Iran and the Surrounding World

INTERACTIONS IN CULTURE

AND CULTURAL POLITICS
Introduction

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This book deals with Iran’s relations with the surrounding world since 1500, concentrating on the cultural and cultural-political spheres, with emphasis on the period since the rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979. By many in the West, Iran’s interaction with the rest of the world is often associated with two salient but contradictory images. On the one hand, there is some recognition of Iran’s important cultural contributions, usually prefaced by the adjective Persian, including Persian carpets, Persian miniatures, and Persian poets, especially those popular in the West, such as Omar Khayyam and Jalal al-Din Rumi. Iranian cinema, music, and exile literature have recently been added to the cultural achievements recognized outside Iran’s borders. On the other hand, there are images of Iranians as fanatical nationalist or political-religious opponents of the United States, which appeared both in the period of oil nationalization under prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951–53) and again during and since the “Islamic” revolution of 1979. The images of fanaticism are frequently exaggerated, and the concerns of a people who feel heir to a proud nation and culture under threat from a dominant West are seldom appreciated in that West. Yet these contrasting, culturally positive but politically negative images, however simplified, in some ways reflect real features of Iran’s history. This history is contradictory in many ways. Iran has a long and distinguished history of major contributions to the world’s cultures, while at the same time Iran’s political record, both domestically and in relation to the outside world, has often been problematic.

Iran’s history has been characterized by many autocratic and repressive rulers and regimes, and by frequent popular revolts and major protest movements, often, though not always, having a religious form. These movements have usually been brutally suppressed and, even if successful, lost much of their original populist program and adopted less spiritual and more autocratic practices. This is true of the Abbasid caliphs after their victorious revolt c. 750 c.e., of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), which began by supporting a radical Shi‘i movement, and of the Islamic Republic, which came to power representing a multifaceted revolt against the Pahlavi regime.
Naturally, there were variations within this very broad pattern, affected by such major events as the Islamic conquest of Iran, later Turko-Mongol nomadic conquests, and the coming of the West and the modern world. But even with these changes, the phenomenon of cultural strength combined with problematic politics, particularly on the part of ruling groups, generally holds. And, as the examples of the great medieval poets Sa’di and Hafez demonstrate, the best art was often created under the worst political circumstances. Even autocratic rulers often patronized excellent art, while in more recent periods the arts developed in part under patronage and in part in opposition to dominant regimes.

This book contains essays discussing both culture and politics, often in interaction, that serve to deepen our understanding of the links between these two spheres, and stresses Iranian cultural and political interactions with the surrounding world. A number of the chapters point up the close relationship between culture and politics, including cultural-political interactions with outside areas, a relationship these chapters show to exist whether or not the politics were (or are) expressed in Islamic terms, and whether the culture involved is in support of the ruling system or is oppositional.

Iran’s interaction with the outside world has hitherto largely been studied for the period before 1500, with a concentration on the transmission of ideas, religious beliefs, and art forms. Those who discuss more recent periods tend to focus on political and economic relations with the West, with little discussion of culture and scant attention to Iran’s relations with the Arab, South Asian, and Turkic worlds closest to it. While political and political-economy approaches are extremely important, this volume tries to create the basis for a more comprehensive view of Iran’s cultural and political relations with the world since 1500. Political relations with the West make up parts of several chapters, but the emphasis is on other relationships—both geographically, in dealing also with South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and in subject matter, including literature, film, art, religion, education, the role of women, and ideology, where interactions were often more fruitful and longer lasting than they were in politics. With such a vast framework there is no attempt to cover the entire subject—rather, we commissioned fine papers from people in various disciplines working on this range of topics, in order to suggest the parameters and importance of Iran’s cultural-political interactions with the surrounding world since 1500.

