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Ideology as Political Weapon: How *Alamut* Challenges the Justice of Plato's *Republic*

Krupa Patel, University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign

ABSTRACT

I explore Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*, drawing on its sociopolitical context in 1938 Slovenia, as a cautionary tale about potential unjust consequences of putting into practice Plato's model of a just city-state, as described in the *Republic* (380 BC). I also investigate how key structures of Plato's republic have been applied to ideologically driven European totalitarian states and modern terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, and argue that the injustice of such institutions has its origins in the deception at the core of their guiding creeds. Following the critiques of Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai in "Monster, Terrorist, Fag" (2002), I conclude by addressing how *Alamut*, as a novel that cautions against ideologies, advances particular racial ideologies itself regarding the Middle East's relationship to terrorism. I explore key implications of this understanding of the novel as we consider the inherent dangers of the inescapable tool that is ideology.

KEYWORDS

Ideology, Totalitarianism, Orientalism, Terrorism, Slovenian Fiction

Plato's *Republic* (ca. 380 BC) has long influenced political philosophy with its elaborate account of how a just state should be constructed, expressed through the character of Socrates in characteristic Socratic dialogue form. Vladimir Bartol's Slovenian novel *Alamut* (1938) challenges views advanced in *Republic* as to how leadership ought to operate in the just city-state. Plato has inspired a variety of political structures; this essay will follow the tradition of interpreting *Republic* as totalitarian and will identify structural elements that support this classification. *Alamut* challenges Plato's political model as the most just by showing through allegory how the leader of such a regime, whom Plato calls the philosopher-king, is able to, unchecked by external authorities, construct and enforce an ideology that promotes unjust ends. *Alamut* lends itself to being read as an allegorical portrayal of both Plato's just republic and the ideologically driven totalitarian regimes that overtook World War II-era Europe. In this paper, I contest Plato's claim that knowledge of virtue necessarily compels virtuous behavior of the wise and use *Alamut* to show that such transcendent wisdom can actually empower leaders to construct ideologies that, rather than actually promoting virtue, instead manipulate the masses toward vice in service of the leader's personal agenda. Guided by its historical context, I investigate *Alamut* as a cautionary tale that imagines potential consequences of Plato's *Republic* and also address how his model manifests in terrorist organizations today. My project aims to highlight the power of ideology, both as presented in *Alamut* as well as through *Alamut*, as the novel itself extends certain stereotypes regarding the Middle East's relationship to terrorism.

Historical Context for *Alamut*

Born in Trieste, Austria-Hungary, in 1903, Vladimir Bartol studied everything from philosophy and literature to biology and psychology, all of which figure centrally in *Alamut*. While studying in Paris in his late teens, Bartol found inspiration for his masterpiece from a friend who introduced him to "Old Man of the Mountain," Marco Polo's tale of the fortress of Alamut, which he had encountered on his travels. This account describes a powerful warlord who won

his men's "fanatical loyalty" and used it to spread his power through suicide missions. Bartol spent a decade developing *Alamut*, situating it in an eleventh century Iranian setting so well-researched that nothing about the novel suggests its Slovenian roots except for the language in which it was originally written (Biggins 382).

The political context lurking in the background of *Alamut*'s construction informs not only its reception but also its key themes. Slovenia was annexed by Germany and Italy between 1941 and 1945, and the communist Yugoslavian regime saw the book as threatening for years (Biggins 382). The prevalent Slovenian view that literature could build national unity hindered *Alamut*'s reception because, for reasons that will become clear, the book may be interpreted as a subversive criticism of the existing regime and of conformity of thought (Komel 356). Totalitarian regimes were sprouting up across Europe at the time of *Alamut*'s formation, and Michael Biggins, translator of the English edition of the novel, suggests that we can read it as an allegory of early-1900s European totalitarianism. Biggins observes, "Hasan ibn Sabbah, the hyper-rationalistic leader of the Ismaili sect, becomes a composite portrait of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin" (383). Given Biggins' reading of *Alamut*, I will follow his commentary on the novel as a cautionary tale against the political exploitation of ideologies to oppress the masses.

Plato's Republic and the Fortress of Alamut as Totalitarian States

This concept of a hyper-rationalistic leader ruling a state is also forwarded by Plato. In "Plato's Totalitarianism," C.C.W. Taylor assesses the status of Plato's just state, as described in *Republic*, as totalitarian (280-82). He identifies two key characteristics of totalitarian states: authoritarianism and ideology.

Authoritarianism is marked by a lack of significant power on the behalf of ordinary citizens to influence political decisions. Ideology is defined as "a pervasive scheme of values...promoted by institutional means in order to direct all or the most significant aspects of public and private life towards the attainment of the goals dictated by those values" (Taylor 280). Under these definitions,

Taylor concludes that Plato's ideal state is totalitarian. It is authoritarian because all political decisions are in the hands of the philosopher-king and not the citizens. Further, it is ideological: the leaders' knowledge of the "Good" (referring to the Form of the Good in Plato's metaphysics) is the basis for their authority and the source for the state ideology's content. What leaders promote as Good is realized in the state through a tight-knit system of education, politics, and morality, and each citizen is expected to defend and advance this ideology. It should be noted that while Taylor and other scholars regard Plato's *Republic* as solidly totalitarian, it has also been read as everything from democratic to oligarchical. In this paper, I maintain that central elements of Plato's republic may at least plausibly be applied to the construction of a totalitarian state.

