

The image depicts a grand, ornate interior, likely a palace or a high-ranking official's residence. The room features a high ceiling with intricate metalwork and a large, multi-tiered chandelier. A man in a dark uniform with a turban sits in a chair, looking towards the camera. The room is filled with large windows, heavy curtains, and a patterned rug. The overall atmosphere is one of historical grandeur and elegance.

The Idea of Iran: Qajar Iran on the Cusp of Modernity

11–12 May 2024

The Idea of Iran | 18th Symposium

The 18th programme in the series is dedicated Qajar Iran

The nineteenth century saw the consolidation of the Qajar State and changed relations with the European powers that had been transformed by political, industrial and agricultural revolutions, among them the loss of Britain's American colonies and the rise of an independent power on the global scene.

When Iran emerged from its own turbulent eighteenth century, it entered a new world dominated by expanding colonial and imperial forces, notably Britain and Russia. Among the many consequences were the remorseless losses of territories in the North and East, by the end of which Iran took on the outlines of its present borders. At the same time, the encounter with the West gave rise to dissatisfaction, realisations of weakness, many calls for change and ultimately, revolution.

What does the Idea of Iran mean at this period? Can we discern the ways that the Iranians viewed their traditions and their environment (natural and built), their own literature and history, their religious identities, their relations with the increasing number of foreigners? And what was the view of these outsiders, in this period that was so formative of the West's idea of Iran? What did Iran look like? How does modern scholarship define the distinctive aspects of the period? These are some of the questions we hope to explore in the symposium dedicated to this complex and difficult period from which Iran emerged with a new, secular and nationalist regime that sought to bring the country into line with these outside forces in the twentieth century.

The Idea of Iran: Qajar Iran on the Cusp of Modernity

11–12 May 2024

Convened by:

- Mariano Errichiello (SOAS University of London)
- Charles Melville (University of Cambridge)

Organised by:

- SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies
- SOAS Centre for Iranian Studies
- SOAS Middle East Institute
- Shahnama Centre for Persian Studies
Pembroke College, University of Cambridge

Sponsored by:

- Soudavar Memorial Foundation

Front cover image: Naser al-Din Shah in the Mirror Hall, by Kamal al-Molk, 1895. Golestan Palace, Tehran

Programme

Saturday 11 May 2024

9.00	Registration
10.00	Welcome and introduction
10.15-11.35	Session One: The 'discovery' of ancient Iran and its treasures Chair: Negar Habibi (University of Geneva) Lindsay Allen (King's College London) Alyson Wharton (University of Lincoln)
11.35-11.55	Break
11.55-13.15	Session Two: Foreign and Persian perceptions of Iran Chair: Assef Ashraf (University of Cambridge) David Motadel (London School of Economics) Charles Melville (University of Cambridge)
13.15-14.00	Lunch break
14.00-16.00	Session Three: The visualisation of Iran Chair: Firuza Abdullaeva (University of Cambridge) Maryam Ekhtiar Mira Schwerda (University of Edinburgh) Layla Diba
16.00-16.20	Break
16.20-17.40	Session Four: The shrinking borders to east and west Chair: Houchang Chehabi (Boston and St Andrews) Charlie Gammell Sabri Ates (Southern Methodist University)
17.40-18.00	Closing remarks

Programme

Sunday 12 May 2024

9.00	Registration
9.45	Welcome and introduction
10.00-11.20	Session Five: The view from the peripheries to north and south Chair: Narguess Farzad (SOAS University of London) Houri Berberian (University of California, Irvine) Alexander Jabbari (University of Minnesota)
11.20-11.40	Break
11.40-13.00	Session Six: Iran as a trading partner Chair: Mariano Errichiello (SOAS University of London) William Bullock Jenkins Ali Gheissari (University of San Diego)
13.00-13.45	Lunch break
13.45-15.45	Session Seven: Politics and reform Chair: Ali Alavi (SOAS University of London) Stephanie Cronin (University Oxford) Jennifer Jenkins (University of Toronto) Robert Gleave (University of Exeter)
15.45-16.00	Closing remarks

10.00-11.35 | The 'discovery' of ancient Iran and its treasures

Material culture and the construction of Iranian antiquity

Lindsay Allen (King's College London)

Iran in the nineteenth century experienced a radical reshaping of intellectual and technological landscapes for the construction of historical knowledge about antiquity. The global awareness of deep antiquity was transformed first by the interpretation of multilingual inscriptions on the fabric of Takht-i Jamshid / Persepolis in the first decades of the century, and next more fundamentally by excavations in the territories of ancient Assyria and Babylonia from the 1830s onwards. The wholesale extraction of archaeological remains proceeded in spurts, interspersed with or, more rarely, accompanied by attempts to survey and record sites. This paper explores the continued multiplicity of historical meaning attached to pre-Islamic antiquities against a variegated backdrop of developing archaeological methodologies.

