated the movement. Some members of the group went as far as to call on the government to “cleanse” the streets. You Stink announced that the protest scheduled for August 25 was canceled. Despite this move, the biggest throng to date, estimated at several thousand, took to the streets that day. The movement now had an exceptional heterogeneity: People who had long disagreed came together in a broad cross-class coalition to express their discontent with the government and the status quo in general. Some of the new arrivals had never demonstrated before. Others were rank-and-file members or affiliates of some of Lebanon’s major political parties: the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, Amal and Hizballah. Realizing that they were no longer the vanguard, the You Stink group apologized for its condemnation and rejoined the rallies. The movement culminated on August 29 with tens of thousands descending on central Beirut in the largest protest that was not organized by a formal political party in several decades. During the period August 24–29 there was a near continuous occupation of several streets and squares downtown. In the following weeks, several new groups proclaimed themselves part of the movement, and garbage-related protests broke out in Tripoli, Sidon and other parts of the country.

Institutional Origins

A number of factors converged to produce the garbage crisis: the nature of the existing waste management contract; the polarization of the Lebanese political field; and the infrastructure of dumping. In 1994, the national government began subcontracting waste management in Beirut and Mount Lebanon to a corporation that would come to be known as Sukleen. The Council for Development Reconstruction initially hired the company to refurbish garbage processing centers in the northeastern Beirut district of Karantina and the south-central suburb of Amrusiyya, which had become
obsolete during the 1975–1990 civil war. The Council quickly expanded the contract to include the collection, transport, treatment and dumping of waste in all of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Prior to the post-war settlement, by law, it was local municipalities that oversaw trash removal everywhere in the country. The municipal garbage workers of Beirut had one of the strongest public-sector unions in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the post-war central governments—particularly the cabinets of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri—saw in the fragility of local authorities an opportunity to enrich themselves and their big business allies by deregulating and privatizing waste management. For example, the founding director of Sukleen, Maysara Sukkar, was a business partner of Hariri in Saudi Arabia before the post-war reconstruction and development began.

The cabinet extended Sukleen’s contract in Beirut and Mount Lebanon several times after 1994. Each time, the per-ton price for total waste management (collection, transportation, treatment and dumping) went up. In 2015, Sukleen charged the Lebanese government $45 per ton for dumping alone. The global average for such services was $11 per ton. The Sukleen agreements were lucrative for all involved.

The latest iteration of the Sukleen contract for Beirut and Mount Lebanon was set to expire on January 17, 2015. Yet the cabinet extended the contract for six months in December 2014 as part of an alleged comprehensive plan for dealing with garbage in the country. The plan featured the division of the country into six regions. One condition in this scheme was to limit each subcontracted company’s business to no more than two of the six regions. Another condition was that, once contracted, each company had to secure its own dumpsite in each region where it collected trash. This latter stipulation meant that the companies had to cooperate with local power brokers. By late July 2015, the six-month extension of the Sukleen contract had ended without the so-called comprehensive plan being implemented.

The comprehensive plan was supposed to provide a new formula for rent seeking and thus consensus among leading politicians. Yet Lebanese politics was gridlocked when the Sukleen contract expired. The March 14 and March 8 coalitions, both founded in 2005 in the wake of Hariri’s assassination and Syrian military withdrawal, remained at odds after an escalating series of cabinet crises. Each coalition holds one third of the current cabinet posts, with a group of independents occupying the remaining third.
The parliament, elected in 2009, had a dubious mandate after decreeing two extensions of its own term in 2013 and 2014. Legislators were—and still are—unable to reach a simple-majority agreement on a president since the last regular presidential term ended in 2014. The distrust and dysfunction was too great to allow for a new agreement about picking up trash in the city. The Sukleen contract expired in a logistical void.

A third factor—infrastructural breakdown—proved decisive. This problem had to do with a dumpsite in Na’ma south of the city, used by Sukleen and the national government since 1997. Originally, they claimed the site was temporary, part of then-Minister of Environment Akram Shuhayyib’s “emergency plan.” During the civil war, various government agencies and other groups began depositing refuse on a plot of land in the neighborhood of Burj Hammoud. By 1997, this dump had far exceeded its capacity and endangered the environment and public health. At first Shuhayyib called for the conversion of the defunct incinerators at Karantina and ‘Amrusiyya into modern waste treatment facilities. But the residents of adjacent areas protested, citing potential health risks. When Shuhayyib tried to insist, locals burned down the ‘Amrusiyya plant. Shuhayyib turned to Na’ma, claiming it to be a temporary solution, while also committing the government to regulating the amount of garbage to be dumped there and the route of the trucks. But violations of the rules were systematic. Nearly four times the amount of trash initially quoted was unloaded in Na’ma. Sukleen trucks drove right through residential areas. There was nothing temporary about the Na’ma dump.

Beginning in 1998, residents organized against the government’s bad faith and the environmental and health hazards posed by the landfill. In 2013, these efforts coalesced in a Campaign to Close the Na’ma Dumpsite. Activists and community members blocked the road to the dump in the summer of 2014. After a brief standoff, the government issued a statement committing to an alternative in exchange for a one-year grace period from the protesters. By the end of that reprieve in July 2015, however, there was neither an alternative plan for dumping nor any evidence that the government had tried to devise one. As the Campaign reoccupied the road, the government officially terminated use of the site on July 17.

