

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power and the State, 1870-1940* by Afshin Marashi

Review by: Maziar Behrooz

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Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power and the State, 1870-1940, by Afshin Marashi. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008. xi + 138 pages. Notes to p. 165. Bibl. to p. 180. Index to p. 186. \$60 cloth; \$25 paper.

Reviewed by Maziar Behrooz

The subject of modern state building and nationalism in the Middle East has been one of much interest to social scientists, particularly historians. The debate on how far a sense of “nation-state” has developed in the region and how it developed has been an ongoing one. The question has become an even more pressing political one in recent years as the region has witnessed a number of state meltdowns in Afghanistan and Iraq and the reemergence of local loyalties as a substitute for national ones.

In this context the book under review is a welcome addition in the study of nationalism and the building of nation-states in the Middle East by examining the case of Iran. The author refutes the prevailing arguments on the origins of Iranian nationalism, which either places it primarily with the Reza Shah period or sees it as rooted in ancient Iranian history. The author then attempts to identify a timeline for the development of nationalism in Iran and analyze different phases in this development.

In this context, the author proposes cutting “across conventions of political periodization.” He regards the years from 1870 to 1940 as the period when the foundations of modern state building and the identification of state with nation were laid. The Qajar period under Naser al-Din Shah is studied in light of increasing interaction with the West and the Shah’s transforming of the secluded Qajar monarchy into a public one, in line with 19th century European monarchies. In addition, Marashi studies a number of key Iranian thinkers who played pivotal roles not only in bringing to Iranian discourse key concepts rooted in the Enlightenment but also tapping into Iran’s pre-Islamic past to forge a new identity. Marashi discusses

constitutionalists such as Sayyid Hasan Taqizadeh and Mirza Path ‘Ali Akhundzadeh as well as the noble freethinker Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar. Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reforms in the 1920s and 1930s are then put in a new perspective after the examination of the period preceding it. Had the author included Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani as one of his subjects of study, this part of the book would have been even stronger.

Overall, the book is a well researched work examining much of the available secondary works as well as primary sources. However, it should be considered, for the most part, an interpretive work. The author delivers on his claim to reexamine previously existing periodization and introduce a new alternative. The book emphasizes the need to pay more attention to the late 19th century Qajar period in order to understand better state building in Iran. The book is written in a coherent and easy to understand manner and will have utility for either graduate or undergraduate courses concerning Iran or as part of a course covering the Middle East.

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A History of Modern Iran, by Ervand Abrahamian. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xxx + 195 pages. Notes to p. 214. Bibl. and further reading to p 223. Index to p. 228. \$80 cloth; \$24.99 paper.

Reviewed by John Limbert

Ervand Abrahamian has undertaken answering the historian’s perpetual question: How did we get to where we are today? In doing so, he has produced a scholarly, readable, and engaging study of the last century of Iranian history. Those readers familiar with Dr. Abrahamian’s earlier works, such as *Tortured Confessions, Iran between Two Revolutions*, and *The Iranian Mojahedin*, will have high expectations for this book. They will not be disappointed. For the student of Iran and for the general reader looking for the historical grounding of today’s tangled situation in Iran, there is no better