

Alcohol in the Islamic Middle East: Ambivalence and Ambiguity

Rudi Matthee

Wine (khamr) has flowed in my veins like blood
Learn to be dissolute; be kind—this is far better than
To be a beast that won't drink wine and can't become a man.
(Hafez of Shiraz (14th c.))

Great is the difference between the Turks and the Persians, for the
Turks, being by law prohibited, abstain from wine yet drink it cov-
ertly, but the Persians, now, as of old, drink openly and with excess.
(Thomas Herbert, 1627)

This essay starts with—and builds its main argument on—a paradox. Historically, most people, and certainly Muslims, inhabiting the world where Islam spread and became the dominant faith, did not drink. This was in accordance with Islam's formal proscription of the consumption of alcohol and the draconian punishment for violators of the ban—eighty lashes; forty for women and slaves.¹ Water has always been their main beverage, women as a rule never drank, and fermented or distilled drinks were generally not readily available, least of all in the respectable public sphere. Throughout Islamic history, radical prohibition of drinking has often followed the rise to power of puritanical regimes—the North African Almoravids and Almohads in eleventh- and thirteenth-century Spain, respectively; the Wahhabis who haunted the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq in the early nineteenth century; more recently the clerics of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet alcohol has always played a surprisingly important role in male elite circles in the Islamic Middle East. The very word alcohol is Arabic in origin, deriving from *al-kohl*, pulverized antimony used to darken the eye lines, and Muslim alchemists, most notably the Iranian Zakariya al-Razi (865–925; better known

¹ Felicitas Opwis, 'Shifting Legal Authority from the Ruler to the 'Ulamā for Drinking Wine during the Saljūq Period', *Der Islam*, 86 (2009), 66–7, 77–8.

under his Latin name Rhazes) are credited with the invention of the process of distillation. Throughout history, Muslim rulers and their courtiers have consumed alcohol, often in huge quantities and sometimes in public view; the examples of ordinary Muslims violating their religion's ban on drinking are too numerous to count; and, while alcohol is strictly forbidden in many modern Muslim countries, quite a few, from Tunisia and Turkey to Syria, Egypt—except during Ramadan—and Indonesia, allow for its (restricted) sale and consumption.

The Islamic world is far too large and complex for generalizations to have any validity, yet one is struck by the similarities throughout its history and across the lands where it came to prevail, in the manifestations of drinking and in the ambivalent approach to alcohol, most clearly expressed in attempts to keep up the appearance of sobriety in the face of reality. The first part of this essay will discuss some of these similarities, the customs and traditions that transcend geography and time to form cultural patterns. The second part will focus on the central lands where Islam became the dominant faith after its great conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries. Within that zone I will single out two early modern states, Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire, with the aim of comparing and contrasting their respective drinking customs in order to identify the extent to which these conformed to traditions carried over from earlier times and to what extent these reveal new, 'early modern' consumption patterns. The third part, focusing on the nineteenth-century Ottoman state and Qajar Iran, will explore the effects on alcohol consumption resulting from the intrusion of trade-based capitalism and the concomitant adoption of western-style modernization by these countries' elites. The essay concludes with a survey of the divergent trajectories with regard to drinking taken by the two modern countries that emerged from these states, Turkey and Iran.

I

The Islamic proscription of alcohol was a gradual, almost reluctant process, one that reveals itself as relative despite its apparent absoluteness, providing loopholes, allowing for subterfuge, and leaving open the chance of having one's guilt absolved. In the Abrahamic tradition the vine and wine have been linked from the outset, and wine has been connected with drunkenness and impudence as early as the story about Noah in the Book of Genesis 9, 20–21.² That the early Muslims knew about alcohol is clear from the references in pre-Islamic poetry about the existence of a trade in wine, supplied by Christian and Jewish merchants to the monasteries that dotted the Arabian

² François Clément (ed.), *Les vins d'Orient. 4000 ans d'ivresse* (Nantes, 2008), introd., 8.

Peninsula.³ This familiarity is also reflected in the Koran, which is ambiguous about alcohol, evincing a 'progressively negative sequence' in a series of 'discreet, evocative statements', with regard to its properties and its consumption, clearly 'in response to a particular set of human circumstances'.⁴ It praises wine as God's gift and recognizes it as a source of enjoyment, but 'etherealizes' it by giving it a place in paradise. Presumably reflecting the problems Mohammad and the first few caliphs had with drunkenness among their followers, Islam's sacred text (5:90–1) ultimately condemns grape wine (*khamr*) for its effect, intoxication, which interferes with the clear-headedness needed for the proper execution of its religious commands.

There is also relief of a different kind for those who transgress. Most importantly, those who cannot resist drinking in contravention of the Holy Law can find comfort in the Islamic notion that sin can be expiated through repentance. Sin in Islam is the wilful act of turning one's back to God, which means that the act can be reversed. Drinking alcohol thus is a transgression for which atonement or a specific punishment is prescribed. Drinking is bad, but the act as such does not turn the actor into a heretic, excluding him irrevocably from the community of believers. It is heretical, rather, to consider it permissible to drink alcohol.⁵ It also helps if the alcohol one consumes is manufactured by a non-Muslim, for this absolves the person who drinks at least to some extent from the intentionality or the premeditated nature of the offence.⁶

Shifting the focus from sin to shame, the imbiber is offered a place of refuge of sorts in the form of the respect Islam has always evinced for the privacy of the inner home, the sanctuary of the family and its honour. In an approach that favours procedure over substance, a strong Islamic, prophetically underwritten injunction about the impermissibility of prying into people's private lives for hidden sin—so as not to bring shame on them—has often provided some kind of legal shelter against the intrusion of the state by way of a morality police.⁷ In other words, since social solidarity is an important virtue in traditional Islamic culture, as long as drinking and other proscribed activities

³ Kathryn Kueny, *The Rhetoric of Sobriety: Wine in Early Islam* (Albany, NY, 2001), 89ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵ Devin J. Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy. Twelver Shiite Response to the Sunni Legal System* (Salt Lake City, 1998), 47.

⁶ Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, and Ancient Babylonia, etc. etc. during the Years, 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820* (London, 1821–2), 347–8.

⁷ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Princeton, 2000), 481–2.

remained confined to the private sphere, the community tended to 'keep up appearances' by pretending that no infringement was taking place.

From the sixteenth century onward foreign observers have commented on the tendency among Muslims to drink to excess, linking the formal ban on drinking to heavy drinking. As the Flemish Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Austrian envoy to Istanbul in the mid-sixteenth century, put it, the 'drinking of wine is regarded by the Turks as a serious crime, especially by the older men; the younger men can commit the sin with greater hope of pardon and excuse. They think, however, that the punishment which they will suffer in future life will be just as heavy whether they drink much or little, and so, if they taste wine, they drink deep'.⁸ Reinhold Lubenau, who in 1587 visited Istanbul as a pharmacist attached to an Austrian mission, similarly reports how Muslim Turks, invited to his house, would burst into loud shrieking before putting the glass to their lips, in hopes that their soul might move elsewhere while they engaged in drinking, so as not to become tainted by this sin. He claimed that, since the transgression was thought to be punishable regardless of the volume of the intake, people would keep drinking until they 'collapsed on the floor'.⁹ Jean Chardin, the most astute outside observer of seventeenth-century Iran, insisted that to get drunk fast was the purpose of drinking for Iranians, which is why they appreciated strong wines. Echoing Lubenau's comments, he also recounts how Iranians would recoil while drinking, treating alcohol like a medicine to be swallowed rather than enjoyed.¹⁰

That quick inebriation was often the point of drinking relates to the fact that alcohol in Islamic culture was not synonymous with sociability. Given its status as a forbidden substance, alcohol in a Muslim environment could never become fully integrated into the idea of good living. In the Greek symposium tradition, alcohol might enliven court sessions, and it was taken for granted as part of the lifestyle of the elite, but it remained a forbidden fruit, and thus could not escape furtive embrace amid public disavowal. Unacknowledged, alcohol in the Islamic world never became an accompaniment to food, enhancing the convivial atmosphere of the meal, the way it did in Mediterranean and Christian/European culture. As foreign visitors noted, meals in the Islamic Middle East were typically taken in silence and rather

⁸ Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, trans. Edward Seymour Forster (Oxford, 1927), 9–10.

