

Tribes & Empire

ON THE MARGINS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Iran

Arash Khazeni



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Tribes and Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran by Arash Khazeni

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Arash Khazeni

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ABBREVIATIONS OF ARCHIVES, COLLECTIONS, AND TEXTS

BNA/FO	British National Archives, London
BP	British Petroleum Archives, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
CAM	Cambridge University, Manuscripts and Archives, Cambridge, UK
CHI	University of Chicago, Regenstein Library, Middle East Collection, Chicago
HAR	Harvard University, Widener Library Archives, Cambridge, MA
ICHO	Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (Sazman-i Mir'at-i Farhangi), Tehran
INA	National Archives of Iran (Sazman-i Asnad-i Milli), Tehran
IOR	British Library, India Office Records, London
ISFA	University of Isfahan Archives, (Kitabkhana-yi Markazi), Isfahan
JRGS	<i>Journal of the Royal Geographical Society</i>
KL	<i>Khuzistan va Luristan dar 'Asr-i Nasiri</i> , Khanlar Mirza Ihtisham al-Dawla
MB	<i>Mir'at al-Buldan</i> , Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltana
NLI	National Library of Iran (Kitabkhana-yi Milli), Tehran
NT	<i>Nasikh al-Tavarikh</i> , Mirza Muhammad Taqi Lisan al-Mulk Sipihir
PRGS	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society</i>
PRI	Princeton University, Firestone Library, Near East Collection, Princeton, NJ
RSN	<i>Rawzat al-Safa-yi Nasiri</i> , Riza Quli Khan Hidayat
SK	<i>Safarnama-yi Khuzistan</i> , 'Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Mulk
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, London
TB	<i>Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari</i> , Sardar As'ad and Lisan al-Saltana Sipihir
TM	<i>Tarikh-i Muntazam-i Nasiri</i> , Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltana
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles, Special Collections, Los Angeles

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

THE PERSIAN TRANSLITERATION used in this book follows the Library of Congress system without the diacritical marks. Exceptions are the names of places and people, such as Herat and Shahsevan, which are spelled in their common form, and terms such as *tayafa*, which are spelled without the *b*. In quoting from older European sources, I have reproduced the language and spellings used in the texts. Dates are given in the Common Era Calendar, except in cases where there is a reason to include the Islamic *hijri* calendar. All Persian translations in the text are my own, except for those otherwise credited in the notes.

TRIBES AND EMPIRE ON THE MARGINS
OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRAN

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK is about tribe and state interactions on the periphery of Qajar Iran. It explores the history of the Bakhtiari tribal confederacy of the Zagros Mountains during the long nineteenth century, when the balance between the center and the periphery in Iran was forever transformed. Drawing upon nineteenth-century chronicles, tribal histories, ethnographies, and manuscripts, the following pages examine imperial projects to develop the wildlands and settle pastoral nomadic tribes in Qajar Iran. After tracing the rise of the Bakhtiari during the early nineteenth century in the mountainous periphery of the city of Isfahan, the narrative turns to examining the role of road building, oil exploration, and the Constitutional Revolution in the waning of tribal power and independence in Qajar Iran.

The following pages approach the history of nineteenth-century Iran from its edge—in this case the Bakhtiari tents and the Zagros Mountains—and place tribal history at the heart of a tale about empire and assimilation. Such an account of Qajar Iran has rarely been attempted. With some exceptions, most of the literature on the period has emphasized the political and cultural center. This study, by contrast, is concerned with the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes on the periphery. It asks the question, how was the balance between the state and the tribes, the center and the periphery, transformed in nineteenth-century Iran? In the Qajar period (1785–1925) the nature of tribe and state interactions was altered and the autonomy of pastoral societies was compromised through imperial projects that opened the land and assimilated indigenous subjects into “the guarded domains of Iran.” The tribes did not remain passive, however, in the imperial transformation of environment and society. These projects of empire in the hinterlands of Iran were always mediated through encounters, accommodation, and engagement with the tribal periphery.

