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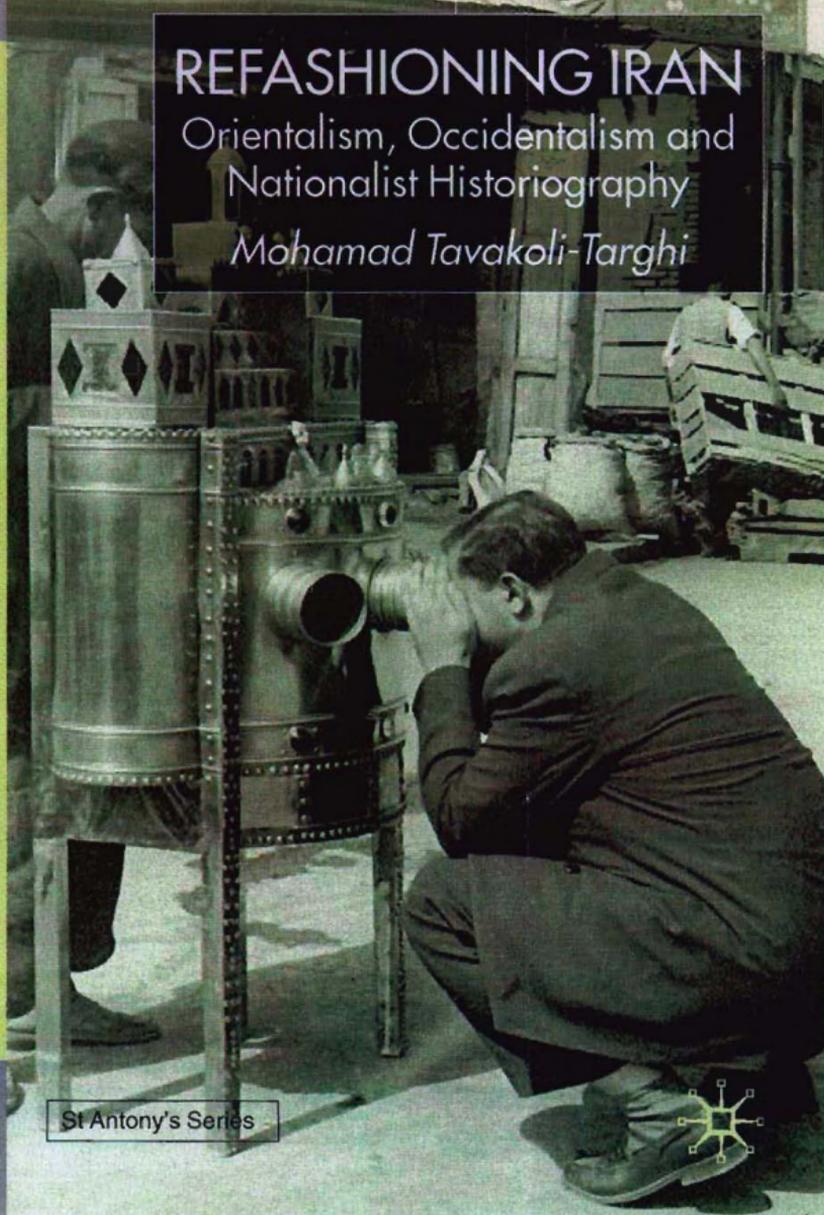
REFASHIONING IRAN

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

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Orientalism, Occidentalism and  
Nationalist Historiography

*Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi*



St Antony's Series



# Refashioning Iran

## Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography

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# 8

## Postscript

The dialogic interaction with India, Europe, and the Arab–Islamic culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to the refashioning of Iran and rescripting of “the people” (*millat*) and “the nation” (*vatan*) in Iranian political and historical discourses. The newly imagined Iran, constructed of textual traces and archaeological ruins, fashioned a new syntax for reconfiguring the past and refiguring national time, territory, writ, culture, literature, and politics. Language, the medium of communication and the locus of tradition and cultural memory, was restyled. Arabic words were purged, “authentic” Persian terms forged, and neologism and lexicography were constituted as endeavors for “reawakening Iranians” (*bidari-i Iranian*). Iran-centered histories *displaced* dynastic and Islam-centered chronicles. To recover from a historical amnesia, pre-Islamic Iran was reinvented as a lost Utopia with Mahabad as the progenitor of humanity, Kayumars as the first universal king, Mazdak as a theoretician and practitioner of freedom and equality, Kavah-i Ahangar as the originator of “national will” (*himmat-i milli*), and Anushirvan as a paradigmatic just-constitutional-monarch. This inventive remembrance of things pre-Islamic inspired a conscious effort to *dissociate* Iran from Islam and the Arabs.

