1 Introduction

The period from the start of the Qajar dynasty to the end of the Pahlavis, from the mid-1780s to the late 1970s, lasted just under 200 years. The Qajars ruled for about 140 years, and the Pahlavis 54 years. In historical terms, these were remarkably brief periods that were, nonetheless, marked by profound transformations and developments with long-lasting consequences. The Qajar period saw the early beginnings of differentiated state institutions and halted political reforms designed to make the system more efficient and less personalistic and arbitrary. Still, as two disastrous wars with Russia were to prove, the country had extremely weak military and political institutions and was economically underdeveloped compared with its two powerful neighbors, the Ottomans to the west and the Russians to the north. Iran was also the scene of intense international competition over the economic exploitations by British entrepreneurs on the one side and by the Russian government on the other. Concessions granted to adventurer businessmen from Britain and loans to the royal court from the Russian government combined to serve as strangleholds over the country’s economy and its resources.

Iran is one of the most invaded and most revolution-prone countries in the world.1 It was in Iran, in fact, that one of the first revolutions of the twentieth century took place. The Constitutional Revolution, from 1905 to 1911, was launched with the aim of restraining the arbitrary powers of the monarch through a parliament. The revolution featured coalitional politics, mass mobilization, a prolonged conflict between the Crown and the popular forces, and, for a brief period at least, the triumph of parliamentary constitutionalism. Ultimately, the experiment in parliamentary politics fell victim to personal and factional rivalries, foreign machinations, and the court’s unceasing hostility toward the Majles, the parliament. As the Majles languished, the Qajars themselves were also dying a slow death. With dysfunction marking the country’s political, economic,

and security predicaments, the opportunity arose for a strongman to take charge of circumstances and to try to mend the broken country. Reza Pahlavi’s political ascent was rapid. He started out commanding the Cossack Brigade, located in the north of the country, was appointed as the war minister in 1921, then prime minister in 1923, and finally as the shah and founder of a new dynasty in 1925. Statism, along with a chauvinistic nationalist ideology bordering on fascism, became the most readily apparent features of the reign of the first Pahlavi monarch. Reza Shah’s son and successor, Mohammad Reza, also tried to promote the virtues of the state under the auspices of what he called “positive nationalism,” albeit in a far less zealous manner than his father had done. The fledgling sense of popular nationalism that was first generated during the Constitutional era reached new heights in the second half of the twentieth century. It was this very nationalism, though not the official nationalism of the king, that eventually resulted in the monarch’s fall and led to the abolition of the monarchy. The revolution that put an end to Iran's long history of monarchy was more than anything else a product of deep-seated nationalist sentiments. This was a nationalism directed against the state, however, not one articulated and promulgated by it.

It would be misleading, or at best simplistic, to consider the history of modern Iran as one driven solely by the forces of nationalism and state-building. The importance of dynamics other than nationalism and the attainment of sovereignty cannot be overlooked. Technological and industrial advancement, social and cultural modernization, and, more recently, the embrace of nativism have all contributed in significant ways to the evolution of modern Iran. From a political perspective, however, all such developments have occurred within the framework and under the auspices of the state. From the Qajars and the Pahlavis, and even under the Islamic Republic, it has been the state that has promoted and dictated social and cultural norms, controlled economic and industrial growth, and shaped and influenced the lives of Iranians. Thus, to understand the history of modern Iran, it is imperative to appreciate the evolution of the Iranian state, its institutions and structures, and its encounter and engagement with foreign powers.

From a Weberian perspective, Iran’s pre-1979 states were “Sultanistic” par excellence. What political institutionalization occurred took place at the hands of overbearing personalities who dominated the country’s political life. A handful of political elites, sometimes less than a few, dictated the very manner in which institutions, procedures, and ideologies evolved.

