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Al-e Ahmad, Guardianship, and the Critique of Colonial Sovereignty

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (corresponding author: E.Sadeghi@gold.ac.uk) and Yaacov Yadgar

Abstract

In this article we seek to think with and against the Iranian intellectual and dissident, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969), and his exploration of the concept of *velāyat* in the context of his 1963 visit to Israel/Palestine. Through his idiosyncratic use of the term and its cognates, well-established in Islamic mysticism, Shi'i theology and jurisprudence, he pursues a decolonial critique of the political theology of sovereignty. By placing Al-e Ahmad's thought in relation to broader debates in the history of political thought vis-à-vis the "extraordinary" character of political foundings, sovereignty and statelessness, and their complex interrelationship, we contend that in addition to delineating, what he refers to, as the "guardianship state", Al-e Ahmad pursues a critique of the latter as a specific kind of modern sovereign power, which exceeds, but is inextricably bound up with the nation-state and its colonial forms. In contradistinction to this state-form, Al-e Ahmad espouses a distinct kind of being-together and form of life, namely, a being-in-common (*ejtemā'*), which refuses those iterations of difference e.g. national/foreigner, majority/minority, civilized/barbarian that have emerged as staples of the modern nation-state and capitalist modernity. We seek to bring out these aspects of Al-e Ahmad's thought in relation to Arendt's reflections on freedom and plurality.

Introduction

In this article we attempt to think both *with* and *against* the twentieth-century Iranian intellectual and dissident, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969), and his exploration of the "guardianship state" (*velāyat*) in the context of his 1963 visit to Israel/Palestine. Through Al-e Ahmad's idiosyncratic use of the term and its cognates, well-established in Islamic mysticism, Shi'i theology and jurisprudence, we argue that he advances a decolonial critique of the political theology of the sovereign nation-state and constituent power's corresponding arrogation of divine authorization. With the explicit aim of cohering Al-e Ahmad's critique, we situate his intervention in relation to broader debates in the history of political thought vis-à-vis the "extraordinary" character of political foundings and the establishment of a sovereign political order ensuing therefrom. We place Al-e Ahmad's insights in direct conversation with those of Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, to examine the logics of erasure and dispossession commonly disavowed and obscured in the process of sovereign founding. These were logics, as we demonstrate, to which Al-e Ahmad was both sensitive and attuned. In the final sections of the article, we argue that in contradistinction to this sovereign state-form, Al-e Ahmad espouses a distinct kind of being-together and form of life, namely, a being-in-common (*ejtemā'*), that refuses those

iterations of difference, such as national/foreigner, rational and industrious/benighted and infantile, majority/minority, civilized/barbaric, which have emerged as staples of the nation-state and its colonial articulations in capitalist modernity. We seek to bring out those aspects of Al-e Ahmad's thought, above all his critique of colonial sovereignty, in conjunction with the insights afforded by Arendt's reflections on freedom and the basic condition of plurality.

Al-e Ahmad's travelogue to Israel has been subject to a raft of commentary, as well as controversy by those seeking to recuperate him as an unreconstructed Zionist (Pardo, 2004), a fierce and uncompromising critic of Israeli colonialism (Dabashi, 2021, Chapter 7), or clairvoyant of Iran's post-revolutionary theocracy (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, Introduction). Several scholars have sought to delineate the different moments of Al-e Ahmad's engagement with Israel, the significance of his break with Soviet Marxism represented in the Tudeh Party, his immersion in the milieu of anti-Soviet social democracy, as well as his pronounced differences with his social democratic counterparts (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi & Yadgar, 2021). Though we will touch upon some of these readings and their attendant problems and omissions, we are not primarily interested in the historiographical debates over when and under what circumstances Al-e Ahmad published his travelogue. Rather it is our intention to explore the extent to which his reflections on Israel as a *velāyat* amount to a critique and negative theology of the modern sovereign state form and its colonial articulations. Some contextualisation, however, is unavoidable and we will therefore provide a brief account of the circumstances under which the travelogue was authored and published.

The origins of Al-e Ahmad's travelogue reside in a two week visit to Israel at the invitation of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 1963. His interest in the country preceded this visit. Here his break with the Tudeh Party in 1948 and close relationship with anti-Soviet socialist activists and intellectuals such as Khalil Maleki and Hossein Malek were decisive, as they searched out alternative socialisms, which they held to eschew the pitfalls of the Soviet model. Al-e Ahmad's travelogue, despite bearing a superficial resemblance to the writings of his close comrades, is nevertheless distinct in several crucial respects, chief among them, his recognition of the politico-theological dimensions of the modern sovereign state and its colonial forms.

Another important point to note before we proceed to discuss the theoretical insights afforded by the travelogue, is the history of the text itself. The text upon which the English translation is based was edited and published posthumously as *Safar beh velāyat-e ezrā'il* (Journey to the *Velāyat* of the Angel of Death) under the guidance of Shams Al-e Ahmad, Jalal Al-e Ahmad's younger brother, who following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, was a member of Iran's Council for Cultural Revolution. The original essay, *Velāyat-e ezrā'il* (*Velāyat* of Israel), published in the journal *Andīsheh va honar* in 1964 makes up the first two chapters of the posthumously published volume (Al-e Ahmad, Mehr 1343 [September-October 1964]).¹ The final chapter of the latter entitled "The Beginning of a Hatred" (*Āghāz yek nefrat*) was first published in *Jong-e honar-e emrūz* following the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, and despite doubts around its authenticity, there are solid grounds to indicate that it was authored by Al-e

Ahmad and that contemporaries recognised Al-e Ahmad as its author.² This article will focus predominantly on the original essay, since we have discussed the significance of the later essay at length elsewhere (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi & Yadgar, 2021).

Israel as a *Velāyat*

While some scholars have sought to dismiss the significance of Al-e Ahmad's use of the term *velāyat* in his description of Israel, in this article we argue that his use of the term is clearly deliberate.³ The essay *Velāyat-e esrā'il* begins thus, "the Jewish state [*hokūmat-e yahūd*] in the land of Palestine is a kind of 'guardianship' [*velāyat*], and not a government [*dowlat*]. It is the rule of the new guardians [*owliyā'*] of the Israelites over the promised land, and not a state [*hokūmat*] of the inhabitants of Palestine over Palestine" (Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 47). Al-e Ahmad thus clearly distinguishes what he calls "guardianship" (*velāyat*) from mere "government". Moreover, "guardianship" despite its dependence on a defined territory, does not extend to all the inhabitants of historic Palestine, nor is it limited to the borders of the said territory. Al-e Ahmad thus clearly contrasts *velāyat* and *dowlat*. It is our contention that what Al-e Ahmad is describing here is at one and the same time an outlier and exemplary case of modern sovereignty.

