

## Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*

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It was not until I attended the twelfth biennial conference of the Association for Iranian Studies held from August 14 to 17, 2018 at the University of California, Irvine, that I first became aware of Professor Abbas Amanat's outstanding achievement: *Iran: A Modern History*—a masterpiece from the most renowned historian of modern Iran, which, in fact, was among the main topic of the conference. A roundtable discussion of this book was conducted on the third day of the program comprising five experts from different fields,<sup>1</sup> which I could not attend; however, I watched some parts of the discussion online after I returned to Japan.

It is extremely impressive that this book, at nearly a thousand pages, was written by a single author. The author states that he spent almost 20 years preparing this book [Amanat: ix]. I would like to underscore that this book is not merely an addition to the university texts of Iranian history. Rather, this voluminous work must be considered a straightforward manifestation of a fresh but convincing perspective on the modern history of Iran.

Prof. Amanat's *Iran: A Modern History* is carefully constructed in accordance with the author's conception of the four historical divisions of the modern history of Iran: Part I—A Shi'i Empire, Part II—Reshaping of the Guarded Domains, Part III—A Nation Recast, and Part IV—A Contested Revolution and the Rise of the Islamic Republic. Here, it is worth mentioning that the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which is generally understood as a key turning point of modern history in Iran, is treated in the last chapter of Part II, which examines and elucidates the Qajar period from the outset. This section consists of the following chapters: The Making of the Qajar Era (1797–1852), Naser al-Din Shah and Maintaining a Fragile Balance (1848–1896), and The Constitutional Revolution: Road to a Plural Modernity (1905–1911).

Prof. Amanat's version of Iranian modern history does not regard the Constitutional Revolution as a starting point or an unfolding of the new historical stage. Rather, he conceptualizes it as a “beginning of the end” of the ruling system represented by the Qajar dynasty. Generally, the Constitutional Revolution has long been regarded as the most important and crucial starting point of modern history in Iran, especially after the 1979 revolution.

The typical scholarly portrayal in this regard is Prof. Ervand Abrahamian's *Iran between Two Revolutions*,<sup>2</sup> whose title clearly describes the author's understanding of Iran's recent history, that is, “between the two revolutions”—the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution. Another typical narrative of modern history is Prof. J. M. Upton's *The History of Modern Iran*,<sup>3</sup> which highlights the significance of Fath Ali Shah, who established the Qajar dynasty. A third example is *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7,<sup>4</sup> which treats the historical time as spanning from the reign of Nader Shah to the Islamic Republic. Further, another recent achievement must be mentioned: Ali M. Ansari's *Modern Iran since 1797*,<sup>5</sup> which conceptualizes the emerging of the Qajar era as a starting point of the so-called “modern Iran.”

Speaking of Prof. Abrahamian's work, the narrative draws attention to the modernization enforced by the late-Qajar

and Pahlavi dynasties, inevitably confronting “Iranian people’s resistance,” which was often repressed by force. This narrative is obviously a fairly stereotyped conception of historical evolution. In the second case of Prof. Upton, the author attempts to objectively narrate the recent history of Iran in the context of the peak of the Pahlavi dynasty before the revolution of 1979. In a sense, this book intends to present Iran’s social modernization process from above. However, the fundamental difference between the Qajar dynasty and previous dynasties is not clearly explained.

In the case of the third book, the volume itself was published in 1991, several years after the revolution. Meanwhile, the first five volumes were published in 1968 and the sixth in 1986. Thus, the basic structure of volumes seems to have been designed during the Pahlavi era. If this is the case, the reason for putting Nader Shah’s era at the top of the last volume is understandable, as at that time Nader Shah was “glorified as a hero and a forerunner of national unity” [Amanat: 142]. However, more than 40 years after the revolution, it now seems far less convincing to narrate the history from Nader’s standpoint.

In the case of Ansari’s work, he appears to stress the shifting influence of Western powers on the defense and modernization of the Iranian state and society. Here, however, the roots of the uneven relationship can be traced back to the Safavid era, and the advantage of Prof. Amanat’s conception of “modern history” remains unchallenged.

