

Introduction

“The past is a foreign country.”

David Lowenthal

Iran entered the twentieth century with oxen and wooden plough. It exited with steel mills, one of the world's highest automobile accident rates, and, to the consternation of many, a nuclear program. This book narrates the dramatic transformation that has taken place in twentieth-century Iran. Since the main engine of this transformation has been the central government, the book focuses on the state, on how it was created and expanded, and how its expansion has had profound repercussions not only on the polity and economy, but also on the environment, culture, and, most important of all, wider society. Some repercussions were intended; others, especially protest movements and political revolutions, were not. This book may appear somewhat quaint and even insidious to those convinced that the state is inherently a part of the problem rather than solution of contemporary dilemmas. But since this book is about major transformations, and these transformations in Iran have been initiated invariably by the central government, it will focus on the latter hopefully without falling into the Hegelian–Rankean pitfalls of glorifying the state.

Through all the changes, Iran's geography and identity have remained remarkably constant. Present-day Iranians live more or less within the same borders as their great-grandparents. The region – three times the size of France and six times that of the United Kingdom – is demarcated in the south by the Persian Gulf; in the east by the deserts and mountains of Khurasan, Sistan, and Baluchestan; in the west by the Shatt al-Arab, the Iraqi marshes, and the Kurdish mountains; and in the north by the Aras River flowing from Mount Ararat to the Caspian Sea, and by the Atrak River stretching from the Caspian Sea into Central Asia. Three-fifths of the country, especially the central plateau, lacks the rainfall to sustain permanent agriculture. Farming is confined to rain-fed Azerbaijan, Kurdistan,

and the Caspian coast, to irrigated villages and oases scattered throughout the county, especially at the foot of the mountain ranges.

Like all national identities, Iran's is fluid and contested. Nonetheless, Iran's attachment to *Iran Zamen* (Land of Iran) and *Iran Shahr* (Country of Iran) has remained remarkably constant. Iranians identify with both Shi'i Islam and their pre-Islamic history, especially the Sassanids, Achaemenids, and Parthians. Names parents choose for their children are living proof of this: from Shi'ism come Ali, Mehdi, Reza, Hussein, Hassan, and Fatemeh; from ancient Iran, via the poet Ferdowsi and his epic *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), come Isfandiyar, Iskandar, Rostam, Sohrab, Ardashir, Kaveh, Bahram, and Atossa. This tenth-century epic continues to be widely read into the modern age. Although national identity is often deemed to be a modern invention, the *Shahnameh* refers to Iran by name more than one thousand times, and the whole epic can be read as a mythical history of the Iranian nation. Among Iranians – as among some other Middle Eastern peoples – national awareness seems to have long preceded the modern era. Of course, how it was expressed and who articulated it has not always remained constant.

Despite continuities, the twentieth century brought profound changes in almost all aspects of Iranian life. At the beginning of the century, the total population was fewer than 12 million – 60 percent villagers, 25–30 percent nomads, and less than 15 percent urban residents.¹ Tehran was a medium-sized town of 200,000. Life expectancy at birth was probably less than thirty years, and infant mortality as high as 500 per 1,000 births. By the end of the century, the population totaled 69 million. The nomadic population had shrunk to less than 3 percent, and the urban sector had grown to more than 66 percent. Tehran was a mega-metropolis of more than 6.5 million. Life expectancy reached seventy years; and infant mortality had fallen to 28 per 1,000. At the start of the century, the literacy rate was around 5 percent – confined to graduates of seminaries, Koranic schools, and missionary establishments. Less than 50 percent of the population understood Persian – others spoke Kurdish, Arabic, Gilaki, Mazanderani, Baluchi, Luri, and Turkic dialects such as Azeri, Turkman, and Qashqa'i. Public entertainment came in the form of athletic shows in local *zurkhanehs* (gymnasiums); *Shahnameh* recitations in tea- and coffee-houses; royal pageants in the streets; occasional executions in public squares; and, most important of all, flagellation processions, passion plays, and bonfire celebrations during the high Shi'i holy month of Muharram. By the end of the century, however, the literacy rate had reached 84 percent; some 1.6 million were enrolled in institutions of higher learning, and another 19 million attended

primary and secondary schools. More than 85 percent of the population could now communicate in Persian although some 50 percent continued to speak their “mother tongue” at home. Public entertainment now comes in the form of soccer matches, films, radio, newspapers, and, most important of all, videos, DVDs, and television – almost every urban and three-quarters of rural households have television sets.