In the opening lines of the essay, Al-e Ahmad explicitly states that he is using the term *velāyat* with respect to Israel in "two senses" (*do ma'nī*) (Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 47). The first is the more mundane, simply meaning "province", "region" or "territory". But the Arabic *wilāya*, from which the Persian *velāyat* is derived, is also an important concept in Islamic theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and mysticism. As has been noted by Vincent J. Cornell, in the Qur'an the term *walī* predominantly carries power-laden connotations such as "guardian", "protector" and "intercessor" (Cornell, 1998, Loc 254). The lexicographer, Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, includes "dominion", "rule" (*hokūmat*) and "leadership" (*emāmat*), among *velāyat*'s descriptors (Dehkhodā, 1377). Etymologically *wilāya* derives from the etymon "w l y", which means to place two things next to or close to one another (Chamankhah, 2019, p. 11). *Wilāya* has often been conflated and confounded with another concept, sharing the same root, namely, *walāya*, which in keeping with its root has been understood to signify "closeness" and "nearness", and more capaciously still, "friendship". The compound word *walī Allah*, often translated as "saint" in English, signifies a "friend" or "intimate" of God, one who protects or intercedes on behalf of others as God's deputy (Cornell, 1998, Loc 263; Knysh, 2017, p. 113).

Walāya is also an essential part, if not a pillar, of the Shi'i faith, and as Amir-Moezzi and Jambet have argued, it can be understood as the "esoteric" counterpart to prophecy. According to them, "*walāya* refers to the sacred function of the imams and in this sense is the equivalent of the imamate; that is, the temporal and spiritual guidance of the faithful" (Amir-Moezzi & Jambet, 2018, p. 72). In this respect it speaks to the unification of spiritual and temporal leadership and authority. In Shi'i Islam this role was historically held by the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the line of his cousin and son-

in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and his daughter, Fatimah al-Zahra. When Al-e Ahmad describes Israel as a *velāyat* and its founders as *owliyā'* he is playing on these resonances in relation to Zionism's and ultimately Israel's, own exclusive claim to be the "guardians" of the Jewish people, and the living embodiment of spiritual and temporal authority.

Al-e Ahmad deploys the concept of *wilāya/velāyat* to explain Israel and Zionism's self-described relationship to the Jewish people the world over. "[T]he guardianship state (*velāyat*) of Israel, with its two million or so inhabitants in that long and narrow land, like it or not, now governs and acts in the name of all the twelve million Jews scattered around the world" (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 25). Israel and Zionism's claim to "guardianship" as protector of the Jews is global in extent. This protection is not extended as in the social contract tradition by means of individual consent or by virtue of having been born into a family which has lived and resided within the borders of a determinate political authority. "Guardianship" is extended purely on the basis of one's belonging to the Jewish people. This principle is integral to Israel and Zionism's self-identity and conception of itself, and is legally enshrined in the Law of Return of 1950, which permits all Jews, or more precisely, all those whom the Nazis would have persecuted as Jews, namely children and grandchildren of Jews and their immediate family members, the right to come and live in Israel and attain citizenship.⁴

In his travelogue, Al-e Ahmad gives very little attention to the complex, highly charged nature of the Zionist "nationalization" of Jewish identity, or to the history of Judaism or Jewishness. Instead, he seems to uncritically accept the Zionist premise of Jewish nationhood, which is the foundation of Israel's claim to be the nation-state of the Jewish – not Israeli – people (the state itself has gone to great lengths to deny the very viability of a purported *Israeli* nation, stressing that its sovereignty is the manifestation of world Jewry's right to self-determination) (Yadgar, 2017, pp. 163-187). The fact that Zionism fails to offer a "non-religious" (i.e., national, political, civic – what Zionism itself would call "secular") definition of Jewishness and instead has reverted to relying on the (often non-Zionist) Orthodox rabbinical establishment to play the role of national gatekeeper for the state has been a staple of Israeli politics for several decades. What is often tagged under the "who is a Jew" controversy carries immense implications for any notion of "Jewish guardianship", and Al-e Ahmad seems largely oblivious of this.

Al-e Ahmad's insistence that Israel is not the rule of the inhabitants of the land over that land, but rather "like it or not...governs and acts in the name of all the...Jews scattered around the world" strikes upon Israel's divergence from the prototypical sovereign nation-state, where the "popular will" of the inhabitants of a given territory endows the sovereign with the authority to politically "express" and "incarnate" this will. While firmly positioned within the "right to self-determination" discourse, Zionism could not have argued for authority in the name of a collective consent of the inhabitants of the land (namely Palestinian Arabs) it sought to colonise, nor could it convincingly argue that it was appointed by Jews the world over to represent them. Tellingly, in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, reference is made primarily to abstract notions of historical right and to

declarations and decisions by the British Empire and the United Nations to legitimise the claim to statehood. Yet most importantly, the demand for such a “guardianship state” was seen as a necessary response to centuries of persecution, which culminated in the very real threat of annihilation at the hands of European fascism. It is in this context that Israel and the Zionist movement thus came to see the state as the only means of protecting and safeguarding Jewish life. Thus, while Thomas Hobbes justified the absolutist state from within the state of nature and war of all against all, Zionism justified the state by effectively generalising centuries of war against European Jewry, predicated on their unrelenting racialization and Othering by the Christian world since at least 1492 (Mamdani, 2020), if not earlier. The irony of course is that this process found itself reproduced in the “quasi-racial exclusionary logic” to which Zionism and the Israeli state are constitutively wedded (Yadgar, 2020, p. 2).

Guardianship, Friends and Enemies

In Shi‘i Islam, as we have seen above, *walāya* and *wilāya* (*velāyat*) are terms which are closely related and yet distinct, but nevertheless when taken together signify the unification of spiritual and temporal authority in the person of the Imam. Moreover, while *walāya* can connote “friendship” and “proximity” to God, in Shi‘i Islam it has also historically encompassed an injunction to “love” the Imams, the possessors of “esoteric” (*bātin*) and “hidden” (*ghayb*) knowledge (*‘ilm*), and correspondingly, to dissociate (*barā‘a*) from and hate their enemies (Amir-Moezzi & Jambet, 2018, p. 73). Thus, the faithful’s love of the Imams, manifested in *walāya*, finds its necessary counterpoint in enmity towards their enemies. This dynamic also finds itself articulated in the course of Al-e Ahmad’s reflections on Israel as a “guardianship state” and, as we will show below, harbors a number of parallels with Schmitt’s and Arendt’s distinct reflections on the nature of the political, constituent power, and sovereignty (Schmitt, 2007).

