

IN MEMORIAM

Ali Reza Sheikholeslami **1941–2018**

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

Ali Reza Sheikholeslami was born in Tehran in 1941. After completing his secondary school education in Iran and a two-year course of study for his A-Levels at Bell School in Cambridge, England (1960–62), he attended Columbia University, where he received a BA in political science in 1967. He continued his graduate studies at Northwestern University (MA in political science, 1968) with a focus on religion and politics in Egypt. Subsequently, he pursued his doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, with a focus on Qajar history. He wrote his dissertation on “The Structure of Central Authority in Iran, 1871–1896” and received his PhD in Islamic studies in 1975.

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

Professor Sheikholeslami’s scholarly research and publications covered a wide range of topics. He started with an interest in the comparative politics and political economy of the Middle East, leading to the publication of the

Political Economy of Saudi Arabia (University of Washington Press, 1984). But gradually his interests shifted toward Iran's political and social history in the late Qajar era. In his *The Central Structure of Authority in Qajar Iran, 1871–1896* (Scholars Press, 1997), based on extensive use of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' archives, he analyzed the extent and limits of the patrimonial authority of the Qajar monarch Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–1896), as well as the Qajars' traditional conception of justice – not as an egalitarian principle, but as a way of preserving the traditional hierarchies within the social order. In an incisive analysis of the exploitative and corrupt practices by the long-reigning Qajar monarch, he showed how the country's major administrative offices were periodically sold to the highest bidders, who were then free to take advantage of their positions to collect arbitrarily set taxes and payoffs – thus placing much of the burden of productive, profit-generating labor on the shoulders of the peasantry.

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

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

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