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ARTICLE

"Islam Says We Are All Equal": The Islamic Turn in Soviet Propaganda in Iran, 1921–25

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Abstract

The early 1920s witnessed an upsurge in Soviet interest in Islam on an international scale. This interest was to a large extent guided by Great Game logic, at a time when the idea of Islamic jihad against the British was extremely popular all over the Middle East. Contrary to the common assumption that the Marxist rationale of the Bolsheviks excluded any possibility of integrating religion into Soviet policy, the highest authorities in Moscow adopted a rather opportunistic position with regard to Islam both at home and abroad. Drawing mainly on Russian archival sources, this study questions the origins and nature of the Islamic turn in Soviet discourse, diplomacy, and propaganda in Iran. The article concludes that although the Soviet rapprochement with some members of the Iranian clergy and the integration of religious elements into communist propaganda were carried out for the sake of short-term geopolitical goals, these maneuvers were much conditioned by Soviet domestic policy and post–World War I regional interdependencies.

Keywords: anti-imperialism; Iranian Communist Party; Islamic nationalism; national communism; Shiʿi clergy; Soviet foreign policy

The October Revolution marked not only the beginning of Bolshevik expansion in the Muslim East but also the emergence of "Islamic" communism as a major Soviet ideological weapon. However, with the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War and the crystallization of Soviet Marxist doctrine, attempts to draw parallels between communism and Islam rapidly gained in ambiguity both in the Soviet republic and abroad. Although the Soviet government was pursuing national communism for security reasons, the communists' professed atheism and their clash with local Muslim elites discredited the Soviets in the eyes of Islamic authorities worldwide.[1] Nevertheless, the integration of Islamic reformist movements into the Bolshevik revolutionary network pushed Moscow to recognize the importance of political Islam and laid the basis for Soviet engagement with regional Islamic anti-imperialist movements. This process was uneven and selective, generally responding to the objectives of the Soviet anti-British geopolitical strategy and Soviet domestic developments. The aim of this article is to elucidate the interdependencies that existed between the Soviet policy on Islam in Iran, the "Islamic" trends in Soviet internal affairs, and the regional political dynamics.

The chronological framework of this study corresponds to the time span between the conclusion of the Irano-Soviet treaty of friendship in February 1921, practically coinciding with the so-called coup d'état of Reza Khan, and the proclamation of the Pahlavi dynasty in December 1925. The immediate post–World War I period in Iran was marked by the

[1] The majority of Turkestan's Muslim authorities supported the local independence movements directed against the Soviet regime. Radjabov, "Struggle for Independence," 181.

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unprecedented scope of British influence, so it is no wonder that the Iranian policy of the Soviets was directed against British regional hegemony. After the disintegration of the tsarist army of occupation in 1917 and the Bolshevik renouncement of imperial privileges in Iran in early 1918, the Caspian region continued to be one of the principal arenas of the Great Game. Once extending as far as the Caucasus and the north of Iran, by 1921 the British military presence had shrunk drastically, and the anti-British uprising in Iraq of 1920 gave additional momentum to Soviet regional designs.[2] Between 1920 and 1922, Soviet power was solidly implemented in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkestan, the prewar regional balance of power thus being restored with the exception of the tsarist semicolonial presence in Iran. Despite the abrogation of the tsarist capitulation treaties, the Bolsheviks seriously considered extending their political influence to the Persian Gulf. Despite the failure of the revolutionary transfer from Russia to Gilan in 1920, the Bolsheviks were still looking forward to revolutionizing Iran, once it attained the level of an industrialized capitalist country.[3] Following the 1921 "coup d'état," the Soviets saw in Reza Khan a charismatic national leader who could not only stop British expansion in Iran but also could centralize the country, set it on the path of industrialization, and enter into a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union.[4] In the early 1920s the Moscow authorities generally backed a strong central government in Iran, vacillating between outright support for Reza Khan and a more cautious status quo position (notably, during the republican campaign in 1924).[5] In these circumstances, Islam was perceived by the Bolsheviks as a double-edged sword: on one hand, the international anti-imperialist movement was gaining in strength under the banner of Islam; on the other, the Bolsheviks generally considered the Iranian ʿulamaʾ, and any other religious authorities, inherently reactionary forces opposed to state-led centralization and economic development. As a result, Moscow adopted an ambiguous stance on the revolutionary potential of Shiʿi Islam, reflecting both its political pragmatism and revolutionary hopes.

The historiography of Soviet Islamic policies has long been focused on the national communism trend in the Soviet Muslim Republics. Led by such personalities as Mullanur Vakhitov, Mir-Said Sultan-Galiev, and Turar Ryskulov,[6] the centrifugal tendencies on the Soviet periphery were examined with specific attention to their pan-Islamic aspects. Having developed in the era of the Cold War, Western historiography concurred with recognition of the influence of national communism in Soviet domestic policy, but this scholarship focused principally on Stalinist centralization and is today regarded by historians as ideologically charged.[7] The opening of the Soviet archives allowed historians to raise new research questions, such as the place of Islam in the early Soviet modernizing agenda and in academic Orientalism. Yet, again, many

[2] The inherent weakness of the British regional hegemony was mainly due to its unexpected and sudden nature, the drastic extension of the British military forces being much due to initiatives by the Crown's impetuous generals; Darwin, "Undeclared Empire," 159; Rose, "Batum as Domino," 267. Although certain members of the British military elite were convinced of Moscow's interference in Iraqi political affairs, the Soviets did not intervene in the Iraqi revolt. For British debates on the Iraqi revolt see McFie, "British Intelligence." For a deeper perspective on the origins of the Iraqi revolt see Vinogradov, "1920 Revolt"; and Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*.

[3] On the Gilan Republic see Chaqueri, *Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran*; Genis, "Les Bolsheviks"; Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia*; and Persits, *Zastenshivaia interventsiia*. See the argument of Kayhan Nejad in "To Break the Feudal Bonds."

[4] For the Soviet academic discourse on Reza Khan's role in Iranian history see, for example, Gurko-Kriazhin, *Kratkaia istoriia Persii*.

[5] According to Iurii Demin, the reason the pro-Soviet national bloc did not rally to support Reza Khan's republican campaign was Moscow's fear of growing British influence; "Sovetskaia diplomatiia," 71–72.

[6] Mullanur Vakhitov (1885–1918) was a Tatar revolutionary, member of the Muslim Socialist Committee and editor of the journal *Qızıl Bayraq*. Mir-Said Sultan-Galiev (1892–1940) was a Tatar Bolshevik revolutionary who drew up the concept of "national communism." Turar Ryskulov (1894–1938) was an eminent Kazakh revolutionary and intellectual, chairman of the Muslim Department of the Turkestan Communist Party (1919), representative of the Comintern in the Mongolian People's Republic (1924–25), vice-president of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (1926–37).

[7] Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *L'islam en Union soviétique*; Rodinson, *Marxisme*; Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*.

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authors in Soviet Oriental studies concentrated on imperial continuities.[8] The rare scholar who focused on early Irano-Soviet relations tended to stress Soviet economic imperialism, dismissing Moscow's anti-imperialist discourse as a tactical maneuver.[9] The recent study of the Iranian Communist Party by Kayhan Nejad breaks with this narrow perspective by demonstrating the persistent Marxist agenda of the Russian authorities, but the author fails to highlight the importance of the Islamic nexus in Soviet regional policy.[10] As for the historiography of the late Qajar sociopolitical struggles, the works of Stephanie Cronin and Vanessa Martin provide an insightful overview of the position and political activities of the Iranian clergy but, being based on the British archival sources, they only briefly mention Soviet agency.[11] There is, however, a parallel historiographical trend that emphasizes the impact of regional revolutionary dynamics on Soviet domestic and foreign policy, the incorporation of Islamic reformist thinkers into Soviet administrative systems, and as well the socialist trends among Muslim intellectuals of the Russian Empire.[12] Inspired by this approach, this study contributes not only to the historiography of Irano-Soviet encounters but also to the complex history of early Soviet transnationalism.