The example provided by Al-e Ahmad to demonstrate this dimension of *velāyat* or “guardianship” is a telling one, namely, the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The Nazi SS-*Obersturmbannführer* who played a leading role in the Judeocide and was famously captured by Israeli agents in Argentina, tried before an Israeli court in 1961 and executed in the year preceding Al-e Ahmad’s visit to the country. The trial of Eichmann demonstrated for Al-e Ahmad that Israel’s status as a “guardianship state” was not merely a matter of it acting as a “safe haven” for Jewish people the world over but demonstrating that it could punish their enemies and mete out justice on their behalf. In a similar vein, when discussing the Israeli state’s framing of the trial, Hannah Arendt remarks, “Like almost everybody else in Israel, he [Gideon Hausner, the chief Israeli state prosecutor] believed that only a Jewish court could render justice to Jews, and that it was the business of Jews to sit in judgment on their enemies” (Arendt, 1977, Loc 417). Adding, “[t]he trial was supposed to show them what it meant to live among non-Jews, to convince them that only in Israel could a Jew be safe and live an honorable life” (Arendt, 1977, Loc 436).

Al-e Ahmad's conception of Israel as a "guardianship state" maps on to Israel and Zionism's conception of itself, demonstrating to its Jewish audience that only the sovereign "guardianship state" could provide Jews with security and "the good life", further highlighting the folly of assimilation and co-existence, but also how only Israel could "render justice" to the Jews and smite their enemies. The Nazi zealot Eichmann of course stood as an exemplary case of the enemy, an individual who had done nothing less than assiduously pursue the mass annihilation of European Jewry. But what other dangers had arisen once the mantle of "guardianship state" had been assumed and could be exercised whenever deemed necessary – a mantle that, it is worth bearing in mind, had been assumed long before the trial of this specific enemy? Indeed, Arendt's scepticism regarding this sovereign claim resounds in the essays that would become *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as various others on Zionism's political fortunes.⁵ Who would ultimately guard the guardians? Guardianship or *velāyat* exceeds mere "protection" within the bounds of the nation-state, indeed as we shall see in the following section, its very foundation is dependent on a constitutive violence which enveloped Palestinian Arabs and extends to retribution and vengeance against the enemies of the Jewish people, real and imagined, and was ultimately unconstrained by borders, international norms, or laws, or even the sovereignty of other states. The danger which Arendt suspected, is that once existential threats and enemies and states of emergency are invoked in the name of "guardianship", the state of exception becomes the rule. Of course, the converse of this *velāyat*, is that those who are identified as not belonging to the Jewish people are, by definition, not only, not extended protection, but emerge as either basically disposable, enemies of Zionism or, at best, disenfranchised second-class citizens (Arendt, 2007b, p. 343). "[W]e cannot but consider Israel a guardianship state, and, its leaders, guardians: those who march onward in the name of something higher (*bartar*) than human rights declarations", Al-e Ahmad proclaims (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 25; Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 49). It is the symbolic embodiment and material incarnation of sovereign power, unfettered by norms or constraints with which Al-e Ahmad is concerned (Arato, 2013).

This is indeed echoed in the Israeli commemoration of the Holocaust, where the establishment of the state is presented as the ultimate answer to the Nazi Judeocide. The symbolic flight of Israeli planes over Auschwitz on 4 September 2003, captured this brilliantly, as the commander of the flight ceremoniously declared "We pilots of the Air Force, flying in the skies above the camp of horrors, arose from the ashes of the millions of victims and carry their silent cries, salute their heroism and promise to be the shield of the Jewish people and its land – Israel" (IDF, 20 April 2009).

Guardianship, Sovereign Power and the Extraordinary

Al-e Ahmad's "guardianship state", despite the distinct kind of sovereignty it embodies, is nevertheless overdetermined by its territorialization. This is figured in the very term *velāyat* which as we saw above can connote both territory and guardianship. In our reading of Al-e Ahmad, the "guardianship state"

enjoys sovereignty on multiple, overlapping scales. The first lays claim to protect/avenge on behalf of all Jews everywhere and on a planetary scale, and the second is enshrined in the domestic legal order which enshrines an ethno-religious sovereign supremacy, namely, the exercise of an exclusively “Jewish sovereignty”, which had conventionally been understood by Zionism in terms of Jews’ national rights to self-determination.⁶

Building on these suggestive affinities, we can see that Al-e Ahmad’s remarks in the opening sections of *Velāyat-e esrā’il* profoundly resonate with some of the classic problems around constituent power, the founding of a new state, and what Andreas Kalyvas has powerfully described in terms of “the extraordinary dimension of the political as the originary, instituting moment of society” (Kalyvas, 2008, p. 10). This is captured in Al-e Ahmad’s provocative description of the founding of Israel as a “miracle” (*mo’jezeh*) as well as his reference to figures such as David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan as “guardians” (*owliyā’*). The language of “miracles” and the “miraculous” finds its way into Arendt’s discussion of new beginnings and foundings as that “something which could not be expected” (Arendt, 2006a, p. 168). But for her it signified first and foremost human beings’ capacity for action and thus their freedom. Al-e Ahmad’s concerns, at least in this instance, lie elsewhere. *Owliyā’*, the plural of *valī*, which as we have seen has well-established theological connotations, signifies a person close or proximate to God, and thereby traversing the mundane and transcendent orders.

Ben-Gurion is no less than Enoch [Idris, the third of the Qur’anic prophets], and Moshe Dayan no less than Joab [commander of the biblical King David’s army]: these new guardians, each one with his own prophecies or—at least—clear-vision, built a guardianship state in the land of Palestine and called to it all the Children of Israel, of whom two million live in New York and the other eight million in the rest of the world (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 25).

In this description which would have surely been both provocative and familiar to his Iranian audience, and would have sparked manifold Qur’anic and theological associations, we see Al-e Ahmad delineating the political theological basis of a specific iteration of constituent power and the sovereign state. The creation of a new political order on this view is akin to an act of divine creation. In *Political Theology II*, Carl Schmitt avers, “[w]hen a god creates a world from nothing, he then transforms nothingness into something utterly astonishing, namely something out of which a world can be created” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 34), and it is Schmitt who famously argues for a “structural identity” between theological and juridical concepts (Schmitt, 2008, p. 42). In his insightful analysis of Schmitt’s particular understanding of constituent power, Andrew Arato has argued that “the theory of constituent power is understood as the secularization of the notion of God as ‘potestas constituens’” (Arato, 2013, p. 149). In keeping with such an analysis, we argue in our interpretation of Al-e Ahmad that he is

essentially taking stock of and trying to understand the role of the so-called “guardians” on the sovereign paradigm of constituent power in founding and fashioning a new political order, which in the final analysis, cannot posit itself as its own immanent foundation.