In the early twentieth century modern modes of travel were just making their debut – paved roads and railways totaled fewer than 340 kilometers. According to one foreign diplomat, mules and camels were the normal means of transport since there were almost “no wheeled vehicles.”² The shah was the proud owner of the only motorcar in all of Iran. Under favorable conditions, travelers needed at least 17 days to cross the 350 miles from Tehran to Tabriz, 14 days, the 558 miles to Mashed, and 37 days, the 700 miles to Bushire. Gas lights, electricity, and telephones were luxuries restricted to a few in Tehran. One English visitor wrote nostalgically: “There are no cities in Persia, and likewise no slums; no steam driven industries, and therefore none of the mechanical tyranny that deadens the brain, starves the heart, wearies bodies and mind with its monotony. There are no gas and no electricity, but is not the glow of oil-lamps pleasanter?”³ By the end of the century, the country was integrated into the national economy through roads, the electrical system, and the gas grid. Many homes – even family farms – had running water, electricity, and refrigerators. The country now has 10,000 kilometers of railways, 59,000 kilometers of paved roads, and 2.9 million motor vehicles – most of them assembled within the country. Travelers from Tehran can now reach the provincial capitals within hours by car or train – not to mention by plane.

The century has brought equally profound changes in everyday fears. At the beginning of the period, the perennial dangers haunting the average person were highway robbers and tribal bandits; wild animals, *jinn*s, the evil eye, and black cats crossing one’s path; famine, pestilence, and disease, especially malaria, diphtheria, dysentery, tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera, syphilis, and influenza. By the end of the century, these fears had been replaced by such modern concerns as unemployment, pensions, housing, old-age infirmities, pollution, car accidents and air crashes, crowded schools, and competition to get into college. Iran has truly entered the modern world. An Iranian Rip Van Winkle gone to sleep in 1900 would hardly have recognized his environment if woken up in 2000.

The most notable change, however, has come in the structure of the state. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the state, if it could be called that, consisted merely of the shah and his small personal entourage – his

ministers, his family, and his patrimonial household. He ruled the country not through a bureaucracy and standing army – both of which were sorely lacking – but through local notables such as tribal chiefs, landlords, senior clerics, and wealthy merchants. By the end of the century, the state permeated every layer and region of the country. Twenty gigantic ministries employed more than 850,000 civil servants and controlled as much as 60 percent of the national economy; semi-governmental foundations controlled another 20 percent. Equally important, the state now wields a military force of more than half a million men. Of the notables who had helped govern the provinces for centuries, only the clerics have survived. The state has so expanded that some call it “totalitarian.” But whether totalitarian or not, the state has grown by such leaps and bounds that it now controls the means of organized violence as well as the machinery for collecting taxes, administering justice, and distributing social services. Such a state had never existed in Iran. For centuries, the word *dowlat* had meant royal government. It now means the state in the full modern sense.

Similar linguistic changes can be seen in other arenas. In the late nineteenth century, Nasser al-Din Shah reigned as *Shah-in-Shah* (King of Kings), *Padshah* (Guardian Shah), *Khaqan* (Khan of Khans), and *Zillallah* (Shadow of God). Courtiers hailed him Justice Dispenser, Supreme Arbiter, Commander of the Faithful, Guardian of the Flock, and Pivot of the Universe. The state was merely an extension of his royal person; the royal person, like traditional rulers the world over, was sovereign. By the later twentieth century, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ruled with such innovative titles as *Rahbar-e Enqelab* (Leader of the Revolution), *Rahbar-e Mostazafen* (Leader of the Dispossessed), and *Bonyadgar-e Jomhuri-ye Islam* (Founder of the Islamic Republic). His “republic” claimed to speak on behalf not only of Iran and Shi’ism but also of the “revolutionary masses” and the “wretched of the world” – terms inconceivable in earlier centuries.

