

Book Review

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Iranian Studies, 2019

Review

Iran: A Modern History, Abbas Amanat, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, ISBN 9780300112542 (hbk), 979 pp.

Abbas Amanat's latest book is a lucid narrative of more than 500 years of Iranian history. Influenced by the French *Annales* School, the author pays close attention to the continuity of deep structures in Iranian history and examines economic history, geography, material culture, and climate as *longue durée* factors that affected the nation's political and diplomatic history. In this way, Amanat provides refreshing new insight into both well-known and unknown facts of Iran's history from the rise of the Safavid Empire to today. He also makes critical comparisons between Iran and contemporary Europe, India, and the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt. This is another major achievement of the work that makes it of great interest to both Iran specialists and others in the field of modern history.

In his discussion of Safavid Iran, for example, he shows that the empire did not live in geographical and political isolation. The Safavids shared with the Ottoman Empire and the Mughal Empire, as well as with some imperial systems of Europe at the time, some rudiments of modernity. These included "well-defined territorial boundaries, a sponsored and often enforced religious creed, armies that had great firepower, agrarian economies that were affected by the new world system of long distance trade, overseas and transoceanic contacts, and monetary trends" (p. 35). In the discussion of Safavid forced conversion of the population to Shi'ism, Amanat similarly draws parallels with

other modern states, such as Spain and England, where “conversion to a state-sponsored creed, in this case Shi’ism, served as the social and moral mortar necessary to hold together the building blocks of a soon rejuvenated empire” (p. 75). In the course of a few centuries, this conversion led to the development of a modern Iranian-Shi’i nationalism. Amanat shows the very gradual emergence of this nationalism: **forced** conversion to Shi’ism could only be implemented in the territories that were geographically accessible to Shah Ismail. This meant that Mesopotamia, Eastern Anatolia, and southern parts of Central Asia “could no longer be easily incorporated into Iran proper despite common Persianate cultural, religious and ethnic ties. Therefore, Shah Ismail’s world-conquering project of [enforcing Shi’ism] was bound to stop at the threshold of Iran’s natural frontiers” (p. 75). After the fall of the Safavid Empire, the Afsharid Nader Shah’s policy of drafting all able-bodied men from remote villages and his attempts to end Shi’i-Sunni sectarianism and create what might be called a Pan-Islamic identity, combined with his court’s references to ancient Iranian history, all contributed to a form of proto-nationalism (p. 143). Subsequently the Zand dynasty, in the second half of the **eighteenth** century, and later the Qajar dynasty, also contributed to this process, by reviving images of the ancient Iranian past and permitting a coffee-house culture where the stories of *Shahnameh* were recited (p. 183). We usually do not associate the Babi religion in the mid-**nineteenth** century with the development of Iranian nationalism. But **in** the concise and highly informative description of the Babi movement, Amanat shows how Babism also contributed to a sense of Iranian nationalism, merging elements of Shi’ism with Iranianism. Babism continued the cyclical view of history, as was common in the Shi’i tradition. But eventually there was a conscious effort to break away from Islam. There was a new interpretation of resurrection, not in the traditional discourse of whether it was a bodily or spiritual resurrection, but resurrection as a symbol of the end of an era, and the beginning of another (p. 239). Babism, Amanat writes, emerged at a critical juncture, “when Iranian society had become conscious of its own national identity, more aware of external military and economic challenges, more critical of the shortcoming of its own state and religious institutions” (p. 245). Bab wrote some of his work including the *Bayān* in Persian, which like Arabic he considered a sacred language. He adopted a novel solar calendar with **nineteen** months. The start of the year was to be Persian Nowruz and would replace the lunar Islamic calendar (p. 241).

Another continuing pattern of Iranian history was the inherent insecurity of the position of grand viziers compared to that of their Ottoman counterparts. We see this in the Safavid era, but it is discussed in much greater detail in the Qajar era, most visibly in the tragic death of Amir Kabir in 1851. We also see it in the early stages of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Here again as in earlier centuries, a progressive minister and champion of reforms, Amin al-Dowleh, is forced out of the court due to a variety of factors including court intrigue, foreign interests, and clerical conservatism (p. 323). The same pattern would later continue in the Pahlavi era, most notably with the 1953 Anglo-American Coup in which Mohammad Reza Shah played a key role in overthrowing the premier Mohammad Mosaddeq.