Tribes and Empire

In the early nineteenth century approximately half of Iran's population was nomadic.¹ These pastoral nomadic societies were politically organized into tribes (*il*; *tayafa*; *'ashayir*; *qabila*) and claimed extensive land for their seasonal pastures (*yaylaq*; *qishlaq*). The tribes possessed customary grazing rights and migration routes (*il rah*) and were governed by an array of local rulers, including the paramount chieftains of the confederation (*ilkhan*; *ilbayg*), the hereditary tribal chieftains (*khan*), the headmen of the subtribes and clans (*kadkhuda*; *kalantar*), the "white beards" and camp elders (*rish safid*).² By necessity the Qajar state treated the tribes as semi-autonomous political units and delegated responsibility for taxation and conscription in the tribal areas to the khans and headmen. For this purpose the khans often received land grants (*tuyul*), and this policy allowed for indirect administration of tribal territories.³ The state ruled the periphery indirectly, and no sustained policy aimed to settle Iran's tribal populations permanently. The tribes gave nominal allegiance to the early Qajars, offering military service and paying light taxes while retaining substantial autonomy beyond the pale of permanent state domination. Although the tribes were subject to the state's traditional policies of control, including punitive military expeditions and forced migrations, powerful tribal confederacies flourished on the margins of the empire.

In the frontiers and hinterlands of Qajar Iran, tribal populations were semi-independent and beyond the reach of state authority. The tribes of the borderlands included the Turkmen, the Baluch, the Kurds, and the Shahsevan. Although geographically on the margins, these groups had longstanding interactions with the cities of the Iranian plateau and their culture. They lived within the boundaries of Iran, but all except the Shahsevan remained Sunni, unlike the majority of the Persian population. During the Qajar period the Yamut, Guklan, Tekke, Salor, and Ersari Turkmen tribes, among others, inhabited the northeastern provinces of Astarabad and Khurasan in the steppes known as the Turkmen Sahra. The Baluch, an Indo-Iranian tribe, lived in the eastern province of Sistan, the Makran highlands, and the borderlands with India and Afghanistan. The Kurds were concentrated in the Zagros Mountains, on the edge of the Ottoman Empire and Iraq, in western Iran near the city of Kirmanshah. The Turkish Shahsevan confederacy inhabited the northwestern frontier in the vicinity of Dasht-i Mughan.

The tribes in the hinterland included the Qashqa'i and the Bakhtiyari confederacies in the south. The Qashqa'i, a confederation of Turkic-speaking



Tribes in Nineteenth-Century Iran

tribes, had their encampments and grazed their flocks in the southern province of Fars, near the provincial capital of Shiraz. The Bakhtiari, the tribes that are the focus of this study, migrated between the highest peaks of the Zagros Mountains west of Isfahan and the plains of Khuzistan. Since the tenth century CE the tribal groups on the periphery of Iran had periodically established powerful dynasties, moving “from the tent to the throne.”²⁴ The Qajar dynasty was the last of these traditional tribal states to rule in Iran. By the late nineteenth century, pastoral nomadic subjects and tribal confederacies were confronted by a modern state that was “the enemy of people who move around.”²⁵

Anthropology and the Tribes of Iran

Previous scholarship on tribal societies in Iran has paved the way for this book. Tribalism in Iran is a subject that has in the past generated much scholarly interest, particularly among anthropologists. In the first half of the twentieth century, ethnographies by Iranian scholars appeared on several of the tribes in Iran, and beginning in the 1960s Western anthropologists and social scientists began

conducting research on Iran's major tribal populations.⁶ Scholars such as Fredrik Barth, Lois Beck, Jean-Pierre Digard, Gene Garthwaite, William Irons, Brian Spooner, Pierre Oberling, and Richard Tapper produced a series of new ethnographies on various tribes on the Iranian periphery.⁷ *Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri Tribe of the Khamseh Confederacy* (1961), by Fredrik Barth, was a groundbreaking study of pastoral adaptation to the natural environment. Barth's ethnography of the Basseri began by describing the elementary units of tent, clan, tribe, and confederation, moving on to examine economic, political, and demographic aspects of pastoral ecology in the southern Iranian province of Fars. In *Nomads of South Persia*, Barth presented a groundbreaking work that heralded a new literature on pastoral nomadic groups in the Middle East.⁸ Following Barth a number of new anthropological studies appeared on the Qashqa'i, the Bakhti-yari, the Shahsevan, and other tribes in Iran.