*Lindsay Allen is senior lecturer in ancient history in the Department of Classics, King's College London. She has published on the extraction of antiquities from Iran in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and on the changing interpretation of Persepolis in the sixteenth century. Her monograph, *The Persian Empire: A history*, was published with the British Museum Press in 2005.*

Armenians and Ideas of Iran: Dikran Kelekian, Kirkor Minassian and Hagop Kevorkian's sourcing of Persian portable arts and their dealings with European and American museums at the turn of the twentieth century

Alyson Wharton (University of Lincoln)

This paper will look at a crucial period in the formation of the careers of three Armenian antiquities dealers, all of whom originated from central Anatolia in the 1860s. It will chart how Dikran Kelekian, Kirkor Minassian and Hagop Kevorkian, after building up their business in

Constantinople, started to turn to Iranian supply networks at the turn of the 20th century, as well as to enjoy royal patronage. Through investigation of their correspondence with major European and American museums, their scant remaining business documentation, and glimpses from Ottoman archives and Armenian histories, I'll argue how Kelekian, Minassian and Kevorkian were central to shaping the image of Iran at this time. I'll focus on the supply of Persian portable arts, specifically manuscripts and ceramics, navigating changing political circumstances and antiquities regimes. I'll also look to shifts in self-image and display strategies as they styled themselves as public authorities on Persian art.

*Alyson Wharton(-Durgaryan) is Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Heritage at the University of Lincoln. In 2012–2015 she was Assistant Professor at Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey, Department of History of Art. She has published widely on Ottoman-Armenian architects in nineteenth-century Constantinople and the Ottoman East. Since 2015, she has been researching Armenian antiquities dealers. In 2023 she did fieldwork in Yerevan, Istanbul, and Tbilisi, sponsored by the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara. She was also Gulbenkian visiting scholar in May 2023. Findings on Armenian dealers and relations with the V&A were published in *Museum and Society* (2020).*

11.35-13.15 | Foreign and Persian perceptions of Iran

The Shah's Grand Tours: Global monarchy in the age of empire

David Motadel (London School of Economics)

The paper will examine the European tours of the Qajar monarchs Naser al-Din Shah (1873-1878 and 1889) and Mozaffar al-Din Shah (1900, 1902, and 1905) in the era of high imperialism. Both monarchs were received with full pomp by the emperors, kings, and statesmen in St. Petersburg, Istanbul, Berlin, London, Vienna, Paris and Brussels. A global microhistory, the paper will offer a reinterpretation of the relationship between European and non-European rulers in an age of European domination. It will explore how participation in the rituals and ceremonials of a state visit – such as gift-giving, the exchange of decorations, and military spectacle – gave expression to the non-European monarchs' dynastic legitimacy and their country's sovereignty. It seeks to show that state visits provided non-European monarchs with a way of integrating themselves and their countries into a system of international relations that was dominated by the European powers. The work draws on sources from the European archives, as well as the Persian travelogues (Safarnamas) of the shahs, and considers how the genre of Persian travel writing also contributed to a wider awareness of conditions within Iran.

David Motadel is Associate Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He is the author of a book on the history of Muslims under German rule in the Second World War (Harvard University Press, 2014), which was awarded the Fraenkel Prize, and the editor of a volume on Islam and the European Empires (Oxford University Press, 2014). He has just completed his book The Shah's Grand Tour: Global Monarchy in the Age of Empire and a co-edited volume on Unconquered States: Non-European Powers in the Imperial Age. A graduate of Cambridge, where he was a Gates Scholar, he has held visiting positions at Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Sciences Po, and the Sorbonne. He was also a Fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study. In 2018, he received the Philip Leverhulme Prize for History.

Communications and the circulation of news in nineteenth-century Iran

Charles Melville (University of Cambridge)

Knowledge of the internal history of Qajar Persia that might lead to the formation of an idea of the country by both foreigners and Iranians alike relies on understanding the sources of information available, their nature and the context in which they were generated. The views of outsiders were formed largely by travellers, visitors and officials, writing for a foreign audience, particularly Europeans and from a variety of motives. For Iranians themselves, this penetration of the country also allowed a comparative perspective on their own society, but one equally important consequence of the opening up of the country was a greater circulation of news and information, provided by the establishment of newspapers and the development of the post and telegraph networks; both channelled news of the centre to the provinces and conversely information from the peripheries to the capital. The genre of Persian travel literature (Safarnamas) also contributed to a wider spread of knowledge particularly in court circles. This paper reviews these source and reflects on the ideas of Iran that they permitted.

Charles Melville holds a BA in Oriental Studies (Arabic & Persian, Cambridge, 1972), MA in Islamic History (LSOAS, 1973) and PhD. in Oriental Studies (Cambridge, 1978). He is Professor Emeritus of Persian History at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Pembroke College. He was president of the British Institute of Persian Studies (2017–2023) and is director of the Shahnama Project. He is currently researching the 'Visualisation of Persian History' with a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship. Among his publications are several edited volumes, including Persian Historiography (London, 2012); The Contest for rule in eighteenth-century Iran. The Idea of Iran, volume XI (London, 2022) and A Short history of the Gibb Memorial Trust and its Trustees (Edinburgh, 2023).

Qajar still-life painting in context

Maryam Ekhtiar

In Iran, the medium of oil on canvas was a European import, but the pictorial roots of still-life painting, beginning in the late eighteenth century, stem from a long-standing local tradition of picture-making. This presentation will trace the development of this art form and will suggest possible meaning(s) these unique canvases held for their nineteenth-century beholders.

Maryam Ekhtiar is Patti Cadby Birch Curator in the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is a specialist in nineteenth-century Persian art and culture, calligraphy, and later Persian painting. She received her PhD from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University in 1994 and has worked and taught at various museums and universities, including the Brooklyn Museum, New York University and Swarthmore College. She was co-editor of the exhibition catalogue Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925 (1998), Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2011), and Art of the Islamic World: A resource for educators, which was released in 2012. She has organized several exhibitions, written articles and lectured extensively in the fields of Iranian art and contemporary art from the Middle East. Her latest book, How to read the art of Islamic calligraphy, was published by the Met in 2018. One of her most recent articles is 'Ahl al-Bayt Imagery Revisited: A Drawing by Isma'il Jalayir at the Metropolitan Museum of Art', Revealing the Unseen: New perspectives on Qajar art (2021).

