Modern Iran since 1797

Reform and Revolution

THIRD EDITION

Ali M. Ansari

Modern Iran since 1797

Modern Iran since 1797 offers a comprehensive analysis of political, social and economic developments in Iran since the end of the eighteenth century. Spanning two centuries, the book provides historical context for Iran's international relationships and its internal struggle to reconcile itself and its traditions with the modern world.

The book presents an overview of this crucial period in Iran's history, its emergence from the political turmoil of the eighteenth century through to its initial encounter with the industrial powers of Europe and its attempts to navigate the turbulent waters of European imperialism. It assesses the impact of European ideas on the triumph and tragedy of the Constitutional Revolution, which established the political template for the country going forward and against which all other political developments have been measured. This new edition has been updated to incorporate new scholarship and research to make a rounded assessment of recent developments and bring the text fully up to date. A substantive new prequel has also been added, covering the long nineteenth century from 1797 through to 1921, including a fuller and more detailed treatment both of the Constitutional Revolution and the events and ideology that underpinned it.

Written in a clear, engaging style and highlighting Iran as a state and society grappling with the realities of the modern age, *Modern Iran since 1797* remains the perfect guide for all those studying the history of modern Iran.

Ali M. Ansari is Professor of Iranian History at the University of St Andrews. His most recent publications include *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (2012) and *Iran: A Very Short Introduction* (2014).

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For Marjon

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time honoured disguise.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

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Preface to the 3rd edition

It seems remarkable to me now that the first edition of this text was completed in 2002 sitting with my mother and stepfather in their somewhat ramshackle villa in Kelarabad in Mazandaran on Iran's Caspian littoral. The world appeared an altogether more optimistic place then. The tragedy of 9/11 had of course by then occurred and President Khatami was facing severe pressure at home not least from yet another downturn in US–Iran relations. Yet despite membership of the 'Axis of Evil', there were still grounds for hope in the future. The international situation might yet still yield opportunities for a rapprochement with Iran, while the Reform movement in Iran, although stalled had not yet been fully derailed. The following decade was to put paid to such optimism and on both fronts, domestic and foreign, developments took a decided turn for the worse. Iran did benefit from the turbulence of the Global War on Terror, but not in the manner its political reformists might have hoped. Time of course offers the benefit of greater perspective and context. An assessment of a revolution after 20 years – especially when ten of those years were wracked by war – is quite different to one after 40 years, when it had reached its proverbial 'middle age', and the optimism of youth gives way to a somewhat cynical weariness. The reader will not be surprised to see such sentiments reflected at times in the pages of this book, not least the conclusion.

This new perspective has been enhanced by the period under review. This new 3rd edition, is most obviously distinguished from the previous two by having a substantive prequel added to cover the long nineteenth century from 1797 through to 1921. Not only has this allowed a fuller and more detailed treatment of perhaps the most significant development in modern Iran – the Constitutional Revolution – but also an assessment of the intellectual awakening that underpinned it and the political and social developments that in turn catalysed what I have described here and elsewhere as an Iranian enlightenment. This context of course changes the balance of the book. Whereas earlier editions juxtaposed the Pahlavis with the Islamic Republic and suggested the former to be anomalous – if in their own way revolutionary – to the natural trajectory of development, this broader context allows us to situate the Pahlavis more securely within the framework of the late Qajar era. Just as students of Turkish history have become increasingly aware of the debt Ataturk owed to the Young Turks, the Young

Ottomans and the Tanzimat, so too I hope it will become apparent that Reza Shah was himself a product of the Constitutional Revolution, and that many of the ideas he institutionalised had echoes in the Qajar period. We may (I hope) finally lay to rest the frequently attested assertion that Reza Shah 'changed' the name of the country to Iran, or indeed, reinvented the title *Shahanshah*. Even the tendency to archaism, and an association with the glories of pre-Islamic Iran were not a preoccupation peculiar to the Pahlavis. Both the Qajars and latterly the Islamic Republic showed a predilection in this regard, and certainly Ahmadinejad's affection for Cyrus the Great and the Achaemenids is almost on a par with Mohammad Reza Shah. The reader will see, that for all the change that has taken place, there are some interesting continuities, and the more a political order seeks to distance itself from its predecessor, the more it in fact resembles it.

Similarly, time and new research has allowed to make a fuller more rounded assessment of developments. The uprising of 2009, and the Arab Spring that has followed, has allowed us to better contextualise the revolution of 1979. Not only in terms of size, but in the violence that enabled it. Gone are the more exaggerated figures for casualties, and research conducted in the Islamic Republic now suggests that total casualties never exceeded 3,000 for the period until the arrival of Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1979. Indeed, the evidence now suggests that the official assessments for casualties in the notorious Jaleh Square massacre were actually accurate. Similarly, the casualties for the Iran–Iraq War have been revised downwards to reflect new research. Perhaps the most significant shift however has been in the assessment of the intellectual inheritance which now leans much more towards Britain than France, and Reza Shah's own debt to the template for change established by the Constitutionalists. While the first two editions always made clear that Reza Khan could not initially have succeeded without the support of intellectuals, this association is now made much clearer and reflects more recent research on this period, including my own. I have nonetheless endeavoured to minimise any changes to the original text, limiting myself to ironing out inconsistencies and factual errors. Where new research has raised questions, I have tended to place these in the endnotes and students are encouraged to review those as well as the additional literature in the bibliography. The reader will I hope, be forgiving of those parts of the text where the stitching together of the new and old texts, their tone and interpretation, are more apparent than intended.

It goes without saying that no text is definitive, and no text is without its errors. Every effort has been made to eradicate the latter, and new sources, research and perspective will see new interpretations emerge in due course. This, like any text should be regarded as a snapshot of the state of the field, an interpretation, and a platform to encourage the inquisitive to delve further into the history of this fascinating political culture. I am grateful for the support of colleagues in St Andrews and further afield, for their comments and often vigorous debates which have helped shape and refine my own views. Particular thanks to my colleague at St Andrews, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi for his help in locating digital Persian sources and for his invaluable suggestions in updating the Guide to

Further Research. I am especially grateful to Paul Luft and David Morgan (whose own excellent *Medieval Persia 1040–1797* in the same series, segues nicely into this volume and provides even more historical context) for reading through and commenting on the first draft of the 'prequel'. Thanks are also due to my editor at Taylor and Francis, Zoe Thomson, for allowing me to insert an extensive prequel and for her patience in awaiting its arrival. I am also grateful to Larry Potter, from Columbia University, a seasoned and loyal user of the earlier editions, who kindly offered me his thoughts on aspects of style. While I have retained many block quotes – in large part because I think it is important for students to hear the historical voices as far as possible first hand – I have moved to eliminate those unfortunate British understatements and most egregiously my overuse of 'arguably'. This might be considered a hangover from my doctoral dissertation when it was deemed prudent to 'qualify' everything, and have been duly, and somewhat refreshingly excised from the main text. I am extremely grateful to my copy-editor Jonathan Hoare, for ironing out the many inconsistencies that inevitably work their way into a text of this length. Thanks are also due to Bonita Glanville-Morris at Taylor & Francis and Julian Webb at Swales & Willis. Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank the National Archives for permission to use extracts from their files. Needless to say, any remaining errors or stylistic *faux pas* are mine and mine alone.

Ali M. Ansari
University of St Andrews – June 2018

Glossary

Ayan Notables, traditional term ascribed to the (landed) aristocracy.

Ayatollah Literally 'sign of God', honorific title given to the most senior religious jurists. Emerges into usage in the twentieth century, and its proliferation has led to further qualification to distinguish those of the highest religious authority as 'Grand Ayatollahs'.

Basij Often translated as 'popular militia'. Under the Islamic Republic, this is often rephrased as 'Islamic militia'.

Bazaaris The traditional merchant classes, operating informally, through extended family networks. Most cities and towns have their 'bazaar'.

Hojjat-ol Islam Literally, 'proof of God'; honorific title afforded to those religious jurists below the rank of Ayatollah.

Ijtehad The use of independent judgement, usually through analogical reasoning, to derive new legal rulings from the existing body of law.

Imam This has two distinct meanings. More commonly, this is the title given to the leader of the Islamic community by Shi'a Muslims, who believe that leadership devolved upon the heirs of the Prophet through his son-in-law Ali, the first Imam. Iran's Shi'as are predominantly 'Twelver', believing that there were Twelve Imams in total, the last of which disappeared into occultation, and who will return at the end of time.

Majlis Literally, 'Assembly', more commonly translated as 'Parliament'; the Constitutional Revolution witnessed the establishment of a 'National Consultative Assembly', replaced after the Islamic Revolution with the 'Islamic Consultative Assembly'.

Marja-e Taqlid Literally, 'source of emulation'; term applied to those Ayatollahs worthy of emulation by a distinct group of followers.

Mujtahid Shi'a *ulema* whose education and training in jurisprudence and Islamic legal texts allow them to practice *ijtehad*. The qualification, in the modern period, is reserved for those of the rank of Ayatollah and above, although not all Ayatollahs are recognised *mujtahids*.

Shah Persian term for 'King'; *Shahanshah*: literally 'King of Kings', sometimes, though not accurately, translated as 'Emperor'.

Ulema The plural of 'alim', a learned individual, more commonly associated with religious scholars, and generally utilised with reference to the clerical class.

Velayat-i Faqih Literally, Guardianship of the Jurisconsult; political concept developed by Ayatollah Khomeini institutionalising the supremacy of the religious jurist in political affairs. The jurist so appointed is termed the *vali-e faqih*.

