

In Memoriam

Ali Reza Sheikholeslami, 1941–2018



Ali Reza Sheikholeslami, a noted scholar of Middle Eastern and Iranian history and politics died at his home in Oxford, England, on 9 January 2018. He was 76.

I first met Reza when we were both students at Hadaf High School in Tehran in the late 1950s. It was a casual acquaintance. And although he maintained friendly ties with several of us, he was not a “joiner.” I recall, for example, his reluctance to join a “literature group” that we had organized, in part because he believed—correctly, I must admit—that our choice of Bozorg Alavi’s *Chashmbāyash* (Her Eyes) as the first book that we had selected to read and discuss was too political. We parted ways when I left Iran at the end of 11th grade to study in the US, while he stayed on to finish 12th grade and then went to the UK to study English and prepare for his A-Levels at Bell School in Cambridge, England.

It was not until Reza came to the US in 1962 to start his undergraduate studies at Columbia University that we reconnected—this time beginning a friendship that would continue and deepen for the next five-and-a-half decades. In the turbulent 1960s, many of us were involved in the student opposition movement against the Pahlavi regime, some aligned with the National Front and others with leftist orientations of different sorts. Reza, however, was an exception. He was certainly as interested in politics as any of us, but for him politics was more an intellectual pursuit than a call to activism. He enjoyed debating with friends and political foes alike, but was rarely swayed by ideological arguments.

After completing his secondary school education in Iran and a two-year course of study at Bell School in Cambridge (1960–62), he attended Columbia University,

where he received a BA degree in Political Science in 1967. He continued his graduate studies at Northwestern University (MA in Political Science, 1968) with a focus on religion and politics in Egypt under President Nasser. Subsequently, he pursued his doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, leading to his dissertation on “The Structure of Central Authority in Iran, 1871-1896” under the supervision of Amin Banani (1926-2013) and received his PhD in Islamic studies in 1975.

In the spring of 1970, we attended a series of lectures together at UCLA by the distinguished Iranian historian, Abdol-Hossein Zarrinkoob (1923-99) on the origins and the evolution of the Sufi tradition in Iran. Afterwards, we persuaded Zarrinkoob to have the lectures published in *Iranian Studies*. Reza and I then spent the better part of the summer preparing the lectures, with extensive annotations, for publication as a special double issue of *Iranian Studies* (“Persian Sufism in Historical Perspective,” 3, no. 3-4, 1970). At a time when Sufism and Rumi were still relatively esoteric topics in the US, the special issue of the journal attracted considerable attention beyond the scholarly community. Indeed, to our surprise, several orders for the issue were placed by general bookstores—including two or three from New York’s Greenwich Village—a harbinger, I think, of the later interest in Sufism and Rumi as one of the most popular and revered poets in America. Later, three of Reza’s own papers on Qajar history, including his incisive analysis of “Sale of Offices in Qajar Iran,” were published in *Iranian Studies*. He also served as the Journal’s Associate Editor from 1972 to 1974.

After obtaining his doctorate, Reza served as an assistant professor of political science at the University of Washington from 1975 to 1985, where his commitment to the intellectual development of his students won him the “Most Distinguished Teacher Award” at the university. He continued his scholarly research in Iran and, later, as a research fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard (1987-88) and a visiting senior fellow at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford (1988-90). In 1990, he was appointed as the inaugural Soudavar Chair of Persian Studies and Professorial Fellow at Wadham College, also at Oxford, a position that he held until his retirement in 2006. Following his retirement from Oxford, he accepted a visiting appointment in international studies at the American University of Sharjah, UAE, and taught there for the next two years (2006-08).

Sheikholeslami’s scholarly research and publications covered a wide range of topics. He started with an interest in the comparative politics and political economy of the Middle East, leading to the publication of the *Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (University of Washington Press, 1984). But gradually his interests shifted toward Iran’s political and social history in the late Qajar era. In his *The Central Structure of Authority in Qajar Iran, 1871-1896* (Scholars Press, 1997), based on extensive use of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ archives, he analyzed the extent and limits of the patrimonial authority of the Qajar monarch Nāser al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96), as well as the Qajars’ traditional conception of “justice”—not as an egalitarian principle, but as a way of preserving the traditional hierarchies within the social order. In his analysis of the exploitative and corrupt practices by the long-reigning Qajar monarch, he showed how the country’s major administrative offices were periodically

sold to the highest bidders, who were then free to take advantage of their positions to collect arbitrarily set taxes and payoffs—thus placing much of the burden of productive, profit-generating labor on the shoulders of the peasantry.

In addition to the above monographs, Reza wrote numerous articles, chapters and encyclopedia entries, both in Persian and in English, on such varied topics as “The Transformation of Iran’s Political Culture” (2000), “Saudi Arabia and the United States: Partnership in the Persian Gulf” (1997), “From Religious Accommodation to Religious Revolution: The Transformation of Shi’ism in Iran” (1986) and “The Creation and the Dignity of Man in Islam” (2004).

His appointment as the Soudavar Chair of Persian Studies at Oxford was the pinnacle of Sheikholeslami’s academic career. The tradition-bound atmosphere of the university suited his own conservative temperament and proclivities. Aside from being a dedicated teacher and mentor to numerous students, he cherished the company of his Wadham College colleagues and affiliates, most of whom, with the exception of his close friend and colleague John Gurney, were in fields other than his own. This was very much in line with his own intellectual style of always wanting to venture beyond the confines of any narrow academic specialty or discipline. His courtly manners, combined with genuine warmth and love for spirited conversation, made him a favorite colleague and a sought-after companion to many. He is survived by his loving wife, Shahrazad Vigh Sheikholeslami.

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