The focus of this paper is on the relations between the Islamic trends in the Soviet regional strategy and the sociopolitical context (in both the Soviet Union and Iran) in which these trends evolved. Drawing mainly on Russian archival sources from the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and the Russian Foreign Policy Archive (AVPRF), the article posits that the Soviet authorities showed much flexibility in readjusting the Marxist dogma to their policy in Iran and undertook a genuine rapprochement with the Shiʿi clergy. Nevertheless, Soviet diplomatic correspondence and the archives of the Iranian Communist Party located in Moscow provide little information on the perceptions and agency of Iranian actors, nor do they give a complete and clear picture of Soviet activities in Iran in the early 1920s. Moreover, access to the documents preserved at the AVPRF being constrained, our perspective on the scope and reach of Soviet propaganda in late Qajar Iran remains extremely limited. The Archives of the French Lazarist Congregation and the French Foreign Ministry Archives (ADMAE) provide more detail on early Soviet policy in Iran, although the French accounts tend to exaggerate the Bolshevik "threat." Inversely, the British diplomatic correspondence preserved in the National Archives (NA) in Kew Gardens tends to downplay the importance of Bolshevik networks (probably to justify the British military retreat from the region) but remains a valuable source on Soviet propaganda methods and Iranian underground political organizations. Relying on unpublished sources in Russian, English, and French as well as on published sources in Persian, this article demonstrates that the Islamic trend in Soviet policy in Iran was shaped by the regional anti-imperialist movement that brought together Caucasian, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian revolutionaries.

The article falls in three parts: the first part treats the Islamic turn in Soviet strategy and academic discourse; the second part focuses on Soviet relations with the Shiʿi clergy in Iran; and the third section explores the place of Islam in the program of the Iranian Communist Party and clandestine communist cells in Iranian territory. After outlining the flexible

[8] Such authors as Michael Kemper and Denis Volkov sought to dismantle the widespread assumption that the October Revolution constituted a watershed in Russian Orientalism; Kemper, "Red Orientalism"; Volkov, "Rupture or Continuity?" On the contrary, Vera Tolz strove to highlight the Russian origins of Soviet revisionism by focusing on the institutional and discursive continuities between the tsarist and Soviet eras; Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*.

[9] See for example Lenczowski, *Russia and the West*; and Volodarsky, *Soviet Union*.

[10] Nejad, "To Break the Feudal Bonds."

[11] See Martin, "Mudarris"; Cronin, "Modernity"; and Cronin, "Popular Protest."

[12] The contradictory role of Muslim anti-imperialist movements in Soviet foreign policy was brilliantly summarized in by Ben Fowkes and Bülent Gökay in "Unholy Alliance." For a brief look at the transnational dimension of early Soviet foreign policy see Dullin and Studer, "Communism + Transnational"; and Hirst, "Transnational Anti-Imperialism." On the incorporation of Central Asian intellectuals in early Soviet administration, see Khalid, *Politics*; and Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*. On socialist thought among the Muslim elites of the Russian Empire see, for example, Shigabdinov, "Islamic Socialism in Turkestan."

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contours of Soviet Islamic tendencies, the article demonstrates the pragmatism of Soviet relations with the Iranian clergy and the persistence of the pan-Islamic trend among the Iranian communists. The article concludes that Islamic communism represented a stable trend in Soviet policy on Iran that flourished thanks to the transnational circulations of the revolutionary era and declined in the face of growing centralization dynamics in Soviet Russia and Iran.

Islam in Soviet Strategic and Academic Debates

From the beginning of the Russian Civil War until the sixth congress of the Comintern in 1928, which saw the proclamation of the "class against class" strategy, the Bolsheviks widely engaged with Muslim reformist and anti-imperialist movements against both Russian and Western imperialism. The scope and potential of this cooperation was reflected in Lenin's theses for the second congress of the Comintern (July–August 1920) and his polemic against Manabendra Roy. The readiness of the Soviets to use Islamic tropes in their propaganda was not just part of the "Eastern turn" of the international revolutionary movement, it also was an act of acknowledgement of the historical weight of pan-Islamism and Islamic nationalism in Eastern political struggles.[13] Of course, the Bolsheviks never considered the possibility of an Islamic path to communism. Meanwhile, Soviet leaders developed a sustained theoretical discourse on "national" revolutionary scenarios as well as the political specifics of Islamic societies. The official Soviet position on Islam combined Marxist dogmatism with a quite heterodox assumption that different forms of social upheaval could precipitate the implementation of a Soviet government.[14] This attitude was shared not only by indigenous revolutionaries but also by the highest Soviet authorities, such as Lenin, Karl Radek, and Fedor Chicherin. The ups and downs of international politics often pushed the Bolsheviks to present their engagements in the East as circumstantial alliances, but at the same time a series of distinct discursive patterns in defense of a Muslim-communist alliance was emerging in Soviet foreign and domestic policy.

The early Islamic trend in Bolshevik international strategy was to a large degree a product of revolutionary transnationalism in which Ottoman pan-Islamic propaganda and the Indian anti-colonial movement played central roles.[15] Such prominent Ottoman figures as Enver Pasha and Kazim bey Orbay joined the Bolshevik revolutionary forces, and the Indian Muslim intellectuals Mohammad Barakatullah and Abdar Rab Nishtar engaged in preaching and publishing activities on Soviet territory.[16] The Comintern also showed its interest in Islamic liberation movements worldwide, notably by welcoming the Indonesian revolutionary Tan Malaka to its ranks.[17] Karl Radek, who claimed at the second congress of the Comintern that Genghiz Khan and the Muslim caliphs attacked Europe "to create a civilization of the free worker," was by 1924 considering expansion of the Islamic revolutionary

[13] Lenin's polemic against Roy revolved around Lenin's assertion that communist parties in all colonial areas must assist "bourgeois-democratic liberation" movements. The Comintern did not accept Roy's theses, but in the end they made a considerable contribution to Lenin's perception of the revolutionary East. See Haithcox, "Roy-Lenin Debate." The First Congress of Peoples of the East, which took place in Baku in September 1920, was another key event marking the Eastern turn in Bolshevik foreign policy. On the role of the Baku Congress in the Iranian revolution see Pezhmann Dailami, "First Congress."

[14] The variety of conditions that potentially can lead to the establishment of a Soviet government were discussed by Leon Trotsky in his work *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930) in the framework of his "theory of uneven and combined development."

[15] See Shablovskaia, "Persian Gate."

[16] "Prince" Mahendra Pratap (1886–1979), president of the Indian Provisional Government in exile, wrote a treatise on the socialist trends in Islam entitled *Religion of Love*. Lenin was reported to have read Pratap's work but did not make any comments on it. Dmitriev, *Indian Revolutionaries*, 48.

[17] Tan Malaka (1897–1949) joined the executive committee of the Comintern in 1922 but returned to South East Asia in 1924 to continue his revolutionary activities.

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propaganda with attention to Iranian developments.[18] The secretary of the Comintern commission on the East, Anatolii Skachko, and the chief of the Comintern executive committee, Grigorii Zinov'ev, also were pointing out the commonality of communist and Islamic doctrines in 1920.[19]

However, Muslim revolutionary elites soon turned out to be the motor of centrifugal dynamics inside the nascent Soviet Union, whereas Soviet peripheral institutions, such as *Musbiuro* and *Turkkomissiia*, rapidly gained in independence and began to question Moscow's authority in the field of domestic and foreign policy.[20] Given that many traditional Islamic authorities sided with anti-Bolshevik forces during the Russian Civil War and Ottoman agents of Soviet influence (notably, Enver Pasha) tended to change sides in the pursuit of their own agendas,[21] it is not surprising that local revolutionary movements were often deemed by Moscow "nationalist" and "pan-Islamic," and an existential threat to the Soviet state. In 1923 the arrest of Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, the eminent Tatar Bolshevik who theorized "national communism," marked the growing Soviet suspicion of the leaders of Muslim liberation movements.[22] On the international scale, pan-Islamism also was widely criticized by the Bolsheviks, which was lamented by Tan Malaka during the third congress of the Comintern.[23] Thus, the early 1920s witnessed the emergence of a certain duality between Soviet policy and the discourse on Islam: the Soviets tended to support Islamic liberation movements but condemned Islamism. Marxist dogma made one immune to the accusations of pan-Islamic deviations but was hardly taken into account in the formulation of Soviet politics in the Islamic world.

