

Power, Crisis, Drugs

An old man [*shaykh*] said to a prostitute: ‘You’re drunk!
At every moment you’re caught in [a man’s] trap’.
She said, ‘Oh old man, I am all the things you say;
Are you all the things you show?’

Omar Khayyam cited by Supreme Leader
Ali Khamenei during a public meeting
in Khorasan (October 14, 2012)¹

At the end, when worst comes to worst, the hypocrite who pretends to be good does less harm than the one who publicly behaves as a sinner.

Don Quijote de la Mancha, *caballero andante*.

Over the course of the last decade, the question around illegal substances and their use and abuse has become central to contemporary politics. It is sufficient to observe the recurrent attempts of parliaments and civil society groups to reform domestic cannabis laws in the Western hemisphere. In June 2018, Canada, following an electoral promise by the liberal-oriented Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, introduced a bill legalising cannabis for consumption and marketization. It is the first instance of a G7 country adopting such regulation nationwide, but there are antecedents on a different scale. Several states in the United States of America had already introduced plans of marketization of cannabis products, while Uruguay, under the government of radical maverick Pepe Mujica, enshrined a historically progressive approach to illegal drugs by establishing a state-led monopoly over cannabis, following decriminalisation of all drug use. European states, too, are discussing – although timidly – the potential for drug policy reform, including the United Kingdom, France and Italy.

¹ Khamenei cited the last two verses of Khayyam’s poem. His speech explored the importance of responding to social participation and deviance with careful methods rather than hard discipline. See ISNA, October 14, 2012, retrieved from www.isna.ir/news/91072314939.

It is a sign of the times that the debates and the proposals turn around calculation of economic benefits, cannabis embodying in the view of many a bonanza for the ailing, austerity-prone economies of Western capitalist states. With the exception of Uruguay, whose governance of illicit drugs runs against the risks of marketization, most policy models being brought to the table hold the primacy of economic return as a justification. Questions around health, development, rights, and consumption remain contentious, as evidenced by the lack of interest in regulations going beyond cannabis. Heroin, amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), methamphetamine, and cocaine are excluded from governments' considerations for reform as they represent thornier issues in terms of public ethics, with less appealing economic returns in terms of taxation and marketization. Substances other than cannabis have less appeal among the urban middle class, which, all in all, is only touched by the criminalising force of prohibition in a limited way.

That said, one would expect reformist debates to be the turf of Western, liberal governments. And yet, these same debates have taken place also in the Islamic Republic, a partial demonstration that the Iranian state is in tune with global policy developments (and policy impediments). Not only have reforms of the illicit drug laws been regularly discussed in policy circles, they have also given way to proposals that are more radical and innovative than those currently discussed in the Western hemisphere. Iran having a larger and diverse drug-consuming population, means that reforms of the drug laws have bypassed the question of cannabis. Public officials have openly addressed the need to reform the drug laws in such a way so as to address the multi-layered dimensions of the drug phenomenon. In 2016, an official of the Expediency Council, the body responsible for updating drug laws (as discussed in the *Interregnum*, Chapter 5), provided an outline of reform based on the text of the General Policies of the State (*siasat-ha-ye kolli-ye nezam*), this latter being a text approved directly by Iran's highest political authority, the Supreme Leader. His proposal proposed a holistic approach to the drug phenomena. According to this plan, drastic reforms needed to be carried out if public institutions intended to comply with the disposition of the General Policies of the State, which seek to decrease the number of drug abusers ('addicts') by 25 per cent over the following five years. Given that successive governments have struggled with raising levels of drug consumption since the outset of the 1979 revolution, the policy

plan required a structural as well as a discursive shift. Thus, the proposal called for multi-layered governance of illicit drugs, centred around the imperative of *managing drugs* rather than simply *prohibiting them*.

When it reached the Expediency Council, the issue was framed as the necessity to adopt the ‘management of all strata of the drug problem’. It highlighted four fields in which management needed to become the governing principle on drugs: managing cultivation, managing production, managing distribution (supply), and managing consumption (demand). Such a plan signifies state-led regulation and control of all matters related to intoxicant drugs. In other words, the state should intervene in the entire cycle of the drug market, from cultivation of crops in the case of the poppy and cannabis; production as in the case for opium and opiates; to distribution through forms of regulation of drug access; to consumption by intervening in the public health dimension of drug use, through already established forms of harm reduction and substitution. Evidently, the implications of the proposal are several: decriminalisation, depenalisation or legalisation of illicit drugs, according to the different circumstances of drug consumption and/or production. That entails a new governance of the drug phenomenon which runs against Iran’s four-decade-long (or, rather, century-long) War on Drugs. It would also mean that by changing the legal status of drug consumption, rates of addiction – which often overlap with drug use – would decrease significantly, fulfilling the objectives of the General Polices of the State. A discursive shift would parallel a policy/legal reassessment.

