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Excerpt
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Prologue

*‘Not the King but the Minister . . . Not
 the Law but the Police . . . ’*

It is only in the sharpest social and political crises that words, expressions, actions, and undertakings reveal their real meaning.¹

Jalal Al-e Ahmad.

The true problem, the central mystery [*arcano*] of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the King, but the minister; it is not the law, but the police – that is, the governmental machinery that they form and they keep moving.²

Giorgio Agamben

Summer 2012 was a typically turbulent period of Iranian contemporary history. President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was in the final year of his presidency, the revolts across the Arab world were matters of concern, interest and comparison in the streets and offices of Tehran, while everyone else was preparing for the European Football Cup in Poland and Ukraine. Arriving in Iran after a long first year at Oxford, I was getting ready for my first day of internship at the Tehran bureau of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). I was excited for many reasons, all of which speak rather clearly of my naiveté. Working for a UN office made me believe that perhaps once I finished my degree at Oxford, I could find employment back in Iran, or for that matter, anywhere in the world. The financial crisis that had struck Europe and the unholy competition for graduate jobs had made all of us students more desperate (including those at Oxford . . .) and hopeful of the potential of an unpaid, uninsured internship at a UN office. Besides, the UNODC seemed the ideal place to start my research about drug policy; Iranian public institutions were unlikely to accept foreign-based interns at that time.

¹ *Safar be velayat-e Ezra'il [A journey to the land of Israel]*. (Majid, 1373 [1995]), 87.

² *Il Regno e la Gloria: per una Genealogia Teologica dell'Economia e del Governo: Homo Sacer*, II, 2 (Bollati Boringhieri, 2009), 303.

A relative of mine, who hosted me upon my arrival, invited me after dinner to sit with him in the lounge, because he ‘wanted to say a few words before my first day of work’. I took the invitation as a further sign of pride among my family at the fact that I was *working* (a euphemism for internship) at the UN. Instead, my relative’s face became stern while he asked me, ‘Do you know the two Iranian researchers – what was their name? – who worked on HIV programmes and were very famous here and in *Amrika*? Have you read what happened to them?’ I was still a bit confused about the combination of his words and facial expression, when it came to my mind that only a year earlier, Arash Alaei, a doctor who had run a few HIV-prevention and treatment programmes in Iran, starting from the early 2000s, had been released after three years of incarceration in Tehran’s Evin Prison. His brother, Kamiar, had been released the previous year. Both had been charged with collaborating with the CIA and acting against national security.

Of course, it was not the first time that I had been warned of the risks of doing research on Iran *in* Iran. Yet, I felt a shiver run up my spine and thought that maybe the fact that I was working on a difficult issue, based in a British university and a college which has had a global reputation for being, among other more scholarly things, ‘a nest of spies’, could have attracted understandable suspicion among the Iranian authorities.³ Nonetheless, during the following six years of research, which included multiple visits over a cumulative period of roughly 15 months, I did not encounter any problem with the authorities, nor I was reminded formally or informally, of the red lines of fieldwork, despite having touched upon highly sensitive issues related to the politics of drugs in Iran. Perhaps not sensitive enough. A typical question from colleagues in the social sciences or Iranians in general runs, ‘what did *they* [the Iranian authorities] tell you when you were *there* [Iran]? Were you interrogated about your research? Did they harass you?’ Truth be told, the presence of intelligence officers and security apparatuses in the conducting of my fieldwork is remarkable by its absence, at least perceived absence. At no time was I interrogated,

³ At the time, I was a student at St Antony’s College, which has been accused over the last decades of being the training ground for Western intelligence. Following the 2009 elections in Iran, Mohammad Reza Jalaipour, head of Mir Hossein Musavi’s electoral bureau, was accused of conspiring with foreign powers and arrested. See *The Guardian*, Friday 25, 2010, retrieved from www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/25/oxford-urges-iran-release-student.

nor did I ever meet people who warned me about what I was doing – apart from my family and friends. A fact, I should not hide, that triggered, in few occasions, accusations and suspicion of being a 'spy of the Islamic Republic' or an 'apologist' of the Iranian regime.

The subject that I had decided to investigate was an un(der)studied field, not only in the context of Iran but also in that of the Middle East and North Africa and, for that matter, the Islamic world.⁴ The only other researcher who had paid heed to the issue of drugs, addiction and politics in Iran is Janne Bjerre Christensen, who had been expelled from the country in 2005 and not allowed back in until 2012.⁵ Few researchers, especially anthropologists, had been able to work inside Iran between 2005 and 2015, especially to conduct studies of politics and the state. When the topic is discussed, often it occurs in the work of journalists, such as Ramita Navai's *City of Lies*, in which, for instance, narrative accounts take an overtly sensational turn at the expense of analysis, misleading readers towards Orientalist ideas such as the fact Iranians have a tendency to lie. This frame plays instrumentally in the geopolitical game and is very much in tune with Israeli and American rhetoric on Iran (see Bibi Netanyahu's big poster 'Iran Lies').⁶ The axiom, Western countries speak truth, was never a serious assertion and less so in the aftermath of George W. Bush and Tony Blair's Weapons of Mass Destruction tirade, let alone in the era of Donald J. Trump.