⁹ Reinhold Lubenau, *Beschreibung der Reisen des Reinhold Lubenau*, ed. W. Sahn, 2 vols. (Königsberg, 1914, repr. Frankfurt a/M, 1995), 1, 260.

¹⁰ Jean Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et en autres lieux de l'Orient*, ed. L. Langlès, 10 vols. and atlas (Paris, 1810–11), III, 218; IV, 69–70.

quickly, to be concluded with a glass of water. Only afterwards would the (male) host and his guests engage in discussion—over coffee or tea and with the enjoyment of the water pipe, and often in a different room.¹¹

Class played a role as well in the consumption of alcohol. Those who drank in the Middle East hailed predominantly from the high end of the social spectrum. Piousness and with it, abstemiousness, was most prevalent among the middling classes. The upper classes drank from a sense of entitlement, enjoying alcohol as a 'right', one of the privileges traditionally granted to the elite, *khass*, in Islamic lands. Abstention was something for commoners, the '*avvam*', unable to restrain themselves. The lower classes tended to use other drugs, especially opium—which is not explicitly condemned in either the Koran or the Prophetic Traditions—to while away boredom, to find oblivion from miserable lives and, above all, as a form of self-medication. To the extent that commoners drank it was part of a subculture of subterfuge and furtiveness, with people sneaking off to taverns located in back alleys in the non-Muslim quarters of town, run by Jews, Armenians, or Greeks. Taverns in Islamic lands remained disreputable, associated with the seamy side of life, and the tavern owner occupied 'roughly the same place on the social scale as the prostitute, the overt homosexual, and the itinerant entertainer'.¹² In these conditions drinking remained hidden, 'invisible', even though it took place in 'full view'. Drinking, after all, was common in court circles and among the elite, and Muslims frequented taverns. But since alcohol was formally outlawed, it could not be linked to reality, so that wine became a metaphor for the ardent feelings of the lover for the beloved in the imaginary world of (mystical) poetry. Unlike coffee, religiously controversial for being stimulating and distracting, alcohol could never become the subject of a public discourse, just as the tavern, operating in the shadows, could never become part of a quasi-public sphere, unlike the often open and airy coffee house, a communal extension of the private home and the basis for political action.

II

In the Arabian Peninsula, where wine was hardly indigenous, Islam's formal ban on alcohol was of little consequence. Elsewhere, the spread of new faith hardly interrupted a long tradition of alcohol consumption. This is certainly true for two vast areas that were initially conquered and that were also among

¹¹ See Hélène Desmet-Grégoire, *Cuisine et modernité: À travers l'exemple de la Turquie. La migration des saisons* (Istanbul, 2012), 137–8.

¹² Ralph Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses. The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Seattle, 1985), 78.

the world's oldest wine-growing and wine-drinking cultures—the Mediterranean basin and 'greater Iran', encompassing Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, the Caucasus, as well as Central Asia as far as the Oxus (Amu Darya) River. The Mediterranean tradition of viniculture is so well known as not to need any elaboration, yet the world's earliest wine culture, going back some 9,000 years, has been located rather farther to the east, in the eastern Taurus, the Caucasus, and the northern Zagros Mountains of Iran.¹³ Pre-Islamic Mesopotamia was the land of wine-soaked royal banquets, of alcohol-induced divination, and of prophecy inspired by intoxicating drinks.¹⁴ In Zoroastrianism, wine symbolized liquid gold and the flowing fire of the radiant sun, and as such had a ritual function, being part of a libation ritual, in which it substituted for blood. Ancient and late antique Iranian elite history could be written as the history of *razm va bazm* (fighting and feasting), with wine at the centre.

As a result, many (newly converted) Muslims continued to consume alcohol, and especially wine, with an alacrity barely dimmed by a guilty conscience. Pre-Islamic poets had drawn their inspiration from wine, and the *khamriyya*, a form of Bacchic poetry, survived the Islamic proscription to thrive in the eighth-century Omayyad state.¹⁵ Wine also retained the various medical benefits ascribed to it by physicians in pre-Islamic times.¹⁶ Drinking was ubiquitous at the secular-minded Abbasid court of Baghdad, to the point where the caliph carousing with his boon companions came to represent a topos.¹⁷ Then, as later, anti-alcohol measures tended to target public consumption, seeking to avoid public scandal in the form of disturbances and brawls, rather than private drinking. The authorities typically tolerated semi-public drinking, and only curbed it when it overstepped its implicitly accepted boundaries of privacy and led to urban unrest. Violators were typically fined or, rather rarely, flogged or paraded in public.¹⁸

¹³ Patrick McGovern, *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (Berkeley, 2009), 82.

¹⁴ Jean Bottéro, 'Boisson, banquet, et vie sociale'. In L. Milano (ed.), *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture in the Ancient Near East* (Padua, 1994), 1–13.

¹⁵ Edgar Weber, 'Le vin dans la tradition arabo-musulmane', in Clément (ed.), *Les vins d'Orient*, 54–83.

¹⁶ See P. A. Norrie, 'The History of Wine as a Medicine', in Merton Sandler and Roger Pinder (eds), *Wine. A Scientific Exploration* (London and New York, 2003), 21–55, esp. 35–6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁸ Christiane Lange, *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* (Cambridge, 2008), 56, 82, 185, 227.

From Andalusia in the far west to Khorasan on the eastern marches of the Islamic empire, wine drinking flourished in the classical age of Islam. Spain, with a climate and soil that allow the grape to grow almost everywhere, had a viticulture going back to the sixth century BCE.¹⁹ The Omayyad rulers of Spain, including the most famous one, ‘Abd Al-Rahman III (r. 912–61), were known for their fondness of wine. The eleventh-century king of Grenada, Badis, remained in his palace, engaged in drinking, for such a long time that people thought he had died. And the last of the so-called Party Kings of Seville (in reference to their divisiveness, not their lifestyle) Muhammad ibn ‘Abbad al-Mu‘tamid (r. 1069–91), ruler as well as poet, sought oblivion in wine as the invading Almoravids stood at the gates of his city.²⁰ In North Africa Islam managed to erase virtually all traces of Christianity, yet proved unable to eradicate a long-standing tradition of viniculture and viticulture. Medieval Arab authors describing the region mention the production of wine made of dates, of honey and dry raisins. As elsewhere, Jews were often the ones who engaged in the trade of all kinds of fermented drinks.²¹

In the eastern half of the empire, encompassing modern Iran and Afghanistan, matters were little different. The rulers of the Saffarid and Samanid dynasties, the first to seek autonomy from their Abbasid overlords, are known for the gusto with which they and their entourage indulged in wine-drinking.²² Modern Persian poetry, which originated at the courts of these rulers, is replete with vivid references to wine bibbing, its rituals and its symbols. Mystical (Sufi) poetry, much of it written in Persian as well, is even more drenched in wine. Its wine-related metaphors, most powerfully expressed by Hafez of Shiraz, include the handsome cupbearer as the object of desire, the refraction of the ruby red wine in the goblet as a symbol of divine radiance, the wine shop, *meykhaneh*, standing for the ‘realm of angels’, and the libertine image of the free-spirited Sufi drunk who spills wine on the payer mat to show his contempt for clerical bigotry and hypocrisy. It is not always easy to distinguish between the metaphorical use of wine and references to the real thing, yet often ‘the literal meaning seems to be the only plausible one’.²³

¹⁹ François Clément, ‘Vignes et vins dans l’Espagne musulmane’, in Clément (ed.), *Les vins d’Orient*, 87.

²⁰ Heine, *Weinstudien*, 127.

²¹ Hildebert Isnard, *La vigne en Algérie. Étude géographique*, 2 vols (Paris, 1947), I, 261–2, 265.

²² Ehsan Yarshater, ‘The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry’, *Studia Islamica* 13 (1960), 43.

