Introduction

A scholar contemplating pre-modern government must experience a sense of wonder. How was it possible to keep control over an extensive region with so few of the tools that modern governments possess? The central administration rarely held a monopoly of force, and a message sent to the other end of the kingdom could require weeks or months to arrive. The population spoke a variety of languages and most were more firmly attached to local elites than they were to the central government. Tax collection was difficult, since both landowners and peasants attempted to thwart the process. In the medieval Middle East, the challenge was particularly great, since there were few legal entities which provided society with a formal structure or regulated relationships among its separate parts. Furthermore its inhabitants included not only urban and agricultural populations but also large numbers of mountain peoples and nomads, some of whom inhabited regions almost inaccessible to government forces. Despite all this, governments did gain and hold power in the Middle East and society remained remarkably cohesive and resilient through numerous dynastic changes.

This book is an examination of how the system worked: both how government retained control over society, and how society maintained its cohesion through periods of central rule and of internal disorder. It is also a portrait of a particular place, time and dynasty: the place is Iran, the time the first half of the fifteenth century, and the dynasty is the Timurids, founded by the Turco-Mongolian conqueror Temür, or Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405). I am examining in particular the reign of Tamerlane's son Shahrukh who ruled from 1409 to 1447. The Timurid dynasty and its military followers came from outside the Middle East, spoke a language foreign to most of the population, and depended on an army that was consciously different from their Iranian subjects. At the same time they were Muslim, literate, and for the most part fluent in Persian. Many were landowners and cultural patrons who had much in common with their subjects, and particularly with the Persian elite who made up the class of city notables. Timurid rule depended on the superiority of nomad armies, but, like all other rulers, the Timurids required some form of consent from the population.

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The relationship of government to society in the medieval Middle East is a slippery question. Here, as elsewhere, the ruler was the lynchpin of government, despite his inability to monopolize coercive force. He held an ambivalent position – above his followers and subjects, but also at their mercy. Because there was no fixed system of succession, the death of a ruler often unleashed a struggle. A serious illness commonly brought disorders within the realm and death could precipitate a free-for-all, bringing with it the destruction of crops and cities and the implementation of ruinous taxes. The Sufi shaykh Khwaja Ahrar told his disciples that his family had been preparing a feast to celebrate the shaving of his head on his first birthday, when they learned the news of Temür's death in 1405. They were too frightened to eat, and so emptied the cauldrons onto the ground and fled to hide in the mountains.[1] The population's panic was fully justified. The importance of the ruler to the system did not ensure respect to central government, the ruler's possessions, or even to his corpse after death.[2]

Despite the fragility of central rule, the medieval Middle East was the locus of a stable and self-replicating society, which was based on personal ties rather than formal structures. The urban populations who depended most directly on central rule included separate and self-conscious groups: the religious classes, artisans, and merchants – none of them organized into legal corporate bodies with a fixed relationship to the ruler or the city. Major cities contained centrally appointed governors and garrison troops, but not in numbers large enough to dominate the area. The towns from which the Timurids ruled their dominions were rather like an archipelago within a sea of semi-independent regions, over which control was a matter of luck, alliance and an occasional punitive expedition. Some major cities remained under their own leaders, as vassals of the higher power. All of the local rulers, of cities, mountain regions and tribes, had their own political programs. Nonetheless the economic system remained strong enough to make the Middle East one of the most powerful and prosperous regions of the world.

I am not the first to attempt an analysis of the relationship between government and society in this area, and my study owes a great deal to those which have preceded it. Roy Mottahedeh's classic study, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, demonstrated the importance of social and ideological loyalties in forging the bonds which fostered order in early medieval Iran. As he showed, people created loyalties in predictable ways through oaths which bound them in relationships of clientage or military service.