In the early 1980s, two important monographs on the Bakhtiyari tribes appeared: an ethnography by Jean Pierre Digard and a history by Gene Garthwaite. Digard's *Techniques des nomads baxtiyari d'Iran* (1981) and other articles take segmentary lineage theory as their point of departure. In contrast to Barth's image of the kinship-based and egalitarian Basseri tribe of Fars, Digard found the various segments of the Bakhtiyari tribes to be unequal in power and lodged in a significant social hierarchy. *Techniques des nomads baxtiyari* provided a Marxist analysis of the Bakhtiyari, with emphasis on the division of labor, modes of production, and unequal access to resources among the tribes. Land and its distribution, he suggested, resulted in the establishment of centralizing structures and the division of classes among the Bakhtiyari.⁹ Digard, however, did not account for history, leaving the written sources for the study of the Bakhtiyari practically untouched. Garthwaite's *Khans and Shabs: A Documentary Analysis of the Bakhtiyari in Iran* (1983) helped to recover a great deal of the Bakhtiyari's textual history.¹⁰ Garthwaite's monograph also included an appendix with an array of unpublished manuscripts, for which he provides translations. The most notable among these documents is the "note-book" (*kitabchich*) of the late nineteenth-century chieftain Husayn Quli Khan. *Khans and Shabs* offers a thorough history of the Bakhtiyari, focusing on the relations between tribal chiefs and the Iranian state from the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) to the Islamic Revolution. Garthwaite's pioneering ethnohistory of the Bakhtiyari khans opened the way for the further study of the social, political, and cultural history of tribes in Iran.

A more recent attempt at writing tribal history appeared in Tapper's *Frontier Nomads of Iran* (1997). Tapper's ambitious ethnohistory of the Shahsevan

tribes of northwestern Iran is noteworthy for combining evidence from fieldwork and historical research. At the intersection of history and anthropology, Tapper's *Frontier Nomads* brought together ethnographic findings with the use of European and Persian primary sources to trace the origins and history of the Shahsevan.¹¹ But much more work remains to be done in bringing textual sources to bear on tribal history. The time also seems ripe to depart from the rather dry and insular discussions of the definition of tribe, tribal history, and tribal identity that predominate the existing literature. The language of social science has often left little room for actual narratives of the social and cultural history of tribes in Iran to emerge. In particular, there is a need for new conceptual approaches to tribe and state interactions in the nineteenth century based upon a full reading of the rich array of available Persian and European textual sources.

While there has been a marked decline in Western scholarly interest in the tribes over the last two decades, partly a result of the nationalist historiography prevalent in the field of Iranian Studies, in the Islamic Republic, scholars have been active in producing numerous ethnographies and histories of the Bakhtiyari, Buyr Ahmad, Lur, Qashqa'i, Kurd, Shahsevan, and Turkmen tribes.¹² This literature, in addition to the volumes of Persian primary materials being published, suggests the lasting significance of scholarship on ethnicity and tribes in Iran.

Center and Periphery in Qajar Historiography

This book is an attempt to write the history of nineteenth-century Iran “from the edge.” It seeks to de-center a historiography that has emphasized the urban, political, and religious elite, silencing the indigenous subjects of Qajar Iran in the historical narrative. In studies of early modern Iran, particularly the times of dynastic instability during the eighteenth century, exchanges between the center and the periphery, the state and the tribes, have been explored in studies of the Safavid, Afshar, and Zand dynasties by Laurence Lockhart, Ann Lambton, John Perry, and most recently, Kathryn Babayan in her magisterial history of “the waning of the Qizilbash,” *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (2002).¹³ Having shaken off the dust of the turbulent eighteenth century, scholars of the Qajar period have been reluctant to leave the shelter of the new capital of Tehran and been mainly preoccupied with the political center, the world of the shahs, the court, the ministers, and the high ulama. The question of the tribal and ethnic diffuseness of the

Qajar polity thus remains absent in accounts of the transformation of the state in nineteenth-century Iran. Most of these existing studies have been political histories mainly interested in the structure and operation of the central government.¹⁴ Despite this historiographical trend, there have appeared traces of tribal history in the Qajar period in works by Lambton, Gavin Hambly, Nikki Keddie, Abbas Amanat, and Afsaneh Najmabadi.¹⁵ With the recent work of Vanessa Martin and Heidi Walcher, among others, the Qajar periphery has taken center stage.¹⁶