With no contract and no place to put the garbage, Sukleen just stopped operating in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Several activists speculate that it was no accident, but a purposeful move by the political elite to silence public dissent. But as the mountains of trash rose higher and higher, the opposite happened.

**Government Tactics**

In the first couple of days, the Lebanese government and major political parties were at a loss for how to deal with the protesters. As the popular movement grew, the government fell back on familiar tactics of brute force. But when the batons and rubber bullets deployed on August 19 only swelled the protesters’ ranks, and made them more diverse in class and political inclination, the authorities experimented with other tactics and became more selective in their use of violence. On August 24, the government erected a concrete barrier around the Prime Minister’s Office building only to remove it a few days later after protesters turned it into a canvas of political commentary. On August 25 and 29 in particular, the security forces waited until the majority of the protesters had left the downtown squares before rounding up the activists who sought to camp out overnight.

The gendarmerie and both civilian and military intelligence agencies also began detaining protesters, targeting men and women, as well as children under the age of 18. The detention policy began on August 23. The government subjected many detainees to urine tests in an attempt to demonize them as drug addicts. It also blindfolded several of them during detention and interrogation. Military intelligence held demonstrators incommunicado for 24 hours or more. The government also filed charges against many protesters, some of whose cases are still pending in criminal courts or military tribunals. A group of lawyers quickly formed a committee for defense. They publicized a hotline for reporting arrests and missing persons, as well as providing legal counsel. Police stations became sites of small protests as activists as well as the family and friends of detainees demanded the release of their loved ones.

Meanwhile, government officials and leaders of both the March 14 and March 8 alliances made ample use of their party structures as well as their access to and ownership of various media outlets to smear activists and stifle the public. Many party heads forbade members from participating in the demonstrations. Two of Lebanon’s most popular networks—LBCI and NewTV—provided 24-hour coverage in the first couple of weeks. Yet key ministers used their influence in other media platforms to portray the mass of protesters as delinquents, foreign agents, potential terrorists or any combination thereof. In certain cases, notably that of As’ad Thibyan of You Stink, politicians resorted to vicious personal attacks. OTV, a network associated with the Free Patriotic Movement founded by the Maronite Christian ex-general, Michel Aoun, aired accusations that Thibyan was an atheist who missed no chance to insult religion, Christianity in particular. The government and political elites depicted themselves as gamely seeking a solution to the crisis, claiming to be in consultation with each other, as well as with business and environmental specialists. Throughout the autumn, they simply waited for the momentum of the protests to slow.

At times, the government did seem to be bending to the popular will. On August 24, the government announced...
fresh consensus on the comprehensive plan conceived by Shuhayyib in 2014. As before, no company would receive a contract for more than two of six regions of the country. But it was too little, too late—the protest movement was too large and too militant. The government returned to the drawing board. Soon after, the environment minister, Muhammad al-Mashnouq, declared that the government would start clearing the streets of refuse. Sukleen teams resumed garbage collection in several areas. But leaked footage revealed that the government was using makeshift dumpsites, in many instances through collusion with municipal authorities. Mashnouq stepped down from the ministerial committee overseeing the garbage issue, which he had chaired up to that point. Prime Minister Tammam Salam appointed Shuhayyib, now minister of agriculture, to replace him. By February 2016 there were an estimated 750 informal dumping grounds—some started by locals but many others by official agencies.

During much of September and October 2015, Shuhayyib and the cabinet advocated for a plan that called for a seven-day grace period in which to reopen the Na’ma landfill and remove the trash buildup from Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Then there would be an eighteen-month transitional period in which the government would extend the Sukleen contract and designate two new dumps in the northern ‘Akkar region and the Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border. The government promised development funds in the form of loans and grants to these two regions, effectively seeking to bribe the residents and their political representatives. The proposal also included reopening the Burj Hammoud dumpsite. Shuhayyib said that responsibility for waste management would revert to the municipalities at end of the transitional period. Locals in ‘Akkar and the Bekaa Valley protested the plan. Most representatives of the demonstrators in Beirut joined them in rejecting the plan on environmental and technical grounds. Their skepticism was well founded: The government issued no decree or law to carry out the new Shuhayyib plan, about which there were no details in the public domain. And it was the same month’s “temporary” measure in 1997 that had created the mess at the Na’ma site. The government effectively abandoned the Shuhayyib plan in December when the cabinet approved a proposal to export the country’s garbage. Activists decried the lack of transparency around the bidding process and terms of reference, both of which the government refused to reveal. On February 19, the cabinet announced the cancellation of the export plan amid a series of related political, legal and financial controversies. As of late February 2016 the government has returned to a variant of the Shuhayyib plan, seeking to identify locations for major new landfills. In the meantime, the government is avoiding a repeat of the ugly scenes in affluent areas, but garbage continues to pile up under bridges, in valleys and in the sea, to say nothing of poorer neighborhoods.

Strategic and Collective Action Dilemmas

The protest movement, for its part, faced strategic dilemmas from its inception, symbolized by You Stink’s decision to quit when the demonstrations grew beyond its control. There was intense debate among activists throughout the summer and fall over goals and tactics. For a while, a coordinating committee facilitated these discussions. But the committee’s membership was itself a source of conflict as questions of representation and decision-making authority arose. Negotiation also took place in social media and in person.