Soviet administrative policies in Muslim regions were rather moderate and attested to the ambiguity of the anti-Islamic Marxist positions of the centralizing bureaucratic elites. Although, as Kemper notes, discussion of the specificities of different Islamic societies was conspicuously absent during the second congress of the Comintern, the cultural variations among the Tatar, Bashkir, Central Asian, Afghan, and Iranian Muslims were taken into serious consideration by the Soviet authorities. Their awareness was notably reflected in Sultan-Galiev's work, The Methods of Anti-Religious Propaganda among the Muslims (1921), which stipulated that the methods of propaganda should be elaborated "in regard to the local mentality and psyche."[24] The proclamation of the freedom of faith by the Soviets led to the adoption of a laissez-faire policy by local administration, with Muslim clergymen often being in a privileged position vis-à-vis their Orthodox counterparts. In Central Asia the Jadids were appointed to key positions, and the Tatar clergy actively cooperated with the Soviet regime to collect funds during the famine in the Volga and Ural regions (1921–22).[25] The progressist trends among the Muslim clergy were receiving positive

[18] Kemper, "Red Orientalism," 450; Shumiatskii to Radek, October 11, 1923, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow; hereafter RGASPI), f. 495, op. 90, d. 76, l. 161.

[19] Kemper, "Red Orientalism," 449–50; Fowkes and Gökay, "Unholy Alliance," 11.

[20] The Muslim Department of the Communist Party of Turkestan (*Musbiuro*) led by Turar Ryskulov was created in 1919 to supervise propaganda activities among the Muslim population. *Turkkomissiia* was a special commission sent from Moscow to Tashkent at the end of 1919 to reinstate Moscow's control over the Turkestan administration. On the independentist trends in the policy of *Turkkomissiia*, see Akramov and Avliiakulov, *V. I. Lenin*; and Bast, "Council for International Propaganda."

[21] Ismail Enver Pasha (1881–1922), who was the former Ottoman Minister of War and member of the ruling triumvirate during WWI, was at first attracted by the Bolshevik policy in the East and even participated in the First Congress of the People of the East in 1920. However, when he was sent by Lenin to Bukhara in November 1921, Enver Pasha made secret contacts with local nationalists and defected to the Basmachi side. On Enver Pasha's anti-Soviet activities in Central Asia see Sonyel, "Enver Pasha"; and Yilmaz, "Ottoman Warrior."

[22] Bennigsen and Wimbush maintain that Sultan-Galiev wanted to preserve the autonomy of the Eastern revolutionary movement; Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*; Bennigsen, "Sultan Galiev."

[23] Fowkes and Gökay, "Unholy Alliance," 11.

[24] Sultan-Galiev, "Metody antireligioznoi propagandy."

[25] Vasil'eva, "Vzaimotnosheniia sovetskogo gosudarstva," 144.

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assessments on the part of Soviet authorities, and the renewal of anti-religious struggle was discussed only in 1923.[26] Finally, the solemn transfer of the Uthman Qurʾan from Ufa to Tashkent in 1923 embodied the Soviet rapprochement with Islamic clergy on both national and international levels.[27]

Similar tendencies could be observed in the Soviet academic discourse on Islam. On one hand, most Soviet intellectuals shared the belief that Islam (as any other religion) would become obsolete after the passage to socialism of Eastern societies.[28] On the other, by 1923 more and more daring Marxian interpretations of Islam began to appear in Soviet literature, notably in the journal of the All-Russian Association of Scientific Orientology *Novyi Vostok*: Z. and D. Navshirvanov affirmed in their article, Communist Trends in the History of Muslim Civilization, that Sufi orders were organized on communist principles; Konstantin Dobroliubskii pointed out in his article, The Birth of Islam in the New Light, that the Prophet "insisted the most on political submission and on the paying of tribute to be distributed among the poor"; and Il'ia Reisner demonstrated in his piece, The Brotherhood of the Fighters for Faith, the revolutionary potential of the Indian Islamic group *Jamaʿat al-mujahidin*.[29] Although pan-Islamism was still treated as one of the "the -isms of the reaction and Asian despotism," most of the journal's publications between 1923 and 1924 provided an explicitly positive account of Islamic laws and organizations.[30]

Soviet discourse on the place of Islam in Iranian policy evolved in the framework of the general Soviet policy on Islam. The first Soviet attempt to establish contact with the Iranian government occurred as early as 1918, when the former Russian consul in Khoy, Nikolai Bravin, responded to the Bolshevik appeal to tsarist diplomats and became the official envoy of the Soviet government to Tehran. The possibility of revolutionary transfer to Iran was discussed by the Soviet authorities only two years later and turned out to be a highly contested issue. Besides the center-periphery tensions that have been amply discussed elsewhere, the question of the use of Islam in Bolshevik revolutionary expansion also divided key actors involved in Iranian politics. Although the president of the recently created *Iranbiuro* , Nariman Narimanov, denied the importance of pan-Islamism in the Eastern liberation movement,[31] Bravin, who had been coordinating the Bolshevik regional exchanges from Tashkent since 1918, was reported to advocate the instrumentalization of religious sentiment in the East. Bravin's view of the Bolshevik policy in the East remains shrouded in mystery, particularly given the fact that Bravin was denounced for his anti-communist views by his Bolshevik colleagues both during his diplomatic activities in Iran and during his mission to Afghanistan in 1919.[32] In this regard, French archives provide an interesting account of Bravin's official position. The French chargé d'affaires in Denmark, Henri Martin, reported to Paris in May 1920 that one of his agents was able to infiltrate the meeting between Soviet officials and representatives of Eastern countries in Moscow. According to Martin's informant, during the meeting Bravin addressed the audience with the following speech:

[26] Ibid., 145–46. It is worth mentioning that the first issue of the Soviet magazine *Bezbozhnik* (The Godless) was only published in December 1922.

[27] Anonymous to Mikhailov (Tashkent), August 4, 1923, Arkhiv vneshnei politiki rossiiskoi federatsii (Russian Foreign Policy Archive, Moscow; hereafter AVPRF), f. 28, op. 10, d. 4, l. 8. On the transfer of the Uthman Coran to Tashkent see Shigabdinov, "A. E. Shmidt i Koran 'Usmana."

[28] Kemper, "Soviet Discourse," 3.

[29] Z. and D. Navshirvanov, "Kommunistisheckie techeniia"; Dobroliubskii, "Vozniknovenie islama," 367; Reisner, "Bratstvo bortsov."

[30] M. N., "Pod znakom islama," 87.

[31] Narimanov to Lenin, November 1, 1919, in Tikhonov, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 43.

[32] The leader of the Baku Commune Stepan Shaumian accused Bravin of being an agent of German influence; Shaumian to Chicherin, May 21, 1919, RGASPI, f. 159, op. 2, d. 51, l. 2. Boris Ivanov, a member of the Soviet delegation to Kabul, denounced Bravin's lack of loyalty to the Soviet regime; Ivanov to Turkkomissiia, December 1919, in Tikhonov, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 77–83.

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> Bolshevism found a fertile ground in the Islamists. They like Bolshevist sermons because of the principle of equality that they promote. The Islamists avail themselves voluntarily of Bolshevism but in its national form, as they want to preserve their identity. The British are very powerful in the Orient but their influence has been shaken in many places and if we remain united, we can break the British hegemony. The Russians are in a privileged situation regarding the Islamists who are now convinced that Bolshevism is not imperialist but, on the contrary, will defend the weak nations. Such is the result of the agitation provoked by the Bolsheviks in Muslim countries by spreading their propaganda in local languages.[33]

During the existence of the Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic in Gilan (1920–21), which turned out to be a disaster for the Bolshevik reputation among the local population, the debate on Iranian policy took the shape of a confrontation between the "radical" purist and "moderate" party factions, the issue of Islam being pushed aside. With the conclusion of the Irano-Soviet treaty of friendship and the arrival of the first Soviet minister, Fedor Rothstein, in Tehran, the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, the NKID, made a significant effort to put an end to the revolutionary "adventurism" in Iran[34] and to diminish its propaganda activities. Yet, constantly criticized for his "bourgeois" diplomacy by the falcons of world revolution, Rothstein was soon replaced by Boris Shumiatskii, who had the reputation of being Trotsky's man and manifested his particular interest in the Islamic propaganda methods. This interest was attested by the British plenipotentiary minister in Tehran, Percy Loraine:[35]

