

THE ORIENT, THE OCCULT, AND THE OTHER: THE ETERNAL QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, the idea of “hidden wisdom” and “primordial truth” has been a perennial fixture of innovative or heterodox beliefs. Repeatedly, novel methods of thought, be they religious, political, or social, have been introduced as a product of a vaunted time and space: lost secrets of the Persian magi, rediscovered wisdom of Solomon, uncovered Egyptian mysteries, etc. This persistent trope begs examination, and highlights one of the oldest trends in human thought: to find legitimacy in tradition, imagined or otherwise. Furthermore, the literature seems to always point towards a land in the greater Middle East as the font of wisdom - even in the writings of people from the Middle East, who simply attribute works to peoples and lands different from their own. Finally, in more modern times, there is a tendency to lean upon the narrative of a lost past for purposes of cultivating a new national identity, especially by peoples grappling with the overbearing mantle of Arabness or the struggles of a stateless people. Overall, the lost golden ages of the Middle East serve as the ideal wellspring of legitimacy for unorthodox ideas regarding the divine, the state, and the nature of a people.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the notion of lost knowledge and ancient wisdom has been a part of the human imagination for millennia. Especially regarding that which is either lost to time or beyond the human capacity to reason out normally, a single word sums it up: occult. In modern usage, the word has come to conjure visions of secret societies, supernatural forces, and heterodox religious thought that could charitably be called “heresy” by most orthodox religious institutions. However, in the original usage, it was not a rather nebulous noun that could mean many different particular systems of thought, but rather was an adjective used to describe anything in the realm of the hidden, unknown, and potentially unknowable.¹ Occult was not a particular category of knowledge or collection of fields, but rather a descriptor for any sort of knowledge or phenomena beyond the conventional, readily available, or plainly visible. Occult, at least in its use as an adjective, is a perennial feature of human culture.

Concurrently, the idea of an alien “other” has had a place in human thought for centuries, and arguably for as long as humans have existed in groups. This organizational scheme extends beyond the simple grouping of different sets of peoples, and into the realm of less tangible concepts such as ideas and essential qualities. The negatively connoted “other” has historically been assigned a simplified, essential character that turns it into an object rather than a subject: something anomalous which exists almost in a vacuum, practically inert rather than reactive, unresponsive to the vicissitudes of history.² The othering of the lands east of Europe, the Orientalism that Edward Said decried in his magnum opus of the same name, was the system,

¹Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). 3.

²Edward Said, *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition with a New Preface by the Author*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 97.

cultivated over the centuries, that categorized the Orient and everything within and about it as intrinsically different on an essential, ahistorical level. For centuries, the greater Middle East has been the preferred essential other.

The occult and the other have a unique meeting point: the Orient. Just as Orientalism has fixated on the essentialist othering of the greater Middle East, so has the occult constantly harkened back to region. The wisdom of Solomon, the rites of the Persian magi, the secrets of the Arab scholars, all familiar tropes in explaining away the origins of the unorthodox, unconventional, and unwelcomely heretical. The hidden and half-remembered apocryphal secrets of the ancients always spring forth from somewhere in the greater Middle East, as part of the essential quality of both the occult and the Orient; such secrets could only come from a place already comfortably placed as beyond the mundane world of mortal men and firmly in the realm of possible myth and distant memory. The suspicious genealogies of the esoteric traditions all run through the East, where the trappings of history do not have hold over reality, and the invented past lends itself to a sense of legitimacy that is hard to fabricate with original ideas. The occult calls the Oriental past home, true or not, because the Oriental past is the unquestionable, unknowable foundation of every historical golden age.

In the modern era, despite the awareness of the misinformation spread by Orientalism, it has not died away, but rather evolved.³ First, the focus of Orientalization has shifted. The

³While this thesis advances arguments particular to chosen case studies and with a novel schema for analysis, there is a wealth of literature built upon criticizing Edward Said and his work on Orientalism. Daniel Martin Varisco, in his book *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 2007, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnjk4>, offers a scathing critique of Said's work as overly simple and misleading, suggesting that Said inadvertently portrays the Orient as possessed of a single essence and placed in a false binary against the limited Occident of Western Europe. For a study of the reversal of roles, wherein a denizen of the Orient examines the works of Orientalist writers to learn of the Occident, see Joseph Massad, "Orientalism as Occidentalism", *History of the Present*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/historypresent.5.1.0083>. Finally, while writing about South Asia rather than the Middle East, Lisa Lau explores the phenomenon of Orientalist practices being embraced by writers from the Orient in recent years in her article "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals", in

Orientalists targeted in Said's scathing critique were essentializing and othering the Orient culturally, religiously, and ethnically. However, in the last century, another strain of this essentialist reductionism has emerged: that of the national origin. With the failure of pan-ethnic transnational movements to unite peoples in the Middle East, particularist nationalist movements have emerged that rely on the same ahistorical thinking as Orientalism of the past. Pharaonism, Phoenicianism, Syrian nationalism, all attempt to carve out a nationalist platform relying not on the centuries of recent history that have visibly shaped local government and borders, but rather on the argument that there is some essential quality of the peoples supplanted by the Arabs ages ago that truly binds together the people.⁴ Turkish nationalist discourse has spent the last century debating who are and are not the secret forefathers, cousins, and heirs of the Turks as well as what defines Turkishness. The final shah of Iran, despite the prolonged history of dynastic upsets and foreign incursions, decided to declare his reign included the anniversary of 2,500 years of continuous Persian monarchy. Kurdish nationalist writing invents a Bronze Age heritage beginning at the same forebearer civilization as some Turkish writers. It is not the whole of history, but rather a romantically reimagined heritage, that defines these movements.

This shines a light on the second major shift in modern Orientalism: the identities of the Orientalists. In the past, Orientalism was an outward facing discipline: the scholars of the

Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 43, No. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20488093>.

⁴While these examples are rich for discussion, for the sake of brevity and clarity of argument these particularist nationalist movements will not be explored in depth; however, literature does exist on all of these topics to satisfy the curious reader. The history of Pharaonism from the turn of the twentieth century to the Sadat years in Egypt is summed up thoroughly in Samah Selim, "The New Pharaonism: Nationalist Thought and the Egyptian Village Novel, 1967-1977", *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (Beirut: Arab Studies Institute), 2000, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27933778>. In regards to Lebanon and Phoenicianism, Asher Kaufman offers a succinct history and keen analysis in his article "Phoenicianism: The Formation of Identity in Lebanon in 1920", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Oxfordshire: Francis & Taylor), 2001, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284144>. Finally, the cultivation of a distinct Syrian national identity in a former Arab nationalist heartland is examined carefully in an article by Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (Oxfordshire: Francis & Taylor), 2006, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284441>.

Occident applying their method to the Orient, the object and subject wholly divorced from one another. In this modern reimagining, they are one and the same, as it is the actual denizens of the greater Middle East who are constructing such essentialist explanations of their lived reality. Rather than be given imported caricatures and romanticized visions of an imagined past to rebuke, Orientalism has become an indigenous phenomenon, with the writing of creative histories and fanciful literature in support of an alternative vision of the self. Authors such as Charles Corm and Taha Hussein, with nationalist visions at odds with the prevailing currents of politics and religion, championed such alternative fonts of legitimacy, which both defied the demagogues of the day and put a distance between ideologues and ideas. By an ancient train of transmission, the essentialist, particularist brand of nationalism was not the new heresy, but rather the old hidden truth.

Here comes together the myriad threads of this thesis into a single tapestry of truth: the occult has always been Oriental, and in turn the Orient has always been occult. That which has been the other in the mind of scholars for generations has been by definition hidden and unknowable, the preserve of long-lost civilizations and mythologized peoples. In turn, that which has paraded about as unknowable and hidden has always traced itself back to a land othered and reduced to essential qualities, outside the confines of history and reality. The occult is legitimized by enshrining itself in narratives leading back to then lands which are rendered essentially brilliant and untouchable. This is finally made manifest in the modern day in the proliferation of the form of heterodox approaches to national narratives that lean on both the hidden wisdom trope of the occult and the essentialist models of the old Orientalists to present novel conceptions of the nation and state as forgotten imports of the glorious past rather than the disruptive inventions of the troubled present.

For this research, and hopefully for use in further studies along the same lines, here the term “Orientalien Schema” will be coined for the first time to refer to this phenomenon. While the three constituent components easily exist outside of it, this term is to refer to the unique intersection of the occult, the Orient, and the other, particularly in Middle Eastern contexts. While further research will be needed to evaluate whether this schema may be applied elsewhere and regarding other matters, in this thesis it will be used in the context of intellectual history in the Middle East. Originally in religious and later in nationalist contexts, the Orientalien Schema offers a new prism through which to examine the development of religious and nationalist thought. In both cases, there is careful attention paid to all three elements, with different cases swapping out what fills each of the three roles: what is hidden, what is essential, and what is alien.

THE MYSTICAL OTHER: A BRIEF HISTORY

Heretical innovation has long worn the guise of lost and hidden wisdom of the East, most especially the development of esoteric and occult practices. Rosicrucianism offers a prime example of this tendency to assign Oriental origins to otherwise Western heterodoxy. Rosicrucianism emerged as an occult movement in the seventeenth century, and featured a recurrent theme of rejuvenation to sweep across Europe and wipe away the order of the world as it existed at the time. Less concretely defined than other occult systems such as hermeticism, Rosicrucian thought did not focus on the ordered and logical approach of other systems, but rather explained the unrest of the world as symptomatic of a new, divinely ordained epoch. An eschatology of promised renewal preempting a new golden age, a promise to be spiritually purified before the coming of a new holy promised land, is central to the Rosicrucian way of thought.⁵ The tradition does not start with the namesake founder, Christian Rosencreutz, but rather with the publication of texts purported to derive from his writings and the uncovering of his hidden tomb filled with wonders alongside his incorruptible corpse, first printed in 1614.⁶ The Rosicrucian manifestos all purport to carry his wisdom to a new world, more receptive to the ideas of spiritual alchemy laid out by Rosencreutz by the time of his death in 1480.

Every layer of the Rosicrucian chain of transmission serves to distance the authors of the manifestos of the seventeenth century from any responsibility as innovators in the realms of theology and philosophy. First and foremost, the actual authorship of the prime Rosicrucian manifestos is unclear, though generally agreed to be a trio of men in southwestern Germany

⁵Leigh T. I Penman, “«Sophistical Fancies and Mear Chimaeras»? Traiano Boccalini’s ‘Ragguagli di Parnaso’ and the Rosicrucian Enigma,” *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, vol. 15, no. 1, (Catania: Accademia Editoriale), 2009, 106, www.jstor.org/stable/24336713.

⁶Ibid., 107.

writing between 1607 and 1610.⁷ Second, Rosencreutz was supposedly deceased for over a century before his work was supposedly rediscovered by a fraternity of followers, who themselves were the third in a sequence of orders devoted to his work. His tomb was allegedly brimming with all manner of wisdom, and it was from these sepulchral secrets that the order extant in the seventeenth century based its manifestos. Finally, Rosencreutz himself was not the creator of any such wisdom, but rather the agent of discovery and transmission, lifted from Arabic sources and purified of their misguided religion.⁸ Rosicrucianism is, by its own admission, an Arabic system of magical thought cleansed of Islamic elements at its heart.

Hermeticism offers another example of an occult system supposedly spun from Middle Eastern sources. Hermeticism broadly covers a wide range of occult sciences, such as alchemy, astrology, medicine, mathematics and ritual magic that all claim to draw from the wisdom of learned sages. The hermetic tradition claims a mythical lineage originating with the fabled Hermes Trismegistus, an Egyptian sage whose extant works largely emerge during the Middle Ages, with uncertain authorship.⁹ While references in the medieval literature make it clear that there was a corpus of hermetic literature in circulation well before the medieval period, and that the concept of hermeticism was in the intellectual milieu of the time, the actual sources that can be traced are medieval at the oldest. These sources are Arabic, and include both the original

⁷Penman, 103.

⁸For more on the matter of Arabic writings on the occult, see Matthew Melvin-Koushki "Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism." *Arabica*, vol. 64, no. 3/4, (Leiden: Brill), 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26569035>. For an example of an earlier instance of Arabic occult knowledge being transmitted into Europe, see Peter J. Forshaw, "From Occult Ekphrasis to Magical Art: Transforming Text into Talismanic Image in the Scriptorium of Alfonso X." *Bild Und Schrift Auf "magischen" Artefakten*, edited by Sarah Kiyannrad et al., 1st ed., (Berlin: De Gruyter), 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbkjz9n.5>.