The Revolutionary portrait: Aesthetics, politics and the relationship between photography and painting in the Constitutional Period

Mira Xenia Schwerda (University of Edinburgh)

During the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) photography played a critical role in defining, mobilizing and memorializing political movements and their leaders in an era of spectacle. Photographic portraiture circulated on picture postcards and influenced drawn depictions in lithographed journals, initiating aesthetic and artistic changes and leading to a new kind of revolutionary portraiture. Painting, which played a crucial role in the visual arts before the Constitutionalist period, appears to take a backseat during this period. Yet, if one looks more closely, one sees a shared aesthetic develop, expressed both in photographic and painted works. This paper will discuss the impact of revolutionary photography on painted portraiture by examining photographic portraiture of the Constitutionalist era, the various ways painters engaged with such photographs, and large-scale oil portraits of politicians by artists such as Kamal al-Molk.

Mira Xenia Schwerda (PhD, 2020, Harvard University) is a historian of Qajar art, specifically print and photography. She is a Getty/ACLS postdoctoral fellow, the managing director of Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online, and the co-founder of the Virtual Islamic Art History Seminar Series. She has worked at the Harvard Art Museums, where she curated the photography section of the exhibition Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-century Iran. She has taught courses in the history of photography, Islamic art history, and South Asian art history in the Department of Art History at the University of Edinburgh.

An Iranian Artist Abroad: Mohammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Molk's European Tour and the Evolution of the Modern Iranian Landscape

Layla S. Diba

Mohammad Ghaffari Kamal al Molk (1859-1940) was the leading court painter of the Naseri era and also the principal exponent of European-style Naturalism in the late Qajar and early Pahlavi eras. He is probably best known for his portraiture and architectural views but this paper will present evidence of his abiding interest in the genre of the landscape and its entanglement with his extended stays in Florence and Paris from 1898-1901.

From at least the 1880s in Tehran, Kamal al Molk produced numerous easel paintings of realistic Iranian landscapes painted en plein air as well as skilled copies of European landscapes executed in his studio at the court. These works are also inscribed with dates, locations, and signatures, making them a valuable corpus for the study of the evolution of Kamal al Molk's landscape style and by extension, for the birth of a naturalistic approach to the painting of nature very different from the classical, abstract style of Persian manuscript illustration.

So by 1898, we shall argue, Kamal al Molk was already a mature painter who had mastered many European illusionistic techniques. By re-examining his European experience, particularly his interactions with the court painter Michele Gordigiani (1835-1909) in Florence and acquaintance with the Macchioli movement of Italian Naturalism, as well as his friendship with the French realist painter Henri Fantin Latour (1831-1904) and his circle in Paris, this paper will seek to understand more clearly what Kamal al-Molk was searching for. By integrating this approach with the examination of the corpus of his known landscapes this paper will endeavor to answer the question of the exact nature of the process of interaction between European and Persian aesthetic traditions in the work of this single and singular artist.

The paper will also address the controversial question of Kamal al Molk's contribution to the evolution of Iranian painting towards a national Iranian modernism. Is it fair to assess him simply as a retrograde influencer of Western culture, later known as Westoxication or Qarbzadegi, who held back the advent of authentic modern Iranian painting? Or should he be better understood as a product of his own era, a roshanfekr, or intellectual of the Iranian Enlightenment, who practiced the painting of his day but not that of the more avant-garde anti-Naturalist movements of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism? More importantly, by looking at the truly revolutionary nature of his modern landscapes in terms of Persian art historical traditions, this paper will argue that they represented an important intermediary step towards the much-desired indigenous modernism that would finally evolve in post-war Iran and that his achievement should not be confused with the retardataire style of his followers.

Layla S. Diba is an independent art advisor, scholar and curator specializing in the art of nineteenth and twentieth-century Iran. She has been the Director and Chief Curator of the Negarestan Museum of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Iranian Art in Tehran from 1975 to 1978 and the Brooklyn Museum of Art's Curator of Islamic Art from 1990 to 2000, where she organized the groundbreaking exhibition Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar epoch (1785-1925) and edited and co-authored the accompanying publication. In 2013 she co-curated the exhibition Iran Modern at Asia Society Museum in New York and co-edited the accompanying catalogue. She has written widely on Persian and Islamic Art and her current projects include the publication of Kamal al Molk and the Invention of the Modern Iranian Landscape and Art in Peril: The Case of the Negarestan Museum and its Collections of 18th and 19th century Iranian Art.

16.20-17.40 | The shrinking borders to east and west

Qajar Herat; Persian, Sunni, Pashtun and Shi'a. Questions of identity and belonging in nineteenth-century Herat

Charlie Gammell

In 1863 Naser al-Din Shah Qajar was asked about the city of Herat, not long lost to Persia as a result of the 1857 Treaty of Paris and its chaotic local and regional aftermath. The shah simply replied, 'I have no taste for such ruined cities'. And yet Naser al-Din Shah's energetic lobbying of the UK court and royal family, and his close interest in the day-to-day affairs of that city, suggested that the Qajars felt the loss of Herat keenly. For Herat had long sat within Persian consciousness, a Timurid imperial capital home to poets and painters Persia would come to claim as its sons: Jami, Behzad, Ansari. Yet Herat ultimately became an Afghan city, the city in which Dost Mohammad Khan was buried. What was Herat, during this period from the arrival of the Sadozai Pashtuns to the death of Dost Mohammad Khan in 1863? To whom was it loyal, and what role does Herat's complex ethnic and sectarian history play in forming its historical and present-day identity?