This plan hints at a comprehensive regulation of narcotic and psychoactive drugs, based on laws that set the line of legality and conditions for the use of certain substances. It would represent, in part, the formalisation of current practices of government, such as the limited tolerance of cannabis and opium, and, in part, the instantiation of a new political model for narcotic and psychoactive drugs, based on the historical experience gained in the last hundred years. Conscious of indigenous aspects of drugs history, the proposal is also aware of its agricultural relevance with cannabis and the poppy being established ecotype plants. Connected to the proposal are also the pilot programmes being discussed by municipal authorities in Tehran with regard to the establishment of safe injection rooms (*otagh-e tazrigh*) and the expansion of currently available harm reduction programmes, such as needle and syringe distribution; opiate maintenance and

substitution in the form of methadone, buprenorphine and opium syrup out-patient programmes; and the vast ecosystem of addiction recovery, treatment and rehabilitation.

The proposal was publicly addressed in the conference on Addiction Studies in Tehran and was further discussed in semi-public venues connected to the Expediency Council and the Parliament. It was also widely circulated in the media and newspapers, receiving, as one would expect, harsh criticism from different scholars, officials and politicians. Not based on disrupting drug consumption and trafficking through the threat of the law, moralisation, indoctrination and/or forced public health measures, the proposal is among the boldest reforms ever put forth in Iran's already experimental history of drugs policy. Were the plan to enter into force in the near future, it would imply a systemic change in the state–society relations of the Islamic Republic, one that would go further than the drug phenomenon. It would also have far-reaching impact on the regional and international drug environment. Cultivation and production of narcotics would signify a diversion of huge financial resources to the state budget, diverted from the illegal networks from Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as inside Iran. Resources spent for law enforcement and border control would be available for development programmes, especially for those regions where the drug economy has historically represented among the few viable economic activities for the local population, especially in Sistan and Baluchistan. With softer drugs available (e.g. cannabis, hashish and opium), with milder or no adulteration, harder drugs and modes of consumption (e.g. heroin injection, meth smoking) could be curtailed and managed through the public health system. That would effect a redirection of the current health budget towards recovery and health promotion among those affected by the criminalising policies run by former governments. Such policy would touch upon the way the state intervenes on key aspects of everyday citizenship, such as consumption, public intoxication, self-care and pleasure.

Although the approval of the proposal is not imminent, steps have been taken in the direction of drug law reform, starting from one of the thorniest issue, that of the death penalty for drug traffickers. Iran allegedly leads the ranking of death sentence per capita. The great majority (60–75 per cent) of these sentences are based on charges related to large-scale drug trafficking, especially along the borders

with Afghanistan and Pakistan.² The international community has mounted pressures against the death penalty for drug offences for decades now; however, officials in Tehran were reluctant to consider a change of terms in national drug laws regarding this matter. Rather than international pressures, it was a domestic debate that propped up changes in the law. With levels of incarceration increasing and drug trafficking prosperous as ever, a cross-cutting agreement emerged among public officials on the need to reform the application of the death penalty. A key discriminating factor in Iran's international standing in human rights, an internal auditing process on the death penalty began by mid 2014, as part of the larger discussion about reform of the drug laws. With the death penalty being discussed as a subfield of drug laws, the debate could take place within the Expediency Council and not, as in other ordinary situations, in the Parliament. The Council, as discussed in this book, has the power to approve laws that go beyond the remit of Islamic Law; its deliberations are not vetoed by the Guardian Council and, therefore, could be in contrast both with Islamic jurisprudence (and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic). The death penalty is, after all, an explicit provision included in the *shari'ah*.

In 2015, Javad Larijani, advisor on human rights to the Judiciary, expressed regret that 'the skyrocketing number of executions for drug charges is bringing some people to question the validity of *qesas* [retributive] law'.³ *Qesas*, which could be translated as 'retaliation in kind' – 'an eye for an eye' – is the retributive law that is used in cases of major crimes as defined by religious jurisprudence. According to *shari'ah* – the Islamic religious law – crimes that qualify for *qesas* are usually considered as a dispute between believers – citizens – but in the case of drug trafficking, it is the state that takes over the role of prosecutor, applying retribution to offenders who are caught dealing drugs multiple times. It is implied that the state accuses the traffickers of 'sowing death' in the social body and that is why repetitive felonies are deemed a capital offence.⁴

Because the death sentence for drug offences is based on *maslahat*, 'expediency', its use is subject to interpretation and if deemed 'not

² BBC, July 23, 2015, retrieved from www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33635260.

³ And brother to both the former Head of the Judiciary and current President of the Expediency Council, Sadegh, and Speaker of Parliament, Ali.