Drawing upon archives in Istanbul and elsewhere, scholars working on the Ottoman Empire have developed a rich literature of regional and provincial history. These works have included social and economic studies of the Ottoman Empire with some documentary based histories of the tribes.¹⁷ A considerable body of work has also burgeoned of late on the history of the Ottoman provinces. The works of Julia Clancy-Smith on the Maghrib, Beshara Doumani on Palestine, Dina Rizk Khoury on Mosul, and Eugene Rogan on Transjordan, among others, have depicted the different parts of the Ottoman realm in more vivid detail.¹⁸ This book contributes to this literature about the periphery of Islamic empires by examining the transformation and assimilation of a tribal hinterland in nineteenth-century Iran.

By presenting a history of the Qajar periphery and the indigenous subjects of the empire, this research also seeks to complement the growing number of histories of the Middle East “from below” in the tradition of E. P. Thompson and others.¹⁹ One tends to forget that a vast number of Qajar subjects were nomads and semi-nomads, since most written sources were left behind by settled populations and townsmen.²⁰ If read critically, however, these sources offer views of encounters between the Qajar state and the tribes on the margins of Iran. Tribe and state interactions in nineteenth-century Iran were marked by negotiation and a constant give and take. As Rudi Matthee has noted in *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran* (1999), state authority in Iran was “the outcome of bargaining processes in which central power and domination confronted local clout and peripheral recalcitrance.”²¹ There was a certain balance between centralization and decentralization, between centripetal and centrifugal elements throughout the empire. The tribal periphery lay beyond the geographical reach of the central government, which could only extend its authority over the periphery through the tribal khans and their subjects. Imperial chronicles and tribal histories from the Qajar period convey these compromises between the state and the tribes.

In southwestern Iran, the nature of the Zagros Mountain range formed a



Isfahan and the Bakhtiyari Hinterland



Bakhtiyari Tribal Migration Routes

physical barrier to state intrusion. Throughout the nineteenth century, the presence of the state in the mountains to the west of Isfahan was mediated through contacts with the Bakhtiyari tribal confederacy. This pattern of accommodation between the center and the periphery, between imperial rule and tribal autonomy continued even amidst the British Empire's inroads into the Zagros Mountains during the late nineteenth century. British imperial projects, by

necessity, had to be mediated through the Bakhtiari khans and their tribal subjects, who held considerable power in the mountainous territory between the Karun River and Isfahan. The volumes of British archival materials on the Bakhtiari, ranging from consular reports to surveys and agreements, attest to the persistence of this negotiation between empire and tribes in the Zagros. At the same time, they chronicle the opening of the Bakhtiari Land (Khaki Bakhtiari) and the beginnings of centralizing processes that transformed this mountainous periphery of Qajar Iran. They are records and narratives of the nineteenth-century imperial transformation of the natural world and the ecologies of indigenous subjects.

Domesticating Wildlands

By the late nineteenth century, a different conception toward the limits of the natural world had slowly emerged in parts of Qajar Iran. These changes were based on encounters between imperialism and nature. The development of powerful centralizing modern empires equipped with methods of scientifically exploring, surveying, and mapping the ends of the earth led to changes in the ways the environment was constructed and used. During the nineteenth century, European and Islamic empires were actively engaged in efforts at the representation, control, and settlement of wildlands and the domestication of indigenous populations. Printed maps, ethnographies, and travel narratives represented the transformation of natural environments. As John Richards noted in *The Unending Frontier* (2003): “Accumulating scientific insights and technical advances stimulated an appetite for intervention in the natural world. . . . The ultimate civilizing mission became that of exploring, comprehending, and controlling the wild places of the earth.”²²