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The monarch was not merely a king; he was the King of Kings, the very embodiment of Iranian nationhood and the personification of whatever the country stood for. He ruled by decree and directly, frequently by whim, and was restrained by no institution or body of laws except the limits of his personal abilities. In quintessentially patrimonial fashion, the country was governed as if it were a family domain, with the king's brothers, cousins, and nephews in charge of important cities and regions or, as was the case under the more recent Pahlavis, in control of strategic resources and industries. In both dynasties, patrimonialism was the guiding principle of the state. The Qajars were, after all, like so many dynasties before them, tribal warriors who had ascended to dynastic rule after defeating other tribes and peoples, each of them with their own distinctive identities and allegiances. In order to expand their reign across vast expanses of the country, Qajar kings relied on nothing less than outright kinship and tribal loyalties.

Under the Pahlavis, the style of rulership changed but its substance did not. Unlike the Qajars, the Pahlavis were not warriors bent on political domination by subduing other tribes. Reza Pahlavi, the new dynasty's founder, was instead a military man, a soldier who acquired power by compelling the reigning shah to abdicate, and who soon became shah himself. His was a military conquest, not a tribal one as the Qajar's had been. But the manner in which the new monarchy stayed in power differed only marginally from that of the Qajars. Patrimonialism continued to dominate the political system, providing perhaps the only state–society nexus through which Pahlavi rule was preserved. The patriarchal nature of Qajar patrimonialism also changed, with tribal and kinship networks and loyalties gradually giving way to more subtle nuances involving royal patronage and the incorporation as well as cooptation of elites.

Despite its growing institutional complexity, and, in parallel, its coercive efficacy, the Pahlavi state remained inherently weak. The state's continued reliance on the person of the shah only accentuated the skewed and incomplete evolution of political structures and institutions. The King of Kings remained central to political life, and the constellation of politicians and ranking administrators revolving around him never encompassed more than an unrepresentative faction of the elite’s elite. In the end, the exclusionary Pahlavis crumbled at the hands of a mass movement more ferocious than the one that had engulfed the Qajars at the turn of the century. Out of the turmoil grew a republic, an Islamic Republic, a state that not only broke with the monarchical heritage of the past but which also held on to power through religious populism and patrimonialism.

This story, one of triumph and despair, of the rise and fall of Iran’s last two dynasties, is the subject of this book. The book starts with the establishment and evolution of Qajar rule from a tribal clan to a ruling
monarchy. Agha Mohammad Khan established the Qajar dynasty; his successor Fathali Shah nationalized it; Naser al-Din Shah glamorized it; and the three other shahs that followed, Muzzafar al-Din, Mohammad Ali, and Ahmad, presided over its slow, painful death. The demise of the Qajars was hastened by the Constitutional Revolution, a historical first for Iran, a coming of age unprecedented in scope and scale.

The Pahlavis were different from the Qajars in temperament and modus operandi but also, more importantly, in goals and objectives. For the most part, the Qajars used the might and resources of the state to retain and maintain power. Whatever else happened, in the form of either progress or regress, was incidental to the central objective of rule, namely to retain power. For the Pahlavis, the purpose of rule was altogether different. Of course, they were interested in holding on to power and maximizing it within the dynasty as much as possible. But they also used the state to affect socioeconomic and cultural change. Notably, change under the Qajar had been halting, sporadic at best, and nonexistent at worst. The few individuals who made it their mission to change and reform the order of things, Amir Kabir and Mirza Hossein Khan the most famous of them, lasted on the job only a few years, cast aside or killed at the behest of insecure courtiers. But the two Pahlavi kings made it their mission to change the country, in ways only they saw fit, but change nonetheless. This myopic tunnel vision, and the defined limits of change that excluded anything political, turned out to be the undoing of the monarchy. The revolution that swept aside the Pahlavis, and with it the long history of Iranian monarchy, was, again, of historic significance. I focus here on specific aspects of it. Yet the scope and scale of the revolution, like its predecessor early on in the century, were once again unprecedented.