On August 29, the protest movement laid out a unified, coherent set of demands: the resignation of Environment Minister Muhammad al-Mashnouq; the prosecution of all those responsible for violence against protesters, including Minister of Interior Nuhad al-Mashnouq should he be shown to be culpable; and a long-term solution to the garbage crisis that is both environmentally friendly and executed by municipal authorities. With these demands, the protesters sought to link government corruption and centralization of services as the chief causes of the crisis.

Yet another item on many lists—new parliamentary elections—exposed a bone of contention inside the movement. On one hand, there was a commonly acknowledged need to assert the illegitimacy of the existing parliament, which had twice extended its own term in contravention of the constitution. On the other hand, there was sharp disagreement about whether the movement should focus on holding the streets or turning to the ballot box. In the view of many activists, new elections would produce nothing but a parliament of similar composition, except with the stamp of democratic approval. Some activists nevertheless considered forming a new party and running for office.

An unresolved debate concerned whether the protest movement should call for additional resignations. Was not the entire political elite responsible for the government’s paralysis? Should not all the cabinet members and legislators be asked to resign? It was this question that led to discussion of “the fall of the regime,” the demand animating the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, and how to define “the regime” in Lebanon. This discussion was not new. It, too, had first emerged in 2011, when Lebanon witnessed a much smaller protest movement under the banner “The People Want the Fall of the Sectarian Regime.” This slogan captured the feeling of many Lebanese that the central political problem in their country is not the particular personalities in charge of government but the complex system allocating parliamentary seats, top posts in the state and access to public goods by ethno-religious affiliation. This confessional system was set up under French colonial tutelage between 1920 and 1943, and cemented in the agreement that ended the 1975–1990 civil war. Yet some activists were concerned about losing touch with the public. It was one thing to
galvanize the anger of average citizens about the rubbish reeking in the street. It was another thing entirely to speak of overhauling the political order. What had befallen the uprisings in Egypt, Syria and Yemen meant that such talk invoked the specter of political instability or even renewed civil strife.

Closely related to the question of demands was that of tactics, first and foremost how to respond to state violence. But activists also struggled to free the movement from the ambient polarization between the March 14 and March 8 coalitions. They wanted to challenge both coalitions, but not to empower one over the other. “All of them means all of them,” many activists said, but there was some dispute as to who “all of them” were. Of special relevance were the Shi’i Islamist party Hizballah and its leader Hasan Nasrallah. Was Hizballah as guilty as others in the garbage crisis? The party was far from government when the Sukleen contract was awarded. Should the protest movement target Hizballah nonetheless? These questions divided activists and helped to form new alliances at the same time. They also colored the way that would-be demonstrators viewed the emerging movement and understood its medium- to long-term implications.

Activists attempted to go beyond the mass demonstration, experimenting with other tactics. On September 1, You Stink members and others staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Environment demanding the resignation of Muhammad al-Mashnouq. Later that week, another group vandalized newly installed parking meters on the Corniche, asserting the right of public access to the seashore. Other actions followed at Electricite du Liban, Riyad al-Sulh Square and Zeytouna Bay. Of particular note was the tearing down of a metal fence enclosing a popular picnic area along the Corniche. These actions showed that many in the movement were concerned with more than uncollected garbage. They drew upon a long legacy of activism around issues of public space. Yet such actions also fractured the movement as different groups vied for leadership.

The protest movement ultimately succumbed to the divergences over these and other questions, as well as the water cannons and sound grenades of the police. The size of protests declined precipitously after August 29. The media smear campaign went on. Activists, for their part, failed to present a unified message in terms of goals and tactics to the broader public. The failure to preserve and expand the initial outpouring of public support, and to create stronger linkages among protest groups in Lebanon, speaks to the broader challenges facing progressive social movements in the country. By October 8, the government seemed to perceive that the public mood had altered. That day, security forces attacked demonstrators with a ferocity many activists say was unparalleled since the movement originated. Soon afterward, two major groups—You Stink and We Want Accountability—bowed out of the coordinating body.

Rethinking Lebanon

As of late February 2016, the protest movement against the Beirut and Mount Lebanon garbage crisis is effectively non-existent. The euphoric moment of mass mobilization proved as ephemeral in Lebanon as elsewhere in the Arab world since 2011. There is still activism, however. And the movement itself achieved some victories: the ditching of the 2014 “comprehensive plan” and the questioning of the new Shuhayyib plan; Minister of Environment Mashnouq’s resignation from the government committee on waste management (even if temporary, as he has since returned); and the government’s acknowledgement (even if only in principle) that municipal authorities should gather the trash. It was the research and advocacy of citizen activists that forced these concessions from political elites that had showed scant concern for public grievances in the summer of 2015.

Perhaps the most lasting achievement will be the new networks and alliances that emerge from the movement over time. It is true that fault lines remain. But a new activist landscape has come into view, along with a new set of questions previously hidden in the folds of sectarian and class conflict. How can the duopoly of the March 14 and March 8 coalitions represent the full diversity of Lebanon? What does it mean to be a progressive activist? Gender dynamics are also front and center. While some activists, men and women, were forced to admit complicity in patriarchy, others experienced a new kind of politicization around gender—in no small part due to the presence of feminist and LGBTQ activists in the protest movement. Such networks and experiences will be important should a renewed moment of mass mobilization arrive.

The protest movement amidst the garbage crisis compels reconsideration of several tropes. The Lebanese state, far from absent, was on prominent display throughout the summer and fall of 2015 as it beat up, arrested and “disappeared” scores of unarmed civilians. Furthermore, the protesters’ solidarity for several months, mirrored by the unity of the political elites arrayed against them, challenge the idea that sectarianism is the analytic lens through which to view social dynamics in Lebanon. Finally, there is the question of the past: Little sense can be made of the garbage crisis or the protest movement without understanding the history of state building, economic development and social mobilization in Lebanon.