The classification of the mountains, plains, deserts, rivers, oceans, flora, fauna, and peoples of the earth varied from place to place and entailed the mediation of environment and society wherever it occurred. In other words, legibility came about through the interactions between empire and the spaces it sought to tame. This point has been elucidated in Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts* (2002). In Mitchell’s provocative study, the interconnected histories of irrigation projects on the Nile River, the spread of contagious diseases, and the onset of war and famine in twentieth-century Egypt are woven together in a critique of the relation between science and nature. Scientific plans and projects, Mitchell suggests, were created in combination “with what is called nature and the material world.”²³ What is more, the very notion of “taming the

mighty elements of nature” were constructed and manufactured. In reference to the building of the Great Dam at Aswan, Mitchell writes, in “the distinction between nature and science, between masonry and symbol, between the river to be tamed and the expertise that later claimed to have tamed it, one can locate any number of episodes, elements, and forces that disrupt the effect created by the final artifact. Engineering the dam was a messy, uncertain, conflict-ridden, and haphazard project.”²⁴

The present study of the opening of tribal territories in nineteenth-century Iran also suggests the uncertainties that attended imperial projects in the Middle East. It stops short, however, of claiming that nature was simply an artifact produced or manufactured by projects of empire. This book does not approach nature as an “effect” or “outcome” of the scientific changes taking place.²⁵ The settlement, domestication, and reclamation of natural environments were among the most salient changes taking place in late Qajar Iran. The transformation of natural environments was not only imagined, it was quite tangible and real, radically altering the ecologies of the mountains, deserts, and marshes. The premodern Islamic state in Iran, itself rising from tribal origins, had allowed for the autonomy of pastoral nomadic societies and ethnic groups. During the nineteenth century, however, the Qajar state consolidated its power and managed to diminish, without completely destroying, the autonomy of the tribes. British projects of exploration, meanwhile, opened tribal territories to commercial traffic and state expansion, contributing to the dissolution of the power and independence of tribal confederacies such as the Bakhtiari of the Zagros Mountains. State building, imperialism, and integration into the world economy altered environment and society on the distant margins of nineteenth-century Iran.

By the mid-nineteenth century, modern imperial projects initiated by foreign concessions had reached the interior and hinterlands of the country. The accumulation of geographical and ethnographic knowledge in the form of printed texts allowed for the control of environment and society. With the advent of the telegraph in the 1850s the provinces were more firmly linked to the Qajar capital in Tehran and beyond. The infamous Reuter Concession of 1872 promised the modern development of the environment and its resources through the building of railways, canals, and mines. The navigation of the Karun River, which flowed parallel to the Tigris and Euphrates, allowed the river to be opened to international trade in 1888, facilitating commerce, communication, and the expansion of the world economy into the interior of Iran. Likewise, the building of the Bakhtiari or Lynch Road through the

Zagros Mountains in the 1890s enabled the extension of commercial traffic and imperialism through the remote territories and seasonal quarters of pastoral nomadic tribes. These nineteenth-century imperial missions in the Zagros Mountains came to a culmination with the British exploration for oil in the late Qajar period. Altogether, they constituted an unprecedented attempt to control natural environments and their resources in the area. What is more, nineteenth-century imperial projects and the expansion of the world economy contributed to the dissolution and waning of the pastoral economy of Qajar Iran. The effect of these transformations, as Marx claimed in the mid-nineteenth century, was the alienation of humans from nature: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinion are swept away. . . . All that is solid melts into air.”²⁶ The march of scientific progress and the world economy dissolved and remade the material basis of relations between societies and environments.

Chronicles, Ethnographies, and Tribal Histories

There exist an array of textual sources for approaching the history of imperial transformations on the periphery of nineteenth-century Iran. This book is based on a reading of imperial records found in archival collections in Iran and the United Kingdom, as well as nineteenth-century printed sources, texts, and editions. These include Persian imperial chronicles and geographical gazetteers, tribal histories and genealogies, manuscripts and ethnographic literature that shed light on tribe and state interactions in Iran during the long nineteenth century. Although I have visited the Bakhtiari in their summer quarters and traveled through the Zagros Mountains, the following research is rooted in texts from the Qajar period.