I have no doubt that the story that follows has gaps. Iran is a complex land, one, as a noted historian has observed, of “anguish and volatile complexity.” Its history is punctuated by autocracy and revolts, contested historical memories, religious paradoxes, evolving norms of gender and social divide, and cultural florescence and fluidity. What follows is a series of snapshots, more a discussion of cause and effects than the actual developments themselves, that combined to produce the tormented histories of Iran’s last two dynasties. History’s progression is not linear, and so neither is the chronology of this book. It goes back in time to pick up different threads. It backtracks in some places, overlaps in others. Altogether, it is my hope that the book offers a glimpse of the complex narrative that is a critical part of the political history of modern Iran.

3 Amanat, Iran, p. 6.
2 Qajar Autocracy

For much of its history, especially well into the start of the twentieth century, Iran was a paradigmatic example of a “strong society and a weak state.” Yet this has not always been the case. At times, in fact, the Iranian nation’s bonds were too frail to resist political imposition from within or from the outside. Multiple states, some indigenous and some from abroad, sought to govern over the Iranian nation. While strong compared to the states seeking to dominate it, the nation was not without its own fissures and divides. By the time the Qajars were being transformed from a tribe into a ruling dynasty, the territory, which they were later to formally call “the Guarded Domains of Iran” (Mamaleh-e Mahrouseh-e Iran), was once again reeling from invasion and attack. The Qajar state dominated society, in fact, not so much because the state was strong but because Iranian society was remarkably weak. The country had been ravaged by the Umayyad and Abbasid conquests from the west and later the Mongol invasion from the east, its political collapse hastened by deep-seated decay and the institutional fragility of preexisting states.

Society, meanwhile, had developed something of a cohesive veneer that held it together. There have always been multiple social identities in Iran, and sometimes they came into conflict with one another. Such conflicts, between clans, tribes, and locales, did not block or undermine the emergence of a larger, national identity. A local sense of belonging did not contradict belonging to a bigger national unit, awareness of which had been passed on through stories and lore, by local and state elites, and, with time, by intellectuals and opinion makers. Cultural, literary,
and political elites played important roles in giving rise to and sustaining
an overall sense of communal and territorial belonging both before and
after Iran was overrun by Muslim armies, by the Mongols, and by the
Safavids, the first leading to the country’s conversion to Islam – Sunni
Islam – and the last to the Shia faith. In each instance, and in all other
historical epochs of the country since, new elites sought to socially recon-
struct national identity, relying on preexisting elements and sensibilities.⁴

It was not until the consolidation of Safavid rule in the sixteenth cen-
tury that a more robust sense of national identity began to emerge. For
approximately 200 years, Iran, along with other Muslim lands, had suf-
f ered from the consequences of the Mongol invasion and the subsequent
establishment of Ilkhanate rule (1256–1335). A semblance of national
unity was achieved only under the Safavids, although the social, political,
and scientific consequences of Ilkhanate rule continued to reverberate
for some time well into Safavid rule.⁵ In particular, in the centuries lead-
ing up to the Mongol invasion starting in 1219, Iran and other Muslim
societies had witnessed a flourishing of scientific and other achievements
in multiple arenas, ranging from algebra, mathematics, and trigonometry
to astronomy, physics, chemistry, mysticism, and rational philosophy.
Although the accumulated consequences of works by scientific luminar-
ies – such as Jabir Ibn Hayyam (721–813), Muhammad ibn Musa al-
Khwarizmi (780–850), Zakariyya Razi (854–925), Abu Nasr Al-Farabi
(872–950), Ibn al-Haytham (965–1040), Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni (973–
1048), Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), and
Yahya Suhrawardi (1154–1191) – were already in decline for about a
century before the Mongol invasion, for some time the Muslim majority
countries in general and Iran in particular had led the world in science,
philosophy, and the prevailing conceptions of nature and the universe.
This decline had been precipitated also by changes in climate, which had
decimated Iran’s once-vibrant cotton and spinning industries, and by the
subsequent migration of much of the industrial talent and know-how out
of the Iranian plateau.⁶

The Mongol invasion, renowned for its bloody ferocity, effec-
tively blocked any scientific progress that had occurred up to that
point in Iran. It instead gave rise to social and cultural conservatism,

