

## **Modern Iranian Historiography: A Report on the Proceedings of a Workshop, held at Yale University**

On May 4, 2012, the Iranian Studies Initiative at Yale University, with support from the American Institute of Iranian Studies, Yale's Council of Middle East Studies, and the Yale Department of History, organized a one-day workshop to assess the state of historical scholarship on modern Iran, to discuss possible avenues for future research, and to explore the potential of an international conference on the historiography of modern Iran (1785 – 1989). The workshop took the form of a round-table discussion with historians and anthropologists from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, the University of Arizona, the University of Connecticut, and Vassar College, along with graduate students from various departments at Yale, including the Departments of History, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC), Sociology, and Comparative Literature. This report on the roundtable's proceedings is meant to highlight the main questions, themes, and debates the workshop raised, in order to facilitate further interest and discussion on topics related to modern Iranian historiography as well as on the future conference.

The Yale workshop followed in the path forged by two recent academic conferences that explored particular aspects of Iranian historiography. A conference held at the University of Oxford in 2004 focused on "Historiography and Political Culture in Twentieth Century Iran," while a 2009 conference at the University of St. Andrews was entitled "Historiography and Iran in a Comparative Perspective."<sup>1</sup> The May 2012 workshop held at Yale, however, differed from these two previous gatherings in its

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<sup>1</sup> The papers presented at the Oxford and St. Andrews conferences served as the backbone to, respectively, Touraj Atabaki, ed., *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); and Ali Ansari, ed., *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2012).

approach and its objectives. Unlike the two earlier conferences, the Yale workshop sought to begin a conversation on broader epistemological and methodological questions.

The May 2012 workshop began from the presumption that, with the growth over the past half-century of available source material on modern Iranian history, issues of historiography and methodology deserve a fresh review. Historians of Iran can now draw on a vast body of primary sources, both published and unpublished. These include, but are not limited to, new archival resources, memoirs, diaries, collections of documents, private papers, travelogues, commercial and economic reports, local and provincial histories, diplomatic dispatches, official memoranda as well as journals and newspapers, collections of popular and folk literature, religious and literary sources, photographs, paintings, and artifacts.

The Yale workshop gauged new potentials that this exponential growth in source availability harbors for the historiography of modern Iran, and at the same time identified potential pitfalls and limitations. Keeping in mind developments in Western, East Asian, South Asian and Ottoman historiography, including recent shifts of focus on to local, transnational and cross-regional connections, as well as an emphasis on subaltern, gender, environmental, micro-historical and other lateral approaches, the workshop explored how these currents might be brought to bear onto the study of the Qajar, Pahlavi, and early Islamic Republic periods.

Prior to meeting on May 4, the Iranian Studies Initiative at Yale invited the workshop's participants to submit short papers addressing a few questions central to the proceedings: Can historians of Iran – by utilizing the wealth of new primary sources referred to above – produce detailed provincial and local histories similar to historians of

Europe and the Americas? Would it be possible to write institutional and legal histories with innovative approaches similar to those recently produced for the Ottoman Empire and Egypt? Can indigenous Iranian sources, especially for the Qajar era, supersede the Western sources, upon which much of the historical scholarship still relies? Are there new opportunities for the more “conventional” fields of political, diplomatic, and military history? What does the increasing availability of private papers and correspondence combined with the burgeoning record of oral history herald for the genre of historical biography? On a more practical level, what are the issues of accessibility, biases, and agendas of the archival gatekeepers, and how do they relate to the quality of historical scholarship emerging in Iran and outside Iran?

Several overriding questions, subjects, and themes emerged from the submitted papers that were then addressed in the workshop’s four scheduled sessions: “What is modern Iranian history and why do we study it?”; “Is there something wrong with the way modern Iranian history has been written?”; “Sources for the study of modern Iran: Lack of access or lack of imagination?”; and “Potentials, approaches, and debates.”

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Two related but independent epistemological questions launched the day’s discussion: how do we as scholars define “Iran,” and how do scholars of Iran define “modern history”? Although no clear consensus was reached on either question, a shared belief in the potential benefit in expanding our definitions of “Iran” and “modern” did materialize. Broadening our visions as scholars may help Iranian historiography emerge out of its perceived insularity. How might framing studies along linguistic or regional lines – like, for example, the Persianate or Persophone world, or the “Caspian Sea zone”

– that go beyond modern national boundaries change how history is written? Are there alternative ways to define modernity, outside of the Eurocentric conception of the term?

Most historians define “modern history” as the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in the case of Iran there may be merit to extending the field of inquiry to earlier periods. Expanding the definition of both “Iran” and “modern” would encourage, potentially, historical questions that are less about institutions of power, and more concerned with social and economic patterns over the *longue durée*. It may also facilitate the emergence of more comparative and interdisciplinary scholarship. More importantly, it would force historians of Iran to reflect on whether questions of modernity actually matter, and to what extent those questions have obscured other axes of historical inquiry – including topics like everyday life, crime, violence, the tribal state, environmental history, and the history of the movement of peoples into and out of Iran.

The workshop’s second session took stock of the state of Iranian historiography, framed provocatively by the question: “Is there something wrong with how modern Iranian history has been written?” The general consensus among the workshop participants was that historical scholarship on Iran has room for improvement. The participants identified several key problems or issues in Iranian historiography, including a lack of concreteness (studies of specific events, people, or institutions), an over-emphasis on intellectual history, historical writing that betrays a teleological bent, hero worship (e.g. Amir Kabir and Mossadeq), Tehran centrism, and Iranian exceptionalism.

