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Iran and the Surrounding World

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Iran

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The immense importance of the complex interaction between Iran and the outside world has long been recognized, but scholars traditionally have been selective in the attention they have paid to its manifestations and individual aspects. From the wars against classical Greece to the Iranian Revolution, their focus has typically been Iran's relations with Europe, and later the United States, revolving around commercial traffic, imperialism and the reaction to it, particularly reform attempts. Especially with regard to the period since 1500, this emphasis has come at the expense of studying relations with countries adjacent to Iran – a situation that is no doubt reinforced by a tendency among Iranians themselves to overlook and ignore the region around them in their eagerness to adopt – or resist – things Western. A different approach, one that looks also at neighbours and at culture and cultural politics, should offer us much new information.

Iran has been a crossroads of civilizations since time immemorial. Its location and physical geography have always made it a favoured and often inevitable corridor for land-based military expeditions and commercial traffic between West and South Asia, between China, inner Asia and the Mediterranean basin. Alexander the Great travelled through Iran on his way to Central Asia. Islam arrived in India through Iran. The Mongols used Iran as their springboard to invade the Middle East. Napoleon planned to use Iran as a passageway for his assault on India, while the British regarded the country as a vital buffer against Russian encroachment on the shores of the Indian Ocean.

The fluidity and mobility of an environment with a large tribal, nomadic population not just energized movement, but also facilitated borrowing and adaptation.

The fruits of this synergy lasted well beyond 1500, the time when three kindred empires, that of the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals, coalesced into political units that, given the remarkable way in which they each reconstituted a common legacy of combined Perso-Islamic and Turko-Mongolian religious and political elements, must be seen as an interactive continuum. Long fascinated by the maritime

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discoveries and the ensuing new level of intensity reached in the interaction between Europe and Southwest and South Asia, scholars only recently have begun to direct their attention to specific aspects of historical ties between Iran with the world directly surrounding it in the period after 1500. The immensely important relationship between Iran and India is a case in point. In the area of economic relations it is only now being recognized that India in early modern times was by far Iran's most important trading partner. Something similar is true for cultural relations. A steady migration of Iranians to the subcontinent, driven by instability at home and beckoning economic and political opportunities in India, created a large and very influential class of Persian-speaking scribes and literati at its various Muslim courts – to the point where in the Mughal period many more speakers of Persian lived in India than in Iran. The same migratory movement influenced the formation and development of Shi'i-ruled principalities and kingdoms, in the Deccan and, following the fall of the Mughals in the 18th century, in the north as well. Most importantly, the influx of Iranians elevated the Persian language and its literature to the pre-eminent status that it would maintain well into the 19th century.

Iran's place in the world

Relations between Iran and its neighbour to the west present a comparable situation. The rich and richly documented military, diplomatic, and cultural relations between various Iranian dynasties and the Ottomans await thorough investigation. Until the 19th century, the two fought many wars but also engaged in the frequent exchange of gift-carrying embassies, and the status of Persian in the Eastern Muslim world ensured steady cultural borrowing. Mutual perceptions were coloured by the variant forms of Islam professed by the two states – the Ottomans were staunchly Sunni while Iran has been the only officially Shi'i country in the world since 1501 – as much as by their shared cultural affinity. In the 19th century, finally, the Ottoman Empire (and later Turkey) provided Iranian rulers and élites with models of political and administrative modernization.

Iran's relationship with its northern neighbour is another field in need of further exploration. Good studies exist on the military and political aspects of contacts between Iran and Russia, the country that posed a threat to its northern borders as of the late Safavid period and that as of the reign of Peter the Great loomed large as its expansionist neighbour but also as a model to be emulated, but the overall state of our knowledge of these contacts remains rudimentary as well.

In modern times, Iran's relations with the West have all but overshadowed its interaction with countries around it. Since the focus in this relationship has been the process of modernization, the tendency has been to see the West as the agent and Iran as the recipient or reactive force. The large shadow the Iranian Revolution has cast over the country's history has only exacerbated the lack of a balanced assessment of Iran's place in the world. Ever since the formation

of the Islamic Republic, most of the Western public has associated Iran with reactionary Islam, state-sponsored terrorism and oppressed women.

To be sure, counter trends to both tendencies do exist. In the 1990s, discriminating movie fans in the West discovered Iran's rich modern cinema. Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Panahi, and an entire generation of younger talented filmmakers, some of them women, have become household names on the roster of quality films, their reputation bolstered by the many international prizes they received. Iranian cinema is hailed in the West as an outstanding example of humanistic art – a most striking counterpoint to the grim appearance of the Islamic Republic – and the subtle and inventive ways in which directors manage to show women's lives, problems, and even expressions of affection between the sexes have drawn wide praise.

The most important of these trends is of course Iran's experimentation with openness and accountability since the election of President Khatami in 1997. The glacial progress of this process and the fierce resistance it has encountered from the hardliners in the government have demoralized Iranians and outside observers alike to the point where one is tempted to conclude that the experiment has run its course and failed. Nor has the so-called Dialogue of Civilizations, launched by Khatami, found much resonance outside the halls of the United Nations (which proclaimed 2001 the year of the Dialogue of Civilizations).