⁹Florian Ebeling, Jan Assmann, and David Lorton (Trans.). *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1ffjptt.6>.

stories of Hermes as well as Islamic commentary, such as how Hermes fits in the prophetic tradition.¹⁰

While the hermetic tradition gained great traction in Europe in the post-Roman era, the great works of hermetica were not of European provenance, but rather imported and translated from Arabic sources. Furthermore, the occult sciences that were hallmarks of hermeticism enjoyed a high status as controversial but valued tools of Islamic rulers in the medieval period. ‘Aṭā-Malik Juwaynī, a Persian historian of the Ilkhanate, notes that courts of the time utilized astrologers to read the stars for omens and auspicious movements before major decisions, such as making war upon the Mongols.¹¹ In fact, mastery of the arts and sciences was linked to politics and held in high esteem in Islamic courts during this period, as well as linked to powers beyond those of mortal men. In the late Abbasid era, the performance of magical rites in accordance with the movement of the celestial bodies was of great importance, with the associated preparation of magically significant amulets and images holding a great significance, even being used to prepare to fight the caliphate.¹² The Islamic rulers of the medieval period embraced the occult sciences as just another form of *‘ilm*, perhaps even among the most great and powerful forms. Islamic civilizations, perhaps by virtue of *jahiliya* Arabic traditions of sorcery combined with their prolonged contact with Central Asian pagans and shamanism, were more receptive to the open embrace of ritual magic and hidden wisdom as the basis of applied occult sciences.¹³

¹⁰Ebeling et. al., 45.

¹¹Isabel Miller, “Occult Science and the Fall of the Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn”, *Iran*, Vol. 39, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001), 249, www.jstor.org/stable/4300607.

¹²Ibid., 253.

¹³For a detailed and insightful view into the application of occult sciences in the Middle East, see A. C. S. Peacock, “Politics, Religion and the Occult in the Works of Kamal al-Din Ibn Talha, a Vizier, ‘Alim and Author in Thirteenth-Century Syria.” *Syria in Crusader Times: Conflict and Co-Existence*, edited by Carole Hillenbrand, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvss3x26.9>. In addition, scholarship relating to classical Islamic sources discussing the occult sciences and their place with the state includes John W. Livingston, “Science and the Occult in the Thinking of Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 112, no. 4, (Ann Arbor: American Oriental Society) 1992, <https://doi.org/10.2307/604475>, and Mushegh Asatryan, “Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult.” *Iran & the Caucasus*, vol. 7, no. 1/2, (Leiden: Brill),

The third great pillar of the Western esoteric tradition, kabbalah, carries its own tradition of hidden wisdom transferred from a distant, perhaps mythical point of origin into the modern era. This schema of knowing God through mystical discipline and practices is distinctly Jewish in origin, and later expanded into Christian and hermetic circles, forming an integral part of medieval and Renaissance esoterica. The transmission of kabbalah into the West follows a partially mythic, partially historical path, as the definite movement of ideas from the Middle East to Italy is attested to, as well as a supposed chain of transmission from the Second Temple era into the medieval.¹⁴ Kabbalah bridged the Jewish and hermetic worlds through a mutual Egyptian root, as Moses supposedly was a master of both Hebrew wisdom and the secrets of the Egyptians.¹⁵ Even in Jewish occultism, the Jewish tradition is insufficiently distant in time and place, despite there being thousands of years of rabbinic tradition and sacred history in which to enshrine the legitimacy of kabbalah. The largely imagined hoary halls of Egyptian wisdom have to be plundered to justify the existence of an occult tradition in the Jewish faith, rather than merely accept the possibility of heresy as indigenously occurring.

In each of these occult cases, the genealogy of knowledge is somehow traced back to the Orient, or even other sources within the shared Orient, and always the distant past, rather than confessed to be products of their time and place. This tendency appears to be twofold in nature, both to legitimize the actual occult knowledge or practices professed, as well as to shield the proponents of such things from allegations of inventing such knowledge. Kabbalah puts a gulf of

2003, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030971>; both demonstrate Islamic scholars refuting the occult sciences that in their times had become prevalent to the point of threatening the place of the sharia in the state. Finally, for an alternative view on the occult in the medieval Middle East, see Leon Nemoy, "Al-Qirgisānī on the Occult Sciences." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 76, no. 4, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1986, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1453918>; his work relating to Karaite Judaism offer another valuable example of writing in Arabic demonstrating a keen awareness of, and distaste for, the occult in the eyes of the more legally inclined religious scholars.

¹⁴Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 155.

¹⁵Karen Silvia de León-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 138, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt211qvg4.13.

age and place between itself and its practitioners, buttressing their potential heresy with the twin pillars of Jewish and Egyptian origins, united in the person of Moses who walked both worlds. Hermeticism puts Egypt as the source of wisdom once again, adding multiple steps in the chain of transmission, adding plausible deniability. Rosicrucianism layers the original, descriptive meaning of “occult” on to the winding path of origins starting in the lands of the Arabs, making the wisdom both lost and hidden. The trope of the Orient being the source of all things occult was so prevalent that it even became a literary fixture by the 17th century. The itinerant Ottoman author Evliya Çelebi, in his equally fantastic and encyclopedic *Book of Travels*, recounts numerous instances of supernatural phenomena, clearly to amaze his audience. When doing so, he reports them as being away from the heartlands of Anatolia where his fellow Turks would reside, but rather on the eastern fringes, near the borders with the Safavids. Here, he encounters a Kurdish sorcerer, and even then adds an additional layer of distance between the origins of the occult magic and the present, with the sorcerer claiming that his spell to transmute a flaming log into a horse was passed down, a secret “which has come down to me from my forefathers.”¹⁶ The occult can never come from within the comfortable realms of the familiar, but must come from beyond, from a time and place now conveniently inaccessible to those who would question the source.

Even among peoples already othered by their Western neighbors, the tendency to other and Orientalize was hardly absent. Kabbalah, despite being the supposed hidden mysticism of the Hebrews, is not even properly owned by the Jewish people in the depths of kabbalist lore, but rather is buried in the Bible and written off as foreign, from lands mired in the mystical. Moses and Job are the twin pillars at the foundation of kabbalah, and they are said to be versed in the

¹⁶Evliya Çelebi, *An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi* (Robert Dankoff & Sooyong Kim, ed. & trans.), (London: Eland Books, 2011), 118.

secrets of natural philosophy from beyond the Jewish realm as well as in matters of theology; in the case of Moses, the lore of the Egyptians and the Babylonians, and in that of Job, the arcane materials of the Chaldeans.¹⁷ In fact, in the historiography it becomes clear that the kabbalist origin story is actually made increasingly Orientalized, othered, and occult as time goes on. In the eldest of sources on the kabbalah extant, dating to the thirteenth century, it is described as another part of the oral Torah, transmitted through Moses down the generations into the present.¹⁸ In later genealogies, the kabbalah is both brought into history and removed from reality. The second tradition states that the kabbalah had been hidden within the biblical text from the beginning, and only recently made known to the kabbalists of the thirteenth century through the revelation of the Prophet Elijah before the father of Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières.¹⁹ This tradition offers two layers of separation between R. Abraham (who would become a renowned Talmudic scholar and rabbinic commentator in addition to his mystical prestige) and his mastery of the occult: his own father, who is hardly accounted for in any record beyond this chain of transmission, and the biblical prophet Elijah. This carefully constructed narrative is additionally attested to only a century after the death of R. Abraham, putting even more distance between the claim and the facts.

The final tradition to emerge opens the floodgates for diverse esoteric research, both of Jewish kabbalists looking beyond Jewish sources, and non-Jewish occultists attracted to the mysteries of their rabbinic counterparts: a tradition stating that the first man, Adam, was given esoteric wisdom and theosophical insight and bequeathed it to the whole of the human race

¹⁷Silvia de León-Jones, 140.

¹⁸Oded Yisraeli, "Jewish Medieval Traditions Concerning the Origins of the Kabbalah", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* Vol. 106, No. 1 (Winter 2016), (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jewiquarrevi.106.1.21>.

¹⁹Ibid., 26.

through his descendants.²⁰ By painting the wisdom of kabbalah as diffuse across all peoples, it legitimizes syncretic mystics that would borrow from occult traditions outside the Jewish tradition. Furthermore, placing Adam at the start of the chain of transmission offers great possibilities to invent lineages, legitimize suspect myths, and create an origin that is impossible to disprove. Even the historically othered and Orientalized Jewish diaspora will not claim direct parentage of this potential heresy, but rather ascribes it to the foreign learnings of respected prophets, or the manifold manifestations of divine wisdom across all peoples. Innovation is heresy, foreign ideas are heresy, but rediscovered wisdom from forefathers and cousins is perfectly kosher.

Perhaps most telling is the writing of Çelebi, whose liminal position as the pious layman from a transcontinental empire makes him an interesting case study in Orientalism in practice. Despite his existence as a subject and servant of an empire of the Orient, whose founders were Turkic peoples, he leans towards the occidental half of the Ottoman Empire, and into the Orientalizing modes of writing from West of the Bosphorus. In his tales of the eastern fringes of the Ottoman realm, he not only describes the sorcerer as being Kurdish, but goes so far as to describe the Kurds as a whole as being accustomed to such sorcery, and even intuitively understanding it rather than being flabbergasted as Çelebi and the recently installed pasha of the region he accompanies.²¹ While his outlandish accounts of magics can hardly be taken as genuine, the attitudes they reflect certainly are: that the othered peoples east of his own are inherently, intrinsically different in disposition and in dealing with forces beyond the material world. When he travels amongst the Safavids, he dutifully notes that the Persians are inclined towards barbarism and heinous tortures in the pursuit of law and order, and that while an

²⁰Yisraeli, 34.

²¹Çelebi, 127.

individual khan he travels with is persuaded of their wrongness, it is the inherent nature of the Persians to be “riotous and heretical,” necessitating such punishment.²² The others of the East are legitimized through an Orientalist lens: they, by necessity of their essentially different characteristics, must live differently from their Western counterparts, not judged as lesser but rather as inalienably alien in nature. The Orientalized subject is constructed in such a way that it is accepted to be an othered object and mired in occult traits, from inscrutable secrets to immutable traits to intrinsic disagreements with the normalized ways of the observers’ world.

While this tripartite union of ideas maps neatly onto religious and mystical analysis, it is by no means rigid in construction or restricted in its usage; on the contrary, this thesis argues exactly the opposite. This rudimentary framework, when reconfigured, provides an invaluable comparative and analytical tool for historical, political, and sociological research. Through the lens of this Orientalien Schema, existing studies and their findings can be synthesized in a new fashion to construct novel models and theories of historical development, political thought, and social theory particular to the Middle East. While there are plenty of examples to explore, the Turks offer a superb starting point in their transition towards a republican form of government after the Ottoman era. By way of prolonged conflict, the Kurds provide a contrast in style rather than substance, as their nationalists take some of the same suppositions used by the Turks and carry them to very different ends through their own creative intellectual writings. Finally, Iran provides a rich case study, with a depth and breadth of historical, political, social, and religious elements to examine from the Safavid era onward.

²²Çelebi, 67.

FROM MYSTICAL TO MATERIAL: OCCULT NATIONAL MYTHS

While the proliferation of theories of mystical wisdom and societies dedicated to their preservation and advancement hardly abated after the nineteenth century, the dynamic between the occult, the Oriental, and the other shifted away from such matters of metaphysics. Rather than be limited to the ethereal realms of theology and theosophy, the system of alien and hidden denizens of the East was repurposed as a framework for modern nationalist movements. Rather than Orientalizing different peoples, the focus has turned inward: the peoples of the Middle East have, since the nineteenth century, Orientalized *themselves* to bolster their nationalist arguments, particularly since the emergence of ethnic and linguistic forms of nationalism, and later self-determination in the twentieth century. Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, and Jews all reinvented their self-image with tales of long-lost glory, semi-mythic origins, and an insistence upon their inherent otherness when compared to any and all other peoples. For the sake of political expediency, creative readings of history and inventive interpretations of legend became the basis of the potential new state. Secular movements in the Middle East did not reject, but rather repurposed, the legitimizing platform of mysticism to further nationalist goals in Turkey, Iran, and the Arab World.

Turkish Nationalisms: Turkism, Turanism, and the Pseudoscientific Sun Language Theory

Perhaps first and foremost among the occult nationalisms of the Middle East is Turkish nationalism, which predates both Iranian nationalism and political Zionism in bearing fruit at the national level. It emerged approximately at the turn of the twentieth century, during a time of an ongoing nationalist identity crisis approaching a boiling point in the Ottoman Empire. One of the earliest published proponents of the pan-Turkist strain of nationalism, Yusuf Akçura, described it in 1904 as an extremely recent development inspired by contact between intellectuals in Istanbul with Germans, and as a third policy to guide the nation, distinct from Ottomanism and Islamism.²³ Pan-Turkism as an ideology entered the intellectual arena as a competing candidate for guiding national ethos in the late Ottoman period, and would outlive the Ottoman state as one of a collection of competing Turkish nationalism variants in the early twentieth century.