> The mistake made in the time of Rothstein of pushing Communism without regard to its effect on Islamism is realised, and every effort is now being made to work with Islamic principles. The use of certain passages in the Koran favourable to Communism is recommended as useful propaganda.[36]

From 1922 onward Soviet consuls began to organize meetings with Iranian merchants during which the former tried to demonstrate the compatibility between communism and Islam.[37] According to the Soviet archives, this task was facilitated by a certain Shiʿi *mojtahed* of Najaf and Kerbela who, in 1923, confirmed that socialism did not contradict Islam (apart from this brief mention in the Soviet archives, there is no other evidence that a fatwa was issued on this subject).[38] On the Soviet side, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin considered Shiʿi Islam "fertile ground" for Bolshevik propaganda. Of course, such a convergence of attitudes was much related to the anti-British upheaval in Iraq, in which the Shiʿi clergy played a leading role. Nevertheless, Chicherin's appreciation of Shiʿism was rooted in a more systemic vision of Islamic culture where, according to Chicherin, Shiʿism occupied a special place, marked by the existence of multiple layers of ideological formation. In this regard, Chicherin was particularly concerned with the recruitment of local actors for propaganda work that required equal knowledge of Marxist theory and Islamic law. The leader of the short-lived 1922 revolt in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan, Abu al-Qasem Lahuti, was a perfect candidate for Chicherin: former militant constitutionalist, Lahuti embodied what

[33] Henri Martin (French chargé d'affaires in Denmark) to the French Foreign Minister, May 29, 1920, Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères (French Foreign Ministry Archives, Paris; hereafter ADMAE), Série E, Asie 1918–40, Perse-Iran, 35, p. 118–20.

[34] Chicherin to Ordzhonikidze, November 29, 1921, in Persits, *Persidskii front mirovoi revoliutsii*, 443–44.

[35] Fernand Prévost to the French Minister in Tehran, June 3, 1922, ADMAE, Série E, Asie 1918–40, Perse-Iran, 37, p. 155.

[36] Loraine to Curzon, November 23, 1922, National Archives, London (hereafter NA), FO 416/189.

[37] Telegram to Saunders, November 26, 1922, NA, FO 416/72.

[38] Shumiatskii to Karakhan, July 19, 1923, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 1, l. 37. Given the leading role of the Najafi *mojtahed* Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani in the Iraqi reformist movement, it is probable that Shumiatskii was referring to Shahrastani's publishing activities. On Shahrastani's stance on Islam, see Bashkin, "Iraqi Afghanis."

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Stephanie Cronin called "the increasing leftward shift" among the Iranian nationalist military elite.[39] Although the Bolsheviks deliberately abstained from any support for Lahuti's eleven-day revolt, Chicherin particularly appreciated Lahuti for his linguistic capacities and his mastery of the Qurʾan and theoretical aspects of Islam:

> It seems to me that we could try to give some literary work to Lahuti Khan in the view of our newly emergent line which consists of instrumentalizing the religious momentum in Islamic countries for our Eastern policy needs. It goes without doubt that having a whole series of internal overlappings (*nasloenii*) and contradictions, the ideology of Islam, especially that of Shiʿi Islam, can provide us with a lot of fertile material to detect these contradictions and reinforce the desirable trends inside them. It should be noted that in Persian conditions there will be very little demand for political or scientific propagandistic literature: in Persia, the most popular religious and philosophical systems have nearly always been clothed in literary and poetic forms, while the genre of political pamphlets in verse has acquired an exceptional political importance since the times of the Constitutional Revolution.[40]

Chicherin's discourse on Islam was however not free from ambiguity: at the end of 1924 Chicherin announced that Eastern societies had already entered the age of modernity where religious sentiment and clerical influence were no longer a powerful mobilizing force.[41] This swift reversal of Chicherin's attitude partly explains the insignificance of Lahuti's later role in Soviet policy on Iran and his purely literary career in the Soviet Union. It must be noted that by downplaying the importance of Islam in Iranian political struggles Chicherin was trying to justify his decision to keep Indian revolutionaries away from Iranian politics, at the moment when Abdar Rab Nishtar manifested his willingness to establish contacts with Shiʿi clerical circles.[42] Here again, Chicherin's radical reversal confirmed the instrumental aspect of Marxist dogma in Soviet discourse on Islam: when the Soviets were interested in an alliance with the Islamic clergy, the East was perceived as economically underdeveloped; when Moscow was reticent about such cooperation, the East was declared to be too modern for religiously colored propaganda. The Iranian case was particularly marked by frequent changes in Soviet revolutionary tactics, but the persistence of Islamic trends in Soviet policy was tangible from the late 1910s to the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. As in Soviet domestic policy, the flexible discourse the Soviet authorities developed on Iranian Islam reflected both the shifting priorities of Soviet regional policy and the limits of Marxist theory when applied to Islamic societies.

Moscow's Relations with the Iranian Clergy

Long before the October Revolution, Russian social democrats pointed out the revolutionary potential of Muslim clergy. Mikhail Pavlovich, who had been a member of the RSDRP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) since 1898 and later became a renowned Soviet Orientalist, had already stated in 1910 that the Shiʿi clergy in Iran played the role of "spiritual proletariat" and was the "bearer of civilization and progress" in its struggle with the secular but conservative government.[43] Similarly, Sultan-Galiev noted in 1921 that in

[39] Cronin, "Iran's Forgotten Revolutionary," 119.

[40] Chicherin to Stalin and the Central Committee of the RCP, August 25, 1923, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 76, l. 133.

[41] Chicherin to Surits, December 11, 1924, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 5, l. 124–25.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Cited in Kemper, "Red Orientalism," 441. Although Kemper postulates that the works of Pavlovich can be placed in continuity with the European Orientalist tradition, Pavlovich's stance on the East as the forefront of world revolution constituted a significant break from the colonial paradigm. Miriam Younes and Manfred Sing point out that the postcolonial criticisms of Marxian intellectuals had a frustrating impact on the Eastern Left, and the Eastern Left never fully interiorized Marxian thought. See Younes and Sing, "Specters of Marx."

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Islamic societies the clergy occupied a very specific position that was substantially different from that of the Orthodox Church in the Russian Empire: Muslim clergymen "perceived themselves as 'people's servants' and were heeding the people's voice, which made them more democratic, accessible and influential."[44] However, such observations constituted a rather marginal discourse vis-à-vis the classic Marxist assumption that the clergy perpetuated the oppressive feudal order and prevented the masses from active involvement in political life. After the October Revolution, despite the Bolsheviks' attempts to use religious analogies to mobilize Muslim crowds, the alliance of religious authorities with nationalist elites during the Russian Civil War[45] contributed to the Bolshevik mistrust of the Muslim clergy and reinforced the classic Marxist discourse on religion. Yet, despite this discursive rejection of the Muslim-Communist alliance, Soviet domestic policy was more informed by the principles of coexistence formulated by Sultan-Galiev and remained rather tolerant of Muslim religious institutions until the Stalinist crackdown on Muslim clergy in the late 1920s.[46]

Such duality between the official Marxist discourse on religion and real Soviet policy regarding Muslim clergy also existed in Bolshevik foreign policy and was particularly tangible in Iran. Beginning with the earliest Bolshevik propaganda activities on Iranian territory, the relations between Russian revolutionaries and Shiʿi clergy were mostly dependent on local and regional circumstances. By the end of 1917 interethnic violence and old political struggles defined the volatile power relations in Iranian provinces. Fleeing from the disintegrating tsarist army, many Russian soldiers were selling their arms and munitions to the Muslims rather than to Christian authorities, the latter being associated with the tsarist officials due to their century-long clientelist policies. The circulation of arms in the west of Iran was often supervised by local religious authorities, and the ideological proximity between Russian social democrats and Iranian democratic nationalists contributed to the rapprochement between Russian soldiers and Iranian Muslims.[47] It is certain that this process was neither smooth nor linear: the advent of the Baku Commune, which was backed by the Dashnaks, as well as the massive Armenian migration from the Caucasus to the north of Iran seriously embittered relations between the Bolsheviks and the Iranian Muslims.[48] Yet local alliances contributed to the regional Bolshevik-Islamist rapprochement. In 1918 the French consul in Tabriz reported that a "well-known mullah was openly preaching Bolshevist theories to his flock."[49] Thus, the Bolsheviks started to form a network among the Shiʿi clerics well before the Soviet intervention in Gilan.