The political language has changed in many other ways. At the start of the century, the key words in the political lexicon had been *estabdad* (autocracy), *saltanat* (kingdom), *ashraf* (noble), *a’yan* (notable), *arbab* (landlord), *ri’yat* (subject), and *tireh* (clan) – a term now as unfamiliar to contemporary urban Iranians as “clan” would have been to a Scotsman living in Victorian London. By the end of the century, the key terms were *demokrasi*, *pluralism*, *moderniyat*, *hoquq-e beshar* (human rights), *jam’eh-e madani* (civil society), *mostarak* (public participation), and a new word: *shahrvandi* (citizenship). In other words, average Iranians now consider themselves no longer mere subjects of the ruler but full citizens, irrespective of gender, with the inalienable right to participate in national politics. Not surprisingly, in

the 1990s more than 70 percent of the adult population regularly participated in national elections.

The century also transformed the meanings of both Iranism and Shi'ism – the two intertwining threads that have helped create national consciousness. For centuries, conventional wisdom had seen the *Shahnameh* as legitimizing the monarchy, linking the crown to the Persian language, and praising epic achievements not only of Iran but also of ancient Persian dynasties. The *Shahnameh*, in other words, was an epic proof that the identity of Iran was inseparable from that of the institution of kingship; no shah, no Iran. But by the time we come to the 1979 revolution, many argued that the epic had been written not in praise of shahs, but in their condemnation since the heroes came from outside the ranks of the royalty and most of the monarchs were portrayed as corrupt, tyrannical, and evil. One writer even argued that the Books of Kings should have been named the Book of Revolt.⁴ After all, he argued, its main hero was Kaveh the Blacksmith who raised the banner of revolt against a tyrannical shah.

Changes in Shi'ism were even more dramatic. In the past, Shi'ism had espoused doctrines which on the whole were conservative, quietist, and apolitical. It had taken interest less in affairs of this world than in the afterlife, in the soul, and in matters of personal behavior and ethics. The most sacred event in the holy calendar – Ashura in the month of Muharram – was commemorated to mark the day in AD 680 when Imam Hussein had knowingly and willingly gone to his martyrdom in the battle of Karbala in order to fulfill God's predetermined will. Shi'is memorialized Karbala, Ashura, and Muharram much in the same way as traditional Catholics commemorate Christ's Easter Passion at Mount Calvary. What is more, ever since 1501, when the Safavids established Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran, they and their successors, including the Qajar dynasty, had systematically patronized Muharram to bridge the gap between themselves and their subjects, and to cement the bond between their subjects against the outside Sunni world – against the Ottomans in the west, the Uzbeks in the north, and the Pashtus in the east.

But by the outbreak of the 1979 revolution, Shi'ism had been drastically transformed into a highly politicized doctrine which was more like a radical ideology than a pious and conservative religion. The central message of Muharram was now interpreted to be that of fighting for social justice and political revolution. Slogans declared: "Make Every Month Muharram, Every Day Ashura, and Every Place Karbala."⁵ It was now argued that Imam Hussein had gone to Karbala not because of predetermined destiny, but because he had come to the rational conclusion that the "objective

6 *A History of Modern Iran*
Table 1 *Vital statistics*

	1900–06	2000–06
Total population	12 million	69 million
Urban population (% of total)	20%	66%
Nomadic population (% of total)	25–30%	3%
Tehran	200,000	6.5 million
Life expectancy at birth	30	70
Infant mortality per 1,000	500	30
Literacy (above 6 years)	5%	84%
Government ministries	4 (9)	25 (21)
Provinces	8	30
Government expenditures	\$8.2 million	\$40 billion
Civil servants		850,000
Armed forces	7,000	508,000
Enrolled in state schools	2,000	19 million
Enrolled in universities	0	1.7 million
Miles of paved roads	325 km	94,100 km
Motor vehicles	1	2.9 million
Miles of railroads	12 km	10,000 km
Electrical production	0	129 billion kwh
Telephones	0	15 million
Radios	N/A	18 million
Televisions	N/A	5 million
Public cinemas	N/A	311
Internet users	N/A	4.3 million
Daily newspaper circulation	10,000	2 million
New book titles		23,300
Public libraries	3	1,502

situation” provided him with a good opportunity to carry out a successful revolution.⁶ Some even described him as an early-day Che Guevara.⁷ Conservatives have difficulty recognizing such ideas. Although Shi’ism – like Iranism – continues to be the language of identity, its real contents have drastically changed.