Persian chronicles remain untapped sources for the history of tribes and cultural difference in Qajar Iran. Previous scholars have mined chronicles for the study of the court, the political and religious elite, and the structure of the central government. However, nineteenth-century Persian histories also reveal an awareness of the tribal and ethnic difference that flourished throughout the empire. Qajar chronicles, including *Rawzat al-Safa-yi Nasiri*, by Riza Quli Khan Hidayat, *Nasikh al-Tavarikh*, by Mirza Muhammad Taqi Lisan al-Mulk Sipihri, *Mir'at al-Buldan* and *Tarikh-i Muntazam-i Nasiri*, by Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltana, as well as local histories such as *Farsnama-yi Nasiri*, to name just a few examples, contain a range of information on the tribes of Qajar Iran.²⁷

The most useful Qajar era text for the purpose of this book has been *Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari* (History of the Bakhtiyari), a tribal history and perhaps the first ethnography in the Persian language. The text was a collaborative project by ‘Ali Quli Khan Sardar As‘ad and ‘Abd al-Husayn Lisan al-Saltana Sipih-r, among others, written between 1909 and 1911. In 1909 Lisan al-Saltana Sipih-r wrote the following words of introduction to this history of the Bakhtiyari tribes:

In the name of Allah, the benevolent, the merciful. The one that gave the history of those who have passed for the people who have come and made the news of the ancestors written for their descendants . . . for memoirs are the best maxims (*andarz*) of life. This humble servant ‘Abd al-Husayn Lisan al-Saltana, “the king of historians” [*malik al-muvarrikbin*], in this year 1909/1327 Hijri, which is the third year of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, is writing the history and geography of the Bakhtiyari by the order of the matchless minister, the prudent and wise land-conquering *amir*, the possessor of the sword and the pen, the protector of the land of Fars and Daylam, the protector of Iran and its people, the excellent Hajji ‘Ali Quli Khan, the Minister of War, the son of the late Husayn Quli Khan Ilkhani Bakhtiyari. Thanks to God, I was able of achieve this great service and now it passes before your view. I named this work *Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari* [*History of the Bakhtiyari*] so that as long as the world lasts, the name of this lineage will remain.²⁸

The original manuscript of *Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari* consists of about 600 lithographed pages, with some of the text consisting of quotations from passages in official Persian chronicles and translations of sections from nineteenth-century Western ethnographies. Other portions of *Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari* consist of original material and are devoted to the oral histories and geographical lore of the tribes, including references to Bakhtiyari organization, administration, and customs. The *Tarikh-i Bakhtiyari* provides a view of Qajar Iran from its edge. It chronicles the tribes’ repeated interactions with the central government during the nineteenth century and the major role they played in the restoration of the constitution in the capital of Tehran.

Archival materials and collections at the Iranian National Archives, the Iranian National Library, the University of Isfahan Archives, the British National Archives, the British Petroleum Archives, the India Office Library, Cambridge

University, the University of London–School of Oriental and African Studies, Harvard University, Princeton University, the University of Chicago, and the University of California have been consulted in this study.

The Iranian National Archives holds a range of documents related to the Bakhtiyari tribes in the Qajar period, including correspondence, surveys, and reports from provincial authorities and agents. At the National Library in Tehran and the Archives of the University of Isfahan, I consulted Qajar-era newsletters and gazetteers that provided urban perspectives on the tribes in Iran. These included *Ruznama-yi Vaqa'î-yi Ittifaqiya*, *Farhang-i Isfahan*, *Ruznama-yi Dawlat-i 'Alliya-yi Iran*, *Surayya*, *Kashkul*, *Habl al-Matin*, *Mulla Nasr al-Din*, *Jahad-i Akbar*, *Isfahan*, *Anjuman Muqaddas-i Isfahan*, and *Zayanda Rud*, among others.

This book also draws upon a variety of European sources, including manuscripts from the British National Archives, the British Library, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the British Petroleum Archives. In addition to these, the writings of several nineteenth-century Western travelers and ethnographers have been used. The limitations of these genres of European writing about the “East” have been suggested in Edward Said’s groundbreaking critique of Orientalism and the unreliability of Western literature on the Islamic world.²⁹ On the subject of tribes in nineteenth-century Iran, however, European sources contain invaluable information and cannot be cast aside. But they must be carefully selected and “read against the grain,” in the subaltern sense of the phrase. These materials reveal the accommodation and bargaining that lay at the foundations of tribe-state interactions.