In today’s context, Prof. Amanat’s presentation of Iranian “modern history” as commencing from the Safavid era seems far more convincing than these conventional preceding narratives. He provides powerful evidence with multiple reasons and clear, descriptive portrayals. For example, he explains, “as in few other early modern states—Spain and England, for example—conversion to a state-sponsored creed, in this case Shi‘ism, served as the social and moral mortar necessary to hold together the building blocks of a soon rejuvenated empire. Whether by force or persuasion, the Shi‘i creed prevailed and endured” [Amanat: 75]. Of course, he overtly denies complete modernization during the Safavid era by stating, “the Safavid did not initiate an Iranian sense of nationhood, nor did they define Iran as a political entity. The former would emerge, in the modern sense of the term, only centuries later. The latter had been a geopolitical reality for many centuries” [Amanat: 75].

Furthermore, regarding Safavid thought and philosophy, Prof. Amanat writes: “as was his European near contemporary Baruch Spinoza, who lived a generation later and shared remarkable similarities with Mulla Sadra, especially in holding ‘substance’ as a continuity of God in nature, the Persian philosopher experienced much harassment. Like the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, whom Mulla Sadra preceded by more than a century, the idea of the development of the spirit through time aimed to make human agency the center of the historical unfolding of the absolute” [Amanat: 119].

Interestingly enough, a prominent Japanese Orientalist specializing in Islamic thought and philosophy, Izutsu Toshihiko, presented a completely different understanding of the historical positioning of Mollā Sadrā (Mulla Sadra) in the “explanation” of his Japanese translation of *Mashā‘ir* (*Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques* in French).<sup>6</sup> Izutsu explains that, generally speaking, the history of Islamic philosophy can be divided into the following three periods:

1. From the early period of mostly translation of Greek philosophy to the end of the twelfth century, ending with the demise of Averroës (1126–1198);
2. From the end of the twelfth/early thirteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, reaching its peak in the Safavid era, represented by Mollā Sadrā (1571/2–1640);
3. From the end of the Safavid dynasty (1720), through the Qajar era, to today, represented by Sabzavārī (1797/8–1878). [Mollā Sadrā: 207].

In this rough sketch of the historical developments in Islamic philosophy, Izutsu seems to place emphasis on the

continuity of the past to Mollā Sadrā, but not so much so on the contemporaneity of his age and the elements leading to the modernity of Iran. Prof. Amanat's explanation sheds light on this aspect.

In addition, we can recognize that Prof. Amanat does not forget to mention the inevitable limitation of Mollā Sadrā in this respect: "His essentially Platonic notion of transcendental wisdom, though evolving with time, still remained loyal to the concept of *wilayat*, a complex Sufi-Shi'i notion pertaining to guardianship, governance, or authority, and one with legal, mystical, and political connotations" [Amanat: 119].

Another interesting idea of Prof. Amanat regarding modernization processes is his evaluation of Nader's era and his governance. He specifically mentions the characteristics of Nader's proto-modern army, stating that "perhaps for the first time in Iranian history—and possibly in the history of empires in the region—his crude method of drafting able-bodied men from remote villages and towns, often without serious resistance, set the precedent for a new conscription army" [Amanat: 143], to which he adds, "Comparable to similar European armies of his time, Nader's drive for a disciplined military force increasingly entailed an element of protonational integration" [Amanat: 144].

Further, he declares, "unlike campaigns of the Safavid era, Nader did not rely on the Shi'i identity to garner support. Rather, he was campaigning against Ottomans almost purely on territorial grounds. It was as though prevailing over the Afghan enemy sublimated, at least momentarily, Nader's personal ambitions into a patriotic objective tied to defending the Guarded Domains and preserving Iran's territorial integrity" [Amanat: 145]. Unlike in Japan, wherein the Meiji Restoration was a major turning point in spurring modernization, Iranian modernization had several starting points for each constituent. In that sense, we (Japanese) must be prudent when drawing convenient comparisons and designating superficial similarities between the Meiji Restoration and Iran's Constitutional Revolution.

