

Introduction

“The past is a foreign country.”

David Lowenthal

Iran entered the twentieth century with oxen and wooden ploughs. 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 a solution to 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 country, especially at the feet of the mountain ranges.

Like all national identities, Iran's is fluid and contested. Nonetheless, Iran's attachment to Iran Zamen (the land of Iran) and Iran Shahr (the 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, internet, 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 seventeen days to cross the 350 miles from Tehran to Tabriz, fourteen days for the 558 miles to Mashed, and thirty-seven days for 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 Book 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.

Table 0.1 *Vital Statistics*

	1900–06	2017
Total population	12 million	82 million
Urban population (% of total)	20%	74%
Nomadic population (% of total)	25–30%	1%
Tehran	200,000	8.4 million
Life expectancy at birth	30	75
Infant mortality per 1,000	500	13
Literacy (above 6 years)	5%	87%
Government ministries	4 (9)	25 (21)
Provinces	8	31
Government expenditures	\$8.2 million	\$80 billion
Civil servants		890,000
Armed forces	7,000	523,000
Enrolled in state schools	2,000	19 million (2006)
Enrolled in universities	0	1.7 million (2006)
Paved roads	325 km	160,100 km
Motor vehicles	1	2.9 million (2006)
Railroads	12 km	10,000 km (2006)
Electrical production	0	129 billion kwh (2006)
Telephones	0	74 million
Radios	N/A	18 million (2006)
Televisions	N/A	5 million (2006)
Public cinemas	N/A	311 (2006)
Internet users	N/A	36 million
Daily newspaper circulation	10,000	2 million (2006)
New book titles		23,300 (2006)
Public libraries	3	1,502 (2006)

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 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.

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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, 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 to 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 “fire-works,” 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