The lamentation for bygone glories prompted a regenerative desire for a better future. These contemporaneous backward- and forward-gazings intensified the dissatisfaction with the *present* order of things, a dissatisfaction that informed the discourse of *mashrutah-talabi* (constitutionalism). The manifold aspects of the desired constitutional future were temporally registered in many key social and political concepts. The temporal reorientation of these concepts was induced by protracted theatrical and rhetorical acts involving maneuvers amongst alternative and often contradictory positions and identities. By shifting from one

discursive frontier to another, the late nineteenth-century clerisy and literati created a discursive *mélange* that intertextualized pre-Islamic, Islamic, and contemporary European histories and ideals. The contested and uneven synchronization of these once autonomous universes expanded the horizon of expectation by providing alternative social and political scenarios for the future. In his famous essay *Yak Kalimah* (One Word), for example, Mirza Yusuf Khan Mustashar al-Dawlah (d. 1322/1888) grafted the 17 principles of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* into Islamic legal culture.<sup>1</sup> Mirza Yusuf Khan's call for the cannonization of law (*qanun*) was not a passive imitation of the French Code but its creative relocation within a different textual and political universe. The popularity and effectiveness of this modern Iranian political manifesto was due to the author's rhetorical and theatrical competence in both Islamic and French revolutionary discourses. Like Mirza Yusuf Khan, the Iranian–Armenian Mirza Malkum Khan gained national prominence by his apt discursive maneuvers between Islamic and European political discourses and his multivalent articulation of contested concepts such as *millat* and *qanun* (law). He established the demand for *qanun* as a populist slogan unifying a diverse ensemble of social and ideological forces. In the second issue of *Qanun*, a political periodical published in the 1890s, he wrote:

If you have a religion, demand *qanun*! If you are detained by the state, demand *qanun*! If your home is destroyed, demand *qanun*! If your salaries have been plundered, demand *qanun*! If your positions and rights have been sold to the others, demand *qanun*! If you have a family, demand *qanun*! If you possess something, demand *qanun*! If you are poor, demand *qanun*! If you are human, demand *qanun*! <sup>2</sup>

In his futurist endeavors Malkum Khan successfully wedded the notion of natural law to the Islamic *Shari'ah*.<sup>3</sup> He used the twofold connotations of *millat* as both a religious and a national community in order to gain the support of the clerisy and the political elite for an orderly and regulated future society. Other prominent figures like Malik al-Mutakalimin (1864–1908), Jamal al-Din Va'iz, and Yahya Dawlatabadi (1861–1939), who were educated in seminary schools, utilized their knowledge of Islam in order to articulate effectively a constitutionalist discourse and identity. The theatrical abilities of such rhetors and their mastery of Islamic discourse enabled them to win over to the cause of constitutionalism such leading Shi'i clerisy as Akhund Mulla Muhammad Kazim Khurasani (d. 1911). Sayyid Muhammad Tabataba'i (1841–1920), Sayyid

'Abdullah Bihbahani (d. 1910), and Mirza Muhammad Husayn Gharavi Na'ini (1860–1936). The double articulation of the interests of the *millat*, as both Iranian and Islamic, accounted for the changing grammar of Shi'i politics, a new grammar that rearranged classical Shi'i concepts into a modernist syntax. With the expanding horizon of expectation grounded in a firm belief in human progress, Islamic political concepts were deployed for the actualization of an orderly constitutional society.