This book provides a broad sweep of twentieth-century Iran. It tries to explain how we have got to the present from the nineteenth century. It describes, on the one hand, how the formation of the centralized state has placed pressures on the society below; and, on the other hand, how social pressures from below have altered the state – especially in two dramatic revolutions. While the state has gained increasing power over society, it has itself become more differentiated, with various political groups having special links with particular social groups. The book also looks at the intimate and complex dynamics between economic and social change,

Introduction

7

between social and cultural change, and between cultural and political change – as reflected in the official ideology of the state as well as in the political culture of the larger society. In the Weberian sense, this book is a narrative of how patrimonial rule has been replaced by a bureaucratic state – one where the center dominates the periphery. Household rule has given way first to royal autocracy and then to modern bureaucracy, where paradoxically the citizen claims inalienable rights. In the Tönnies’ sense, it describes the transition from *Gemeinschaft* into *Gesellschaft* – from small face-to-face communities ruled by tradition, custom, and kinship into a large nation-state dominated by the impersonal forces of the bureaucracy, market, and industrial production. In the Marxist sense, it traces the transition from feudalism into state capitalism – from a loosely knit geographical region dotted with isolated villages and tribal clans to an urbanized and integrated economy where classes jockey for power within the state. The state is no longer a separate entity unto itself hovering over society, but a large entity deeply enmeshed in society. In the Braudelian sense, it explores the deep-seated and slow-moving shifts that have occurred in popular *mentalités* as well as the sparks, the “fireworks,” that light up the surface layer of political events. In the Foucaultian sense, it narrates how the introduction of novel “discourses” has created tension between old and new, and thereby dramatically transformed both Shi’ism and Iranism. In short, the book aspires to Eric Hobsbawm’s goal of presenting not just political history or social history, but a history of the whole society.⁸

CHAPTER I

*“Royal despots”: state and society
 under the Qajars*

Kingdoms known to man have been governed in two ways: either by a prince and his servants, who, as ministers by his grace and permission, assist in governing the realm; or by a prince and by barons, who hold their positions not by favor of the ruler but by antiquity of blood. Such barons have states and subjects of their own, who recognize them as their lords, and are naturally attached to them. In those states which are governed by a prince and his servants, the prince possesses more authority, because there is no one in the state regarded as superior, and if others are obeyed it is merely as ministers and officials of the prince, and no one regards them with any special affection. Examples of the two kinds of government in our time are those of the Turk and the King of France.

Nicolò dei Machiavelli, *The Prince*

THE QAJAR STATE

Nineteenth-century Europeans tended to depict the Qajars as typical “oriental despots.” Their despotism, however, existed mainly in the realm of virtual reality. In theory, the shah may have claimed monopoly over the means of violence, administration, taxation, and adjudication. His word was law. He appointed and dismissed all officials – from court ministers, governor-generals, and tribal chiefs, all the way down to village and ward headmen. He made and unmade all dignitaries, bestowing and withdrawing honors and titles. He even claimed to own all property, treating the country as his own private estate. Lord Curzon, after exploring the country in person and making liberal use of the India Office archives, concluded his monumental *Persia and the Persian Question* with the grand claim that the shah was the “pivot of the entire machinery of public life” and that he fused the “legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government.”¹ In reality, however, the power of the shah was sharply limited – limited by the lack of both a state bureaucracy and a standing army. His real power ran no further

than his capital. What is more, his authority carried little weight at the local level unless backed by regional notables. “The Qajars,” in the words of a recent study, “had few government institutions worthy of the name” and had no choice but to “depend on local notables in dealing with their subjects.”² In Machiavelli’s schema, the shah resembled more the French king than the Ottoman sultan.