[1] Fakhr al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Ḥusayn Wāʾiẓ Kāshifī, *Rashaḥāt-i ʿayn al-ḥayāt*, edited by ʿAlī Aṣghar Muʿīniyān (Tehran: Bunyād-i Nīkūkārī-yi Nūriyānī, 2536/1977), 391.
[2] When Temür's grandson Pir Muhammad b. ʿUmar Shaykh was murdered by a follower in 812/1409–10, one of his followers stole the clothes from his body, leaving him naked (Tāj al-Dīn Ḥasan b. Shihāb Yazdī, *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh- Ḥasanī*, edited by Ḥusayn Mudarrisī Ṭabāṭabāʾī and Īraj Afshār [Karachi: Muʾassasa-i Taḥqīqāt-i ʿUlūm-yi Āsiyā-i Miyāna wa Gharbī-yi Dānishgāh-i Karāchī, 1987], 18–19).

Although such acquired loyalties did not survive the men who made them, they were often dictated or reinforced through loyalties of category based on a perception of shared self-interest among people of common family, lifestyle or profession. Almost from the beginning of Islamic history, there was a theoretical separation between the ruler and his subjects, considered necessary because only a ruler outside the groups making up society would be able to remain impartial and maintain a balance among them. The dreams which connected the ruler to the supernatural, and made his rule a compact with God rather than with man, were one mark of the ruler's separate status.[3]

More recently Jürgen Paul has presented an analysis of eastern Iran and Transoxiana up to the Mongol period emphasizing the economic and institutional aspects of government and society. He describes a division of tasks between local elites and the central government with a relationship mediated largely by the local notables and Sufi shaykhs, whose importance increased as the period progressed. What set the notables apart was their local base of power, which was independent of the central government. Both Mottahedeh and Paul stress the importance of individual loyalties to personal groupings and the ruler himself. Paul discusses a long period and suggests an increasing distance between government and society from the eleventh century, with the advent of nomad rulers who were less connected with agricultural and urban society.[4]

For the later period two scholars, Marshall G. S. Hodgson and Albert Hourani, put forward complementary theories of the relationship between government and society which have been widely accepted. Hodgson outlined a dynamic which he called the "*a'yān-amīr* system." The landowning classes were drawn to the cities, where they exerted influence through clientship, in a social atmosphere imbued with the values of Islamic law. Order and security were assured by a garrison of military commanders – emirs – who were often foreign.[5] Hourani described the politics among the city notables, drawn from these landowning classes and dominated, usually, by the ulama. Hourani showed that the city elite could control a significant part of city life and in times of government weakness or crisis they could take over governance of the city.[6] Thus we see a separation between government and society with the

[3] Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Islamic Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 69–71, 178–80.

[4] Jürgen Paul, *Herrscher, Gemeinwesen, Vermittler: Ostiran und Transoxanien in vormongolischer Zeit* (Beirut: F. Steiner, 1996). The two studies mentioned are of course not the only ones from which I have profited. Claude Cahen, *Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dan l'Asie musulmane du moyen âge* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), Ann K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (Albany, NY: Biblioteca Persica, 1988), and more recently Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) are among the central contributions to the discussion.

[5] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 4 vols. (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1974), vol. II, 64–69.

[6] For a discussion of Hourani's theories see Boaz Shoshan, "The 'Politics of Notables' in Medieval Islam," *Asian and African Studies* 20 (1986), 179–215.

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city and its elite as the point of contact. Government and society were
connected by a tacit contractual relation based on common interests in
stability, the promotion of religion, and the protection of trade and agricul-
ture. For the later period in particular, military matters are seen to be the
domain of the government, largely removed from the general population.
Since the central administration took limited responsibility for the daily life of
the population, social cohesion is usually ascribed to the strength of social
and kinship groups controlling the life of the individual.[7]