Amanat's keen attention to economic policies offers background on political, diplomatic, and religious aspects of Iran's modern history. He pays careful attention to major global economic problems that preceded the Constitutional Revolution. The first major US economic depression of 1893, which left a serious impact on Iran's silver-based currency, is among these factors. Following the cancellation of the Tobacco Concession (1892), Iran had to pay a heavy indemnity as the global depression led to a sharp devaluation of Iran's silver between the years 1892 and 1893. To raise the required revenue, the government farmed out all the remaining customs revenues. Custom duties doubled under the Belgian administrators of the border trade, who heavily favored the Russians, and this led in turn to the ruin of many small and mid-sized merchants (p. 325).

Amanat does not limit himself to the continuous resurrection of these deep patterns in Iranian history. He points to the originality of the Constitutional Revolution as well, the fact that unlike the 1908 Young Turk Revolution or the anti-colonial movements in the Arab world, Iran's Constitutional Revolution was a grassroots movement marking a historical turning point that placed Iran on the path to socio-political modernity. He follows its grassroots history as he tells the story of the Constitutional Revolution from the sit-in protests (*basts*) of 1905 to the formation of the first Majles in 1906-8, the civil war of Tabriz in 1908-9, the formation of the second Majles in 1909-11, the arrival of Morgan Shuster in 1911 and the public support that he received, and the Russian machinations and British collaboration that finally ended the Constitutional Revolution in December 1911. But here again he emphasizes the Babi elements in the Constitutional Revolution. The very idea of a house of justice (*beyt al-'adl*) was rooted in the Babi religion. The ferocious persecution of religious reformers had convinced the Azali Babis to conceal their religious views, channeling their socially progressive ideas into legal and constitutional language, rather than a religious one.

In reading this extremely impressive work, I only wished that more of a gendered view of politics was incorporated into the uncovering of the deep structures of Iranian history. By this I do not mean more discussion of women, as prominent women such as Mahd 'Olyā or Qurrat al-'Ayn are taken up. Rather, we miss the enduring gender patterns in Shi'i-Iranian culture and how issues of gender and sexuality have repeatedly shaped the macro-politics of Iran. For example, in the treatment of the highly violent and disruptive insecurities of the Safavid through the Qajar royal administrations, a discussion of Iranian traditions of polygamy would have shed greater light. In the Iranian royal court, where shahs often had four formal wives and numerous temporary ones, as well as slave concubines, intrigues, backstabbing, murder, and other violence were normal occurrences. Since only one son could become king, he would often order the execution of all his brothers and other contenders for power soon after coming to power. In medieval and early modern Europe, the Catholic Church dealt with this issue in a different way. As Stephanie Coontz has shown,¹ the Church recognized only the son that was born of the king's formal mar-

¹Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.

riage to the country's queen, and often refused to recognize the king's many other children born of his concubines. This was a great stabilizing factor both for the Church and for many European monarchies and also helps explain the great patronage that many queens bestowed upon the Church. Another way of dealing with this problem was the solution adopted by the Ottomans. As Leslie Pierce has shown, in the Ottoman harem there were four wives who could potentially produce heirs.² The harem administration adopted a policy of one mother, one son, so that when a wife gave birth to a son, she was henceforth denied access to the king. In this way the number of potential sons born to the same mother was limited, and thus the number of contenders to power was also reduced. In the Iranian Shi'i courts, however, no efforts were made to systematically reduce the number of contenders. All children born of temporary or formal wives, including recognized children of *kenizes*, were eligible for inheritance and could be potential claimants to power, making murder of one's competitors the only available solution to the sons (and mothers) in the royal harem.