Alamut exemplifies the totalitarian model described in *Republic*. It is founded on the unquestioned authority of Hasan, the philosopher-king of Alamut, and on the ideology that he has constructed and integrated into every aspect of his fortress. Ibn Tahir, a fresh and particularly keen feday, or warrior, notices the rigidity with which Alamut is internally organized from early on: "He had already begun to recognize that this new world had its own hard and fast rules, that it was organized and governed from within, from the inside out, and that its structure was consistent, logical, and complete" (Bartol 55). Each class, from the houris to the fedayeen to the dais, is to perform only its assigned role, and none may question the established system or Hasan's intentions behind it. Miriam, one of the houris, or maidens of paradise, also realizes that "Hasan's behavior had been utterly consistent" (196). Each of his beliefs, from his "contempt for everything the masses held sacred and indisputable," to his "ambivalence about all received knowledge," to his "absolute freedom of thought and action," reflect his critical worldview and guide his governance (196). Using the absolute authority he establishes by constructing a false religious ideology, Hasan is able to enforce unjust totalitarian rule and to earn his faithful followers' support for it. To preserve their faith, he, at all costs, maintains the consistency of his ideology, even publicly killing his son and only heir to show that his laws bend for no one.

Given that Alamut is a totalitarian state built on the structure described in

Republic and that Hasan is its philosopher-king, what can we make of the fact that he does not, as argued by Plato, lead the city in the direction of virtue? Perhaps by revisiting concepts of justice, we may make sense of Hasan's vicious actions in *Alamut*. Karl Popper examines the nature of justice in *Republic* in Chapter 6 of his *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (1945). He observes that when we consider justice, especially those who come from a humanitarian perspective, we often associate it with equal treatment of people—before the law, in courts, and in advantages as well as burdens. This conception of justice as impartiality promotes egalitarianism, the view that all people have equal inherent worth and are deserving of equal treatment. Yet, for Plato, minding one's own business by “keep[ing] one's own station” (i.e. doing the job of one's own class) was considered a virtue (Popper 84). Popper argues that, for Plato, justness is a term applied to “that which is in the interest of the best state,” which consists of keeping one's own station insofar as it contributes to the maximal functioning of the whole (89). The obligation of the individual to the state necessitates strict class distinctions, class rule, and prevention of class mobility. In Plato's *Republic*, injustice is conceived of as the “changing or intermeddling within the three classes” (Popper 78). Whereas the modern western tradition typically identifies justice in a lack of privileges among people, Plato identifies it in the strength and stability of the unified state. In Popper's conception of Platonic justice, *Alamut* is, in fact, a just state, complete with stringently assigned roles meant to advance the goals of the state and a foreboding emphasis on preserving the status quo. Suleiman explains the way of things to ibn Tahir: “That's just how it is and nobody but [Hasan] needs to know why it has to be that way” (48). Everyone must comply and trust that Hasan's dictates are in the best interest of the whole.

The Rise of Totalitarianism in World War II-era Europe

Popper's controversial interpretation of Plato's *Republic* as oppressively totalitarian is grounded in key biographical features of his life, as is the case with Bartol's writing of *Alamut* and even Plato's writing of *Republic*. All three wrote during turbulent times, responding to the issues at stake in their respective

sociopolitical contexts: Popper and Bartol wrote amidst the Second World War in Europe, and Plato wrote in the chaotic aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, which was characterized by political executions, the tyrannical dictatorship of The Thirty, and a bloody civil war. Born in Vienna in 1902, Popper found inspiration for his political philosophy and critique of totalitarianism in the 1938 annexation of Austria (Thornton). He was frustrated by the inability of democracy to combat the rise of fascism in Austria in the decade following 1920 and by the Marxists' warm reception of it, because he saw its potential to collapse capitalism and set the stage for communism (Thornton). Popper revisited Plato—who had, until the late nineteenth century, largely been associated with a fantastic utopian vision lacking any serious political implications—in order to identify dangers of the political structure in Plato's *Republic* (Sasaki 5). Writing in these critical war years, Popper, like several other philosophers, connected Plato's theories directly to the political landscape that put them into practice, the most extreme examples of which are Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Mussolini's Italy. Plato's philosophy takes on new life in the political structures, ideologies, and methods of these dictatorships. The consequences presented in *Alamut* also emerge in these historical examples, suggesting that Plato's model can have real-world implications that are not particularly optimistic.

