Iran

From encounters with Western powers in the nineteenth century through to a Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, and from the overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddeq in the 1950s to the current Islamic Republic, Iran's history has rarely been anything other than tumultuous and dramatic. The ways in which Iranian society has participated in and reacted to these events have been equally fascinating and revolutionary.

Here for the first time in English, Yann Richard offers his take on the social and political history of Iran since 1800. Richard's account traces the common threads of national ideology and violent conflict that have characterized a number of episodes in Iranian history. By also concerning himself with the reactions and feelings of Iranian society and by referring frequently to Persian sources and commentaries, Richard gives us a unique insight into the challenges encountered by Iranians in modern times.

Yann Richard is Professor Emeritus at the Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris. A specialist of the history of contemporary Iran, Persian literature, and the sociology of modern Shiism, he is the author of a number of books on modern Iran and is also the coeditor of the "Iran Studies" book series.

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A Social and Political History since the Qajars

Yann Richard
Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris
With the assistance of Willem Floor

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PREFACE

With the eruption of violent conflict and the opposition between the Americans and their allies on the one hand and the national and religious power structures in the Middle East on the other, the media have often spoken about Iran and the Iranians. But what do they know about them?

Why do Iranians seem to be the main beneficiaries of American interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003)? Does the signing of the nuclear agreement with the Americans, Europeans, Russians, and Chinese in Vienna in 2015 provide Iran with a new opportunity for regional hegemony? Or is Iran a real danger to the security of Israel? Is the American withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018 a path towards peace or a challenge to the stability of the Middle East?

To answer the many questions that have been raised about the violent anti-western reaction of the "Islamic Republic," one needs to appreciate the history of the country since its first encounter with European nations and to take into account the way this history is understood by Iranians: history as told and imagined is often a very different narrative from documented history.

This book offers fresh insights into the history of modern Iranians. In the West, we hardly know them any better than our Enlightenment forebears who saw Persia as paradigm of strangeness. The book aims to show how Iran, after a period of systematic secularization, has become an Islamic republic, and, at the same time, a foil for western intellectuals. Since ayatollah Khomeyni founded a state that can scarcely be said to resemble a paradise of liberties, as western

intellectuals had dreamt when fulminating against the Shah, the country has fallen into collective disgrace for reasons that are not only due to its religious orientation. Those who denounce the chadors, veils, stoning, and other questionable practices in Iran have long remained silent about the situation in Saudi Arabia, a much less liberal country, but one linked to the western economic system; there women are veiled in such a way that one cannot even see their eyes, and their rights are much more limited than their Iranian sisters'.

To complicate the situation, Iranians themselves are tormented by their collective superego. Regardless of their political leanings, they are crushed by the image of their past, less by nostalgia than by a paranoid anguish about external conspiracy and fear for their future. Periodically rediscovering the grandeur of their history, they compare it with the tribulations of the present and think that the cause of all their problems rests with others. "*Az mā-st ke bar mā-st*," ("what happens to us comes from ourselves,") answers a Persian saying. But Iranians' concern for their future is fueled by painful memories.

The weight of its rich heritage creates an identity strain in Iran. Like the French, who for many years thought that, unless you spoke their language, you could never appreciate their genius, Iranians are not far from believing that only they have the right to talk about themselves. That a foreigner speaks and reads their language seems to them an intrusion, as they like to hide behind their identity. While contemplating themselves, they see only what should be seen. Indeed, far from homogeneity, Persia has been governed by Turkic-speaking dynasties for many of the last ten centuries.

In 1987, an Iranian academic journal launched a debate on the status of the Turkic Azeri language, which is spoken by about 40 percent of the population, and which a recent book proposed as the country's second official language.[1] In response to the editor's highly nationalistic speech, a defender of Turkish referred him to his own genealogy: after the Mongol invasion that saw his ancient forefather killed, the latter's widow taught Persian to her child, but a child that was the result of rape – the memory of the wounds of the past always haunts a country that, since the time of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, has suffered invasions, pillaging, and occupations. Iranians often think that their identity has been stolen from them, that it has been violated,

[1] N. Purjavādi, "Irān-e mazlum."

perverted by foreigners. Some nationalists, looking for truth in the ancient past, point the finger at Islam and the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Others point to Turkic, Seljuq, and Mongol invasions. For the last two centuries the culprits have been the Europeans and, most recently, the Americans, whose interference the Iranians rail against. Thus, they readily overlook or excuse their own weaknesses.