⁴ Ahmadi, Bonyad-haye Hoviyyat-e Melli-ye Iran (Foundations of Iranian National
Identity), pp. 118–119.
⁵ Abbas Edalat, “Farziyeh-e Faje’h-zadegi: Ta’sir-e Paydar-e Faje’h Moghul dar
Tarikh-e Siyasi, Ejtema’i, va Elmi-ye Iran” (Hypothesis of Catastrophic Events: The
Lasting Impact of the Mughal Catastrophe on Iran’s Political, Social, and Scientific
⁶ Ibid., pp. 4, 7–8.
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fundamentalism, superstitious beliefs and mysticism, and arbitrary divisions of entire cities such as Isfahan and Tabriz into rival factions. Some observers have even argued that the bloodlust and brutality that marked the political conquests and reigns of Shah Ismail Safavid (1501–1524), Shah Abbas (1571–1629), Nader Shah (1688–1747), and Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar (1742–1797) were modeled after and a result of lessons learned from the Mongol subjugation of Iranians and their neighbors centuries earlier.

Ilkhanate rule had slowly given rise to the spread of Shia beliefs among the population, who sought shelter from the rapacious rule of their overlords in the Shia emphasis on public and collective mourning and celebrations of martyrdom and sacrifice. Already, commemorating the heroic death of Imam Hussein in Karbala in 680 had become commonplace since the days of the Buyid dynasty (934–1062). This was to greatly facilitate the consolidation of Safavid rule starting in 1501, when the founder of the dynasty, Shah Ismael, made Shia the state religion and converted much of the country to the sect. During the Safavid period, which lasted until 1722, Shia beliefs and practices, which now had state sanction, were urbanized and the religion was turned into a cosmopolitan project. With the collapse of the Safavids, Nader Shah put an end to a sustained theory of Shia state and a corresponding conception of civil society.

Post-Safavid Iran saw a succession of tribal rulers appealing to pre-Islamic conceptions of Persian kingship in order to hide their nomadic dispositions. The period between the collapse of the Safavids and the emergence of the Qajars lasted less than a century but is known as the “era of fear.” The country was once again wracked by competing claims to the throne and attacks from the outside, mostly by Afghan tribes. Into the vacuum stepped Agha Mohammad Khan, one of the leaders of a northern Turkic tribe called the Qajars. In 1785, Agha Mohammad Khan marched into the royal capital, Isfahan, and ensured its submission. The following year, the cities of Tehran and Mashhad also submitted, putting an end to the Afsharid dynasty that had made Mashhad its...
capital. By 1789, Agha Mohammad Khan felt secure enough to crown himself the king of the domain, the shah.

**The Qajar State**

Before exploring the reigns of each Qajar monarch, several defining features of the dynasty should be highlighted. The most important of these had to do with the anemic nature of state institutions and the continued dominance of the person of the king over all affairs of the state from the start to almost the very end of the dynasty. As one of the country’s powerful tribes, the Qajars were no strangers to politics, several of their leaders having in the past served in prominent positions in the Safavid court. In power, however, they continued the tribal practice of highly concentrated and personalized leadership. The king, adopting the old title of shah, remained the center of all political power. The power of the dynasty was rooted in patrimonial loyalties to the king at the top and then patron–client relations between big men and lesser men from there. Patrimonialism reigned supreme, governing every aspect of the relationship between state and society. Relations between the king and local elites were, of course, also important. But the king, whose position and authority had long been justified through historical and literary works – the Iranian national epic is, after all, called *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings – was seen as the embodiment of national values and the transmitter of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. The state remained a reflection of the royal household, governed by imperial fiat and decree.

In the tradition of Iranian monarchy, lasting into the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, the monarch had a divine right to rule, conferred upon the king by God’s grace. This bestowed upon the person of the ruler a sense of religious sanctity. Nevertheless, despite the absolute nature of his power, the monarch could not wage battle against the *sharīʿa*. All seven Qajar monarchs retained court astrologers to testify that the king enjoyed divine blessing as evident in celestial signs.