In Italy, for example, Benito Mussolini forced the king to allow him to establish his own government and became its prime minister on October 29, 1922. In "Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy," Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi offers explanation for how Mussolini's regime obliterated the nation's democratic features and established a dictatorship in 1925 through "tirelessly invented symbols, myths, cults, and rituals" (6). Mussolini presented himself as a heroic, esteemed leader—an image central to the Italian fascist ideology that secured his power. This ideology emphasized the revival of the prodigious Italian state, rooted in its powerful Roman history, and romanticized war as a "potentially regenerative" tool associated with the redemption of its power, and also glorified violence as a necessary tool for the "revolution" that it claimed would restore the state (Falasca-Zamponi 6-7). The regime united its

citizens against outsiders by constructing this ideal of a glorious state; however, “the existence of the state depended on people’s faith in it” (Falasca-Zamponi 7). In a speech he gave in 1926 for the Novecento Art exhibit, Mussolini claimed that “in order to give wise laws to a people it is also necessary to be something of an artist” (Falasca-Zamponi 15). Like Hasan, Mussolini treated himself as an artist and the state as art: the masses were passive material for him to mold into his ideal vision. He perceived them as incapable of reason and critical thinking, sentiments echoed in Bartol’s construction of Hasan. His power and influence and the desire for more led Mussolini to invade Ethiopia and Greece, to lend support to Spanish Fascists during the Spanish Civil War, and to enforce anti-Semitic legislation.

A similar situation ensued in Germany, where Adolf Hitler, an ally of Mussolini, established rule over the Third Reich in 1933. In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), Hannah Arendt describes how popular support was vital even for totalitarian leaders like Hitler (as well as Stalin) to initially assume power and then to manipulate the public that gave them that power:

Hitler's rise to power was legal in terms of majority rule and neither he nor Stalin could have maintained the leadership of large populations, survived many interior and exterior crises, and braved the numerous dangers of relentless intra-party struggles if they had not had the confidence of the masses. (306)

Like Mussolini and Plato, Hitler promoted a nationalistic ideology in which the good connoted the good of the state, not of the individual: “The right is equivalent to being good or useful in distinction to its parts” (Arendt 299). Hitler also embraced the power of rhetoric to persuade the people, and those who heard him speak regarded him as one might a “popular preacher with the power of revelation” (Overy 16). He harbored deep contempt for the majority of humankind and spoke of his enemies in destructive, hateful language. He perceived people as pawns and explained his exceptional influence over the crowds by claiming, “The masses are like an animal that obeys its instincts. They do not reach conclusions by reasoning” (Overy 19). Plato also insisted on the masses’ incapacity for autonomous rational capacity, and Bartol’s Hasan, too,

recognized that “the vast multitudes...don’t know [what really is]” and that the best a leader can do is feed them “fairy tales and fabrications” (201). Furthermore, Hitler capitalized on the inclination of people to conform to group opinion in large, emotionally driven crowds: “At a mass meeting, thought is eliminated” (Overy 19). Such conformity, if directed toward an end established by an influential leader, could achieve a great deal for that leader. Hitler recognized and enforced Plato’s point in *Republic* that the impressionable masses should be subjugated to a rational leader. This led to the oppression of entire citizen groups through extreme policing by the SS, the suppression of opposition (both civil and political), policies of discrimination toward political enemies and certain demographics, and ethical atrocities including the Holocaust.

Another tyrannical ruler, Joseph Stalin, established a dictatorship in Russia in 1922 and took Plato’s conception of the rational leader to the extreme. In an interview with an American journalist, he was insulted when asked what role luck played in his political career because he attributed superstitious belief in gods and devils to “an old Georgian granny” and claimed belief in just one thing: “the power of the human will” (Overy 4). He had a “shrewd, informed, cautious, and organized intelligence,” and read and wrote extensively (Overy 9). Stalin, like Hitler and Bartol’s Hasan, saw people as tools for achieving his alternative motives and only kept them around so long as they were of value to him; when they stopped being useful, he eliminated them. Distrusting and simultaneously distrustful, he was known to be able to gain the faith of someone he was at the same time plotting against. Stalin was able to kill thousands of his party members and to rule so viciously not because he was sadistic but because he was “a man who used the weapons he understood to achieve the central purpose to which his life had been devoted since he was a teenager” (Overy 13). He shaped his life and actions around a single ideology—that of building and consolidating socialism in one country—and did everything in his power to enforce that ideology. Several millions of victims are estimated to have died as a direct result of his control, notwithstanding those who died from the famines that occurred due to his harsh policies. Stalin’s devotion to a sole ideological aim and his two-faced personality

are recreated in Hasan, who devotes his life to maximizing political power through destroying his enemies and is willing to abuse and backstab his most faithful followers to achieve that goal.

Hasan serves as a composite representation of these three European dictators. He has the compelling charisma and acute intelligence, the impenetrable commitment to a purpose and ideology, the contempt for the masses, and a fiercely opportunistic perception of those masses. He also brilliantly exploits followers' faith to serve his own agenda. Hasan is hyper-rationalistic and feeds on the susceptibility of his followers to emotions and propaganda, taking advantage of what he perceives as their inability to think critically and autonomously. It is evident how Bartol could be read as responding to the totalitarian uprising in Europe, especially in his native Italy, and as constructing a novel that shows the traumatic consequences of such absolute political power by someone wise and trusted enough to be able to construct and enforce an authoritarian ideology.