History and Ideology

How can one have a dispassionate and objective discussion in such a highly charged environment? Can the historian of Iran ignore the emotional weight of certain facts? Is the neutrality of the researcher not akin to treason? The ideological discourse, either nationalist, communist, monarchist, or Islamic, incessantly uses historical data to give it a moral or political slant. With the exception of some rare heroic figures, such as Karim Khān Zand or Amir Kabir, no other actors in that history are embraced by everyone. Prominent personalities such as Hasan Taqizāde, an important politician since 1906 until his death in 1970, are still the subject of laudatory or resentful biographies: a neutral presentation would be suspected of hidden intentions. The founding heroes for one side are the black sheep for the other. Fazlollāh Nuri, the highly regarded theologian who was sentenced by a revolutionary court and hanged in the public square in 1909, is at the same time the champion of an Islam that resists reforms imposed by Europeanization and the traitor who allied himself with the plotting monarch. For one group, Rezā Shāh revived Iran; for others, he is the most corrupt despot who sold out to foreigners. Mosaddeq, adored by nationalists, has been dragged through the mud by Islamists since the 1979 Revolution.

In this context is it possible for a westerner to write a history of Iran that will be read by an Iranian? Although at every moment I risk acting like the proverbial bull in a china shop, such is the challenge I am trying to respond to here, in order to explicate the paths taken by Iran before it became an Islamic republic.

The challenges are multiple: how can one understand Iran today if one ignores the history of the failed encounters between Iran and the West? The historical discourse on a rapidly changing society needs distance from emotions and journalism. Documentary evidence can be unearthed at any time, in contradiction to previous statements. The historian of contemporary societies and the journalist inevitably

meet, and, in the face of unpredictable social behavior, both feel helpless. The "journalist" is under pressure to give his readers immediate information and understanding, while the "historian" can go back as far as is necessary. More so than the journalist, he has to be free of the two contrary and complementary rationalities of history: that of the long view where each event is the result of a long maturation process, where the only pertinent facts are beyond individual control, where statistics and numerical data form a barrier to speculation; and that of individual destinies, human will, and the force of circumstance. Each individual is subject to different influences and sometimes acts according to contradictory and changing motivations. Thus, the historian has to identify multiple strategies to shed light on their convergence. Generalizations are always wrong, because they depersonalize events as if they resulted from occult forces or from abstract laws, while in fact each person acts in the name of an ideal or from personal interest.

The Creation of a Modern Nation

Since the time of Darius over two millennia ago, Iran has been fortunate to lay claim to elements of an identity that has changed very little. These include its language (which has evolved from Old Persian in much the same way as other Indo-European languages have developed), the very name of the country (*Irān*, the country of the Aryans), and the borders of its imperial heartland (bounded by two seas, two mountain chains, plains, and deserts). The changes that have taken place in relation to the dynasties and regimes ruling the region have not impacted the continuity of a nation. But what is a nation? The Europeans, who invented the concept in the nineteenth century, can be said to be in the process of destroying it by introducing new concepts, the supranational (the European Union) and the subnational (Corsica, the Basque Country, Scotland, regionalism). What is the value of these concepts at a time of globalization?

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Iran has known difficult times, although the country has never been colonized. In many of the new nations of the Third World born in the twentieth century during the breakdown of the big empires, colonization has often led to the replication of imperial power structures by the national elites. In Iran, too, the imitation of foreign political structures played an important role. Were the "imitators" progressives or, on the contrary,

did they betray their homeland by selling it to a faraway power that dominated them? This debate has torn Iranian intellectuals for decades. The leaders have identified themselves with "civilized" countries and, of course, tried to reproduce their institutions and rules. But the real change happened in social behavior and policies, even when there was a regular return to authoritarianism, or even absolutism. The weakening of Iran was regularly blamed on conspiracies. In reality, the visible progress hid an undertow that the reformists were unable to suppress. Since 1906 the Iranians had a Constitution, but they had difficulty in respecting the constraints of a parliamentary system.