⁴ This shift in the application of a traditional category of the Islamic law speaks also about the modernisation of the means of prosecution in the Iranian context.

useful', it can be substituted with other forms of punishment. This echoes the declaration of the former Head of the Judiciary and current President of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Shaikh Mohammad Yazdi, who declared that 'the death penalty for drug crimes is the product of states [*hokumat-ha*], not of religious law [*sharq*]'.⁵ The declaration substantiated the way drugs and drugs policy have gone from being a highly moralised and ideological field – as described in this book's narrative on the Islamic Revolution in Chapter 3 – to a secular field of intervention to which, according to the Head of the Expediency Council, religious law should not apply. This transition from the religious terrain to that of political rationales – governed primarily by the state and its social agents – is the underlying narrative that runs along this text.

The question of the death penalty opens up other venues which are relevant in these concluding pages. Acceptance that most of those punished for drug trafficking belong to the poorer, marginalised classes whose economic opportunities are limited to the illegal drug economy has triggered sociological considerations among law makers and enforcers. Drugs being a commodity that increases in value by moving across geographical space and specifically borders, implies that border populations such as the Baluchi minority and the Afghan migrant population have been among the immediate targets of national anti-narcotic strategy. This has kept at bay the top rings of criminal organisations, often based outside Iran (in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or much farther), while exposing individuals and families residing within the remit of Iranian law enforcers to systematic structural violence. Contrary to drug laws in the United States and other Western countries (e.g. France) where drug laws target, for instance, the Afro-American, Latino or Arab population, the Iranian strategy has not identified ethnic and religious minorities as preferred objects of its anti-narcotic strategy. Instead it results from the overlapping of geographic determinism – in the spatial presence of impoverished minorities close to borderlands – and political determinism towards underdeveloped communities over several decades. That has resulted in what seems a selective implementation of the anti-narcotic strategy, with its burden being disproportionately imposed on the social and geographical margins of the Iranian plateau. This claim also holds water in the case of

⁵ *Sharq*, October 11, 2015, retrieved from <http://sharghdaily.ir/News/75647>.

those arrested for minor drug offences. It is pauperised, plebeian and proletarian communities residing in the large metropolises that face the criminalising means of drugs laws. Part Two of this book made a case of how drugs politics affects recovery and punishment among impoverished communities.

All these overriding concerns have materialised in the later part of the 2010s and have fuelled what is a vibrant drug policy debate, with repercussions branching throughout political and social life. The revision of the law, however, has encountered obstacles along its way and it is still pending review. It is not Islamic jurisprudence that impedes policy update. One important element in this process is the unpopularity of softening punishment. As elsewhere, the 'tough on crime' and, more so, the 'tough on drugs' is hard to break after decades of anti-narcotic propaganda. Policymakers are aware of this and do not want to be associated with a softer stance on drug trafficking, even though their harsher stance has brought a halt to international funding for anti-narcotics since 2011, after the success of human rights campaigners.⁶ Lack of popular support for drug law reform is another facet of what I described in Chapters 7 and 8 as grassroots authoritarianism. The idealised version of civil society leading to a reformist society or to the adoption of an open society, with inherently liberal values, remains a dream with little substance (and that is why it is the dream of scholars who study politics without engaged, ethnographic means). It is grassroots groups, charities and civil society organisations that often adopt and implement drugs prohibition and application of punitive measures against drug (ab)users. Addiction recovery in the treatment camps is a quantitatively important case for this assertion, whereas the ideology and practice of NGOs and charities is another example of how capitalist (or so-called neoliberalism; i.e. marketization, competition, hierarchism) processes work at the heart of society. They do so autonomously from the state policies, but they reproduce lines of interests that are statist, including in the maintenance of tough drug laws and the inclusion of the death penalty for drug offenders. That does not imply that all grassroots groups are authoritarian and regressive; indeed, many organizations lobby for humanitarian and compassionate reforms in drug policy as well as other fields. Yet, they don't necessarily represent the entire picture of what we call 'civil society'.

⁶ See Christensen, 'Human Rights and Wrongs'.

The issue of the death penalty has received overwhelming coverage in discussions about Iranian politics and, more selectively, Iran's drug policy. That is right and proper, but the analysis of the drug situation should go far beyond that. For that matter, the issue of the death penalty itself needs a more sophisticated portrayal, which can take into account the global and local dimensions of the drug trade and its geopolitics, including the fact that 80 per cent of the global opium supply travels through Iran towards European countries. Compared to other geographical spaces, such as the Mexican–American border where the cocaine supply is at its most blatant, levels of violence in Iran, including state violence, remain exceptionally low (in Mexico more than 260000 people died in drug violence since Felipe Calderon's election in 2006). Rather than representing an apologia of the anti-narcotic strategy of the Islamic Republic, this datum suggests that scholars and analysts of global drugs politics should open up their interpretative frames. To start with, they should ask one simple question: Why has drug violence, and anti-narcotic violence especially, been much lower in the context of Iran, compared to Mexico, Colombia, Brazil or Afghanistan? A response to the question could open up the comparative dimension of drugs politics, one embedded in geopolitics, state-society and drugs history. It would also help positioning the Iranian case within the global debate on drugs politics, beyond exceptionalist framing focusing on Islamic culture, or authoritarian politics.