The book includes both overviews and papers that fall within defined periods. Although Iran’s history may be periodized in different ways, here, in order to orient readers, we would suggest the following outline—which includes some very broad divisions for periods before 1500, periods mentioned here
because their images and realities continue to influence Iran in the modern world. (1) The period c. 1500–500 B.C.E. includes the formation of the Zoroastrian religion and the creation of Iran’s first states and empires, ruled by those who spoke old Persian, an Indo-European language. (2) From c. 500 B.C.E. to 740 C.E., Iran saw the rise and fall of several agrarian-based empires and the spread in them of Zoroastrianism, and also major interactions with Near Eastern, Greek, Hellenistic, and Byzantine cultures. (3) 740 C.E. marked the Arab-Islamic conquest, which over time brought the conversion of most Iranians to Islam and its culture, while over the centuries Iranian modes of government and ideas were of major importance in the development of a cultural synthesis that spread through the Islamic world. (4) The invasions of Iran and Anatolia by the Seljuq Turks from the mid-eleventh century brought in new nomadic tribes, and began a period of Turko-Mongol nomadic invasion and rule in Iran that lasted until the rise of the Safavids in 1501. (5) The Safavids, 1501–1722, initially relied on Turkic tribes, but they were able to create countervailing forces and set up a centralized state roughly corresponding to today’s Iran. They were also important for converting Iran to the Shi’i branch of Islam. The Safavids were conquered by Afghans, and the eighteenth century was one of division and internal warfare. (6) The Qajar period, 1796–1925, saw Western military and economic encroachments but only weak attempts to respond to them on the governmental level, although Western and modern ideas began to influence many individuals. (7) The Pahlavi dynasty, 1925–79, was characterized by top-down modernization, centralization, autocracy, and ties to Western powers, along with neglect of traditionally oriented, usually less prosperous, classes and their culture, all of which helped bring revolution. (8) The Islamic Republic, 1979–today, has seen a re-creation in twentieth-century terms of Islamic norms, but has been mostly authoritarian and top-down in its approach, despite some beginnings of greater democracy.

Regarding the subject of this book, relations with the surrounding world since 1501, under the Safavids the most important cultural contacts were with South Asia and the Turkic and Arab worlds, while since the Qajar period the main interactions have been with the West. Many aspects of Iran’s interactions with the surrounding world before 1501 remained important after that date, including those in the spheres of religion, ideas, art, and governmental organization. After the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iran, interactions between the Muslim Arabs and Iran in the above and other spheres resulted in syntheses of ideas and cultural practices, with many novel developments appearing in such fields as art, literature, philosophy, and theology. Such cultural elements and syntheses, expressed both in Persian and in Arabic and dating both to pre-Safavid and post-Safavid periods, were very influential both in
South Asia and among Turkic peoples as they had earlier been among the Arabs. Persian influence in some cultural spheres also spread to the west. There were also important influences going the other way, from South Asia and from Turks, Arabs, and, later, the West, into Iran.

A major area of Iranian influence abroad from pre-Islamic times onward was in the realm of religion. Scholars are increasingly stressing that Iranian Zoroastrianism influenced early Judaism and, mainly via Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This influence occurred in key points of belief and eschatology, including belief in an afterlife and day of judgment, angels, and a supernatural, evil Satan. At least one scholar believes Zoroastrianism began the whole Western or Judaeo-Christian-Muslim concept of progressive time. The Zoroastrian-influenced religion Manicheanism, with its transformation of Zoroastrian dualism into a belief that matter was evil and spirit good, influenced a whole series of religious movements in East and West, which were characterized as heresies by both Christians and Muslims.

The most influential later religious interactions came after the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iran and the rest of the Middle East, when Islam was gradually adopted by local populations who also greatly influenced the development of this religion. The minority, Shi‘i, branch of Islam, though begun by Arabs, was adopted by some Iranians, but only after 1501 did it become the state religion of Iran and acquire a particularly Iranian identity. Iranian forms of Shi‘ism have spread in the Muslim world since then and they continue to do so today. Under the Safavids and later, Iranian-influenced Shi‘ism became important, especially in South Asia and in Arab areas near Iran. Under the Islamic Republic, its brand of Shi‘ism has spread, mainly by influencing the beliefs and practices of those who already adhere to the Shi‘a.

Iranian religious interactions with the outside world in the period since 1500 are discussed in several chapters within. The chapters by Juan Cole and Vali Nasr highlight the changing influence of Iranian Shi‘ism in South Asia since 1500, while Wilfried Buchta, Asef Bayat, and Bahman Baktiari show the difficulties of spreading the influence of a highly politicized form of Shi‘ism in non-Shi‘i areas of the Middle East. The political aspects of the religious-political movement identified with the leader of the Iranian Revolution and Islamic Republic, Ruhollah Khomeini, have in recent years been more influential than have been its religious aspects. Only in Shi‘i communities in the Muslim world has there been a widespread acceptance of Khomeini’s vision. As the Buchta and Bayat/Baktiari chapters show, there have been several obstacles in the way of early hopes within the Islamic Republic that Iran’s model of an Islamic revolution and an Islamic state might be followed in countries following the majority, Sunni, view of Islam.
In the visual arts, what has mainly come down to us from pre-Islamic times are buildings and bas reliefs that evince Iranians’ mastery of design and often depict human and animal figures frequently in symbolic interrelationship. These elements continued in Islamic times, when Iran became a center for the revival of figurative art, with miniatures in books being the best-known form. This figurative art was influenced, after invasions by Central and East Asian nomads, by the arts of Eastern peoples, and it in turn influenced painting and other arts in India and the Ottoman Empire in the period covered by this book. Abolala Soudavar’s chapter shows how the Safavids followed an artistic-cultural policy that helped spread Iranian influence in these areas.