***Alamut*: Plato's System in Action**

We must first evaluate how Plato arrived at his conception of the just state to appreciate what his intentions were and where they could have gone astray. In Books II to IV of *Republic*, Socrates, upon being challenged by Glaucon to explain justice of the soul, verbally constructs a just city to explain this virtue. In this city, we find three classes: the producers, or working class; the auxiliaries, or guardians of the city; and the philosopher-kings, the philosophers who will rule over the other classes. Harmony between these classes, located in the proper balance of power between them, requires the rulers to decide what is best for the city and the producers and guardians to carry out the ruler's dictates unconditionally and unquestioningly. One can already recognize the first signs of threat to the citizens' liberty and rights in a state where they are forbidden from challenging their own class position or the authority of their leader.

The rulers of the just city must be philosopher-kings because only philosophers, Plato emphasizes, are fit for the position. A philosopher is, as the term suggests, a lover-of- wisdom, one who desires and pursues all kinds of

wisdom and is insatiable for an ever-clearer understanding of truth (Plato 150). Plato insists that few qualify as philosophers, but that “members of this small group...have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and at the same time they’ve also seen the madness of the majority” (170). They recognize the susceptibility of the masses to appearances and false beliefs, and they break free from the mold and think for themselves. Importantly, they must be both naturally adept to practice philosophy and to lead a city. The masses under their rule, those guided by belief rather than truth, are best suited to “leave philosophy alone and follow their leader” (149). They are not only less capable of thinking for themselves but are actually dissuaded from doing so.

Alamut’s Hasan-i Sabbah serves as philosopher-king for the Iranian fortress of Alamut in 1092. Keen to explore the intricacies of the nature of people and the universe since an early age, Hasan dedicated his life to study. A life of intense philosophizing and impactful experiences leads Hasan to arrive at a radical conclusion which he holds onto as the one guiding truth of his life: the truth is unknowable. As Plato figured only a philosopher could, Hasan establishes how he penetrated the delusions, particularly religious ones, fed to the masses and has discovered true wisdom:

So I divide humanity into two fundamentally different layers: the handful that knows what really is, and the vast multitudes that don’t know. The former are called to lead, the latter to be led. The former are like parents, the latter like children. The former know that truth is unattainable, while the latter reach their arms out for it. What else can the former do, but feed them fairy tales and fabrications? What else are those but lies and deceptions? (201)

Hasan understands that the God-fearing doctrines he and his peers were spoon-fed by religious (and so also, at the time, political) authorities from an early age were merely constructions designed to elicit obedience from the masses. The prophets had to feign performing miracles in order to win the public’s respect and ultimately to secure their own power. Without that power, and without the supervision of a just God, the masses would have nothing to fear and no way to be

controlled. For order to be maintained, they must be told these lies; it is on deception, Hasan notes that an institution's power rests.

Plato also argues that deception is necessary for the just republic to function optimally. The rulers, he insists, are the only ones justified in executing such deception: "If it is appropriate for anyone to use falsehoods for the good of the city, because of the actions of either enemies or citizens, it is the rulers. But everyone else must keep away from them" (65). Specifically, Plato suggests that the guardians of the city, in order to become fearless, needed to "be told stories" that instill courage (61). He also endorses telling citizens a noble lie—a myth of metals that designates their social positions as God-granted—in order to discourage discord by justifying class distinctions.

Hasan embraces this storytelling maxim at Alamut in a shocking, though ingenious way. His guardian class consists of the fedayeen: Ismaili assassins that he has recruited to Alamut and trained rigorously to fight for the Ismaili sect in holy war against religious dissidents. Hasan manipulates the religion of Islam, to which he knows his soldiers subscribe wholeheartedly, to present himself as the voice of and second-in-command to Allah. As such, he tells the fedayeen he has the power to deliver them to the paradise promised to virtuous believers after death and especially to the martyrs who die for their faith. Hasan anticipates that such a hefty claim would invite doubt from the fedayeen, however, and has planned for that.

Behind the fortress of Alamut, hidden from view from the fedayeen, there lie exotic gardens in which Hasan has placed lush plants, exotic animals, and the most beautiful young women that could be found far and wide. These women, called houris, have been trained in the art of love by a teacher who ensures that they seduce without fail and gives them something to tighten themselves in order to create the illusion of virginity (most of the houris, however, have extensive sex experience as the prized property of prior men). Hasan has a few fedayeen at a time drugged and carried into the gardens to be seduced not only by these attentive women but also by the allure of the picturesque, soothing setting, so that by the time they are re-drugged and carried back to the fortress, they are

convinced of having seen paradise. The fact that the men only enter this space at night and amidst the minimalist, abstinent lifestyle of a feday make the illusion all the more tempting. As we will see, however, not all the fedayeen buy it.

This delusion that Hasan has constructed earns him not only the fedayeen's devotion, as they now believe him to be in contact with God, but also their unfaltering commitment to him in battle. These men, desperate to be reconnected with the pleasures of heaven and assured fully that their sacrifice in battle would not be in vain, are more than willing to die for whatever cause he deems worthy enough to make martyrs of these men. Their body-breaking training as soldiers and the deprivations they endure make them eager to slip back into the peaceful existence of paradise and to be remembered as heroes for it.