Although one should not be over-optimistic about the prospect of smooth and unhindered change in drug laws, the very existence of public debates and the tabling of new proposals signals a historical shift in the multifaceted realities of illicit drugs. Increasingly, those intervening in this terrain agree in dismissing the *war machine* of prison, police and punishment for a *management machine* which operates through an assemblage of health, welfare and consumption. Paradigmatic of this shift could be the onset of safe drug injection rooms in Tehran, a proposal that is being currently examined by governmental officials and for which there are potential prospects of success.

If only for it being a history of great human and political experimentation, drugs politics in Iran is a history of salience. This book tracked this journey from the outset in the early 1900s up to its changing regimes in the 2010s. There is probably no other country in the world with such a fluid and counterintuitive history of drugs as Iran. Yet, the Iranian story is an untold one. Figures E.2 and E.3 sketch the transformation(s) of drug phenomena and the effect of the state on them – *state effect* – in the last century. Long-term processes of modernisation, secularisation, reaction



Figure E.1 Caricature of the Safe Injection Room Proposal
‘The Head of the Working Group on Decreasing Addiction [DCHQ]: “Society does not have the capacity of accepting the safe injection room for addicts”’; below, a man, ‘Actually the capacity of society is very high. The capacity of this room is low’. Sent by Telegram App, ‘Challenges of Addiction’, February 2016.

and revolution, combined with the Brechtian ‘historical incidents’, the politics of drugs can only be understood in light of history and of ethnographic engagement.

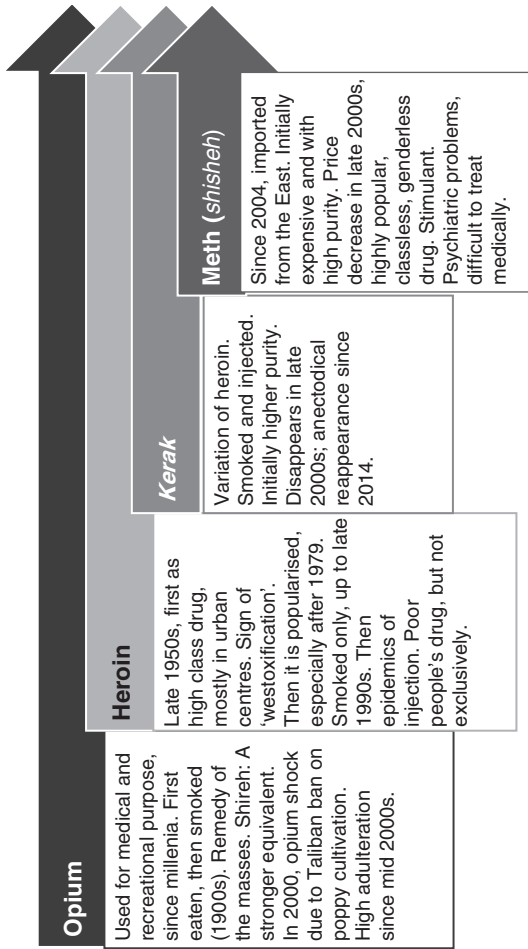
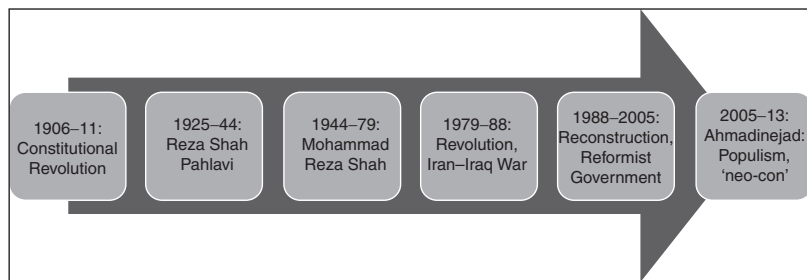


Figure E.2 Changes in Drug Phenomenon in Iran (1800–2015)



1912–55	1955–69	1969–79	1979–90	1998–2005	2005–15
First drug laws against public 'addiction' Collection of street users Closure of <i>Shirehkesh-khaneh</i> Prison, labour camps	Hospitalisation Treatment in clinics Forced rehab	Provision of state opium coupon Addiction clinics Psychiatric programmes Rehab centres	Labour camps, island exile, forced detoxification Some medical support available, Prison Private centres expansion, including fake treatment	Underground harm reduction Private treatment Support group for users (e.g. NA) Triangular Clinics	Methadone Clinics Prison harm reduction (Illicit) treatment camps Outreach harm reduction services Repression of street use and tolerance Spiritual and self-help groups