A second gendered issue that could have received more attention has to do with the book's argument that "[t]hroughout, there was precious little articulation of political thought: democratic rule versus despotism, civil and human rights versus power of the state, legislated human law versus the primacy of divine law, and secular values of the emerging society versus requirements of the sharia" in the Constitutional Revolution (p. 381). Here again, greater attention to gender and status hierarchies would shed more light on the issue. At the turn of the twentieth century any serious discussion of the above issues, whether democracy, civil rights, or sharia versus constitutional law, immediately led to the question of women's place in society, their access to public spaces, as well as rights of religious minorities of Iran, and other marginal people such as slaves. Citizens immediately asked: who was entitled to these democratic rights? Did they include women as well as men? Propertied people as well as landless peasants? Muslims and non-Muslims? What was to be done with existing sharia laws that required the subservience of religious minorities to Muslims or women to men? What about the non-recognized religious minorities, such as Babis? There was also the fact that the balance of power had shifted dramatically by the early twentieth century. Christian nations had become powerful colonial forces, were sending emissaries and merchants to Iran on a regular basis, and were urging the Iranian state to grant protection to non-Muslims, and to recognize their rights—a process that had taken place in the Ottoman Empire a century earlier.

However, Usuli mujtahids remained adamantly opposed to the granting of democratic rights, more than half a century after the brutalities they had incited against the Babis and later the Baha'is. After all, what was the argument of the leading anti-constitutionalist cleric, Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri? He complained that the ignorant constitutionalists were demanding that a Muslim and non-Muslim have the same rights. He complained that in a future constitutional world women might wear pants and marry

²Pierce, *The Imperial Harem*.

non-Muslims. These were outrageous ideas to him. However, they were not incorrect assumptions about a future democratic society in Iran.

The pro-constitutionalist cleric Mohammad Hosain Na'ini's *Tanbih al-Umma va Tanzih al-Milla* (Awakening of the Muslim Community and Purifying of the Nation) is singled out by Amanat as the work of a Shi'i intellectual who seriously grappled with the project of reconciling constitutionalism with the sharia. In fact, there are better examples from this period. Naini did support the election of recognized religious minorities to the Majlis, stating that "If the minorities select someone from their rank, even though they are not expected to be loyal to Islam, they will exhibit good will toward the nation (*vatan*) and others, and such qualifications will be sufficient for their participation." But he also backed Article 2 to the 1907 Supplementary Constitutional Law, which created a committee of clerics that would monitor and veto the deliberations of the Majles. In his *Tanbih al-Umma*, Na'ini assuaged his audience's concerns. He assured them that the new laws would not legitimize the "equality of Muslims with *dhimmi* non-Muslims" or lead to the "unveiling of women." Such radical measures would not be adopted in Iran, because the constitution did not call for equality between "adults and children, sane and insane persons, healthy and sick people" and so forth. With these assurances, he convinced many other clerics that the new constitutional order, with the added Supplementary Laws, would not threaten the *ulama's* authority in any significant way.

The person who really developed a new political theory for this period was Ali Akbar Dehkhoda. However, since his writings appeared as editorial columns, rather than in a book manuscript, his views were never discussed in any great detail. In his editorials to *Sur-e Esrāfil* (1907-8), Dehkhoda articulated a new interpretation of Islam that was open to modern science, tolerant of religious minorities, and accepting of women's greater presence in the public sphere. He also undermined three central pillars of Shi'ism, *khātamiyat*, *shefā'at*, and *mahdaviyat*.³ But his argument was explosive. Several times the offices of *Sur-e Esrāfil* were ransacked and, as a result, *Sur-e Esrāfil* changed course and instead of pushing for religious reform and ways of bridging the gap between human law and divine law, moved to propagate social democratic reforms and civil liberties. This included strong support for ratification of article 8, which gave equal rights to all Iranian men before state law, rights of peasants, and an eight-hour day for workers. Thus, civil rights champions such as Dehkhoda pushed for legal reforms through legislative and grassroots means and left the project of religious reform for future generations to tackle. Soon after the June 1908 coup, Mirza Jahāngir Shirazi, the managing editor of *Sur-e Esrāfil*, was one of the first men to be arrested and executed by the state, while Dehkhoda managed to escape to Europe.

These comments are simply meant to expand on Amanat's important work, by examining the deep structures of Iranian society in other arenas, especially in gender relations and sexuality. Amanat's book is a detailed and comprehensive

³Dehkhodā, *Charand-o Parand*.

study that will be required reading for any serious student of modern Iranian history and will **still** be read in generations to come.

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