On the other hand, there is an abundance of research on illicit drugs and addiction inside Iran. This body of knowledge is unfortunately dominated by epidemiological studies with narrow quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative, sociological and historical approaches. When social scientists engage in the study of illicit drugs, the tendency is to portray drugs through an ideological lens, turning them into all-encompassing

⁴ With the exception of Philip Robins, *Middle East Drugs Bazaar: Production, Prevention and Consumption* (Hurst, 2016) and a few recent publications by myself: Mazyar Ghiabi, 'Deconstructing the Islamic Bloc: Middle East and North Africa and Pluralistic Drug Policy' in B. Stothard & A. Klein (eds.), *Collapse of the Global Order on Drugs? From UNGASS 2016 to the High Level Review 2019* (London: Esmerald Publication, 2018); and 'Drug Culture and Drug Policy across the Middle East and North Africa' in P. Gootenberg (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Global Drugs History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ Personal communication with the author.

⁶ Noa Landau, 'Netanyahu: Iran Nuclear Deal is Based on Lies – Here is the Proof', *Haaretz*, April 30, 2018, retrieved August 21, 2018, from www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/pm-expected-to-reveal-how-iran-cheated-world-on-nuke-program-1.6045300.

evils. There has not been a systematic treatment of illicit drugs from Iranian social scientists, perhaps with the exception of Said Madani’s historical sociology, *Tarikh-e E’tiyad* (History of Addiction), which details the changing policies of drug control and addiction treatment from the Pahlavi monarchy up until 2005, the end of reformism. This book is currently out of print and its author sent in exile in the southern city of Bandar Abbas, for reasons unrelated to his research on addiction.

The dearth of scholarly work on illicit drugs prompted the project behind this book. With the generous support of the Wellcome Trust Doctoral Studentship in Society & Ethics at Oxford University’s Department of Politics and International Relations, I was able to design a qualitatively rich and fieldwork-oriented study of drugs politics in Iran. The book uncovers the politics of illicit drugs in their historical trajectories and through ethnographic engagement. It does not deal with the object of illicit drugs as a separate dimension in modern society. Instead, it regards drugs as part of the larger state–society relations and power dynamics evolving throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drugs are objects defining social and political life in a number of ways. People consume drugs, governments punish consumption and dealing of drugs, people seek sanitary and welfare support for drug dependencies, states intervene in facilitating, impeding or instructing public health measures on drug consumption. Drugs, hence, are part of a political game beyond the norms and regulations of drugs policy. This is what I refer to when discussing *drugs politics*.

In the case of Iran, illicit drugs are part of an underlying form of politics which assumes paradoxical outcomes. The Islamic Republic has systematically criminalised drug offenders and punished them with draconian measures, while it has also provided among the most progressive and controversial set of public health programmes (e.g. harm reduction) for drug (ab)users. Here, drugs politics works in a field of ambiguities and contradictions. In the book, these ethical contradictions and political articulations show how incongruities are essential to the maintenance and reproduction of political prerogatives, to the preservation of state interests. In doing so, the book dispels the idea of Iranian politics as a paradox and as exceptional.

Paradoxes are analytical venues for the understanding of modern politics in Iran, as elsewhere. For example, Iranian authorities, based on religious interpretation, allow and actively sponsor so-called *temporary marriages* (*sigheh* in Farsi, *mut‘ah* in Arabic), while forbidding

de jure and punishing premarital sex.⁷ In practice, this has resulted in the legalisation of prostitution and sex work, especially in sites of religious pilgrimage. But it is also used as an expedient for people willing to engage in a flexible union as for those engaged in *white marriages* (*ezdevaj-e sefid*), unmarried couples living together.⁸ Strict sexual codes and the adoption of normative sexuality intersect with the secular trends among younger generations, in defiance both of family and of state mores and norms.

Transgender identities in Iran are another apparently paradoxical situation. Since the late 1980s, the authorities have legislated in favour of gender reassignment surgery ('sex change'), legalising and providing welfare support for people who want to change gender, while denying legal status to homosexuals.⁹ In this way, the Islamic Republic has maintained an orthodox ban on same-sex desire through an unorthodox religious interpretation facilitated by the development and use of medical technology. In that respect, the status of transgender people is protected and legally safeguarded, potentially facilitating social and gender integration, while that of homosexuals remains unlawful and unrecognisable.