These protracted maneuvers account for the foundational reenvisioning of the *millat* from the "Shi'i people" (*millat-i Shi'ah-i isna 'ashari*) to the "people of Iran" (*millat-i Iran*). As collective formation associated with the community of believers, *millat* was dissociated from Islam and the creator, God, and was anchored to the life-giving mother-nation (*madar-i vatan*) and the mother-tongue (*zaban-i madari*). Recognized as the mother-tongue, the Persian language became a pivotal instrument for homogenizing "the people" and the "nation." *Vatan*, previously one's birth-place, became inclusive of territorial Iran. Collectively imagined as a 6,000-year-old mother, the rejuvenation of *vatan* became a central project of Iranian nationalism, a project that shaped the modern Iranian subjectivity. Individually hailed as a beloved, *vatan*-adoration (*vatan-parasti/vatan-dusti*) fostered *individualization* and individual devotion and obligation towards the Iranian homeland. The crafting of a de-differentiated *milli* and *vatani* identity linked to ancient history and the Persian language subverted "the twinship of state and religion," a basic mechanism of political consensus and coercion in premodern Persianate political discourse. As described in Chapter 7, the relocation of "divine effulgence" from the Shah onto the *vatan* contributed to a radical resignification of *siyasat*. Considered as the right of the sovereign to punish and even execute "his subjects" in classical political manuals, *siyasat* was recoded as the right of the *millat* – the responsible children of *vatan* – to promote the welfare of the motherland and to participate in its rejuvenation and progress. *Inqilab*, formerly considered as disorder created by unruly subjects, was redefined as the endeavor of the *millat* to reestablish the bygone glories of "Iran-land" (*Iran-shahr/kishvar-i Iran*) and to rebuild the *now* "desolate Iran" (*iran-i viran*), a degeneration "brought about" by the tyranny (*istibdad*) and injustice of the shahs. The regeneration of Iran was linked to the "acquisition of knowledge" (*kasb-i 'ilm*), which was considered as a remedy for the illness of the motherland. Previously delimited by the clerisy to Qur'an-centered knowledge, *'ilm* was resignified by the new intellectuals (*munavvar/munavvar al-fikran*) who sought to regenerate Iran by inheriting the scientific knowledge of the "cultured Europe" (*Farang-i ba farhang*).

Hailing Europe as the heterotopia of knowledge and progress, “catching-up with Europe” served as an affective rhetorical topos for inspiring collective action for the revitalization of the “desolate Iran.” Thus Orientalism’s device of temporal distancing, as explored in Chapter 1, was affectivity utilized by Iranian nationalists to foster urgent actions for closing the temporal gap between Europe and Iran, this once “caravan-guard of civilization.”

The rejuvenation of Iran was mediated through a sustained struggle against the Qajar “tyrannical state” (*dawlat-i mustabid*).<sup>4</sup> The fight against “tyranny” (*istibdad*) was a corollary of temporal concepts that anticipated a constitutional social and political order. The coalescing of the dissatisfaction with the *present* and the anticipation of the *future* contributed to a successful fracturing of the political space into two antagonist camps of the people (*millat*) and the state (*dawlat*). The *dawlat* was portrayed as tyrannical and unjust (*zalim*), and the *millat* as oppressed (*mazlum*) and justice-seeking (*adalatkhwah*).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the ‘ulama, who were viewed as *ru’asa-yi millat* (leaders of the nation/people), could not openly support the *dawlat*, the enemy of the *millat*. The clerisy’s dual and precarious position at this conjuncture explains their contradictory roles during the events that led to the constitutional rupture in 1905–9. The arch-Mujtahids, who synchronized their position with the *millat*, were given the honorary title of *Ayat Allah* (Sign of God). This title was discursively important since it was parallel to the Shah’s title of *Zill Allah* (Shadow of God). Members of the clerisy who did not support the *millat* were branded as religious impostors and seekers of worldly privilege.

The hybridization of the idea of the equality of all Muslims before God with the principles of the French *Declaration of Rights* empowered the *millat* as a new source of sovereignty. The sovereignty of “the people” not only challenged the symbolic power of the Shah, but also the function of the clerisy as the guardians of the legal basis of the society. The society that was conceived and institutionalized in the course of the Constitutional Revolution was based not on the divine *Sharīah* supervised by the ‘ulama but on the *Sharīah*-informed *qanun* legislated by the representatives of the *millat*. The discursive rearticulation of the *millat* as a national sodality and the establishment of the National Consultative Assembly (*Majlis-i Shura-yi Milli*), the institutional expression of national will, provided the key components of popular politics and polity.