Figure E.3 Changing Regimes of Power and Treatment

Over the decades, the Iranian people and governments have gone through several realities in drug politics, comprising of a *zero tolerance* for traffickers, *limited tolerance* for cannabis and opium, *tolerance* in special zones of drug use, *acceptance* of harm reduction and even *provision* of certain drugs, as in the case of methadone and opium tincture. That paralleled the epochal shifts from traditional opium consumption in the first part of the twenty century to chemical calibration as exemplified with meth and polydrug use, together with the rise of LSD and other psychedelics.

Despite drugs' historical roots in the plateau and the history of policy experimentation, Iran remained an insular and hidden case

study within the global debate on illegal drugs and, for that matter, among historians and social scientists working on modern Iran. I have tested this on several occasions, the most telling of which occurred during a drug policy roundtable organised by LSE-Ideas 'International Drug Policy Project' in London. While listening to the presentation of an invitee from the Tehran bureau at the UNODC, the person sitting on my left, an international drug policy expert and harm reductionist, shook her head in disapproval of what was being presented. The Iranian presenter was illustrating the data about the scaling up of harm reduction programmes, listing statistics on treatment facility and services since the mid 2000s. Once the presentation was over, the woman on my side whispered in my ear (not knowing that I worked on Iran's drug policy too), 'these data are all false, how can she present something like that here? She is not credible. It's ridiculous!' Later, she was comforted by another expert who shared her disbelief about the truthfulness of the Islamic Republic's harm reduction programmes, *because it was so exaggerated*. I was surprised by the harshness of this judgement, given that most, if not all, of the experts in the room had little clue about Iranian drug policy and have never engaged with the case of Iran, let alone visited the country. Their incredulity expressed well the insularity of Iranian drug policy in mainstream debates about drugs, in spite of the fact that Iran is not only a main international trafficking route, but also has a population with one of the highest number of illicit drug users and among the most comprehensive systems of medical intervention and welfare for drug (ab)users in the Global South. Iran needed to be included in the frame of reference of international drug policy, but it was distrusted even by drug policy reformers.

Given this, the primary objective of this book is to open up a field of investigation on drugs politics in Iran as embedded in global currents on the theme. Instead of looking at drugs as a standalone object that can be analysed and narrated in isolation, the book provides an understanding of drug phenomena as part of historical movements in society and politics. Drugs, in this way, fall at the interstices of power, knowledge and change, an entryway into the transformation of institutions, policies, ideologies and human agency. In Part One, the book's narrative dwelt on historical disruptions and continuity in illicit drug governance, from the first pushes of Constitutionlists on opium control to the authoritarian and revolutionary attempts at reforming the social body. Crisis drove the spirit of government on narcotics throughout the

twentieth century. Governments, civil society and international drug controllers inter-played with the spectre of crisis embodied in drug addiction, its moral falls and health epidemics. In this way, crisis becomes a genealogical tool in situating drugs in Iran's modern history; it is also a paradigm of governance on the disorder associated with drug consumption.

Drug governance is a form of crisis politics. In Iran, this governance has given birth to political venues charged with the duty to govern the crisis. To do so, the Expediency Council acquired overriding powers on legislating and reforming laws on illicit drugs, as part of its prerogative in crisis politics. The origins of drugs politics, and the permanent crisis to which it gives way, has found an institutional home in the Expediency Council. This genealogical root is manifest in a new form of governance of illicit drugs and addiction disorder with the rise of the post-reformist state.

In the new millennium, the Iranian state demonstrated a profound capacity for reforms in the field of drugs, often with idiosyncratic outcomes. Most of these reforms took place during Mahmud Ahmadinejad's governments (2005–13). The short-decade of Ahmadinejad's rule resulted in the most impenetrable (especially for social scientists) and contorted era of post-revolutionary politics. Under the populist presidency, the state introduced deep-seated reforms in governance and society. Instead of adopting the established position arguing that governance during this period (2005–13) was top-down and authoritarian, I use ethnographic observation and fieldwork material to demonstrate quite the contrary. The state adopted multiple tactics towards the drug crisis, and relied on competing agents, most of whom belonged not to the realm of public institutions or of traditional security or disciplinary forces, but to that of civil society, exemplified in the activities of addiction recovery charities and NGOs. This is the way grassroots authoritarianism worked under (and beyond) the post-reformist state. Grassroots authoritarianism is a form of power operating in the face of crisis. It is autonomous of the state, but its goals are not independent of it. The metaphor of the rhizome describes the grassroots nature of crisis governance. Rhizomes, in political parlance, represent a form of power that does not flow from the vertical hierarchy, but rather pops up from the ground, the grassroots, the social milieu made of ordinary people. Because they operate autonomously from public policy, their actions and social presence is seen as independent of state

power and public authority. In that, they belong to the sphere of civil society; and yet they reproduce state prerogatives on the management of social margins and public (dis)order. Beyond the realm of illicit drugs, this approach speaks about forms of politics and governance that defy binary schemes of state versus society, authoritarianism versus resistance, structure versus agency. Instead, it outlines an assemblage in which competing forms of governance coexist.