The Irano-Soviet exchanges after the foundation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran in the summer of 1920 generated new tensions in Bolshevik relations with the Iranian clergy but also laid the basis for their short-lived collaboration. On one hand, the radical policy of the Iranian Communist Party and Bolshevik emissaries in Gilan provoked violent opposition among many Iranian clergymen who joined the local landlords, backed by the British troops.[50] On the other hand, revolutionary messianism of the Bolsheviks fostered their

[44] Sultan-Galiev, "Metody antireligioznoi propagandy."

[45] Despite the overwhelming participation of Muslim religious authorities in the anti-Bolshevik movement in Central Asia, a certain number of lower clerics, occasionally known as "Red mollahs," joined the Bolshevik forces; Bazarov, "Sovetskaia religioznaia politika."

[46] Fowkes and Gökay, "Unholy Alliance," 14–15.

[47] Soeur Catherine Berthe Laperrière, "Compte tenu des événements qui eurent lieu en Perse, 1918–19," February 28, 1918, Archives historiques de la Congrégation de la Mission lazariste, Paris, 137H. Ahmad Kasravi provides an account of the rapprochement between Russian soldiers and the population of Tabriz after the February Revolution (1917); Kasravi, *Tarikh-e hedjdah saleh-ye Azarbayjan*, 674–75. On transnational solidarities fostered by the February Revolution, see Forestier-Peyrat, "Faire la révolution."

[48] Dailami, "Bolshevik Revolution," 57–58.

[49] French consul in Tabriz to the French Minister in Tehran, March 27, 1918, ADMAE, Série E, Asie 1918–40, Perse-Iran, 35, p. 80.

[50] Genis, "Les Bolcheviks," 474, 478.

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rapprochement with Sufi circles: one of the most illustrious examples of such encounters was the trajectory of the Russian poet and revolutionary Velemir Khlebnikov, who worked for the propaganda section of the Gilan republic and regularly attended the meetings of local Iranian Sufis.[51] After the conclusion of the Irano-Soviet treaty in February 1921, the Bolsheviks did not cease to spread their ideas through Iranian territory, and the meetings of the Iranian Communist Party were often held under the guise of Muslim religious ceremonies.[52] Meanwhile, local clergy played a conspicuous role in Irano-Soviet diplomatic exchanges and were regularly invited to the festivities organized in the Soviet consulates.[53] Moreover, some clerics were made part of the Soviet intelligence network and worked as GPU agents.[54] Such cooperation remained stable until the Pahlavi crackdown on the Iranian Left in 1926, which practically coincided with the Stalinist isolationist trend in Soviet foreign policy.

Yet official Marxist discourse, which was echoed in Soviet ministerial correspondence, condemned the Iranian clergy as an oppressive class of landlords and as the pillars of a reactionary feudal regime. This vision was reinforced by the ʿulamaʾ's recurrent attacks on Soviet representatives and local communists cells: Soviet diplomats pointed to a profound anti-Soviet sentiment expressed by the leaders of Iranian Islamic political societies such as *Jamaʿat-e diyanat*, *Eqrar-e eslam*, *Jamaʿat-e melliyun-e eslam*, *Jamaʿat al-eslam* and *Mardan-e kar*.[55] Soviet diplomats and Orientalists drew parallels between Muslim preachers and the tsarist Black Hundred,[56] the former being particularly active in rousing the local population against the centralizing government of Reza Khan. Low-ranked clerics who often led urban crowds were accused by the Soviets of creating "fascist" cadres,[57] and higher religious authorities were condemned as Anglophile reactionaries. Indeed, many influential clerics, such as the Friday prayer imam of Khoy, Zahir al-Islam, Sayyed Hasan Modarres, Shaykh Mohammad Amin, Ashtiyani, and Shaykh al-Araqeyn, adopted a quietist, pro-British position on the revolt in Iraq and preached a conciliatory attitude toward the British. At the same time these religious figures were particularly hostile to those clerics who manifested their interest in socialist ideas, such as Tabatabaʾi and Sayyed Mohammad Reza Mosavat.[58]

Sayyed Hasan Modarres was the figure who embodied the essence of clerical reaction for the Soviets, and he was the most frequently targeted by Soviet criticism. The origins of Soviet hostility toward Modarres were more political than ideological: it was Modarres's popularity together with his relentless opposition to Reza Khan that sparked Soviet resentment. Drawing on the support of the bazaar networks of merchants and guilds, Modarres embodied traditional Iranian resistance to centralization and foreign influence.[59] Ironically, when Reza Khan ascended to the throne in December 1925 and proclaimed the Pahlavi dynasty, the Soviet plenipotentiary minister (*narkom*) in Iran, Konstantin Iurenev, noted that "Modarres lost but Modarresism won."[60] Meanwhile, Modarres made some attempts to play on Russia's close historical relations with the Qajars as well as the Soviet democratic agenda and tried to reach out to the Bolsheviks in his struggle against Reza Khan. In 1925 Modarres founded an opposition group, Aqaliyat, and sent his representative ʿAli Asghar Rahimzadeh-Safavi to France to bring back Ahmad Shah, who was supposed to

[51] On Khlebnikov's experience with Iranian dervishes see Ioffe, "Budetlianin na obochine islama."
[52] Report on the ICP meeting in Khorasan, August 12, 1921, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 40, l. 193.
[53] Saunders to Curzon, November 26, 1922, NA, FO 416/72.
[54] Agabekov, *ChK za rabotoi*, 159–60.
[55] Shumiatskii à Karakhan, April 1923, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 1, l. 47.
[56] To Soviet observers, such clerics were *chernosotennye mully* (Black Hundred mollahs). See Gil'bars, "Imperialist Images of the Persian Life," 1922, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 67, l. 38.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Shumiatskii to Karakhan, July 19, 1923, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 1, l. 37.
[59] Martin, "Mudarris," 200.
[60] Iurenev to Aralov, December 4, 1925, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 9, l. 229.

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assume the leadership of nomadic armed forces directed against the government of Reza Khan. In the case of the Shah's refusal, Rahimzadeh-Safavi was instructed to obtain the Shah's approval for the crown prince's ascension to the throne and request the aid of the Soviet authorities.[61] When Ahmad Shah declared his noninterference in Iranian political affairs, Rahimzadeh-Safavi traveled to Odessa, where he made contact with Comintern members.[62] His overtures were not taken seriously by either the Comintern or the NKID, as the figure of a senior cleric like Modarres inspired hostility in both Soviet internationalists and imperialists. Although the Iranian Communist Party informed the Comintern that Modarres was conspiring with Reza Khan, Chicherin was less interested in a strategic alliance with the Qajars than in the creation of a centralized militarized state on Iranian territory under the leadership of Reza Khan.[63] Moreover, already in 1924, Chicherin warned against undesirable Indian interference in Iranian affairs through the Islamic line of Nishtar, who was contemplating an Islamic revolutionary alliance with Modarres.[64] All in all, the Soviets had never given much credit to Modarres, and their refusal to engage in any sort of cooperation was justified by their official anticlerical discourse, which associated Iranian clergy with feudalism and contrasted Shiʿi clerics with Iranian "progressive" nationalists.

However, this official discourse was usually modified when it concerned the Muslim clerics who were loyal to Moscow and who were perceived by the Soviet authorities as valuable allies. Such an attitude was nurtured by not only years of cooperation with the Muslim clergy but also an upsurge of the Muslim anti-colonial struggle in the early 1920s. One of the central figures of this anti-colonial movement in the East was Mohammad Mahdi Khalesizadeh,[65] the son of Shaykh Mohammad Mahdi Khalesi, who was one of the most venerated *mojtahed*s living in Iraq and one of the central figures of the Iraqi revolt that started in 1920 and continued until 1922, when the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections was widely contested by the population, led by its religious figures. Like his father, Khalesizadeh was fighting against British imperialism,[66] first in Iraq and then in Iran. At the end of 1922, while Shaykh Khalesi was exiled to Yemen, Khalesizadeh, together with several other recalcitrant clerics, was transferred by the British authorities to Iranian territory. The departure of Khalesizadeh suited King Faisal I (r. 1921–33), but his presence in Iran was energetically opposed by the Iranian government, which was incessantly asking the foreign office to organize his return to Iraq.[67] Finally, the British decided to protect their interests in Iraq at the expense of their prestige in Iran, and Khalesizadeh was able to continue his preaching in Iran until his arrest by government forces in July 1924. Khalesizadeh's political activities and his irreconcilable attitude toward the British were highly appreciated in Moscow, and a parallel Soviet academic discourse on the modern Shiʿi clergy emerged on the fertile ground of Sultan-Galiev's ideas. In 1923 an article by a certain V. O., entitled The Events in Mesopotamia and the Shiʿi Clergy: A Letter from Tehran, was published in the periodical of the All-Russian Association of Scientific Orientology*Novyi Vostok* (the same issue contained the articles of Navshirvanovs and Dobroliubskii). The article praised the reformist agenda of Khalesizadeh, applauded his criticism of the Muslim clergy, and hinted at the growing political potential of the self-modernizing strata of the Shiʿi religious authorities:

> The constitutionalist period left behind primitive forms of fanatical sermons which begin to take a more enlightened shape, according to the demands of the new era.