How can one define modernity in this society that is so different from our own? The Iranian reformers dreaming of "progress," of "civilization," wanted to identify with a European model. Beyond the exterior forms of democracy and the parliamentary system, they had to integrate types of action that were incompatible with the traditional communal system and with the sanctification of authority. It was not yet modernity, because this concept also implies active participation, never foreign imports or imitation. Politically, modernity excludes authoritarianism and absolutism, two grooves into which Iran seems to fall back periodically.

According to "developmental" sociology, which analyzes the modernization of traditional societies, a return to political absolutism is impossible in a society where citizens can read the newspapers, listen to radio stations, and watch television stations, navigate the Internet – in a word, use the instruments of participation and education in the diversity of modern culture.[2] Does Iran constitute a counter-example where modernity has not prevented political violence and where the media have fostered an idea that was rejected by the industrial societies of the West, that of a unique collective will and of greater interference of religion in politics?

This book aims to show "the creation of the nation" of Iran, and begins with the rise of the Qajar dynasty and the first national wounds suffered by Iran following the interference of its Russian and British neighbors. Despite the efforts of reformers and self-proclaimed nationalists, we have to wait until the end of the twentieth century to see the true emergence of patriotic, popular feeling in confrontations and

[2] See D. Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society. Modernizing the Middle East*, New York: The Free Press, 1958.

conflicts, first against Great Britain (1951–53), then Iraq (1980–88). The confrontation with the West – which, in another form, is an echo of the crises of the more distant past with the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Great Britain – and the current regional ambitions of Iran, cannot be fully understood without recourse to the country's history.

Basic Definitions

Irān is the name that Iranians have always given to their country; however, Westerners have preferred, until modern times, to use *Persia* and *Persians,* originally the name of the tribe that founded the Achaemenid Empire. In accordance with the usage of diplomats and travelers until 1935, one can still speak of Persia and the Persians for the country and its people. In 1935, Rezā Shāh ordered western embassies to abandon this name, which had connotations of tales, legends, and ancient culture, since he wanted to present his country, Iran, as a modern power oriented toward progress. In 1989, saddened to have to conclude that the Iran from which he had been exiled only reminded westerners of violence and fanaticism, an Iranian academic asked them to return to the ancient usage, which had a positive cultural image (such as Persian literature, painting, architecture).[3] I use both terms here without making a distinction between them.

At present, most Iranians (about 85 percent) are Shiites. Shiite Islam, imposed as the official religion in Iran at the beginning of the sixteenth century, is, with Sunni Islam, one of the two main constituent branches of Islam. In Shiism, piety is surrounded by intermediaries and intercessors, the twelve Imams and numerous saints. Religious authority is represented by theologians who are traditionally independent from the ruler and who constitute what may be called a "clergy" (*ruhāniat*). Despite certain discordant voices, most Shiites accept the Koran as established by Caliph Osman.[4] In Persia there are also, since Antiquity, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians and, since the end of the nineteenth century, a Bahai community (300–500,000 in 1979). Today, after the massive departure of Baha'is, Jews, and Christians, non-Muslim minorities represent less than 2 percent of the population,

[3] E. Yarshater, "Communication."
[4] On the distortions of the Koran, see Md. A. Amir-Moezzi and Ch. Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shî'isme ?*, pp. 89f.

perhaps only 1 percent. However, a spectacular surge in apostasy and conversion to Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, and above all to Christianity, might reverse that trend.

Within its borders, Iran has relatively well-integrated ethnic minorities: Azeris, Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs, Lurs, Baluchis, to name but a few. Regional languages are allowed, but Persian is the only official language recognized by the Constitution. The teaching of Persian is compulsory in schools, even in provinces where a local tongue may be taught in addition. Persian (called *fārsi* in Iranian Persian, *dari* in Afghanistan, *tājik* in Tajikistan) is an Iranian language, as are Kurdish and Pashto, the official language of Afghanistan.