Based on this array of Persian and European sources, this book is organized in five chapters. The first chapter, “On the Periphery of Nineteenth-Century Iran,” explores interactions between the Bakhtiyari tribes and the early Qajar state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While the Bakhtiyari offered military service to the state, paid taxes, and were vulnerable to Qajar military expeditions, they retained substantial autonomy and were beyond the pale of permanent state domination. Chapter 2, “The City of Isfahan and Its Hinterland,” traces the complex ties between the provincial capital of Isfahan and its mountainous tribal periphery between the 1860s and 1880s. In those decades, the Bakhtiyari tribal confederacy was unified and reached the peak of its power under the charismatic chieftain Husayn Quli Khan, allowing for indirect rule over the tribes to be established through ties of kinship and contacts with the provincial government of Isfahan. Chapter 3, “A Road through the Mountains,” examines the planning and construc-

tion of a commercial road through the rugged Bakhtiyari Mountains by the British during the 1890s and its effects upon the local tribal population. Moving through very difficult terrain, the road was described by the British as an effort to civilize and pave over the roughness of nineteenth-century Iran. Chapter 4, “In the Fields of Oil,” delves into the social and cultural history of oil exploration in the Bakhtiyari tribal territory. It recounts the early history of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the commercial exploitation of natural resources in the Zagros Mountains. The book closes with Chapter 5, “The Bakhtiyari Tribes in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution,” which considers the decisive participation of the Bakhtiyari tribes in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11 and their integration into the politics and language of the Iranian homeland.

The narrative presents a view of state building, imperialism, and territorial assimilation on the tribal periphery of nineteenth-century Iran. Set in the wildlands on the margins of Isfahan, it examines the efforts of the Qajar dynasty to expand settlement, to collect taxes, and to maintain nominal state order among the Bakhtiyari tribes as the British Empire made commercial inroads into their once inaccessible mountains. British imperial projects, such as the accumulation of geographic and ethnographic knowledge, the building of roads, and the exploration for oil, diminished the power and independence of the Bakhtiyari tribes. These nineteenth-century projects assimilated the pastoral nomadic tribes on the peripheries of Qajar Iran into a wider imperial territory and the world economy.

ON THE PERIPHERY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRAN

IN THE SPRING OF 1809, the soldiers of Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar (1797–1834) mounted a military expedition against Asad Khan Bakhtiyarvand in the lofty peaks of the Zagros Mountains. According to the mid-nineteenth-century Persian chronicle *Nasikh al-Tavarikh*, Asad Khan was known as the “lion killer” (*shir kush*), and according to legend he once killed a lion with a single blow of his sword.¹ For nearly a decade the daring khan had brazenly rejected the word of the shah, robbed caravans on the road, and withheld taxes from the government. Although the shah’s troops surrounded the Bakhtiyarvand near the snow-capped summit of Zard Kuh, the tribes scaled the rugged cliffs and made their escape over difficult passes to impenetrable fortresses in the mountains.

The flight of Asad Khan and the Bakhtiyarvand epitomized the tribal autonomy encountered on the periphery of nineteenth-century Iran. Various pastoral nomadic tribes (*ilyat*), including the Baluch, Kurd, Lur, Bakhtiyari, Qashqa’i, Arab, and Turkmen, were virtually free from state authority on the edges of the empire.² Because of the inaccessibility of the terrain and the local power of the tribes, the Qajars found it difficult if not futile to try to assimilate them, and the empire contained a heterogeneous population. Like its predecessors the Safavids and the Afshars, the Qajar dynasty saw no alternative but to rule pastoral nomads as tribal confederacies with considerable political and cultural autonomy on the imperial periphery. The maxim of the fourteenth-century Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah* still held true:

A dynasty rarely establishes itself firmly in lands with many different tribes and groups. This is because of differences in opinions and desires. Behind each opinion and desire, there is a group feeling

defending it. At any time, therefore, there is much opposition to dynasty and rebellion against it, even if the dynasty possesses group feeling, because each group feeling under the control of the ruling dynasty thinks that it has in itself enough strength and power.³

Likewise in early modern Iran the central state perennially struggled to control the dissident and powerful tribes on the margins of the empire.