Endnotes

1 I am grateful to Joelle Boutrous, Tania El Khoury, Samer Frangie and Sherene Seikaly for feedback on an earlier draft of this article.
Caught in the Crossfire of Climate and Politics
The Eritrean Afars in Ethiopia

Dan Connell

Conscription into the army or other government service for years on end, fear of detention and torture for real or imagined transgressions with no legal recourse, no prospect of schooling or meaningful work, and no personal freedom: The reasons Afar refugees in eastern Ethiopia gave for fleeing their homeland often echoed those I had heard from their countrymen in interviews I conducted in 19 countries over the last two years. But most I spoke with had another grievance—disempowerment and discrimination based on their ethnicity and culture.

Dan Connell is a contributing editor of Middle East Report and vice chair of MERIP’s board of directors. He is working on a book about Eritrean refugees. Part one of this series on Eritrean Afars appeared in MER 276 (Fall 2015).

Eritrea is a diverse society, roughly half-Christian and half-Muslim from nine distinct ethno-linguistic groups, and its leadership is relentlessly secular. But Christian Tigrinya speakers dominate both the political sphere and the economy under a regime derived almost exclusively from the army that won Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia in the early 1990s, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, whose core leadership came largely from the Tigrinya heartland. EPLF veterans control all the top government posts under the front’s former commander, who has refused to implement a constitution drafted in the 1990s or to hold national elections.
The Afars are Sunni Muslims, but religion is not central to their status, at least not in a doctrinal sense—the regime has jailed far more Christians for banned religious practices than they have Muslims, banning all denominations it could not control. Only four denominations, which have a long history in the country, are legal: Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Sunni Muslim. But all media are state-run, no non-governmental organizations or social movements are allowed, and either the state or the ruling party—now called the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice—hold controlling interests in all large-scale enterprises and agricultural schemes. The upshot is that if you are outside the EPLF/PFDJ core, you are by default marginalized. And the Afars are the quintessential outsiders.

A tightly knit, insular society with a strong warrior tradition, the Afars inhabit an area that extends from southern Eritrea into Djibouti and Ethiopia in one of the harshest environments in East Africa. Over the centuries, most eked out a living from pastoralism, though some on the Red Sea coast lived from fishing and regional trade. Life was always precarious, which no doubt made the Afars that much more determined to hold onto what they had—and to who they were.

And for the most part, they succeeded, maintaining traditional forms of social organization and administration despite the imposition of artificial borders and repeated efforts by outside powers, including imperial Ethiopia, to subdue them. They also kept their distance from the liberation fronts within Eritrea, which left them with little representation at the center. While the Afars enjoyed more autonomy than other groups, the fact that if you are outside the EPLF/PFDJ core, you are by default marginalized. The Afar region has become not only a primary destination for Afar refugees but also the base for contemporary Afar nationalism and the headquarters for the largest Afar political movement, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), the only indigenous organization of any consequence with a presence in the region.

Meanwhile, the Afar region has an outsize importance for Ethiopia, despite its poverty and harsh environment, due to its strategic location, bordering on Djibouti, through which Ethiopia has access to the Red Sea, and on Eritrea and Somalia, where Ethiopia has fought major wars and which have served as bases for Ethiopian opposition groups. And the Afar region appears to sit on significant mineral deposits.

The Underserved Afar Camps

Ali Ahmed’s story was typical. When he was a child, his father had worked as a small merchant, but during the border war trade ground to a halt, leaving the family destitute. Ali had only finished tenth grade by 2006 at the age of 22 because he had taken time off to support the family and only attended school part-time, but he knew he would be called to national service the next year so he fled that summer. “My life was not in my hands after tenth grade,” he told me.

But it was not just the prospect of national service that triggered his flight. Ali said he had been alienated from the government since the 1998 arrest of 48 prominent Afar elders accused of being pro-Ethiopia. The idea of serving this regime was too much to bear, but he still longs for the chance to go home again if things change there. Now 31, he lives in the Assaita camp, close to Ethiopia’s border with Djibouti, where he survives on UN rations and occasional day labor. “I never forget Assab,” he said, recalling the once bustling port where he was born and raised. “If there was some hope, I would go back. Why would anyone live here?”

Ethiopia’s Afar Regional State, one of nine created under its policy of “ethnic federalism,” is among the country’s poorest and least populated, with some 1.6 million people spread across 270,000 square kilometers, all but 13 percent of them in rural areas. Much of it is desert at or below sea level. Over 90 percent of the inhabitants are Afars, by far the largest concentration in a region whose total Afar population is around 2 million, including 100,000 in Eritrea and 300,000 in Djibouti.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Ethiopia counted nearly 29,000 Afar refugees in this state at the start of 2015, but more crossed the border without registering to live within the local Afar community, as became clear on walking tours of the towns of Assaita, Semera and Loggiya clustered along the Addis Ababa-Djibouti highway where my guide repeatedly hailed people he knew from Eritrea. Some had been in Ethiopia for decades, but most came in the last ten to 15 years.