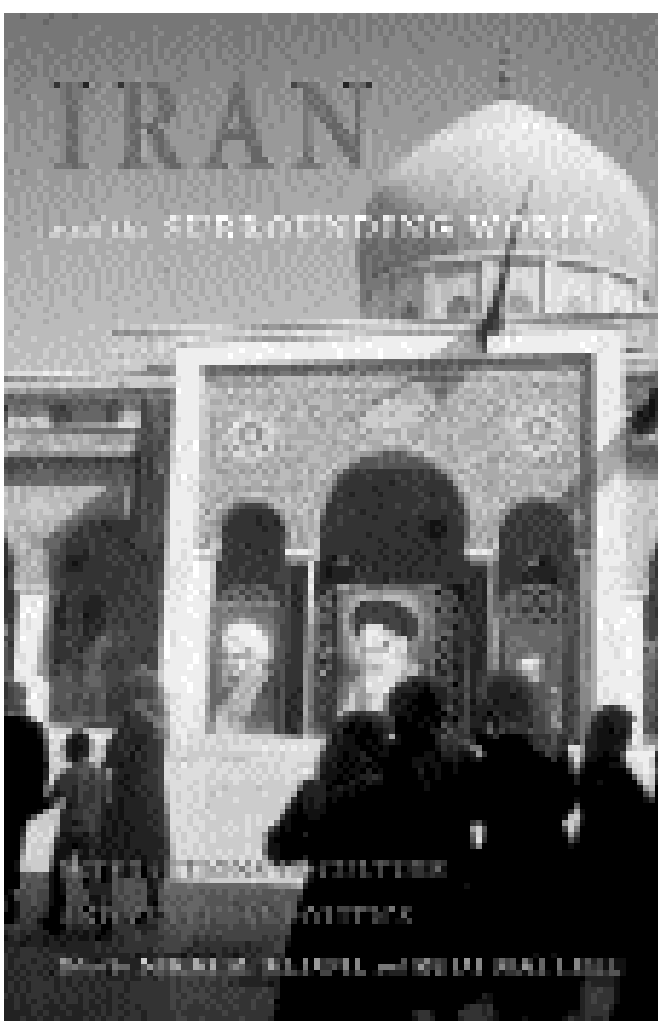
Yet it would be a mistake to write Iran off. The new openness of the Islamic Republic arguably has little inspiration for the Westerners, who may see discussions about civil society held in the face of continuing (or worsening) political oppression as futile, and most of whom know nothing of positive changes in the lives of many young people and women. In the region immediately surrounding Iran, however, developments are followed with great attentiveness, and Iran is seen as a dynamic country and even a model in its continuing endeavour to create a society that combines modernity with a lasting adherence to Islam and tradition. Present-day Afghanistan is a good example. To Afghans coming out of Taliban rule, the Iranian way of integrating Islam into political and social life must look positively enlightened. The many cultural ties with especially the Tajik parts of the country make Iran's educational system, the role it accords women in public life, and, last but not least, the ways in which the Iranian state manages to keep the country's myriad ethnic and linguistic groups unified under the umbrella of a common identity.

Egypt is another example of a country where the new Iran exerts some influence, albeit of a different nature. Ever since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, even those Egyptians who had initially welcomed Khomeini's Revolution as divine intervention, were forced to choose between Islamic and Arab solidarity in their assessment of the Islamic Republic. First vilified by Egypt's regime, then ignored, Iran gradually faded in the public consciousness – until the advent of the Tehran spring following Khatami's election. Overlooking the many negative stereotypes about Iran that exist in their

country, many Egyptians have come to see in Iran an inspiration as a vibrant society engaged in Islamic reformation built on notions of pluralism and free elections – a stark contrast, in short, to the perceived military staleness of much of the Arab world.

The women's movement

Even Iranian women are proving to their Muslim sisters that Islamic strictures can co-exist with experimentation and development. In Iran, many more women work and operate in public life than in many other Muslim countries. Iranian women, who now form the majority of university students, have been at the forefront of resisting interpretations of Islamic law that are inimical to females. More specifically, the country's women's movement has been actively engaged in finding ways to encourage emancipation without giving up Iran's indigenous culture, including Islam. Due in part to its heavy emphasis on the chador, the regime's efforts to propagate its message on women have made little headway in countries with a recent history of secularism, such as the former Soviet republics. More recently, Iranian NGO groups speaking on behalf of women have followed a more pragmatic approach in their attempt to forge contacts and connections with women's groups in other Islamic countries. Such attempts and the partial successes of Iran's post-Islamist women's movement do not receive much coverage in the press, but they do add yet another dimension to the picture of modern Iran as a centre of culture and cultural politics that has influenced and been influenced by both nearby and distant countries and cultures. Iran's cultural relations with the world as a subject can contribute much to current interest in global and world history.



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