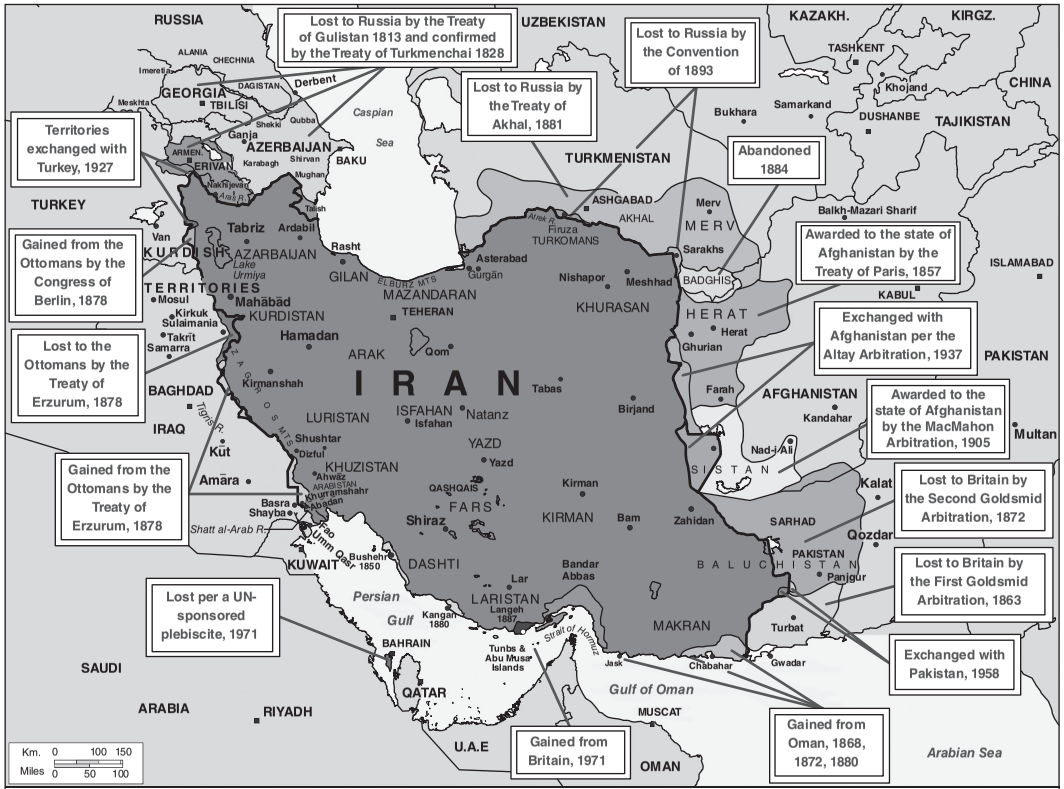
Chronology of modern Iran

1797	Death of Agha Mohammad Khan; accession of Fath Ali Shah
1804	Outbreak of First Russo-Persian War
1807	Treaty of Finkenstein
1813	Treaty of Golestan
1826	Outbreak of Second Russo-Persian War
1828	Treaty of Turkmenchai
1833	Death of Abbas Mirza
1834	Accession of Mohammad Shah
1848	Accession of Nasir al Din Shah
1850	Execution of the Bab
1851	Death of Amir Kabir
1856/7	Anglo-Persian War
1857	Treaty of Paris
1872	Reuters Concession
1891/2	The Tobacco Revolt
1896	Assassination of Nasir al Din Shah
1906	Constitutional Revolution
1908	Discovery of oil, foundation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC)
1914	Outbreak of the Great War
1919	Paris Peace Conference; attempted imposition of Anglo-Persian Agreement
1921	Coup, led by Seyyed Zia Tabatabaie and Reza Khan, overthrows government Reza Khan appointed Army Commander, and subsequently Minister of War
1923	Reza Khan appointed Prime Minister
1924	Debate on Republicanism/Fifth Majlis
1925	Majlis deposes Qajar dynasty, elects Reza Shah as first king of new Pahlavi dynasty
1926	Coronation of Reza Shah
1927	Dress codes imposed; inauguration of Trans-Iranian Railway project
1928	Foundation of the National Bank of Iran

1933	Death of Teymourtache
1934	Law for the foundation of Tehran University ratified
1935	Foreigners informed they must desist from using the name 'Persia' and instead use 'Iran'
1936	Abolition of the veil
1939	Outbreak of Second World War
1941	Allied invasion and occupation of Iran; abdication of Reza Shah; succession of Mohammad Reza Shah
1946	Azerbaijan Crisis; beginning of Cold War
1949	Assassination attempt on the Shah while visiting Tehran University
1950	General Razmara becomes Prime Minister
1951	General Razmara assassinated; Dr Mosaddeq becomes Prime Minister Oil Nationalisation bill ratified Britain boycotts Iranian oil
1952	Diplomatic relations with Britain severed
1953	Coup '28th Mordad'; overthrow of Dr Mosaddeq and National Front government
1955	Iran joins Baghdad Pact; Baha'i pogrom launched
1956	Suez Crisis
1957	Foundation of SAVAK
1958	Qarani plot; Iraqi Revolution
1960	*Coup d'état* in Turkey; Dr Ali Amini appointed Prime Minister
1962	Resignation of Amini
1963	Shah launches the White Revolution Riots in various cities protesting reforms
1964	American government personnel granted immunity from prosecution in Iranian Courts US loan to Iran approved Ayatollah Khomeini exiled
1965	Prime Minister Mansur assassinated, replaced by Hoveida
1967	Coronation of the Shah
1968	Britain announces 'East of Suez' policy
1971	Shah celebrates 2,500 years of Persian Monarchy
1973	Shah engineers quadrupling of oil price
1975	Foundation of Rastakhiz
1976	Change to Imperial calendar
1977	Jimmy Carter begins presidency
1978	Article critical of Ayatollah Khomeini published in *Etelaat* newspaper Cycle of riots begin unwinding of Pahlavi regime Jaleh Square massacre Muslim month of Moharram witnesses massive demonstrations against the Shah
1979	Shah leaves Iran; Ayatollah Khomeini returns Monarchy abolished; Islamic Republic founded US Embassy occupied and diplomats taken hostage

1980	Iraq invades Iran
1982	Iran recaptures occupied territory, symbolised by reconquest of Khorramshahr
1988	Ceasefire in Iran–Iraq War
1989	Imam Khomeini dies; Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani becomes President
1997	Election of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to the Presidency
1998	Revelations about the 'chain murders'
1999	Attack on student dormitories by Islamic vigilantes leads to nationwide demonstrations
2000	Reformists seize control of Parliament Hardline reaction begins
2001	Khatami elected in second landslide election victory 9/11 and war in Afghanistan
2002	George W. Bush describes Iran as part of 'Axis of Evil' in State of the Union address Details of Iran's nuclear programme revealed
2003	Invasion and occupation of Iraq
2004	Hardline conservatives seize control of Parliament in what is widely seen as a fraudulent election
2005	Hardline Mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected President
2009	Presidential election crisis
2013	Election of Hasan Rouhani
2015	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed between the P5+1 and Iran
2018	The United States withdraws from the JCPOA

Iran in the twentieth century (showing territorial changes from the 19th century)



1 Introduction

> All ranks in Persia are brought up to admire show and parade; and they are more likely to act from the dictates of imagination and vanity, than of reason and judgment. The character was well drawn by Muhammad Nubbee Khan, the late ambassador to India. 'If you wish my countrymen to understand you, speak to their eyes, not their ears'.
>
> (Sir John Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, 1827)

Few countries have proved so persistently incomprehensible to Western analyses as Iran. Seemingly determined to obstruct and frustrate understanding, Iran has come to occupy a particular position in the Western world view,[1] which in many ways mirrors Iran's multifaceted attitude to the West. At once fascinated and enamoured by the exotic luxuries and sophisticated manners of the civilised *Persians* (the 'Frenchmen of the East', as Curzon described them), they are also regarded as strangely resistant to the onward march of 'modernity', and prone to a destructive fanaticism which belies rational comprehension. Such interpretations are not new and are a reflection of the West's encounter with Iran in the nineteenth century, which coincided not only with the political ascendancy of the West, but with the development of the discipline of history. Indeed, the study of history, as we know it today, is a product of modern Western society, and many of the first histories written reflected the aspirations, prejudices and demands of a Western readership. Indeed, many of the primary documents were products of Western bureaucracies and consulates. When Iranians encountered their 'history' therefore, it tended to be mediated through the pens of Western historians, while their own, largely oral traditions were dismissed as fable and at best as literary artefacts, skilfully written, but of little historical value.[2]

This tendency has been increasingly challenged in the twentieth century, in part as a result of the changing nature and importance of the Iranian state, but more importantly, because of the growth in education and the determination of 'Iranians' to write their own history. Ironically, the moment of real historical growth in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution coincided with the deepest failure of understanding. Just as some Iranian historians were seeking to explain the Islamic Revolution in terms of the Iranian historical experience in the twentieth

century, some foreign scholars and commentators (including émigrés) were determined to wrench the political upheaval of 1979 away from its historical roots and towards a comparative framework which sought to resituate Iran within a distinctly 'Islamic' setting. To some extent the West successfully re-appropriated Iranian history, and the narrative which dominates the Western perception of Iran is that of the early revolution, almost as if little happened beforehand, or indeed subsequently. Whether 'History' had stood still or not in the East, the West seemed determined to bring it to a standstill.[3]

The reality is, however, one of dynamic change rooted in Iran's determination to successfully confront and harness the challenge of modernisation and 'modernity'. This change was all the more traumatic because of the innate and profound conservatism of a society that proved at first highly resistant to the change that was being imposed. Yet after decades of apparent stupor, as the Qajar era came to a close with the triumphant rupture of the Constitutional Revolution, Iran embarked on a period of radical modernisation, understood as the appropriation, absorption and application of Western achievements to an Iranian environment. This apparently wholesale process of imitation provoked uncertainty and reaction, which began to challenge the particular conception of modernity imposed most vigorously by Reza Shah. A window of political opportunity, prior to the *coup d'état* which overthrew Dr Mosaddeq, witnessed the bitter debates and often violent contest over the development and identity of an Iranian state, which was then succeeded by another period of sustained autocracy. By the end of this period, even Western definitions of modernisation were beginning to be redefined. The most dramatic change, of course, occurred during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when Iran appeared on the face of it at least, to definitively break with its Western patrons.