This leads us to return to Al-e Ahmad’s use of *velāyat* and its relationship to Imamate as the unification of spiritual and temporal authority, with the Imam in the role as “lawgiver”, or more accurately the ultimate interpreter of the will of God as the “lawgiver” or *al-shāri‘*. Unlike that of a traditional Shi‘i Muslim, who in the time of the Imam’s occultation and “absence” (*ghaybah*) awaits his return (Arjomand, 2010, p. 44), Al-e Ahmad deploys *wilāya/velāyat* in order to signify the originary moment of the political, integral to the institution of the symbolic, and the founding and preservation of a unified and embodied sovereign power. In his words, “[t]his I call a miracle: an order or command (*amrī*) contrary to custom (*‘urf*) and norm (*‘adat*), against international law and the precedent of governments” (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 25; Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 48).

Without the Imams, without the “saints” and “guardians” no community would be possible at all. This brings us to two further iterations of *velāyat*, namely *velāyat-e tashrī‘ī*, often translated somewhat inadequately, as “legislative guardianship”, and *velāyat-e takvīnī*, again not unproblematically translated as “cosmic” or “existential guardianship”. *Velāyat-e takvīnī* describes the Imams’ ontological and cosmological status and significance, and in the words of Sajjad H. Rizvi, “the absolute power and authority to act upon the cosmos and manipulate it” which “becomes an expression of the notion that the Imam as the perfect human manifests the totality of the divine attributes and names” (Rizvi, 2014, p. 393). According to Hamid Mavani, the “Imam, whether accessible to the public and recognized or not, is regarded as the pivot and the pole that sustains the world. If he were to be absent for even a moment, every other existing being would forfeit the cause of their existence and perish” (Mavani, 2013, p. 7). Without the Imam, no world and therefore no community, would be possible. *Velāyat-e takvīnī* is a complex and contested notion, and we are not able to explore its various permutations across historical time and traditions in the scope of this article, even while its associations with “miracles” and the ontology of “world-making” carry through to the present (Makārem Shirāzi, 8/3/1395 [28/May/2016]; Sāfi Golpāyegānī, 2013). As mentioned above, Shi‘i doctrine considers the Imam to be endowed with both spiritual and temporal authority, even though his spiritual authority is not dependent upon his possession of temporal power (Mavani, 2013, p. 6).

Velāyat-e tashrī‘ī, by contrast, represents the power to legislate and thus discern the *shari‘ah*. In Shi‘i literature, broadly speaking, following the Prophet Muhammad, the Imam as Proof of God (*hujjat Allah*), is the custodian of divine laws. The latter prerogative would over the centuries find itself claimed by prominent figures among the Shi‘i ‘ulamā’, while *velāyat-e takvīnī* was understood to be the exclusive possession of prophets, the Imams, and in rare instances the *owliyā’*, those “friends” who had attained a state of spiritual perfection by virtue of their service and closeness to God (Mavani, 2013, p. 40). In Shi‘i Ja‘fari jurisprudence *velāyat-e tashrī‘ī* has been understood in terms of a kind of trusteeship over persons who are *non compos mentis* (*mahjūr*), as well as legal minors (*saghūr*) (Amanat, 2007, p.

130), as well as conflated with patriarchal forms of authority and control over women (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, & Rumminger, 2015). Crucial for our argument, however, is the connection we believe that Al-e Ahmad is drawing between the “extraordinary” nature of founding, constituent power and world-making, constituting itself as a “new absolute”, as it stands in for the “absolute of divine power”, and thereby establishes itself as sovereign (Arendt, 2006b, p. 29).

In this respect, Al-e Ahmad is not diagnosing Israel’s exceptionality, but how the process of state-founding and the constitution of sovereign power is by its very nature an “extraordinary” endeavour and one which lays claim to a form of authority, which establishes the state as “guardian” and guarantor of the symbolic order in God’s stead. Al-e Ahmad is bringing out this paradox which characterises the modern sovereign state, substituting for God, while at the same time laying claim to either some kind of divine provenance or proximity to the deity. In this respect, we might think of Al-e Ahmad’s travelogue as rehearsing Lefort’s well-known and paradoxical formulation, namely, that “human society can only open on to itself by being held in an opening it did not create” (Lefort, 1988, p. 223). In the same vein, Al-e Ahmad is testifying to the impossibility of sovereignty’s immanent self-grounding. This too comes out in Rousseau’s famous intervention in *The Social Contract*, even though he views the role of “divine authority” in largely instrumental terms:

That is why the founders of nations have been forced in every period to resort to divine authority and attribute their own wisdom to the gods, in order that their peoples, who are subject both to the laws of the state and those of nature, should recognize the same power in the creator of man and in the creator of society, obeying freely and submitting meekly to the enforcement of public felicity. It is the decisions of this higher reason, beyond the scope of average men, that the legislator ascribes to the Immortals, so that those who cannot be moved by human prudence will be led by divine authority (Rousseau, 1999, p. 79).

The importance of Al-e Ahmad’s deployment of *velāyat* and the role of the *owliyā’* represent a way in and means of exploring the politico-theological character of a unitary and embodied form of sovereign power, of which Israel is both an exemplary and peculiar instance. In Al-e Ahmad’s account, it was these founding “guardians” and their formative role in the establishment of the sovereign state which belongs to the politics of the “extraordinary”. This does not amount to approbation on Al-e Ahmad’s part, but rather comes out of the observation that the founding of any new sovereign power amounts to a break with the humdrum of ordinary politics. It stands as an instance of constituent power in which a community and the basic laws by which it is governed is constituted for the first time, or in terms that Claude Lefort might recognize, it amounts to the symbolic institution of society. According

to Warren Breckman, “the symbolic creates a figure of the unity of the social, as well as a sense of the lawful and the unlawful and of the difference between sense and nonsense, and then, secondly, to the world more broadly insofar as the symbolic establishes ontological categories of the existent and the nonexistent” (Breckman, 2013, p. 154). The autopoietic and constituent power to which Al-e Ahmad is bearing witness in the form of the “guardianship state” exemplifies the political, as a “generative principle that gives a specific form of social life its manner of being” and the accompanying symbolic institution of society (Breckman, 2012, p. 30). Al-e Ahmad readily acknowledges the decisive role of European imperialism, racism and the Judeocide in contributing to Israel’s emergence. But for him this does not detract from the power of this process of founding and symbolic institution of the political, nor the foundational and ongoing dispossession upon which it is predicated. On our reading, what Al-e Ahmad is grappling with and trying to *understand* is how this was possible at all, and what kind of exclusions and erasures it might enact in the process.