To these two cases, one could add the legal framework of organ donations, which in Iran operates under a legal, regulated market where individuals have the right to sell their organs to private citizens for a quantifiable amount of money. The law approved in 2000 regulates the private market of human organs in an attempt to curtail the mushrooming of the illegal organ trafficking market, as it has in other contexts such as India and other developing countries. Iran does not have a waiting list for transplant organs, especially for kidneys. Organised through public associations, under the control of the Ministry of Health, neither the transplant centre nor the transplant physicians are involved in identifying potential vendors.¹⁰ Nonetheless,

⁷ Temporary marriage is a contractual agreement (as all marriage is according to Islamic jurisprudence) in which the two parties determine beforehand the duration of the marital bond.

⁸ Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2014).

⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Duke University Press, 2013). The cost of the entire process is covered by the Welfare Organisation.

¹⁰ Ahad J. Ghods and Shekoufeh Savaj, 'Iranian model of paid and regulated living-unrelated kidney donation', *Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* 1, 6 (2006).

this approach exacerbated the classist dimension of the legal organ market where economic hardship often compels individuals to resort to the sale of their organs for the benefit of wealthier people in need.

Another manifest paradox is the political structure of the Islamic Republic. The centre of gravity of this order stands in the coexistence and fluid balance between religious anointment, represented by the guidance of the Islamic jurist (in the shadow of god), with electoral representation of most major institutions. This systemic ambivalence is a rare thing in global politics and, thus, Iran seems a political exception of modernity. Uninterrupted national and local elections testify to the existence and endurance of democratic elements within the Iranian state, in spite of domestic and foreign challenges to which it had been exposed since the victory of the 1979 revolution. In this way, the political order, from a formal standpoint, adopts two diverging – incompatible – forms of legitimacy: a religious, theological one and a popular electoral one.

These are just a few examples of political paradoxes in Iran. It is no surprise, therefore, that the scholarship on Iran is also rife with references to 'paradoxes'.¹¹ A land of self-contradictory enigmas to which one cannot respond in a logical way, Iran's politics is regarded as being exceptional and differing from political trends as much in the West as in the East. In particular, the theocratic and republican paradox has been the object of countless academic publications, which in turn claim that the Islamic Republic is either a theocracy (and therefore implying that it is politically retrograde) or a faulty Islamic democracy, with potential of reform. Political practice is not part of the analytical picture. Scholarship of this type looks at paradoxes as opportunities for intellectual divagation and not as existing political reality. Instead of discussing modern Iranian politics and its inconsistencies as a paradox, my objective in this book has been that of dissecting this much appraised incongruence, the paradox itself, and bestowing meaning to it in the governmental practice of the state. The Iranian state cannot be explained simply by

¹¹ To mention a few: Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 'The Paradoxes of Politics in Postrevolutionary Iran' *Iran at the Crossroads* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Hamid Dabashi, *Iran, the Green Movement and the USA: The Fox and the Paradox* (Zed Books, 2010); Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, 'L'individu dans le Monde: Paradoxe de l'Iran Islamique' *Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, 26 (1998); Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (Anchor, 2009).

employing the metaphor of the paradox or, for that matter, that of a theocracy. Instead, the paradox has become the way power (and the state) operates, the mechanism through which it governs.

In the chapters of this book I do not argue that Iranian modernity is simply animated by paradoxes and self-contradictory phenomena, but that it is constituted by the oxymoron, and an oxymoronic dimension. The difference between these two figures of speech (paradox versus oxymoron) is capital: the etymology of 'oxymoron' indicates something that is 'sharp/pointed' (oxus) and 'dull/foolish' at the same time, as a 'wise fool', an 'eloquent silence'; in the realm of politics, the oxymoron reproduces the underlying, inescapable contradictions that animate political life and on which politics is ultimately constructed. Paradoxes, instead, remain simply a condition that defies logic and to which one cannot bestow political meaning. The examples of gender reassignment, organ donation and temporary marriage clarified situations of oxymoronic value. Oxymora are bearers of unusual meaning, which, beyond their poetic value, enable the formulation of new concepts and the opening of new intellectual avenues. In that, they hold chimeric value for they are not trusted at first glance, but make possible the overcoming of old habits, like that of getting used to words and ideas in the social sciences.