Some of these perceived shortcomings can be explained by the fact that the field of Iranian history is young and its practitioners few. There simply are not enough historians working on Iran, and unlike in many other subfields, serious scholarship on

Iran dates back only two or three generations. And yet, many of the earlier studies on intellectual, political, and religious history have a lasting quality and continue to have long shelf lives because they were carefully written and faithful to the sources. They also provided the foundation and lay the groundwork without which future scholars would not have been able to begin their own work. The workshop participants therefore emphasized the importance of acknowledging the many high-quality examples of historical writing on Iran.

Another major obstacle to historical scholarship has been the role of political regimes in obstructing access to sources. In the case of scholarship on the early to mid twentieth century, Pahlavi era controls prevented the development of serious work on the period. The situation changed after the revolution but the field is new. Many sources have only recently become available. Iranians who are fully immersed in the history gradually have begun to emerge in the field. For this reason, many unanswered questions on the Pahlavi era may be addressed by coming generations of scholars. In addition, some of the workshop participants felt that the claim of hero worship is biased, since historians whose research addresses periods during which they lived neither can nor should disentangle their individual experiences from those events. These histories are personal and cannot be abstracted.

Nevertheless, it is also fair to say that the time has arrived for historians of Iran to move away from notions of Iranian exceptionalism, insularity, and nationalism. Historians of Iran can and should engage with broader historiographical debates – like, to take just one example, the notion of “decline” – in the way that historians of the Ottoman Empire and South Asia did twenty to thirty years ago. They can also develop historical

typologies, models, and units of analysis that until very recently emerged primarily in a European context. The Annales school, Marxism, orientalism, feminism, and nationalism all drove historical scholarship during the twentieth century – can Iranian historiography contribute to these schools, or perhaps contribute towards new ones?

The problem of lack of concreteness in Iranian historiography is more difficult to explain and has resulted in scholarship skewed towards general histories and syntheses. A keyword search on *American Historical Abstracts* covering the historical scholarship on Iran for the period 1800-1979 over last ten years resulted in 68 works. Excluding biographies and edited volumes of sources, the result was 32 works. The clear winner in the type of scholarship produced over the past ten years has been studies that cover a long period of time, like textbooks, and which numbered 16. There were ten books on intellectual history and five on diplomatic history. Iranian historiography would benefit from more specific studies that focus on narrow questions – biographies, institutional history, local and provincial histories, and histories of commodities, goods, and technologies – as well as social and economic studies that draw on legal records, imperial decrees, geographic and narrative sources, and even diplomatic correspondence that is read against the grain. Historians working on Iran can look to Ottomanists, who have explored center-periphery relations and in-between groups (e.g. households and merchant networks) in the Ottoman Empire, as inspiration. There are some encouraging signs that over the past ten or so years historical scholarship on Iran is also moving in these new directions.

Any discussion of potentials and possibilities in historical scholarship must eventually face the reality of what sources are at a historian's disposal. This means not

only what sources exist, but also whether they are accessible. There was a general consensus among the workshop participants that there is a lack of adequate archives for the nineteenth century (and even less so for earlier periods), and a lack of access for the twentieth, posing challenges for historical scholarship on Iran that does not exist for, say, the Ottoman Empire.

At the same time, however, there was a sense among the participants that emphasizing the lack of accessible and available sources is not helpful. An abundance and surfeit of sources presents its own challenges, after all. There is the danger of fetishizing archival material and not using sources critically or with an appreciation for their broader significance. A more useful approach would be to assess what kinds of archives and sources *do* exist, and then ask what can be done using them. Some Iranian libraries and archives have begun digitizing their collections and each year more and more collections of primary sources are published in Iran. Publications like *Farhang-i Iranzamin* are also invaluable for publishing primary sources. Most of this voluminous material has been underutilized, if at all, by historians. There are many archives outside of Iran – in Russia, Turkey, India, and Georgia to name just a few – that hold important documents for any historian of Iran, and even well-known archives in Britain and France can be revisited and sources can be re-read in novel and different ways. Historians can also learn lessons of how to build relationships and trust from anthropologists in order to gain access to closed, sealed, or otherwise private archives. In sum, there *are* adequate sources for historical scholarship on Iran, but it may take a measure of creativity, ingenuity, imagination, resourcefulness, and perhaps even luck, to put them to use.

In the final session of the workshop, the participants considered potentials going forward, and made specific suggestions for possible next steps. One was to set aside a small budget to hire an intern who could produce a statistical report on the state of Iranian historiography since the 1960's. Several other participants suggested ways in which websites could be created in order to advance historical scholarship on Iran. One idea was to create a website with abstracts and summaries of newly published works, similar to what *Abstracta Iranica* used to provide before discontinuing in 2008. Another was to form some kind of tool or finding aid to assist locating documents and primary sources. And finally there was the suggestion to create a website analogous to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for Iranian history.

As we historians of Iran ponder the future of the field, it would be helpful to bear in mind the potential ways our work may be able to bridge the scholarly communities North America, Europe, Iran, and elsewhere. One way to do that would be think more explicitly about the potential audience for historical scholarship: is the intended audience scholars in Europe, North America, or Iran? Is it for academics, students, or a wider audience? Moreover, in recent years institutions based in Iran have published a large number of primary source materials. Government-funded research institutes have often produced these volumes. Historians need to assess the manner in which these volumes were compiled and their use for future research. Further inquiry should be made into the availability of archival materials in Iran and other locations around the world. In addition, we should be sensitive to the varying conceptualizations of history that inform scholars in different regions: there seems to be a gap in the approach between scholars who focus on analytical work and theory, and those in Iran who focus on the publication of source

material. Both approaches have their merit, but more effort needs to be made to bring the two closer to one another. And finally, the multitude of languages required in the field has resulted in the alienation of scholars based and working in different countries, a problem that it is hoped can be lessened in the years to come.