As implied above, Al-e Ahmad’s conception of the “guardianship state” harbours certain affinities with Rousseau’s understanding of the legislator, but also departs from it in crucial respects. Most importantly, Rousseau is clear that the legislator is not sovereign, an inalienable possession of the General Will (Rousseau, 1999, p. 77). Whereas we are arguing that Al-e Ahmad is framing *velāyat* as a kind of constituent power correlative to a unitary and embodied sovereign, which harbors considerable parallels with Carl Schmitt’s classic definition of sovereignty as “he who decides the exception”. More crucially, it is Schmitt’s reflection on the exception’s concrete application, specifically, “who decides in a situation of conflict the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 6). For Al-e Ahmad, Israel’s claim to *velāyat* resides in its claim to “guardianship” and protection of Jewish people the world over, a protection correlating to the dispossession of those who either do not belong or present a threat to the welfare of the community as defined by the sovereign. Al-e Ahmad can therefore be understood as highlighting the promise and dangers of the autopoiesis of a form of sovereign power which cannot ground itself. In its bid to protect, the state can call upon those over whom it rules to make sacrifices on its behalf and bring about the ruination of those it deems hostile. Moreover, as ultimate protector, the existence of the state becomes a precondition for the very existence of the people or society, in effect, making the state’s preservation and those whose sovereign will its claims to incarnate and embody, transcend all other considerations.

Building on our exposition above, we can, following Al-e Ahmad, understand *velāyat* as a form of constituent power and the originary instituting of a unitary and embodied sovereign political order. Furthermore, we understand the “guardianship state” as fundamentally embodying the basic paradox of sovereignty, namely, that the sovereign is at once inside and outside of the juridical order. It is the juridical order which confers citizenship and the sovereign “guardianship state” that has the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, thus legally placing it outside of the law (Agamben, 1998, pp. 15-16). Taking leave from Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben conceptualises the sovereign exception, in terms of “the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have

validity” (Agamben, 1998, p. 19). More importantly for our purposes, Agamben adds, again taking his cue from Schmitt, specifically Schmitt’s *Nomos of the Earth*, that “only the state of exception opens the space in which the determination of a certain juridical order and a particular territory first becomes possible” (Agamben, 1998, p. 19). The “guardianship state” thus functions on one level in a deterritorialised fashion beyond determinate borders, exercising its sovereign decision-making power to identify friends and enemies, while “localising” and “ordering” space by means of which a juridical order can emerge. In Schmitt’s theory, sovereign *nomos* represents “the constitutive event of law with respect to every positivistic conception of law as simple position and convention” (Agamben, 1998, p. 36). It is “a constitutive historical event, an act of legitimacy that alone renders the legality of the new law meaningful in general” (Agamben, 1998, p. 32; Schmitt, 2003, p. 73). Thus, the “higher law” which cannot claim itself as its own foundation, is a condition of legality. Where *nomos* performs this role for Schmitt, *velāyat* enacts an analogous one for Al-e Ahmad.

Al-e Ahmad was also clearly struck by the fact that this state which had been established in his lifetime, was in the process of fashioning a people out of the “Diaspora” from disparate tongues, cultures and ways of life. In this regard, he saw himself, not merely reflecting on the founding of the “guardianship state”, but the making of a people out of myriad disparate and incongruous elements in a relation of exteriority to those whom they had displaced and expelled. This comes through when he suggestively recollects his visit to a kibbutz in the Negev and his attendance of a stage production of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in Tel Aviv:

They spoke Hebrew. But each one in a different way. Sometimes it seemed like Arabic, sometimes like Russian. And sometimes like nothing I recognized. Later, we had this same experience again, on the night we saw quite a modern stage production of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in a theatre in Tel Aviv; we really thought that they were speaking Russian (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 43).

This *velāyat* of Israel was in Al-e Ahmad’s words, “neither especially promising, nor ‘promised’” (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 25). It was by no means a forgone conclusion and stood against the backdrop of the catastrophe of the Judeocide, for which, not the perpetrators, but, in the words of Al-e Ahmad, “the Easterner” must pay and expiate. The exemplary figure who stands in a relation of exteriority to the juridical order and effectively cannot become a subject of rights was, of course, the Palestinian refugee, 750,000 of whom found themselves expelled and dispossessed in 1948 in what Israel calls its “War of Independence” and Palestinians their *Nakba*. Another roughly 200,000 would become subjects of Israeli sovereignty and nominal citizens of the state, living under military rule from 1948 until 1966. This is a point of which Al-e Ahmad reminds his hosts on a number of occasions, “do not forget that you took this territory by force and you do not get along with the true owners. I have seen that no one takes care

of the villages and cities in the Arab areas. I have seen that they do not even have electricity and schools” (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 45). Al-e Ahmad speaks to a larger point about sovereign power, its indivisibility and unified embodiment, and the question of whether it can be held by two distinct peoples so long as they view their respective claims to the same land as both absolute and fundamentally irreconcilable. Under such conditions the racialised and exclusivist embodied sovereignty of one necessitates the repudiation of another’s claim. Even when their claims might not be mutually exclusive, they must be hierarchically ordered in such a way that the rule of one people, the majority, trumps its minority counterpart. This expressly holds for the settler colonial nation-state and the “guardianship state” is no exception in this regard. From the perspective of Zionism, the end of Jewish sovereignty, is tantamount to the end of the state itself, and, given that it sets itself up as the embodiment and guarantor of the very existence of the people, the end of the Jewish people too.

As should have become apparent by now, Al-e Ahmad’s depiction of Israeli state and society is profoundly ambivalent in nature. But one feature that repeatedly comes through is that it is a highly militarised and mobilised one. Remarking upon a conversation he has with an Israeli settler in the Negev, he says, “I made a reference to the demonstration of weapons during the previous night’s assembly [in the kibbutz] and asked, “How long will it be necessary to motivate people with fear?... You yourselves are constantly playing with fire. When you frighten their side you yourselves have to become frightened as well. And in place of eliminating your class differences, you spend your resources building shelters” (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 45). In fact, Al-e Ahmad is convinced that it is this constant state of militarised mobilisation which allows the kibbutz to exist, and that the moment it disappears, the kibbutz will disappear along with it. In his riposte, Al-e Ahmad seems to acknowledge that one of the factors which ballasts the “guardianship state” is fear, and it is fear which continues to propel it forward in its current form.

Minorities, Statelessness, and Sovereign Dispossession

Arendt’s reflections on statelessness are illuminating in bringing to the fore the reverse side of the “guardianship state” in Palestine, which despite certain differences is unable to escape the logic of the sovereign nation-state. Not only was it incapable of eluding that logic, but its establishment was explicitly premised on the dispossession of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. There is therefore not only a politico-theological dimension to which we must attend, but a related (settler-)colonial one as well. Al-e Ahmad’s reflections highlight how even European Jews, arguably the twentieth century’s archetype of a racialized and persecuted people and figure of stateless dispossession, in establishing the “guardianship state” in Palestine, expressly depended upon and continued to perpetuate the dispossession and ruination of an Other. Yet the story of Israel’s founding is fundamentally predicated on denying, repudiating, and erasing that very historical process. In Al-e Ahmad’s words, “Palestinian

refugees have been paying the penance for someone else's sin in that hellish cauldron [i.e. Fascist-dominated Europe]" (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 27; Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 51).