The Cave of Ignorance

Beginning in Book VII of *Republic*, Socrates introduces the famous cave allegory that further illuminates the dangers of the kind of deception fundamental to Plato's model, enforced in *Alamut*, and ubiquitous in totalitarian regimes at large. In order to explain the relation of the philosopher-king's knowledge to the masses who are clouded by belief, Socrates likens the life of the masses to an existence confined to the walls of a cave. He has us imagine a group of men who, for their entire lives, have been chained in a fixed position to one wall while perpetually facing the opposite wall. They cannot see behind them, cannot turn to see one another, and cannot see themselves. Behind them is a dividing wall, and behind that wall are puppeteers who cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners can see. These shadows are lit by a fire placed between the prisoners and the puppeteers—a source of light the prisoners are unaware of. The sounds these puppeteers make as they whisper among themselves are believed by the prisoners to come from the shadows, which they believe to be figures in themselves. For these prisoners, “the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts” (187). They live in perpetual ignorance, believing reality to be what is actually just an illusion, a shadow of reality.

Plato conceives of ignorance as a state of delusion that people must emerge from painfully and deliberately in order to seek truth: “Consider then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like if something like this came to pass...he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see things whose shadows he’d seen before” (187). Such a break from accepted reality would be staggering in itself, but the prisoner is still only in the first transition out of appearances. The second step requires being led out of the cave, which has to this point comprised the prisoner’s entire universe: “And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn’t let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn’t he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn’t he be unable to see a single one of those things now said to be true?” (188). The freed prisoner’s eyesight would need to adjust drastically in order to properly see the world outside of the cave; the prisoner would eventually progress from being able to discern shadows, to images of people and things, and finally to things in themselves. At the height of the prisoner’s exposure to truth, “He’d be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself” (188). The sun, the prisoner would recognize, is the source of everything visible. Now, upon returning to the cave after having witnessed these things outside of it, the prisoner would “count himself happy for the change and pity the others” (188). The prisoner would become distant from worldly human affairs, choosing instead to orient the soul to the higher wisdom awaiting outside of the cave. This truth-seeker could better rule a city than “people who fight over shadows,” having become equipped to make decisions based on the actual nature of things (192). Hasan is the primary philosopher-king who has seen the light in the novel, but another one soon emerges in his footsteps.

Exit from the Cave

Hasan positions himself as one who has awoken and seen the sun (recognizing the falsity of religion), returned to the cave (the fortress of Alamut), and taken on

leadership of the cave. He sets up a pyramid of power that preserves his absolute rule by carefully dispersing knowledge downward through different branches of control. Should his religious followers discover that Hasan is willing to have his fedayeen kill themselves in the name of the false ideology he has constructed, they will distrust and abandon him. From the start of the novel, he refrains from showing himself to the members of Alamut in order to preserve the illusion of his divinity. He trusts his dais, teachers, and administrators to take care of the fedayeen's training, which is aimed at solidifying the soldiers' commitment to the cause and their preparation to fight to the death for it. The middlemen that execute Hasan's orders are the puppeteers in the cave and the fedayeen are the prisoners.

Hasan may have remained the only one on the fortress grounds to fully understand the ideology guiding Alamut's operations had it not been for an acutely observant feday by the name of ibn Tahir. Ibn Tahir comes to Alamut to join the Ismaili cause and avenge his Ismaili grandfather, and he is received graciously for his association with the brave faith-fighter. Almost immediately upon his arrival, ibn Tahir questions the happenings at this mysterious fortress: "The castle concealed a great mystery, this much he sensed....Would he ever be given the chance to remove the veil from it, to look it in the face?" (149). Unlike his peers, he attempts to navigate the cave; however, when he tries to explain how Alamut's contradictory religious doctrine can be reconciled with what he knows to be true of official Islam doctrine, he is warned to cease his inquiries. The fedayeen explain that Hasan "can forbid or permit whatever he wants" and that they must obey him in any case (35). They have been taught by the middlemen that Hasan can allow what has been forbidden by the Prophet, because "Allah has given him the power to issue commandments and prohibitions" as well as the ability to open the doors to heaven (159). Hasan has legitimized his absolute power by crediting it to God.

When he enters paradise, ibn Tahir insists to the houris that it is all a dream, perhaps a game devised by Hasan. He insists that he will not be fooled and that Hasan's pellets have put him under this spell. He tugs incessantly at his reason to dispel the illusion, reflecting on his feelings to draw himself back to

reality. Though he recognizes that it must be a product of “some incredible skill of [Hasan’s],” he soon lets down his guard and becomes receptive to the pleasurable experience (231). He develops feelings for one of the most beautiful girls in the garden, Miriam, and his love for her makes him feel like he is genuinely in paradise; he yearns to remain with her. Ibn Tahir recognizes that, even if this is all a well-devised deception, his feelings, at least, are real and make him want to believe. This is how citizens in a delusive society may be inclined to respond: even if they recognize something amiss, it is often easier to yield to an immediately rewarding falsity than to suffer for the truth.