Crisis has transmuted into the central engine of contemporary politics (or perhaps it has always been so?), amid the decline and disappearance of systemic, ideological referents, including in the ideologically strong Islamic Republic. Governments justify change, reforms and political undertakings in crises – material or imagined – whereby the present lives amidst the *most serious crisis*, prosaically and ordinarily. In Europe, this has taken shape with increasingly visibility following the economic crisis of 2008, where the dictum of austerity has brought deep constitutional reforms that render ordinary politics divested of popular input. A clear example is given by the way public spending, labour laws, and other fields of public policy have become dependent on the European Union's financial, banking legitimation, especially in countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain. The crisis of public debt is permanent and it is transformed in a form of governance with indefinite power. Beyond economic policymaking, crisis is also key in other fields: security is a privileged terrain when one looks at how the threat of terrorism in France and the United Kingdom – but discursively throughout the West starting from the United States – has reformed domestic laws and civil rights in favour of ever-narrower, authoritarian readings. That has also worked in fields unrelated semantically as much as phenomenologically to terrorism, such as the refugee crisis.⁷ Rulers in the Middle East and North Africa, following the revolts in the Arab world, which went under the unhappy name of 'Arab Spring', adopted a similar form of governance.⁸ The threat of

⁷ France's extension of the 'state of emergency' for over more than twelve months after the Paris terrorist attacks is one such example; Italy's request for the EU budget approval in the wake of the earthquake and refugee crises is another; similarly, Recep Erdogan's use of emergency laws following the failed coup in Turkey. See *BBC*, November 13, 2016, retrieved from www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37965708; *Politico*, October 26, 2016, retrieved from www.politico.eu/article/italy-matteo-renzi-pledges-to-veto-eu-budget-over-refugee-crisis/.

⁸ Bronwlee & Ghiabi, 'Passive, Silent and Revolutionary'.

Islamist radicalism legitimised the counterrevolution in Egypt and Syria, militarising the question of public order and rendering the demands for political participation devoid of value. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, aka *daesh*) contributed to turning the discourse of crisis into a paradigm of governance throughout the Mediterranean. The election of Donald J. Trump to the White House in Washington DC reified crisis as a discourse in power, starting with the escalating confrontation with North Korea (and *détente*), the looming war with Iran, the anti-migrant wall crisis, up to indifference to climate change, with its dooming effects, to mention just a few examples from international affairs.

The Islamic Republic is no exception to this rule of global politics. In 2012, *The Economist* argued that ‘one reason for the Islamic Republic’s durability against what many would regard as overwhelming odds is the dogged but subtle *crisis management* of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’.⁹ Yet, how could the management of crisis be the turf of one man, be it even the Supreme Leader? While crises are addressed collectively and politically in so-called liberal democracies, they are expected to be managed and controlled individually in the Islamic Republic. The argument in this book has run counter to this type of framing. There are underlying governmentalities and political machineries – even beyond the state itself – that partake in the management and government of crises. In light of this, one can understand how crisis has become an idiom of reform and management in the Islamic Republic, bearing in mind that politics globally has progressively adopted similar processes of formation.

‘Crisis’ is not an exceptional condition in post-revolutionary Iran. In fact, crisis has been perpetual ever since the establishment of the modernising state in the early twentieth century, intensifying sharply in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. With the establishment of a revolutionary regime, the public discourse on politics has been reproduced – not only by Iranian officials, but also among international observers – through recurrent allusion to the notion of crisis: ‘the hostage crisis’ which lasted 444 days between 1980 and 1981 and contributed to the election of Ronald Regan; ‘the oil crisis’ that has had its ups and downs from the 1973, 1979, to the 1980s embargo up to the crippling sanction regime in the 2010s; ‘the post-war crisis’ of the

⁹ *The Economist*, May 5, 2012, retrieved from www.economist.com/node/21554242.