Nearly all the camp residents are ethnic Afars, as Ethiopia transports refugees from other ethnic groups to camps in the northern Tigray Regional State and relocates Afars who enter Ethiopia to one of two camps here—Berahle or Assaita—regardless of where they entered the country. Because many Afar refugees come with families and settle in the camps or towns with others from their place of origin, fewer move on to other destination countries than refugees of other social backgrounds, many of whom fled as individuals.

With the degree of autonomy the Afars enjoy here, the sheer size of their population, and the cultural and political limits on Afars in Eritrea and Djibouti, the Afar State has become not only a primary destination for Afar refugees but also the base for contemporary Afar nationalism and the headquarters for the largest Afar political movement, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), the only indigenous organization of any consequence with a presence in the region.

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All of which makes it surprising that the Afar refugees appear to fall off the radar for most international aid agencies. Assaita and Berahle are, like all refugee camps in Ethiopia, administered by the country’s refugee authority, known as ARRA, and supplied by UNHCR, which supports limited social and educational programming there. The Norwegian Refugee Council has supported some construction, but neither the Council nor the International Rescue Committee, the two most active NGOs in other camps, has an active presence in those for the Afar. Nor do any other European or American NGOs. There are primary schools and sports for older children, but most of the adult refugees are idle and have few prospects of steady work. It is, for most of them, the end of the line.

**Inside the Assaita Camp**

Abdalla Mohammed, 32, from a small village outside Assab, had fled Eritrea in 2009 after serving ten years in national service. He cited the treatment of the Afars, not national service, as the main reason he left. “There was no equality,” he told me when I met him in the Assaita camp last year. “They abused our language, our culture, our religion.” He said it finally became too much, so he started planning as he waited for right moment: “To leave is very difficult.” During the Eid celebrations at the end of the Ramadan fast, he slipped out, walking ten miles in one night to reach Ethiopia. He went straight to Assaita and has been there ever since.

Mohammed Hussein, 29, fled his village of Afambo in 2010 when faced with a call-up for national service, but he, too, had specific grievances. He said that six men from his family—uncles and older brothers—had already been conscripted. Two had been killed; none had yet come back. “They are lost to the family,” he said. When his notice came, he went into hiding and then fled, crossing the border at a remote spot in the Danakil desert near the long dormant Afdera volcano and a nearby salt mine and then made his way to Assaita. “I didn’t know where I was or where I was going,” he said, but strangers along the way directed him to the camp. Five years later, he has no work and survives “day by day,” getting his clothes, food and shelter from donations and UN distributions. His life to that point had revolved around tending animals, and was the second highest official in the economic affairs department. Mohammed had grown up within the liberation movement and had himself been an EPLF fighter. But in 2004 he found he was losing the use of his left leg, and he was diagnosed with diabetes, so he requested leave to go to Asmara for treatment. When he was refused, he went on his own but still lost his leg. Upon his return, he was fired for going without permission. Angry, disabled and impoverished, he decided to flee the country.

“I had served this organization [the EPLF] since my childhood in the field,” he said. Rebuffed by the authorities, he turned to the Afar sultan to plead his case and received financial support for a boat trip to Yemen that October. Like Abdalla, he settled in Mukha, fleeing the town when it came under siege by the Houthis and coming to Ethiopia. He said he has no idea about his future at this point: “Just I am here.”

Another man, Mohammed, told me he had left school early to support his parents and had avoided national service until the age of 28, when officials finally came looking for him. He said he fled immediately, fearing not only conscription but risk to his life after Eritrean security forces had killed a neighbor suspected of supporting RSADO guerrillas, who frequently passed through the area. He walked across the border near Bada, and his family followed shortly after, joining him at Assaita.
Since then he has not had a consistent job, but he improvises by selling things he collects (wood, discarded goods) and getting occasional work on the new sugar plantation.

Yusef, 54, was from Sobelale, a small village near Wade. A prominent tribal leader, he was the head of the village administration when he came under suspicion for supporting RSADO in 2014 soon after a neighbor was accused of harboring members of the organization and executed. Once he heard he was on a list for arrest, he fled to Assaita, telling no one he was leaving. A third, from the same village, said he, too, fled to Assaita in 2014 when he was tipped off that he was suspected of aiding RSADO. All three said they were happy to be surrounded by Afars and had no plans to go anywhere until the situation changed at home.

The Berahle Camp

To get to Berahle from Assaita, we drove almost straight north through the Danakil depression, historically one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. Today, it and the surrounding area are also among the driest, due to a drought that is being compared to the one that ravaged Africa in the mid-1980s. Water holes and wells are drying up, grasses are withering and sheep, goats and cattle are dying, both in eastern Ethiopia and across the border in southern Eritrea, though apparently not to the same degree in the densely populated highlands where the small number of expatriates live, which renders the drought and its victims largely invisible to outside eyes. But with new arrivals pouring in every day, this camp virtually shouts the news.

Abdella Mousa Ali, 50, arrived ten days earlier with a sister and a brother. “Our animals were dead and people were dying,” he said. “There was no food, and no help from Asmara [the Eritrean capital] or the UN. Nothing.” The grueling three-day journey over the parched mountains took its toll, too; some died on the way, he said.

Nearly all the newcomers spoke of drought as a factor in their flight, the more so if they lived largely or partially from livestock. But there were other pressures that multiplied drought’s impact—intensified government controls on fishing, the civil war in Yemen and a growing military presence, which felt to them like an occupation.

