

FRONTIER FICTIONS

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SHAPING THE  
IRANIAN NATION, 1804-1946

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I.B.TAURIS *Publishers*  
LONDON • NEW YORK

135-9204

Published in 2000 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DZ  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
Website: <http://www.ibtauris.com>

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ISBN 1 85043 270 8

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Manufactured in the USA

**To Our Mother, Fereshteh  
My Brother, Mohammed  
And in the Memory of Our Father,  
Mohammed Hossein**

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The legalistic discourse on the jihad, intended for a more specialized audience, differed from the popular literature on the subject that reached the shah's court. The former grounded the permissibility of jihad in traditional Shi'i jurisprudence (*fiqh*), while the latter outlined the duties of those devoted Shi'is subjects of Iran in lay terms. Although the *jihadiya* literature stressed the defense of Islam (*mulk-i Islam*, *bayza-yi Islam*) more than the homeland, the connection to Iran was strongly suggested. The frequent references to Shi'i Muslims, Russia, and the Qajars—who considered themselves both the kings of Iran and the protectors of Islam—made it difficult to separate the *jihadiya* texts from Iran's historical circumstances. Shi'i Islam was threatened only because Iran had been imperiled, and the prosperity of the religion depended upon the country's well-being. Islamic lands, like Iranian domains, depended upon the country's commanders for its preservation.

Mirza Buzurg Qa'im Maqam, a distinguished statesman in the shah's court, authored two lay treatises, the greater and lesser *jihadiya*, in which he discussed the essentials of jihad in order to protect the lands of Islam against infidels.<sup>59</sup> The lesser *jihadiya*, intended for the broad audience outside the 'ulama's exclusive circle and the shah's elite court, was published in Tabriz in A.H. 1234/1815, in the hope that it would inspire mass involvement in the protection of Iran's Islamic domain. The risalah likened dying in the army of Abbas Mirza to perishing in the army of Islam to assure that the martyrs of the *mulk* and the faith would receive the rewards of afterlife for their courageous sacrifice. "Where is the pride of Islam?" he asked, initiating a series of rhetorical questions aimed at inciting the reader to action. "Where are the *ahl-i namus* [the people of principle] of the community?" he demanded, playing on the term *namus* to associate the sanctity of the Islamic lands with the chastity of the Islamic woman.<sup>60</sup>

Russia's acquisition of neighboring Islamic lands only heightened Mirza Buzurg's fears. As he explained, "It is clear to all the Muslims and to the mature public that in the past few years the Russian infidels have seized upon the countries of the Muslims and are in the process of conquering the kingdoms of Islam."<sup>61</sup> He further stressed that the glory and propagation of the "din" depended upon the independence of the government of Islam. Though the *jihadiya* defined Russia's threat in religious terms, Iran's specific circumstances were not ignored. As Mirza Buzurg commented, "On the whole of the Iranian public it is obligatory to obey that excellency [Fath 'Ali Shah], who is the king of Islam and [thus] the commander-in-chief to obey in this regard, and to follow the na'ib al-saltanah, who is in charge of the matter of jihad."<sup>62</sup>

The war against the British offered yet another opportunity for jihad. Presumably around 1856, Hajji Mirza 'Askari bin Hidayat Allah al-

Husayni, a leader of the Friday prayer (*imam jum'ā*), summoned his Persian Shi'i audience to arms against the British: "Because in this age in which this stray, hypocritical tribe, the followers of Satan (*Iblis*), known as Inglis . . . with raw desire [covetousness] have turned [their attention] to the cities of Islam (*bilad-i Islam*) . . . it is necessary for all Muslims and the whole of the people of faith (*ahl-i iman*) . . . to perform the jihad."<sup>63</sup> As in the text of the lesser *jihadiya*, the play on words with the rhyming couplet *Inglis* ("England") and *iblis* ("Satan"), paralleled the clever verbal maneuverings of Qa'im Maqam, who frequently rhymed *Rus* ("Russia") with *mulk-i mahrus* ("guarded domain") in his verse.<sup>64</sup>

'Askari, a lesser religious figure than Qummi, abandoned the traditional legal format of question/answer in this treatise, which deals exclusively with jihad, unlike the works of Kashif al-Ghita and Qummi, who place jihad within a broader discussion of religious obligations for Shi'is. Like Qummi, 'Askari discusses the multifarious meanings of jihad in Shi'i *fiqh*. Assault on the life and property of Muslims by non-Muslims and general protection of Islam ranked among the two bases of jihad, which rests with the Imam's authority or the imam's vice-gerent.<sup>65</sup> "No act is bigger than the protection of Islam," he maintains, contending that "the sacrifice of self for guarding Islam is not only admissible but obligatory." 'Askari makes little distinction between the intrusion of infidels upon the person or property of Muslims. Either or both conditions necessitated the defense of Islam and its territories by the believers, whether "man or woman, free or enslaved, or sick or maimed or blind."<sup>66</sup>