²³ Dick Davis, ‘Wine and Persian Poetry’, in Najmieh Batmangeli, *From Persia to Napa. Wine at the Persian Table* (Washington DC, 2006), 62.

The many hallucinatory images of swaying rocks and undulating landscapes in Persian miniatures depicting Sufis certainly point in that direction.²⁴ And although some poets hint at a sense of unease endorsing a practice at variance with the Islamic law, there is in fact little suggestion in any of their works that wine is intrinsically sinful.²⁵ The *bon viveur* image of the cultured courtier included not just the actual quaffing of wine, but presupposed knowledge about when and how to serve and consume it, and, of course, how to come to terms with the fact that it is formally forbidden in Islam. All this is reflected in the medieval Persianate *Adab* and *Nasihāt*, Mirror for Princes literature, which includes advice involving hospitality and etiquette with regard to royal drinking parties in its guidelines for proper conduct.²⁶

III

The rulers of the dynasties that came to rule the Middle East from the tenth century were either ethnic Turks or Mongols hailing from the steppes of Central Asia. Both groups were known for their bibulousness—albeit mostly involving *kumiss*, fermented mare's milk, in the case of the Mongols.²⁷ Their drinking patterns, combined with the Islamic tradition already in place, were carried over into Safavid Iran, named after the dynasty, the Safavids, which ruled the country between 1501 and 1722, and to a lesser extent, the Ottoman Empire, which expanded from its fourteenth-century western Anatolian origins to become the largest, most powerful and longest-lasting Muslim state in the early modern period.

The early Safavids exemplify a type of pre-modern elite drinking combining ancient pre-Islamic traditions with the customs of the Central Asian steppes and, following the introduction of numerous Georgians and Armenians as slave soldiers and bureaucrats, the rites and rituals of Christianity. The head of a wild tribal warrior band, revered by his followers as an incarnation of the divine, and espousing a form of Twelve Shi'ism suffused with pre-Islamic semi-pagan customs and rituals, the first Safavid shah, Shah Isma'il (r. 1501–24), drank copiously, in public, banquet-style,

²⁴ See Nina Ergin, 'Rock Faces: Opium and Wine. Speculations on the Original Viewing Context of Persian Manuscripts', *Der Islam* 90:1 (2013), 65–99.

²⁵ Davis, 'Wine and Persian Poetry', 59.

²⁶ See Kay Kavus ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus, *A Mirror for Princes. The Qābūs nāma*, trans. Reuben Levy (New York, 1951), 57–60; and Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings. The Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama*, trans. Hubert Darke (Richmond, Surrey, 1960, repr. 2002), 119.

²⁷ For Mongol drinking, see Antti Ruotsala, *Europeans and Mongols in the Middle of the Thirteenth Century. Encountering the Other* (Helsinki, 2001), 110–29.

surrounded by his warriors, who feasted as hard as they fought—before and after going into battle. Paradoxically, the shah's hard drinking did nothing to detract from his aura, indeed augmented it. By drinking in public Isma'il projected the image of a ruler who inhabited his own moral universe, beyond the strictures of religion, and drinking copiously marked him as a tribal chief, a big man able to hold his liquor.²⁸

The dynasty lost some of its divine aura with the terrible defeat Shah Isma'il suffered against the Ottomans on the battlefield of Chalderan in 1514. Turning inward, his successor, Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524–76), sought salvation through repentance, and abstained from intoxicating substances for life. Yet most shahs who came after him drank again, and some drank in excess. With the exception of Shah Isma'il all Safavid shahs declared bans on drinking at one point or another during their reign. At the same time, most continued to tipple themselves, and several are known, or are likely, to have died from overconsumption. Many high officials and even some high-ranking clerics appear to have been heavy drinkers as well. Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), the greatest of the Safavid kings, was an exception for drinking in moderation, surrounded by his courtiers and quite often foreign guests, who were allowed to quaff from his own gold goblet. Shah 'Abbas was also heir to a long tradition of Iranian rulers, going all the way back to the Achaemenids, who used alcohol to loosen lips among his courtiers.²⁹

Shah 'Abbas's grandson and successor, Safi I (r. 1629–42) declared a ban on alcohol upon coming to power. Yet, advised by his physicians to treat a cold that his opium use had caused with alcohol, he soon succumbed to hard drinking, to die from dipsomania in 1642.³⁰ His successor, Shah 'Abbas II, proclaimed a ban on drinking when he acceded to the throne at the tender age of nine in 1642.³¹ Seven years later, still in his teens, he took up the cup during a triumphant return from a campaign that had gained him mastery over Qandahar. The chronicler who narrates the events justifies the shah's

²⁸ For more on alcohol in the Safavid period and, in general, in Iranian history, see Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure; Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900* (Princeton, 2005), chs. 2, 3, and 6; and Rudi Matthee, 'The Ambiguities of Wine in Iranian History: Between Excess and Abstinence', in Florian Schwarz, Ralph Kauz, and Bert Fragner (eds), *Wine in Iranian History* (Vienna, 2014), 1–30.

²⁹ Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle*, 2 vols, ed. Gancia (Brighton, 1845), I, 668.

³⁰ Abu'l Mafakher b. Fazl Allah al-Hoseyni Savaneh-negar Tafreshi, *Tarikh-e Shah Safi*, ed. Mohsen Bahramnezhad (Tehran, 1388/2010), 22–3; and Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 52–3.

³¹ J.-B. Tavernier, *Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier en Turquie, en Perse et en Indes* (Paris, 1678), 579; Fasa'i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, 2 vols paginated as one (Tehran, 1367/1988), 477.

change of heart by referring to an old adage also proffered in the *Mirror of Princes* literature, according to which God and the law both permit happiness and pleasure, especially in youth. In this reasoning, the shah in particular enjoys the right to unbounded pleasure as long as he does not neglect his realm and his subjects.³² Like his great grandfather, Shah 'Abbas I, Shah 'Abbas II showed a remarkable bonhomie toward his foreign guests, inviting them to his frequent drinking sessions.³³ The relaxed mood was interrupted when in 1653 the sheikh al-islam of Isfahan urged the shah to foreswear wine as a way to prevent the Mughals from retaking Qandahar. In customary fashion, the ban became moot within a year; life returned to its normal state of ambiguity, and the shah resumed his previous lifestyle, drinking lustily until his death in 1666.³⁴

Exemplifying the shift the Safavid state had undergone in the century and a half since its inception—from tribal dispensation to agrarian-based urban-centred polity—the last two shahs of the dynasty, Soleyman (r. 1666–94) and Soltan Hoseyn (r. 1694–1722), no longer ruled as warrior kings, patrolling their realm and engaged in endless campaigns. Instead, they reigned as stationary monarchs, ensconced in their palace, where they engaged in 'lust and play', as the Persian sources call it. They, too, issued bans on the consumption of alcohol. Indeed, the inauguration ceremony of the exceedingly pious Soltan Hoseyn included a ban on frivolous pastimes such as kite-flying, on the public appearance of women unaccompanied by male relatives, and on the use of intoxicants. Six thousand bottles of wine were taken from the royal cellar and demonstratively poured out on Isfahan's main square. Yet, the proscription lapsed less than two years after the shah's accession, removed at the behest of his great-aunt who, herself addicted, persuaded the king to take up the bottle.³⁵

The Ottoman Empire was different. True to their semi-nomadic background, its early rulers were ambulant warriors, too. Yet with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Ottoman rulers prematurely came to preside over an urban-based stationary court. Henceforth the sultan reigned from the privacy of the Topkapı palace, and his drinking thus remained hidden from view. Some sultans were notorious tipplers; others are known to have been teetotallers. Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), in Busbecq's words, lived modestly and was never seduced by wine (or by pederasty, a common

³² Mohammad-Yusof Valeh Esfahani, *Khold-e barin. Iran dar zaman-e Shah Safi wa Shah 'Abbas-devvom*, ed. M. Naseri (Tehran, 1380/2001), 480.

³³ Tavernier, *Les six voyages*, 544.