The basic schema drawn by Hourani and Hodgson has been elaborated by
numerous specialized works over the last thirty years, particularly concerning
the religious classes who made up the core of the city notables. In such studies,
scholars draw conclusions about the general from the particular, and the
choice of population studied is determined by the sources available. The
middle period of Islamic history, from the Seljukid through the Mamluk
and Timurid period, has provided most of the material for detailed analysis.
For social history, biographical works are usually the most valuable source
and studies of urban life and the activities of the ulama are most often based
on material from the Mamluk Sultanate which produced rich historical
literature, including voluminous biographical collections on the ulama.
Studies on the composition and organization of the military have also
depended heavily on the superior sources available from the Mamluk
regions.[8] For Iran and Central Asia, there is much less information on
ulama but we have a fund of biographical literature on Sufi shaykhs. These
have strong influence over our views on Sufi society. A social history of the
Middle East based on existing secondary studies is likely to depend on Mamluk
material about cities and the ulama, but may favor Iranian material for Sufi
circles. We should recognize however, that social norms in the two regions may
not have been identical.

While studies on individual communities can provide invaluable insight
into social history, they do not fit together well to produce a composite
picture of the dynamics of society as a whole. The literature of the medieval
period divides society into classes and types of people, and separates out the
history of each. Each genre of historical compilation preserves a different
type of information, and thus provides a selected and homogenized picture of
the people with which it deals; together the sources serve to emphasize the
peculiarities of each group and the differences between them. The picture thus
presented of separate and distinct groups is misleading. Neither occupational
nor kinship groups were mutually exclusive. Few people and certainly few
families belonged to only one class or type; this is something we know and

[7] See Albert Hourani, *The History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: MJF Books, 1991), 98–146,
and Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2003), 128.
[8] See the numerous studies by David Ayalon, and more recently those of Reuven Amitai.

often acknowledge, but it is nonetheless difficult to write history in a way that fully incorporates our understanding. Furthermore, we must recognize that politics, even within a given milieu, rarely involved only internal personnel; people fighting over a common prize often reached outside their own group for allies. Just as no type of person was clearly defined and separated from others, there was no sphere of power controlled exclusively by one group of people. Rulers and military were important in the religious sphere and religious figures in the economic one. In Iran at least, the city classes, including both artisans and ulama, played an important role in regional military contests. The nomad and semi-nomad populations of mountain and steppe were connected not only to central and regional military powers, but also directly to city populations.

Most studies have focused on institutions and on the practices they engendered. In this book I attempt to analyze the relationship between government and society primarily by examining the practice of politics, seeking the dynamics that kept people together within the groups they belonged to, and connected people of different associations. I am looking for the blurred edges of groups; for the overlaps among different types of organizations and classes of people. I have chosen to concentrate on a single defined period, the reign of Tamerlane's son Shahrukh and the first years of the power struggle after his death. The place is likewise limited to Iran and Central Asia, which were the central parts of Shahrukh's domains. While the use of a limited time and region prevent me from drawing conclusions which can be confidently applied over a longer period, it does offer a number of advantages. First of all, it allows the use of a variety of interrelated sources, which make it possible to trace the activities of important people in different spheres. In this way, the action of an individual in one situation can be judged against accounts from different sources; we can discern secondary identities not mentioned in a single type of source. Secondly, it is possible in a detailed study to recognize the different affiliations contributing to the prestige of an individual or a family.

I have tried to treat individuals not as representatives of particular groups but as independent actors, using whatever affiliations were available to them. I have done the same in the case of cities and provinces. Here again, there are advantages to a study which goes beyond the individual city but remains within a contained period. It is possible both to determine something of the common political structure in Iranian cities and to discern variations in political culture. Likewise, in the case of provinces and regions, one can perceive a range of difference within the larger system. Examining a number of different Sufi affiliations, together with contemporary habits of shrine visitation, allows us to analyze the interaction among communities and to gauge their place and their role in society more fully than the study of one ṭarīqa over time would allow. Moreover, the detailed analysis of a particular time and place permits the historian to check the actual against the ideal. The

literature of the period is liberal in its explanations of approved attitudes and the narrative is shaped to reflect them. If motives for behavior are mentioned they will fit into the categories considered appropriate, and it is thus important to keep in mind that collective memory can distort both events and conventions to fit what are perceived as the rules of society. William Lancaster has analyzed the practice of manipulation in his discussion of genealogy among the Rwala Bedouin:

> As political and economic motives change with time, so the genealogy must change to accommodate changing assets and new options and so there is no true genealogy – truth is relative to the pragmatic needs of the group involved. Thus a society that appears to be constrained by the past (for this is how we see genealogies) is in fact generating the very genealogy through which it 'explains' the present, and ... using that genealogy to generate the future.[9]

Many of our sources manipulate their material in similar ways, and while we cannot untangle relationships and motivation reliably, the use of a variety of different sources and the study of different groups does allow some correction to the picture provided.

There are two major questions posed in this study: first, how a government retained power and fulfilled its function without a monopoly of force, and second, how society maintained its cohesion. The most common answer for the functioning of government has been that the preservation of order was worth the payment of taxes. The city populations who made up urban government thus had some common interests with the ruling group.[10] Society was so frightened of disorder that any government was better than none at all, and should thus be obeyed; this maxim became a truism of premodern political thought.[11] Had obedience been only passive, this explanation would be sufficient, but in Iran at least urban elites and semi-independent rulers were actively engaged in politics and military activity. In examining the life of the cities, religious classes, and independent rulers, one sees a mass of people pursuing their interests with the tools they had at hand. Some further explanation is therefore needed. I have examined here not only the common interests which might persuade powerful, independent groups to collaborate with the government, but also the way in which their internal politics intersected with those of the central and provincial administrations.

The other major issue I address is the cohesion of society, and here a central part of the discussion is the question of how to deal with the relationship of the individual to the group. When we learn that a person was a member of a given commonality, what does that tell us? If people saw themselves less as

[9] William Lancaster, *The Rwala Bedouin Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 35.
[10] Hourani, *Arab Peoples*, 133–37.
[11] Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 182–83.

free individuals than as members of a group or community, then we must attempt to understand how a specific community affected the individual, what its internal politics were, and how it fit into society at large. We should not assume that because a group was an important factor in the life of its members it would command their full loyalty or achieve internal unity. The history of any royal lineage demonstrates that blood ties can cause as much conflict as cooperation. The extended families central to pre-modern society also fostered internal rivalry; one can argue that the more benefits the extended family offers, the more likely it is that there will be strife within it.

The central question, then, is how people coped with the constraints and possibilities of their society. Each group to which a person belonged offered both support and danger; one could hope to call on one's fellows for help, but one was very likely to be competing with them for a common set of prizes. Alliances thus often went across recognized groups, both of birth and of training. The politics of the Timurid period was highly factional, with a dynamic made up of individuals with multiple loyalties, identities and rivalries. The multiplicity of obligation gave choice back to the individual person – anyone in a position of wealth or authority had to navigate among a variety of conflicting obligations and attachments. Thus, in the end, we must assume that the individual was a key player in this society, and not always a predictable one.

The place and the period

The period I have chosen for this study is the early fifteenth century, and the dynasty that of the Timurids, who ruled Iran and Central Asia for much of the century. The founder of the dynasty was Temür, a Muslim Turk of Mongol descent who came to power in Samarqand in 1370 and spent most of his life in spectacularly successful conquest. He was succeeded by his son Shahrukh, whose reign, from 1409–47, is the focus of this study. Shahrukh was a cautious ruler who balanced the ideological and political forces of his time to consolidate control over a friable realm, and he was a man who fit the time he lived in. The fifteenth century offers us less sound and fury, and fewer outstanding personalities than the centuries which preceded and followed it. The major dynasties who controlled the Middle East after the Mongol conquests were already in power: the Ottomans in Anatolia and eastern Europe, the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt, the Timurids in Iran and Central Asia and the Delhi sultans in northern India. This was a period in which the changes of the past could be assimilated and newly won positions consolidated.