After the fedayeen are re-drugged and brought back from the garden to Alamut, Hasan tests their faith by asking about their experience. The men insist that he has delivered them to paradise and that they will testify to their peers about his ability to do this and about the bliss they experienced. In the terms of the cave allegory, the men have gone from one cave to another and then returned to the first ready to preach about a reality that was, in fact, another illusion. Hasan is using them as pawns to promote his agenda and to bind more tightly the prisoners’ obedience to him. Jokingly, he refers to this stage in his plan as “Awakening” or “Return from paradise,” but these are, of course, false stagings (251).

Ibn Tahir feels a wall rise between the fedayeen and himself, because he has been changed by that night. Back at Alamut, he feels deeply melancholic, lacking in something essential, and is desperate to return to his beloved. Hasan’s deception has produced the intended effect, as the only way for ibn Tahir to return to the fantasy is through death. Recognizing ibn Tahir as a reliable candidate because of this, Hasan sends him on a suicide mission to kill the grand vizier, an enemy of Hasan. He is to travel to the grand vizier’s estate, stab him with a poisoned dagger, and then “commend [himself] to Allah” (281). Hasan promises him heaven, and Miriam in particular, for his feat. Ibn Tahir is to rest assured that this act is in the service of a grander purpose and to execute it without question or challenge.

Ibn Tahir accepts, travels to the grand vizier, and stabs him confidently. Witnesses are dumbfounded; they have never seen such a bold act, such lack of fear for death. They are quick to attribute it to “religious delusion” and “madness” (291). The vizier himself is shocked to see the youth of the boy that murdered him and questions his purpose in the act. Ibn Tahir defends himself using the false Ismaili doctrine, stating that he was executing the orders of a master who had been given power by Allah Himself. Having been closely acquainted with Hasan in the past, the vizier sees that the boy has been duped and exposes him to the deception (i.e., drags him up to the light, despite ibn Tahir’s reluctance to believe the truth and forego the old delusions). The truth shocks him, and he must reformulate his reality.

Seeing the Sun

Ibn Tahir learns that he had not, in fact, seen paradise, but instead had seen the gardens left behind from previous kings who had them built behind the old castle for amusement. The vizier also shares with ibn Tahir the actual, undisclosed Ismaili motto: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted” (292). Hasan composed this maxim after realizing that the universe is not governed by a just God but is actually meaningless and indifferent to humanity; nothing can be determinately “true” because there is no universal order to serve as a standard for truth. Given the absence of judgment or punishment from a higher entity, humans are free to do anything and “everything is permitted” (168). This leaves clear potential for chaos, however, so people seeking to prevent anarchical disaster or to exploit this understanding in order to gain power can construct ideologies to tame the masses and convince them of higher entities; they control through fear. Interestingly, this maxim is also believed to reflect the last words of the historical Hasan (Burroughs 61). The religious reality presented to ibn Tahir and to his peers is simply a construction of reality, a shadow on the wall manifested by a master puppeteer. The vizier, on his deathbed, sees that “[ibn Tahir] has seen the truth” and frees him to return to Alamut alive to reap revenge on Hasan (296).

Meanwhile at Alamut, Hasan has decided to demonstrate the extent of his power in front of an enemy army by ordering two of the men who have seen paradise, who have craved a return to paradise ever since, to commit public suicide on the spot. Both agree without hesitation. One stabs himself and the other jumps off a tower; even in death, both men appear ecstatic, like men who find salvation in death. This convinces any fedayeen who may have doubted that Hasan “is master over life and death for his subjects” that he can, in fact, send followers to paradise at will (307). The witnessing fedayeen, too, are now willing to follow their peers to paradise.

When ibn Tahir returns to the cave of Alamut, it is not as a prisoner, but as one who has seen through the shadows and identified their source. As Plato predicted, ibn Tahir is shocked by this new reality, which has forced him to abandon the one that previously provided false security. Ibn Tahir agonizes: “How could he have guessed that a religious leader, whose devoted followers all thought he served justice and truth, could be such a vile fraud!” (329). He accuses Hasan to his face of deceiving those who had unwavering faith in him in order to “accomplish [his] criminal goals” (335). This scene informs a critical point of concern in Plato’s theory of justice: the citizens must blindly help their leader accomplish his goals, whatever they may be, trusting without question that he understands and actually promotes what is best for the state.