³⁴ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 85–90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92–4.

indulgence in the Ottoman Empire as much as in Iran).³⁶ The German chaplain Franciscus de Billerberg (Franz Billerbeck), who spent time in Istanbul in the 1580s, called Murad III (r. 1574–95) a teetotaler as well.³⁷ He also contradicts Busbecq, who attributed the good order in the sultan's military to an absence of intoxicating drinks in the regular army.³⁸ The troops of Murad's father, Selim II (r. 1566–74), De Billerberg insists, could not be 'compelled to abstain from wine'.³⁹ Indeed, alcohol consumption seems to have been rife among the Ottoman soldiery, most notably in the ranks of the notoriously unruly Janissaries.⁴⁰

Other than consumption by dervishes, about which we have limited information, and with the exception of conditions in the Balkans and Greece, the use of alcohol in the Ottoman Empire among civilians was largely confined to the cities. In the Balkans the old tradition of wine drinking continued with little noticeable abatement, even in the countryside, with the interesting twist that Muslims in Bosnia seem to have obeyed the wine prohibition prescribed by the Sharia while considering raki, an anise-flavoured spirit distilled from grapes, to be permitted by Islam. Sarajevo was home to twenty-one taverns in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴¹

But even in urban centres, the nature of drinking was determined by the type of inhabitants. The Ottoman Empire was fundamentally different from Iran in that a large percentage of its originally Christian population never converted to Islam. This was particularly true in the Balkans and on Aegean islands such as Naxos and Mytilini (Lesbos) and Chios, which supplied most of the wine consumed in Ottoman lands, but also in the port cities such as Istanbul and Izmir. Since dhimmis were officially exempt from liquor laws, alcohol might be obtained wherever they dwelled. Hence taverns, *meyhanehs*, watering holes tucked away in side alleys and run by indigenous Greeks, Armenians, or Jews, were predominantly found in port cities and invariably located in the Christian part of town.⁴² In 1829 all of the 554 taverns in

³⁶ Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters*.

³⁷ Franciscus de Billerberg, [*Most Rare and Straunge Discourses, of Amurathe the Turkish Emperor that now is with the Warres betweene Him and the Persians: The Turkish Triumph, Lately Had at Constantinople.*] (1584) (London?, 1584), unpag. (2).

³⁸ Metin And, *Istanbul in the 16th Century. The City. The Palace, Daily Life* (Istanbul, 1994), 187.

³⁹ De Billerberg, [*Most Rare and Straunge Discourses*], unpag. (2).

⁴⁰ See James Grehan, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus* (Seattle, 2007), 134.

⁴¹ Jelena Mrgić, 'Wine or Raki—The Interplay of Climate and Society in Early Modern Ottoman Bosnia', *Environment and History*, 17 (2011), 633.

⁴² Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters*, 19.

Istanbul were run by non-Muslims.⁴³ The availability of wine and other pleasures gave the city's Christian quarters across the Golden Horn, Galata and, later, Pera, an image of 'otherness', eliciting a reaction part abhorrence part envy from Ottoman commentators.⁴⁴ In eighteenth-century Smyrna (modern Izmir) the non-Muslim community kept its taverns 'open all Hours, Day and Night'.⁴⁵ In Aleppo greater restrictions applied. There, Ottoman officials and Janissaries were known tipplers, and drinking by Sufis seeking ecstasy was generally tolerated, but, beyond private dwellings, the consumption of alcohol was confined to the *Han al-gümriük*, the 'customs hostel' where (foreign) merchants were lodged.⁴⁶ In nineteenth-century Egypt, the Coptic population distilled arak from dates, while local Greeks produced *tafia*, a sweet beverage of poor quality made with molasses and sugar cane.⁴⁷ Boza, a beer-like drink made of fermented millet and of low alcoholic content, was consumed in Egypt, too, as it was elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, mostly by members of the lower classes whiling away time in *bozahanehs*, establishments of a distinctly disreputable fame.⁴⁸

Muslims would only frequent these establishments stealthily, fearful of the punishment that awaited those who were caught. Meanwhile most people, Muslims and the 'People of the Book' alike, drank in the privacy of their homes. In seventeenth-century Aleppo, people, Muslims as well as Jews and Christians, would buy enormous amounts of grapes, to turn these into wine at home.⁴⁹ As in Iran, Ottoman authorities periodically issued bans on alcohol consumption while turning a blind eye to Christian drinking, or indeed to the

⁴³ François Georgeon, 'Ottomans and Drinkers: The Consumption of Alcohol in Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century', in Eugene Rogan (ed.), *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East* (London and New York, 2002), 12.

⁴⁴ Edhem Eldem, 'Istanbul: From Imperial to Peripheralized Capital', in Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Masters (eds), *The Ottoman City between East and West. Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul* (Cambridge, 1999), 150.

⁴⁵ Daniel Goffman, 'Izmir: From Village to Colonial Port City', in Eldem, Goffman, and Masters (eds), *The Ottoman City*, 94, quoting the French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort.

⁴⁶ Grehan, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture*, 134; and James Mather, *Pashas. Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World* (New Haven and London, 2009), 78.

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Luth, *La vie quotidienne en Égypte au temps des Khédives* (Paris, 1998), 180.

⁴⁸ Edward Lane, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (New York, 1908; repr. 1966), 96; Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge, 2010), 189.

⁴⁹ Laurent d'Arvieux, 'Mémoires du Chevalier d'Arvieux', in Hussein I. El-Mudarris and Oliver Salmon (eds), *Le consulat de France à Alep au XVIIe siècle* (Damascus, 2009), 344.

boozing of the Janissaries, taking bribes to allow the latter to indulge.⁵⁰ Most sultans proscribed alcohol and, with it, controversial consumables such as coffee and tobacco at one point or another during their reign, whether upon acceding to the throne, or in order to propitiate the heavens during natural disaster or on the eve of a military campaign, motivated by religious fervour, pressured by the ulama, mindful of the approach of old age and the reckoning in the hereafter, or, simply seeking to maintain public order. Süleyman thus forbade the public sale of wine in the 1540s, making it difficult even for non-Muslims to obtain any.⁵¹ Similar bans were issued by his successors, Selim II (1566–74), Murad III (1574–95), Mehmed III (r. 1595–1603), Ahmed I (r. 1603–17), and Murad IV (1623–40). The latter, an alcoholic himself, was particularly severe in his reaction to public drinking, killing violators encountered during incognito nocturnal outings with his own hand. The ban on drinking issued during his reign was part of a larger offensive known as the Kadızadeli movement. Named after Kadızade Mehmed (1582–1635), a preacher from the provinces who in 1631 rose to become the highest religious state official, the Kadızadeli movement long after its founder's death continued to exert pressure on the state to act against improper practices associated with its main target, Sufism, not just drinking but smoking and music-making as well. In 1662, following a terrible fire in Istanbul and an outbreak of pestilence, disasters that the ulama blamed on unislamic practices, the sale of wine was prohibited within the walls of Istanbul, comprising the Muslim quarter of the city. Eight years later, the ban was tightened by being extended, first to any neighbourhood that housed a mosque, and next to private use even among non-Muslims.⁵² Naturally, such bans proved unenforceable, and soon wine-drinking and selling resumed.

The frequency and sequential nature of these decrees indeed suggest that they were largely incantatory. The ban Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1808) decreed upon his accession to power in 1789 foundered in the face of creative circumvention—with Muslim males disguised as non-Muslim women sneaking drinks into their homes—but failed above all for economic reasons. The people of the Aegean islands, deprived of income, filed numerous petitions protesting their loss of livelihood. Most important was the loss in much

⁵⁰ And, *Istanbul in the 16th Century*, 188; Boyar and Fleet, *A Social History of Istanbul*, 195.

⁵¹ Özlem Kumrular, 'The Role of Wine in Ottoman Society. A Collective Vice: Restrictions and Disobedience to the Laws', in Özlem Kumrular, *The Ottoman World, Europe and the Mediterranean* (Istanbul, 2012), 188; and Suraiya Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (London and New York, 2000), 215.