One of the great watersheds in the history of the central Islamic lands was the Mongol invasion of the early thirteenth century. The whole of the Middle East was affected by their rule, either directly or by example: their conquests and their rivalries became part of the political dynamic of the Middle East. After the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227, his empire was ruled by a supreme

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khan or *khaghan* and was divided into sections ruled by subordinate khans
from the families of Chinggis Khan's four sons by his chief wife. The western
region stretching from the steppes north of the Black Sea to the Aral Sea and
into Siberia was the inheritance of the eldest son, Jochi. The family of the
second son, Chaghadai,[12] held much of central Asia from Transoxiana
through Turkistan and the Ili region. Chinggis's third son Ögedei became
supreme khan, but the personal area of his house lay outside Mongolia, in the
Altai. The youngest son Tolui inherited Mongolia itself; his descendants
succeeded in taking over the position of great khan, and then in founding a
separate dynasty in Iran: the Ilkhanate. After the death of the great khan
Möngke in 1259, no one member of Chinggis Khan's family was able to
achieve universal recognition as *khaghan*. Supreme power remained limited to
the family of Chinggis Khan but each section of the empire was ruled as an
independent state. By the mid-fourteenth century, the Mongol elites west of
Mongolia had converted to Islam, and the Islamic and Mongol worlds had
come to overlap. Despite its division, as an idea the Mongol Empire remained
strong and the memory of Chinggis Khan retained a supreme place in
political and cultural traditions.

In the Middle East the Mongol conquest reinforced some old political
traditions and introduced new ones. The elimination of the caliphate with
the fall of Baghdad in 1258 created new possibilities for rulers within the
Islamic world. It became possible to claim full sovereign power within one
area and to base one's legitimacy on dynastic claims unrelated to the house of
the Prophet. The first to take advantage of the new situation were the
Mamluks in Egypt and Syria, who based their legitimacy in part on their
resistance to the Mongols and their possession of a descendant of the
'Abbasid dynasty whom they kept in Cairo as a titular caliph. Iran and Iraq
were ruled by the Mongol Ilkhans. Mongol rule brought about an ethno-
graphic change, with the division of the region into separate culture areas.
The arrival of new nomads to occupy the pastures of the eastern regions
displaced Turks who had entered with the Seljukid invasions of the eleventh
century. This population had already begun to move into Anatolia, and
Mongol pressure completed the Turkification of the region. Mongol rule
centered in Iran and did not extend beyond Iraq, thus creating a separation
between these areas and the Arab cultural region of Egypt and the Levant
controlled by the Mamluks. From this time on, the Middle East has retained
the division into three major cultural zones, one primarily Arab, one primar-
ily Iranian, and one primarily Turkic.

In Iran and Central Asia the impact of Mongol rule was far-reaching.
Throughout their realms, the Mongols introduced a period of experimentation.

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[12]   Where I discuss Chinggis Khan's son, I use the Mongol version of the name, but for the people
and the khanate to which he gave his name, I have chosen to use the later Turkic rendering of
this name: Chaghatay.

In the realm of culture, science and daily life, they brought in changes of all sorts – new foods, new plants, new styles of art.[13] In the political sphere, they brought in traditions from earlier steppe empires and from China. In the fifteenth century many Mongol administrative traditions were still in force. There were regional armies conscripted from the population and organized in decimal units, military governors – *darugha*s – in many cities, and a Turco-Mongolian military and court administration bearing Mongol titles. These two regions were part of the former Mongol Empire, just as they were part of the former caliphate.

The high culture of Iran under the Mongols was influenced by its new ruling class, and by the end of the Mongol period Iran differed markedly from the Arab regions of Egypt and Syria in literary and visual culture. The Mongols employed many Iranian bureaucrats, and, at their court, Persian became the primary language of high culture. In the visual arts they introduced significant Chinese influence and their rule oversaw the introduction of a new art form, the Persian miniature. By the Timurid period the Persian miniature was well established and buildings, decorated liberally in colored tiles, were very different from the Mamluk architecture which relied on stone for decoration.