A decisive historical moment in the recognition of “the people” was the popular struggle that compelled Muzaffar al-Din Shah to consent to the convening of the National Consultative Assembly (*Majlis-i Shura-yi*

*Milli*) in August of 1906. In the course of negotiations that led to the drafting of the Shah's proclamation, the Prime Minister proposed the establishment of an Islamic Assembly (*Majlis-i Islami*).<sup>6</sup> But the protestors disagreed, insisting: "With the power of the *millat*, we will obtain a National Consultative Assembly [*Majlis-i Shura-yi Milli*]." In the proclamation (5 August 1906), which was addressed to the newly appointed Prime Minister, Nasr Allah Mushir al-Dawlah, Muzaffar al-Din Shah called for the convening of an assembly in which the representatives of "crown princes and Qajars, 'ulama and theology students, nobles and notables, landowners, merchants and craftsmen" were to participate.<sup>7</sup> While the proclamation included the constitutionalist demand for the founding of a *Majlis*, it failed to make mention of the *millat*. The exclusion of the *millat* from the "Constitutional Proclamation" (*Farman-i Mashrutah*) was unacceptable to the Constitutionalists who spoke in the name of the people.<sup>8</sup> The text of the Shah's widely distributed proclamation was torn off the walls. Protesters who had taken sanctuary in the British Embassy refused to leave until the word *millat* was added to the Constitutional Decree.<sup>9</sup> A few days later, Muzaffar al-Din Shah issued a supplementary *farman* noting, "I have explicitly ordered the establishment of a *Majlis*, an assembly of the representatives of the people [*majlis-i muntakhibin-i millat*]."<sup>10</sup>

Although the Shah was forced to recognize the *millat* as a unified political sodality, he made an important rhetorical move to subvert the Constitutional contingent that had united a wide spectrum of ideological and religious forces. In the supplementary letter the Shah changed the name of the assembly from *Majlis-i Shura-yi Milli* (National/Popular Consultative Assembly) to *Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami* (Islamic Consultative Assembly). At that enthusiastic moment, the importance of this strategic shift was disregarded by the Constitutionalists, who were busy organizing for the convening of the *Majlis*.<sup>11</sup> At the inauguration of the *Majlis* on the October 7, 1906, crowds, reportedly for the first time, chanted "Long live the people of Iran" (*zindah bad millat-i Iran/payandah bad millat-i Iran*).

Recognition of the *millat* in the Constitution provided the foundation for a new age of popular politics. In Iranian political discourse prior to this period the civil society was viewed as an ensemble of various classes, ranks, professions, and religious groups. This was evident from the Shah's *farman* dividing society into six classes.<sup>12</sup> But the constitutionalist discourse broke away from the hierarchical language of politics and introduced the *millat* as a unified and homogeneous force, the source of sovereignty, with the right to determine the policies of the government

through its representatives to the Majlis.<sup>13</sup> In the constitutionalist discourse, *millat* signified everyone without regard to professional, social, and religious status. This view of *millat* radically differed from the hegemonic ranking of Muslims over the protected non-Muslim communities (*millal/millats*). This de-differentiation of the people provided the discursive terrain for the expansion of democratic rights. A 1910 *Iran-i Naw* editorial viewed the division of the people into separate religious *millats* as a tyrannical design. The editorial asserted that “Iranians are of one *millat*, a *millat* who speak in different dialects and worship God in various ways.”<sup>14</sup>