⁵² Madeline C. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600–1800)* (Minneapolis, 1988), 129ff.

needed state revenue. Spirits taxes were a problematic issue, for to impose them was to acknowledge, indeed, encourage the use of alcohol, which is why they were abolished soon after being introduced in the seventeenth century. Drinking proved to be too lucrative a source of income for the state, though, and by the late eighteenth century the (reinstated) tax on alcoholic beverages was a major source of revenue for the Ottoman state. Pragmatism, in other words, tended to prevail: people, and certainly dhimmis, were left alone in their drinking as long the public order was not disturbed, and rulers often effectively stimulated consumption for the tax revenue it yielded, even if they would never advertise this inclination.⁵³

IV

Alcohol and the venues where it was consumed could never be agents of change in the Islamic world. Taverns fundamentally differed from coffeehouses because wine was fundamentally different from coffee (and tobacco), both of which conquered the world long after the emergence of Islam. When they were first introduced, coffee and tobacco sparked lively debates about their commensurability with religious norms and values, in Islam as much as in Christianity. Eighteenth-century European coffeehouses (and taverns), venues where commercial transactions took place and news was collected and distributed, were incubators of capitalism and modern politics. Over time, coffeehouses in the Middle East played a similar 'modernizing' role in the sense that they contributed to the creation of a cultural public sphere separate from the mosque.⁵⁴ Taverns, however, never assumed that function, could not assume that function. They 'had no chance to nourish their own distinct social life', for their *raison d'être*, drinking, invited just denial and repression, or at most connivance.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cengiz Kirlı, 'The Struggle over Space: Coffeehouses of Ottoman Istanbul, 1780–1845' (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Binghamton, 2000), 58–62.

⁵⁴ For the Ottoman case, see, besides Kirlı, 'The Struggle over Space'; İlay Örs, 'Coffeehouses, Cosmopolitanism, and Pluralizing Modernity in Istanbul,' *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 12 (2002), 119–45; Selam Akyazıcı Özkoçak, 'Coffeehouses: Rethinking the Public and Private in Early Modern Istanbul,' *Journal of Urban History* 33 (2007), 965–86; and, arguing that the Ottoman coffeehouse was a 'heterotopic' space rather than a public venue conforming to Habermas's model, Alan Mikhail, 'The Heart's Desire: Gender, Urban Space, and the Ottoman Coffee House', in Dana Sajdi (ed.), *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee. Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2007), 133–70.

⁵⁵ James Grehan, 'Smoking and "Early Modern" Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)', *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), 1375.

This does not mean that the onset of the modern age in the form of a creeping growth of European influence on the lifestyle of the elite classes did not help change drinking practices in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and in Qajar Iran; it did—albeit in different ways.

As elsewhere in the Muslim world, in the Ottoman Empire water remained the customary drink of the Anatolian heartland, and any changes that occurred in consumption patterns left most parts of the empire, especially Arabia, totally unaffected. The availability of alcohol in port cities such as Istanbul, Alexandria, and Izmir increased with the growth of the expatriate European population in the nineteenth century. Expanding trade relations and the signing of commercial treaties with European powers brought in new western drinks, such as rum and champagne, enabling non-Ottoman subjects to open up taverns as well. The modernizing Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) set the tone for more open elite consumption of alcoholic beverages. Robert Walsh, Irish chaplain to the British embassy in Istanbul in 1820–27, observed how under this ruler the former curtailing practices had become ‘restrained’, and how ‘the sultan himself, though formerly a very temperate man, [had] adopted the use of wine as one of the European customs to which he has made such approximations’. He called Mahmud ‘particularly fond of champagne’, adding that a bottle was ‘set beside him every day at dinner’, and noted that Ottoman officials ‘drank as freely as any of the company’ during receptions given by European ambassadors, always preferring a large goblet and never mixing their drinks with water.⁵⁶ A preference for European spirits thus became a marker of modernity for the upper classes taking their cue from the palace. Mahmud II’s successor, Sultan Abdulmecid (r. 1839–61), a ‘gentle sybarite’, would visit representatives of the Christian community of Izmir, occasions where alcohol was served in a semi-public fashion, and was sometimes too drunk to stay on his horse.⁵⁷ It was mostly French wines, especially Bordeaux, which gained some popularity in the late nineteenth century, even if its clientele was mostly limited to foreign residents and rich Ottoman citizens—who were said not to like French wine and only to put it on the tables to show off their sophistication.⁵⁸ Wine, meanwhile, never caught on in the Turkish heartland—despite the fact that at the turn of the twentieth century

⁵⁶ Robert Walsh, *Residence at Constantinople during the Period including the Commencement, Progress, and Termination of the Greek and Turkish Revolutions*, 2 vols (London, 1836), vol. 2, 275–6.

⁵⁷ Philip Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean* (New Haven and London, 2011), 54, 168.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; and Yavuz Köse, *Westlicher Konsum am Bosphorus: Warenhäuser, Nestlé & Co. im späten Osmanischen Reich (1855–1923)* (Munich, 2010), 164–5.

the Ottoman sheikh al-islam declared it legal for Muslims to consume it if they thought it beneficial for their health.⁵⁹ Locally produced brands were (and are) mediocre, especially the white variety—Istanbul's francophone Bulletin of the Chamber of Commerce in 1902 called it 'simplement horrible'—and were mainly consumed by Greeks.⁶⁰

Beer, first introduced by German immigrants in the 1830s, made inroads from the middle of the nineteenth century, first in Izmir and later in Istanbul.⁶¹ Izmir was home to two breweries by the 1860s. By the turn of the century, beer had become the second most favoured alcoholic drink in Ottomans lands—after raki. Izmir especially, the most Levantine of Ottoman cities, by then had developed a sophisticated drinking culture, with many brasseries and beer gardens that encountered little opposition, in part because there was no religious stigma attached to beer.⁶² In Istanbul matters appear to have been less relaxed. Initially, the beer houses of Pera, small, unregulated and ephemeral, catered mostly to travellers, expatriates, and sailors. In the 1890s, drinking moved to the district near Taksim Square, which became the centre of a newly developing middle class leisure culture, with brasseries, cafés chantants, and casinos run by Greeks crowding out the traditional *meyhanes* and *şaraphanes*.

By far the most popular alcoholic drink became mastik, distilled with anis, and especially raki, mastic without the resin. Imported from Chios, raki became a popular aperitif in the late nineteenth century—consumed by everyone, Christians, Jews and, above all, it was said, by Muslims. Taken with mezze, light snacks that increased thirst and helped digest the alcohol, raki at the turn of the twentieth century became known as Turkey's national drink.⁶³ In 1903, the annual consumption in Istanbul alone was estimated at 37,000 hectolitres.⁶⁴

Beer, mostly consumed in a solitary rather than a sociable ambience, long remained associated with foreignness and superficial modernization—especially in the last days of the Ottoman Empire, as the Young Turk

⁵⁹ *Revue Commerciale du Levant. Bulletin Mensuel de la Chambre de Commerce Française de Constantinople*, 261, 'Vins et spiritueux' (31 Dec. 1908), 807 and 322–7, 'Vins et spiritueux' (1914, first semester), 83.

⁶⁰ *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, 261, 'Vins et spiritueux' (31 Dec. 1908), 808.

⁶¹ Malte Furfman, 'Beer, the Drink of a Changing World. Beer Consumption and Production on the Shores of the Aegean in the 19th Century', *Turcica*, 45 (2013, forthcoming 2014); quoting Anna Forneris, *Schicksale und Erlebnisse einer Kärntnerin während ihrer Reisen in verschiedenen Ländern* (Laibach, 1849; repr. Klagenfurt, 1985), 56–64.

⁶² Furfman, 'Beer, the Drink of a Changing World'; and *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, 322–7, 'Vins et spiritueux' (1914, 1st semester), 96.

⁶³ *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, 322–7, 78.