The Qajars ruled over Iran from 1779 to 1925. The Pahlavis then ruled the country until the revolution of 1979, which is often called, to follow official usage, the "Islamic Revolution," although, as we will see, it has no intrinsic relation to Islam.

Persian onomastics are complex, as befits an imperial society where matters of hierarchy, social ranking, and protocol have a long tradition. *Mirzā* means prince when it follows the name, but a man of letters when it precedes it. *Seyyed* indicates a descendant of the Prophet, a title often usurped, but it is used as a noble title. *Khān* serves as a title, without rigorous distinction, and is sometimes simply a respectful manner in which to address men. In the Qajar period, the actual titles of nobility (*laqab*, pl. *alqāb*) in principle indicate a function in court or in the administration and are liable to sudden changes of holder, such that over the course of his life, the same person may have three or four successive titles, those that he gives up, during his lifetime, passing to another person, sometimes his son (but not necessarily so). Titles that end in *od-Din, ol-Eslām, ol-Olamā* in general are given to religious persons. Those ending in *os-Saltane* are in principle higher ranking than those ending in *os-Soltān, od-Dowle, ol-Molk* or *ol-Mamālek* (servants of the monarchy more highly honored than servants of the monarch, state, or country).

Dates are given according to the Gregorian calender, with the inevitable margin of uncertainty when converting dates of the lunar Hegira calender. For the last 100 years in Iran, a solar calender of 365 days has been used, which has the Hegira as its beginning. In bibliographical references where I give the date of publication according to the calender of origin as well as the calculated date of the Christian calender, one will sometimes find, between 1976 and 1978, dates of the Iranian Imperial calender that the Shah tried to substitute

for the Hegira calender (2535 for 1355, corresponding to 1976–77). Many references in the notes refer to Persian works in order to take account of Iranians' own perceptions of their past, even when, to me, they may seem to be erroneous: it is important to understand Iranian historiography from the inside and to articulate our view alongside that of the Iranians themselves, even when they vary considerably.[5]

The first French edition of this book was published in 2006 by La Martinière under the title of *Iran. Naissance d'une république islamique* (Iran: The Birth of an Islamic Republic) and then with some improvements by Flammarion (2009 and 2016) as *L'Iran de 1800 à nos jours* (Iran from 1800 to the Present Day). It owes much to a large number of colleagues and friends who have been with me for many years in the discovery of Persian culture and Iranian history. It pleases me to mention a few masters to whom I owe much in particular in this field: Nikkie Keddie (Los Angeles), Maxime Rodinson (d. 2004), and Jamshid Behnam, among others. The students who participated in my seminar at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, notably Oliver Bast and Nader Nasiri, now colleagues at Paris and Strasbourg respectively, my colleagues at the CNRS, as well as many others deserve my acknowledgment. But I have thought much, while writing, about all the Iranian researchers who look at the works of Orientalists with some distrust and to those among them who generously helped me in my choice of reading material and sources, whose works constituted the main foundation of my knowledge, notably Fereydun Ādamiat (d. 2008), Iraj Afshār (d. 2011), Kāveh Bayāt, Mansoureh Ettehadiyeh, Homa Nategh (d. 2016), Mohammad Torkamān and many others.

The difficulty in creating a reliable translation into English led my friend and colleague Willem Floor to write a first English draft and take the opportunity of suggesting a number of corrections. His readings brought many improvements for which I am very grateful, even when our standpoints don't always match. This English version differs in many details from the original French. I owe the elegant English rendering to Elizabeth Stone (at Bourchier) and my editor Kilmeny MacBride. My thanks to all.

[5] On modern Persian Historiography, see T. Atabaki, ed., *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture*, and particularly H. Chehabi's. contribution.

I dedicate this book to the Iranian officials who, by denying me access to their country since 2002, have increased my desire to understand the Islamic Republic. Without dissuading me from returning there, they have given me, in the meantime, greater freedom of speech. This book is also dedicated to the Iranians who are thirsty for justice having suffered torture, repression and censorship, before and after the 1979 Revolution.