The eldest of the three major varieties of Turkish nationalism, Pan-Turkism, espouses the most transparently fantastic and mystical national doctrine of the three. The intellectual basis of this school of thought is firmly rooted in racial theories positing that Turks bound not by country or faith, but by shared blood and heritage, were best suited to form an enduring and successful state. As with the old mystical secrets of the past, a suspect genealogy of secrecy and myth attempted to enshrine pan-Turkism in a font of legitimacy. Ironically, this lineage was hardly Turkish in origin; Akçura himself was a Russian Tatar educated in France, and was hardly the

²³Yusuf Akçura, "Three Types of Policy" (1904), in *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945), Volume III, Issue I*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 224, <https://books.openedition.org/ceup/1994?lang=en>.

first non-Turkish, non-Ottoman proponent of pan-Turkism.²⁴ Mustafa Celaleddin Pasha, who published the first fanciful Turcological theories in 1869 in the same vein as romantic Central European nationalism (including such assertions as Turks being part of a “Turanic” subdivision of the Aryan race, predecessors to many civilizations, and perhaps primogenitor of all human languages), was originally Konstanty Polkloziec-Borzecki of Poland.²⁵ Ziya Gökalp, chief proponent of pan-Turkism and its even more pseudoscientific derivation, Turanism, was a Kurd of eastern Anatolian origin. So committed was he to a “mystical vision of blood and race” wherein the Turkic peoples of the world would be united in a sprawling ancestral homeland that he invented a “cult of Turkic antiquity” to support his vision of a Turkic ethnocracy.²⁶ If anything, this hidden diversity of pan-Turkism proponents only lent strength to their arguments: the disparate peoples, all secretly Turkic, were brought together by some inextricable fraternal bond, unique to their kind. The scions of legendary Turan, a lost homeland of an ancestral Turkish race, fighting to unite would even inform late Ottoman foreign policy. The government shaped by the Young Turks, who embraced a pan-Turkist platform, negotiated with the Germans at the outbreak of World War I regarding the fate of Russian territory in the ensuing peace to make “a small correction of her eastern border which shall place Turkey into direct contact with the Moslems of Russia.”²⁷

The second variant of Turkish nationalism, Kemalism, arose in the early post-Ottoman political landscape as a replacement for the unifying duality of sultanate and caliphate. Named after Mustafa Kemal Pasha, later the mononymous Atatürk, Kemalism is a comprehensive national platform for the Republic of Turkey which includes nationalism as one of its six

²⁴Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World of Genocide and Extermination From Sparta to Darfur*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 400.

²⁵Ibid., 401.

²⁶Ibid., 402.

²⁷Ibid., 407.

planks.²⁸ Kemalist nationalism is an inversion of the Orientalien Schema repurposed by the pan-Turkists and Turanists: a transparent, occidentally minded program that wholly disavows any notion of othering. Atatürk was so bold in his articulation of nationalism that he went so far as to insist that only Turks inhabited the territory of the Republic of Turkey, legally prohibiting even the mention of other ethnic groups and regions. In his own words,

Within the political and social unity of today's Turkish nation, there are citizens and co-nationals who have been incited to think of themselves as Kurds, Circassians, Laz, or Bosnians. But these erroneous appellations - the product of past periods of tyranny - have brought nothing but sorrow to individual members of the nation, with the exception of a few brainless reactionaries, who became the enemy's instruments. This is because these individual members of the nation share with the generality of Turkish society the same past, history, concept of morals and laws.²⁹

Atatürk, in his quest to forge a modern state from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, chose to wholly disavow the occult, the Oriental, and the other, and instead obliterated any notion of the other as part of the nation, a nation founded as a modern (in the Western fashion) state in clear continuity of history. Kemalism, in rejecting the whole of the Orientalien Schema, reinforces the fact that the three constituent parts of the schema cannot be disentangled, but are inherently in union. Furthermore, the fact that all three primary aspects of the Orientalien Schema had to be disposed of makes it clear that the interplay of occult, Orientalist, and other in nationalist discourse was something that the intellectuals and ideologues of Turkey and the greater world were well aware of at this time.

The final major strain of Turkish nationalism, Anatolianism, presented an alternative conception of the nation-state by arguing that the Turkish nation as a singular entity was a falsehood. Rather than espouse the panethnic rhetoric and dubious racial theories of Turanism, it

²⁸Mete Tunçay, "Kemalism", *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed February 22nd, 2021. URL: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0440>.

²⁹Atatürk, in Andrew Mango, "Atatürk and the Kurds", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284037>.

rigidly subdivided Turkic peoples into national categories that existed in fixed homelands. While a Turkish race was seen as the precursor, each nation of people is considered inherently distinct from one another, set apart by homeland and history. In the Turkish journal *Anadolu* (“Anatolia”), published between 1924 and 1925, the Anatolianist position was developed by university students in Istanbul. In the eyes of the Anatolianists,

‘Turk’ is not the name of a nation. It is the name of a race from which many nations have sprung: Anatolians, Azerbaijanis, Northern [Turks], Turkestanis, etc. - all of these are without doubt Turks; but they are not of one nation. In order for them to be one nation, their cultures and fatherlands must be one. But their fatherlands are different from one another, and even their cultures [are not the same].³⁰

While it never gathered the same following or left the same cultural footprint as pan-Turkism or Kemalism, the Anatolianist view offered another vision of the Orientalien Schema: a group Orientalizing and othering themselves, by way of arbitrary classification and imagined inheritance of the storied pre-Ottoman past. While an Anatolianist might point to the Seljuqs as his honorable forbearers rather than to semi-mythic Turan, it is still a fanciful occult history, another insistence of hidden continuity, inherent otherness, and essentialization of land and peoples of the Orient.

The heart of Turkish nationalist discourse for the past century has been the so-called “Turkish history thesis.” This pseudoscientific theory regarding the origins of the Turkish people and nation claimed that the lands of Central Asia were not only the ancestral homeland of the Turks, but also of human civilization in general. According to the thesis, the Turks had migrated outwards from their homeland across all the connected continents of the Old World, either sowing the seeds of advanced civilization by establishing the Sumerian and Hittite empires, or

³⁰Mehmet Halil, “Milliyetpervverliğin Manası”, as quoted in Frank Tachau, “The Search for National Identity among the Turks”, *Die Welt Des Islams* New Series, Vol. 8, Issue 3, (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 167, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1570234>.

culturally uplifting others such as the Chinese or Indians prior to their great achievements.³¹ This reading of history, with little historical basis, puts Turks as the hidden forefathers of much of mankind for a variety of reasons, and finds purchase in both pan-Turkist and Kemalist circles. On the pan-Turkist side, the claim of legitimate heir to many ancient civilizations allowed for the argument that the Alexandretta Sanjak given to French Mandatory Syria rightfully belonged to the nascent Republic of Turkey, given its history as Hittite land occupied by a Turkic race known as the Hurrians before the rise of the Arabs.³² For the Kemalists, the Turkish history thesis was the font of legitimacy for a rising new Turkish state, and enforced through classrooms as the official history.³³ The perfect amalgamation of the occult, the Orient, and the other came to become the official story of the nation, and one that conveniently glossed over the immediate imperial past.³⁴

These tendencies towards fanciful histories have informed post-Ottoman Turkish nationalism and policy for over a century, and the echoes of the original cry to enshrine the Republic of Turkey in a dubious foundation of ancient legitimacy reverberate into the present. In the days of Atatürk, the pseudosciences and occult histories invented around the Turks would be promulgated through the official channels of the state, most notably education. In 1936, in the presence of Atatürk and guided by his vision of enriching the state and elevating the Turkish nation-state, a school was opened dedicated to the study of history, geography, and literature, which espoused the so-called Sun Language Theory. The essence of the Sun Language Theory rests upon the three pillars of the Orientalien Schema: Orientalizing a race of people to be

³¹M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 164, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1h1hx88.15.

³²Hanioğlu, 166.

³³Handan Üstüdağ and Gökçe Bike Yazıcıoğlu, “The History of Physical Anthropology in Turkey”, in *Archaeological Human Remains: Global Perspectives*, (New York: Springer, 2014), 203.

³⁴Hanioğlu, 165.

understood as objects possessed of immutable qualities, othering to set them apart from the world, and occult history as the narrative backbone. As explained at the time of the school's opening:

Work done by various scientists during the last fifty years goes to show that the Turkish race has been grossly maligned by older historians biased by racial or religious prejudices. The Turks are far from being a predatory race of barbarians. The Turks reached, in remote ages, a high state of culture which, during migrations into China, India, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, they spread among the less enlightened peoples. They should therefore really be considered the fathers of civilization and possessors of one of the greatest and most glorious histories in the world.³⁵

The Sun Language Theory helped to cement that the state so viciously fought for in the aftermath of World War I was above being partitioned into a rump state encircled by a series of mandates, protectorates, and occupying armies.³⁶ It put forth the trinity of the Orientalian Schema as the justification for a Republic of Turkey rather than a Mandatory Anatolia in the same vein as Palestine, Syria and Lebanon: that there was some essential quality of the Turkish race, some hidden history and inherent otherness, that allowed for their separate existence. Self-determination being a sufficient *raison d'être* for a state, it seems, was a privilege reserved for the Europeans.

Even beyond the immediate needs to justify the birth of the nascent Republic of Turkey, the myths of the pan-Turkists continued to hold sway over culture and policy even decades later.

The fight against communism took on an Orientalist dimension in Turkey in the 1950s, as

³⁵“Turks Teach New Theories”, *The New York Times*, Feb. 7 1936, page 82. Accessed digitally March 15, 2021. URL: <https://nyti.ms/3loT12T>

³⁶The Ottoman Empire was served the Treaty of Sèvres after the First World War, which included drastic territorial provisions; some, such as the partition of provinces in the Levant, Hejaz, and Mesopotamia into British and French Mandates were to last, while others, including the loss of eastern Thrace to Greece and eastern Anatolia to Armenia, and a proposed Kurdistan, did not materialize. This, alongside foreign occupation zones and internationally administered regions threatened to leave behind the new Turkey as a “rump state” - a greatly reduced state that has lost the majority of its territory but has not been forced to have a government in exile. While not entirely relevant to this paper, outrage over the Treaty of Sèvres is recognized as a key catalyst for the Turkish War of Independence and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. For an insightful analysis of the contexts surrounding the treaty and its long-term consequences, see Sevtap Demirci, “Turco-British Diplomatic Manoeuvres on the Mosul Question in the Lausanne Conference, 1922-1923,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No.1, (Oxfordshire: Francis & Taylor), 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25702898>.

opposed to an economic or philosophical opposition. In arguing against communism, rather than extol the virtues of capitalism or decry the oppressive environment of the Soviet Union, the politicians of Turkey instead opted to classify communism as incompatible with the concept of being Turkish. Not only was the pan-Turkish model considered to be an inherent part of the Turkish people and state, but the relative economic backwardness of other states and peoples was attributed to their marriage to the vile, un-Turkish abomination known as communism.³⁷ According to these pan-Turkists, there is simply something inherently inimical to communist ideology within the Turks as a people, which is not only an essential trait of them as a people, but one that sets them apart from others, such as the Russians or the Spaniards. The entire pan-Turkist narrative driving policy and political action in the immediate post-Atatürk era embraced the reclamation of myth and long forgotten history as models of emulation for the modern Turk.

The unification of all Turks as it was under the Göktürk Empire, the heroic figure Kür-Şad, and the symbolic Gray Wolf all became tools of the pan-Turkist, exalted through prose and poetry, and used as icons and titles.³⁸ In the eyes of the pan-Turkist, the three inseparable components of the Orientalien Schema are also essential in the construction of Turkishness and the demarcation of enemies of the Turks. While the noble ultranationalists styling themselves as Gray Wolves are the proud heirs of a forgotten history and scions of a hero more myth than man, their leftist opponents are not merely enemies, but are not even Turks. The Gray Wolves are masculine and honorable in essence, and their opponents feminine and unchaste, the leftists of the Republic of Turkey pejoratively referred to as not even Turks, but rather as Muscovites.

³⁷Gregory A. Burris, "The Other From Within: Pan-Turkist Mythmaking and the Expulsion of the Turkish Left", in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 616, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284570>

³⁸Ibid., 615.

Writers in the leftist sphere were derided as servants of Russia, slaves to Moscow, while anonymous figures such as the Sumerian author of the Epic of Gilgamesh were appropriated by the Turks and held up as pillars of proper Turkish identity.³⁹ Only the Gray Wolves were true Turks, and all others national imposters, subversive agents, parasites and enemies.

Even in exceptionally modern times, the mythmaking of forgotten pasts remains extremely influential, especially in the spheres of popular history and the thorny questions raised by navigating the waters between secularism and political Islam in the heartlands of the last caliphate. In modern Turkey, the invention of a broad Anatolian culture, claimed to be descended from the Hittites, informs identity and is pushed by education and enshrined in museums. In truth, the Hittites exist as archeological curiosity millennia in the past rather than a storied civilization, an object of history rather than a subject that would write one. The Hittite sun disk symbol was adopted during the time of Atatürk as a symbol of both a proud Turkish people and a glorious proto-Turkish civilization, conveniently skipping over the Islamic and Ottoman past. Beginning in the 1990s, arguments over the nature of Turkishness challenged not only the role of the more immediate past in the collective remembrance of Turkish history, but the guiding structure of the Orientalien Schema over the identity of the Republic of Turkey.⁴⁰

The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, which houses an extensive collection of Hittite artifacts, is a prime example of the Orientalien Schema in action in the present day. The Museum, established during the formative early years of Atatürk's national project during the Turkish War of Independence, serves as a projection of the pan-Turkist vision of the Turks and Anatolia. While faithfully including all parts of the history of Anatolia from prehistory to

³⁹Burris, 617.