When read in conjunction with his observation regarding what he describes as "the Jewish spectacle of martyrdom, the memorialization of the war's murdered and gone", claiming that he sees "the other side of the coin of Fascism and a dependence on the racism which replaced it", he is clearly gesturing toward the politico-theological dimension of sovereign founding, and its constitutive violence (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 27; Āl-e Ahmad, 1373 [1994], p. 52). But he is also delineating a historical process whereby a formerly stateless and persecuted minority in Europe, instituted an order which was fundamentally indebted to the same organizing (sovereign nation-statist) principle of majority vs. minority. The same principle that was at least partly responsible for European Jewry's dire status during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and legally enshrined by the British mandate in Palestine following WWI. Furthermore, as indicated above, the very institution of this majority/minority order was itself only realisable on the basis of another's expulsion and relegation to the same condition of stateless limbo to which Jewish refugees had been brutally subjected in the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, in the cycle of martyrdom and dispossession pinpointed by Al-e Ahmad, the "guardianship state" can call on those over whom it guards to sacrifice themselves for its preservation, while it exacts a "high price" upon those who have no claim to its protection (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 27).

In "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man", Arendt famously explores the condition of stateless persons, who in the course of the disintegration of imperial formations and the contagion of war, had emerged as the "scum of the earth". Even though Minority Treaties were in place and minority rights were guaranteed by an international body, the League of Nations, in the absence of a nation-state to guarantee rights they were for all intents and purposes hollow and without force. While one might dispute the singular importance she attributes to the French Revolution, Arendt makes a powerful case for the mutual interdependence of rights and the sovereign nation-state.

The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them (Arendt, 2017 [1951], p. 381).

For Arendt, because European Jews failed to form a majority in any country they could be regarded as *the* minority par excellence (Arendt, 2017 [1951], p. 378). What brings Arendt's and Al-e Ahmad's analyses together is the recognition that the "solution" of the so-called "Jewish Question", which in Al-e Ahmad's phrasing had given rise to the "guardianship state" of Israel, had been forged through conquest, which in turn created another stateless population in its wake:

After the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved – namely, by means of a colonized and then conquered territory – but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people (Arendt, 2017 [1951], p. 381).

The configuration of the sovereign “guardianship state” is both distinct from and entangled in the logic of the nation-state. The great irony that a people who had been the archetype in Arendt’s story of statelessness and its devastating consequences, had in effect reproduced this logic of dispossession is one to which Al-e Ahmad was clearly attuned. Just as European Jews ultimately proved unassimilable and at constant risk of state-sanctioned violence throughout western and eastern Europe, the Israeli “guardianship state” proved constitutively hostile to recognising and including the rights of those who had been displaced, if not intentionally expelled. Determined by its constitutive logic as the “Jews’ state” – a logic determined by the very European racialisation and politicisation of Jewish identity, the source of the European “Jewish problem” – Israel sees the maintenance of a “Jewish” majority as a precondition of it upholding its very *raison d’être*. Those whom the state does not see as “Jews” (primarily, of course, Palestinian Arabs) thus by definition become a “demographic threat” to the state. In this way, the “guardianship state” which drew its moral force and impetus from the destruction unleashed by the Nazi death camps had resulted in those who had been displaced to confront other modes of confinement and internment in the refugee camps (with the tacit, if not explicit cooperation of the governments of several Arab nation-states and the imperial powers), while those who remained under Israeli sovereignty were compelled to live under military rule.

The sovereign nation-state and its forms have come to have a remarkable influence upon postcolonial nation-building (a point to which Arendt alludes in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*), structuring social relations by means of the Eurocentric categories of race, tribe, minority and majority. Thus, to give but one, illuminating example, Faisal Devji’s history of the ideology of Muslim nationalism shows how the emergence of national majorities in the modern European nation-state (dictated by the very logic of political modernity) “turned” Jews in Europe and Muslims in India into “problems”, which were in turn to be solved exactly by the same “demographic” logic of a national majority versus an “alien” minority, further perpetuating the sovereign nation-statist epistemology and its corresponding political forms (Devji, 2013).

More recently, Mahmood Mamdani has explored the various historical and political trajectories which the epistemology of the sovereign nation-state has engendered in a range of historical case

studies. Among these, he also considers Israel/Palestine, identifying Zionism as “the most perfected expression of European political modernity in a colonial context”:

Zionism is both a product of the oppression of Jews under European modernity and a zealous enactment of European modernity under colonial conditions. Nationalism made the European Jew an impossible presence in Europe, yet, steeped in the same ideology that denied them dignity and equality in Europe, Zionists decided that Jews’ only option was a state of their own, so they went elsewhere to build it. When they did, they became the oppressor, for in the nation-state, one can be only the oppressor or the oppressed, the majority or the minority, the nation or the other (Mamdani, 2020, pp. 250-251).

Plurality and the Negative Theology of the State

We have seen how Al-e Ahmad marvelled at Israel’s “guardianship state” and the ways in which its emergence spoke to the “extraordinary” dimension of sovereign constitution, in conjunction with its claims to both establish and form a new “people”. He recognises this “extraordinary” moment of founding and how Zionism and the Israeli “guardianship state” assumes an almost God-like mantle of protector and saviour of the Jewish people. Al-e Ahmad is also cognizant of the logics of dispossession, expulsion, and erasure constitutive of this process, and how Palestinian Arabs, and the peoples of the region more broadly, have been forced to atone for the crimes of European anti-Semitism culminating in the Judeocide. His diagnosis provides insight into the double-sidedness of constituent power and sovereign founding, their inherent and inextricable creative potential and violence, which in his words are “a source of power and also—on that very account—a source of danger” (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 26), and Zionism’s claim and assumed mandate for the protection of “Jewish life” writ large, which despite being territorialized, in the final analysis, refuses all determinate borders. The question, however, remains as to whether it is possible to discern the elements of an alternative normative vision contained in the interstices of Al-e Ahmad’s itinerant observations? In this final section, we aim to briefly remark upon the lineaments of this vision and the manner in which it emerges from out of his critique of the unitary and embodied sovereign power in a colonial register.