This book seeks to chart Iran's engagement with the challenge posed by the West and Western modernity, from the foundations of the Qajar state in 1797 to the ongoing contest in pursuit of an 'Islamic Democracy' in contemporary Iran, and to situate current developments within their proper historical framework, a narrative frame of reference that is frequently cited and referred to by Iranians. A pivotal moment in the history of modern Iran, as will be detailed later, was the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, even if many of its ideas were not realised until the advent of Reza Khan and the subsequent establishment of his dynasty. This crucial period in the history of the country established the political template against which much else is measured. But the Constitutional Revolution did not emerge from a vacuum but was itself rooted in the encounter with European 'modernity' which confronted Iranian statesmen from the early years of the nineteenth century. Military power was swiftly followed by economic penetration and intellectual engagement on a scale that would profoundly affect the development of the country. Yet by anchoring our understanding of modern Iran in the broader context of two centuries of development we are better able to judge the degrees of continuity and change that have affected the country and see the Pahlavi period as an acceleration of a trend that was established decades before their emergence: as much a consequence as a cause of change.

Needless to say, in a country which continues to be politically volatile, history remains contested as rival interpretations of determining events are vigorously debated and refined. The narrative is still being woven. As perspectives change, and new sources emerge, our understanding of modern Iranian history will necessarily be further refined, and even if archives are proving more difficult to access, published sources are on the increase and provide historians with new, and far more accessible avenues for research. (See the Guide to Further Research p. 346.)

Recognising these limitations, there are nevertheless a number of discernible themes and tensions which may be said to inform Iranian history since 1797.[4]

Reform and reaction

This is fundamentally a book about change and the politics of managing that change, as successive governments and political elites sought, and continue to seek, to navigate a stable and sustainable route from a perception of tradition to a particular conception of modernity.[5] This change has occasionally been sudden, violent and explicitly political, but on other occasions, arguably of greater durability, the transformation has been a gradual (if still comparatively rapid) social and economic one which in the space of a century has fundamentally altered the political landscape of Iran. On occasion, the process of change has been indigenously engendered, but foreign influence has been strong, especially within the framework of ideas. For most of the period covered by this book the management of change has been the responsibility of elites. It was a succession of elites which performed the function, sometimes well, at other times ineffectually, of the 'revolutionary' vanguard, bringing new ideas about social organisation, and political and economic development, and adapting them (with varying degrees of efficacy) to Iranian circumstances. Reform, even revolutionary reform, has been imposed on a largely unwilling and conservative society by elites convinced of the truth of their policies. The applicability of borrowed policies and the efficacy of implementation in relation to the social reality confronted often dictated the success of a given policy. At the same time, it would be wrong to suggest that the elites who dictated the pace and direction of change were oblivious to the consequences for society and to social forces they could neither control nor dictate. As will be seen, elites were regularly confounded by the consequences of policies that they initiated, or that had been the result of broader unforeseen trends in the international economy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similarly, while elites by and large functioned as the means through which the Western model of development, however that was defined in its specifics, was adapted and transferred to Iran, it has only really been from the 1990s that the process of synthesis has gathered pace and wider society, empowered by education and social media, has played an increasing role in shaping the wider debate. In this sense society was becoming more democratic even if politics was proving resistant to the idea. Meanwhile, the intelligentsia, one of the distinctive social groups of twentieth-century Iran, alternated between a conscientious and almost dutiful critique of the establishment, and a very occasional co-option into the political elite.

These problems, which have been faced by Iranian statesmen since at least the Treaty of Turkmenchai in 1828, and which were brought into sharp focus during the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11), revolve, on one level, around the need for political and economic reform and the nature and form it should take, while, at a deeper level, they have focused on the cultural and intellectual contradictions that require some form of resolution. Just as the growth of the modern state and the international order forced the implementation of well defined and delineated international boundaries, and encouraged the development of rational bureaucratic structures, so too it has rendered obsolete and ineffectual the convenient and essential ambiguity which has allowed the co-existence of contradictory ideas about identity both domestically and internationally to continue.[6] The rationalisation of ideas has forced Iranian intellectuals to reconsider the ambiguous relationship between 'Iran' and 'Islam', and, crucially for our purposes, Iran and the West. At times, crude attempts were made to impose cultural homogeneity, to develop a singular 'idea' of Iran to the exclusion of all others. But the impracticality of this led gradually and tentatively to the adoption of a more sophisticated, inclusive model, one which sought to redefine relationships to facilitate a pluralistic model in which identities were complementary rather than antagonistic. Indeed, it may be argued that the single most important theme of this book is the continuing contest over the right to define the identity of Iran and its relationship with the outside world.

Ideas over which direction Iran should take in response to the challenge posed by the West emerged in the aftermath of Iran's defeats at the hands of Tsarist Russia in the early nineteenth century and gradually came to dominate the thinking of Iranian statesmen. By the end of the nineteenth century ideas of nationalism were increasingly prevalent among the political elite, and while there was a broad range of opinion as to what exactly nationalism entailed, and to what extent it was antagonistic to religion (and Islam in particular), there was a broad consensus that reform was an increasingly urgent necessity. Arguments raged among the intellectual and political elite as to the precise nature of national revitalisation and the utility or otherwise of nationalism, be it secular or religious in character. Some rejected such ideas wholesale as a Western invention, others felt it could be usefully adapted to Iran, while still others, such as Kermani, espoused an increasingly chauvinistic secular nationalism, which viewed Islam as an alien religion imposed by force on the Iranian people. Diverse, often contradictory, views emerged which were to develop throughout the twentieth century and while the central *raison d'être* of national revival united all of them, thereby emphasising a broad nationalist consensus, differences in detail prevented a workable and durable synthesis. The consequence was that it often took a political or economic crisis to bring these disparate groups together to practical political effect. Thus it was that the economic crisis of the late nineteenth century compounded the developing political disenchantment with the Qajar state to unite different factions from a cross-section of society, including the *ulema*, the intelligentsia, the aristocracy and the *bazaaris* (an inter-related if ideologically disparate group of individuals), to mobilise themselves against the Qajar state in the Constitutional

Revolution of 1906. Its rapid success, while indicative of the weakness of the Qajar state which opposed it and its limited popular impact, must not detract from the profound consequences of the movement, which effectively succeeded in permanently altering the political culture of the country by introducing the lexicon of constitutionalism, frequently ignored but always acknowledged by successive regimes.

The Constitutional Revolution: the pivot of modern Iranian history

Many of the problems implicit in developing and imposing a practical programme for change became very apparent during the Constitutional Revolution and Movement, and were a major cause of the collapse and perceived failure of the movement. The Constitutional Revolution also highlighted a number of characteristics of political movements and social change in Iran. These problems and characteristics were to recur frequently throughout the period covered by this book, and in many ways constitute the central themes and issues. For instance, a critical political problem faced by the leaders of the Constitutional Revolution was the limited level of popular political awareness and the desirability of extending it. The Constitutional Revolution was led and dominated by elites, and while urban groups participated in the final stages particularly through the encouragement of leading members of the Shi'a *ulema*, its popular appeal, while spontaneous and often decisive, was not profound. Popular grievances were much more immediate and were not a reflection of the liberal democratic values espoused by members of the elite who had access to foreign ideas, or indeed had lived abroad. This meant that, while some members of the political opposition had a clear idea of the sort of constitutional monarchy they wanted, along with an elected parliament, the notion of 'popular sovereignty' that they also encouraged was incomprehensible to the majority of Iranians, while more traditionally minded members of the elite thought the concept blasphemous. Furthermore, it should be remembered that popular participation remained an urban phenomenon and, given that in 1906 it is estimated that only 10 per cent of the population lived in cities and towns, the general pool can be seen as somewhat limited. At the same time, it is worth stressing that the Constitutional Movement was in a very real sense a child of the European Enlightenment from which it drew its ideas and vocabulary. These tended to emphasise the 'republic', in other words the rule of law, over any concept of 'democracy' and implicitly supported the idea of an elite vanguard.

This lack of a popular base, or indeed the mechanism of government, was to severely hinder any chance of immediate practical success for the revolutionaries, who found the social and practical foundations for their political aspirations to be weak. It also allowed their opponents within the state to challenge their authority and confront their limited power with increasing confidence. At the same time, this lack of social penetration should not lead to the conclusion (suggested by some historians) that the Constitutional Revolution was little more than a political curiosity, a storm in a teacup, idealistic in the extreme, and a practical

catastrophe for the Iranian state. While its practical consequences were in the short term to render government impotent, this was not entirely the responsibility of the leaders of the movement, although it may be ascribed to their general political weakness and lack of a profound political base. On the other hand, as noted above, its intellectual legacy was immense, perpetuated as it was in the recollections of both victors and vanquished, the intellectual vanguard who left a highly charged and emotive reference for successive generations of political leaders. The myth of the Constitutional Revolution and its high ideals, destroyed by a reactionary king encouraged by his foreign allies, was delivered with great passion by veterans of the movement to a new generation of political leaders who were only too eager to emulate the achievements of their illustrious if tragic predecessors. In time the myth would be spread, by the growth in literacy and the emergence of mass forms of communication and media, to a far wider audience, but the fact that the movement enjoyed an urban focus ensured that the seed of this myth was planted at the political heart of the country. For it is important to emphasise that, small as the urban centres were, they were the focus of political activity and the political centre of gravity from which political awareness would consolidate itself and spread. While it would be several decades before the foundation of the University of Tehran, the capital city, for all its poverty, had established itself as the pre-eminent political centre in the country. Tabriz may have been the gateway for ideas. Tehran was where these ideas were to be exploited. Throughout the twentieth century Tehran never lost this political status and indeed, as rural–urban migration accelerated in the middle of the century, this status was simply exaggerated.