⁴⁰Kivanç Kiliç, "'The Hittite Sun is Rising Once Again': Contested Narratives of Identity, Place, and Memory in Ankara", in *History and Memory*, Vol. 29, No.2 (Fall/Winter 2017), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/histmemo.29.2.02>.

present, the Museum minimizes the Classical (Greek, Roman, and Byzantine) and Islamic (Seljuk and Ottoman) eras while privileging those leading up to the Bronze Age, most especially the Hittites. In fact, while the museum is oriented as a circle wherein the visitor may walk a linear path from prehistory to present, the whole museum is bisected by a Hittite gallery larger than any other exhibit, placing the Hittites both physically, historically, and essentially at the center of Turkishness. Again, the refrain of the Orientalien Schema rings true: the hidden forefathers of a forgotten Anatolian past are brought to the forefront, distinct peoples of the past such as the Urartians and Phoenicians are rewritten as being of Anatolian essence, and the modern Turk is reminded that he is distinct from Islam, Orient, Occident, and their respective peoples and histories.⁴¹ The Turk of the Republic of Turkey, according to such a framework, is a being neither indebted to the ancient past nor shaped by the immediate past, but rather the sole heir of a people inscrutable from a time immemorial.

Today, the reconciliation of the carefully constructed past of the pan-Turkists and more modern readings and political alternatives brings the Orientalien Schema into the conversation of identity once again, with forces secular and religious opposing it. As recently as 2015, the reimagining of Turkish history was put on full display during the visit of President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine to Ankara. Visiting for talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abbas was greeted at the new presidential palace by a bizarre form of honor guard: sixteen warriors festooned in costumes, weapons, and even fake facial hair meant to represent the so-called Sixteen Great Turkic Empires.⁴² This fanciful collection of states supposedly the collection of the great civilizations of Turkic descent, has even been criticized by avowed

⁴¹Kilinç, 13-15.

⁴²“Abbas welcomed at Turkish presidential palace by Erdoğan - and 16 warriors”, Agence France-Presse in Ankara, reported in *The Guardian* January 12th, 2015. Accessed digitally April 30th, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/abbas-erdogan-16-warriors-turkish-presidential-palace>.

pan-Turkists for taking certain historical liberties, including curious exclusions and questionable inclusions (most notably of the Mughal Empire which, while founded by a warlord of Chagatai Turk stock, almost immediately embraced both Persianate courtly arts and culture as well as local Indian customs and traditions to become a dynamic Indo-Persian empire). Nationalist writer Nihal Atsız wrote viciously against the idea in his magazine *Ötüken*, decrying it as “religious (!), National (!), Social (!) Nonsense”[sic] that falsely connected many disparate states of dubious Turkish lineages at best.⁴³ While pan-Turkism had a strained relationship with true history at the best of times, it was avowedly secular to the point of disowning the Islamic past, which informed its selective reading of history. While the Sixteen Great Turkic Empires are a fantastical reading of history to begin with, the secular pan-Turkists of the more Kemalist age took umbrage not with the idea of such an interpretive liberty, but that it cast a wide Islamic net rather than emphasize the (often pre-Islamic or post-Ottoman) Anatolian elements.

The Republic of Turkey today is more under the sway of political Islam in recent years, promulgated largely by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which Erdoğan founded in 2001. Erdoğan is keen to embrace symbols and readings of history that his Kemalist predecessors were not, welcoming allusions to the Islamic past, even those of questionable relevance; the Mughals were tenuously Turkic, but certainly Islamic. The presidential palace he had built, while lambasted for being wasteful and extravagant, is claimed to be a symbol of the “new” Turkey he is building.⁴⁴ Today, Erdoğan approaches the same task as his predecessors a century ago: to refashion the Orientalien Schema in a fresh way, to support a new national vision. As always, a hidden lineage is claimed, but this time emphasizing the Islamic elements and

⁴³Nihal Atsız, “16 State Tale and Made-up Flags”, *Ötüken*, 65th Issue, 1969, cited in *Tarih Gazetesi*, “16 Turkish States and Nihal Atsız”, Accessed Digitally April 30th, 2021. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160321225542/http://tarihgazetesi.net/index.php/yazilar/makaleler/1592-16-tuerk-de-vleti-ve-nihal-ats-z>.

⁴⁴“16 warriors”, *The Guardian*.

downplaying Greek, Byzantine, or Roman pasts. Again, some inherent idea of Turkishness is invoked, an essential power strong enough to bind Mughal to Ottoman to Hun as historical Turkic brothers. Once more, these occult, Orientalist forces are cast as clear markers of the otherness of the Turk against the rest of the world, though differently from the vision of the pan-Turkists or Kemalists.

Erdoğan is shifting the nationalist paradigm in a decidedly less secular direction, but it still adheres to the same rules of pseudoscience and ahistorical readings as those who came before him, and every other application of the Orientalien Schema to nationalist mythologizing. Islam is hardly inimical to the Orientalien Schema, rather, the Turkish case highlights how it can be used in different ways: discarded, as in the case of the pan-Turkists and Kemalists, or held up as the essential, Orientalist pillar as done by Erdoğan. There is even the argument that this is a case where political Islam and Islamism are not synonymous, and that Erdoğan is doing the same thing that the occult masters of the past did: legitimizing novel practices by applying a thin veneer of Islam, rather than outwardly declaring himself an innovative autocrat.⁴⁵ Republican Turkey initially used a selective reading emphasizing pre-Islamic elements and downplaying the role of Islam in Turkish history, while recently the paradigm has shifted in such a way that militancy, especially that which carried Islam with it, is the preferred nationalist narrative. While many scholars would describe some of the ancestral achievements and state predecessors of modern Turkey as Persianate or Mongol, the likes of Erdoğan continue to insist on a history that is secretly, inherently, exclusively Turkish in nature.

⁴⁵Ahmet Erdi Öztürk & M. Hakan Yavuz, “Turkish secularism and Islam under the reign of Erdoğan”, *Southeastern Europe and Black Sea Studies*, Volume 19, Issue 1 - Islam, Populism and Regime Change in Turkey: Making and re-Making the AKP, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 1-9. Accessed Digitally April 30th, 2021. URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683857.2019.1580828>.

Modern historiography continues to question the construction of Turkishness, and the inextricably bound construction of Ottoman identity by extension. Prior to the advent of a Republic of Turkey in need of definition in a post-empire, post-caliphate context, the Ottoman state grappled with an identity crisis rooted in selecting a hidden history and true essence to define itself. Initially, despite the insistence upon being a Turkish sultanate, the Ottomans put Islam ahead of ethnicity as a defining feature, especially after the conquest of the Mamluk Caliphate in 1517.⁴⁶ The empire increasingly embraced Islamic titles such as *caliph* and *sultan* over lesser titles of Turkish origin such as *bey*, and Turkish sounding names such as Bayezid or Orhan fell by the wayside as the scions of Osman styled themselves with more Arabic names such as Abdulaziz or Abdulmecit. Later, as the Ottomans attempted to modernize during the Tanzimat Period, the Ottoman Nationality Law of 1869 showed how the pendulum of perceived self was swinging away from Islam somewhat, as the nine sections of the law did not at all define rights, but rather who qualified as an Ottoman citizen and what could challenge this.⁴⁷ All the while, the Ottomans grappled with the weight of history as conquerors of the Byzantines and the complex issues of having an extremely pluralistic identity. In fact, the term *Rum*, in reference to the Eastern Roman Empire, became an integral part of the Ottoman identity specifically because the Turkish and Islamic elements could not be navigated easily, especially with the large Greek, Orthodox, and Arab constituencies in the empire.⁴⁸ Rather than put large swathes of subjects at odds with one another, the Ottomans were happy to claim that the true, secret thread binding them all together was the unique heritage of being built upon a Byzantine foundation.

⁴⁶F. Asli Ergul, "The Ottoman Identity: Turkish, Muslim, or Rum?", in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 632. Accessed digitally May 6th, 2021. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41721156>.

⁴⁷Will Hanley, "What Ottoman Nationality Was and Was Not", *Journal of The Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 284, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jotturstuass.3.2.05>

⁴⁸Ergul, 638.

It seems that in the Turkish context, the nationalist repurposing of the Orientalien Schema has been torn between two competing themes, ethnicity and religion. While early Ottoman conceptions of the nation-state were largely able to navigate around these issues through pluralism and *Rum*, beginning in the late nineteenth century this was insufficient. As nationalism from among the various groups within the Ottoman Empire became a rising force, the Turks had to address which facet of their identity would be given primacy: their Turkishness as conquerors of a shared lineage, or their religiosity, as noble *ghazi* propagating Islam and the last true heirs to the caliphate. Since then, Turkish identity has vacillated between fantastically un-Islamic mythmaking and questionably broad Islamic conquest narratives that both strain the definition of “historical.” Rather than enshrine the current Republic of Turkey in any sort of foundation of ideology or law, legitimacy is still sought in the realm of legend, legacy, and lineage; it seems that no spirit of democracy, secular or otherwise, is as compelling as some secret inheritance, be it Hittite, Mongol, Byzantine, or Islamic.

Kurdish Nationalism: The Valiant Mythologizing of Abdullah Öcalan

Among the Kurdish people, whose territory is divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, the nationalist struggle has been a fixture of their collective identity since the dying days of the Ottoman Empire. In the modern era, the Turkish front has produced the most lively intellectual developments as well as the fiercest nationalist action, with ongoing bouts of terrorist violence, government oppression, and attention from international observers from the late Ottoman era to the present. Most recently, the firebrand intellectual of the Kurds, most especially in Turkey, has been Abdullah Öcalan. Alternatively known as a revolutionary demagogue, freedom fighter, or terrorist mastermind depending on the politics of the reporting entity, Öcalan founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been engaged in a mixture of violent conflict with the Republic of Turkey and international organizational and advocacy work on behalf of the Kurdish people. Since his arrest in 1999, he has been imprisoned mostly in total isolation under a strict security detail with limited access to any visitors including attorneys on the small island of İmralı in the Sea of Marmara, including ten years as the sole prisoner on the island. During his time in confinement, he has still been considered leader of the PKK, and has written numerous books in prison that have guided the PKK and laid the foundation for the Kurdish nationalist platform for decades. Quite simply, Öcalan is to the Kurds what Marx is to the communists, and his work offers a fair insight into what could be considered normative Kurdish nationalist thought. Thus, it is his work that becomes the starting point of any intellectual analysis of Kurdish nationalism.

While Öcalan is a prolific author, and undoubtedly a well read one, his work can hardly be called academic or objective. Especially after his imprisonment, his writings are much more clearly guided by the Orientalist mode of thought that typifies Middle Eastern nationalist writing. While his work is extremely broad and multifaceted, touching upon issues of history, sociology, political science, ethnography, and more, and he is clearly a well-read man, his assertions and theories reside in an ahistorical realm akin to that of the Turkish nationalists. His writing, while perhaps not drawing from racial theories and pseudoscience like the Turanists and pan-Turkists, most definitely employs suspect interpretations of archaeological evidence. In his *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, Öcalan begins by introducing the major centers of Turkish Kurdistan, such as Diyarakir, Batman, and Urfa, as sites of the earliest stages of the Neolithic Revolution. However, he follows this bit of archeological fact with romantic storytelling and conjecture, asserting that “many more of these early neolithic settlements must be buried under the countless mounds that one passes on an ordinary drive through the terrains that have been called Kurdistan since the times of the Iranian Seljuks”.⁴⁹

He leaps from the facts, namely that several areas of Turkish Kurdistan have been home to important archeological sites, to the suggestion that the entire region of Kurdistan is the secret cradle of civilization (nevermind the Fertile Crescent, Sumer, and Babylon). Furthermore, in his choice to use the term “Iranian Seljuks,” he refuses to categorize the Seljuks as a Turkic people, which hardly seems an accident given both how common the term “Seljuk Turks” is, and Öcalan’s own experience as part of a group accustomed to erasure by the Turks. It appears just as counterfactual as the term “Mountain Turks” used to designate the Kurds since the time of Atatürk, and for the same reason: to delegitimize a people. However, here it is a rebuttal of sorts,

⁴⁹Abdullah Öcalan and Klaus Happel (Trans.), *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2006), 5.

a denial of the Turkish claims to be heirs to the great civilizations of the region. Öcalan is presenting the Kurds as the true primogenitors of human civilization, the secret forebearers that today are heirs to this noble legacy, once again using the Orientalien Schema to justify his people rather than basic assertions about the rights of a people to exist. Öcalan is no fool, he is not ignorant of such ideas, of how the broader global community and international institutions such as the United Nations relies more heavily on ideas such as rights and freedoms for these cases. He is instead speaking to a Middle Eastern audience when he uses the Orientalien Schema, whether it is his fellow Kurds in need of rallying, Turks in need of criticism, or neighbors such as those in Iran or the Arab states to whom such logic speaks loud and clear. To an underdog like Öcalan, the Orientalien Schema is the framework to work within to seek legitimate political gains domestically because it is the system that informs the whole of political thought and life in the region.