*Charlie Gammell is the author of *The Pearl of Khorasan; A History of Herat* (Hurst, 2016), as well as several articles (Afghan Analysts Network, Times Literary Supplement, Economist, Tony Blair Faith Foundation, Royal Society for Asian Affairs) and publications on Afghanistan's history and politics, and Iranian current affairs. He has worked for ICRC and UNESCO in Afghanistan on cultural heritage and development projects and as a Farsi / Pashto interpreter in Afghan prisons. A former UK diplomat who worked on UK-Iranian relations from 2016-2020, as well as a stint in the UK Embassy in Morocco, he remains engaged on Iranian politics and current affairs. He gained his MPhil in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from Cambridge (Pembroke) in 2011 and wrote on the role of the Azali Babis in Iran's Constitutional Revolution.*

The transformation of the Ottoman–Iranian frontiers

Sabri Ates (Southern Methodist University)

One of the longest-in-the-making and the oldest among Muslim countries, the Ottoman-Iranian frontier underwent nearly four centuries of evolution to reach its final form. The geographical line that separates Iran, Iraq and Turkey today emerged from the conflation of numerous boundaries. This paper examines the transformation of geopolitical, religious-ideological, and medical borders. The first two types of frontiers evolved in tandem and in relation to global shifts regarding the territorialization of sovereignty. However, the rise of the medical frontier, specifically concerning the transfer of deceased bodies across the frontiers and the outbreak of cholera, accelerated the transition from a borderland to a delineated boundary. This paper investigates how these various borders merged to form the contemporary boundary.

*Sabri Ates is an Associate Professor at Southern Methodist University's Department of History in Dallas, Texas. Ates' research focuses on Ottoman-Iranian relations, Kurdish history, borderlands and the borderland peoples, and the history of sectarianism in the Middle East. He is the author of *Tunalı Hilmi Bey: Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyet'e Bir Aydın* (Istanbul, 2009), and, *Ottoman-Iranian borderlands: Making a boundary* (Cambridge, 2013). At present, Ates is working on his new book, *The Sheikh Ubeidullah uprising: The pursuit of an independent Kurdistan*.*

10.00-11.20 | The view from the peripheries to north and south

The role of Armenians and Georgians in Caucasian–Iranian connections

Houri Berberian (University of California, Irvine)

This paper focuses on the role of Armenians and Georgians in connecting Iran and the South Caucasus through their role as transimperial figures – whether educators, activists or revolutionaries – crisscrossing Russian and Qajar imperial frontiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paper provides a quick background of Armenian and Georgian presence and engagement in Iran before and through the nineteenth century; however, it pays particular attention to the Iranian constitutional period (1905–1911) that marked the zenith of circulation, connection and collaboration among South Caucasians and Iranians. Based on original research in Armenian-language primary sources for the Armenian case and secondary sources on the Georgians, the approach will be analytical and comparative, drawing attention to the Armenian example and drawing upon the Georgian one to highlight similarities and differences to strengthen broader conclusions about Caucasian–Iranian connections.

Houri Berberian is Professor of History, Meghrouni Family Presidential Chair in Armenian Studies, and Director of the Center for Armenian Studies at University of California, Irvine. Her publications include Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911: "The Love for Freedom Has No Fatherland" (2001), the award-winning Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds (2019), and the co-edited Reflections of Armenian Identity in History and Historiography (2018). Her most recent work is a co-authored (with Talinn Grigor) book, The "Armenian Woman": Minoritarian Agency in the Making of Iranian Modernism, 1850-1979 (forthcoming Stanford University Press, 2025).

Bazgasht and after: Conceptions of Iran in a literary context

Alexander Jabbari (University of Minnesota)

In the latter years of the Qajar era, literary and intellectual exchange between Iran and India helped consolidate an Iranian national identity, which found expression in Persian literature. This paper follows the evolving idea of Iran by examining travelogues, tazkeras, early literary histories and poetry from both Iran and India. It argues that the logic of nationalism – supported, in part, by the reception of Orientalist philology – came to shape how people envisioned the relationship between Persian literature and Iran. Iranians increasingly asserted a central role in the world of Persian letters. While earlier Indian litterateurs had challenged this, by the late nineteenth century Indian Muslims accepted and even contributed to this Iran-centric paradigm of Persian literary history. This paper also considers Iranian literary works from the period that evince an ambivalence about ideas that would later dominate Iranian nationalism, thus revealing the historical contingency of those ideas.

*Alexander Jabbari is an assistant professor in the department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota, where he works on the literature, history, and philology of the Middle East and South Asia. His first book, *The Making of Persianate Modernity: Language and Literary History between Iran and India*, was published with Cambridge University Press in 2023.*

Tariffs, treaties, trade: Qajar Persia's economy and commercial integration under nineteenth-century global conditions

William Bullock Jenkins

With surprising effects, early modern commercial practices and dynamics defined and persisted in Iranian trade through the long nineteenth century. The robust continuity of early modern commercial networks and institutions caused Qajar Persia to have a positive balance of trade with Tsarist Russia, its largest trading partner. By contrast, and only within limits, 'modern' imperial production and commercial infrastructures emerged in the Anglo-Persian trade.