Another major theme highlighted by the Constitutional Revolution was the clash between those who held to secular nationalism and popular sovereignty, and those whose religious allegiances made the unequivocal support for such concepts problematic. It is important to recognise that in the mutual antagonism which existed and continues to exist between the doctrines of Islam and those of nationalist ideologies, especially the secular varieties of nationalism, we are dealing in essence with ideas that are open to interpretation and change, and a degree of fluidity has always existed between them. Islam and nationalism, according to individual interpretations and understandings, sometimes opposed each other, at other times made curiously convenient bedfellows. What is certainly true is that Iranians were forced increasingly to confront the contradiction they had previously relegated to comfortable and convenient ambiguity. As the Constitutional Revolution was to show, this was not simply a theological debate, but an intellectual and ideological exercise of immense practical consequence. Not only were the *ulema* as a social class immensely influential in Iranian political life, but given that a major aspect of popular culture was permeated throughout with myths and symbols of Islamic derivation, the *ulema* effectively possessed the language of communication which could most easily access large tracts of the population. Islam, its symbols and cultural constructs, was quintessentially the language of popular mobilisation and this social strength has probably only begun to significantly dissipate in the last two decades. This is not to denigrate the symbols of a

distinctly national identity that Iranians may have had not least through the varied myths derived from the *Shahnameh*, but as these traditional myths were being gradually replaced in the twentieth century with a new 'national' historiography, which was for much of this period in the process of rediscovery or construction,[7] it was natural that the average Iranian would turn to stories and personalities that were familiar. While this nationalist mythology was relatively underdeveloped in popular political culture (in stark contrast to elite culture), Islamic mythology was correspondingly more profound and had established deep roots. It was a reality which was not only accepted but approved of by the political elite, who firmly held to the belief that religion was the best tool for the maintenance of social order. It inadvertently delegated to those who could aspire to religious authority priority access to the masses, and as such it became a prominent ideological and practical obstruction to those who increasingly felt nationalism was the tool of popular mobilisation *par excellence*.

Social structures

Antagonism between these two ideological trends was exacerbated by the tendency to extremism and polarisation among factions. This was itself a reflection and consequence of the limited political base these elites enjoyed. On the one hand, it eliminated the need for compromise which a broader base would necessitate, while on the other, the absence of such a base meant that practical achievements could only be accomplished by those collections of individuals whose convictions were so profound and so passionately held that they could function effectively as a vanguard, albeit at the expense of the exclusion of others. In short, the politics of individual rather than collective pluralism accentuated competition within the political elite to a high intensity. This encouraged ambiguity, compromise and the maintenance of the status quo, but paradoxically forced those desirous of change to take up increasingly extreme positions to signify both their political dedication to change and also their intention, born of frustration, to get things done. As a political process it was a curious reflection of a traditional patrimonial structure struggling to break free of itself, and more often than not, as the sociologist Max Weber argued, it was the function of charisma, real or created, to break the mould. Iran in the twentieth century threw up a succession of 'charismatic' leaders whose function it was to break out of the gravitational constraints of patrimonial stagnation which, in the eyes of many observers, both Iranian and foreign, was the main cause of Iran's failure to keep up with the Western world.

According to Weber, charismatic authority, as an ideal type, seeks no authority but itself. It is as a consequence 'revolutionary' in relation to the tradition from which it has emerged; the espousal of 'revolution' is often a badge of legitimacy. However, as the case of Iran shows only too well, none of the revolutionary leaders entirely escape the tradition from which they have emerged and to a greater or lesser extent the consequences of their leadership are mixed. But if patrimonial and revolutionary politics are the domain of the elite and the vanguards, they have been gradually supported in increasing measure by social changes and the

growth in political awareness – at times a consequence of their reforms, but at others a result of technological changes and ideological influences beyond their direct control. Throughout the twentieth century therefore we see added to the Iranian political spectrum not only a more active religiously inspired mass participation in politics, but an increasingly emphatic Marxist influence, especially in urban centres but, with the advent of the wireless radio, also extending into rural areas. Increasing rural–urban migration assisted this process. Throughout the century the new and increasingly potent factor of Marxism was being added to the equation of Iranian politics, a factor which the practitioners of traditional patrimonial politics viewed with ambivalence and distrust. Some sought to harness it to their cause with varying degrees of success, none were able to entirely control it, while others rejected it altogether as a dangerous consequence of reform and revolution. The growth of mass politics in Iran also highlights the nature of revolutionary change in Iran in the twentieth century, emphasising that, while some changes were engineered by the elites, others were the unforeseen consequences of their actions, or indeed were the result of broader trends in global political competition and economic development.

International integration

This is another major theme of this book – the emergent integration of Iran into the international order. Iran has never been isolated from the international order. From the sixteenth century onwards, Iran had played a distinctive role in the politics of the Islamic world and from the seventeenth century the cultural and economic influence of Safavid Iran on the wider world was significant. European embassies and trade missions established themselves at the court of the Great Sophy in Isfahan, while Iranian goods and fashion began to have an impact on the courts of Europe. By the eighteenth century there was a growing literary interest in 'Persia' and, as Britain expanded into India, so interest in Persian literature and language grew. At the same time Russian power expanded in the north and for the first time Iranians became aware, as the Ottomans had done, of the threat posed by European military power. However, it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that this military power began to make itself felt. At the treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828), Iran felt the full brunt of Russian military and political power as her Caucasian dependencies were stripped from her and Russia gained extraterritorial rights within the country. This was the first time that the Iranian state felt the consequences of her weakness, although society as a whole remained unaffected. Throughout the nineteenth century as Britain and Russia competed for influence it was first the state, and later the commercial classes, which felt the impact of European penetration. Ideas also began to emerge, but it was still very much an elite preoccupation. The importance of Russia and Britain to the politics of Iran was made explicit in the Constitutional Revolution, when first British support facilitated its success, and then Russian antipathy encouraged its failure.

While idealism and imperial expansion occasionally motivated British and Russian policy towards Iran, their fundamental strategic interest in Iran was a

desire to ensure that it did not fall completely under the control of either power. More often than not, the Russians sought to extend their dominance while the British sought to limit it. Iranian politicians often skilfully played each against the other. However, the discovery of oil by William Knox-D'Arcy in 1908, after having been sold the exploitation rights by the Iranian government in 1901, altered the equation dramatically. Prior to the discovery of oil, Britain's interest in Iran revolved around the defence of her Indian empire, but with the Royal Navy move towards oil in 1913, Iran became a strategic interest of great importance to Britain, and European penetration into both state and society was accelerated. Oil lubricated the wheels of integration. Not only did it bring new wealth to the country, allowing the implementation and financing of many of the reforms imagined by Qajar statesmen, it made it possible for Iranians to travel abroad. Crucially, it brought Europe to Iran, in the shape of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and its enormous refinery in Abadan. British interests expanded and diversified throughout the country bringing more Iranians into contact with the outside world. This contact was multiplied during the Second World War when Iranian geopolitics, along with oil, encouraged the Allies to occupy her and use her as a transit route to supply the beleaguered Red Army from 1941 to 1946 when the last Red Army troops left the country. The Allied occupation had an immense impact on Iranian society, while the emergence of the Cold War, arguably begun in Iran in 1946, saw Iran entangled in a superpower rivalry of much greater intensity than anything she had experienced in the previous century. The second Pahlavi Shah indeed saw it as essential for Iran to fully integrate the country within America's Cold War interests, in order to access the capital required to finance his own 'revolution'. The patron–client relationship allowed successive Iranian statesmen, as their predecessors had done, to occasionally 'wag the dog', sometimes to an extent that the division between patron and client seemed to contemporaries to be distinctly blurred. Iran offers an interesting case study of a country able to use its international relationships (a consequence of its ability to maintain at least a nominal independence) to play a role far above its military and political strength.[8]

Weapons of the weak

In dealing with the outside world, Iranian politicians have been, by and large, excellent practitioners of the weapons of the weak to confound, confuse and frustrate the ambitions of greater powers in Iran. Acutely aware of their own military weakness but driven by ambitions of imperial stature inherited from an earlier age, Iranian statesmen have substituted diplomatic for military power, and have shown a diplomatic sophistication which has often confounded both partners and opponents whose impressions of Iran have too often been dictated by one-dimensional statistical analyses of the country. Western powers, confident in their own achievements and imperial in their ambitions, were consistently outmanoeuvred and frustrated by the activities of their Iranian counterparts, a result too often credited to the inadequacies, immorality, dishonesty and downright ineptitude of Iranians. While this was on occasion a true reflection, as is the case

with any nation, it more often than not reflected the prejudices of Europeans who found their ambitions frustrated by a political system, by which I mean language as well as structure, which they could not fully comprehend.[9]

This continuing miscomprehension has plagued Iran's relations with the outside world and the West in particular for much of the period under review. This lack of cultural empathy and communication was of course bilateral, and, in so far as the Iranians were concerned, was often deliberate. Both sides recognised the important relationship between knowledge and power, and, while the West sought clear lines of demarcation to facilitate control, so Iranian statesmen counteracted this threat by the use of persistent dissimulation. This was often extended to all things 'modern', thereby accentuating the cultural impasse between Westerners, who could not understand why Iranians should be opposed to developments that would add to their material well-being, and Iranians, who construed such developments as merely extending the tentacles of Western penetration and domination of Iran. Just as in the nineteenth century Iranian politicians opposed the construction of roads on account of the fear that it would allow foreign troops to overrun the country more quickly, so in the twentieth they argued against the institutionalisation of processes and in favour of ambiguity, lest foreigners 'understand' and as a consequence 'control'.[10] Arguably, it is only in recent years that this fear has been systematically addressed by Iranian intellectuals and a dialogue begun, though it is clearly far too early to say where this intellectual exercise will lead.

Analysing Iranian political structures

As noted above, this conscious desire to prevent foreign comprehension of the political and social processes has been compounded by an almost irrational desire on behalf of foreign observers to force Iran to fit a particular model of development witnessed, theoretically at least, in the Western world. Most striking perhaps, is the implicit (and occasionally explicit) determination to impose the 'secularisation thesis' – in which 'secularisation' (inadequately defined) is regarded as an essential precursor to 'modernisation' (again inadequately defined, but more often than not seen as synonymous with 'Westernisation') – even though the Western experience is neither as seamless or uniform as the various high priests of modernisation would have us believe. The secularisation thesis has frequently been accompanied by a 'modernisation' thesis that sees all change as being driven by economic development which will in turn, by processes that are inevitable, trigger political and social change. These ideas, which came to prominence in the social sciences after 1945, are not without their critics (Huntington was a prominent early critic[11]) but they remain pervasive enough to warrant consideration and, where it affects policy and attitudes, genuine concern. Thus, for instance, it is not uncommon to find some frustrated commentators relegating Iran to the category of anomaly, the exception which proves the rule. Unfortunately, Iran is too big an exception not to encourage some reflection as to the reconstruction of the rules. Yet this has been a sadly neglected exercise, and foreign observers have been too quick to selectively analyse a particular event in favour of their particular theory.[12] Thus the British were quick to

conclude, in the aftermath of the fall of Dr Mosaddeq, that Iranian nationalism was hollow and ineffective, while in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, views alternated between the sheer unpredictability of revolutions and its anomalous nature as a revolution that was apparently regressive rather than progressive in character.[13] While the reality is often complex, unusual and occasionally surprising, one should resist the temptation to dismiss as anomalous that which does not conform to our preconceptions. Any given narrative is constructed from 'historical facts' selected and inherited by the historian, and as such remains an interpretative exercise. This is not to deny the historicity of events, simply to point out that method as well as indigenous complexity may be responsible for difficulties in comprehension.[14] In the case of the Islamic Revolution, for instance, many earlier accounts were provided by intellectuals steeped in the Western tradition – fed in large part by the many Western-educated émigrés who fled the Revolution. Far from history being written by the victors, in this case it was overwhelmingly the *victims* who determined its direction.