Even the Hittites, preferred primogenitors of the pan-Turkists, see a rather mythic revision in the writings of Öcalan. His account of the Hittites offers a more comprehensive view of their civilization, describing the multifaceted nature of their society, including detailed accounts of the various ethnic groups they embraced. He links the Kurds with the ancient Hurrians, who occupied a realm roughly coterminous with modern-day Mardin in southeastern Turkey, a part of Turkish Kurdistan. His portrayal of the Hittites takes the basic pan-Turkist premise, of an ancient precursor people in Anatolia with a relatively rich and advanced civilization, and layers additional embellishments on top of it, some aggrandizing and others a diminishing of any legacy bequeathed to the Turks. In his depiction of the Hittites, they are a grand civilization indebted to both the more famous historical civilization, Sumeria, as well as their minority subjects, most especially the proto-Kurdish Hurrians. He argues that the Hittite

kingdom was one established on a model of Sumerian politics and religion, with Hurrian beliefs mixing with Sumerian mythology. Going even further afield into the realms of the fantastic and occult, he claims that the Hurrian beliefs “contain Indo-European strands also found in those of the Vedic Aryans,” that the Hittite civilization bridged “the nascent Greek world in the West and the great empires of the East” at Troy, and that the Trojan War was a narrative of Greek victory upsetting the previously Eastern-dominant paradigm of civilizations.⁵⁰ Here, Öcalan leans into the mystique of both popular Greek myth and of the occult airs surrounding India, both in service to fanciful national myth making. His work also has clear influences in the realm of archeology and linguistics regarding the origins of ethnic groups, though he does not cite any source in particular as inspiration for these extremely bold assertions.⁵¹

Going even further to discredit the pan-Turkists, Öcalan even goes so far as to claim that the Hurrians not only established a proto-Kurdish civilization, but even were the principal transmitters of Sumerian culture to the greater region. By his account, the region around the Zagros Mountains (which is usually identified as what would be considered Kurdistan, discounting modern borders and geopolitics) was the center of a Hurrian civilization that was an integral part of the Sumerian world of antiquity. In perhaps the boldest assertion one could make on the matter, he suggests that “it may be said that Sumer *was* the central civilisation of the Hurrians”; notably, that the Sumerian identity was wholly inherited and only a part of the Hurrian identity, rather than Sumer being dominant and exalted.⁵² He describes the Hurrians in this region as being strongly present and loosely aligned as a confederation, but too strongly

⁵⁰Öcalan, 44.

⁵¹While he does not cite any particular author, Öcalan seems to be relying on a reading of history in line with the “Anatolian hypothesis” first articulated by Colin Renfrew in *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1987. This hypothesis places the origin point of Proto-Indo-European humanity in Anatolia before dispersing, but has received great amounts of criticism since publication.

⁵²Öcalan, 45.

bound to tribal allegiances to unify and form urban centers and a cohesive, centralized civilization akin to the Hittites. He is quick to point out the parallel between this situation and that of the modern Kurds, often separated not only by artificially constructed borders but also by inability to unite in the face of their adversaries. Not only does he lean on the idea of the occult inheritance of Hurrian culture bequeathed to the Kurds, he even paints the conflict between Kurds and Turks as inherited, the perennial and eternal struggle between two peoples. Furthermore, his portrayal of the key difference between the Hurrians and Hittites in terms of civilization building as one of the tribalists versus the centralized urbanites sounds the familiar refrain of not only the eternal other, but of there being an essential quality separating the two, just as present millennia ago as it is today.⁵³

In a disturbing continuation of this occult narrative, it seems that Öcalan would suggest that the Armenian Genocide is only a recurrence of longstanding ethnic tension, going back to the times of their distant forefathers. He eventually details the rise of the rival Mitannia and Urartu states speaking tongues related to Hurrian existing in areas roughly coterminous with Turkish Kurdistan and the Armenian heartlands of modern-day Iran, respectively.⁵⁴ It seems hardly coincidental that Öcalan characterizes the proto-Armenian Urartu as being, while advanced, a civilization whose greatest works were wrought by forced labor and whose only cultural aspiration was the emulation of the Assyrians by the higher echelons of society. His characterization of the Assyrians fits as a parallel of the Ottoman Turkish system filtered through

⁵³While he does concede that other factors, such as the presence of strong neighboring powers and burgeoning threats in the region, may have had an impact, Öcalan focuses primarily on the tribal allegiances as the determining factor in the fate of the Hurrians. The idea of strong tribal loyalty being potentially divisive to modern Kurds has been written about before, and even considered an obstacle to a united Kurdish nationalist front coalescing in the twentieth century. For more on Kurdish nationalism and intra-Kurdish bickering, read Hakan Özoğlu, “‘Nationalism’ and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman-Early Republican Era”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2001, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259457>.

⁵⁴Öcalan, 46.

the biased lens of an ethnic minority in modern Turkey, as he describes a hegemon more preoccupied with crushing its minority subjects than anything else. Especially considering his earlier characterization of the proto-Turks as essentially scavengers supping on the table-scrap of proto-Kurdish civilization, his portrayal is exceptionally damning. He describes the Assyrians as those who “continued the heritage of Sumerian civilization without adding much to it,” their empire as “the aggressive, militaristic expansion of the original Sumerian civilization,” and that “Assyrian military prowess uprooted virtually every ethnic community in the Middle East.”⁵⁵ If his earlier mode of storytelling and history paints the Hittites and Hurrians as proto-Turks and proto-Kurds respectively, then the Assyrians here become the proto-Ottomans of Öcalan’s great chronicle. Just as the Ottomans themselves went to great lengths to claim legitimate inheritance of the legacy of Rome by way of Byzantium, which many denied or found hollow, Öcalan characterizes the Assyrians as the shallow pretender heirs of Sumerian glory. Once again, a narrative of debatable historicity leans on the idea of secret lineages and inheritance, of essential qualities and eternal rivalries.

Öcalan only goes further in his account that almost becomes a historical allegory rather than a simple history. His continued explanation of Assyria includes too many parallels to the Ottoman world to ignore, describing the suppression of minority vassals “in regions as disparate as Sinai, the eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, Upper Mesopotamia, and Iran” (roughly corresponding to the Jewish heartlands, Lebanon, Kurdistan, Iraq, Armenia, and the fringes of the Persianate world where the Ottomans dared to infringe). He asserts that “mass deportations were a notorious means of Assyrian warfare,” which invokes the ghost of the Armenian Genocide hanging over the whole of the former Ottoman sphere. His typification of unrest in the

⁵⁵Öcalan, 50.

aftermath of Assyrian violence and suppression as “religious or sectarian movements rather than ethnic uprisings” seems to parallel the role of religion in nationalist dissident movements in the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East, such as the birth of Arab nationalism and political Islam, or the significance of religious authorities in opposing Ottoman and Republican Turkish authority, such as Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca and Sheikh Said of Palu.^{56,57} Overall, Öcalan adapts the working of the Orientalien Schema to fit his vision of the history of the Middle East, mapping the conflicts of living memory over the events of the ancient past.

Öcalan’s vision of history through a lens informed by (though not necessarily in full agreement with) Marxism only builds upon the assumptions of the Orientalien Schema. Öcalan paints certain socioeconomic systems and modes of existence, such as feudalism and capitalism, as inherently Western, unsuited to the realities of the Middle East. For instance, he argues that the concept of a nation was elevated and transformed through capitalism in such a way that the idea of the nation “only became important with the arrival of capitalism.”⁵⁸ Expanding upon this point, he asserts that the rise of the concept of the nation as influenced by capitalism was damaging to the very concept of *ummah*, and in turn fed by the diminishment or even death of religion in the lives of the masses. He Orientalizes heavily, coding secularism, capitalism, and the Western World as inextricably linked, and the Middle East and beyond as diametrically opposed: feudal, religious, and wholly divorced from the West, spun of different cloth. The whole of his analysis of thousands of years of history still rests upon the same assumptions as the Turanists of the last century, the Orientalist historians of the centuries before them, and the occult

⁵⁶Öcalan, 51.

⁵⁷For further reading on the role of religious authorities in the mobilization of the Kurds, Robert W. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1989, is an excellent read. For evidence of the significance of religious authority in galvanizing Arab revolutionary sentiments, the so-called “McMahon-Hussein Correspondence”, later published as *Command Paper 5957: Correspondence Between Sir Henry McMahon, G.C.M.G., His Majesty’s High Commissioner at Cairo and The Sherif Hussein of Mecca, July 1915 - March 1916 (with map)* for Parliament.

⁵⁸Öcalan, 200.

mythmakers of the centuries prior. In his writing, Öcalan uses the ideas of the Orientalien Schema to bring to life a concept that reduces any and all historical and political writing to a pointless, rote exercise: perennial history.

Writing with all the certainty of an oracle, Öcalan characterizes all historical civilizations as bound by the same universal laws of development, preordained to follow a path tread by each great civilization that came before. In his appraisal of the modern world of capitalist civilization, Öcalan describes capitalism as having reached a zenith precipitating a transitional period for the world, before laying out his blueprint for the lifespans of civilizations past and present. According to his model,

All systems of civilisation, as we saw, go through three historical phases: the foundation phase, the institution-forming phase and the zenith - just as a human being passes through childhood, adulthood and old age. All well-known historical civilisations - Sumer, Egypt, Rome, Persia, China, Islam, etc. - went through these phases, all with similar characteristics. All important systems of civilisation are confronted with a conflict during the last phase - civilisations age and wear out. If the system is in danger of being overthrown, they try to compensate for the effects of aging by restoration, reform or both.⁵⁹

Once again, the historical record is acknowledged rather than truly interacted with or analyzed, used as a simple piece of questionable evidence stripped of all nuance, the proof of a hidden pattern rather than a series of unique and distinct historical circumstances. His theory of history is one of a constant, predictable, even cyclical model of events. His description of the current state of the Middle East, in particular with regards to the Kurds, the Turks, and the areas of Anatolia and Kurdistan reflects this well. The language he uses to describe this even leans on the occultists' tools once again, framing historical and present disunity and fratricide as a tradition.

In his own words,

The Kurds and their homeland witnessed all kinds of military aggression, occupation, and conquest during the slave-holder period - by the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Arabs, the Mongols, and eventually the Turks. Nonetheless

⁵⁹Öcalan, 213.

their tribal order remained undisturbed. Sometimes they were united; most of the time, however, they fought among themselves. This tradition continues today.⁶⁰

Öcalan explains away any serious questions regarding the failures of the Kurdish nationalist movement as well as their ability to endure in the present with the simple reduction of all history to essential traits, hidden patterns of tradition and warfare, and the constant presence of an entity to be othered. The Orientalien Schema is a convenient intellectual framework not only for the formulation of a grandiose, semi-mythic vision of the imagined nation, but also for the absolution of responsibility of a people, for the mythologizing, politicizing, even de-historicizing of the historical record when it is most convenient for ideologues.

Even through the eloquent prose of the foremost intellectual of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the whole of the nationalist history and project is filtered through the Orientalien Schema in such a way that the history is secretly grand, the enemies are all anathema, and the defining currents of Kurdish history are borne on tides of blood rather than of history, defined by bloodlines rather than state lines and their owners. Öcalan is first and foremost the head of the PKK even after his incarceration, the firebrand leader of a militant political organization facing direct opposition from a state actor and looking to marshal military might within Turkish borders and political pressure from without; much as he paints himself as an intellectual in the same vein as a Marx or Weber, his writing is acutely political, charged with direct challenges to the Turkish state rather than some nebulous concept of a social order or economic system. Kurdish nationalism in the present day is filtered almost exclusively through the lens of Öcalan, and he is heavily reliant on the Orientalien Schema to frame his work in a way as flattering to the Kurds and unflattering to the Turks as possible; hence, the Orientalien Schema is the dominant intellectual framework for the articulation of a coherent Kurdish nationalist program at present.

⁶⁰Ibid., 295.

The language of religious heterodoxy and occult secrets has been repurposed as the language of desperate nationalists, whether out of familiarity on the part of said nationalists or an appeal to state actors still receptive to such language, and is still the foundation of legitimacy on which the Kurds of the PKK have enshrined their platform. Without going into needless detail regarding the further works of Öcalan, there is an acknowledgement that there are other ways of going about political and social change, especially in democratic systems; however, Öcalan argues that liberal Western modes of political and social discourse are inimical to the lived realities of the Middle East, tacitly endorsing the somewhat magical thinking of the Orientalien Schema as the only appropriate lens through which to view the region.⁶¹

⁶¹Öcalan, 294.

