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# The Ayatollah Under the Bed(sheets)

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, all politics may not be sexual, but all sex is political.

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BY KARIM SADJADPOUR | [MAY/JUNE 2012](#)



In the early years of the Iranian Revolution, an obscure cleric named Ayatollah Gilani became a sensation on state television by contemplating bizarre hypotheticals at the intersection of Islamic law and sexuality. One of his most outlandish scenarios -- still mocked by Iranians three decades later -- went like this:

Imagine you are a young man sleeping in your bedroom. In the bedroom directly below, your aunt lies asleep. Now imagine that an earthquake happens that collapses your floor, causing you to fall directly on top of her. For the sake of argument, let's assume that you're both nude, and you're erect, and you land with such perfect precision on top of her that you unintentionally achieve intercourse. Is the child of such an encounter *halalzadeh* (legitimate) or *haramzadeh* (a bastard)?

Such tales of random ribaldry may sound anomalous in the seemingly austere, asexual Islamic Republic of Iran. But the "Gili Show," as it came to be known, had quite the following among both the traditional classes, who were titillated by his taboo topics, and the Tehrani elite, who tuned in for comic relief. Gilani helped spawn what is now a virtual cottage industry of clerics and fundamentalists turned amateur sexologists offering incoherent advice on everything from [quickies](#) ("The man's goal should be to lighten his load as soon as possible without arousing his woman") to [masturbation](#) ("a grave, grave sin which causes scientific and medical harm").

Perhaps it's not entirely surprising that Iran's Shiite fundamentalists -- not unlike their evangelical Christian, Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, and Sunni Muslim counterparts -- spend an inordinate amount of time pondering sexuality. They are human, after all. But the sexual manias of Iran's religious fundamentalists are worthy of greater scrutiny, all the more so because they control a state with nuclear ambitions, vast oil wealth, and a young, dynamic, stifled population. Yet for a variety of reasons -- fear of becoming Salman Rushdie, of being labeled an Orientalist, of upsetting religious sensibilities -- the remarkable hypocrisy of the Iranian regime is often studiously avoided.

That's a mistake. Because religion is politics in a theocracy like Iran, uninformed or antiquated notions of sexuality aren't just confined to the bedroom -- they pervade the country's seminaries, military barracks, boardrooms, courtrooms, and classrooms. A common aphorism among Iranians is that before the revolution, people partied outside the home and prayed inside, while today they pray outside and party inside. This reverse dichotomy is true of a lot of social behavior in Iran. For many Iranians, this perverse state of affairs is now so ingrained, such an inherent aspect of daily interactions with Iranian officialdom, that it is no longer noteworthy. For those in the West who seek to better understand what makes Tehran tick, though, the regime's curious fixation on sex cannot be ignored.

To **paraphrase** the late U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neill, in the Islamic Republic of Iran all politics may not be sexual, but all sex is political. Exhibit A is the revolution's father, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Like all Shiite clerics aspiring to become a "source of emulation" (*marja'-e taqlid*), Khomeini spent the first part of his career meticulously examining and dispensing religious guidance on personal behavior and ritual purity that ranged from the mundane ("It is recommended not to hold back the need to urinate or defecate, especially if it hurts") to the surprisingly lewd.

In his 1961 religious treatise *A Clarification of Questions (Towzih al-Masael)*, Khomeini issued detailed pronouncements on issues ranging from **sodomy** ("If a man sodomizes the son, brother, or father of his wife after their marriage, the marriage remains valid") to bestiality ("If a person has intercourse with a cow, a sheep, or a camel, their urine and



dung become impure and drinking their milk will be unlawful"). As a young boy growing up in the American Midwest, I remember being both horrified and bewildered after coming across these precise passages in a translated volume of Khomeini's sayings I found in our Persian émigré home.

Scholars of Shiism -- including harsh critics of Khomeini -- emphasize that such themes were the norm among clerics of Khomeini's generation and should be understood in their proper context: Islam was a religion that emerged out of a rural desert, and the Prophet Mohammed was himself once a shepherd. Whereas religions like Christianity and Judaism simply declare such behavior to be sinful, Islam addresses them from a juridical point of view.