The political structure of Iran remains complex because it represents an intricate tapestry of social and political classes in the process of dynamic change, reflecting the conflicting tendencies inherent in the transformation of traditional structures into 'modern' ones. Its very fluidity means that any analysis that does not take into account this dynamism is limited to being a mere snapshot, a one-dimensional static representation of a three-dimensional model in the process of continuous formation. Fluidity and dynamism exist not only in the construction and composition of social groups, but also in the ideas that drive them. In analysing the social groups that have shaped modern Iranian history we are faced with the prospect of charting the changes within social groups as well as with the ideas they purport to espouse. But just as continuity does not preclude change, so change is predicated on a measure of continuity. The fundamental question is not, therefore, whether structural analysis is possible, but how we approach it. Clearly the wholesale adoption and transfer of European constructs to Iran is unsatisfactory. At the same time, certain key developments in European historical and social theory can and must be applied, and there is no suggestion here that they must be rejected. This would be an equally unsatisfactory solution and in many ways an unrealistic exercise. Again it is the approach taken that is essential, if any systematic analysis is to enjoy some success.

Just as the environment under scrutiny is dynamic, so the approach must reflect this dynamism and accommodate it. To quote Karl Mannheim, 'In a realm in which everything is in the process of becoming, the only adequate synthesis would be a dynamic one, which is reformulated from time to time'.[15] Furthermore, the complexity of the environment must also be reflected in the theories which we bring to its study, avoiding the tendency to reductionism and generalisation. Above all, we must restore imagination to our understanding of Iranian history and that of the Middle East in general; avoid the tendency to objectify our subjects, denying them thought processes independent (or autonomous) of grand structures; and restore agency to a political process which is after all highly dependent, as noted above, on individual actors. While social and economic forces have played a role in shaping development, this must not blind us to the importance of imported ideas

carried by the intellectual and political elite into a reluctant society. As has been noted above, this vanguard has on occasion been extremely small.

In light of these considerations, what social groups can be discerned? In the Constitution of 1906, six categories of the population were delineated: princes and the Qajar tribe; doctors of divinity and students; nobles and notables; merchants; landed proprietors and peasants; trade guilds. From these we can discern three main groups: the landed aristocracy, the *ulema* and the *bazaaris*. These three broad groups formed the main pillars of the Iranian state, and above them the monarch, whose traditional role was to mediate among them. In time, the Pahlavis would add another pillar, that of the army. But the army, for reasons which will become apparent, was the coercive arm of the state (monarchy); its institutional links with society were limited. The aristocracy, the *ulema* and the *bazaaris* had profound roots in society, and with each other, in kinship associations as well as commercial and social relations. The relative longevity of the Qajar dynasty had allowed an uncharacteristic continuity and stability to emerge among these groups, and some bureaucratic families could certainly lay claim to generations of service, but in comparison with European societies there remained a considerable amount of social mobility – in both directions.[16]

These three groups formed the governing elite of Iran, and their limited numbers belied their social influence in both financial and ideological terms. While not a middle class, they formed the intermediary group between the lower classes and the Shah, with whom they were not always in agreement. While many of the landed aristocracy in particular provided the personnel to staff the court and the administration, as a social group they were by no means uniformly in support of the monarch, although it would be fair to say they all supported the institution of the monarchy, albeit with some changes. What really distinguished the individuals in these groups was the ideas they espoused, and it is here that complexity sets in because, far from representing a monolithic class interest, it is clear that many had different opinions on what their class interest happened to be. Thus to take the example of the Constitutional Revolution, supporters of the movement came from all three groups, as did opponents. For instance, the prominent Tehran *mujtahid*, Tabatabaie, agitated in favour of the movement, while Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri declared it blasphemous. Such rifts were apparent in the other groups. Furthermore, affiliation to a particular ideological group depended very much on circumstance, and on occasion it was not unknown for people to switch loyalties when they felt particular interests were under threat. Such flexibility has been the hallmark of Iranian political activity throughout the century, and has, as noted above, inadvertently assisted the rigorous polarisation of views partly as a result of trying to force individual decisions and positions.

The emergence of social forces

Beyond this elite group, social groups of political importance were negligible for much of this period. But by the 1930s an embryonic professional 'middle' class

outside the old elites began to emerge, and by the following decade, as a result of communist influences from the Soviet Union, a greater section of the urban lower classes and to some extent the rural peasantry were beginning to matter in political terms. Indeed in the Oil Nationalisation Crisis, Dr Mosaddeq was faced with a politically organised urban workforce that was viewed, not only by him, as increasingly outside his control. Fear of what this represented eventually turned the other traditional elite groups against Dr Mosaddeq, and indeed the crisis was a watershed in Iranian politics, because it signified that politics was no longer the preserve of the elite. Nationalism, and the mass mobilisation which accompanied it, was coming of age. Henceforth, political leaders would need to take account of the crowd in Iranian politics and greater efforts were expended seeking to manipulate it.[17]

In time Mohammad Reza Shah would use the land reform programme to remove one of the main pillars of the Iranian state, the landed aristocracy, and in turn would seek to weaken the *ulema* and the *bazaaris*. His intention was to replace them with a combination of the army and a new 'middle class' which would be dependent on him. Yet it is one of the curiosities of late Pahlavi Iran that a professional middle class rooted in society never emerged. Instead the new professionals were either co-opted into the elite or left on the margins. Indeed in the Pahlavi period this process of bifurcation applied to all classes with the consequence that the two-tier social model of elites and the rest was maintained, albeit with a different composition. This division between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' was keenly expressed by a British diplomat in 1957 in his description of southern Tehran:

> Here the mullahs preach every evening to packed audiences. Most of the sermons are revivalist stuff of a high emotional and low intellectual standard. But certain well known preachers attract the intelligentsia of the town with reasoned historical exposés of considerable merits . . . The Tehran that we saw on the tenth of Moharram is a different world, centuries and civilisations apart from the gaudy superficial botch of Cadillacs, hotels, antique shops, villas, tourists and diplomats where we run our daily round . . . But it is not only poverty, ignorance and dirt that distinguish the old south of the city from the parvenu north. The slums have a compact self-conscious unity and communal sense that is totally lacking in the smart districts of chlorinated water, macadamed roads and (fitful) street lighting. The bourgeois does not know his neighbour: the slum-dweller is intensely conscious of his. And in the slums the spurious blessings of Pepsi Cola civilisation have not yet destroyed the old way of life, where every man's comfort and security depend on the spontaneous, un-policed observation of a traditional code. Down in the southern part of the city manners and morals are better and stricter than in the villas of Tajrish: an injury to a neighbour, a pass at another man's wife, a brutality to a child evoke spontaneous retribution without benefit of bar or bench.[18]

Nationalism[19]

Nationalism was the driving force of mass mobilisation in twentieth-century Iran. But nationalism remained an essentially contested concept in both theory and practice in Iran, and secular nationalism found itself competing with religious and dynastic forms of nationalism, each appealing to particular sections of Iranian society. While secular forms of nationalism informed by the West ignited the spark, and the Pahlavis adapted it to their own needs by refocusing attention on the importance of the dynasty to Iranian nationalism, it took religious nationalism to free Iranian nationalism from its elite pretensions and make it popular. Indeed, religious nationalism, the politicisation of Iranian identity as it had formed in the nineteenth century, reflected the successful synthesis of an elite-imposed ideology and the realities of popular politics.[20] It also reflected the fact that a distinctly 'national' identity was not an entirely alien concept to the mass of ordinary Iranians familiar with the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi.[21] Religious nationalism was a composite identity of tremendous political force, as was to be seen in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It sanctified the nation. This is not as unusual a phenomenon as we are often led to believe in the West, where the suspicion of religion in some areas of scholarship has reached almost epidemic proportions.

The truth of course is that secularism, as opposed to laicism in the French model, has never disavowed religion. Indeed for many Iranians, even those who espoused and advocated a distinctly secular nationalism, Shi'ism remained an integral component of their 'national' identity. The real debate between secular and religious nationalists was the precise role of religion in society. Few secularists would have argued that religion had no function at all. On the contrary, while secular intellectuals in the West have been characterised as tending towards atheism or agnosticism, this has not been nor is the case in Iran. While some secular intellectuals, notably Mirza Agha Khan Kermani,[22] or later Ahmad Kasravi, may have been hostile to the *ulema* and their application of Islam, it did not follow automatically that they were necessarily anti-Islamic or irreligious. Their main criticism was targeted against organised religion and its function, in their eyes, as a pillar of the establishment and a constraint on meaningful reform. There were many in the *ulema* who were equally critical of their own function and organisation (one of the most notable being Ayatollah Khomeini) while others such as Kasravi were themselves the products of the very religious institutions they rejected.[23] Some of the most notable nationalists of the Constitutional period were members of the *ulema*, including Tabatabaie and, of course, Muddaris. While most of the early ideologues had received their primary if not secondary education in religious seminaries – the absence of alternatives in the nineteenth century made this inevitable. The consequence was that support for nationalism in its various forms cut across all the major classes.