This chapter explores the history of tribalism on the periphery of nineteenth-century Iran by examining the interactions between the Bakhtiari tribal confederacy of the Zagros Mountains and the ruling Qajar dynasty. It details the nature of Qajar state control over the pastoral nomadic subjects and the tribal margins of Iran. At the end of the day the tribes in nineteenth-century Iran were beyond the pale of the state. Although the Bakhtiari gave nominal submission to the Qajars, the presence of the state was scarcely felt in their mountainous territory. Itself of tribal origins, the Qajar dynasty kept loose and indirect control over the tribes through the intermediary chieftains or khans.⁴ By offering military service and paying light taxes to the central government, the Bakhtiari ensured their autonomous status in the Zagros Mountains of southwestern Iran. The central state's limited control over the periphery was further revealed by instances of tribal resistance, mobility and flight.

Nineteenth-century Persian chronicles, gazetteers, and histories depict the autonomy of the tribes in early Qajar Iran. Although state-centric in perspective, nineteenth-century Persian chronicles, such as Mirza Muhammad Taqi Lisan al-Mulk Sipihri's *Nasikh al-Tavarikh* and Riza Quli Khan Hidayat's *Rawzat al-Safa-yi Nasiri* convey a deep awareness of tribal and cultural difference in Iran.⁵ This is also true of other state sources, including Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltana's geographical dictionary *Mir'at al-Buldan* and official history *Tarikh-i Muntazam-i Nasiri*, Muhammad Taqi Khan Hakim's chronicle *Ganj-i Danish*, Mirza Hasan Fasa'i's geographical history of Fars Province *Farsnama-yi Nasiri*, Mirza Abu al-Hasan Sani' al-Mulk Ghaffari's illustrated gazetteer *Ruznama-yi Dawlat-i 'Alliya-yi Iran*, and Iran's first newspaper, *Ruznama-yi Vaqa'-'i-yi Ittifaqiya*.⁶ These texts reveal the attitude of state authorities toward the tribes. Focused on portraying the monarchical glory of the Qajars and their dauntless campaigns against rebellious pastoral nomads, official chronicles seek to sanction and legitimize the state and its expansion through the writing of official history. Chronicles tend to highlight outbreaks of tribal violence and the government's efforts to control them, with the Qajar

nobility emerging as benevolent princes and kings subduing tribal insurrections throughout the country. However, Persian chronicles also praise the bravery, resilience, and independence of the Bakhtiyari in their rugged mountain territory on the distant edge of the guarded domains of Iran (*mamalik-i mabrusa-yi Iran*).

By mid-nineteenth-century estimates the Bakhtiyari tribal confederacy numbered between 28,000 and 51,000 tents, or approximately 140,000 to 256,000 individuals.⁷ In Qajar chronicles, the Bakhtiyari tribes appear as rebellious nomads perpetually in need of being kept in line by the state. They are labeled as rebels (*yaghi*), robbers (*rahzanan*), and ruffians (*avbash*), instigators of mountain uprisings (*tuqiyān*, *shararat*), and nomads prone to plundering and looting (*gharat kardan*) in and around the provincial capital of Isfahan.⁸ Despite their slanted outlook, however, Qajar chronicles provide views of the edges of Iran, the Zagros Mountains, and the black tents of the Bakhtiyari tribes. Nineteenth-century Persian chronicles and geographical texts suggest the Qajar's awareness of ethnic or tribal difference among the peoples of Iran, as well as the limitations of rule from the center.

These nineteenth-century historical and geographical narratives have yet to be mined for the history of the tribes in the Qajar period. Although several ethnographies have appeared on the Khamsa, the Bakhtiyari, the Qashqa'i, and the Shahsevan, among others, there has yet to be a study devoted to the tribes in the Qajar period based on the range of existing Persian and European sources. Nineteenth-century Persian imperial chronicles and histories have been cursorily explored and most often dismissed as biased and not pertinent to the pressing questions of social science. According to Tapper:

The available source material for such a social history is mostly written from a distance by outsiders and views the tribes with hostility or some other bias. For example, the information on the tribes that can be gleaned from sources such as Persian court chronicles, manuals, and local histories, and from European agents' and travelers' reports, largely concerns such matters as taxation, military contingents, disturbances and measures taken to quell them, and inaccurate lists of major tribal groups, numbers and leaders. Economic and social organization are treated superficially if at all, and even for the last two centuries their basic features must be inferred circumstantially or deduced from later, more comparative studies.⁹