Al-e Ahmad mentions Martin Buber (1878-1965) twice during his travelogue. It is unclear how he became acquainted with the Austrian-born philosopher and most famous member of “Brit Shalom” (Covenant of Peace), but when he does, it is in connection with Buber’s advocacy of a bi-national state in Palestine (Buber, 2005), a model that sought to work-around, as it were, the paradigm of the modern nation-state, which, as we have seen, the “guardianship state” exceeds, but in which it is nonetheless entangled. It would be futile to try and summarize here the nuances of Brit Shalom’s evolving political

stance (Ratzabi, 2001), and even more so Buber's own elusive theopolitical vision (Lesch, 2019); nor is it our intention here to "recruit" Al-e Ahmad to an evolving argument regarding a "one-statist", "two-statist" or other horizon for Israel/Palestine. What is critical for our purpose here is that Al-e Ahmad evokes, via Buber, a notion of co-existence which escapes the dangers and elisions of the unitary and embodied sovereign and its correlative nation-statist entanglement. He thus confidently proclaims that the "only solution to the problem is forming a federal government of Arabs and Jews called Palestine," unambiguously, concluding that partition and separation are not viable options, nor will they produce peace (Al-e Ahmad, 2013, p. 58). Rather they will only perpetuate more of the same kinds of violence and dispossession that were present at Israel's founding.

While *Brit Shalom* has proven highly attractive to scholars in later decades, in its own time it failed to gain much traction among the Yishuv. Committed to a "cultural" rendition of Zionist ideology, placing emphasis on the cultural "revival" of the Jewish people as a precondition for its future striving for statehood, while nevertheless accepting the foundational Zionist politicization, nationalisation and ultimately racialisation of Jewish identity. *Brit Shalom* advocated a "binational" programme for Palestine, where "Jews" and "Arabs" would have equal political rights, each enjoying national autonomy. They accepted as a given the Zionist opposition of Jew (or, in the preferred terminology of the time and ideology, Hebrew) and Arab - seeing each as a separate "nation" - enforcing, that is, the European racialization and politicisation of Jewishness and in effect denying – or making impossible – Judeo-Arab identity. The overwhelming Zionist rejection of their proposals attests to the unalloyed triumph of the epistemology and metaphysics of the sovereign nation-state. On the one hand, Al-e Ahmad unthinkingly regurgitates this Zionist premise, while on the other, seeming to suggest that through a process of decolonization and the establishment of relations of freedom and equality between Jew and Palestinian Arab, that a different form of being-with and co-existence might be imagined. Despite their best intentions, the advocates of bi-nationalism arguably ended up replicating the European, sovereign nation-statist and *ethnonationalist* perspective on Jewishness and of "the Jewish problem" – viewing, that is, Judaism and Jewishness as instances of nationalism or ethnonational identity – that perpetuated the dichotomy of Arab and Jew as mutually exclusive categories of ethnonational identity (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2011, p. 73). Al-e Ahmad's suggestive analysis, by contrast, seems to call for the Jews' return to the fold of "the East". A necessary condition of such a return would, needless to say, be tantamount to an irrevocable break with Zionism, as well as its concomitant colonial forms.

Much like the politico-cultural association of *Brit Shalom*, which fell short of providing a coherent political programme and blueprint for the resolution of Zionism's and the Israeli ethno-state's colonial predicament (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2011, p. 58), Al-e Ahmad does not propose anything like a systematic vision which might resolve these contradictions, binaries and erasures. Instead, we argue that Al-e Ahmad provides us with a normative "negative theology" of sovereign power and the nation-state, describing it in terms of what it ought *not* to be. To some extent this should have already come through

in the insights afforded by *Velāyat-e esrā'īl*, first and foremost, his critical remarks on the cycle of autopoietic, constituent power and sovereign founding, absolutization and dispossession. An alternative social form would have to elude the trap of trying to reconstitute a unitary and embodied sovereign will in state-form, reflected in the image of society as a unified subject. It would have to eschew the temptation, in Arendt's words, "to find a new absolute". It is our contention that like Arendt, Al-e Ahmad was attuned to "the condition of human plurality", which "can never amount to omnipotence" for "laws residing on human power can never be absolute" (Arendt, 2006b, p. 29). It is for this reason that we have advanced the argument that *Velāyat-e esrā'īl*, despite its shortcomings, and the often uncritical uptake of Zionism's self-avowed mandate, can be read as a critique of the unitary and embodied conception of sovereign power, best exemplified in the writings of Schmitt.

One insight which can be gleaned from Al-e Ahmad's many and varied writings is his denaturalization of the sovereign nation-state, a state which he holds to be based on essentially colonial foundations and its organizing principle of racialized majority rule. This comes through in several instances in his writings such as *Gharbzadegī* (Westoxication [1962]) and *Dar khedmat va khīyānat-e rowshanfekrān* (On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals [1969]). *Gharbzadegī*, for example, has been read as a critique of how the formation of the modern nation-state and colonial capitalism naturalised racial difference for the purposes of exploitation and extraction (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2020). In the posthumously published, *Dar khedmat va khīyānat-e rowshanfekrān*, Al-e Ahmad critiques Iran's own highly militarised, coercive and violent process of state-formation (Āl-e Ahmad, 1357 [1979]-b, p. 15), and the brutal imposition of "national unity" (Āl-e Ahmad, 1357 [1979]-b, p. 104). He refused nationalist primordialism and racist narratives of decline, seeing them as the mirror image of Orientalism, and therefore reproducing the relations of coloniser and colonizer, civilised and non-civilised, they purported to challenge.⁷ When in the course of a conversation he was asked to state "the distinguishing features of Iran and Iranians", he flatly refused, responding, "which language and which religion have remain pure (*khāles*) and untouched? Which pure nation (*mellat*) are you able to show [me]? I don't like this nationalist playing around (*mellat bāzī*) whatsoever. This is an imported European concept. The European bourgeoisie made the concept of the nation" (Āl-e Ahmad, 1374 [1995], p. 156). In the same conversation he also explicitly precludes any prospect of a "return" (*bāzgasht*) to an essential and autochthonous ethno-linguistic and cultural identity. In an almost oracular register he asks rhetorically, "a contemporary writer of Persian must know the past, and also prognosticate (*pīsh gū'ī*) the future and write for it, so what does 'return' even mean?" (Āl-e Ahmad, 1374 [1995], p. 157)