Nationalism as a viable tool of political action was born in the Constitutional Revolution, came of age during the Oil Nationalisation Crisis and began its social maturation in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It was shaped by the struggle against perceived imperial powers, but its resources were much deeper than other

emergent nationalisms in the Third World. The rich, complex tapestry of historical experience and myth which constituted the idea and the identity of Iran, and ultimately produced Iranian nationalism, provided Iranians with coherent if ambiguous self-consciousness prior to the arrival of the Europeans. In this respect Iran had much more in common with China than it did with other countries in the Middle East. Therefore, while Iran at the turn of the century may have been an 'imagined community', it was a community bound together by an increasingly fertile and convinced imagination. With the growth of the media and the spread of literacy throughout the century it was an imagination which was to grow. While some conception of 'Iran' had undoubtedly existed prior to the modern era, the increasing centralisation of the state and the growth of communications was to encourage the erosion of local loyalties and identities and replace them emphatically with the notion of a singular, if not homogenous, Iranian national identity. Nationalism thus joined religion and constitutionalism as a major, if not predominant, term of reference in modern Iran. It defined people's loyalties, and leaders competed to be more nationalist than each other and to acquire the authority and legitimacy nationalism bestowed. While religion sanctified the nation, it was the concept of the nation which drew disparate groups together. There was no greater epithet than 'patriot' and no greater slur than 'traitor'. Similarly it was the fear of national disintegration and dismemberment which crystallised nationalist politicians and subsumed differences. It was an innate fear which was to be exploited regularly throughout the twentieth century by successive governments.

While in the West nationalism has increasingly been seen as the child of modernity, an unfortunate progeny, in Iran modernisation was the handmaiden of nationalism. Nationalism allowed modernisation and modernisation strengthened the nation. Thus Reza Khan used nationalist sentiment to forge a modern army through conscription and enforce Iran's national integrity by eliminating those forces which appeared to harm the power and authority of the state. New methods and new technologies allowed the state to be strengthened vis-à-vis the periphery and as a consequence, it was felt, the nation. Under Reza Shah the notion that a centralised, modernised state was beneficial to the nation, which was itself homogenous and singular, gained wide credence, but as a result it also came under increasing criticism. Just as there was growing criticism of what modernisation meant in practice, so there were questions as to how compatible nationalism and modernisation actually were. This tension over the compatibility of a nationalism which preached self-sufficiency and national honour with the needs of economic and social development – which frequently required the appropriation of foreign technology and personnel – continued throughout the century. More often than not, it was nationalism that won over the demands of modernisation, either because national honour dictated that developmental plans were too modest, or because in the absence of indigenous expertise, developmental plans could wait.

The other major tension which persisted was the nature of modernisation itself and whether the centralisation of the state was the policy which had to be pursued. Arguing that Qajar weakness was a consequence, in part, of the

impotence of the Qajar state, reformers sought to rectify the problem by concentrating on the strengthening of the central organs of the state. Indeed the Pahlavi state created by Reza Shah and his supporters, while flawed, marked the first time that the Iranian state consistently and regularly affected the lives of ordinary Iranians. But as the state began to dictate to society, so people increasingly queried previous assumptions and argued for decentralisation as a way of strengthening the nation with the state. There was and continues to be a debate and at times confusion between the centralisation of (sovereign) authority and the centralisation of power.

These arguments about the nature of the state, and the aims of modernisation are a consistent theme in modern Iranian history and the contradictions they contain help explain the erratic nature of development. Indeed it may help to see the process of development in Iran as a dialectical one in which a sequence of contradictions emerges and needs resolution, either intellectually, practically or coercively, before the next stage can be reached.[24] Sometimes these resolutions are violent in nature, at other times relatively peaceful, but on all occasions the atmosphere of tension is palpable. This often gives the impression of instability, and certainly the closer one is in spatial and temporal terms, the more confused, erratic and unstable the situation seems. However, the advantage of history is that it allows us to view change from a distance of relative comfort and to create a more complete picture from the various strands that are revealed. Even these advantages are, in the Iranian case, relative and, in a society in the throes of revolutionary change, certain precautions need to be taken into consideration before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Continuity and change

Lambton famously noted in reference to Medieval Iran that 'continuity did not preclude change'. One might of course add that by extension, change does not preclude continuity and as Iranian Constitutionalists and their later intellectual heirs concluded, successful change was often predicated on knowing how to preserve that which was valuable to the cohesion of society at large. In this respect Iranian intellectuals drew on and undoubtedly echoed the writings of Edmund Burke in arguing that knowing what to preserve, allowed one to face the future of change with a good deal more confidence. This debt to what we might term a British Enlightenment tradition naturally conflicted with other more revolutionary traditions that were drawn from French thought and later in the twentieth century from the Russian experience, from where it might be added many Enlightenment ideas were first mediated. But the dominance of Burkean ideas reflected the social and political realities faced by many Iranian reformers and revolutionaries who appreciated that durable revolutionary change paradoxically relied on a measure of conservatism. Too sudden or dramatic a change, as France, and the Soviet Union would suggest, only encouraged a reaction to the old order albeit in new clothes, and real change had to be built on foundations of continuity. The political trick was to understand the relationship between these

two poles and to harmonise them such that change could be managed towards sustainable progress. It should come as no surprise that for those in power in Iran, Britain and later the United States provided models of emulation and admiration, even if there were regular disagreements about policies, and the less than ideal way in which Britain and the United States applied their policies.

For much of the period under review Iranian society remained intensely conservative in its outlook, and with two centuries to survey, it is remarkable just how much continuity exists in social mores and attitudes, to say nothing of the linguistic continuities that exist in vernacular (as opposed to bureaucratic and court) Persian over several centuries. Malcolm's discussions on a range of social and religious issues with his Iranian companions in the early 1800s would not appear entirely out of place in contemporary Iran. The state, inasmuch as it existed, in the nineteenth century, saw its role as managing this conservatism, rather than seeking to change it, and it was only with the onset of the Constitutional Revolution that this attitude changed. Here on in, the Iranian state shed its early modern perspective to promote an Enlightenment doctrine of the state as an agent of change and a means of promoting the welfare of its citizens. Henceforth, and certainly with the rise and rule of Reza Shah, the state imposed change and promoted the welfare of its citizens often despite themselves and against their wishes. This was accelerated in different ways under Mohammad Reza Shah, but certainly did not end under the Islamic Republic. Indeed the Islamic Revolution may have changed the substance but it was quite definitely Iranian in form, and in its determination to impose change upon its erstwhile citizens, the Islamic Republic owed a far greater debt to its republican pretensions than its Islamic ones. Over time, the roles would reverse. An increasingly educated public, empowered and connected by technology, sought both to engage and to emulate the outside world. Their 'imagined community' now spanned the globe. The children of the Constitutional Revolution had come of age, shaken off their innate conservatism to embrace a more progressive politics. Enlightened despotism, as in Europe, had achieved its purpose and was now viewed as surplus to requirements – a position unsurprisingly not held by those in power, who have sought to resist the tide of change by entrenching their power in a divine authority to which their monarchical predecessors could only aspire. Just as society eventually responded to the demands of politics, so too in time will politics have to respond to the real revolutionary change of a society on the move.

Notes

1 Epitomised in January 2002 by being accorded membership of the 'Axis of Evil' by the United States, although subsequent US announcements have sought to soften the impact.
2 For an attempt to reconcile these conflicting traditions, see Sir John Malcolm's much neglected *History of Persia* in two volumes, London: printed for John Murray and Longman and Co. by James Moyes, 1815.
3 The notion that the 'East' is 'unhistorical', where change does not occur, is Hegelian. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*. New York, NY: Dover, 1956, pp. 11–223.

4 Akbar Ganji has defined these 'tensions' as between nation v state, left v right, theocracy v secularism, tradition v modernity, repressive autocracy v freedom and democracy. See A. Ganji, *Ali-jenab sorkh poosh va ali-jenab khakestari* (The Red Eminence and the Grey Eminence). Tehran: Tar-e no, 2000, pp. 11–12.
5 J.S. Coleman, 'The Development Syndrome: Differentiation-Equality-Capacity', in J.S. Coleman and L. Binder (eds), *Crises and Consequences in Political Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 73–100.
6 See R. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1985.
7 Ironically, it is under the Islamic Republic that this process is beginning to reach fruition.
8 See for instance Y. Mazandi, *Iran – Abar Ghodrat-e Qarn?* (Iran – Superpower of the Century?). Tehran: Alborz, 1373/1994.
9 In essence the problem of 'Orientalism' as highlighted by Edward Said, a critique which has itself come under considerable scrutiny. See also V. Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, pp. 174–87.
10 This critique of 'modernity' may be characterised as distinctly Foucauldian, and it should come as no surprise that Michel Foucault is widely read among Iranian intellectuals, both religious and lay, in the post-revolutionary era.
11 S.P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968.
12 As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, revolutions tend to be not only politically isolated but intellectually quarantined; see *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Manchester: Fontana, 1966, Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 34.
13 See for instance Keddie's discussion 'Can Revolutions Be Predicted? Can Their Causes Be Understood?', in N. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution*. London: Macmillan, 1995, pp. 13–34. Also G. Watson, 'How Radical Is Revolution?', *History Today*, November 1988, pp. 42–9.
14 This debate on the nature and selection of the 'historical fact' is of course extensive. See for example E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* London: Pelican, pp. 7–30. See also H. White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in B. Fay, P. Pomper and R.T. Vann (eds), *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*. London: Blackwell, 1998, pp. 15–33.
15 K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, p. 135.
16 A social mobility noted by Lord Curzon.
17 See E. Abrahamian, 'The Crowd in Iranian Politics, 1906–1953', *Past and Present* 41, 1968, pp. 184–210.
18 FO 371 127139 EP 1781/3 dated 7 September 1957.
19 Nationalism has been discussed in greater detail in my *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
20 For our purposes, 'nationalism' will be defined as the politicisation of the cultural identity which bound together the various ethnicities constituting the Iranian state under the Qajars.
21 For example, see Sir John Malcolm, *History of Persia* and Vita Sackville-West, *Passenger to Tehran*. London: Hogarth Press, 1926, pp. 105, 121 (see also fn. 49).
22 Kermani is recognised as one of the first Iranian nationalist ideologues.
23 Another key thinker in this regard, though outside the scope of this book, is Jamal al Din al Afghani, increasingly referred to by Iranians as 'Asaadabadi'.
24 For an interesting discussion see J.A. Bill and R. Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994, pp. 5–8.