When ibn Tahir confronts Hasan about his ploy, Hasan patiently listens and then proceeds to grant ibn Tahir’s final wish to have a burning question answered: “How were you able to come up with such a dirty scheme for us, when we’d pledged ourselves to you body and soul?” (335). The dynamic takes a critical turn as Hasan calmly discloses his perspective on the truth:

Do you think the overwhelming majority of people care about the truth? Far from it! They want to be left alone, and they want fairy tales to feed their hungry imaginations. But what about justice? They couldn’t care less, as long as you meet their personal needs. I didn’t want to fool myself anymore. If this is what humankind is like, then exploit its weaknesses to achieve your higher goals, which will benefit them too, even though they don’t understand that. (336)

Hasan has made himself into a prophet for the masses to follow, drawing on their gullibility and passion for pleasure to earn their obedience. He emphasizes how a person's subjective paradise provides real pleasure and how, so long as one does not see through its illusory nature, one can die happy, something Ibn Tahir understands as he succumbed to the temporary pleasures of paradise despite suspecting their illusory nature. The person whose knowledge prevents succumbing to illusion, contrarily, is denied that pleasure and enters what Hasan knows to be the lonely and empty space of philosophy. Ibn Tahir, having reached transcendent understanding, has now accessed truth: he has left the cave and seen the sun. Hasan frees him to travel and study the world. Plato emphasizes that philosopher-kings must be selected from the best of the auxiliaries; Ibn Tahir has, from the start, outshone his peers in intellect and courage, and it is fitting that he has ascended intellectually to the rank of philosopher.

Ideology in Modern Terrorism

The justice promoted by Plato's state leaves substantial potential for corruption. It can quickly become an excuse for the violation of human rights in the service of ideologies created by leaders whose wisdom enables their manipulative techniques. The consequences of the system Plato advances are increasingly evident in *Alamut* as, one by one, those who have been made players in Hasan's political games fall tragic victims to it. As a consequence of all the deception, two of the houris and two of the fedayeen take their own lives. Ibn Tahir, too, would have died in vain had the truth not been revealed to him in time. Hasan's leadership, rather than promoting virtue and harmony, wrecks human lives to advance the state's/his goals.

The issues at stake, particularly as they affect human lives, transcend *Alamut*, permeating western culture today in its relation to Islamic extremism. In *Trends in Modern International Terrorism*, Boaz Ganor concedes the difficulty of defining terrorism because of the tendency to perceive it as freedom fighting, but generally conceptualizes it as the "deliberate use of violence aimed against

civilians in order to achieve political goals (nationalistic, socioeconomic, ideological, religious, etc.)” (21). In *Alamut*, Hasan outlines such political goals and sends his fedayeen to enforce them through violence.

Modern terrorist organizations, like Alamut and the totalitarian regimes of Europe, direct all of their efforts and resources, up to and including human lives, toward a single ideological agenda. Though there are certainly vast varieties of terrorist organizations at work today with unique methods and missions, I will focus on a particularly ideologically driven one—al-Qaeda, an Islamic extremist group. In his essay “Ideology in Terrorism and Counter Terrorism,” Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, explains how al-Qaeda followers perceive the US and Israel as co-conspirators working on a global level to oppress Islam and its followers. They despise American presence in the Arabian Peninsula and blame the US government, people, and foreign policy for the suffering in the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda aims to combat these culprits by consolidating a united Islamic nation that permits force, if necessary. It targets those who do not share its worldview, both Muslims and non-Muslims, and teaches that it is “a religious duty of Muslims around the world to wage jihad on the American land, American citizens, Israel and Jews” (Gunaratna 7).

Their ideology, popularly called jihadism, actually contradicts most Islamic religious teachings (like Hasan’s does). However, it maintains strong support because it provides religious justification for terrorism and defends Al-Qaeda as an institution “defend[ing] the dignity and pride of the nation” (Gunaratna 6-7). Adherents’ loyalty is further solidified by the belief in martyrdom that drives the mission: “Al-Qaeda’s operatives firmly believe that Allah guides and rewards those who sacrifice themselves for a noble cause” (Gunaratna 8). The belief that God will guide and reward those who sacrifice dispels terrorists’ doubts or hesitations, as it does for the fedayeen in *Alamut*. It also helps to create a unified collective working toward the same goals by minimizing internal discord:

The *baiah* or the pledge of allegiance serves as an assurance that those affiliating themselves to the organization are committed to the organization's ideology. By instituting it, the organization is freed from conceptual problems arising from differences in opinion. To a certain degree, through it an acceptable level of uniformity is maintained which contributes to the organization's stability and ease of management and administration. (Gunaratna 8)

Ideology is the critical driving force for al-Qaeda, above publicity, money, and/or fame. The organization's ideology legitimizes its mission and justifies its chosen means to its end. Though Osama Bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda, is "demonized in the Western media," his followers and fighters see him as a hero who had forsaken his wealthy comforts to live among his poor followers and help them defend their faith (Gunaratna 9). Gunaratna emphasizes that, more so than its tactics, it is al-Qaeda's creed that is most threatening and powerful, and that those waging war on the terrorist organization can only succeed by challenging its very ideology.

How *Alamut* Advances Orientalist Ideologies

At the same time that *Alamut* cautions against ideology as a manipulative tool, it also proliferates certain ideologies itself. We must ask why Bartol, who was writing in Slovenia in the 1900s, chose to set his novel in eleventh century Iran. The obvious answer is that he wanted to make visible a critique of totalitarianism without being personally targeted. As aforementioned, the communist Yugoslavian regime felt threatened by *Alamut*. Situating it in a time and place so alien to his contemporaries was likely a safeguard against persecution or censorship.