State-Building in Iran: Messiahs, Mullahs, and Modernity

In Iran and the surrounding regions formerly part of the various incarnations of the Persian Empire, the inclination towards mythmaking as a form of national identity building has been strong for centuries. In fact, the three hallmarks of the Orientalien Schema have been recurrent features of the Iranian political landscape since at least the Safavid era, and progressed through the various dynasties and into the era of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The occult enshrinement of legitimacy in the same legendary histories and mythical pedigrees of heterodox mystics is present in Iranian history, perhaps more so than anywhere else thanks to the unique entwinement of religion and ruler in the area. Indeed, this unique history and relationship is characterized in Orientalist language as something inherent to the Persianate world in general and to the peoples of the Guarded Domains of Iran in particular. Furthermore, all the incarnations of rulership from the Safavid era onward in Iran have been painted in contrast to some sort of “other,” a force against which the state stands in stark contrast, be it secular or religious, from within or without; indeed, a few times it is not even an external “other,” but rather the immediate predecessor in power. Iran is anchored by the three pillars of the Orientalien Schema, with each tumultuous chapter of Iranian history swirling around the same three great pillars anew each time.

Beginning with the Safavid era, the messianic warrior lodge turned powerhouse dynasty began with the sort of establishment of pedigree one would expect. While ethnically Kurdish and religiously Yarsani in origin, the Safavid dynasty later migrated to northeastern Azerbaijan, against the backdrop of religious warfare lending itself to a certain mystique, as a house of

saintly martyrs.⁶² The patriarch of the order, Safi al-Din Ardabili, organized a Sufi order and found great success and acclaim as a mystical poet, laying the foundation for dynastic success. In his time, the mid-thirteenth to early fourteenth century, the mystical sensibilities of Sufis in general and his nascent order in particular carved out a niche in the political and religious landscape as an alternative to the orthodox modes of Islamic practice. With their emphasis on an immediate relationship with the divine rather than juristic prowess, the Safavi Order was able to build a powerbase over the generations that came to include peasantry, urbanites, and nomadic Turkmen, and soon the tomb of their founder had become a pilgrimage site. While initially modest and apolitical, the origins of the Safavi house laid the foundations for an effective assertion of legitimacy and ability to later seize political agency.

In the strictly religious origins of the house, the typical methods of the Orientalien Schema are introduced. By definition, the Sufis, as mystics, embrace the occult element of the schema, given that their immediate approach to divinity implies a hidden substratum of accessible religious enlightenment outside the mainstream traditions; the heretical supposition of a hidden dimension within a revealed faith.⁶³ In addition, the hidden history element rears its head in this case as well, as Safi al-Din Ardabili, while himself an accomplished mystic, was not the creator of his own order, but rather the chosen inheritor of the Zahediyeh Order of the renowned Sheikh Zahid Gilani.⁶⁴ This religious forbearer would become part of the Safavid lineage in more ways than one, as not only did his order become the Safavid Order after his death, but in his lifetime he had his daughter marry Ardabili along with designating him the

⁶²Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 40.

⁶³While the Safavid Order is an excellent example of many typical Sufi practices and characteristics, curious readers are encouraged to peruse Massington, L. , Radtke, B., Chittick, W.C., Jong, F. de., Lewisohn, L., Zarcone, Th., Ernst, C, Aubin, Françoise and J.O. Hunwick, “Taṣawwuf”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, (Leiden: Brill), 1954-2005, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1188 for a detailed description of Sufism in general.

⁶⁴Fr. Babinger and R.M. Savory, ‘Ṣaḥī Al-Dīn Audabīlī’. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Ed. P. Bearman et al., (Leiden: Brill), 1954-2005, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6446.

successor to lead his order. Though he never claimed any sort of inner divinity or unique qualities himself, Safi al-Din Ardabili would later be endowed with them in hagiography, working towards the traditional model of a mystical order with a founding figure removed not only by the innavigable seas of centuries past, but in even his essence. The first hagiography of Safi-al Din was composed in the time of his son and successor as head of their eponymous order, and is noted for including potentially contradictory material, as well as for being most likely a tool to bolster the legitimacy of the house through a fabricated claim to *sayyid* status.⁶⁵ This carefully constructed lineage both imbues the Safavids with intrinsic qualities tied to holiness and authority that cast them as far apart from the average person, simultaneously constructing the Orientalist ideal of the essentially imbued people and establishing a clear sense of otherness in doing so. The early Safavids are the prime model of the Orientalien Schema as it applies to a religious or mystical movement, with the layers of hidden history, indescribable characteristics, and detachment from the norms of the world one would expect to see from occult magicians and esoteric thinkers the world over.

The Safavid Order and House would both transform significantly in the era immediately preceding their ascension to the Persian throne, though certain constants would remain, both attributes and attitudes, all in alignment with the Orientalien Schema. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the Safavid Order began a path towards worldly power in addition to their mystical authority. Myriad threads of authority and legitimacy came together over the generations, weaving a tapestry of messianic promise and royal bloodlines that would be completed by Shah Isma‘il with his introduction of Twelver Shi‘a theology to the mix. Ethnically, politically, and religiously, the rising might of the Safavid Dynasty was the result of the confluence of an

⁶⁵Kazuo Morimoto, “The Earliest ‘Alid Genealogy for the Safavids: New Evidence for the Pre-Dynastic Claim to Sayyid Status”, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4, (Oxfordshire: Francis & Taylor, 2010), 448, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23033219>.

assortment of outsiders, minorities, heretics, and othered peoples in the region. The genealogy of Isma‘il came to include the mystic Kurd Sheikh Safi al-Din, the Turkmen warlord Uzun Hasan, and the Byzantine imperial House of Megas Komnenos by way Uzun Hasan and his Greek Orthodox wife. His chief supporters, the confederated tribal Turkmen known as the Qezilbash, were drawn from realms as far-flung as Anatolia, Syria, Azerbaijan, and the Caucasus, and brought Central Asian shamanism, the vestiges of Zoroastrianism, and a bold strain of messianism that held the lord of the Safavids as a reincarnated ‘Ali, the divine made manifest on Earth. Isma‘il himself introduced the Twelver Shi‘a elements that would define Iran, retroactively infusing the namesake red caps of the Qezilbash with symbolism in their twelve folds, marrying his religion to the throne in the dualistic tradition of sacred kingship that had defined Persianate rule since the Zoroastrian rulers of the ancient world.⁶⁶

With the rise of the Safavids as shahs rather than sheikhs, the Orientalien Schema is realized in another mode, the effective demonstration of how the framework can be repurposed from a strictly religious to a political toolset, by a single dynasty. In the transition towards political maneuvering, Isma‘il fully embraced the many hidden layers of the Safavid claim to legitimacy, based not only in mystical pedigree but in the martial achievements of his grandfather Uzun Hasan and the royal Greek bloodline traced to the last continuous Roman successor state. He was the secret heir to all manner of legacies, all meeting at a single point, a peacock throne to hold him aloft, with feathers of mystical, martial, and monarchial authority fanning out from him. Held in the highest regard by the Qezilbash belief in his divine immanence, Isma‘il was imbued with the loftiest of all essential qualities, that of a chosen servant of God and the reborn legacy of ‘Ali, which engendered a level of fealty unlike any

⁶⁶Amanat, 42-46.

other.⁶⁷ Both in his person and in his diverse coalition of followers including the Qezilbash, Isma‘il was able to bring to bear a mighty coalition that stood in solidarity against a supreme other, the leviathan that was the Ottoman Empire to the West. While his followers came from a wide range of locales and backgrounds, a common thread between them was suffering at the hands of the Ottomans; indeed, Uzun Hasan himself had lost to Mehmed the Conqueror, and the last of the Komnenos’ were executed in Constantinople. Generations of conflict with the Ottomans united the exalted personage of Isma‘il with his many tribes of loyal followers against the supreme other, that had trampled upon multiple different members of his lineage, and vied for many of the same honors, including legitimate Roman continuity and kingship in the name of God. In the time of Isma‘il, the Safavid claim to the throne was legitimized by the tripartite amalgam of vaunted bloodlines, the intrinsic divinity ascribed to the original Safavid shah, and the coalescence of a formidable force poised to strike against the most antipathetic of aliens. Isma‘il became the axis upon which his dynasty, his land, and by extension the course of Persianate history, would shift, throwing the might and methods of religious zealotry towards a new, politically empowered age that would see the return of a truly united Iranian state.

Tahmasp I, son of Isma‘il, would consolidate his authority and that of his dynasty in a more overtly national, less mystical application of the same tools of his forefathers. While heir to the manyfold legacies of his father that had enshrouded him in an almost mythic mien, Tahmasp pivoted towards more traditional, legally sound Twelver Shi‘ism that imbued the Safavid state with a different essential quality than that of Isma‘il. This time, the young shah aligned himself and his national program with Shi‘a jurists against the messianic dogma of the Qezilbash, who

⁶⁷For further details on the unique fealty afforded by way of divine beliefs to the Safavids, as well as a more detailed description of the relationship between the Safavids and the Qezilbash, see Richard Tapper, “Shāhsevan in Safavid Persia”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol.37, No.2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1974, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/612582>.

attempted to manipulate his regency during his first years on the throne.⁶⁸ In his choice to align more strongly with the ulema as a counterweight against the influence of the Qezilbash, Tahmasp shifted the defining essential quality of religion in the state towards Shi'a orthodoxy with a heavier emphasis on the shari'a. In addition to this more legalistic bent, this also changed the nature of the othered opposition against which the state was arrayed, placing the Qezilbash further from the imperial throne and house. Tahmasp himself was said to have also personally moved in a more disciplined, orthodox direction including a disavowal of certain practices associated with the Qezilbash and other Islamic mystics, resulting in bans on wine, song, and dance.⁶⁹ His move in a less Sufi direction had both political and religious ramifications, signaling a strategy less reliant on the Qezilbash and their messianic loyalties. Furthermore, the introduction of the Persian answer to the Ottoman janissaries, the *gholam* slaves drawn from the Christians of the Caucasus, introduced a new element loyal to the shah above all and allowed for a greater break from the Qezilbash, including relocating the capital away from their base in Tabriz. With the *gholam* at his side and a new capital in the Persian-speaking Qazvin, Tahmasp was able to refocus his realm in a more Persianized direction, more free from Qezilbash influence.⁷⁰ In the *gholam*, Tahmasp inculcated an intrinsic loyalty to the person of the shah and the nation he ruled, and cast them against the others who would stymie his designs, including uncooperative or fractious administrators and tribesmen. The strategies that initially were focused against outside forces to roughly define a state were now being used to redefine its national character, to great effect.

⁶⁸Amanat, 63.

⁶⁹Rudi Matthee, "Safavid Dynasty", in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Online Edition, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica), 1996-present, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids>.

⁷⁰Amanat, 68. For an in-depth explanation of the role of the janissaries and their relationship with the Ottoman Sultan to compare and contrast with the *gholam*, see Gilles Veinstein, "On the Ottoman janissaries", in Erick-Jan Zürcher (Ed.), *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour, 1500-2000*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 2013, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp6pg.7>.

By the mid-sixteenth century, Tahmasp had shaped the nature of his nation in a distinctly Persian and Shi'a direction despite the diversity of his subject and lineage, and defined his state against the backdrop of others to be crushed or curtailed, including the Qezilbash and his own rebellious brother Alqas from within, and the invading Uzbeks of the East and perennial Ottoman threat to the West. By 1555, with the Peace of Amasya, the borders between Iran and the Ottomans were defined, officially recognizing not only victory in the face of a foreign aggressor, but also authority exerted over the whole of the Guarded Domains and the competing chieftains and warlords therein.⁷¹ In consolidating his power, Tahmasp had established an order built on keeping the others of his realm in check through the machinery of the state, keeping them as peripheral as necessary to avoid challenges and undue influence as in the case of the Qezilbash, and embracing those whose essential traits bound them to be loyal, as in the *gholam*. Like his father, he had repurposed the tools of the Orientalien Schema to fit a new project, one grounded in temporal authority rather than religious might; in turn, these same tools were the ones reimagined by Isma'il to suit his agenda of putting a foot in both worlds as a spiritual and secular leader. While quite different in direction from their illustrious ancestor Sheikh Safi al-Din, the Safavids as a dynasty would embrace the Orientalien Schema as a toolset to carve out their domain for centuries to come.⁷²

⁷¹Amanat, 69. The distinction between Iran and Persia, while considered a more modern phenomenon, has historical roots predating even the Safavids, with the idea of the domains of "Iranshahr", within which rested the realm of Fars. While the Iran-Persia distinction will continue to be explored in this thesis, it is important to note that historically, "Iran" has an imperial connotation, encompassing multiple peoples across a series of domains, referred to as "Iranshahr", or in English, the "Guarded Domains of Iran." "Persia", on the other hand, refers more to Fars and the people therein, which, while inherent to the Iranian political landscape and historically dominant, was only a part of the Guarded Domains. For a detailed explanation of the history behind the use of the terms "Iran" and "Persia", including the different maps declaring the area to be under one label or the other for various reasons, see Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Fragile Frontiers: The Diminishing Domains of Qajar Iran", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/164017>.