⁶⁴ *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, 196–201, 'Raki et apéritifs' (1903, 2nd semester), 119.

government came to emphasize patriotism. Raki, by contrast, was to gain a status as indigenous, more authentic, 'patriotically accepted'. Raki also won out over imported and increasingly popular fare such as cognac (and knock-off substitutes), either because it was cheaper or because it allowed Muslims to circumvent the Koranic prohibition, which did not explicitly target a drink of relatively recent vintage like raki.⁶⁵ This beer-raki controversy gained in poignancy during the First Balkan War, and Atatürk, a life-long raki aficionado, following the Turkish capture of Smyrna in 1922 famously ordered a raki upon entering the city.⁶⁶

These developments remained confined to port cities, including Salonica and Beirut. Even so, there was clerical opposition to the relaxation of the strictures on drinking in public, and the imposition of a uniform spirits tax in the Tanzimat period. Such resistance seems to have quieted in the later part of the century, and especially with the onset of the Public Debt Administration, which made taxes, including the excise on alcohol, a matter of paying debt, lending it an aura of legitimacy. Henceforth, the authorities navigated an ambivalent course between licensing and wariness.⁶⁷

Nineteenth-century Iran underwent various changes in its drinking culture as well. Some of these were similar in nature, even if they typically occurred later than in the better connected western Ottoman lands; others were different, reflecting different circumstances. Farther away from European influence, with a much smaller non-Muslim population, and without any major cosmopolitan ports, the country's relationship with alcohol had never been mediated by large numbers of Christians or European expatriates. In contrast to the Ottoman state, which expanded its military and administrative reach throughout the nineteenth century, the Qajar state was rather weak. Emerging as a tribal confederation in the late eighteenth century, Iran's rulers were perennially challenged by defiant tribes and obstreperous clerics. The latter especially had gained in power ever since the late Safavid period, taking advantage of the turmoil of the eighteenth century to take on the role of

⁶⁵ Köse, *Westlicher Konsum am Bosphorus*, 164–5; Georgeon, 'Ottomans and Drinkers', 16–18; and Fuhrman, 'Beer, the Drink of a Changing World'.

⁶⁶ Mansell, *Levant*, 214; Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922. The Destruction of a Christian City in the Islamic World* (New York, 2008), 284.

⁶⁷ Stanford Shaw, 'The Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Tax Reforms and Revenue System', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6 (1975), 442–3; Köse, *Westlicher Konsum am Bosphorus*, 151, and 170; and Fuhrmann, 'Beer, the Drink of a Changing World'. As late as 1903 the Ottoman authorities outlawed the consumption of alcohol for Muslims, causing the consumption of raki to drop by 40 per cent. See *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, 196–201, 'Raki et apéritifs' (1903, 2nd semester), 126.

the sole defenders of a rudderless population fleeced by a succession of rapacious rulers. Most importantly, the Qajars lacked the religious legitimacy of the Safavids, who had turned Iran into a Shi'i country, or, for that matter of the Ottomans who, ruling over Mecca and Medina, boasted the title of protectors of Islam's two holy shrines.

As a result the Qajars, in order to establish their religious credentials, adopted sobriety or, at least, moved their drinking into the inner palace. Some, such as Mohammad Shah (r. 1834–48), may even have been teetotalers. In a reflection of how far Iranian kingship had moved away from the open-air bacchanals of the Safavids, Naser al-Din Shah, the longest ruling Qajar monarch (1848–96), liked to drink a glass or two of Bordeaux for dinner or, to calm his nerves, in anticipation of public executions.⁶⁸ By then, a public ceremony organized by the palace which included the distribution of soup had long replaced the raucous drinking fest of the Safavid Qizilbash.

This does not mean that the Qajar elite stopped boozing. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the ruling classes, especially in rural and tribal areas like Kurdistan and Khorasan, continued to drink with abandon.⁶⁹ Much of this was done in traditional fashion. Ritter von Riederer, an Austrian adviser who spent time in Iran in the 1870s, noted that an Iranian would observe religious rules as long as others watched him but do whatever appeared to him as comfortable and pleasurable as soon as he was in the privacy of his home. Drinking in private was among these activities. The state, Ritter von Riederer added, followed time-honoured conventions by punishing only those drunks who caused a public nuisance, and never bothered to intervene with indoor drinking parties, even if in the end 'all were lying about'.⁷⁰

Much of Qajar drinking remained traditional, seeking to reconcile public censure and private craving by way of self-fashioning. The Russian S. Lomnitski, an engineer who resided in Iran at the turn of the twentieth century, includes an anecdote in his perceptive travelogue that is as amusing as it is informative in describing an example of such self-fashioning according to changeable circumstances. He recounts how he was among the guests at a drinking party at the residence of a wealthy Iranian where clerics were in attendance. Before bringing out alcohol, the owner of the house ordered

⁶⁸ E'temad al-Saltaneh, *Ruznameh-ye khaterat-e E'temad al-Saltaneh* (Tehran, 3rd edn, 1356/1977), 300 and 778; and, for the wider context, Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 179ff.

⁶⁹ Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York, 2004), 316–17.

⁷⁰ Anon. [Ritter von Riederer], *Aus Persien. Aufzeichnungen eines Oesterreichers der 40 Monate im Reiche der Sonne gelebt und gewirkt hat* (Vienna, 1882), 86.

‘something and the hats to be brought in’. A tray filled with hats was brought in, and each of the clerics took one and put it on his head, declaring that he was now no longer a mullah but a private person, after which they set out to play Islamically forbidden games—checkers, chess, cards—while availing themselves of the ‘something’; which turned out to be an array of alcoholic drinks, including vodka, cognac, wine, and liqueurs.⁷¹

Also traditional but with a new twist, was the defiance displayed by some drinkers, who in their taste for alcohol recall the libertine, anti-clerical attitude of traditional high-minded Sufis claiming a private moral sphere that is so powerfully articulated by Hafez and his fellow poets. New in the Qajar period was not so much the contempt these showed for the increasingly abrasive ulama who felt no longer restrained by a forceful ruler capable or willing to rein them in, as the self-conscious stridency with which they flouted the laws of the Prophet, exhibiting a ‘modernizing’, western inflected disposition. Flaunting one’s drinking became an explicit political statement, displaying a ‘modern’ attitude by way of heaping scorn on obscurantist clerics and their cant, and as such it was part of a social ferment in nineteenth-century Iran that bred forms of radicalism such as the Babi movement as well.⁷²

Among the ruling classes European liquors gained in popularity in the same process that affected the Ottoman Empire—that of a growing entwinement with the outside world by way of tastes and the imports that fed them. This includes the type of alcohol people consumed as well as the ambience in which it was enjoyed. The nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of new types of high-percentage alcoholic beverages into Iran—beyond Russian aquavit which had been known since Safavid times—as part of the country’s ongoing incorporation into the global market.⁷³ A century and a half after Chardin, James Baillie Fraser pointed to an Iranian fondness for potent stuff, suggesting by way of explanation that the pleasure of drinking ‘consists, not in the gradual exhilaration produced by wine and conversation among companions who meet to make merry, but in the feelings of intoxication itself; and therefor a Persian prefers brandy, and deep potations, because these soonest enable him to attain that felicity’.⁷⁴

⁷¹ S. Lomnitskii, *Persiia i Persy* (St. Petersburg, 1902), 121–2.

⁷² For more on this, see Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 199–204.

⁷³ M. von Kotzbue, *Narrative of a Journey into Persia in the Suite of the Imperial Russian Embassy of 1817* (London, 1819), 122–3; J. A. Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years, Among the Nestorian Christians with Notices of the Muhammedans* (Andover, 1843), 225.

⁷⁴ James Baillie Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London, 1825), 422.

European wines, which seem to have entered the Iranian market quite a bit later, were still far from ubiquitous by mid-century. The British Resident Justin Sheil at that time called the Iranians 'extremely fond of European wines', yet added that, 'still none among them, even the richest, are willing to undergo the expense of its conveyance from Europe. They satisfy themselves with the thin growth of their own vineyards, quantity compensating for quality.'⁷⁵ In keeping with a trend among the Ottoman upper classes, a fairly large number of Iranians had meanwhile taken to the Russian habit of consuming *zakuska*, hors d'oeuvre, accompanied by vodka.