In an interesting passage 'Askari considered the attacks of other Muslims sects upon Twelver Shi'ism and the role of jihad under such circumstances. As he explained, "Whenever those other than infidels from [sects] other than Twelver Shi'ism want to control Twelver Shi'ism like the infidels who were discussed . . . those same considerations are executed here."<sup>67</sup> His defense of Twelver Shi'ism, particularly in a treatise inspired by Iran's political troubles, forged a forceful nexus between the homeland and the faith. A fellow Muslim's attack on Twelver Shi'ism was equated with an assault on Iran by Great Britain. Other Muslims, in effect, were to be treated as infidels when they threatened the state religion. As 'Askari professed, "Protection of the faith is obligatory like the protection of Islam," in particular when the adversary is a Shi'i of another sect (*khusus har gah shi'i-yi ghayr-i ithna 'ashari bashad*).<sup>68</sup> 'Askari's oblique reference to the Babi uprisings, quelled only three years earlier, was presumably meant as a deterrent against any future religious rebellion threatening the Twelver dominance in Qajar Iran. Jihad literature conveyed a heroic portrait of martyrdom. The garden, a recurring motif in Shi'i literature, pervaded popular religious works, symbolizing

the pristine wilderness of paradise—a sensuous and sumptuous Shi'i utopia. If Persian secular literature portrayed gardens as a metaphor for the *mulk*, Shi'i literature used gardens as an allegory for the paradise of martyrs by stressing the protection of the Islamic homeland.

### Pursuit of Geography

Like the jihad, geographical undertakings emerged from a need to defend the frontiers of the country and to learn about the *vatan*'s landscape. Already in 1842 the Russian Orientalist N. Berezine had drawn up a plan of Tehran, the Qajar capital. In 1857–58 Augustus Krziz, the Austrian officer and Dar al-Funun instructor, designed a blueprint of Tehran. The proper use of public space could enhance the capital's prominence as the seat of the monarchy and reinforce the resplendence of the sovereign gracing its throne. If the monarch could not control the universe, then the center of the universe would shift to enable him to remain in command of his realm. Nasir al-Din took the decision to tear down the old walls of Tehran in 1867.<sup>69</sup> Commenting on the change, Lord Curzon remarked, "After being twenty years upon the throne, it appears to have occurred to him [Nasir al-Din] that the 'Point of Adoration (*Kibleh*) of the Universe' was framed in a somewhat inadequate setting."<sup>70</sup> The students of the Dar al-Funun worked out the details of the plan under the guidance of 'Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Mulk, who published his map of Tehran in 1890. The depiction of ancient Iranian heroes became common in reenvisioning the capital. The feats of ancient heroes like Rustam were portrayed alongside those of modern Persian warriors.<sup>71</sup>

Fascination with the land inspired the monarch himself. Nasir al-Din traveled to various regions of Iran during his reign, from Gilan and Mazandaran, to Khurasan and Iraq-i 'Ajam. These journeys exhibited Nasir al-Din's personal interest in his domains. In fulfilling his kingly responsibilities, and in the hope of integrating the country, he recognized the necessity of acquiring firsthand knowledge about the *mamalik* he sought to protect. The trips took the monarch through familiar stomping grounds as well as through little-known locales. He made myriad observations about the physical geography of the land, its people, and their customs, and even sketched a map of the province. In reading the monarch's travelogues, one gains an understanding of the elements that seemed to tie the population of the rustic villages to the denizens of the capital. During his trip to Iraq-i 'Ajam, Nasir al-Din and his entourage observed the Nawruz and religious ceremonies in the month of Muharram, for example, even on the road.<sup>72</sup> Nature, it

seemed, failed to fire the monarch's imagination, even if it did capture his attention. Nasir al-Din's narrative lacked a poetic flair, imbued more with insipid details regarding the physical geography of the land than with colorful portraits of the landscape. The wealth of information gleaned on the road, however, did much to abate the monotony of style. These chronicles served as textual sketches of the provinces, and the simplicity of language helped to disseminate the newly acquired information for public consumption.