Prof. Amanat's philosophy of assigning the Safavid dynasty as the starting point of Iran's modernization in history is rather unique in the English-speaking world. However, on Persian shores, it is not highly unusual. For instance, when we evaluate Dr. Rāzī's *Tārīkh-e Kāmel-e Īrān*,<sup>7</sup> we immediately identify that its structured narrative comprises two typical dimensions: Īrān-bāstān (roughly, ancient Iran) and the Islamized era. The latter comprises the following three sections: the early Islamized era, the Mongol invasion to Timurid, and from Safavid to Qajar. This simplistic classification indicates Iranian historians' collective tendency to narrate from the Safavid to the Qajar dynasties as if they belong to the same historical division.

In terms of employing the longest possible time span to narrate Iranian modern history, we could consider that the continuity of history in modern and pre-modern Iran has most successfully been preserved by Prof. Amanat's classification. Importantly, Prof. Amanat's narrative style provides in-depth insights that allow the reader to grasp the historical background of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Prof. Amanat devotes the entirety of the fourth part to narrating the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and its aftermath, up until the Green Movement in 2009. His book can be considered one of the first historical narratives that placed the 1979 Islamic Revolution in an appropriate historical context—not as a closing chapter, but as the final turning point that led to the present-day developments. In fact, we have already lived with and observed the post-Islamic Revolution era for more than 40 years, and we are in desperate need of a historical overview for a proper understanding of the background and the primary causes of the 1979 revolution.

Arguably, the mainstream academic explanation pertains to the ruling of the Shi'i cleric after the revolution originated during the Constitutional Revolution and the anti-imperial sentiments of that period.<sup>8</sup> Such narratives, emphasizing the historical importance of Constitutionalism and the Constitutional Revolution, have varied origins preceding the 1979 revolution<sup>9</sup> and receive significant attention as the most persuasive explanations of its backgrounds and reasons.

Prof. Amanat's narrative, which has a far more extensive historical perspective, allows us to consider other fundamental causes and motivations for the 1979 revolution, especially the subtle effects of the 1953 coup d'état against Dr. Mosaddeq's cabinet because of a conspiracy between the CIA and MI-6. More than 40 years after the revolution, in consideration of the ongoing hostilities between Iran and the US, we can infer that this partially-neglected nationalistic repulsion against the insensitive past actions of the US must have caused this unprecedented revolt against the imperial hegemony of the US in the region.

The fourth part of this book consists of the following chapters: Chapter 13, The Making of the Islamic Revolution (1977–1979); Chapter 14, The Guardian Jurist and His Advocates; Chapter 15, Consolidation of the Islamic Republic (1979–1984); Chapter 16, Facing the Foe: The Hostage Crisis, the Iraq-Iran War, and the Aftermath (1979–1989); and Chapter 17, Society and Culture under the Islamic Republic. Focused on the processes that stimulated the revolutionary regime and the war with Iraq, Prof. Amanat dares to remain optimistic about the future of his beloved nation, Iran. In the epilogue, after mentioning the 2009 Green Movement, he writes: “The emerging generations, who are products of Iran's demographic resolution, are better nurtured, better educated, and often less romantically nationalist. They are by and large cynical about the regime's xenophobic outlook and its isolationist policies. The age of Westoxification and imagining a strict bipolarity between the East and the West seems to be over” [Amanat: 907]. Here, the author is looking into the future—far beyond the time of Khamene'i's current reign—to the next generation of his blessed nation and country.