[61] Dehgan, *Khaterat-e Rahimzadah-Safavi*, 10.

[62] Ibid., 163, 172.

[63] Report by Nikbin (Gasanov) to the Comintern Secretariat, December 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 109, l. 28–29; Shumiatskii to Karakhan, July 19, 1923, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 1, l. 33.

[64] Chicherin to Surits, December 11, 1924, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 5, l. 124–25.

[65] For more information on Khalisizadeh see Yazdani, "Ḵāleṣizāda"; and Arjomand, "Ideological Revolution,"189.

[66] Hairi, *Shiʿism*, 129–35.

[67] Report by Nikbin (Gasanov) to the Comintern Secretariat, December 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 109, l. 28–29; Loraine to the High Commissioner of Baghdad, November 22, 1923, NA, FO 416/73.

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> This process of renovation of the "arsenal" of the Persian clergy was particularly vividly demonstrated in the public speeches of Ayatollah Khalesizadeh—one of the *mojtahed*s exiled to Persia. Being pushed by the Mesopotamian developments and the echo which they provoked in the Muslim world, he tried to discern the origins of the decline of Islam. While stigmatizing unbelief and heretical novelties, he at the same time demanded the restructuring of clerical ranks, the admission of progress as such, and the improvement of general culture by the religious authorities. Coming from the mouth of one of the most advanced representatives of Shiʿi clergy, this sermon is particularly characteristic of the present moment. The period of genuine religious agitation in Persia will certainly be used by the clergy for the further exaltation of popular masses as well as for the reorganization of the Shiʿi clergy ranks whose positions are weakened by the ongoing crisis and the collapse of the feudal economic order. As the process of capitalization is extremely slow in Persia and different socio-economic formations, from nomadic and feudal to capitalist, co-exist in the local conditions marked by decentralization, disunity . . . and absence of transportation . . ., the Persian clergy will have to play an important role in political affairs for a long time and it will continue to paint social and political struggles of the Persian people in religious tones.[68]

However, despite the positive Soviet assessment of Khalesizadeh's activities, the cleric's relations with Soviet diplomats were established on a pragmatic rather than an ideological basis and remained quite ambiguous until the end of the Qajar era. Naturally, the Soviets placed Khalesizadeh's anti-British position at the center of their cooperation with him. For example, in August 1923 the Soviet newspaper *Isvestiia* referred to Khalesizadeh's declaration that "if the desire to liberate Mesopotamia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik."[69] Khalesizadeh was a regular guest at the Soviet legation in Tehran, and his multiple demands for funding were mentioned in the reports of the Soviet *narkom* Shumiatskii. Nevertheless, the relations between the Soviets and Khalesizadeh also were marked by mutual suspicion for several reasons. First of all, the Soviets were embarrassed by Khalesizadeh's virulent criticism of the government of Reza Khan, which was indirectly supported by Moscow. Shumiatskii reported in 1923 that thanks to his efforts Khalesizadeh was gradually quitting the opposition camp of Modarres and joining the ranks of the progressive "nationalist" clergy.[70] The Soviets also tried to transform Khalesizadeh from an opposition figure into their agent of influence in Iranian official circles by conferring on him the mission to mediate between the Soviet legation and Reza Khan in the question of the contested Caspian fisheries.[71] Despite this, Khalesizadeh remained an ardent opponent of Reza Khan, and during his 1924 republican campaign he declared that the Persian constituent assembly did not have the power to change the existent political order.[72] Second, the Bolsheviks might have been worried about resurgence of the pan-Islamic trend in the regional anti-imperialist movement, especially after the bitter reversal in Moscow's relations with Ankara. According to the British sources, the Turkish consul paid Khalesizadeh 8,000 tomans for his first visit and public speech in Mashhad, whereas the Soviet consul met the cleric secretly, a few miles outside the town.[73] Finally, Khalesizadeh had never openly spoken about his alliance with the Soviets and in his memoirs criticized the Soviet quietist position in regional politics.[74]

The instrumental role of Khalesizadeh in Soviet short-term regional designs did not exclude a more long-term scenario of cooperation in the field of knowledge production. In the early 1920s the Iranian Communist Party (ICP) could not boast a rich collection of

[68] V. O., "Sobytiia v Mesopotamii," 433.
[69] *Izvestiia*, August 12, 1923.
[70] Shumiatskii to Chicherin, 1923, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 1, l. 27–28.
[71] Shumiatskii to Chicherin, February 20, 1924, AVPRF, f. 28, op. 10, d. 5, l. 24.
[72] *Izvestiia*, March 22, 1924.
[73] Report by Loraine, May 22, 1925, in Shofield, *Iran-Iraq Border*, 616–17.
[74] Luizard, *La vie*, 339.

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reading materials in Persian, and this deficiency pushed the ICP toward cooperation between the Iranian and Tajik communists.[75] But even the Tajik Soviet authorities were unable to organize the production of Marxist literature in Persian without external aid: eminent Persian revolutionaries such as Abu al-Qasem Lahuti played a central role in establishment of the Soviet Tajik literary school.[76] In the view of the Soviets' pressing need to boost their production of literary propaganda in Persian, it was not surprising that Khalesizadeh received from Shumiatskii a command to write a theoretical work on Islam's proximity to communism. Khalesizadeh accepted the Soviet offer and wrote a treatise entitled *The ABC of Great Truths of Islam* which was to be published in both Persian and Arabic.[77] Although it never happened (to our knowledge, the only extant print copy is in Russian and is preserved in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), this work marked the climax of the Islamic turn of Soviet policy in Iran. Although Khalesizadeh is listed as the author in this Russian version, it is possible that the text was written by the Soviets and attributed to him. The treatise opens with an apology for the Soviet policy in the East:

> The toilers of Soviet republics also have their own tasks in the East because the very foundation of their state is the struggle against the aggression, despotism and imperialism of Western countries as well as the will to break the chains of slavery imposed by Western imperialists on Eastern toilers. The chains which stopped the development of the East led it to economic decline and created poverty among its toilers.[78]

However, *The ABC of Great Truths of Islam* also can be viewed as a work echoing the debates on the role of Islam in politics that took place among reformist Shiʿi intellectuals in Iraq in the early 1920s.[79] Khalesizadeh engaged not only with the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist discourses but also with some theological aspects of Islam that he was trying to relate to communism. Chapter 3 of *Great Truths* was entitled The Teaching of Communism from the Standpoint of Islam: Communist Postulates in Islam. According to Khalesizadeh, these postulates included universal equality, equality between different social groups, equality between peoples and nations, denial of nationalism, measures against economic inequality (such as zakat), prohibition on amassing a lot of wealth, nonrecognition of material values, and Islamic prescription of consultation in political affairs. Interestingly enough, Khalesizadeh referred to the Islamic exclusion policy toward infidels as another "communist postulate":

> If one points at certain privileges for Muslims over non-Muslims in Islam, he should make a difference between those who follow its precepts and those who do not. In the same way, those who have not accepted the principles of communism do not have the right to benefit from its laws.[80]

Chapter 5 was entitled Russian Politics from the Standpoint of Islam: The Duties of Every Muslim toward the Russian Government. This chapter stressed the cultural proximity between Russia and the Eastern countries as well as the anti-imperialist politics of the Soviet government:

> We have said earlier that even if the principles of communist laws did not originate in Islam, they are completely compatible with Islam. The unlawful designs of imperialist

[75] Taji-Zakhshizadeh to Esmailzadeh, 1924, RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 184, l. 19.