1990s when reconstruction of Iran's domestic infrastructure and ailing economy challenged the very political order of the republic; 'the water crisis' which became manifest in the case of Lake Orumiye in 2015 and it is today the most serious environmental challenge for the state; 'the corruption crisis' that first brought Ahmadinejad to power in 2005 and later escalated in internecine struggle among members of the establishment, with the revelation of an embezzlement case worth up to one billion dollars in 2011; and, ultimately, 'the nuclear crisis' which, despite the successful negotiations of 2013 and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and world powers, is the heart of crisis politics, following Donald Trump's aggressive and destabilising strategy against Tehran.

There are theoretical implications for the perpetuation of crisis in politics. The intensification of a discourse of crisis proceeds over the blurring of boundaries between what is legitimately policy (and the state) and what is performed at the level of political intervention. In other words, what takes place in the realm of theory of governance, of laws, regulations, and agreed conventions and in the rhetoric of politicians, and what takes place in the political practice of the time, in the on-the-ground workings of political machines. As Janet Roitman argues, the reference in modern politics to crisis is a blind spot, which is claimed constantly in the political rhetoric, but 'remains a latency'.¹⁰ The Iranian state, in this respect, has mastered, often maliciously and sometimes progressively, the arts of governing crisis and managing disorder, establishing itself closer to modes of governance of contemporary Western states. Indeed, crisis as an interpretative frame and as a governmental tool brings Iranian and global politics closer.

Crisis, its Greek etymology (*krisis*) reminds us, takes effect in the domains of theology, law and medicine, the moment when a religious minister, a physician, or a jurist *decides* upon matters of life and death. The encounter of religion, law and medicine is at the heart of the Islamic Republic's state formation and governance, whereby politics, not only in the field of drugs, operates through the logics of management and control. In situations of risk, 'plagues' and crisis, states and private entities often form partnerships, in which quantified evaluation and self-supervision are set as the norm. The medical community, when a plague, epidemic or health crisis is declared, assumes a potent political

¹⁰ Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 39.

role, which underpins state legitimacy, sovereignty and interventions. Through the expansion of political technologies, modern societies also witness the economisation of intervention, shifting their imperative from disciplining the subject to economically managing unruly subjects or crisis/disorder. By transforming people into numbers, this form of governance proceeds to a broader shift in the framing of state and society, one which has been usually explained only in terms of Western liberal societies, and which, as this book demonstrates, operate in specular ways in the Islamic Republic. Beyond this similarity – that could be an (un) fortunate exception – the investigation of drugs politics and the technologies of management of crisis in the Islamic Republic are exploratory of deeper, fundamental paradigms of government of this state, and society, in the larger context of global politics.

Decentralised, societal and multifarious rhizomes, analogous to the root structure of a plant, partake in the state formation that characterised revolutionary Iran. Crisis and, more specifically, the drugs phenomenon had a productive effect on this process. So far, the study of Iranian politics has been strongly embedded in statist, centralising and personality-obsessed perspectives, with some notable exceptions.¹¹ To a certain degree, this obsession with *the regime* is the side effect of the place the Islamic Republic has come to occupy in the scholarship of global politics. Discussion of contemporary Iran risks being at the mercy of the production of think-tank knowledge, with its focus on security and leadership apparatuses, driven by anti-Islamic Republic ideology, which is currently being given unprecedented momentum sustained by Trump's alignment with Saudi and Israeli interests. Knowledge produced through these networks assumes that government and the state in Iran are inherently obstructive and regressive whereas social agents are bearers of positive change, or that change cannot result from indigenous inputs. They also proselytize an idea of post-revolutionary Iran as dominated by the idea of obscurantist Islam, totalitarian in its scope. This argument does not merit careful discussion, as I believe the preceding chapters demonstrated how politics takes form in Iran and, indirectly, what is (or is not?) the place and influence of Islam or, for that matter, obscurantism in the Islamic Republic.

Running counter to this framing, the book reasserted the centrality of the state in the study of political and social phenomena by adopting

¹¹ Harris, *A Social Revolution*; Bayat, *Street Politics*; Keshavarzian, *Bazaar and the State*; Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy and Democracy*.

a grassroots lens, attentive to political practice. Without transforming the political order into a *deus ex machina* of the present, the state represented in this book is the bearer of meaning in the study of power and its effects inasmuch it makes itself insular, invisible and masked. In the case of Iran (but also elsewhere), this camouflage happens through privatisation of its means of intervention, such as treatment, rehabilitation, coercion and surveillance medicine, but it is not a prelude to its disappearance or irrelevance. More importantly, this condition of the state is not revelatory of multiple sovereignties within its structure, as has been regularly argued for the Islamic Republic.¹² The state unfolds forms of ‘indirect government’ entangled in the incoherent tactics and competing strategies that public and private agents co-produce. That often signifies more state intervention and a capacity of consolidation greater than that of direct state action.