Contrary to reigning historiography and assumptions of relative imperial strength defining commerce, constructing the terms and composition of trade from primary sources and synthesizing social and political history reconstructions shows that: Persian merchants out-traded Russia's into the 1900s; merchants exercised agency set against Qajar and Tsarist imperial state incapacity; and methodological nationalist claims of 'economic penetration' lack historicity as questionable political projections onto Qajar Persia's economy. Iran's economic history in this era upends received historical narratives of Russian and British imperial domination of Qajar Persia's commerce.

William Bullock Jenkins is an independent researcher and scholar. Professionally, as Gravamen Advisory, he conducts integrity and dispute investigations, evidence gathering, and political risk assignments. He formerly worked in Dubai on Iran trade and as a director for firms in London. An Arabic and Persian speaker, academically, William trained as an historian and economist. He received his graduate degrees in global economic history from the University of Leipzig in Germany and the London School of Economics and Political Science. His undergraduate degrees with honours in Middle Eastern languages and political economy are from the Australian National University.

The Idea of Commerce and its configurations in Qajar Iran: Domestic and transregional contexts

Ali Gheissari (University of San Diego)

Commerce in Qajar Iran was built on a number of transregional routes of exchange and communication through which not only goods and capital but also ideas travelled. Domestically, however, commercial life was usually impacted by the interactions between the state and the merchants. By drawing on a broad range of primary and secondary material this presentation will explore Qajar commerce within two distinct but interrelated domains of meaning and practice (in terms of ideational and real factors) in social life. The state in many ways had a nominal (nevertheless normative) presence, whose materiality projected itself to greater or lesser extent on the maintenance of order within its often fluid domain, attempting to collect taxes as much as it could, and administering justice, which itself was subject to social and local variables and often lacked uniformity. Meanwhile, the merchants did their best to navigate this milieu by utilizing possibilities of supply and demand and surviving economic and political tides that were often beyond their control.

Ali Gheissari studied at Tehran University and Oxford, and later taught at the University of San Diego. He has written extensively in Persian and English on the intellectual history and politics of modern Iran. His more recent publications include 'Fruits of gardens: Ethics, metaphysics, and textual pleasures in late Qajar Iran' (Journal of Persianate Studies, 2023); 'Unequal treaties and the question of sovereignty in Qajar and early Pahlavi Iran' (Ann Lambton Memorial Lecture, 2023). He served as the Editor-in-Chief of Iranian Studies (2016–2020) and his current research is on aspects of legal and constitutional history of modern Iran.

Britain and the 'Persian Empire': Iran through a Classical Lens

Stephanie Cronin (University of Oxford)

In 1815 Sir John Malcolm, a high-ranking military officer and diplomat of the East India Company, published his majestic two-volume "History of Persia." This work is credited with being the first such history, crystallizing and expressing a discourse, composed according to the rules of the new "modern" scientific methodology, which had come to dominate British understanding of Iran's past and which would go on to shape Iranian understanding also. The main tenets of this discourse are well known. They include the greatness of pre-Islamic civilization, its inevitable decline, largely the result of an oriental despotism weakened and corrupted by luxury and vice, its consequent conquest by barbarians, in this case specifically Arabs and Muslims, and its subjection to a continuing alien oppression.

The impact of Malcolm's discourse, especially its adoption by Iranian intellectuals in the later nineteenth century and eventually in the twentieth century by the modern Pahlavi state itself, was profound and has been the focus of much attention. Yet the sources of his ideas have remained relatively neglected. Certainly, as is well-known, his discourse had its origins in the Greek classics, but its subsequent genealogy, and its survival, and especially its evolution and its flexibility, over the several centuries which separated the Renaissance from the high point of British imperialism, has never been fully examined. The account which follows seeks to understand the origins and development of Malcolm's conceptual framework. It examines the long history of British thought and attitudes, and especially British imaginaries, regarding the country they insisted on calling "Persia".

*Stephanie Cronin is Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Research Fellow in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford. She has published widely on Iran and the broader Middle East, most recently a monograph entitled *Social Histories of Iran: Modernism and Marginality in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) and the edited collection, *Poverty, Crime and Survival: The Dangerous Classes in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomsbury 2019). She is on the Editorial Boards of *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Iranian Studies* and the *Journal of Persianate Studies* and is the Series Editor of *Edinburgh Historical Studies of Iran and the Persian World*.*

German diplomacy and Iranian nationalism during the Constitutional Revolution

Jennifer Jenkins (University of Toronto)

The modern relationship between Iran and Germany was forged during the Constitutional Revolution, and one of its most powerful elements was a shared perspective on the possible futures for a constitutionalist Iran. German diplomats serving in Tehran in 1906–1907 had a particular vision of Iran as a modernized country which endeared them to the national movement, while also being strongly at odds with the assessments of British and Russian diplomats. This paper analyzes the articulation of this vision in 1906–1907 and the ways it played forward into the formation of the Kaveh group in Berlin during the First World War.

Jennifer L. Jenkins is Associate Professor of German and European History at the University of Toronto, where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Modern German History. She is the author of Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Hamburg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003) and has held fellowships from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Harvard University's Center for European Studies and from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

During the 2013-2014 academic year, she was a Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College, Oxford, where she was finishing a book on German-Iranian relations from the Crimean War to Operation Barbarossa (entitled Weltpolitik on the Persian Frontier: Germany and Iran in the Age of Empire). Further projects include Germany Among the Global Empires 1840 to the Present, which she is writing for the Wiley-Blackwell series "A New History of Modern Europe." In 2014 she was an associate of Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. Future research interests include two projects: "Germany's Orient, 1905-1979" and "Tehran 1943: Iran, Europe and the Second World War."