The recognition of the *millat* as a people with diverse languages and religions equal before the law challenged the most basic hierarchy of the *millat* as a Shi'i-Muslim sodality. The ambiguous double articulation of the *millat* that had earlier united both the nationalist and Islamist forces reached an impasse with the constitutional debates over the questions of “equality and parity” (*barabari va musavat*) and “freedom and liberation” (*azadi va hurriyat*), two basic ideals of the French Revolution integrated into the Iranian revolutionary discourse. With the death of the ailing Muzaffar al-Din Shah after the convening of the Majlis and the ratification of the Fundamental Laws on December 30, 1906, his son Muhammad 'Ali, an antagonist of the constitutional movement, moved to Tehran as the new Shah.<sup>15</sup> Muhammad 'Ali Shah refused to invite the deputies of the Majlis, “the representatives of the *millat*,” to his coronation. In his speech he spoke not of *mashrutah* (constitutionalism) but of *mashrutah-i mashru'ah*, (Shari'atist Constitutionalism), a government based on the Shari'ah. By using *mashrutah-i mashru'ah*, the new Shah used the Shari'ah as a mechanism to subvert the constitutionalist discourse and to divide the constitutionalist contingent. The drafting of Supplementary Fundamental Laws was divisive. It included controversial issues such as the curbing of royal authority and the equality of all citizens. With the assistance of Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri, a leading mujtahid of Tehran, Muhammad 'Ali Shah managed to organize the *mashru'ahkhwah* camp, which thought of constitutionalism not as a government based on *qanun* (Majlis-legislated law) but the divine Shari'ah. Unlike the constitutionalists who were moving towards secular politics, the *mashrutahkhwah's* emphasized the importance of the Shari'ah as the legal foundation of the society. In the Shari'atist discourse, because of the centrality of Islam, *millat* had a clearly religious definition and the equality of Muslims and non-Muslims was viewed as a heretical stand. Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri, the intellectual leader of the *mashru'ah* contingent, argued against the constitutional idea of equality (*musavat*). Pointing to

the *mashrutahkhwahs* (constitutionalists), he stated: "Oh you who lack integrity and honor, the founder of the *Shari'a* has granted you integrity and privileges because you belong to [the community of] Islam! But you disenfranchise yourself, and demand to be brother of and equal with Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Jews?"<sup>16</sup>

The same protestation against the equality of Muslims and non-Muslims was voiced in a gathering for the election of the Majlis deputies in the city of Yazd, a city with a large Zoroastrian population. One of the clerics present in the session pointed out that: "We should not allow Zoroastrians to become dominant. I hear that one of the articles of the laws of the Majlis is equality. Zoroastrians must be wretched and *held in contempt.*"<sup>17</sup> *The Shari'atists viewed the superiority of Muslims* over non-Muslims as divine privilege. The equality of all citizens was thus perceived as detrimental to Islam and the privileges of the Muslim community.

Shaykh Fazl'allah, as the leader of the Shari'atist camp, also argued against the Constitutionalists' notion of "freedom" (*azadi*): "The strength of Islam is due to obedience and not to freedom. The basis of its legislation is the differentiation of groups and the summation of differences, and not equality."<sup>18</sup> Admonishing the Constitutionalists, whom he labeled "Paris worshipers" (*Paris parastha*), Shaykh Fazl'allah argued, "Oh, you God worshipers, this National Assembly [*Shura-yi Milli*], liberty and freedom [*hurriyat va azadi*], equality and parity [*musavat va barabari*], and the principles of the present constitutional law [*asas-i qanun-i mashrutah-i haliyah*] is a dress sown for the body of Europe [*Farangistan*], and is predominantly of the naturalist school [*tab'i mazhab*] and transgresses the Divine law and the holy book." Shaykh Fazl'allah asked the Constitutionalists why among "so many banners of long live, long live, long live equality, equality and fraternity, why don't you once write: long live the Shari'a, long live the Qur'an, long live Islam?"<sup>19</sup> He explained that "In Islam the verdict of equality is impossible (*mahal ast ba Islam hukm-i musavat*)."<sup>20</sup> Shaykh Fazl'allah clearly understood that the new conception of politics – the equality and freedom of all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation – would undermine the political primacy of Islam and the Shi'i clerisy.

With the discursive articulation of *mashrutah* as anti-Islamic, the campaign against it was depicted as an attempt to "protect the citadel of Islam against the deviations willed by the heretics and the apostates."<sup>21</sup> The Shari'atists demanded an *Islamic Consultative Assembly* and the Constitutionalists a *National Consultative Assembly* (*Majlis-i Shura-yi Milli*). This intensified the antagonism between an exclusionary

conception of Islam and an inclusionary view of *millat-i Iran* as an undifferentiated collective sodality. To ground themselves in Iranian history and culture and to guard against the charges of inauthenticity and “Paris-worshiping,” the Constitutionalists turned increasingly to pre-Islamic myths, symbols, and system of historical narration. In this way, the concept of the *millat* gained the meaning of “the people” of Iran, with an increasingly secular and non-Islamic connotation. While in the pre-Constitutional period the leading ‘ulama were viewed as the leaders (*ru’asa*, sing. *ra’is*) of the *millat*, in the period immediately after the Revolution this title (*ra’is-i millat*) was granted to the head of the Majlis.