The decision to set it in Persia, however, places Bartol within a European tradition of appropriating Middle Eastern culture for self-interested purposes. In "Monster, Terrorist, Fag," Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai explore how long-standing racial ideologies caricature and stereotype Islamic terrorists. They describe the cliché perception of Islamic terrorists in post-September 11 America: "We hear often the idea that sexually frustrated Muslim men are promised the heavenly

reward of sixty, sixty-seven, or sometimes even seventy virgins if they are martyred in jihad” (Puar and Rai 124). Bartol ties this idea to *Alamut* directly. The terrorist is posited as abnormal, a “racial and sexual monster” symbolizing the deviant psyche in the Western notion of the individual (Puar and Rai 124-25). Hasan’s operations at *Alamut* demonstrate nothing if not deviancy, and the fedayeen are portrayed as willing to die for, among other reasons, the virgins of paradise, exhibiting the stereotyped “sexual depravity of the Oriental torrid zone” (Puar and Rai 124).

In a note preceding *Alamut*, the publisher claims, “in publishing this book, we aim to undermine hateful stereotypes, not reinforce them” (i). They insist that the ideologies the novel cautions against are intended to symbolize the nature and dangers of ideologies in general, not to suggest that Islam or even religion in general incline one toward terrorist activity. The characters in the novel should not, the publisher emphasizes, be interpreted as representing Islam or the religion’s endorsement of violence. However, the question of why the Middle East was singled out among all the regions to have produced extremist groups throughout history, from the Japanese to the European, still stands, and we are brought back to where we began, with the West’s tradition of using the Middle East as a whipping boy for fanaticism.

Biggins also addresses the stereotypes operating in *Alamut* and attempts to caution against them in an ironic afterword to *Alamut* titled “Against Ideologies.” Biggins realizes that “the most blinkered reading of *Alamut* might reinforce some stereotypical notions of the Middle East as the exclusive home of fanatics and unquestioning fundamentalists” (386). Besides reiterating the presence of such a risk for misinterpretation, Biggins does little to justify Bartol’s decision to take that risk and instead hands responsibility to the reader to “come away from *Alamut* with something very different” (386). His defense certainly seems at odds, though, with the novel’s back cover, which lures readers using Orientalist clichés: “If you want to learn the true story behind the 72 virgins awaiting al-Qaeda’s martyrs in paradise, *Alamut* is the training manual.”

Bartol elucidated his motivations for *Alamut* in a commentary he

published for the 1957 edition of the novel. In it, he suggests that readers focus less on Hasan's "terrible, inhuman, and despicable" methods and instead appreciate the solidarity and human connection fostered in response to these by the fedayeen and the houris (388-89). He praises the values of friendship, love, and truth, moralizing while evading the elephant in the room: why use this completely unfamiliar Middle Eastern setting and not so much as address its use?

I am not suggesting that Bartol was consciously forwarding a racist ideology; instead, I propose that his work produced such an ideology despite his intentions. In fact, the inevitability of the reproduction of this ideology is precisely the point: even a criticism of ideology cannot escape ideology. In "Orientalism in Bartol's Novel *Alamut*," Mirt Komel explains how the novel was first published in the United States following Al-Qaeda's September 11 terrorist attacks and was used to explain the "irrational behaviour of Islamic extremists, who disregard their own personal safety and have no moral compunction in killing civilians" (357). By conceiving of them as irrational, we distinguish ourselves from and polarize terrorists, making it easier to forget their humanity and the incredibly diverse motivations driving their behavior. Furthermore, we risk viewing them as reflecting a broader group of people, particularly when they become our only point of contact with an entire religion or country. *Alamut* became Slovenia's most successful piece of literature known abroad, "all the while reproducing Orientalist stereotypes disguised as answers to complex political and cultural problems" (Komel 357). For some, this novel could be the only representation they have ever encountered of the Middle East. Hence, while *Alamut* warns against reproducing Plato's ideologically driven political model, the reader must remember that it also reproduces stereotypes about a complex demographic. Indeed, this very essay could be read as perpetuating certain Orientalist ideologies for its selection of Al-Qaeda to exemplify modern terrorism; this is why thinking for oneself and seeking truth through different sources (a key lesson of *Alamut*, as well) is of vital importance.

A more subtle lesson we may draw from *Alamut* is that one way to escape ideology is to create one's own and detach from it post-production, as Hasan did.

However, as *Alamut* shows, such an existence is painfully lonely. Perhaps Plato designed his republic to be led by someone who would deny any emotion and human connection; such a leader could make citizens happy with fantasies while being fully aware of their spuriousness. Hasan often mentions how his followers found bliss in his illusion. And some, like the fedayeen who committed suicide for it, died ecstatic and fulfilled. In this interpretation, Hasan appears as the most altruistic of people, serving as a god on Earth who constructs truth for his adherents in a way that gives them real joy at the cost of his intellectual loneliness. However, this interpretation fails to rectify the fates of those who did not die blissfully, such as the heartbroken houris who lost their loved ones. When deception enters the political formula, citizens are from the very outset denied justice by being denied the right to the truth and the ability to make fully informed decisions. As Plato himself emphasized, truth is the highest good and is categorically superior to all beliefs and appearances, no matter how pleasant they may be (1049).

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