Religious developments in Qajar Iran: Scholarly authority and the Qajar state

Robert Gleave (University of Exeter)

The beginnings of the Qajar dynasty in Iran coincided with a major intellectual shift in Shi'ism. The influence of the Akhbari school of Twelver Shi'ism in the seminaries of Iraq and Iran began to wane and the Usuli school emerged as the dominant force – a position it has continued to hold until today. In this presentation, I will discuss how these intellectual developments impacted the formation of Qajar politics and society. The ulema – whether in Iran or Iraq – held generally high prestige in early Qajar society, and many had close relations with the court of Fath 'Ali Shah. At times the internal rivalries within the seminary were played out in the court, as scholars vied with each other for the Shah's attention. Fath 'Ali Shah, often seen as a monarch with a programme of religious as well as political policies, was also keen to employ members of the ulema for his own purposes. Most famously, he asked for fatwas legitimating his defensive military operations against the Russian forces encroaching on the northern border of his empire on more than one occasion. Under subsequent Qajar monarchs the ulema-state relationship was tested in new ways – the programmes for modernisation and reform meant new challenges for ulema and their political status changed. How these developments were reflected in the scholarly discussions of the ulema will be the focus of the second part of this presentation. Using sources (fatwas, clerical biographies, letters and treatises), I aim to paint a picture of the rich and complex intellectual world of the Shi'i seminary and its engagement with Qajar society.

Rob Gleave is Professor of Arabic Studies in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. From January 2023 until January 2026 he is British Academy/ Wolfson Professor with the research project 'The Foundations of Modern Shi'ism: The End of Akhbārism and the Beginnings of Usūlism'. His research focuses on Islamic legal theory and practice, particularly legal hermeneutics, and the history of Shi'i legal thought and institutions. Recent and forthcoming publications include the three-volume Violence in Islamic Thought series for Edinburgh University Press (2018, 2020 and 2022), Shi'ite Legal Theory (edited with Kumail Rajani: Gibb Memorial Trust/EUP, 2023) and Islamic Law in Context (edited with Omar Anchassi, Cambridge University Press, 2024).



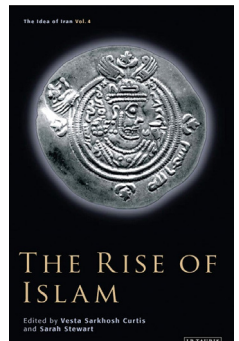
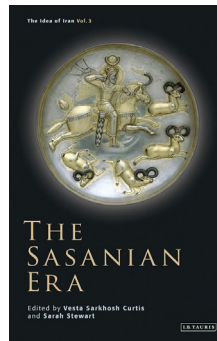
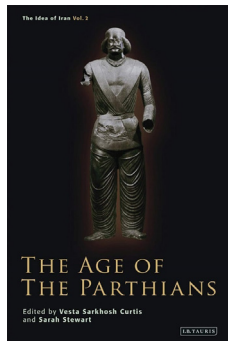
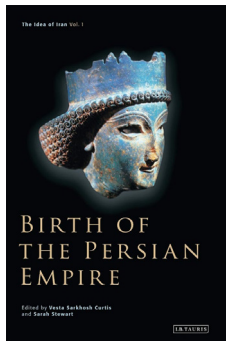
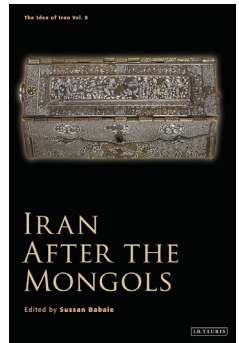
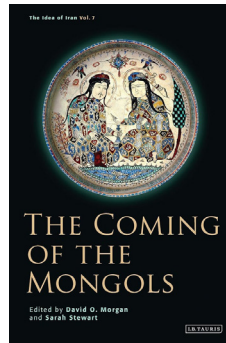
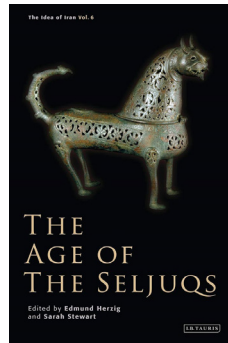
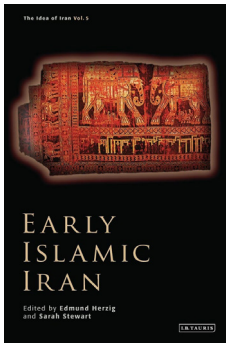
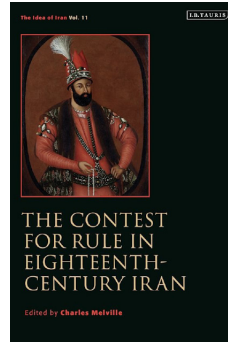
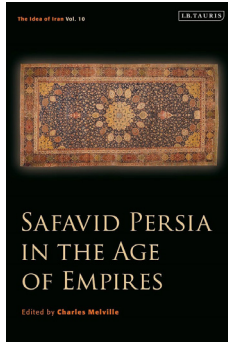
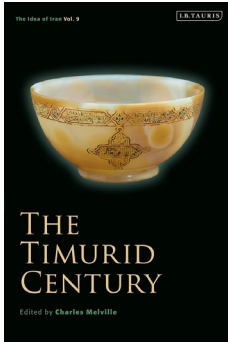
Portrait of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar by E. J. Turner.