In response to the monarch's interest, travel and the writing of travelogues attained a new fervor in Nasir al-Din's reign. Though often sanctioned by the government, these journeys nonetheless opened the eyes of the Iranian traveler to differences in cultures and to other social and political customs. The government's endorsement of these journeys represented yet another effort to integrate the country. Realizing that lack of supervision in the periphery invited foreign intervention, which in turn resulted in loss of territory, the state made a concerted effort to learn about the borderlands and eventually to police them. In 1875, an article translated by the British on Baluchistan represented an effort to learn about the periphery. As its author, Mirza Mehdi Khan, commented: "[T]his report is a great advance on those of old times. I do not remember having ever seen anything like it emanating from a Persian before."<sup>73</sup> Though by no means comprehensive, this article was notable for its wealth of detail on the natural habitat as well as for identifying obscure villages. Despite the author's claims, the article did not in any way supersede Farman Farma's detailed narrative of his trip to the region three years earlier.

Tribal unrest along the periphery as well as boundary negotiation efforts continued to spur Qajar endorsement of geography and cartography. Though nineteenth-century Persian newspapers rarely contained maps of Iran or sketches of the country's borderlands, the official Qajar gazette, *Ruznamah-i Dawlat-i 'Illiyah-i Iran*, occasionally published crude Persian maps. In 1863–64, due to Turkoman disturbances, this newspaper published two unrefined depictions of the Yamut regions as well as a narrative of the skirmishes with the Turkomans. These depictions, published in a relatively early stage of Qajar cartographic development, did not display a sophisticated knowledge of mapping. The topography of the Yamut area, drawn in a linear, picturelike fashion, was labeled rather simply as "grass" (*chaman*), "marshland" (*murdab*), or "river" (*rud*)—a technique that relied little on mathematical calculations or graphs. Still, these crude sketches manifested the strategic and diplomatic significance of maps—as well as the centrality of land—for the Qajar state in its efforts to assert territorial ownership of its borderlands and in its desire to subdue frontier disturbances. These depictions

"anti-social" tendencies thrive in the vast, wild lands of the west. This "frontier individualism," inimical to control and authority, advanced American democracy.

Constitutional Iran offered a parallel political panorama despite the vastly different frontier experiences of the two countries. Whereas America had successfully stretched its borders "from sea to shining sea," Iran had humbly watched its frontiers narrow from gulf to tenebrous sea. Whereas America's westward trek had inspired an individualist, liberal ethic, Iran's inward movement had brought a tightening of central authority. Whereas America articulated its frontier vision in a pithy proposition, Qajar Iran failed to produce a Turnerian thesis to frame its frontier experience. Still, the preoccupation with land and borders profoundly affected Iranian politics even if this phenomenon did not generate an official doctrine. By delineating the country's frontiers, Iranians attached new connotations to the territorial space to which they belonged and popularized political allegories that encapsulated their frontier drama.

If Turner's thesis had engendered the false myth of "free land" and the promise of individualism and democracy in America, the frontier phenomenon sired other fictions in Iran. First, it hallowed the nation's borders, making the defense of Iran's boundaries a civic duty rather than a religious or royal responsibility. Just as paying taxes to the government became an expression of patriotism, so too did defending the nation's periphery. Protection of the homeland grew out of an anxiety over territorial effacement—a leitmotif of Iran's frontier experience. Preoccupation with the nation's periphery, in turn, engendered a sense of ownership of lands that had made up the domains of "old" Iran. Nationalists continued hoping for the reconquest of the country's former territories, and many regarded constitutionalism as a way to restore the "great" Iranian civilization of the past. An irredentist longing for the lost frontiers consumed Iranians, forcing a constant bifurcation of the homeland's image in the national psyche. The present existed largely in relation to the past despite the radical changes transforming the nation's political panorama, yet the nation failed to compete successfully with the imperial past because it had not reestablished the country's former boundaries. This tension constituted another pillar of Iran's frontier experience.

The revolution offered a way out of this failure, founding still another fiction in the process. It forged a heroic myth—freedom (*hurriyat*, *azadi*)—to complement the worn, yet received, wisdom of the monarchy. This new ideology became rooted in a modern territory—the constitutional nation of Iran—just as *saltanat* had become grounded in Persian political theory as the inherited tradition of the land of the Sasanid

monarchs. The closing of the frontiers, almost by contrast, had fashioned a politics of openness and self-reflection. Political reforms accompanied the tightening of central authority. New themes—freedom, citizenship, law—now ingrained this constitutional land as a consequence of Iran's frontier phenomenon. Iran was not just the birthright of "Oriental despots," but a land with parliamentary rule and egalitarian principles (at least nominally). It was a homeland not just for Shi'i Muslims, but also a haven for Sunnis, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews, though not necessarily Baha'is. The constitution would help to embrace these values by creating new laws, even if in practice equality would become a distant aspiration rather than a political reality. Iranian soil became hallowed ground not only because it nurtured life but also because it was endowed with the rare gift of freedom.