The Qajars, a Turkic-speaking tribal confederation, conquered the country piece by piece in the 1780–90s, established their capital in Tehran in 1786, founded their dynasty in 1796, and proceeded to reign for more than a century. They presided over the center through ministers (*vezirs*), courtiers (*darbaris*), princes (*mirzas*), hereditary *mostowfis* (accountants), and nobles (*ashrafs*) with such titles as *al-saltaneh* (of the realm), *al-dowleh* (of the government), and *al-mamaleks* (of the kingdom). But they reigned over the rest of the country through local *a’yans* (notables) – *khans* (tribal chiefs), *arbabs* (landlords), *tojars* (wealthy merchants), and *mojtaheds* (religious leaders). These notables retained their own sources of local power. Even after a half-century of half-hearted attempts to build state institutions, Nasser al-Din Shah ended his long reign in 1896 leaving behind merely the skeleton of a central government. It amounted to no more than nine small entities – bureaus without bureaucracies. Five ministries (interior, commerce, education and endowments, public works and fine arts, and post and telegraph) were new and existed only on paper. The other four (war, finance, justice, and foreign affairs) were of older vintage but still lacked salaried staffs, regional departments, and even permanent files. They were ministries in name only.

The ministries were sparsely manned by families of scribes who had held similar positions since the early days of the Qajars – some ever since Safavid times in the seventeenth century.³ They treated government documents as private papers; and, since the monarch did not pay them regular salaries, they considered their positions as assets to be bought and sold to other members of the scribe families. To recognize their sense of corporate identity, Nasser al-Din Shah had decreed that “men of the pen” should wear the *kolah* – a round grey-shaded bonnet hat. By the end of the century, they were easily distinguishable from the *ulama* (clerics), *sayyeds* (descendants of the Prophet), *tojars* (merchants), and *hajjis* (those who had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca) who wore black, white, or green turbans. The *kolah* was also distinguishable from the red fez worn by officials in the rival Ottoman Empire. This term “men of the pen” carried much significance. It came from ancient Zoroastrian and Greek thought via the Persian genre of “mirror for princes” literature. This literature divided the population into

four classes, each representing the four basic elements in nature as well as the four “humors” in the human body. “Men of the pen” represented air; “men of the sword,” warriors, represented fire; “men of trade,” merchants and tradesmen, represented water; and “men of husbandry,” the peasantry, represented earth. The prince was depicted as a doctor whose main duty was to preserve a healthy balance between the four humors in the human body. In fact, “justice” meant the preservation of a healthy balance.⁴

The finance ministry, the oldest and most substantial of the four institutions, was staffed both at the center and in the provincial capitals by hereditary *mostowfis* (accountants) and *moshirs* (scribes). The Mostowfi al-Mamalek family – whose origins reach back to the Safavids – passed on the central office from father to son throughout the nineteenth century and until the 1920s. Other mandarin families – many of whom came from either the region of Ashtiyan in central Iran or Nur in Mazandaran – assisted the main governors in collecting taxes. The term *mostowfi* came from *ifa* and *estefa* meaning “collector of government payments.” For tax purposes, the country was divided into thirty-eight regions – by the 1910s they had been reduced to eighteen. Each region was “auctioned” every *Nowruz* (New Year’s Day); and the successful bidder – usually a notable offering the highest *pishkesh* (gift) – received the royal *farman* (decree) along with a royal robe making him local governor for the duration of the coming year. As such, he held the fief (*tuyul*) to collect the *maliyat* (land tax) – the main source of revenue for the central government. The *tuyul* was a hybrid fief linked sometimes to the land tax, sometimes to the actual land itself. These *tuyul*-holding governors had to work closely both with *mostowfis*, who had to verify the receipts and who possessed tax assessments from previous generations, and with local notables who could hinder the actual collection of taxes. The *mostowfis* also continued to administer the ever-diminishing state and crown lands. In the words of one historian, “even in 1923 the government continued to farm out taxes simply because it lacked the administrative machinery to collect them.”⁵ Morgan Shuster, an American brought in to reorganize the finance ministry in 1910, tried in somewhat condescending but useful terms to make sense of the complex *mostowfi* system:⁶

There has never been in Persia a tax-register or “Domesday Book” which would give a complete, even if somewhat inaccurate, survey of the sources of internal revenue upon which the Government could count for its support. Persia is divided for taxation purposes into seventeen or eighteen taxation regions each containing a large city or town as its administrative center . . . Beyond a very indefinite idea in the heads of some of the chief *mostowfis*, or “government accountant,” at Tehran