2 The legacy of the eighteenth century

In 1800, Sir John Malcolm, then serving as an officer in the army of the East India Company, was dispatched to Iran to establish diplomatic and commercial relations. Having left his native Scotland at the tender age of 12, Malcolm had grown up in the Persianate world of post-Mughal India, and was well versed in the Persian language, but above all and perhaps more importantly, possessed a profound cultural appreciation of the Iranian world.[1] He recognised the importance of presentation and image, the subtleties, bordering on tedium, of the various idiosyncrasies that defined Persian etiquette that regulated both society and politics. On arrival in Iran he took care to ensure that his embassy remained disciplined and where necessary on display, providing a careful coordinated theatrical presentation to the Iranians he was sure had been sent to observe him. His first encounter with officialdom at a regional court proved the first contest of wills which Malcolm won with a degree of aplomb that attested to his political acuity.[2] He was rewarded with an audience with the monarch himself, Fath Ali Shah, the nephew of the founder of the Qajar dynasty whose regal bearing, and portrait, has become emblematic of the entire dynasty.

The encounter was to prove revealing and the conversation in many ways provided a valuable vignette and template, not only for Iran's relations with the newly empowered 'West', but in the monarch's appreciation of his own kingdom. The Iranians were not oblivious to European power, but in the 80 years since the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722, there was a tentative if reluctant realisation that the balance of power had shifted. For a people who were notoriously uninterested in the world beyond their own horizon, they had acquired a curiosity about the establishment of European interests in India, both French and British; a development, which along with the expansion of Russian power in the north, ensured that 'Europe' and Iran were to be effective neighbours for more than a century. Fath Ali Shah began by inquiring about the strength of the French, notably commending Malcolm for an honest answer that he felt was remiss from his own courtiers, who he pointedly noted, tended to exaggerate.

But it was when he inquired about the nature of government in Britain that the yawning gap between East and West became apparent and Iran's problems

were laid bare for all those who cared to see. On being informed of the role of George III within the British constitution, Fath Ali Shah remarked that he appeared to be little more than a chief magistrate. His comments, as related by Malcolm, were revealing: '"Such a condition of power", said he, smiling, "has permanence but it has no enjoyment. There you see Suliman Khan Kajir, and several other of the first chiefs of the kingdom – I can cut all their heads off: can I not?" said he addressing them. "Assuredly, 'Point of adoration of the world', if it is your pleasure". "That is real power", said the king; "but then it has no permanence . . ."'.[3] Fath Ali Shah added that the one consolation was that his sons, of which there were many, would fight for the inheritance and Iran would consequently be ruled by a soldier. None of this needless to say augured well for the future stability of the kingdom and the contrast with Britain, and Europe in general, was increasingly clear as was the challenge faced by an Iranian state that had emerged from a century of political turmoil. Ultimately, British observers would conclude that Iran's problems were neither innate nor predetermined but a function of inadequate and unstable politics. Reform the political system (as indeed the British had done) and benefits would flow. This simple exchange in many ways exposed the central challenge that faced Iranian statesmen for the next century, and indeed, beyond.

The Safavid inheritance

The modern Iranian state is naturally the product of multiple factors, influences and experiences but for our purposes the foundations and cultural parameters of the state were established under the Safavids, the dynasty that ruled Iran between 1501 and 1722. It was the Safavids who established the territorial boundaries of the modern state and while these may have retracted on all fronts, the border with the Ottoman Empire, demarcated by treaty in 1639, remains one of the oldest fixed borders anywhere in the world. As the Huguenot merchant and writer, Sir John Chardin, who was resident in Isfahan in the latter half of the seventeenth century, noted caustically, 'Persia is the greatest empire in the world, if you consider it according to the geographical description given by the Persians'.[4] Indeed the Iranian imagination extended far further than the realities of their imperium. Chardin, a keen observer of the Iranian worldview, noted that Iranian geographers retained the ancient boundaries, 'alledging, that they are still in right and fact, the bounds of their country', and should not be adjusted on account of transient political events that only required a leader of quality – such as the late Shah Abbas, known to posterity as 'the Great' – to reverse.

This complacent attitude was borne of a keen sense of cultural superiority cultivated through historical experience, which suggested that for all the turmoil that might occur, 'Iran' – for that was the name in common usage at the time – would somehow still remain, Iran.[5] All travellers to the country in the early modern period note this nomenclature and it is worth reiterating here to remove

once and for all the impression that the appellation 'Iran' is a twentieth-century exercise in archaism. This idea of Iran was drawn from both literary and historical experience, though the distinction between the two was not at all clear at least until the end of the nineteenth century. It was encapsulated and largely though not exclusively drawn from the *Shahnameh*, the poetic epic which charted the ascent and descent of 'Iran' through to the Islamic conquest in the seventh century. It was this text that framed a distinctly Iranian world view, and it was the concept of *Iranshahr* (later transcribed as *Iranzamin*), the land or empire of Iran, far more than any classical depiction of Imperial Persia, that was being reflected in Chardin's writing. The ideas and the stories behind them formed a good part of the cultural and folkloric heritage of the peoples of the Safavid empire, but they were perhaps most actively promoted by the bureaucratic elites that were to serve a series of dynasties and were to provide, in stark contrast to the rulers, an unusually robust and continuous narrative thread.

The success of the Safavids as a dynasty – to date the longest lasting of Iran's 'modern' dynasties – depended in large part on their being able to draw on and exploit a number of sources of legitimation, including a 'Turkic' inheritance and most obviously as the guardians of Twelver Shi'ism, which the founder of the dynasty, Shah Ismail forcibly introduced on his accession in 1501. So prominent and consequential has Shi'ism been in the subsequent history of the country, that earlier historians have tended to emphasise this characteristic above all others, a trend that was unsurprisingly reinforced by the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (when for a brief period at least, almost all Iranian history was interpreted through an Islamic lens). Subsequent research has suggested that despite claims of descent from the Prophet and links with the Imamate, Safavid Shi'ism was a good deal more eclectic, and even cosmopolitan in approach than had initially been thought.[6] This is certainly reflected in the nature of the empire itself, which incorporated and indeed tolerated a number of different faiths. Later Safavid monarchs, scions of Circassian concubines who emanated from the Christian heartlands of the empire in the Caucasus, appeared to have been quite open-minded about the religious beliefs of their subjects.[7] This was by no means a sectarian empire with totalitarian intent, even if it inflicted the occasional pogrom.

The seventeenth-century Safavid state, the product of Shah Abbas' reforms, thus drew on Persian, Islamic and perhaps to a decreasing extent Turkic sources of legitimacy – a cosmopolitan inheritance for a cosmopolitan empire. Shah Soleiman I, the penultimate monarch was emblematic of this complex inheritance. The son of a Circassian mother he was described by Chardin as blond and blue eyed (although he dyed his hair black),[8] his first language was effectively Turkish, and his birth-name was Sam, the grandfather of the Persian (mythological) hero, Rostam, and while his throne name was decidedly Muslim, his adherence to scripture was not.[9]

Of the three ostensibly Muslim empires of the period, the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires, the Safavid was neither the richest nor the most powerful,

but it certainly managed to hold its own, despite territorial losses to the Ottomans, and what it lacked in material power it made up for with cultural depth and reach. Both the Ottomans and the Mughals had connections to the Persianate world. The language of government in Mughal India was Persian providing in many ways for a fluid cultural zone in which men of letters moved and settled relatively freely.[10] While to the West the Turco-Iranian culture of the Ottoman Empire remained relatively accessible to the Turco-Iranians of the Safavid empire. Perhaps most strikingly for the better part of a century following Shah Abbas' death in 1629, Iran enjoyed a period of prolonged peace almost unprecedented in its recent history. This cannot but have increased the affluence of its society as trade increased and merchants were protected, even if the state became as a consequence even more complacent, and the government in the shape of the king and his court, indulgent to the point of decadence.

The failure of the dynasty to produce a ruler with the energy of Shah Abbas I has traditionally been blamed in the latter's policy of ensuring that all heirs be raised within the confines of the harem, thereby depriving them of any meaningful political experience prior to their accession. There is little doubt that such a policy cannot have helped matters but it is just as likely that the lack of a serious challenge – either internal or external – had resulted in an administration that proved highly resistant to change and overconfident in its own abilities. To this complacency we must add the impact of what was to prove the last of the reigning Safavid kings, Shah Sultan Hossein (1694–1722), whose inadequacies were a salutary reminder that the Shah remained the lynchpin of the Iranian state.

Shah Abbas the Great had begun his reign as an exponent of piety and ended his rule as a cynic, given to bouts of melancholy and a perceived religious cosmopolitanism that led some Christian missionaries to convince themselves that he might actually convert.[11] Shah Sultan Hossein's journey appears to have been the reverse of this. Possessed of striking blue eyes like his father, the new king appeared to combine the decadence of Shah Soleiman with a meekness and excessive piety that drew the derision of his courtiers. Although they would seem to have been partly responsible for the succession insofar as the heir apparent had reportedly warned them to choose another if they wanted glory, and only him if they wanted peace and tranquillity. Under Shah Soltan Hossein, indulgence and piety appeared to increase in equal measure though guilt about the former ensured that the latter increasingly took precedence, and while government fell into a stupor, it was to prove dangerously inadequate to any challenges that might emerge.

This challenge was to emerge from the eastern margins of the empire, from an unexpected quarter that was unsurprisingly viewed with typical complacency. Following persistent raids by Baluchi tribesmen, Shah Soltan Hossein decided to dispatch a Georgian prince and vassal, Gorgin Khan, to restore order. This he duly achieved but at the cost of antagonising and provoking into rebellion the Afghan warlord Mir Wais. Gorgin was assassinated in 1709, and the situation was left to fester for several years until Mir Wais' death in 1717. It was then decided

to use tried and tested diplomatic and financial means to bring the rebellious Afghans back into the fold. Unfortunately for Shah Soltan Hossein, Mir Wais' son, Mahmud was to prove considerably less amenable to any form of financially induced charm and instead launched a raid into the heartlands of the empire, occupying Kerman in 1720.