Half a dozen young men from the Tio area had arrived that week. “The government stopped us from fishing and the fighting in Yemen stopped us from trading,” said 20-year-old Mohammed Idris, a tenth-grade student, adding that all he saw in his future was forced labor in the country’s national service. Mohammed Ibrahim, 26, who had come with him, said he had been working as a fisher while hiding from the authorities for years, but the recent arrival of an army battalion in his village to enforce the ban on artisanal fishing made this impossible: “My choice was to die or to leave.”

Ali Mohammed, 48, came alone after seeing his carpentry and furniture making business collapse. “There was no work and no money,” he said. “Even if you’re making things, no one can buy.”

The oldest person I met was Hussein Ali who at 70 had decided there was nothing left for him in Eritrea. He had worked in salt mines along the border until the war with Ethiopia in 1998 shut that down. Then he turned to petty trading, going from village to village to buy and sell grain and other basic goods, but the collapse of the economy had caught up to him. “There is no profit in this now,” he said. “No jobs, no resources, no way to support myself.” So he packed up what he could carry and set off to find a son living in the city of Mekele, in the nearby Tigray Regional State. “Many elders want to leave, too, but the journey is too difficult on foot,” he added, showing open blisters on his feet, still raw after four days at the camp.

Harrowing the Ground

The Afar refugees describe an economy and a society in deep crisis, with conditions in Eritrea resembling foreign rule by administrators and security forces who neither speak their language nor respect their culture. Many, rightly or wrongly, are convinced that the regime sees them and their pastoral way of life as an obstacle to development strategies hatched in Asmara to serve the political and economic interests of the Tigrinya-dominated elite. This point of view is reinforced by the use of Afar territory to house numerous military bases and prisons but only two secondary schools and no post-secondary institutions.

The absence of assistance for the resident population in the face of economic strangulation on all sides adds to this perception. Some say their flight may be just what the regime seeks.

Their insistence on remaining close to home, coupled with the depth and breadth of their shared grievances, which are seen through the lens of ethnic domination, harrows the ground for active resistance to what most perceive as the source of their problems—the government in Asmara—especially among young men who have seen other options disappear. The failure of a viable pan-Eritrean opposition to emerge has strengthened the view among many that only an Afar-led resistance can be trusted to act in their interests, only other minorities with similar experiences and grievances can be counted on as allies, only regime change in Asmara will suffice, and only armed conflict will achieve that outcome, a position that resonates with the Afars’ warrior culture.

That context helps to explain why the Afar region has been the site of the highest number of reported violent incidents in Eritrea over the past decade, numbers that have risen in recent years. Should the Afars in Ethiopia, both existing communities and newcomers, experience a significant falloff in resources and support, many will be ripe for the appeal of more radical alternatives than those offered by RSADO or traditional leaders. Such alternatives are close at hand, with both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda gaining ground across the Bab al-Mandab strait in Yemen.
Mary Ann Tétreault

Mary Ann Tétreault died peacefully in her sleep at home in Newport, Vermont on November 11, 2015. She was a spectacular human being, a gifted intellectual, and a generous mentor and friend.

Mary Ann earned her undergraduate degree at Sarah Lawrence College and her masters and doctorate at Rice University. She wrote her dissertation on the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries. She taught at Old Dominion University and Iowa State University before moving to Trinity University in San Antonio where she was the Una Chapman Cox Distinguished Professor of International Affairs from 2000–2012.

Trinity’s Sussan Siavoshi remembers Mary Ann’s “unbound intellectual energy and her interest in everything, from the most mundane to the most profound.” She cherishes also Mary Ann’s hennaed hair and her laughter. Nannette Le Coat adds, “We all miss Mary Ann’s passionate commitment to human values and the intellectual energy she brought to the study of international politics on the Trinity campus.”

Mary Ann guided and inspired generations of students. She taught more than 50 different courses over her career and once wrote, “To me, the greatest enemy of democracy and autonomy is ignorance. My goals in teaching are to transmit not only knowledge but also the skills and confidence that will enable students to continue to educate themselves throughout life.” Her page on Trinity’s website speaks volumes. She writes, “A T-shirt slogan of my youth was ‘Question authority.’ To that, I say, ‘Amen,’ even when I am the authority.”

Mary Ann pioneered many aspects of the study of the Middle East that are now taken for granted. She wrote extensively (including for this magazine) about women, oil, political economy, social movements, norms, human rights, democracy and all things related to Kuwait. Women were the focus of many of her projects “because the actions and experiences of women are often so different from men that they enable me to test global theories—which I often find wanting.”

Among her publications are three books on oil. Ellis Goldberg writes, “Her book on the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries published in 1981 was hands down the most complete book written about it.” It was “a technical tour de force” and the “most imaginative and whimsically insightful thing I’ve ever read about the oil industry. Mary Ann was an avid investigator of fault lines whether in parliamentary politics, women’s liberation or even the price of oil.”

Mohamed Al Ghanim recalls: “Her work never failed to offer original and often missing nuances to the topics she scrutinized. She contributed greatly to unraveling complex dynamics facing the Middle East and Kuwait especially.” Mary Ann’s book Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait is still used in classrooms even though it was published in 2000. Farah Al-Nakib credits Mary Ann for establishing “the foundation that those of us who write about Kuwait continue to build on. I owe much of my career to her, but it is the joy and warmth of her friendship that I will miss most.”