Regarding literature, the greatest Iranian poets lived before 1500, but their influence abroad grew after that date. Western writers and literary audiences have been interested in Persian poetry at least since the eighteenth-century translations by William Jones, and the popularity of this poetry has most recently been expressed in Jalal al-Din Rumi’s being the bestselling poet in the U.S. for several years. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak analyzes the masterful, non-literal translations done by Jones of Hafez and by Coleman Barks of Rumi. A contemporary aspect of Iranian world influence in the visual arts is Iranian cinema, analyzed by Hamid Naficy, which provides a current example of great, humanistic, and often implicitly oppositional art created under a repressive regime.

If Iran had major cultural influence abroad before and after 1500, it was also strongly influenced by people coming from other cultures. This often took place via conquests, the most important of which was the Arab-Islamic conquest, but a less emphasized and understood series of conquests by Turko-Mongol nomadic states that began in the eleventh century were also of great importance. Thomas Barfield’s chapter summarizes the nature of the Turko-Mongol conquests and the states they produced in Iran and elsewhere, noting that these people had the basis for far longer-lived and more stable states than did the Arab Bedouins or other pre-Turkic nomads (on whom Ibn Khaldun’s model for a short, three-generation state was based). The interaction between Persians and Turks, while not involving as important a religious and cultural change as did the Arab conquest, reinforced the role of nomadic tribal federations in Iran and was crucial to the creation of the Safavid state. The Safavids made Shi’ism the religion of the overwhelming majority of Iranians, giving Iran a cultural adhesive that helped it hold together through turbulent times and despite major ethnic differences.

After the Safavids took power, they had important political, economic, and cultural relations and interactions with a wider number of areas than any previous Iranian state, owing largely to the rise in importance of Europe and its
traders. Abolala Soudavar’s chapter shows how Safavid rulers effectively utilized Iranian brilliance in the arts to launch a cultural policy, largely via gift-giving to foreign rulers, which helped Iranian influence abroad. Juan Cole shows the spread of Iranian influence in South Asia in the Safavid and subsequent periods, while Rudi Matthee deals with Iranian attitudes toward the British and the Russians, whose trade and expansion were beginning to encroach on Iran in the Safavid period. Matthee suggests that even before the nineteenth century Iranians showed an eagerness to learn from foreigners, coupled with a profound suspicion of those foreigners’ motives, prefiguring later attitudes toward the West.

In the nineteenth century, a number of educated Iranians began to be concerned with Iran’s “deficiency,” later seen as “backwardness” as compared to Europe, and this was reflected in the literature of those who went abroad and wrote about it in ways detailed in Monica Ringer’s chapter. In the same period began expressions of Iranian nationalism, discussed in Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet’s paper. This was doubly influenced by contact with the West: first, because such contacts both showed up Iran’s weaknesses and provided a model for self-strengthening, and second, because Western nationalist and racist theories provided a model for Iranian nationalists, especially since, because Persian is a language in the Indo-European or “Aryan” family, nationalists could adopt widespread Western racial theories saying that “Aryans” were superior to others. Kashani-Sabet also discusses the vicissitudes of nationalism under the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic.

Western cultural influence grew in a number of domains in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, among them the spheres of education and of refashioning the position of women, covered in Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi’s paper. The Qajar government did little in the sphere of education, and almost nothing in girls’ education, so the role of foreign schools, mostly of religious background, was especially important. These schools pioneered in modern education for girls, and, along with a general modern curriculum, stressed what is here called “scientific domesticity,” including household management and hygiene. This approach greatly influenced middle and upper-class women (while the practices of other classes were often denigrated) and was taken over by Reza Shah in his policies, which also supported some new roles for women.

The importance of interactions with foreign, especially Western, countries to the position of women is again stressed in Nayereh Tohidi’s paper on the period since 1979. While the leaders and ideologues of the Islamic Republic originally reacted strongly against what were seen as un-Islamic and Western-based Pahlavi reforms in the position of women, over the years both
internal forces and foreign contacts led to a reinstatement of many of these reforms. Tohidi shows the importance in promoting such changes of Iranian women’s international contacts and conferences. Less optimistic is Golnar Mehran’s chapter on images of the “other” in Iranian textbooks: she shows that textbooks inculcate the superiority of male Muslim Iranians and do not give adequate representations of other groups, although this may change in time.