The underlying problem, says Islamic scholar Mehdi Khalaji, a former seminary student in the Shiite epicenter of Qom, is not that such issues were addressed, but the fact that "Islamic jurisprudence hasn't yet been modernized. It's totally disconnected from the issues that modern, urban people have to deal with."

Indeed, Khomeini's religious prescriptions are often the butt of jokes among Iran's post-revolutionary generations. "I've never even seen a camel in Tehran," prominent Iranian cartoonist Nikahang Kowsar told me, "let alone been tempted to have sex with one."

**IF THERE IS A DOUBLE ENTENDRE** that aptly captures today's Middle East, it is the "youth bulge." The Arab world's median age is 22, Iran's is 27; Western Europe's, by contrast, is near 40. High levels of Internet and satellite television penetration, with their pervasive pornography, coupled with the region's youthful demographics, have accentuated the Muslim Middle East's fraught relationship with sexuality.

Google Trends, which monitors searches from around the world, shows that of the seven countries that most frequently search the word "sex" on Google, **five are Muslim** and one (India) has a large Muslim minority. (The word "**sexy**" is even more popular among Arabs.) Google Insights, another trend spotter, shows that the most rapidly rising search term for Iranians so far in 2012 has been "Golshifteh Farahani," a popular exiled actress who in January posed topless for the French magazine *Madame Figaro*.



Before the 1979 revolution, religious fundamentalists were revolted by images of scantily clad Iranian women in the country's cinema and television; today, state television and cinema are forbidden from showing unveiled Iranian women. This is despite the fact that most of the country's citizens have access to the much more tawdry fare on satellite TV (the dishes are officially illegal, but thought to be smuggled in by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps itself). In the forthcoming documentary *[The Iran Job](#)*, Kevin Sheppard, an American who played basketball in Iran's professional leagues, is shocked while surfing his newly connected satellite television. "We have 600 channels," he remarks, "400 of them are sex!"

Because of its religious pretensions, however, the Iranian regime is forced to spend untold millions of dollars trying to jam satellite TV broadcasts to prevent them from reaching the country's citizens -- a futile attempt to simultaneously repel the forces of both technology and human nature. In an interview with the *New Yorker* several years ago, an Iranian security official [candidly assessed the challenge](#) at hand:

The majority of the population is young.... Young people by nature are horny. Because they are horny, they like to watch satellite channels where there are films or programs they can jerk off to.... We have to do something about satellite television to keep society free from this horny jerk-off situation.

One might assume a country that suffers from chronic inflation and unemployment -- not to mention harsh international sanctions and a potential war over its nuclear program -- would have better things to do than discourage its youth from masturbating. Yet the regime continues to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into Chinese censorship technology to create a [moral Iron Dome](#) against political and cultural subversion, with decidedly mixed results. Piped-in BBC Persian and Voice of America television are sometimes successfully scrambled, but those who want pornography have no shortage of outlets. That said, the censorship software sometimes get a bit overzealous. One Iranian friend told me of repeated unsuccessful attempts to access his British university's email account from Tehran, only to realize that the school's apparently bawdy name -- Essex -- was prohibited by the regime's Internet filters.

**DURING THE RULE OF WESTERN-ORIENTED** autocrat Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Tehran was a rapidly evolving society that deceptively appeared to be crossing into the modern age. My own family history is perhaps representative of Iran's urban middle-class trajectory during the 20th century: My devout paternal grandmother, born in 1907, wore a chador and wasn't formally educated beyond elementary school; three of her four daughters attended university, and all eschewed the veil. All of *their* daughters grew up in a Tehran in which miniskirts were the trend, and **Googoosh** -- Iran's pre-revolutionary J. Lo (but remarkably modest by today's standards) -- was their main "source of emulation."