Mary Ann wrote World Politics as if People Mattered with Ronnie Lipschutz (2005). I was privileged to co-edit her final book Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition along with Andrezej Kapiszewski. Her friend and frequent publisher Lynne Rienner says, “I will always miss Mary Ann, her heart, her glowing hair, her just plain feistiness and of course all the rest. To know her was (and still is) to love her, so though it may seem strange, I feel lucky to be able to miss her.”

Mary Ann was something of a rebel and always tackled hard issues head on. Donna Lee Bowen remembers that “Mary Ann had one of the most incisive intellects I have been exposed to—her powers of logic and judicious thought were astounding. She employed these abilities in a continual search for human justice.”

She was very active in the International Studies Association, the international political economy section of which awarded her the Distinguished Scholar Award in 2012. She also served on the editorial board of the Journal of Arabian Studies.

Mary Ann was an exuberant spirit and she loved friends, family, food, drink and rollicking conversation. Her generosity knew no bounds. She had a special knack for bringing together people who would go on to become life-long friends.

Upon retirement in 2012, Mary Ann moved to Vermont. She continued to inspire others and was writing on Gulf security and education even in her final months. But she also made sure to tend her beloved garden with its plethora of produce—peas, cherries, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers—and to rejoice in hummingbirds, grosbeaks and other feathered creatures. As they had for more than 20 years, she and her husband Richard made their “annual hijra to Iowa” to enjoy three operas.

Mary Ann is survived by two sons, Paul and Charles, as well as Richard, the ground beneath her feet. The two of them shared a deep love and a wicked sense of humor. With that foundation, she fully embraced life with all its challenges and opportunities. We shall all miss Mary Ann and remain grateful to her.

—Gwenn Okruhlik

A really good social analysis can take a seemingly minor issue and use it as a lens through which to examine multiple aspects of a complex system. Pamela Karimi has done exactly that in her impressively researched study of *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran*. This book is not just about the role of things in private homes. Rather, Karimi tracks how the changing material culture of Iranian households reflected changing social experiences, norms and expectations at every level of experience, from the most intimate matters of personal hygiene to the Cold War agendas of international policy. She examines the social construction of domestic spaces and the spatial organization of social life, progressing along a loose chronological path from late nineteenth-century Qajar Iran to the early twenty-first-century Islamic Republic. But the structural organization of the book is really conceptual: Each chapter addresses a different aspect of the changing human geography of social and spatial relations, and as a whole, the book very successfully challenges any lingering assumptions that spaces can be readily segregated into public or private realms. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, including architectural and urban planning resources as well as missionary archives, educational curricula and religious treatises, Karimi documents how Iranian households became “modern” by making the home the locus of consumption (of both goods and behaviors), and how modernity became more widely accessible as domestic spaces and consumer items increasingly became local versions of a broader global “middle-class” experience.

Karimi opens the book by discussing that ubiquitous modern appliance, the air conditioning unit or “kooler.” As a “montage” product initially produced by an Iranian-American joint venture, the Iranian kooler became a middle-class consumer necessity, an avant-garde art subject and eventually a target of Islamic nationalist political ire. Her brief overview of the varied history of this simple household commodity provides a witty introduction to her larger project of examining Iranians’ construction of modern identities and spaces. Each chapter revolves around an aspect of domestic life, the focus of the discussion continually expanding in order to pull in a wider set of integrated issues. The chapter on late nineteenth-century domestic design begins with a sensitive discussion of the pastiche of Qajar interior decoration, and the quite public role of the newly constructed Tehran private palaces (Gulistan in the central city royal compound, and the suburban summer pavilions Shams al’Imarah and Khabgah). Karimi demonstrates that these apparently traditional spaces of gender segregation actually highlight the question of women’s presence, whether visible (as a Western image inset and lacquered to the mirror and plaster wall work of a formal reception room), or implied (in the published and circulated images of the shah’s newly built family quarters). Under the Pahlavi monarchy, domestic architecture becomes more firmly connected to urban planning and industrial development, and the exemplary modern domestic space is increasingly intended for the appropriately modern nuclear family. The availability of concrete enabled the building of multi-story apartment buildings, and new models of industrial organization led to planned communities in company towns, segregated by class and occupation rather than gender. The modern worker, the modern home, the modern family and the modernizing monarchy were all intended to complement each other. But authorities, whether political or religious, did not leave the social organization of these new spaces to chance. In two fascinating and complementary chapters, Karimi explores the development of a local home economics curriculum as a core subject in girls’ education (often taught by foreign missionaries and supported by the US Department of Education as part of American Cold War strategy), and Islamist experts’ pre- and post-revolutionary creation of modern handbooks of proper behavior (that both accommodated new consumer items and images and vilified their material lure). While experts of various kinds exhorted them to practice appropriate modernity and proper domesticity, ordinary Iranians observed and adapted changes in their political, moral and material regimes.

The last few chapters of the book are perhaps less tightly organized and the discussion becomes more fragmented. This is partly an understandable problem of historical periodization: Writing about changes to domestic architecture and private life under the Islamic Republic is inevitably more challenging, since the politicization of these issues is more immediate. This lack of historical and political distance seems to push Karimi to connect topics that do not quite cohere; I found the linked discussion of the role of skyscrapers as a pre- and post-revolutionary housing unit, and the ambivalent pre- and post-revolutionary government targeting of women as guardians of domestic propriety, to be a bit confusing. But since new skyscraper apartment buildings continue to be built, and to dominate the contemporary Iranian imaginary for both satisfactory urban skylines and desirable domestic space, their influence on the changing spatial and social organizations of Iranian experience may provide Karimi with some very fruitful possibilities for further research.