⁷²While this thesis will continue to touch on the vacillating position of Shi'ism and the ulema in Iran when relevant, the rise of Shi'ism in Iran is a rich topic deserving of further exploration. A particularly well-received and insightful history of Iranian Shi'ism can be found in Rula Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire*, (London: I.B. Tauris), 2015.

While the Safavids would initially rise as a powerhouse of the Middle East, situated between two other great powers and comfortably holding their own, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, decadence and misrule had opened the doors to usurpers. In the opening power vacuum amidst a backdrop of weak kings and petty warlords, Nader Shah Afshar emerged, building a national movement to ascend to the highest echelons of power with his own spin on the principles of the Orientalien Schema. Nader was a scion of the Afshar tribe, born to one of the original tribes of the Qezilbash that had propelled Isma‘il to the throne two centuries prior, whose early career was spent in service to a warlord claiming descent from the Kayanid Dynasty, the legendary house central to the heroic tales of the *Shahnameh* and the Zoroastrian Avesta. Later, in service to Tahmasp II, Nader would assemble a formidable army comprised of all manner of troops from the periphery as well as the interior, enjoining the tribal warriors of the Turkmen, Kurds, Baluch, Afghans, and Uzbeks alongside peasantry of the Persian interior.⁷³ Through brilliant leadership, military successes, and drawing in the remnants of his defeated foes as fresh troops, Nader sublimated the differences between his troops, imbuing his army and person with an essential quality of being Iranian, rather than their previous identities.

Indeed, Nader’s military genius and wild successes in reclaiming lost territory, including his introduction of standard heraldry, integration of many disparate elements into a unified military machine, and goals defined by borders and territory, lent itself to a distinctly secular Iranian, rather than Shi‘a zealot, program.⁷⁴ Operating along the lines of territory and borders allowed for the clear physical demarcation of a definite other, and having standard insignia to mark the units in an army promoted cohesion, and by extension starkens the contrast against said other. Furthermore, he borrowed from the legendary history of Iran rather than Shi‘a literature,

⁷³Amanat, 142-143.

⁷⁴Ibid., 144-145.

modeling his own symbols and regalia after motifs found in the *Shahnameh* eventually, with the symbolic Kayanid crown based on national myth coming to represent his rule, in stark contrast to the Qezilbash cap and its Twelver connotations for the Safavids. In the campaigns of Nader before his eventual seizure of the throne, the exclusive artefacts of nation building, rather than the aspects shared with the religious, come into direct interaction with the tools of the Orientalien Schema.

In fact, Nader's nation building activity seemed wholly intent on exorcising God from the machinery of the state, in perhaps the most hard turn away from the Safavid design. Towards the end of 1736, Nader assembled a massive meeting on the plain of Moghan by the Aras River to discuss the future of Iran, including the conditions for him to (reluctantly, or so he claimed) seize the throne. Among his preconditions for rulership was the total loyalty of all to his person, the complete disavowal of the Safavids then and for all time thereafter, and the abandonment of Twelver Shi'ism as a state religion in favor of the Ja'fari creed. This drastic move would dilute or dispel many of the many unique features of Islam in Iran, including messianic proclivities, the primacy of jurists, and the religious antagonism with the wider Islamic world, including his own Sunni minority troops.⁷⁵ The assembly at Moghan itself was considered a callback to the old Ilkhanid legacy in the region, and Nader himself invoking an image of himself as the Timur or Isma'il of his age, calling upon the occult motifs of hidden and cyclical histories. Resonating with the echoes of history, of conquerors and unifiers of almost legendary stature, Nader could call upon these fonts of authority through occult modes of thought to safely challenge one of the most iconic innovations of the Safavid regime.

⁷⁵Amanat, 147-8.

In his attempt to remove Twelver Shi'ism from its position married to the Peacock Throne, he addressed both the essentialist concerns of his nascent regime, as well as managing the dynamics of othering within and without his burgeoning realm. The extreme nature of the Safavid brand of Shi'ism, while helpful in forging a national identity of Persian kingship married to a messianic promise, also cast the nation in sharp relief against both mainstream Islam abroad and the many non-Shi'a subjects within the Guarded Domains. A shift in religious paradigm would both correct the issue of internal others compromising the integrity of a united Iranian identity, and allow for the shift towards a secular proto-nationalist essence that truly was of a nation rather than a religion embraced by a shah and select subjects. Especially now that Nader had embraced national, rather than religious, characteristics against which to define the other and the self, this allowed him to design a system that would completely reconfigure the state along new lines, more in line with nation-building ambitions. By drawing on the legacy of warlords past and rewriting the character of his peoples as Iranian in essence and loyalty, Nader was able to effectively bind the whole of the periphery and the heartlands of Iran into a state defined by borders, along which it was poised to repel and even ransack the Ottomans and Mughals. The attempt to cleanse the state of Twelver Shi'ism was couched in concerns over the morality of a clerical establishment, another other to be quashed to bring the remainder of the state in line with his designs. By remedying this concern, he could cast himself as both the moral stalwart against the corrupt clergy, and mobilize a diverse body of subjects as a single body ready to war with the world without rather than the order within.

While Nader Shah would fail to establish a state and dynasty that would outlive him with much success, his actions were pivotal in demonstrating that the Orientalien Schema could be used as a framework for nation building in Iran even while downplaying religious elements.

While the relationship between secular and spiritual authority in Iran was more complex than most, even compared to other monarchies in the Islamic world, Nader Shah successfully drove his nation-building program on a less overtly religious line than his predecessors. His reliance on the occult had invoked the hidden histories, mythological imagery, and links to the past that typified mystical orders and the early Safavids, but did it in a way that invoked warlords and legendary heroes rather than divine imagery. While his regime still maintained the same perennial foes to the East and West that had been the norm during the Safavid era, the means by which he identified foes, set goals, and gathered forces were a dramatic shift towards a more proto-nationalist essentializing of the self and a less religious definition of the reviled other. In fact, Karim Khan Zand, whose dynasty would briefly replace Nader Shah's Afsharids, borrowed many of his tricks, including a heavier reliance on myths of Persian kingship and a shift towards a broader Iranian identity alongside a heightened degree of Persian awareness.⁷⁶ The turmoil between the Safavid and Qajar eras of Iranian history, while characterized by relatively brief reigns and inability to consolidate power over the whole of the territory, did lead to a revolution in nation-building techniques. Late Safavid weakness invited competition for the reins of power, but the nominal recognition of enduring Safavid power, usually by an Afsharid or Zand claiming to reign as a servant or regent of a Safavid shah or prince, meant that the heirs of Safi al-Din still had a monopoly on religiously enforced monarchy. The need to establish an independent source of legitimate authority prompted a complete reinvention of what legacy the Shah of Iran was to inherit, what the Peacock Throne represented, and against what the Iranian state was cast in terms of others domestically and abroad.

⁷⁶Amanat, 153.

The rise of the Qajars in Iran heralded a pivot away from the more secular path of the Afsharids and the Zands, but not necessarily a full return to the way of the Safavids. Aqa Mohammad Khan Qajar, the first Qajar shah, had family history with all three preceding dynasties. The Qajars, one of the original Qezilbash tribes to serve Isma‘il, had failed in their contest to become regents for the final Safavid shahs, with the Afsharids ascendant under Nader Shah. Later, Aqa Mohammad Khan would be castrated by the Afsharids, and held in captivity in the court of the Zands by order of Karim Khan Zand, whose forces had killed Aqa Mohammad Khan’s father.⁷⁷ His was a tale of repeated loss at the hands of opposing dynasts and squabbling princelings, with his relatives frequently maimed and killed in the contests for power held over the throne. The connections back to the early Safavids would color his rise to power, as would his resurrection of the more prominent Shi‘a identity for the Iranian state. While not the redeemer of the Safavid order, he would certainly invoke much of the same imagery and history, if to a slightly different end.

Earlier in his reign, Aqa Mohammad Khan did as the Afsharids and Zands did, paying lip service to the ghost of Safavid sovereignty by minting coins in the name of a Safavid prince with his own name beneath, putting on the airs of one who serves rather than rules. However, on Nowruz in March 1786, the dawn of a new Islamic century, he took symbolic measures that both distanced him from the other dynasties and imbued his own claims to power with a degree of religious, even messianic, weight. He issued new coins in the name of no Safavid or Qajar, but in the name of the Mahdi, the Twelfth Shi‘a Imam and supposed Hidden Imam that would return to usher in a new age. At the same time, he declared his capital to be Tehran, a move with both practical and symbolic considerations, as it offered a defensible location with ease of access to

⁷⁷Amanat, 160-161.

the interior as well as the fringes of the realm while being situated away from pro-Safavid Isfahan and pro-Zand Shiraz, with ruins of biblical and early Islamic significance, and edifices of Safavid and Zand design.⁷⁸ The full panoply of occult history was on display with this move, with the decision to announce his designs on the Nowruz, the Persian New Year since the time of the Zoroastrians, hardly a coincidence, and the decision to invoke the Mahdi definitely a move to reaffirm the Shi'a character of his regime. The physical move to a new capital at the dawn of the thirteenth Islamic century, to a place with a Safavid citadel to be the center of a far grander future and the former residence of Karim Khan to be demolished for a palace, was no accident. Aqa Mohammad Khan had established himself as the triumphant return of a Shi'a order without any personal claims of messianic divinity, a completion of the Safavid project of a united Iran without their mystical proclivities or practical shortcomings. He had drawn on the Persian past, the Qezilbash legacy, the promise of the Occultation of the Mahdi to end, and positioned himself as the harbinger of the new order.

Later, as he was stamping out the strongholds of his remaining opponents, Aqa Mohammad Khan managed to crush his enemies both in reality and symbolically as a further testament to his growing power and absolute authority. With assistance of the local administrator Haji Ibrahim Shirazi, the Qajar conqueror was able to take Shiraz in 1792 with a minimum of effort, and while his capture of the city hardly harmed the regular inhabitants, the Zands suffered in many unique ways. Their women and children dispersed among the Qajar harems, their walls and fortifications destroyed, the marble of Karim Khan's palace carted off to be reinstalled in the new Golestan Palace in Tehran, all tearing down what the Zands had wrought during their brief moment in the sun. Most monumentally of all, however, Aqa Mohammad Khan had the bones of

⁷⁸Ibid., 162-163.

Karim Khan exhumed, and, reportedly along with the remains of Nader Shah, buried beneath the threshold of his new palace's reception hall.⁷⁹

While he had already positioned himself as possessed of a uniquely Iranian, devotedly Shi'a, essence to suffuse his new realm, the new Qajar shah othered his opponents in the most extreme way possible, destroying those diametrically opposed to his designs and vision of an Iranian nation. To literally trample the remains of the mightiest of the Zands and the Afsharids whenever honored guests were received, in a new palace built in the shadow of a Safavid citadel, was hardly a symbolic coincidence. Aqa Mohammad Khan propped up a dynasty built to last on a pedigree of lost Qezilbash glory and forgotten Shi'a piety, imbued with a distinct touch of older Persianate kingship by a warlord uniquely divorced from the vices of corrupt kings as a eunuch. By his death, he had eliminated his opponents within and without, clearly othering all dynasties before him, remembering one as a necessary predecessor, and the other two as vile usurpers worthy of vilification.

In the dying days of the Qajars, a new contender for the throne would have to arise, and with it, a new narrative to justify the ascent to power. Originally in military and ministerial positions, the future shah, Reza Khan, began his campaign to position himself as the next king of kings began with familiar steps. Using the power of historical memory, Reza Khan harkened back to the memory of Nader Shah as a humble military mind risen to the stature of national savior, but added to the mix the tool of the Middle Eastern nationalist of the age: archaeology, with references to Cyrus the Great and Darius. In a time when people were concerned that the invitation of democracy was also a death threat to religion, he made a point of showing his religiosity publicly during 'Ashura and visiting such important sites as Najaf and Qom. In

⁷⁹Amanat, 165.

adhering to family name laws in adopting one for his own line, Reza Khan settled on Pahlavi - a reference to pre-Islamic aristocracy and the whole of the language of Middle Persian, loaded with the weight of being intrinsically, essentially Iranian.⁸⁰ Reza Khan built himself a link to the past with all the latest means of propagandizing to build a national movement to place him on the throne, using the power of the press and a largely powerless Majles to validate his claims with legislation. Greater availability of archaeological knowledge gave a new avenue through which to glorify the Iranian, especially the pre-Islamic.