[76] During the Stalinist era Lahuti occupied the position of a "court poet" and became the symbol of new Tajik literature. See Holt, "Performing."

[77] Shumiatskii to Stalin, Zinoviev, Voitinskii, and Radek, December 20, 1923, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 76, l. 164.

[78] Ibid., l. 165.

[79] See Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 34–35.

[80] Shumiatskii to Stalin, Zinoviev, Voitinskii, and Radek, December 20, 1923, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 76, l. 178.

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> countries plunged Muslim states into oblivion, while the egoism of the West caused poverty and hardship of the Muslims, so much exploited and repressed that they have lost all means of self-defense. . . . Imperialist countries are the most virulent enemies of national independence and freedom of Eastern countries; they also are the enemies of the ideas and customs of Eastern peoples. This is why an imperialist country cannot be the guarantor of what she has stolen. This is why Soviet Russia is the only [friendly] country which is left. She is the only country whose laws are congruent with Islam. She is tightly bound to the Eastern countries because her ideas, customs and morals are similar to those of the East. She has fixed an objective to grant independence and absolute freedom to weak peoples. . . . This is why all Orientals should strive to unite with this state and create together an Eastern Union which will take revenge on the imperialist West.[81]

Khalesizadeh's heterogeneous discourse on Islam and communism confirms the fact that there was no such thing as Soviet Marxist hegemony in the field of knowledge production. Given Khalesizadeh's international influence and family reputation, one can speculate on the potential of his temporary alliance with the Soviets, which came to an end abruptly in the summer of 1924; his arrest and Reza Khan's anti-communist offensive precipitated the decline in Soviet relations with the Iranian clergy. Indeed, the scale of Moscow's rapprochement with the Shiʿi clergy in the early 1920s was never matched in the Pahlavi era (even the overtures of Ayatollah Kashani during the oil nationalization campaign of Mosaddeq were dismissed by the Soviet embassy in Tehran in the early 1950s).[82] Of course, the early Soviet tactical alliance with Khalesizadeh was much conditioned by the regional geopolitical context in general and by the Iraqi revolt of 1920–22 in particular. However, the start and the end of this cooperation coincided with two particular trends in Soviet domestic policy: the drive for national communism and the subsequent extreme centralization from 1925 onward. The interdependence of Soviet domestic and foreign policy was patent in the modification of the official Marxist discourse on Islamic clergy as it occurred in parallel with the revision of Soviet domestic policy in Muslim republics. The reserved nature of Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Shiʿi clergy was less due to ideology than to political considerations, such as Soviet support for Reza Khan and the maintenance of the regional status quo.[83]

Islam and Iranian Communist Cells

The recognition of Islamic communism was tangible not only in Soviet policy but also in the program of the Iranian Communist Party. Although the ICP's central bureau in Baku remained under strict Soviet control, the ICP's presence on Iranian territory was assured by a conglomerate of semiautonomous heterogeneous groups, financially supported by Moscow. The loose organizational structure facilitated the implementation of communist cells in Iran, but the weakening of Soviet control often resulted in considerable deviations from the official party line. A conciliatory attitude toward Islam inside the ICP cells on Iranian territory was one of the local trends tacitly approved by the Comintern and skillfully instrumentalized by Soviet representatives. The fusion of religious sentiment with communist principles, in the spirit of the works of Khalesizadeh and Mahendra Pratap, was typical of the ICP's discourse on equality. This discourse represented one of the many variants of Marxist readings of Islam emerging at the intersection of Soviet strategic interests and regional revolutionary dynamics.

[81] Ibid., l. 186.
[82] Kalinovsky, "Soviet Union and Mosaddeq," 408–9.
[83] The Soviet penchant for regional status quo was highlighted by Robert Olson in "Foreign Policy."

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Before discussing the place of religion in the ICP's program, one has to mention the complexity of the ICP's internal organization, which had a significant impact on the party's ideology and tactics. In 1922 the number of ICP members was quite small: 231 in Gilan, 1,620 in Azerbaijan, and 160 in Khorasan.[84] The party was forced into a semi-clandestine existence, its communist cells given the status of radical factions inside the Iranian Socialist Party and worker's syndicates.[85] Initially conceived as a party of workers and peasants, by 1924 the ICP had acquired a more inclusive, nationalist tinge that exacerbated the tensions between the moderate and the radical wings of the party.[86] These tensions reached a critical level during the republican campaign of Reza Khan, with the radicals finally quitting the ICP. In 1925 the new Soviet plenipotentiary minister Konstantin Iurenev found the ICP almost disintegrated, and his efforts to resurrect the party did not bear fruit.[87] Besides internal conflicts and external pressure, the ICP was weakened by the financial abuses of local administrators, who had very little ideological instruction and did not engage in propaganda activities.[88] All in all, the ICP was suffering from a series of fundamental flaws, but it did have its adherents in the north of Iran, and it allowed discussions about policy. With the growing influence of the moderates, the ICP was becoming more and more aligned with the Soviet stance on Reza Khan's centralizing government.[89]

The ICP's entangled relations with the socialists, syndicates, and nationalist circles required the adoption of a flexible program that could reconcile the opposing parties of the Iranian Left. Contrary to the socialists who were relying on the well-educated upper classes and professed aggressive anticlericalism, the communists turned out to be quite moderate on the question of religion. After the conclusion of the Irano-Soviet treaty in February 1921, meetings of Iranian communists were held in Khorasan and were often organized under the cover of religious processions.[90] The British intelligence services described the populist tone of Iranian communist cells that were more concerned with work conditions than with profound restructuring of the entire society. The question of religion occupied in general a marginal place among the communists' demands for social equality: for example, the program of the communist association *Kaunik* only stipulated the separation of church and state.[91] Meanwhile, the Tehran unit of the ICP placed Islam at the center of its program, in which socialist revolution was interpreted as the restoration of the "true" law of Islam:

> According to the law of Islam, all the real estate belongs to peasants so as to be managed by society. Purchases, sales and other types of property transmission are prohibited. No landlord respects this law. . . . Persian Muslims do not know that Islam is not about the relations between masters and slaves. Islam says that we are all equal. Islam permits individual responsibility to be avoided by implementing social justice. Islam prescribes assistance to the oppressed and the eradication of injustice. Islam was created by humanity and not by parasites.[92]

[84] Report by the Executive Committee of the PCI, February 22, 1922, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 132, l. 8–9.

[85] Shumiatskii to Brikke, March 3, 1921, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 76, l. 41.

[86] Nikbin (Gasanov) to the Comintern, December 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 109, l. 34–35; Nikbin (Gasanov) to Petrov, July 28, 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 109, l. 16–18.

[87] Report by Nikbin (Gasanov), December 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 109, l. 36.

[88] Saunders to Loraine, October 2, 1922, NA, FO 416/71; Report by Mamedov, n.d., RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 40, l. 65–66.

[89] Executive Committee of the ICP to the Comintern, October 25, 1925, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 77, l. 18–20.

[90] Notably, Khalesizadeh mentions that the head of the Iranian Socialist Party, Soleyman Mirza, was trying to prevent cooperation between Moscow and Khalesizadeh by spreading rumors about the Shiʿi clergy's alliance with the British (Luizard, *La vie*, 317); Report on ICP meeting in Khorasan, August 12, 1921, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 40, l. 193.

[91] Saunders to Loraine, October 2, 1922, NA, FO 416/71.

[92] Program of the Tehran branch of the ICP, n.d., RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 40, l. 224.