Observers often understand the harsh penalties for drug offences as a side effect of Islamic law. Indeed, following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, authorities adopted stricter rules and measures against drugs trafficking and drugs use. This strategy contributed to the militarisation of anti-narcotics, especially in the southeast region of Sistan and Baluchistan, but also in the adoption of the death penalty against drug traffickers up until 2017. However, a closer look at the history of drugs in Islam shows that Islamic law remains rather silent on the matter of narcotic drugs. Those expecting religion to be the driving force behind political decisions *vis-à-vis* illicit drugs will be disappointed. Only recently, following the appointment of clerical figures at the head of state institutions, have Islamic jurists taken a bolder, overt stance against narcotics. Even then, the clergy has often adopted a more nuanced and compromising approach on narcotic drugs compared to their civilian counterpart. Unrelenting calls for anti-drug operations comes from officials unconcerned with religious matters. For instance, once inquired about the medical and therapeutic use of

substances such as cannabis, a number of Islamic jurists – often with highly influential followings – do not shy away from saying that, if scientifically proven, cannabis use is not against the rule of Islam for medical and therapeutic use.¹² This apparent paradox shows that regulation of illicit drugs does not derive from religious exegesis or persuasion, but rather from the workings of state. Religion could potentially be even a way towards reform of the current prohibitionist laws on illicit drugs. The book will not discuss the way religion treats the subject of drugs in the Islamic Republic. It avoids it with intent, for religion has little influence over the making of public policy on illicit drugs – or, for that matter, in most other fields of contemporary life. So, religion here is discussed by its absence in the thought and practice of drugs politics.

Following Gilles Deleuze’s line of thought, the book does not question ‘what is the nature of power’, whether Iran is a theocracy, a republic or just another authoritarian state, but rather ‘in what ways power is exercised, in what place it is formed and why it is everywhere’.¹³ This new approach recasts the primacy of political practice over political rhetoric and formality. It privileges bottom-up analysis of social and political change as opposed to changes in political outlook and institutions. Paraphrasing Giorgio Agamben: this book is unconcerned with god and theology, but attentive to the intervention of its angels and agents; it leaves the king (or the Supreme Leader) aside and looks for the ministers; it reads the laws, but goes after the police.¹⁴ Ethnographic observation and engagement, therefore, become a preferred method of study, instead of the classical use of discourse analysis and formal interviews. Practice over rhetoric, politics over policy, political order over the regime mean that the close-up narrative on Iran is seen transversally in light of political transformations globally.

This is a time when both illicit drugs and Iran are experiencing a surge in global interest. For the first time in a century, there is a direct challenge to the prohibitionist regime, with new models of drug regulation being discussed and proposed across the globe, the effects of which could be far-reaching in terms of social, cultural and

¹² Mazyar Ghiabi et al., ‘Islam and Cannabis: Legalisation and Religious Debate in Iran’, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 56 (2018).

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Due Regimi di Folli e Altri Scritti: Testi e Interviste 1975-1995* (Einaudi, 2010), 3.

¹⁴ *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 303.

politico-economic futures.¹⁵ The legalisation of cannabis adopted by Uruguay, Canada and a number of US States is a distinctive sign of the change in the global approach to illicit drugs to which the Iranian case is very much connected. And for the first time in several decades, in the wake of the nuclear negotiations in Vienna, Iran and the Western world are laying the hazardous ground for a broader rapprochement, an event that so far lives in the erratic environment of US president Donald Trump's foreign policy and in the regional confrontations across Eurasia and the Middle East. Regardless of the outcome of the current geopolitical earthquake, Iran is set to be a gravitational epicentre for regional and international politics, constructively or destructively. Although this book does not deal with either drug legalisation or post-nuclear-deal Iran, it pays attention to changes in Iran's drugs politics as a litmus test for larger societal and political transformations, in Iran as well as globally.

The study of drugs and politics also represents an unusual endeavour. No material product has been the object of systematic, global and unflatteringly ideological and practical interventions by the state as has illicit drugs. This has occurred with exceptional conformity, like no other global phenomenon. There is no country on the planet that has not adopted, in the last hundred years since the inception of international drug control, some sort of policy about illicit drug control. Regardless of cultural specificities or the economic and social importance of drugs (e.g. coca, opium, cannabis) states across the globe have adopted specific measures to bring under control, or to eradicate, these substances. The case of Iran, in particular, provides a paradigm of what has come to be known as the 'War on Drugs', in a political and cultural setting that has been characterised, by most of the area studies literature, by other investigations and scholarly questions. Iran, nevertheless, represents an outstanding case for the study of the War on Drugs; it is at the geopolitical crossroads of international drug routes, it has one of the world highest rates of drug 'addiction' – estimated at between 2–3 per cent and 6–7 per cent of

¹⁵ Uruguay is the most significant case, but also in the USA, the case of Colorado, Washington, Oregon, California and Alaska. Similarly, Portugal has adopted a radical decriminalisation model while regulation of cannabis is being discussed in Italy, Spain and, interestingly, Iran. See *International Drug Policy Consortium*, retrieved from <http://idpc.net/policy-advocacy/the-un-general-assembly-special-session-on-drugs-ungass-2016>.