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Times of Ahmad Fardid
Ali Mirsepassi
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PART I

Introduction

Introduction. Islam after the Fall: Why Fardid Matters

Ahmad Fardid (1910–1994) was a man whose life and thought embodied a unique experience of the modern world and a related set of ideas that are critical for understanding Iran’s complex history and experience of modernity. He lived in Iran between two revolutions, and while loathing the first (the Constitutional Revolution of 1906), he went on to become the self-appointed spokesperson for the second (the Islamic Revolution of 1978). At the same time, Fardid also represents a larger twentieth-century intellectual trend in the world of ideas, centered on the thought of Martin Heidegger. Fardid portended important themes in the post-structuralist critique of Orientalism, and articulated Islamism as a “revolutionary” alternative to the Marxist model of social change. He was also critical of the “traditional” understanding of Shi’a Islam espoused by the ulama, and was recklessly hostile to secular liberalism and rational materialism as beacons of the degenerating modern West. Within this larger context, the figure of Fardid presents an important historical case study in understanding the anti-modern political and cultural critique that remains deeply relevant today.

Fardid’s life and ideas are best explained within the historical context of the critical transitional period in which they originated. Fardid was born in 1910, at a pivotal juncture in modern Iran’s political history. He despised the achievements and spirit of Iran’s Constitutional Revolution that colored his early life. To understand this, it’s necessary to keep in mind the transnational dimensions of Fardid’s outlook. Fardid’s larger mission was to revolt against the international order shaped by the modern West. His romantic objectives and rhetoric, and his determination to create a qualitatively different type of society, were rooted in a rejection of global social and moral processes and their primary mode of social organization – namely, liberal capitalism. This latter feature of his political agenda accounts for his marked affinity with Marxism, even as he professed to loathe it and rarely

mentioned capitalism (except in the metaphysical terms of Heideggerian historicism). Fardid's abstruse metaphysical jargon harbored a venomous hatred of this "materialist," "secular" world-historical conjuncture in the emerging global economic order, and he dreamed of creating a pure and spiritually regenerated Shi'a Islamist world.

Fardid remained initially indifferent to various secular social movements in Iran during his lifetime, only to later attack them virulently, dismissing them as part of the broader process of "Westoxification" in Iran. It is the ambition of this study to ascertain why Fardid rejected secular politics in favor of a "spiritual politics" that makes its appeal to a higher, mysterious level of reality, over against the ethical and material exigencies of the "real" world. This complex story involves Fardid's perception of the emergent Western global order and its encroachment on his native Iran following his return from Europe about a decade earlier, where he had studied the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. It was during that time, while tucked away on an unspecified retreat somewhere in the ominous industrial wreckage of post-World War II Europe, that he had experienced his cosmic "epiphany" surrounding the world's succumbing to the forces of "Westoxification." There, he must have witnessed a civilization in ruins – Berlin leveled by the war and the palpable struggle for survival following the destruction of the Third Reich. Fardid lived in Paris from 1946 to 1950, and then in Heidelberg, Germany, from 1951 to 1955.

To fully understand Fardid's vision, we must recall how both the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the later 1978 revolution emerged from Iran's historical experience of foreign imperial domination. Nineteenth-century Qajar Iran was divided into political and economic zones ruled by Great Britain and Imperial Russia. Imperial power controlled trade, banking, telegraph systems, and the Qajar military forces. Autonomous tribal chieftains, landlords, merchants, and powerful clerics – the traditional overlords of Iran's diverse ethnic and linguistic populations – were co-opted and marginalized. Following several decades of foreign-directed Qajar modernization reform, Iran's 1906 popular Constitutional Revolution was linked to contemporaneous mass revolutions in the neighboring Russian and Ottoman empires. Culminating in fierce civil war, the popular mobilization of 1908–1911 deposed the despotic shah and challenged foreign control of Iran. The emerging national movement combined democratic and socialist discourses with traditional Shi'a conceptions

of community justice. The second *Majles* (parliament) proposed land redistribution, labor laws, separation of religion and state, and the enfranchisement of women – demands remaining at the core of Iran’s twentieth-century reform movements. This epoch also produced Iran’s first political parties, journalism, and experiments in artistic and literary production. However, British and Russian occupation during World War I interrupted Iran’s constitutional experiment, wreaking economic devastation, famine, and deaths.