In sum, this is a fascinating and wide-ranging study, exemplary in the breadth and depth of scholarship Karimi has brought to bear. It will be enormously valuable to anyone interested in issues of urbanization, gender roles, experiences of modernity and modernization, consumer culture and aesthetics, and Iranian social and material
Much of the media coverage of ISIS has been sensationalistic, not surprisingly, since the organization clearly stages its public executions and other displays of brutality as spectacles for mass consumption. But a few book-length investigations have emerged that shed light on ISIS rather than generate (or reflect) heat. Of these, the most concise and accessible is Phyllis Bennis’ primer.

Bennis is a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington’s only truly progressive multi-issue think tank, and a veteran journalist and activist focused on the Middle East. (She is also a former editor of Middle East Report.) This primer is one of a series she has published with Olive Branch Press—all in reader-friendly question-and-answer format. It is polemical, in the best sense of the word, intended to challenge readers to think outside conventional categories of analysis and not to accept the bipartisan consensus that the only response to phenomena like ISIS is some combination of military force overseas and intense surveillance at home.

Rather than start with ISIS’ startling military victories in 2014, as many thumbnail histories do, Bennis begins with a section on the various iterations of the war on terror. This move allows her to situate the rise of ISIS not just in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq but also in the longer history of US-led interventions in the greater Middle East in the name of fighting “terrorism.” This term, she points out, has no universally agreed-upon definition, and is now “used almost exclusively to describe political violence committed by extremist Muslims.” That context is crucial to understanding why the war on terror has been so widely perceived as a war on Islam and hence why ISIS has been able to attract adherents from abroad.

The next few sections offer more detailed accounts of the immediate origins of ISIS in the Iraq war and the civil wars in Libya and Syria. Bennis then turns to topical questions such as the relation between autocracy and political Islam, the causes of sectarianism and the role of oil.

The final, very useful chapter outlines alternatives to the ISIS-era war on terror, based on de-escalation of the conflicts that enabled ISIS’ ascent and diplomacy to find durable political solutions in the combat zones, as well as massively increased humanitarian aid. Bennis reproduces a compelling summary of recommendations to this effect by a group of Syrian women who met in 2013 and 2014. It is striking that though this item originally appeared in Time magazine in October 2014, it has received little attention to date. The guns drown out the region’s more humane and sensible voices.

The primer’s short format leads to some elision of history, and the emphasis on European colonial and US interference lets local authoritarian rulers (though not the Saudis) off the hook to some degree. But the information and analysis presented by Phyllis Bennis are what the average American reader most needs to see.

—Chris Toensing


Editorial continued from page 1.  

agreement, Iran has accepted restrictions and external scrutiny that go considerably beyond its obligations as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The deal, in other words, is as good as it gets—in terms of assurances that Iran is not building the bomb. It was salutary, in fact, that in the furor over the deal in the US media and political spheres so many Establishment figures were willing to acknowledge reality. No US administration, no matter how bellicose, was ever going to compel Iran to surrender. To the contrary, the obduracy of the Bush and (for a time) Obama administrations on the subject of uranium enrichment wound up lending the Islamic Republic considerably more leverage when serious negotiations finally started. Staying close to the letter of international law, and loudly asserting its treaty rights, Iran managed to obtain enough centrifuges and enrich enough fuel to have something to give in exchange for sanctions relief. Now that the accord is completed, no US administration can afford to reneg on it. The other five powers that signed the deal with Iran will not acquiesce in such abandonment—barring egregious Iranian violations—and Washington, not Tehran, will be alone.

Opposition to the agreement, if it goes beyond macho obsession with US primacy, is rooted in the notion that the Obama administration has betrayed Washington’s two main strategic partners in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia. This objection is utter nonsense: The White House has actually ramped up the twin “special relationships.” Months before the Iran deal was struck, the US pledged still more arms sales to Israel and the Arab Gulf states. In early March, Vice President Joe Biden met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss a new Memorandum of Understanding by which the US would send $5 billion in military aid for the next three years, on top of the $3.1 billion that is already on the way. And the US continues to slip target coordinates and high explosives to the Saudis for their criminal assault on Yemen.

Rather, the single-minded pursuit of détente with Tehran reflects the Obama administration’s own reckoning with grim realities of geopolitics. Israel and Saudi Arabia are garrison states that show no interest in “stability,” certainly not if that overworked locution means “peace.” Other US allies, such as Bahrain and Egypt, are betting blindly on pure coercion to bring restive populations to heel. Afghanistan and Iraq remain war zones more than ten years after US invasions. Elsewhere, with Syria being the chief example, events are out of any one power’s control and the outcome is impossible to predict. But the level of Russian, Iranian, Saudi, Turkish and other outside intervention there demonstrates the limits on US clout, which were always there but which Obama’s predecessors chose to disregard. The nuclear accord, with its tacit but unmistakable disavowal of aspirations to topple the Islamic Republic, is the administration’s effort to spare its successor still another quandary. It is crisis management and not a revision of grand strategy.

The Iran agreement is no magic wand, neither for winding down the combat in the Islamic Republic’s vicinity nor for improving that state’s horrid human rights record. Its promise is to banish the specter of yet another war in the Middle East. The deal’s tragedy is that its impetus came from the collapse of the regional order and the accompanying, incalculable human suffering.
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