Russian influence was especially paramount in northern Iran, evolving around the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) into outright military occupation. In the late nineteenth century, as Russia's influence on Iran grew, the import and consumption of arak increased so that by century's end more was said to be consumed in Tabriz than in Tbilisi.⁷⁶ By the first decade of the twentieth century Russia's influence had made vodka quite common in the north.⁷⁷ A report about the latter province from the early 1920s, when Gilan was under Russian control, insists that alcoholism was rampant among the region's Armenian and Russian inhabitants and that a predilection for the best wines and spirits prompted a search for good French wines, cognacs, and liqueurs among the well-to-do classes.⁷⁸ The French consul in Rasht at the time added that much of the wine consumed in Gilan came from Russia and that alcohol was sold clandestinely in coffee houses in the province.⁷⁹ Cognac, too, entered Iran at the time, from India as well as from France and Greece. The other popular drink among upper-class Iranians was champagne. Fantastic prices were paid for this luxury item. French and German wines and liquors were imported for the same clientele. By now, beer, too, was consumed by the most affluent Iranians, but even more so by resident foreigners. In the north Russian beers were most common; German and English and even some American brands prevailed in the south.⁸⁰ In 1902 a total of 134,634 bottles entered the country, 121,130 of which originated in Russia.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Lady Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London, 1856), 157.

⁷⁶ Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, *Zendegi-ye tufani (khaterat)* (Tehran, 1379/2000), 45.

⁷⁷ Walther Kuss, *Handelsratgeber für Persien* (Berlin, 1911), 121.

⁷⁸ Archives des Affaires Étrangères (AAE, French National Archives, Paris), CP, n.s., Perse 49, 'Notes sur Guilan', fol. 57.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 'Notes sur les conséquences économiques de la guerre en Guilan', fols. 5 and 27.

⁸⁰ Kuss, *Handelsratgeber*, 121.

⁸¹ AAE, Corr. Politique (CP), n.s., Perse 47, 'Rapport sur le mouvement commercial de l'année persane bars-il, 21 mars 1902 à 20 mars 1903'. For conditions in the Ottoman Empire in this period, see Georgeon, 'Ottomans and Drinkers'.

V

Rules and regulations concerning the sale and consumption of alcohol vary widely from country to country in the modern Islamic world, ranging from secular Syria, where alcohol is freely available, to Pakistan and Malaysia, where only non-Muslims can obtain alcohol by presenting proof of (religious) identification, to absolute interdiction in Saudi Arabia. The level of official secularism, that is, the degree to which the official religion does not inform the legal system, generally determines the availability of alcohol.

For most of the twentieth century Turkey and Iran followed the 'secular' model. In keeping with Atatürk's vision and preference, the republic of Turkey became not just a secular state but one in which religion was deliberately marginalized. In 1926 the sale and consumption of alcohol by Muslims was made legal, and for the remainder of the twentieth century no legal restrictions were imposed on either, so that drinking alcohol became socially accepted. Turkey nonetheless continued to be a nation of 'light' drinkers, and women by and large still abstained. The majority of Turks who do imbibe prefer beer, which accounts for some 60 per cent of total consumption, with the average person consuming 0.8 litres in 2005, or spirits, meaning raki, at 0.5 litres per person. Wine, by contrast, is hardly drunk at all.⁸²

Things began to change with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP for *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in 2002. Since 2005 the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has waged a campaign to limit the supply and consumption of alcohol. It has become much harder to obtain and renew liquor licences and, citing the 'need to protect family values', municipalities have outlawed drinking in government-owned hotels, restaurants and cafes.⁸³ Proposals have also been made to ban alcohol in city centres by limiting the sale and consumption to restricted areas, 'alcohol ghettos', on the edge of towns. By 2005 alcohol bans were in place in 61 of Turkey's 81 provinces.⁸⁴ Proposed changes in labour legislation call for the right for companies to fire anyone who shows up having had anything to drink. In September 2012 a law took effect that bans the sale of alcohol and cigarettes 'by breaking its packaging or dividing them', which, critics say, effectively prohibits the sale by the glass in restaurants.⁸⁵ In April 2013 Erdoğan declared *ayran*, a salty mixture of yoghurt and water, rather than raki the national drink of Turkey, and a month later the Turkish parliament,

⁸² <http://www.turkishmuse.com/2011/01/war-against-alcohol-in-turkey.html>

⁸³ *Asia Times*, 26 August 2009, 'Turkey's beer-swillers get hammered'.

⁸⁴ *The Guardian*, 23 Dec. 2005, 'Alcohol the battleground in east-west conflict'.

⁸⁵ *Hürriyet Daily News*, 23 Sept. 2012, 'Turkish AKP alcohol law raises question marks'.

citing public health reasons, passed a bill that would ban retail sales of alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., halt all advertising and promotion of alcohol-related products, and forbid the sale of liquor within 100 metres of schools and houses of worship. In September 2013 the bill became law. Its restrictions quickly led to the emergence of an underground alcohol market in the form of late-night delivery services.⁸⁶

The state has been most consistent in curbing availability by dramatically raising taxes. In 2002 the government instituted a special consumption tax (ÖTV) on alcohol, raising VAT on alcohol from the regular VAT rate of 18 to 48 per cent, with a further increase to 63 per cent in 2009. Severely criticized for this policy, the government in 2010 eliminated this impost on some alcoholic beverages, such as wine, only to add a lump-sum tax on each bottle. The tax on beer, meanwhile, went up by almost 800 per cent between 2002 and 2010. The price of raki, which remains the national tipple, in the same period has quadrupled to some 35 TL, or almost \$20 for a 700 cl bottle.⁸⁷

These tax hikes have made a glass of beer or raki exorbitantly expensive, on par with Scandinavian countries, and, taking into account the moderate purchasing power of most Turks, the most expensive in the world, putting alcohol out of reach for most. The result is that Turkey's per capita consumption, already very low by international standards, has dropped by one third in the last few years, and that the number of cafes and restaurants selling alcohol was reduced by 21 per cent between 2005 and 2008. This creeping social transformation has also pitted secular Turks who uphold the right of citizens to make their own lifestyle choices against their more traditional fellow-citizens who believe that drinking is a sin and should be outlawed by the state, reflecting a general debate in Turkish society about the role of religion in public life that in the late spring of 2013 erupted in confrontation and violence.⁸⁸

Twentieth-century Iran evinces initial convergence with Turkish patterns followed by a sharp turn in policies with the establishment of the Islamic

⁸⁶ *The Economist*, 1 June 2013, 'Alcohol in Turkey. Not so good for you'; *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 Sept. 2013, 'Restrictions on alcohol sale go into effect today in Turkey', at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/restrictions-on-alcohol-sales-go-into-effect-today-in-turkey.aspx?PageID=238&NID=54074&NewsCatID=344>; and Emre Kizilkaya, 'Turkey's new prohibitions lead to underground alcohol market', *al-Monitor*, 17 Sept. 2013.

⁸⁷ *Hürriyet Daily News*, 10 May 2010, 'AKP, Alcohol and government-engineered change in Turkey'; *Ibid.*, 29 Oct. 2010, 'Turkish consumers dazed by another alcohol tax increase'.

⁸⁸ For the role drinking has assumed as a symbol of resistance for many secular Turks, see Tim Arango, 'Resisting by Raising a Glass', *New York Times*, 9 June 2013.