The Idea of Iran | Book Series

Charting over 1,000 years of history, the Idea of Iran series offers a significant new appraisal of one of the most fascinating of the great civilizations of the world. Comprising substantial volumes by leading experts in the field of Iranian Studies, the series explores the empires and cross-cultural traditions that have shaped the culture of Iran and the Persianate World.

- The Contest for Rule in Eighteenth-Century Iran [Volume 11]
- Safavid Persia in the Age of Empires [Volume 10]
- The Timurid Century [Volume 9]
- Iran After the Mongols [Volume 8]
- The Coming of the Mongols [Volume 7]
- The Age of the Seljuqs [Volume 6]
- Early Islamic Iran [Volume 5]
- The Rise of Islam [Volume 4]
- The Sasanian Era [Volume 3]
- The Age of the Parthians [Volume 2]
- Birth of the Persian Empire [Volume 1]

The book series is published by I.B. Tauris, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing and is produced in association with the Soudavar Memorial Foundation.



Purchase the books from:
bloomsbury.com/uk/series/the-idea-of-iran/

The Soudavar Memorial Foundation

The Soudavar Memorial Foundation's mission is to preserve and promote the rich and diverse cultural and artistic heritage of the Greater Iranian world in all its diverse aspects, with a particular emphasis on continuities, areas of neglect, and on interaction with other cultures.

Founded by a family with a long history of philanthropy, the Soudavar Memorial Foundation was formally established in 2001 and follows on the lifelong commitment to the arts, culture and heritage of Iran by Fereidoun Soudavar (1908-1997) and his wife, Massoumeh Amir-Alai.

Established in London since before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, they were amongst the first Iranian expatriates to commit themselves to the preservation of the long tradition of Persian studies in the West. In 1987, they endowed the Massoumeh and Fereidoun Soudavar Professor of Persian Studies at Wadham College, University of Oxford, the first and still the UK's only endowed Chair in the field, which was complemented in 2001 with the posthumously created Ali Reza and Mohammad Soudavar Senior Lectureship in Persian Studies at the University of Cambridge in dedication to the memory of their sons. Further endowments support Iranian students at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Brunel in Britain, as well as at Princeton University in the United States. After Fereidoun Soudavar passed away, his appointees established the Soudavar Memorial Foundation to pursue the same path of devotion to Persian culture that he had so well served.

Its flagship initiative is the 'Idea of Iran' annual symposium held at SOAS, University of London. The aim is to explore the empires that have shaped Persianate culture in Iran and its periphery and emphasize cultural continuity from before the Achaemenids to modern times.

The Pembroke Shahnameh Centre for Persian Studies

The Shahnameh Centre for Persian Studies has grown out of the Cambridge Shahnama Project and represents the fulfilment of one of the original aims of that project, to promote Persian studies in Cambridge and across the UK. The seeds for the Centre were planted in 1999, when Professor Charles Melville (Pembroke College) initiated a five-year research project in collaboration with Professor Robert Hillenbrand of Edinburgh University, which was supported by an AHRB grant. The project aimed to create an electronic database of illustrated Shahnama manuscripts held in museums, libraries and private collections around the world.

With the support of the Iran Heritage Foundation, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and several other private institutions, together with a second substantial research grant from the AHRC (2006-2009), the project developed a website that is now an extremely useful tool both for scholars of Persian art history and literature, and the wider public. A major landmark in the development of the project was the exhibition of Shahnama manuscripts in UK collections held in 2010 at the Fitzwilliam Museum, to mark the millennium of the completion of the epic in 1010.

Bitā Daryabari's very generous donation of \$2 million in 2014 enabled the transformation of the Project into the Shahnameh Centre for Persian Studies, based in Pembroke, and a widening of its activities. The Centre's Director of Research is Dr Firūza Abdullaeva, responsible for managing its multidisciplinary academic and cultural projects, to include termly lectures on Persian and Islamic art, academic conferences and publications and other cultural events, such as art exhibitions and musical performances. The Centre also houses a considerable and growing library available for consultation.

The original Shahnama database is now being migrated to the Cambridge University Digital Library and a new website is being developed for the 25th anniversary of the project in 2024.

SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies

The Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies was created to support and expand Zoroastrian studies at SOAS University of London. It was launched in June 2018 thanks to the generous donation from a Parsi benefactor, Mr Shapoor Mistry, in the name of his grandfather, Mr Pallonji Shapoorji Mistry.

We provide an open, vibrant and non-confessional learning and research environment for the Zoroastrian community, for students and scholars from around the world, as well as for the wider public. Our interests lie in all aspects of Zoroastrianism of all periods, including history, religion, philosophy, languages, arts, archaeology, society and culture. We work collaboratively on the long-term digital and material preservation of the precious and endangered Zoroastrian heritage for generations to come.

The Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship programme offers postgraduate students the opportunity to study at the only Institute in the world dedicated to Zoroastrian studies. Our outreach programme hosts the Pallonji Shapoorji Memorial Lecture series as well as the Dastur Kutar Memorial Lecture series.

In addition, we are pleased to organise the annual Zoroastrianism Summer School in collaboration with the University of Bergen. Over the last 5 years, this one-week intensive programme has given 46 students the opportunity to learn more about modern Zoroastrianism in Iran.

SOAS Centre for Iranian Studies

The Centre for Iranian Studies draws on the range of academic research and teaching across the disciplines of SOAS, including Languages and Literature, the Study of Religions, History, Economics, Politics, International Relations, Music, Art and Media and Film Studies.