Naser al-Din Shah’s long reign began to usher in a slow but steady process of political institutionalization as the monarch tried to change

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some aspects of the elementary and highly informal means through which he ruled. By the end of his reign, he had created something of an institutionalized state machinery. The strictly patriarchal nature of Qajar rule gradually changed to one of patrimonialism as the shah began to share some of his powers and authority with a few ministers and advisors. While the monarch still remained the personal embodiment of imperial rule, he began routinely appointing ministers and administrators and, early in his reign at least, actively encouraged the implementation of social and political reforms. Although he became increasingly indifferent toward reforms and the affairs of state near the end, by the time of Naser al-Din Shah’s death social change had gathered enough momentum to set in motion dynamics that, decades later, resulted in the Qajars’ downfall.

Qajar rule was more than just personalized. It was also arbitrary and despotic. Although despotism had hardly been absent from Iran’s political history before the Qajars, its intimate link to Qajar rule acquired added significance. Because the Qajars were able to extend their control over almost all of Iran, except in some contested areas near the Russian and Afghan borders, Qajar autocracy was exercised not only in the new capital, Tehran, but also throughout the provinces by royally appointed provincial governors. These governors, often surpassing the shah in greed and in their harsh treatment of the local population, were made up mainly of Qajar princes or local tribal leaders who had pledged allegiance to the royal court. The primary responsibility of the provincial governors, called valis, was to ensure that the royal treasury in Tehran was sufficiently supplied.

While Tehran had become the center of the country’s political life with the Qajars’ assumption of power, most provincial towns were also subjected to the same royal authority. Prior to the Qajars, the existence of competing tribal dynasties enabled the peoples of different regions to throw their support behind one of the many regional kings when disenchanted with the local ruler. This opportunity no longer existed under the Qajars’ centralized rule, although some provinces continued to experience frequent rebellions against local governors.

By the time the second Qajar monarch, Fathali Shah, came to power in 1797, the Qajars’ transition from a ruling tribe to a national dynasty was well underway. The dynasty had in many ways been nationalized, with royal authority now reaching into the far corners of the kingdom. It was this extension of royal authority throughout the kingdom that later led to the occurrence of Iran’s first nationwide revolution. In previous

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historical instances, rebellions against the person of the ruler had almost always been limited to a particular region or a tribe. The establishment of Qajar autocracy and its extension throughout the kingdom through the provincial administrative system eventually resulted in the development of Iran’s first national revolution, one which started in the capital but soon spread throughout the country.

Another significant development that occurred during the Qajar era was the intense and somewhat unsavory encounter between Iran and the Great Powers. The growing contacts between Iran and the two super-powers of the time, Britain and Russia, developed not only out of diplomatic interests but also from emerging global economic and military dynamics. Within the context of the Industrial Revolution and rapid colonial expansion, and driven by their own commercial and political needs, European powers found Iran to be an increasingly important factor in the emerging international competition over land and resources. European colonial expansion met with the unsuspecting enthusiasm of a few reform-minded Qajar politicians, who believed that the country’s progress could be expedited through increasing its economic and diplomatic ties with Europe. Also conducive to foreign penetration was the avarice of the shahs, who mindlessly secured foreign loans in order to finance their European journeys and palace escapades.

These and other factors combined to turn Iran into a playground for international rivalry and competition. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the country fell victim to a series of international developments over which it had little or no control. While the Qajars succeeded in transforming Iran from a tribal domain into a dynastic kingdom, they could never acquire genuine respect in the international community, economic and diplomatic independence, or true national sovereignty for the country. Growing awareness and resentment of political despotism and foreign domination culminated in the emergence of a number of political uprisings. The protests over the Reuter and Tobacco Concessions, in 1872 and 1891–1892 respectively, grew out of the development of nationalist sentiments fanned by xenophobia. By the time of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, liberal and democratic ideals had become prevalent enough to compel members of the intellectual elite and even many commoners to embark on a movement to curtail the shah’s unlimited powers.

From Tribe to Dynasty

The founding of the Qajars as a dynasty was a decidedly tribal affair. Not surprisingly, the influence of tribal customs and characteristics in the Qajar dynasty were most pervasive during the reign of its first monarch,