In contrast to the unitary and univocal sovereign nation-state "with its colonial and semi-colonial foundations", Al-e Ahmad explicitly advocates a form of "free thinking" (*āzād andīshī*) which breaks with the confines, partitions and walls of separation, valorised and laundered by the nation-state in its colonial iteration (Āl-e Ahmad, 1357 [1979]-a, p. 46).⁸ In stark contrast he proclaims, "anytime the individual breaks with their solitariness and engages the common (*ejtemā'*), and this means coming out of one's small corner and one's home, city, language, province (*velāyat*) and religion, and one sees the

world as the encompassing unity of humanity of different peoples, languages, customs, cultures and religions” (Āl-e Ahmad, 1357 [1979]-a, pp. 25-26). While it would be misplaced to claim Al-e Ahmad’s vision here perfectly aligns with that of Arendt (she, after all, remained committed to the idea of viewing Jewishness through the European lens of “nationality”), and one must be circumspect about claiming a coherent doctrine for him on this score, the connection drawn here between freedom and irreducible plurality held in common is explicit and powerful.⁹ It dispenses with the univocity of the modern sovereign state and the constitutive violence at its heart. Indeed, he describes the process of partaking in “the common” in terms of leaving one’s own “home” and *velāyat*. In other words, it shows a considered commitment to disrupting enduring binaries such as “home” vs. “foreign” or “native” vs. “alien”, and in effect, the renunciation of a certain kind of sovereign power. Furthermore, it refuses to reify hierarchies of difference, the basis for which was laid by the sovereign state’s colonial and racial epistemology and its corresponding organization of political power. We have translated Al-e Ahmad’s use of *ejtemā’*, which is today more commonly translated as “the social”, “society”, or “public” as “the common”, because it implies not only an openness potentially available to all, but it can also signify, according to Dehkhoda, a process of “coming together” or “gathering together” (Dehkhodā, 1377). It can therefore only emerge *with* another.

As implied in the above quote, and in the spirit espoused by Arendt, this gathering together in public, not only required freedom as its basic precondition, but transformed those engaged in the common (*ejtemā’*) in the process. This form of being-with not only aligns with Al-e Ahmad’s criticisms of the authoritarian neo-colonial Pahlavi state (Āl-e Ahmad, 1385 [2006], p. 142), but also the Zionist “guardianship state”, which is not to conflate the two or the distinct ways in which the coloniality of the modern sovereign state has inhered within their respective institutions and *modus operandi*. For these reasons, we argue that like Arendt, albeit in his own idiosyncratic fashion and context, Al-e Ahmad articulates through his multi-faceted critique of the “guardianship state” and the modern sovereign nation-state in Iran, a form of being-with and relating in common, which embraces plurality *against* sovereignty. The “aspiration toward omnipotence always implies—apart from its utopian hubris—the destruction of plurality”, declares Arendt, a conclusion with which we contend Al-e Ahmad’s analyses strongly concur (Arendt, 2018 [1958], p. 202).

Concluding Remarks

To briefly conclude, it emerges that Al-e Ahmad’s travelogue contextualised within the manifold and layered meanings of *velāyat* can be read as a diagnosis of the “extraordinary” character of sovereign constitution and its necessary assumption of an “absolute” mandate. The “guardianship state” was founded in the wake of the real threat of annihilation and the imperative to discern friends and enemies. Its founding, however, was inextricable from the constitutive processes of ruination and dispossession

of those whose rights were neither intelligible, nor recognisable, let alone a subject of restoration, namely, the figure of the stateless Palestinian refugee.

We also argued that Al-e Ahmad's analysis can be understood in terms of a wider critique of certain modern forms of sovereign power and the nation-state, which the "guardianship state" both exceeds and within which it is entangled. The "guardianship state", which emerged in response to European racism, too replicated the division and separation of those over whom it ruled into majorities and minorities. Finally, we concluded by outlining what we called Al-e Ahmad's negative theology of the state, which amounts to a fundamental critique of unitary and embodied forms of sovereign power and their claims to transcendence. We argue that in contrast to sovereign power, he counterposes the notion *ejtemā'*, as a form of being-in-common and "coming together", which takes plurality to be axiomatic.

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Author Biography

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi is Lecturer in Comparative Political Theory in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Goldsmiths, University of London. He was previously a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, where he also obtained his doctorate. He is the author of *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), co-editor of *Politics* (SAGE), and series editor of *Radical Histories of the Middle East* (Oneworld).

Yaacov Yadgar is Stanley Lewis Professor of Israel Studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies & Department of Politics and International Relations and Fellow of St Anne's College, University of Oxford. Yadgar's two most recent books are *Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis: State and Politics in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism* (SUNY Press, 2017).

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¹ Hamid Dabashi, whose work on Al-e Ahmad we hold in the highest esteem, unfortunately makes the mistake of confusing the posthumously published title for the original title of the Israel/Palestine travelogue so as to critique the English translation and mount a broader argument dismissing the significance of Al-e Ahmad's use of the term *velāyat*. (Dabashi, 2021, p. 233).

² Dabashi had in an earlier work speculated that the final chapter of *Safar beh velāyat-e ezrā'īl*, "The Beginning of a Hatred", might not have been written by Al-e Ahmad. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi and Yadgar have shown that there are solid grounds to think that it was indeed authored by Al-e Ahmad, a view with which Dabashi would subsequently concur. (Dabashi, 2006, p. 70).

Al-e Ahmad's authorship has also been confirmed by multiple contemporary sources. Apart from of course Al-e Ahmad's brother, whose editorial role was the source of doubts in the first place, Al-e Ahmad's authorship has been confirmed by close associates of his such as Dariush Ashuri and Reza Baraheni: (Ashuri, 19 December 2018) (Barāhenī, 1363 [1984], p. 156).

Furthermore, in a searing critique of Al-e Ahmad, the Marxist-Leninist intellectual and activist Amir Parviz Puyan, also mentions Al-e Ahmad's apparent change of heart, or in the words of Puyan "repenting" (*towbeh*) on the question of Israel and explicitly mentions the highly critical stance he assumed in the controversial piece published in the aftermath of the 1967 war (Pūyan, 1348 [1969], p. 4).

³ While we are of the opinion that Dabashi is overly dismissive of the significance of Al-e Ahmad's use of the term *velāyat*, we concur with his firm repudiation of any hasty equation of Al-e Ahmad's use of the concept with Ayatollah Khomeini's notion of *velāyat-e faqīh*, as outlined by the latter in his lectures a year after Al-e Ahmad's death, to justify the legitimacy of clerical political rule. (Dabashi, 2021, pp. 233-234). We have also roundly critiqued any such conflation (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi & Yadgar, 2021, p. 18).

⁴ More recently, this principle was also enshrined in a semi-constitutional basic law declaring Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people (Gavison, 2010).

⁵ Arendt nonetheless strongly supported Eichmann's trial and execution. (Arendt, 2007a, p. 465).

⁶ The Basic Law: Israel the Nation-State of the Jewish People explicitly declares that the right to self-determination is reserved for Jews alone in Israel.

⁷ Al-e Ahmad forceful rebuttal of the thesis *'arab zadegī*, namely, that it was the Arab conquests and their cultural legacy which had led to the decline of Persian civilization is a good example of this (Āl-e Ahmad, 1374 [1995], p. 146).

⁸ Al-e Ahmad also testifies in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci, whose work he also knew, to the capacity of virtually everyone to think and become an "intellectual". (Āl-e Ahmad, 1357 [1979]-a, p. 46).

⁹ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies the public realm with "the common". (Arendt, 2018 [1958], p. 49).