By the combined powers of a malleable press, a manipulable Majles, and compliant clergy, Reza Khan was able to establish the Pahlavis as both a return to the glories of Iran's past and the defenders of the Shi'a soul of the modern Iranian state. He had constructed a lineage of sorts connecting him to both the last great conqueror shah before Qajar domination and the mightiest dynasties before the coming of Islam. In name and deed, he had positioned himself and his goals as those of the people, of the heart of the Iranian nation, as a sort of populist, nationalist figure shrouded in the Persian and Shi'a trapping of most of his subjects. Most importantly for securing the throne, he identified and othered the main opposition force to his own rise: the threat of a democratic society. The rise of Atatürk's new Republic of Turkey caused alarm, as within six months the general turned president had abolished both the Ottoman sultanate and the adjoined caliphate. This signaled the possibility of a similar pattern of secularization under a democratic regime, and gave Reza Khan a new means to augment his legitimacy and claims to rulership. At a time when there were concerns over the shape of government and the fate of the clergy, he pivoted towards a more religious bent through meeting with ayatollahs and

⁸⁰Amanat, 438-440.

pilgrimages, placing the forces of republicanism, which had been painted as inimical to the clergy, as his foes as well.⁸¹

The rising Pahlavi dynasty quelled competing oppositional currents through clever and modern uses of the tools of the Orientalien Schema. In the era of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, when inclinations towards and against all manner of new ideas such as republicanism, anti-clericalism, and modernization ran high on all sides, Reza Khan took the same tools as his many predecessors and repurposed them to fit the modern context. His rise to power included the fabrication of a pedigree that any heretic or pretender would be jealous of, tying the innovation of his person and dynasty to the greatest of rulers past. In a modern twist, the future shah would also invoke the idea of being a national and even popular savior, cultivating something akin to a cult of personality to prop up his strongman ambitions, like his contemporary commander turned head of state, Atatürk. In this effective propagandizing as well as his extremely well timed displays of piety and even choice of name, Reza Khan set the stage well for his eventual transformation into Reza Shah, propping himself up on the twin pillars of kingship and Shi‘ism that had defined all previous dynastic inceptors since the Safavids. In addition, he kept the modern innovation of the Majles, powerless as it was, as a sort of third pillar, propping up the idea of a popular mandate being an intrinsic part of the promised Pahlavi order. In vesting himself with greater powers, eventually leading to the termination of the Qajars and the official rise of Reza Shah, the new king of kings placed not only his predecessor as a loathsome other, but also competing modes of government in a time when there was a real possibility of change. The Pahlavis understood the need to enshrine their regime as the only preferable mode of government, and in doing so placed secularism and democracy firmly in

⁸¹Amanat, 433.

opposition to their designs (and by extension of their populist and nationalist claims, the designs and livelihoods of the people).

Even in the waning days of the whole institution of Iranian monarchy, the final shah, Mohammad Reza Shah, embraced much of the same ideas of legendary kingship and popular will made manifest. Especially as he suppressed opposition to his rule, he only continued to act in ways to glorify and exalt himself, beginning with his assumption of the additional title *Aryamehr*, “Sunlight of the Aryans”, in 1965, imbued with an innate royal glory. In the coming years, he would have an elaborate coronation ceremony after two and a half decades on the throne for his own aggrandizement, followed in 1971 by his infamously extravagant celebration of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy held opposite the ruins of Persepolis.⁸² In the face of increased opposition domestically in the form of all manner of critical clergy and political dissidents, the last shah continued to insist on a legendary lineage of blood and kingship to which he was the ultimate heir, the quintessentially Iranian monarch. Even when he othered and eliminated domestic opposition that rooted itself in the very notions of nationalism and Shi’a piety that had elevated his father to the throne, the shah was confident in his inherent qualities, his sanctioned and even divine right to rule. His own ministers, with their unbridled access to the shah as a private individual rather than a public figure, reported his assuredness and the reason why, detailing that:

His Majesty mentioned strange things about his belief in divine support for him. “I have noticed that whoever opposed me, has been eliminated, whether domestic or foreign.” He gave the example of the Kennedy Brothers... “John Kennedy was assassinated. Robert, the senator, was assassinated. And the last of them, Edward, because of a strange affair over the death of a girl, was scandalized and now his star is fading. Nasser, the Egyptian president, was also eliminated.” Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, who also disapproved of His Majesty, was eliminated. In Iran, too, whoever opposed the shah was deposed...⁸³

⁸²Amanat, 663-665.

⁸³Asadollah ‘Alam, court minister to the shah, from his secret diary, as found in Amanat, 667-668.

To the bitter end, the Pahlavi state insisted upon the essential qualities of its dynasty, without realizing that this had in fact disconnected it from the people, opening the doors to a complete redesign of nationalism in the Iranian state with the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

In the most recent regime change of Iranian history, the Islamic Revolution, the nation building tools found their most modern use, ironically towards an end very reminiscent of the earliest uses of them in both Iranian contexts and more widely in the contexts of religious heterodoxy. The shah certainly did himself no favors throughout his rule in inculcating genuine public loyalty and affection, with his increasingly distanced stance towards Islam, his selective glorification of the pre-Islamic past, his brutally suppressive tendencies through the secret police of the dreaded SAVAK, and his friendliness and even seeming submission towards Western powers such as the United States. If anything, he did the job of the revolutionaries for them in some regards, othering himself from the demands of the clergy, the merchants of the bazaar, the peasants, the educated, and many other large and crucial segments of the Iranian population. By the time Ayatollah Khomeini became the driving engine of the revolution and guiding force of the nascent Islamic Republic, the shah was perhaps the most identifiable other in the nation. At the same time, the fervent Islamists of the revolution were able to mobilize immense public support through the charismatic person and almost messianic story of Khomeini, whose return from exile while espousing the Guardianship of the Jurist, fit a Mahdi narrative perfectly.⁸⁴ Taking advantage of his immense popularity, Khomeini was able to enact a purge of many potential enemies and critics from the clergy, government, and academia, all against the backdrop of defying American designs for the region and an Iraqi invasion.⁸⁵ It was a perfect

⁸⁴For a masterful explanation of Mahdism, the Guardianship of the Jurist, and the climate which allowed for its meteoric rise in Iran on the road to the Islamic Revolution, see Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 1985.

⁸⁵Amanat, 774.

storm, and at the eye of it all was a brilliant ayatollah and his cadre of clerics and fighters with a clear national vision.

In short order, Khomeini was able to execute all three parts of the Orientalien Schema to hijack an initially disjointed revolution with multiple vying directions into a single national movement. Through his own vociferous preaching and history as an enemy of the shah, Khomeini was able to invoke the memory of the martyred Imams, even being known as Imam Khomeini by many, as if he were the heir to the Twelve Imams, the answer to the problems of the age before the end of the Occultation.⁸⁶ By his silencing of enemies and competitors, he was able to more easily shape the character of his new nation, embracing a new alternative to monarchy that was, in design and designation, intrinsically Shi'a and rightly guided: an Islamic Republic. This even bled into the means by which elements of the old regime were purged, as those previously loyal to the Pahlavis were not only "collaborators" as one would expect to see in a post-revolutionary political landscape, but "idol worshippers", a throwback to the ignorant pre-Islamic age.⁸⁷ While identifying and cleansing the other within, the Islamic Republic was immediately placed into a situation to rally against the other without, with the Iraqi invasion that would become the Iran-Iraq war. Rather than shatter the nation as he had hoped, Saddam Hussein instead handed the Iranians perhaps their greatest unifying force, a war for survival in which all the nation would fight hand in hand. Partially by Khomeini's designs and partially by fortune and circumstance, the tools of the Orientalien Schema were used to spectacular effect to transition from a chaotic revolutionary moment into an enduring national memory.⁸⁸

⁸⁶For an excellent collection of translated works of Ayatollah Khomeini, see Ruhollah Khomeini and Hamid Algar (Trans.), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*, (Jakarta: Mizan Press), 1981.

⁸⁷Amanat, 775.

⁸⁸While not given full attention in this paper for reasons of brevity, more recent research continues to examine the role of occult ideas, especially surrounding the Madhi, in Iranian politics. For an insightful read into the impact of these ideas during the Ahmadinejad Administration, see Rashid Yaluh, *Mahdism in Contemporary Iran: Ahmadinejad and the Occult Imam*, (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies), 2011,

CONCLUSION

The phenomena of the occult, the Orient, and the other are hardly new topics of study, as many trees have been felled and much ink spilled to pick apart their particulars, correlate them, and examine them under various contexts. However, the specific intersection of these three concepts, and their specific modes of interaction, have great use and relevance in Middle Eastern studies for the exploration of nation building, a common phenomenon especially after the nineteenth century. The union of Orientalist modes of thought, occult modes of mythmaking, and the sociological othering of peoples or concepts can neatly be described as the “Orientalien Schema,” and is demonstrably at work in the establishment and maintenance of heterodox religious movements. Beyond this, however, the same schema has been applied to more worldly concerns, most especially the nation building projects of the Middle East. Many of the tools and trends initially used to define and elevate mystical orders and heretical sects over time were turned towards the legitimization of new forms of government, or to argue for the rights of a people.

This thesis does not fully cover all possible instances of the Orientalien Schema in action, for the sake of brevity, though there are many interesting avenues of research to be explored hereafter. This thesis only covered in any real depth Turkey, Iran, and the Kurdish people, which, while being marvelous case studies, hardly constitutes a full investigation of the Middle East. The complexities of the Arab World and nation building, especially in light of the rise of Arab

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12677>. In addition, the idea of the other, both foreign and domestic, remains important and is still actively fostered by the government, as explored in the very recent work of Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, (Redwood City: Stanford University), 2019.

nationalism in the mid-twentieth century and the Arab Spring, warrant a separate and much more extensive study, and to append the topic to this one would be a disservice. While the ideas surrounding the Orientalien Schema may be of some use in dissecting the rise and fall of Arab nationalism, that would require research beyond the scope of this thesis; the ideas may be universally applicable, but their universal application in one study is highly impractical. Similarly, the study of the more particularist strains of nationalism in the Middle East, especially after the sun set on Arab nationalism, would be both rich and worthy of study. Such ideas as Lebanonism, Phoenicianism, Pharaonism, and Syrian nationalism coming to prominence after the zenith of Arab nationalism are worth examining through the lens of the Orientalien Schema, especially to examine why none have managed to gain great popularity. Finally, the matter of the founding of the State of Israel and the heated debates and violent conflicts in the ongoing Arab-Israeli Conflict would definitely be prime material to examine through this new lens, but for the aforementioned reasons, shall not be addressed here.

Another avenue for research in this same direction would be the degree to which political Islam has risen in the past fifty years, as this thesis has demonstrated that the same tools can be used to similar effect in both religious and secular contexts. Indeed, the final discussion of Iran, brief as it was, did touch on how the Orientalien Schema lends itself well to modern religious popular and nationalist movements. This framework could be useful in examining such phenomena as the rise of Islamist terror groups that begin to exercise the powers and responsibilities of a state actor, as seen in Hamas and Hezbollah. It could also be of use in examining the complex relationship between clergy and state in Saudi Arabia, where the rise in tandem of a tribal house and fringe creed to regional (and arguably global) prominence is evidence of Islam's enduring political impact. The rise of Islamist parties in emerging Arab

democracies, such as Egypt and Tunisia, offers another fascinating application of this framework. Perhaps most interesting would be the furthering of this research in future work in the direction of global terrorist networks, such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban with their uncompromising doctrines of war against the world, or ISIS with their move from non-state terrorist organization to aspiring Islamic state. In any event, the Orientalien Schema has value in analysis of political Islam in myriad ways, hopefully to be further developed in future studies along the same lines.

In summary, the history of religious innovation in general, and in the Middle East in particular, features elements broadly defined as occult, in the original meaning of the hidden, of not immediately and readily apparent. Alongside this, the tendency, ascribed by Edward Said in his magnum opus *Orientalism* to scholars of the Orient, to reduce an object of study to a simple collection of essential qualities and attributes finds itself being used in these contexts to define and legitimize a movement or school of thought. In addition, the sociological concept of the other comes into play as a tool against which the heterodox cleaves itself from the orthodox and establishes itself as a distinct entity rather than an associated and subservient outgrowth of a mainstream body of thought. This confluence of ideas, simply termed the Orientalien Schema for ease, has major ramifications for religious studies as at least a potential tool for exploring the occult and mystical elements of a faith. In the context of Middle Eastern studies, this schema becomes an interesting and invaluable tool in evaluating the rise of new regimes in the modern Middle East, as many of the tools used for religious propagation are in common with nation building in the modern era. Through the case studies of the rise of the Republic of Turkey in the post-Ottoman world, the struggles of the Kurdish nationalist cause to become a self-determining people, and the myriad regime changes in Iran from the Safavid era onward, it is plain that the

toolset of the heresiarch is also that of the national hero in the Middle East. This thesis endeavors to provide a new lens through which religious, social, and political studies of the Middle East may interpret the vicissitudes of history and the tumult of today in the region. While original and untested, hopefully the Orientalien Schema will prove a useful tool for the continued study of the Middle East, and will be either used and refined by future scholars, or disregarded entirely due to the emergence of some more appropriate tool that considers and corrects any shortcomings and errors not considered in this thesis.

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