The Centre organises lectures, seminars and conferences, holds regular film screenings and other events. The Centre is dedicated to promoting high quality research on Iran, including in collaboration with other such centres in the UK, in Iran and internationally. It aims to build cordial relations with the various diasporic communities in London and to showcase and foster the best of contemporary Iranian talent in the arts, music, digital culture and film.

The Centre for Iranian Studies was established in 2010 under the umbrella of the SOAS Middle East Institute (previously known as the London Middle East Institute - LMEI).

MA Iranian Studies at SOAS

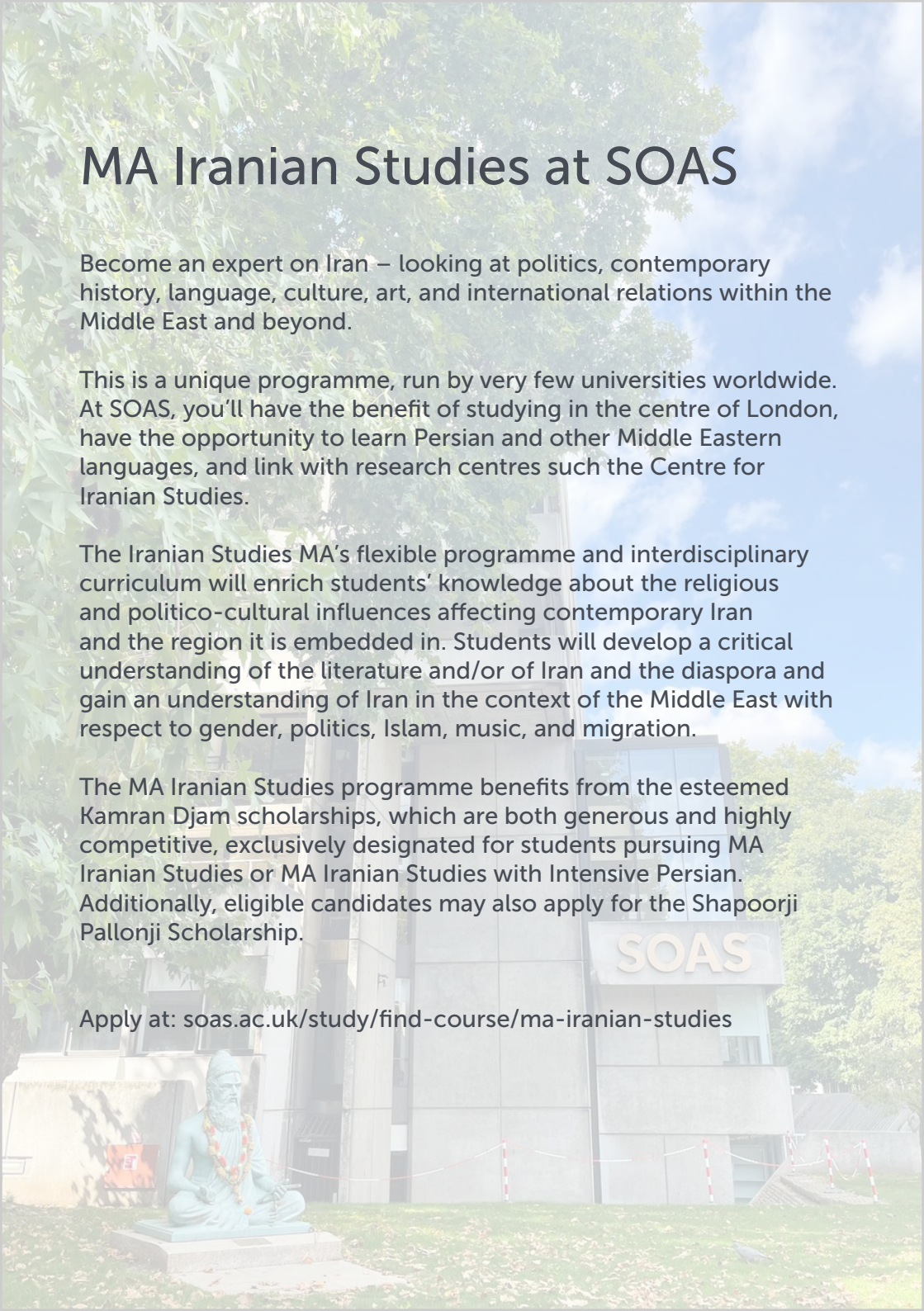
Become an expert on Iran – looking at politics, contemporary history, language, culture, art, and international relations within the Middle East and beyond.

This is a unique programme, run by very few universities worldwide. At SOAS, you'll have the benefit of studying in the centre of London, have the opportunity to learn Persian and other Middle Eastern languages, and link with research centres such the Centre for Iranian Studies.

The Iranian Studies MA's flexible programme and interdisciplinary curriculum will enrich students' knowledge about the religious and politico-cultural influences affecting contemporary Iran and the region it is embedded in. Students will develop a critical understanding of the literature and/or of Iran and the diaspora and gain an understanding of Iran in the context of the Middle East with respect to gender, politics, Islam, music, and migration.

The MA Iranian Studies programme benefits from the esteemed Kamran Djam scholarships, which are both generous and highly competitive, exclusively designated for students pursuing MA Iranian Studies or MA Iranian Studies with Intensive Persian. Additionally, eligible candidates may also apply for the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship.

Apply at: soas.ac.uk/study/find-course/ma-iranian-studies





SOAS
Where everything happens

SOAS
Where everything happens



SOAS
University of London