Khomeini's opposition to the shah was fueled in part by the latter's enfranchisement of women, which the ayatollah deliberately conflated with sexual decadence. In his 1970 book *Islamic Governance(Hukumat-e Islami)* -- which would later provide the ideological and political template for post-revolutionary Iran -- Khomeini **hyperventilated** that "sexual vice has now reached such proportions that it is destroying entire generations, corrupting our youth, and causing them to neglect all forms of work! They are all rushing to enjoy the various forms of vice that have become so freely available and so enthusiastically promoted."

Khomeini nonetheless reassured his liberal revolutionary compatriots -- just months before the revolution, while in Paris exile -- that "women [would be] free in the Islamic Republic in the selection of their activities and their future and their clothing." Much to its retrospective dismay, a sizable chunk of Iran's liberal intelligentsia -- both male and female -- lined up behind Khomeini, some even referring to him as an "Iranian Gandhi." Shortly after consolidating power, however, Khomeini and his disciples swiftly moved to crush opposing views and curtail female social and sartorial freedoms. "Islam doesn't allow for people to [wear swimsuits] in the sea," he **proclaimed** shortly after becoming supreme leader. We "will skin their hide!"

Women who resisted the mandatory veil were met with violence and intimidation, including lyrical taunts of "*Ya roosari, ya toosari!*" ("Cover your head or be smacked in the head!"). As Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi **recently wrote**, "Although the 1979 revolution in Iran is often called an Islamic revolution, it can actually

be said to be a revolution of men against women.... The drafters of [the Islamic Penal Code] had effectively taken us back 1,400 years."

Like Islamists in today's Egypt -- and some among America's Christian right -- Iran's revolutionaries found fertile ground on which to play the politics of pious populism, rather than concretely address the enormous challenges of building a diversified economy. The country's massive oil wealth made it appear all too easy. Khomeini famously dismissed economics as "for donkeys," and he responded to complaints of inflation by saying, "The revolution wasn't about the price of watermelons." Three decades later, the results are self-evident: In 1979, resource-rich Iran's GDP was almost double that of resource-poor Turkey. Today, it is roughly half.

The brutal reality is that Iranians had entrusted their national destiny to a man, Khomeini, who had spent far more time thinking about the religious penalties for fornicating with animals than how to run a modern economy.

**AFTER HIS DEATH IN 1989**, Khomeini was succeeded by the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has remained loyal to Khomeini's vision for Iran, including his prudishness regarding matters of the flesh. For Khamenei -- who has said that keeping women in hijab would "prevent our society from being plunged into corruption and turmoil" -- outward displays of feminine beauty are viewed not only with religious disfavor, but as an existential threat to the regime itself.

Khamenei contends that the health of the family unit is integral to the Islamic Republic's well-being and is undermined by female beauty. Although to some this worldview is fundamentally misogynistic, **Khamenei sees** men, not women, as untrustworthy and incapable of resisting temptation:

In Islam, women have been prohibited from showing off their beauty in order to attract men or cause *fitna* [upheaval or sedition]. Showing off one's physical attraction to men is a kind of fitna ... [for] if this love for beauty and members of the opposite sex is found somewhere other than the framework of the family, the stability of the family will be undermined.



Interestingly, the word Khamenei employs against the potential unveiling of women - *- fitna --* is the same word used to describe the opposition Green Movement that took to the streets in the summer of 2009 to protest President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's contested reelection. In other words, women's hair is *itself* seen as seditious and counterrevolutionary. Even so-called liberal politicians in the Islamic Republic have long fixated on this issue. Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Iran's first post-revolutionary president, who has spent the past three decades exiled in France, reportedly once asserted that women's hair has been scientifically proven to emit sexually enticing rays. (An Iranian satirist responded with a cartoon showing a man inadvertently aroused while eating lunch at his friend's home; the culprit turned out to be an errant strand of his friend's wife's hair in the ***ghormeh sabzi*** stew, an Iranian national dish.)

**OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES**, the women of Iran's younger generation have increasingly pushed back and loosened their veils, but any discussion of abolishing the veil altogether is not tolerated by Khamenei. In addition to opposition toward the United States and Israel, the hijab is often considered one of the Islamic Republic's three remaining ideological pillars. "For Islamic Republic officials, the hijab has vast symbolic importance; it is what holds up the dam, keeping all of Iranians' other demands for social freedoms at bay," says Azadeh Moaveni, an Iranian-American **author**. "Relax on the hijab, they think, and all hell will break loose; next people will want to swill beer on the street and read uncensored novels. They think of it as a gateway freedom."