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Famously captured by the Iranian poet and singer Aref Qazvini (1882–1934) in his poem calling Lenin "Angel of Mercy" (*Ey Lenin, ey fereshteh-ye rahmat*), the spirit of Islamic communism also dominated the popular imagination and Iranian perceptions of Soviet power in the early 1920s:

ای لنین ای فرشته رحمت
(Lenin O Angel of Mercy)

قدمی رنجه کن تو بی زحمت
(Come quickly, without any formality)

تخم چشم من آشیانه توست
(Your place is in the pupil of my eye)

پس کرم کن که خانه خانه توست
(Come, that this home is your own)

یا خرابش بکن یا آباد
(Destroy it or build it up)

رحمت حق به امتحان تو باد
(May God bless your undertakings)

بلشویک است خضر راه نجات
(The Bolshevik is the divine guide to salvation)

بر محمد و آل او صلوات
(Blessed be Mohammad and his people).[93]

Former militant constitutionalist and one of the major supporters of Reza Khan's republican campaign, Qazvini also denounced Modarres as an agent of British influence. Together with other leftist poets such as Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi (1889–1939), Qazvini probably gravitated to the orbit of the Soviet legation in Tehran,[94] but we possess no solid evidence that proves his commitment to the Soviets.

Meanwhile, the resolution adopted during the Khorasan-Astarabad conference of the ICP stated that it was necessary to "wage ideological war against pan-Islam as well as against the influence of the clergy and other medieval elements."[95] Although pan-Islamic slogans were absent from the ICP's program, the idea of anti-imperialist solidarity between Muslim countries was assigned the highest priority by the Tehran unit, which remained in direct contact with Shumiatskii and Indian representatives:

> The geographical position of Persia vis-à-vis India proves the importance of communist propaganda in Persia. It is necessary to spread communist ideas here while India remains powerless—she has no arms and she will be able to attain the revolutionary goal but in a very long time. Persia is strong and has arms. It is necessary to preach Indian revolution in Persia in order to free both India and Persia. Hence, the Persian committee carries out the revolution which is in reality nothing but revolutionary assistance.[96]

93 Translation mine. See Qazvini, *Divan*, 303–5.
94 For instance, in spring 1922 Yazdi took refuge in the Soviet legation in Tehran; Gheissari, "Poetry and Poetics," 38.
95 Resolution of the ICP during the Khorasan-Astarabad conference, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 39, l. 49.
96 Program of the Tehran branch of the ICP, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 40, l. 225.

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This statement was inspired by both Soviet geopolitical designs and regional transnational revolutionary circulations. Whereas the former were particularly tangible in the ICP's call to prioritize Soviet imports over British products, the latter had a continuous impact on the ICP's work, notably through the Indian revolutionaries' presence at the Soviet legation in Tehran.[97] Finally, one cannot exclude Iranian agency in the consolidation of the ICP's program as well as the Iranian ambition to lead the regional anti-imperialist movement, present since the first days of the Gilan Republic.

The program of the ICP reflected some major trends in the Soviet stance on Islam, notably the belief in its ideological proximity to communism. Yet, it would be shortsighted to see the ICP, with it numerous semi-independent cells, as a mere instrument of Soviet policy. The persistent tensions between the ICP's different factions as well as the influence of regional revolutionary circulations to a large degree determined the vector of the party's development. The ICP's program echoed the traditional Iranian call for social justice, and the party's focus on India reflected the important role played by Indian revolutionaries in the regional anti-imperialist movement. For instance, Mahendra Pratap not only was well informed about Soviet policy in Afghanistan and Persia, but he also was involved in the Soviet expedition to Tibet.[98] At the same time, Soviet designs for revolutionary transfer to the East, Moscow's anti-British sentiment, and the Bolshevik policy of religious tolerance were of utmost importance for the crystallization of the ICP's program. Being located at the crossroads of regional liberation movements, the ICP constituted a link in the chain of transnational circulations, and its discourse on Islam was part of general Eurasian revolutionary dynamics.[99]

Conclusion

In the early 1920s Soviet relations with the Islamic world were marked by bifurcation of the Marxist discourse on Islam, extension of Soviet influence among the Muslim clergy, and growing instrumentalization of Islam in Soviet propaganda. These tendencies were tangible in both Soviet domestic and foreign policy: as the local administration was struggling for legitimacy in the Muslim periphery of the nascent Soviet Union, Soviet foreign policy makers were trying to take advantage of regional anti-imperialist movements to undermine British hegemony in the Middle East and ignite world revolution. However, a certain ambiguity persisted in Soviet perceptions of Islam, as the discourse on progressive Islam coexisted with virulent denunciation of pan-Islamism and Marxist rejection of religion as an element of oppressive feudal order. As a result, Marxist dogma was skillfully adjusted by Soviet policy makers to fit their pragmatic designs, and diametrically opposed Marxist discourses coexisted in Soviet knowledge production.

In Iran the Soviet position on Islam featured a similar duality: the Islamic liberation discourse represented a stable trend in Bolshevik propaganda, but Soviet strategy with regard to Islam was marked by regular institutional conflicts and policy reversals. On one side, Bolshevik propaganda stressed the egalitarian nature of Islam, and the legacy of WWI anti-imperialist movements pushed Iranian Muslim revolutionaries into a tactical alliance with the Soviets. On the other, from 1920 to 1925 the Soviet authorities were divided on the use of Islam in propaganda. Whereas the first Soviet envoy to Tehran, Nikolai Bravin, welcomed a Muslim-communist alliance, one of the masterminds of the Gilan revolution,

[97] Ibid.; Rothstein reported that the Comintern representative in Tehran was mainly focused on the Indian line; Rothstein to Chicherin, n.d., RGASPI, f. 159, op. 2, d. 51, l. 40. Another report by one of the ICP members shows that a regular connection existed between Iranian and Indian revolutionaries. According to the report, this connection was assured by navigation between Bandar Abbas and Bombay; Mirza Latif to Kobetskii, August 1921, in Persits, *Persidskii front mirovoi revoliutsii*, 410–12.

[98] Andreyev, *Soviet Russia and Tibet*, 96.

[99] The use of the term "Eurasian" here permits establishment of a certain geographical framework for the connected histories of India, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Russian and Ottoman empires. A similar approach was adopted by Abbas Amanat, Kevin Gledhill, and Kayhan Nejad in their edited volume *The Caspian World.*

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Nariman Narimanov, insisted on the obsolete nature of pan-Islamism and the inevitable end of Muslim transnational solidarity. After the ravaging conflict between the radical ICP and moderate branches of the ICP, the decline of Bolshevik activities in Iran coincided with weakening of the Muslim-communist "pact." Meanwhile, arrival of the new Soviet *narkom,* Boris Shumiatskii, in 1922 opened a new chapter in Soviet relations with Iranian religious circles. This renewal of the old Bolshevik strategy was reinforced by the outburst of anti-British agitation in Iraq, but the Soviet interest in Iranian Islam was mainly related to the continuous Islamic trend in Soviet strategic and academic debates.

The rapprochement between the Soviets and the Shiʿi clergy in the early 1920s took place at the intersection of regional and Soviet interior dynamics. As the clerical leaders of anti-British unrest became the agents of Soviet influence, Soviet academics and policy makers drew up a new discourse on the progressive Islamic clergy. The duality of Moscow's position on Islam was manifest in the contrast between the Soviet criticism of Modarres, who presented as the leader of Iranian feudal reaction, and Chicherin's appreciation of Khalesizadeh, who was praised for his reformist views. Such difference in attitude was even more political than ideological: Modarres's unconditional opposition to Reza Khan embarrassed the Soviet authorities. Khalesizadeh's cooperation with the Soviet legation was, in its turn, part of larger transnational dynamics embodied in the Marxist adaptation of Islamic laws and consolidation of the anti-imperialist movement in Muslim countries.

Finally, the ICP's stance on Islam also reflected the major trends in Soviet policy as well as in the regional balance of power. The ICP claimed that equality was at the core of Islamic law and declared anti-imperialist solidarity between Muslim countries. As in Soviet public and academic discourse, the rejection of pan-Islamism in the program of the ICP coexisted with affirmation of the Islamic origins of communism. Yet, the ICP was far from being a mere instrument of Soviet politics, and the ICP's internal dynamics echoed both late Qajar political culture and transnational influences.

The interdependence of the Soviet and Iranian discourses on Islamic communism was much determined by revolutionary circulations in the Eurasian space and not by Soviet hegemony in knowledge production, if it ever existed. The Soviet position on Islam in Iran cannot be reduced to either Irano-Soviet interstate relations or Russo-British rivalry in the Middle East; it reflects a much broader range of phenomena, such as Eurasian mobilization patterns and the continuous importance of Islam in regional transnational exchanges. Further study of the literature produced by leftist Muslim intellectuals will add new layers to our understanding of transnational and transregional entanglements in the Middle East and Asia.

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