Lastly, I must say a few words about minor shortcomings, which are peculiarly related to Japan. One concerns the “Map 1.2,” entitled “Early modern empires 1450–1650,” wherein Japan is marked as one of the eight empires of that era, described as “Japan: Sengoku (c. 1467–c. 1603) and the Tokugawa periods (1603–1745).” It is uncommon in the Japanese historical context to treat the era between the Ōnin War (1467–1477) and the early days of the Tokugawa Shogunate as an empire. Here, I am rather curious about how the author acquired this idea. The second critique concerns Part III, Chapter 10. “The White Revolution and Its Opponents (1953–1963),” particularly the part entitled “Land Reform and the Changing Village” [Amanat: 577–582]. Here, Prof. Amanat discusses the situations and changes in rural societies in the 1960s and the 1970s in Iran, but unfortunately, his research overlooks Japanese contributions in this field. In fact, the important contributions of Japanese Iranologists could be pertinent in this particular field of inquiry. It is regrettable that he did not include first-hand research by Japanese pioneering scholars, namely Prof. Ōno Morio and Prof. Okazaki Shōkō.<sup>10</sup> However, these shortcomings could also be attributed to Japanese scholars, as our work is rarely ever translated into English or Persian and the majority are only available in Japanese.

Here, I would like to underscore yet again the invaluable contribution of Prof. Amanat's magnificent and masterful work, which, in part, can be attributed to his religious background of being Bahā'ī. Inevitably, he must have faced several hardships in his personal life, but his sublime talent allowed him to complete this everlasting narrative of Iranian history spanning over 400 years. It would have been impossible to narrate this kind of Iranian history if he had resided in Iran. Thus, in that sense, an undeniable cosmopolitan essence was created because of his personal fate, being a part of a displaced family. In this regard, I would like to mention a discovery that I made.

While in London from 2015–2016, I unexpectedly came across an article about Prof. Amanat's brother and a talented architect, Mr. Hossein Amanat.<sup>11</sup> This article, written by Ms. Rozita Riazati of the BBC World Service, was fascinating. However, I was quite impressed years later by the picture of Mr. Hossein's personal office in Vancouver, Canada. On a panel of pictures on the wall behind him, was the famous Azadi Tower, which he had designed in his youth, and for which he had won the Iranian national competition of architects in 1966. This picture is identical to the

picture in Prof. Amanat's book, Plate 17.2, reportedly clicked on June 15, 2009, comprising young Iranians gathered at the height of the Green Movement—this alone, tells us many untold stories.

## Notes

- (1) Several presentations and discussions are now available: Arash Khazeni, Rudi Matthee, Sussan Babaie, Janet Afary, and Afshin Matin-Asgari, "Book Review Roundtable," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 52, nos. 3–4 (May–July 2019), 639–655. The focus ranges broadly from Safavid history to the history of arts and architecture, gender politics, and narrative issues, but it is impressive that every review concludes with admiration of its unprecedented academic achievement.
- (2) Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. His recent work also seems to follow almost the same concept of "modern history" in Iran: Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008 (rev. 2018).
- (3) Joseph M. Upton, *The History of Modern Iran: An Interpretation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- (4) Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly and Charles Melville (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- (5) Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed., Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019.
- (6) Mollā Sadrā, *Mashā'ir (Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques)*, translated by Izutsu Toshihiko, Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1978 (In Japanese).
- (7) 'Abd-o-llāh Rāzī, *Tārīkh-e Kāmel-e Īrān*, [Tehrān]: Eqbāl, 1988.
- (8) A conventional work of this kind other than Abrahamian's above-mentioned work is Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- (9) In this regard, apart from numerous Persian works by Fereydūn Ādamīyat, we could name the following: Abudul-Hadi Hairi, *Shī'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran: A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977.
- (10) While it is true that not many works are translated from Japanese to English or Persian in this field, there are a few, such as: Okazaki Shōkō, *The Development of Large-scale Farming in Iran: The Case of the Province of Gorgan*, Tokyo: Institute of Asian Economic Affairs, 1968; Okazaki, "The Great Persian Famine of 1870–71," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 49, issue 1, 1986, 183–192; Ōno Morio, *Kheyrābād-nāmeḥ: 25 sāl bā rūstāiyān-e Īrān*, translated by Hāshem Rajabzādeh, Tehrān: Enteshārāt-e Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān, 1376 (1997/8).
- (11) Rozita Riazati, "The Man behind Iran's Most Famous Tower," *BBC World Service*, Jan. 14, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35295083>.

Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, xiii+979 p.

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