The other major study of Iranian drug policy concludes by asking the question ‘how can the Iranian state sustain itself in the midst of these political contradictions?’¹³ The answer, Christensen holds, is in ‘continuous political disagreements as to which form of Islamic order and means of governance should be employed and, in effect, what kind of state the Islamic Republic should become’.¹⁴ This tension, however, is a fundamental rationale of modern politics everywhere, of which we are reminded by Foucault when he writes that ‘the state is at once that which exists, but which does not yet exist enough’.¹⁵ The contentious nature of Iranian drug policy could be interpreted too, as a quest beyond the not yet enough *Islamic Republic*; but we need agreement that the Islamic nature of the political order remains marginal in the making of its polices, especially in its crisis politics. Governance drives the engine of state formation, a birthright anointing the establishment of the Islamic Republic, to which Ayatollah Khomeini gave paramount importance, and to which his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been faithful. Less crucial is the intellectual diatribe around how Islamic the Republic should be, or through which means this Islamic identity should be

¹² Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy*, 225–32; Ramin Jahanbegloo, ‘The Cultural Turn in New Democratic Theory’ in *Democratic Theorists in Conversation* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014), 56–71; Naser Ghobadzadeh, and Lily Zubaidah Rahim, ‘Electoral theocracy and hybrid sovereignty in Iran’, *Contemporary Politics* 22, 4 (2016), 450–68.

¹³ Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy*, 225. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁵ Dean and Villadsen, *State Phobia*, 113.

achieved, or the many shades of reforming Islamic politics. The latter questions exist in the agenda of politicians and a number of public institutions, but they are not the driving force, the political engine, behind the art of government in the new millennium.¹⁶ Rather, they are what they claim to be: intellectual discussions around ways of thinking about the political order rather than ways of interpreting politics and political practice.

At no time has the distance between intellectual analysis and political practice been greater than during Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency, from 2005 to 2013. This was a key moment in the state formation process of the Islamic Republic. With scant non-ideological scholarly research, Ahmadinejad's period in government corresponded to a major transformation of politics. The high hopes of reformism under Mohammad Khatami turned into a straightforward populist demand of economic equality and revolutionary policymaking. Privatisation reconfigured the very infrastructure of the economy, with lasting effects up until the Rouhani administration. A new nationalist, anti-imperialist discourse, combined with religious allure, reasserted Iran's foreign policy amidst the growing conflict in the Middle East, first in Iraq and Afghanistan, then in Syria and beyond. Instead, deep-seated secular trends animated social changes, with the rooting of global consumer culture, new civic dynamics in gender and sexuality, and individual subjectivities animated by competition, appearance and self-care. By 2013, when Iranians elected Hassan Rouhani president of the Republic, Iranian society had gone through a decade of transformation in every existing field of state–society relations, of which, obviously, drugs politics – its assemblage of consumption, treatment and punishment – were epiphenomenal.

Scholarship on this period was mostly informed by studies 'at distance', with little or no on-the-ground engagement. Most contributions analysed governmental discourses, foreign policy or security matters, or, when they addressed societal aspects, they did so either through studies of digital media – a key aspect of this era's social and political life, but not to be regarded as one existing in isolation, rather as in symbiosis with 'lived life' – or by riding the wave of social movements (e.g. Green Movement in 2009). Conscious of this limitation, this book addressed questions of power and politics through an on-the-ground

¹⁶ For some reason, these discussions have been object of interminable scholarly productions on post-revolutionary Iran.

approach, following phenomenological lines of enquiry. Extensive ethnographic observation, interviews with public officials, experts, activists, professionals, and drug consumers informed the book with first-hand information on the history and current state of drugs politics.

Throughout this book, I referred to Iranian politics as bearing an inherent oxymoronic value. I did this not so much to distinguish it from other forms of politics, but rather on the assumption that modern politics is fundamentally contradictory, even dialectical. These contradictions cannot be dissected from a distance; they must be embraced from an engaged point of view. For too long, protracted debates have been waged over whether Iran is an Islamic Republic, whether the Republic is Islamic or Islam can be republican.¹⁷ This book's theoretical contribution stands in that politics needs to be understood in its governmental processes, in its becoming and in the ramifications of its contradictions, in the built-in inconsistencies that drive the political machine in its perpetual and multidirectional transformation, a fact that makes Iran a privileged case for the study of state formation in contemporary times. Indeed, the political order does not stand domineering above society, determining its shape, its means, its political culture. And civil society is not simply the panacea for reform and for a renewal in politics; often, it adopts means of intervention and ideas that are more restrictive and less participatory than the state itself.

Through this approach, the book shows that, with regard to 'crisis' and at the governmental level, politics works along secular (i.e. worldly), profane (unreligious, 'outside the temple') lines. The Islamic Republic works as a modern, secularised political machine; Islam is not its primary fuel.

¹⁷ A sound discussion of this topic is by Bayart, *L'islam Républicain*.