Despite Khamenei's assertion that the hijab prevents men from straying, governmental policies in fact encourage the opposite. For example, to help accommodate the apparently incorrigibly wandering libido of the Iranian male, the country's parliament -- composed of Khamenei loyalists -- has supported sharia-sanctioned "temporary marriages" (known in Persian as *sigheh*) allowing men as many sexual partners as they want. The marriage contract can last as little as a few minutes, and it doesn't need to be officially registered. The man can abruptly end the *sigheh* when he likes, but initiating divorce is far more difficult for women. Indeed, women who stray from the sanctity of their marriages do so at grave risk -- dozens have been stoned to death in Iran for adultery.

The country's economic malaise has also led to a reportedly sharp rise in plain old, non-Islamically sanctioned prostitution. Tehran's high-end taxi drivers, often underemployed university graduates, casually point them out on the street.

"When economies take a downturn, informal economies and illicit networks become more attractive," says Pardis Mahdavi, author of a [book on sexuality in Iran](#). "Technology facilitates this too."

During the shah's time, Tehran's [notorious red-light district](#) was known as Shahr-e Noe (New City), a place where countless young Iranian men lost their virginity. Like many things post-revolution, however, the Islamic Republic just imagined that banning the symptom would make the problem go away. But pouring saltpeter from the minarets hasn't worked. "They razed Shahr-e Noe thinking it would end prostitution," a retired Iranian laborer once told me. "Now all of Tehran has become Shahr-e Noe."

**UNSURPRISINGLY, THE OUTWARDLY CHASTE** nature of Khomeinist political culture has perverted normal sexual behavior, creating peculiar curiosities -- and proclivities -- among Iranian officialdom. Omid Memarian, a journalist who spent several months in the notorious Evin prison for his articles critical of the government, told me that his interrogators seemed far more interested in his sex life than his political peccadilloes. "I tried to answer their questions in very general terms, but they'd interrupt me," he recalled. "They wanted to know details. 'Start from when you were unbuttoning her blouse....'" In one instance, he told me, he was horrified when an interrogator appeared to be rubbing himself while listening.

Observers of American politics -- the land of [Jimmy Swaggart](#), [Mark Sanford](#), and [Newt Gingrich](#), to name just a few -- won't be surprised to learn that it is often the most outspoken Iranian advocates of traditional values who fall short of achieving them. Memarian spent part of his mandatory military service in Tehran writing speeches for a senior Revolutionary Guard commander who routinely attacked the craven immorality of the "Global Arrogance" (i.e., the United States). "His *filmi* [the person who brought him bootlegged films on CD] later told me that he always requested 'films with scenes' [*film-haye sahne-dar*]," a euphemism for porn.

In a well-publicized national scandal in 2008, the Tehran police commander responsible for enforcing Iran's strict anti-vice laws, Reza Zarei, was caught nude in a brothel with six women (one of the women claimed he had asked them to [pray naked](#) in front of him). While American politicians might bounce back from such transgressions with their own [television show](#) (see: [Spitzer, Eliot](#)), the revelation of the incident reportedly led Zarei to attempt suicide while in prison.

The shame of sexual malfeasance has been routinely used by the regime as a form of political coercion and intimidation. When the famously jocular reformist cleric Mohammad Ali Abtahi, former vice president to Mohammad Khatami, was imprisoned after Iran's contested 2009 presidential election, he surprised his supporters by confessing with great gusto to being part of a Western-backed conspiracy to foment a velvet revolution. Although his confession was undoubtedly forced, his close associates claim that what compelled him to confess was not physical or psychological torture but hidden photos of him -- *in flagrante delicto* -- at a secret Tehran love nest that was long being monitored.