The international impact of the ideology and related practices of the Islamic Republic is discussed in several papers. Wilfried Buchta shows how the theoretical desire of some early leaders of the Republic to work toward an ecumenical Islam that would unite Shi‘i and Sunni Islam has been effectively undermined by the overwhelming power of religious conservatives who insist on the very features that divide Shi‘i from Sunnis. Only those he calls “semi-oppositional,” notably Abdol Karim Soroush, point to what would be needed for genuine ecumenism within Islam. Asef Bayat and Bahman Baktiari discuss the influence over time of the Islamic Republic on the Egyptian public, and note that this influence has been greatest when there have been signs of liberalism and democratization, as under Mohammad Khatami’s presidency since 1997, and smallest when the country has been more repressive of free thought and action. Vali Nasr’s discussion of influence is perhaps the most pessimistic one, as he deals with the role of the Islamic Republic as both model and instigator of an increasingly organized, exclusive, communal view of Shi‘ism by many Pakistani and South Asian Shi‘is, which has contributed to a rise of communal animosities within South Asian Islam. More optimistic is Gary Sick’s paper on the relations of the Islamic Republic with the outside world, which sees cause for hope, especially in some recent developments.

This book emphasizes the period since 1979, which has been subject to less scholarly scrutiny than have earlier periods, and within the decades of the Islamic Republic it stresses cultural and cultural-political aspects of Iran’s attitudes to and relations with the outside world. The roots of recent attitudes may, however, be seen in earlier periods, and often in cultural divisions that appeared especially since the onset of Western influences. Regarding women, for example, although many middle- and upper-class women and men were happy to rearrange gender relations on a more Western model, as shown in Rostam-Kolayi’s chapter, this left out many men and women of the popular and bazaar classes, who retained many elements of an older view of gender relations and of women that resurfaced in the revolution and the Islamic Republic. But early strictness has given way, due to internal necessity, women’s pressures, and foreign contacts. Somewhat similarly, regarding Shi‘ism, while there were liberal clerics and secular laypersons, there remained
large groups of clerics and non-clerics convinced that Iranian Islam was threatened by the West and by deviations from strict Islamic law and practice, and these people gained power after 1979. They, too, have had to adjust considerably to the realities of the modern world. Some important clerics now accept or even promote more liberal views than previous clerics, while others try to preserve as much strictness and clerical power as possible.

In the larger cultural sphere, the arts went from being primarily tied to courts and patronage to being largely, at least implicitly, oppositional, a position they retain under the Islamic Republic. It is often not realized outside Iran that, even with recent crackdowns on the periodical press, book publication remains remarkably free and sometimes even openly oppositional in the Islamic Republic, while other aspects of the arts are constantly pushing the boundaries that have been set up for them. In this, foreign influences in cinema, writing, music, and art reach Iran and are important, while Iranians both at home and in the diaspora are having increasing influence in world culture.

Iran’s resistance to the world race toward globalization and free trade has some positive aspects. Free trade in film, for example, could swamp Iran’s film industry as it has those of many countries. On the other hand, no country today can be an island, and Iran’s continuing economic crisis seems to guarantee continued efforts to improve relations with the outside world. Khatami’s “dialogue of civilizations,” a phrase he first voiced in 1997 that has since been widely adopted even outside Iran, may seem an indirect route to solving economic and political problems in relations with the West, especially the U.S., but it may be more feasible today than the U.S. government’s desire for direct governmental negotiations. For one thing, increased Western respect for the culture of Iran and for Islam, topics covered in this volume, would provide a new and more even playing field for eventual negotiations than does the attitude of U.S. superiority that has characterized past relations. Khatami’s speech on U.S. television praising many aspects of American culture and politics in essence invited a similar response (not yet heard, aside from President Clinton’s few remarks on Iran’s great cultural traditions) from U.S. leaders regarding positive aspects of Iranian culture. We may hope that Western leaders will gain a greater acquaintance with this culture, as well as with the reasons for Iran’s past reactions against the West and especially the U.S., as a prelude to improving relations with Iran, which in turn could improve Iran’s internal situation. To such an outcome this book might make a modest contribution. Its contributions to a better understanding of many aspects of Iran’s recent history are more certain. While none of its authors tries to predict the future, all provide material and insights that contribute
to our understanding of the forces at work in today's Iran and in countries interacting with Iran, giving a more complete picture than one which concentrates only on political and crisis aspects of Iran's relations with the surrounding world.

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