Republic in 1979. Anti-liquor campaigns, often following riots instigated by clerics and targeting Jewish property, would occur into the twentieth century. The early part of the same century saw several more attempts at restrictions on sale and consumption. In 1909, during the Constitutional Revolution, the police chief of Tehran sought to regulate alcohol by licensing the right to operate distilleries and awarding licences only to cabarets run by non-Muslims and foreign nationals.⁸⁹ The government that came into being following Reza Shah's coup of February 1921 at first experimented with prohibition. One of its first proclamations included a ban on the importation, and then the overall consumption of alcohol. The sale of liquor was outlawed and shops selling alcohol were closed. Presumably inspired by Sayyed Zia Tabataba'i, Reza Shah's fellow conspirator and a cleric, the measure was designed in part to forestall Bolshevik influence by way of strengthening Iran's religious profile.⁹⁰ Upon Tabataba'i's forced resignation in May 1921, liquor stores and alcohol-serving venues were allowed to open their doors again.⁹¹ Within a year, the ban on foreign imports had been 'considerably diluted', largely for reasons of revenue, as the British resident in Tehran put it.⁹² In 1924, all distilleries in Tehran were concentrated in five locations outside the city.⁹³ Late 1926 saw the proclamation of a new ban on the importation of luxury imports—items whose domestic manufacture should be encouraged—which included alcoholic beverages.⁹⁴ In 1926–27 tariffs on alcohol reached 100 per cent, putting it beyond the means of most people.⁹⁵ The result was a steep decline in imported liquor.⁹⁶

Alongside continued religiously based opposition to (public) drinking at the turn of the century, one observes a growing medicalization in the evaluation of the use and abuse of alcohol. Seeking to curb and contain through admonition and exhortation, advocates of this new approach used medical, health-related arguments. Publicists now presented drinking as harmful, using

⁸⁹ Willem Floor, *A Fiscal History of Iran in the Safavid and Qajar Periods 1500–1925* (New York, 1998), 405–6.

⁹⁰ Hoseyn Makki, *Tarikh-e bist saleh-ye Iran. Kudeta-ye 1299*, 3 vols (Tehran, 1323/1944; repr. 1358/1979), I, 298–9; and Ja'far Shahri, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i-ye Tehran dar qarn-e sizdehom* (Tehran, 3rd edn, 1378/1999), vol. 4, 378–9.

⁹¹ Shahri, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i-ye Tehran*, vol. 4, 380–1.

⁹² National Archives, London, FO, E8057/8057/34, Ndeg314, 'Persia. Annual Report, 1922. XII - Medical Affairs. (2.) Sanitary and Allied Questions', 64.

⁹³ Floor, *A Fiscal History of Iran*, 407.

⁹⁴ AAE, Corr. Commerciale, Tehran to Paris, 8 Jan. and 10 Feb. 1927, fols. 65ff.

⁹⁵ AAE, CP, n.s. Perse 62, fol. 116.

⁹⁶ *Tableau générale du commerce avec les pays étrangers pendant l'année 1305* (Tehran, 1927), xi/2, 'Importations'.

arguments borrowed from European scientific research. This trend intensified in the 1920s, reflecting the new era represented by Reza Shah and the push for a modern, orderly and disciplined Iran that marked his political agenda.⁹⁷

Yet neither interdiction nor admonition seems to have lowered the level of alcohol consumption; indeed, indications are that it went up, riding on an increase in relatively cheap, domestically produced alcohol.⁹⁸ Much of this was no doubt consumed indoors. Friedrich Rosen, a German diplomat stationed in Iran in the early twentieth century, observed that most Iranians did not drink and that Iran by and large was a 'dry country'. Yet, echoing earlier observers of life in Iran, Rosen also pointed to the propensity among those Iranians who drank to do so generally 'with the idea of getting totally intoxicated', since the 'sin [. . .] is anyhow committed, therefore it is advisable to make the best of it'.⁹⁹

By the time Reza Shah was forced to abdicate, in 1941, Lalehzar Street had opened up. Originating as a garden, the Bagh-e Lalehzar, this famous street had been laid out in the 1870s at the orders of Naser al-Din Shah after his return from his first European trip. In the course of the twentieth century Lalehzar Street developed into the entertainment district of the capital, a symbol of modernity filled with cinemas, theatres, cabarets, and European-style restaurants and bars serving food and drink. Elsewhere in the city the western bar, *piyaleh-forushi*, made its entry as well in the late Qajar period. Substituting for the traditional speakeasies, the *kharabat* and *meykhanehs*, the *piyaleh-forushi* would become more common in the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–79), first in Tehran and later in provincial cities as well.¹⁰⁰ The modern hotels that opened in the 1960s invariably had their own bars, catering to foreigners as well as to more westernized Iranians keen to flaunt their modern lifestyle by drinking gin-tonics and whiskey. Yet, overall, Iran continued to be, as it had always been, a 'most sober nation', where most people lived and died without ever tasting wine.¹⁰¹

This situation—in which alcohol was publicly available yet not common, its consumption limited, as before, to the lower classes and the haute

⁹⁷ *Peyk-e Sa'adat-e Nesvan* 1:3 (Esfand 1306/Ramazan 1346), repr., ed. Banafsheh Mas'udi and Naser Mohajer (Berkeley and Créteil, 2012), 4–6 (134–6 in new edn); and *Salnameh-ye Pars* 1314/1925, 88, 89.

⁹⁸ *Baladiyeh-ye Tehran. Devvomin salnameh-ye ehssa'iyeh-ye shahr-e Tehran/Deuxième annuaire statistique de la ville de Teheran*, 1925–1929 (Tehran, 1310/1930).

⁹⁹ Friedrich Rosen, *Oriental Memories of a German Diplomatist* (London, 1930), 139.

¹⁰⁰ http://www.darioush-shahbazi.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=314&Itemid=12

¹⁰¹ Rosen, *Oriental Memories*, 139.

bourgeoisie—remained in place until the end of Pahlavi rule in 1979. The Islamic government which took over in that year moved against alcohol not, as its Turkish counterpart, by stealth but in full combat mode, outlawing both the sale and consumption for Muslims. (Armenian Christians are exempted from the ban and allowed to produce their own alcohol.) Iranians thus once again had to turn to the privacy of their homes to quench their alcoholic thirst. And by all accounts the thirst is greater than ever. According to a report issued in 2011 by the official Iranian news agency *Mehr News*, some 80 million litres of alcohol are currently bootlegged in the country each year. Much of this is smuggled into the country from abroad, especially from Iraqi Kurdistan, in an illicit trade reportedly facilitated by bribe-taking Revolutionary Guards and thus controlled by the very same authorities that occasionally mete out draconian punishment to boozers. Whether supplied with moonshine provided by local Armenian bootleggers or imbibing expensive imported liquor, modern Iranians drink for various reasons, to seek solace from the frustrations of daily life in the Islamic Republic, or to act out their part in the country's continuing 'culture wars'. In keeping with tradition, those who indulge tend to drink heavily and with great gusto, the intensity of the experience sharpened by the 'taboo' element, the fact that consuming alcohol, in addition to violating religious strictures, is decried by a regime loathed by many.¹⁰² As one cleric, excoriating the rampant alcohol consumption in his country, intoned in 2011, 'Not even the Westerners drink alcohol like we do. They pour a neat glass of wine and sip it. We here pour a four-litre barrel of vodka on the floor and drink it until we go blind. . . . We are all the masters of excess and wastage.'¹⁰³ So rampant has alcohol abuse

¹⁰² See BBC 'Illegal Alcohol Booming in Iran', 15 Sept. 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14939866>. Also see Frontline, Tehran Bureau, 10 April 2012, 'That Sweet Iranian Spirit', at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/04/dispatch-that-sweet-iranian-spirit.html>; *Express Tribune*, 15 May 2012, 'Rising alcohol intake "worrying": minister'; Radio Free Europe, 'Iranian officials warn alcohol abuse on the rise', at <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-alcohol-abuse-on-the-rise/24617070.html>; Omid Memarian, 'Death sentence marks Iran's latest battle in Iran's culture war', *The Daily Beast*, 27 June 2012, at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/06/27/death-sentence-marks-latest-battle-in-iran-s-culture-war.html>; Max Fisher, 'Forbidden Drink: Why alcoholism is soaring in officially booze-free Iran', *The Atlantic*, 28 June 2012, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/forbidden-drink-why-alcoholism-is-soaring-in-officially-booze-free-iran/259120/> and *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 2012, 'Iran confronts its alcohol problem', at <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iran-alcohol-20120707,0,5211937.story>

¹⁰³ See BBC 15 Sept. 2011, 'Illegal alcohol booming in Iran', at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14939866>.

become that the authorities in 2013 bowed to reality by seeking religious permission for the opening of an alcohol rehab center with the argument that alcohol addiction is an illness not a sin.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Merhnaz Samimi, 'Iran opens first alcohol rehab center', *al-Monitor*, 25 Oct. 2013, at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/iran-alcohol-permit-rehab-center.html>.