The Islamic Republic isn't always so prudish, however. In fact, it's been willing to use sexual incentives as a form of statecraft. In a [WikiLeaked U.S. State Department cable](#), for example, senior Iraqi tribal chief Abu Cheffat confided in a U.S. diplomat in Baghdad that Tehran effectively wielded influence over Iraqi politicians -- ostensibly visiting Iran for "medical treatment" -- by offering inducements including "temporary marriages" with Iranian women. Not that Cheffat was complaining, mind you: The perks were surely better than when he visited President George W. Bush at the White House in 2008. It was not without reason, he explained, that Iranian soft power was trumping American hard power in Iraq.

More recently, three Iranian intelligence agents who unsuccessfully tried to kill Israeli government officials in Bangkok this past February photographed themselves at a bar in the beach resort of Pattaya with local ["escorts"](#). When I asked the scion of a powerful cleric in Tehran how ostensible devotees of Khomeini's religious ideology are able to reconcile frequenting non-Muslim prostitutes and drinking alcohol, he quickly dismissed any religious obstacles. "There are government clerics who can easily grant them religious



pretexts [*mojavez'e Shar'i*]," he explained. "They can make the case that if they didn't frequent prostitutes and drink alcohol they would appear to be [terrorists] and raise suspicions."

In essence, the Iranian regime's approach toward sex, like its philosophy of governance, is marked by *maslahat*, or expediency, and used alternately as a tool of suppression, inducement, and incitement. In the summer of 2009, when hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest Ahmadinejad's reelection, many protesters were brutally beaten by the Basij militia, gangs of young regime thugs on motorbikes who were given a green light to quell the uprising. As Iranian-American academic Shervin Malekzadeh reported from Tehran, the Basij seemed to be driven by a combination of class resentment and pent-up frustration. "They don't screw; they don't drink or smoke joints," one of his sources told him. "What else are they going to do with all of that energy?"

But perhaps the seminal -- and most heartbreaking -- moment of the Green Revolution was the murder of a 26-year-old female protester, Neda Agha-Soltan, whose bloody death was caught on cell-phone camera and rendered one of the most viral videos in history. In an [HBO documentary](#) about her life, Neda's mother [recalls a message](#) that some sympathetic female Basij members relayed to Neda days before she was killed by a sniper: "Dear, please don't come out looking so beautiful.... Do us a favor and don't come out because the Basiji men target beautiful girls. And they will shoot you."

While the iconic faces of Iran's 1979 revolution were bearded, middle-aged men, Neda has come to symbolize the new face of dissent in 21st-century Iran: a young, modern, educated woman. For her opposition to the regime and to the hijab, she is the embodiment of fitna in Khamenei's eyes.

**THREE SPRINGS LATER**, the Iranian regime once again is faced with a crisis, this time of an external variety. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatens war in between meals, the Pentagon plays war games and policy planners huddle in the White House: Is the Iranian regime rational or irrational? Can diplomatic negotiations prevent Iran from obtaining a bomb, or is an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities inevitable?

Many Iran watchers assert that to persuade Tehran not to pursue a nuclear weapon, Washington must reassure Khamenei that the United States merely seeks a change in Iranian behavior, not a change of the Iranian regime.

What they fail to consider is Khamenei's deep-seated conviction that U.S. designs to overthrow the Islamic Republic hinge not on military invasion but on cultural and political subversion intended to foment a "velvet" revolution from within. Consider this [revealing address](#) on Iranian state TV in 2005:

More than Iran's enemies need artillery, guns, and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption.... I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center said: "Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts." He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.

Khamenei's vast collection of writings and speeches makes clear that the weapons of mass destruction he fears most are cultural -- more Kim Kardashian and Lady Gaga than bunker busters and aircraft carriers. In other words, Tehran is threatened not only by what America does, but by what America is: a depraved, postmodern colonial power bent on achieving global cultural hegemony. America's "strategic policy," Khamenei has said, "is seeking female promiscuity."

Khamenei's words capture the paradox and perversion of modern Iran. While dropping bombs on the Iranian regime could likely prolong its shelf-life, a regime that sees women's hair as an existential threat is already well past its sell-by date.

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