The 1919 Anglo-Persian agreement was designed to turn Iran into a protectorate, which was met with fierce nationalist resistance and never ratified by the *Majles*. The 1921 army coup led by Reza Shah, an obscure soldier of fortune, was backed by Britain for the purpose of building a centralized state capable of imposing order, repelling Soviet influence, and guaranteeing Iranian oil for the British Empire. Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1940) created Iran’s first modern and authoritarian state, which systematically stifled autonomous expressions of civil society, thus destroying the concrete democratic achievements but not the spirit of the Constitutional Revolution.¹

Fardid, in a highly *recherché* ideological construction, interpreted the Constitutional Revolution as the first move in a grand, foreign, colonial plot. The “masses” and intellectuals of the Iranian nationalist movement, believing they were fighting for the rule of law and democracy, were actually unconsciously (and in some cases intentionally) adopting the Western model for the Iranian nation. The significance of Fardid’s intellectual intervention was to shift the vantage of the political interpretation of Iranian resistance to injustice from a predominantly secular (i.e. liberal, leftist, or reformist Islamic) perspective, to a more extremist and Islamist claim to authenticity and totality. He sought to align the subsequent 1978 revolution with a divine horizon of national transformation. Fardid expressed this in the characteristically mystifying language of Heideggerian historical periodization in the following passage:

We should be on the path of the *day before yesterday’s* God and the *day after tomorrow’s* God. People are chanting in favor of the *yesterday* and *tomorrow’s* god. This is the anti-revolutionaries’ god. Whether we demonstrate for

¹ Touraj Daryaei, *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 347.

this god or reject it, the result is the same. This god is a colonized god. This is the one-hundred-year old habit of the Constitutional Revolution . . . The era of yesterday, today, and tomorrow's god is so powerful that it has captured our universities and our country.²

Modern Iranians, according to Fardid, were living under the symbolic contamination of foreign influence, which remained as yet on the collective unconscious level. He promoted a kind of rebuttal to this foreign influence, which involved the purging of “inauthentic” elements. Democracy, he insisted, was a mode of social organization inherently alien to true Islam, instead being uniquely European and even Greek: “There is no way to find democracy in the Qur’an . . . Democracy belongs to Greece, and idolatry is embodied in Greek.”³ This statement derives its authority not from the Qur’an, the Hadith, or other traditional Islamic sources, but rather from a European convention of Heideggerian philosophical discourse, articulated under the heading of the “History of Being.” “The fate of our time (*havalat-e tarikhi*) has led to the total forgetfulness of Being – or the true God.”⁴

It is on this basis that we may understand Fardid's relation to the second revolution – the Islamist triumph of 1978. The ascendancy of the “Islamic state,” subsequent to the successful outbreak of the 1978 Iranian Revolution, subverted widespread conventions that modern revolutions herald progress and modernization. In a strong and semi-developed state, massive popular demonstrations and strikes overthrew the modernizing Pahlavi regime. A revolutionary state was established, led by Islamic clerics, claiming legitimacy as heirs to the seventh-century rule of the Prophet Mohammed; its religious leaders spread the message that Iran must return to its Islamic roots. Once the Islamic Republic of Iran had been pronounced, Khomeini consolidated power by organizing military and police forces (i.e. revolutionary committees and militia) with vast powers and unspecified duties. Those with grievances against neighbors or colleagues might inform the revolutionary committee that a given person was an opponent of

² Ahmad Fardid, *Didar-e Farrabi va Fotuhat-e Akbar al-Zaman* [The Divine Encounter and Apocalyptic Revelations], 2nd edition (Tehran: Moasseseh-ye Farhangi va Pajuheshi-ye Chap va Nashr-e Nazar, 1387/2008), pp. 101–102.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the revolutionary government, and thereby have the person incarcerated or killed.

Yet these defining events hardly vindicate the view of the Iranian revolutionary movement as a primarily religious or cultural development. The pre-1960s period saw a quietist stance among clerics – i.e. the Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi – while active opposition was mobilized among Iranian secular nationalists. Indeed, severe admonition of “radical Islam” among lay religious intellectuals remained the norm until very shortly before the revolution. A thorough understanding of the emergence of the “ideological structure” undergirding the development of the Iranian Revolution requires analysis of both the socio-economic realities and the global and historical intellectual context of its propagation.⁵

We can see how the 1978 Iranian Revolution provided a model for action for the dissatisfied masses and revolutionary activists in other countries. Osama bin Laden, obviously inspired by the revolutionary vision, said in an interview: “We expect for the ruler of Riyadh the same fate as the Shah of Iran. We anticipate this to happen to him and to the influential people who stand by him.”⁶ However, by scrutinizing the events of the revolution on the level of ideas, we observe what Fred Halliday has called a “hybrid Islamic-nationalist ideology.”⁷ The figure of Fardid in particular presents a deeply illuminating window onto the intellectual, cultural, and historical underpinnings of these still urgent events in recent political history, whose basic causal determinations and nature remain to this day unclear.