The Constitutionalist movement that had started with dialogism and mutual influencing of nationalist and Islamic discourses ended with a civil war. The Constitutionalist and Shari’atist contingents, with Iran and Islam respectively as the primary loci of their identity, clashed during the 1908–9 Civil War. In the final battles of the Civil War in July 1909, the Constitutionalists captured Tehran, deposed the Shah, and executed some of the leading anti-Constitutionalists, among them Shaykh Fazl’allah Nuri. This seems to have been the first time in the history of Iran that an orthodox Shi’i cleric was hanged from the gallows in public. The execution of Shaykh Fazl’allah, the cultural equivalent of the execution of Louis XVI, marked a radical rejection of the previous political and symbolic order. The Revolution instituted “Iran” and “*millat-i Iran*” as the legitimating loci of political discourse. Authoritarian, Islamist, and populist political forces that emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution all unavoidably authorized their sociopolitical projects in the name of Iran and *millat-i Iran*. These forces could only temporarily dispense with the Majlis, the legitimating institution of modern Iranian politics.

With the hegemony of the nationalist discourse a “bordered” historical perspective became the fashionable style of historical writing and thinking. This bordered history was a product of cultural sedimentation and historical amnesia instituted by the struggle for constitutionalism. The rhetorical depiction of the pre-Constitutional period as the age of darkness, despotism, and fanaticism, which was ingeniously used to legitimate the struggle for constitutionalism, gained factual authority. Likewise the ideas of the decline and the degeneration of Iran from its pre-Islamic luster, originally formulated by the eighteenth-century Orientalists, became a conventional wisdom that informed both scholarly and lay historical arguments. This historiographic assumption also grounded the prevalent view of the pre-Constitutional period as the age

of literary, artistic, scientific and philosophical decadence. Thus Iranian modernity (*tajaddud*) came to be viewed as a byproduct of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution or the establishment of the “enlightened” Pahlavi Dynasty (1926–79).

These nationalist historical perspectives were often informed by and corroborated Orientalist historical writings. Both nationalist and Orientalist historiography assumed a continuity between the contemporary and ancient Iran and Iranian “character,” an assumption that simultaneously spatialized and detemporalized history. This assumption involved the taxonomic partition of the history and destiny of peoples residing in the bounded territories of Iran from those of the Arabs, Indians, and Turks. While this partition invigorated Iranian nationalism and the Iranian nation-state, it also created what in Chapter 1 was identified as “homeless texts,” the marginalized traces of a forgotten prenationalist modernity.

By reactivating the homeless texts of Persianate modernity, this book has tried to chart a different account of the making of modern Iranian history, culture, and identity. This account establishes a close connection between the homeless Persianate texts and eighteenth-century Orientalist works, a connection that is rarely admitted in the burgeoning scholarship on Orientalism. It also acknowledges the significance of Indian Persianate works in fashioning a historical perspective that informed the nineteenth-century Iranian nationalist historiography. It explains how this historical vista sought to dissociate Iran from Islam and to contrive a counter-Arab Iranian identity. While forgetting the Arabs and purging Persian of Arabic terms, the architects of modern Iranian nationalism sought to invent cultural and linguistic affinities between Iran and Europe. Having constituted Europe as the heterotopia of modernity and progress, they blamed the Arabs for the “reverse progress” of Iran and its “non-contemporaneity” with Europe. The nationalist project for the rejuvenation of Iran and the recovery of its “ancient luster” was rhetorically grounded in the Orientalist assumption of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Iranian and European societies. This rhetorical time-distancing has gained scientific validity in the scholarship on Iranian modernity. The seven chapters of this book have explored new issues that require further inquiry and documentation. They have raised more questions than they were able to answer. It is hoped that the exploratory spirit of this project is pursued by other historians of Persianate modernity.