The Safavid administration appeared incapable of taking the threat seriously and were reassured when after six months Mahmud withdrew, only to find that he returned with more energy in 1722, this time coming to within 20 km of the capital Isfahan. Even now the response was incoherent and lacklustre, with the Safavid administration hamstrung by a mixture of Shah Soltan Hossein's fatalism and superstition. It was not that the state was materially incapable of mobilising a force to repel the Afghan marauders, but more that the political will and moral fibre to evince a coherent strategy and mobilisation were lacking. Having approached the threat with a barely disguised sense of contempt, the sudden and somewhat shocking defeat of a larger and better equipped Safavid army by the Afghans resulted in near panic as the capital found itself under siege. So began one of the more catastrophic periods in modern Iranian history, the trauma of which would be felt long after the siege ended.

The siege of Isfahan lasted from March through to October 1722, when faced with the starvation of the city, Shah Soltan Hossein finally relented and surrendered to an Afghan warlord who was just if not more surprised by the turn of events. With typical fatalism Shah Soltan Hossein had concluded that Mahmud's triumph had been ordained by divine providence and consequently he had no choice but to hand him the crown. The man who had come to plunder the empire found himself instead inheriting it and it is worth bearing in mind that Mahmud and his cousin Ashraf, who overthrew him in 1725, both regarded themselves as rulers of the 'imperial kingdom' of Iran.[12] Not that the kingdom itself was content with the change of dynasty. The authority of the Safavids survived the immediate shock of defeat and pretenders continued to lay claim to the throne. The Afghan 'interregnum' was to prove a highly disruptive and bloody period, as both Afghan rulers sought against the odds to consolidate their gains. The hapless former Shah Soltan Hossein was finally executed in 1726, when an Ottoman army threatened to restore him to the throne.

These developments raise an important and distinguishing point with respect to the Safavid state which is often forgotten by historians who seek to draw parallels with both the Ottoman and Mughal empires. While the dynasty was central to the idea of Iran, it did not necessarily supplant it in the popular and perhaps more importantly, the bureaucratic imagination, that intellectual elite who were bound by the idea and who acted as a vehicle for its transmission. Mahmud did not seek to overthrow the empire or necessarily redraw its boundaries around his own distinct patrimony, but to inherit the throne and kingdom intact. Similarly the collapse of the dynasty, did not immediately imply the disintegration of the state, still less of the cultural frame of reference that

was Iran. Government, in terms of the central administration, had failed, and regional governance was experiencing the consequences, but it was striking that the authority of the Safavids long outlived their political demise. Part of this no doubt reflected their religious legitimacy, and their longevity. But it also reflected their broad appeal to, and close association with what remained a cosmopolitan empire.

Warlords and saviours

While Iran's new rulers settled into a life considerably more destructive and debauched than the political order they had just overthrown, Shah Soltan Hossein's only remaining son, Tahmasp (in this case a throne name drawn from the *Shahnameh*), sought to gather loyal supporters in the north. Among these supporters was the erstwhile chief of the Afsharid clan from north-eastern Iran, Nader, who took the honorific title, Tahmasp Quli Khan (the slave of Tahmasp), as he formally entered the service of the young pretender. His impact in material and cultural terms was to be profound. Here was the saviour who would restore Iran's fortunes just as it appeared that dynastic misfortune would lead to a political fragmentation of the empire.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that the loss of Isfahan had on public perceptions. Indeed, the impact was felt as far afield as Europe, even provoking what may be the first academic dissertation on Iranian history, at a European University, that of Uppsala.[13] More immediately, the dramatic weakening of the state convinced neighbours that now was the time for some choice territorial acquisitions. The Ottomans moved in from the west, ostensibly in support of a Safavid restoration, while to the north a new emerging power was making itself felt in the form of Russia. Iran's Caspian provinces were soon being occupied, as Peter the Great sought to turn the Caspian into a Russian lake. The Afghan inheritance was proving to be a shadow of its former self. The origins of Nader Afshar are difficult to ascertain and in later life he took pride in effectively being self-made without an aristocratic lineage. He seems nonetheless to have made himself by dint of birth and more importantly, military prowess, the chief of the 'Turkic' Afsharid 'clan'.

While the term 'tribe' has often been used to describe these vast kinship networks (though these groups did not necessarily signify consanguinity of any other than an invented sort), the term is avoided here as being too loaded with negative connotations to be of use within the Iranian context. These extensive networks varied in size and did not necessarily imply a nomadic lifestyle. What did distinguish them was that they drew their strength from a rural rather than an urban base, and that these rural settings were often peripheral to the centres of power, which were usually located in cities and towns. This does not mean that they came from the margins of empire in a geographic sense – as indeed Mahmud's Afghans had done – but that they were located on the peripheries of power that were largely urban based.

Similarly I have used 'Turkic' rather than 'Turkish' throughout to avoid confusion with modern concepts of Turkish identity, or indeed the nationalist tendency to appropriate backwards into history, meanings and associations that do not apply. That the Afsharids were Turkic implies that their bases were rural and that they tended to communicate primarily in a Turkic dialect. It has no bearing on religious belief, which in Nader's case appears to have been pragmatic rather than pious, and bore no relation to their identification or otherwise (as we shall see) with the Iranian state and worldview. This of course reflected the mytho-historical inheritance of the *Shahnameh*. 'Iran' and 'Turan' – terms which reflected the rural–urban dynamic and tensions of the Iranian oecumene, rather than any intrinsic ethnic division – may have grown to be distinct but they were born of a common inheritance and Turkic roots by no means precluded or prevented an adherence to a broader idea of Iran.[14]

There is some evidence that Nader visited Isfahan as a youth and was suitably unimpressed by the excess and indulgence which he witnessed.[15] If so it is likely to have had an impact on his own attitudes to life and politics that were reflected in an austere lifestyle that naturally endeared him to those of a military inclination. Nader's rise to prominence was as dramatic as it was ultimately to prove tragic. His mercurial career possessed a good deal more calculation than posterity has bestowed on him and he was careful to position himself as the military arm of the Safavid heir apparent. It was in the service of Tahmasp that he began the re-conquest of the kingdom from the Afghans, Ottomans and Russians. It says much of the nature of the Safavid state and its dynastic collapse, that Nader was able to turn things round with alacrity raising a force to contend with the various challenges. It also says much of the continuing authority of the Safavid state reinvigorated by Nader's military achievements, that the Russian withdrawal from the Caspian provinces was concluded by negotiation and overseen by observers.

Indeed by 1730 much of Iranian territorial sovereignty had been restored, the Afghan interregnum was effectively at an end, and Nader had incorporated many of the remaining elements into his own forces. Confronted by the duplicity of Tahmasp he had him deposed in 1732, formally assuming the title of regent, for Tahmasp's infant son, now enthroned as Abbas III. In marrying his son to Tahmasp's sister, it was increasingly apparent that Nader had dynastic ambitions of his own, and by 1735, having eliminated any outspoken supporters of the Safavids, he took the fateful decision to seize the throne. In 1739 he launched his invasion of India, defeating and debilitating the Mughals before returning with a haul of gems and jewels that allowed him to announce the waiving of all taxes for a period of three years. India, however, was to prove to be his undoing.[16] If Nader eschewed the decadence of the Safavids, he was to prove no less avaricious when it came to men and money for his continuing campaigns, and the following years to his assassination in 1747, were not only to witness even greater exactions on the fragile Iranian economy (the much vaunted period of tax relief was soon forgotten), but crucially what appears to have been his own moral breakdown

following the blinding of his son and heir in what amounted to a fit of jealousy. Nader never appears to have recovered from this, becoming more violent, vengeful and ruthless with every day that passed, such that in 1747 he was murdered by his lieutenants. The empire he reconstituted and substantially extended soon collapsed to be fought over by his successors, with one of his Afghan generals moving swiftly to establish a distinct Afghan kingdom.

The failure of Nader Shah's dynastic ambitions have made him little more than a footnote in Iranian history, albeit one that has etched itself in Iranian memory. His legacy in material terms was not a positive one. He left the country far poorer in men and materials than he found it, and morally and spiritually unprepared for the challenges that it would soon face. But the moral of the tale, of usurpation and decadence tends to disguise some important lessons of the period. Far from simply a reckless warlord Nader was careful and calculated about his projected ascent to the throne. He cultivated the three great pillars of legitimacy, drawing on his Turkic associations and lineage by seeking on one level to emulate the achievements of Tamerlane, while at the same time stressing his Persian legitimacy by defining himself as '*Nader-e Iranzamin va khusrau-e giti setan*' (Nader of *Iranzamin* and world conquering *khusrau*), an epigraph that was to be found on the coin minted for the occasion of his coronation[17], later adding the title *Shah-e Shahan* (king of kings). Warriors and merchants initially found much that appealing in the new order.

He even sought to reshape the religious environment in his favour. Aware of the continuing affection and loyalty to the Safavids through their association with Shi'ism, Nader Shah sought from an early stage to diminish that appeal by re-situating Shi'ism as a distinct yet inclusive school within the orthodox 'Sunni' tradition. Some have argued that he sought to do this to enable further conquests within the broader Muslim world, but the cosmopolitan nature of the Safavid 'imperial' state does not suggest that religion was a barrier to conquest. More likely it reflected the extensive inclusion of Sunnis within Nader Shah's army, as well as his own distaste for what he considered to be the excesses of the Safavid court and their religious enablers. Indeed in many ways Nader Shah's pragmatic approach to religion reflected a wider reaction to the ineffectual piety of Shah Soltan Hossein, and a sense that the state had been weakened by a decadence facilitated by an excess of faith. It is often assumed that such charges of decadence emanated principally from European observers, but Iranian contemporaries were no more forgiving of the excesses that characterised the late Safavid court.[18]

Nader Shah's failure cannot therefore necessarily be attributed to a misguided religious policy, though his studied neglect of the religious classes meant that he had to compensate in other areas. His victories brought undoubted lustre to his name – not least his descent on Delhi – and his broader policies, most obviously his determination to build a navy, could well have set Iran on a quite different political trajectory, but his failure to ground his ambition in any institutional and administrative foundation meant that his continuous campaigns