In order to shed light on these matters, this book aims to explore and reply to the two questions posed in the following paragraphs.

The first question concerns Fardid’s general profile. How might we account for the path – one, it is worth noting, traveled by many similar figures – by which a man hailing from a religious familial background, yet having a primarily modern and secular education and having

⁵ Maryam Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 15.

⁶ Najibullah Lafraie, *Revolutionary Ideology and Islamic Militancy: The Iranian Revolution and Interpretations of the Quran* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009), p. 202.

⁷ Fred Halliday, “Iranian Foreign Policy since 1979,” in Juan R. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (eds.), *Shi’ism and Social Protest* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 88–107.

studied (as is almost universally the case) in elite Western universities while cultivating a fascination for Western ideas and intellectual figures, then transforms into the leading intellectual and ideologue of an anti-modern, Islamist movement? Fardid was born in 1910 in Yazd, a city deep in the central Iranian desert that was once an important station on the Silk Road. The word “Yazd” means “worship,” with the city known in the Islamic Republic as “the City of Muslims.” Although Yazd is renowned for its Islamic religious conservatism, the city is also the birthplace of the Zoroastrian religion and renowned for its atmosphere of relative tolerance.

Fardid grew up during a unique moment of social and cultural change in modern Iranian history. During his youth, constitutional ideas remained at the heart of intellectual discussion. Fardid’s father, a well-to-do farmer from Yazd, hired a French tutor for his 12-year-old son in 1922 and encouraged his study of the language. There is also evidence that Fardid studied at the Shi’a seminary in Yazd. Fardid began studying philosophy and Arabic at the age of 14. From these “cosmopolitan” intellectual beginnings, he went on in later life to articulate the philosophical foundations of Iranian Islamism through the influential concept of “Westoxification.” Fardid acquired this vision during a lengthy “academic” journey, first studying philosophy at Tehran University, and then at the Sorbonne in Paris and Heidelberg University in Germany in the late 1940s and early 1950s. While in Europe, Fardid experienced a sort of epiphany. He had endured a state of philosophical restlessness over many years. At the end of this “journey,” he “discovered” that he was the “intellectual kindred spirit of Heidegger.” Ironically, it was through reading the German philosopher’s ideas that Fardid was inspired to offer his anti-Western Islam-oriented philosophy (*hekmat-e onsi*). Following his return from Europe, Fardid went through a period of academic inactivity, only participating in conversations at small intellectual gatherings. However, he emerged as a lively public figure on the eve of revolutionary turmoil, seeking to spread his ideas and guide the revolution by participating in several televised debates both before and after the 1978 revolution.

The second question of this study concerns an apparent contradictory element that consistently emerges in the context of militant intellectual positions assumed against the modern Enlightenment and its political achievements under the liberal democratic model, typically in the name of religion (in this case, Islam): On the one hand, there is an

emphasis on mysticism and spirituality (and, of course, creativity and aesthetic experience), and on the other hand there is a characteristic dogmatic militancy through which the particular ideology at hand is promoted. In the case of Fardid, he speaks of “Eastern Spirituality” and the Sufi poetry of Hafez and Rumi (usually identified as non-violent and tolerant), but also calls for the violent suppression of dissent after the revolution.

One of Fardid’s post-revolutionary proclamations exemplifies this violent intolerance: “Since the Constitutional Revolution began, they [Judaism, Zionism, and freemasonry] took control over three things: philosophy, history, and literature.”⁸ This kind of paranoia-driven reasoning, espoused by a public intellectual no less, was used to justify harsh policies, including arrests and violence against dissenting Iranian intellectuals who did not share the official post-revolutionary ideology. Abundant accounts exist of Fardid variously accusing the West, intellectuals, freedom, and modernity of moral degeneration, and instigating the persecution of his fellow Iranians upon this basis. Fardid’s authoritarian attitude is difficult to reconcile with the poems of Hafez, which exhort forgiveness, tolerance, non-violence, and a kind of ontology of “lightness” in which cosmic power is more playful than vengeful:

Let’s forgive the seventy-two sects for their ridiculous wars and misbehaviors. Because they couldn’t accept the path of truth, they took the road of moonshine . . . Live in peace. Each time the playful angels in Paradise catch sight of us, they reach for their wineglasses and dance.⁹

Of course, Fardid’s interpretation of Hafez was a-historical. He cast Hafez an anti-modern poet, the nemesis, together with “Spiritualism,” of liberal modernity.