In the fourteenth century, as the descendants of Chinggis Khan began to lose power in some of the areas they controlled, a heady period of apparently unlimited opportunity arose. In China, an indigenous dynasty took control and pushed the Mongol ruling class back into the steppe. Towards the end of the century, the Chinggisid ruler Tokhtamish reunited much of the Jochid section of the Mongol realm and revived its claims to the Transcaucasus and Khorezm. In the west, the Ottomans under Bayazid I (r. 1389–1402), decisively entered the central Islamic lands and laid claim to the whole of Anatolia. The most spectacular career was that of Temür, who undertook a symbolic recreation of the Mongol Empire. He died in his eighties on his way to reconquer China, where Mongol government had been overthrown in 1368. While he was not descended from Chinggis Khan and thus could not claim supreme power for himself, he created a structure of Mongol legitimation by marrying into the Chinggisid house and ruling formally through a puppet khan descended from Chinggis. At the same time, Temür claimed supremacy in the Islamic world and crushed the Mamluk and Ottoman rulers who dared to assert equality. In explaining the justice of his conquests, he called on both the *sharī'a* and Mongol traditions.

The great military engagements of Temür and his contemporaries gave way after his death, in 1405, to a period of more cautious rule within most of the Islamic lands. In both the Mamluk Sultanate and the Ottoman state the first task was to repair the ravages of Temür's campaigns and to regain formal

[13] For more information on the Mongol impact on cultural exchange see Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

independence from the Timurid dynasty. The level of ambition shown by Bayazid I was not appropriate for his immediate successors. For the Delhi Sultanate and the other Muslim dynasties of northern India, even independence was beyond reasonable expectations, and they continued as formal vassals of the Timurids to the end of Shahrukh's reign.[14] The Golden Horde of the Russian steppe could support local rulers in the Crimea or the Volga, but had lost control over the trade routes and much of their influence over the western steppe. Neither the Islamic nor the Turco-Mongolian world of the fifteenth century encouraged the adventurism shown by Temür and his contemporaries.

The choices that Temür himself had made also discouraged his successors from considering further conquest. In the last ten years of his career, he had clearly differentiated between two types of military campaign: those designed to bring land into his domains and those undertaken to display his superiority over rivals. He chose only to incorporate lands which had a strong agricultural base and had been part of the Mongol Empire; these were the regions which would accept his Mongol legitimation and could produce taxes sufficient to support a mixed army of nomad and settled forces. At the time of his death his realm was complete and further conquests would have been both costly and unprofitable.

Both Temür and his successors used Mongol legitimation and recognized their kinship with other Mongol peoples, most notably the Jochid Uzbeks and the eastern Chaghadayid Khanate, from whom they sought brides descended from Chinggis Khan. While Shahrukh discontinued the practice of ruling through a puppet khan, he himself informally adopted the Mongol supreme title of *khaghan* and in the histories written for him and his sons, the dynasty's connection to the house of Chinggis Khan became the subject of an elaborate myth. Loyalty to the Mongol heritage did not prevent the Timurids from subscribing fully to the Perso-Islamic culture of their subjects. Temür himself, though illiterate, was bilingual in Persian and Turkic and had a strong interest in intellectual questions, particularly history and religious studies. He collected at his court not only the finest craftsmen of the cities he conquered, but whatever scholars he could bring home. In religious sciences he was particularly successful; his court contained three scholars of outstanding prestige, Sa'd al-Din Taftazani, Sayyid 'Ali Jurjani, and Muhammad al-Jazari. He commissioned histories of his reign in both Persian and Turkish. What was equally important for the future course of the dynasty was Temür's active interest in the education of his descendants. According to the historians of Shahrukh's period, Temür took charge of the education of his grandchildren, personally appointing their nurses and tutors. During his lifetime, almost all his grandsons were raised in the central court

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[14] Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate. A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 322.