By keeping these two questions in view – the enigmatic nature of Fardid’s own anti-modern turn, and the tension of mysticism and violent militancy at the heart of his ideology – the contents of this book may refer the reader to a core structure that elucidates how ideology informs the armature of emergent institutions in times of major social

⁸ Fardid, *Didar-e Farrahi va Fotuhat-e Akbar al-Zaman*, p. 194.

⁹ Robert Bly and Leonard Lewisohn (trans.), *The Angels Knocking on the Tavern Door: Thirty Poems of Hafez* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 39.

change. When these ideologies are nefarious, so are their consequences in the real world.

Fardid's Romance with the West

In my book, *Political Islam, Iran, the Enlightenment*, I argued that Iranian Islamist political movements were largely influenced by ideas and intellectual traditions outside the Islamic religious tradition.¹⁰ I also argued that certain modern ideas might have helped to inspire a radical anti-modern discourse that we now know as “political Islam.” I contested that, at least on the level of philosophical and intellectual inclination, political Islam shares its sensibility and general worldview with the European counter-Enlightenment movement, and particularly its early twentieth-century German variant. Both the Islamist movement and the German counter-Enlightenment identify themselves as hostile to modernity. They specifically reject its epistemological and political claims, founded in rational secularism and liberal democracy. Finally, they are either “religious” in orientation, or inspired by what has been called “religion after religion.”¹¹

This book centers on the anguished life and thought of Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid, who spent his long life loathing what he termed the global process of *Gharbzadegi* (“Westoxification”). This concept encompassed the modern Enlightenment, as well as Europe’s, and indeed Iran’s, intellectual and historical roots in Greek metaphysics. Fardid built the concept by selectively utilizing resources from “tradition” (Islamic/Iranian Gnosticism and spiritual literature) and contemporary intellectual thought (Heideggerian philosophy) to create a new vision of Islamic transcendence. In this context, Fardid belongs to an earlier generation of “post-colonial” thinkers (of the conservative bent) and served as a comparatively crude but strikingly similar intellectual forerunner.

The shared impulse uniting this earlier generation of scholars was a Heideggerian critique of modernity. The poet and spiritual father of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal, made the stark relocation from 1880s British Indian Punjab to the place of his philosophical studies in

¹⁰ Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

Heidelberg in 1907. Engrossed in the visions of Bergson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Iqbal produced a counter-Enlightenment political aesthetic for modern Islamism. His philosophy of mass revolution begins at the top, linking the power of art to popular political awakening, condemning “The dogma of art for art’s sake” as “a clever invention of decadence to cheat us out of life and power.”¹² The aesthetic must be mobilized to serve the vitalist abstractions derived from phenomenology and existentialism, i.e. to excite the “life-yielding capacity” or the “dormant will” of the collective unconscious. Meanwhile, renowned French scholar of Islam, Henry Corbin, articulated his notion of the “imaginal,” a Heideggerian, dream-like category spun between the years 1939 and 1946. While studying Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination in Istanbul, Corbin affirmed that “beyond the sensory world there exists another universe with a contour and dimensions and extension in a space,” the “mystical Earth of Hurqalya with emerald cities . . . situated on the summit of the cosmic mountain.” This book will unearth the meaning of these phantasmagoric visions in their proper political context, qua social and cultural formations arising from intellectual and political processes evolving over an extended historical period.

Although this book presents a group of studies with related themes, Fardid is the subject proper of the work, in his capacity as a pioneering visionary of “Spiritual Islam,” and a serious political liability for Iran’s future. “Mystical Islam” more broadly, I will show, was very attractive among the cultural elite and educated middle class in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s. This explains why important members of the Iranian elite class (Hossein Nasr, Dariush Shayegan, and many others) were drawn to it. Having also, in a peculiar way, belonged to this class of people, Fardid’s origin in the town of Yazd – where in his youth he’d envisioned becoming a Shi’a cleric – was upended when he moved to Tehran at the age of 16, where he would become part of the modernizing intellectual current of the first Pahlavi period. This tension-driven situation may aid in explaining Fardid’s intellectual torment, facing a radical and fast-paced modernization initiative, while having experienced childhood religious indoctrination. It was perhaps within this conflicted context that, recognizing how respected Europeans (Henri

¹² Muhammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), p. 4.