The last myth originating from Iran's frontier experience was the fiction of unity. The notion of Iran as a composite of semiautonomous districts—"mamalik-i Iran," or the provinces of Iran—gave way to a perception of Iran as a federated whole—"mamlikat-i Iran," or the country of Iran, as its frontiers were delineated anew. Iran was the homeland of various ethnic groups that inhabited its territory, including Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, Turks, and Arabs. Together, these ethnic groups were encouraged to form another category—"Iranians"—in order to thwart any challenges to the nation's perceived territorial unity.

Yet the Constitutional Revolution also promoted the Persianization of Iran, so that even as the nation's spokesmen stressed unity, they undermined this unity by imposing a distinctly Persian and Shi'i character upon the country. Though this transformation had begun in the nineteenth century, because of the paucity of institutions as well as the infancy of the print medium it did not achieve wide success. The revolution, however, expedited this process, as it developed institutions seeking to universalize Persianist ideals in the name of Iranian nationalism. While modern Iran's frontier experience—a process that had begun with the contraction of the country's boundaries and the forced melding of hitherto semiautonomous peoples—had forged a myth of Iranian nationality based on territorial unity, it did so by recognizing the ethnic and religious diversity of the country and without excessively privileging one province over another. Iranian nationalists, however, resisted the country's depiction as a nation of dangling and divisive parts, and increased Persianization occurred as a way to combat the growing ethnic nationalisms of the Kurds, Afghanis, Turks, and Arabs with which Iran had to contend at the turn of the century.

While the frontier experience had helped to forge the fiction of national unity through a commonality of place—an encounter that had accepted and built on Iran's different ethnicities—it would be through

i Milli. To my knowledge, the text I mentioned has been neither published nor cited in relevant historical works. Kirmani also makes a reference to Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* when discussing this work and the history of Sistan. Another reference to Firdawsi is found on p. 271 of the manuscript. Kirmani offers more information about his own background in the beginning of the historical section of the manuscript, p. 268.

49. Since my training has not been in physical geography, it is beyond the purview of my study to analyze the mathematical measurements provided by Kirmani in this exhaustive manuscript, yet I believe that historical geographers interested in physical geography would find these data useful and enlightening.

50. For instance, Kirmani disputes the notion that Jamshid was the biblical figure Solomon (Suleyman). *Ibid.*, p. 270.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 341–342.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

53. Kirmani, "Arz va Tul-i Bilad-i Iran," p. 343. For an etymology and explanation of these French terms, see L. Febvre, "Frontière: The Word and Concept," in Peter Burke, *A New Kind of History From the Writings of Febvre* (New York: Harper and Row), 1973).

54. Kirmani, "Arz va Tul-i Bilad-i Iran," p. 343.

55. *Habl al-Matin*, no. 42, 15 Jumada al-Awwal 1318/10 September 1900, p. 19.

56. Shaykh Ja'far, Kashif al-Ghita, *Kitabu Kashf al-Ghita*, (Isfahan: Intisharat-i Mahdavi, n.d.), p. 381; Ann Lambton, "A Nineteenth Century View of Jihad," *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970): 181–192. Lambton claims that the passage on jihad seems to have been composed around 1809, when the 'ulama were seeking a jihad against the Russians.

57. Kashif al-Ghita, *Kitabu*, p. 382.

58. Mirza Abu al-Qasim Qummi, *Jami' al-shshatat*, ed. Murtaza Razavi (Tehran: Intisharat-i Kayhan, 1371/1992), 1:377. For further discussions of Qummi and nineteenth-century jihad, see 'Abd al-Hadi Ha'iri, *Nakhshtin ruyaruyi'ha-yi andishah garan-i Iran* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Amir Kabir, 1367/1988).

59. Mirza Buzurg Qa'im Maqam Farahani, *Jihadiya*, ed. Jahangir Qa'im Maqami (Tehran: Chapkhanah-i Bist va Panjum-i Shahriyar, 1974), pp. 1–2 and 9. Also introduction by Jahangir Qa'im Maqami, pp. 5–8.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 21. For more on the woman analogy, see p. 25.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

63. "Jihadiya-i Nasiriya," Tehran, MS 803/F, pp. 8–9, Kitabkhanah-i Milli.

64. Cf. A. Amanat, "Russian Intrusion into the Guarded Domain: Reflections of a Qajar Statesman on European Expansion," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 1 (1993): 35–56.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

68. *Ibid.*

69. John D. Gurney, "The Transformation of Tehran in the Later Nine-

teenth Century," in *Téhéran: capitale bicentenaire*, ed. Chahrayr Adle and Bernard Hourcade (Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1992), pp. 51–52. Also, Réza Moghtader, "Téhéran dans ses murailles: (1553–1930)," in *Téhéran: capitale bicentenaire*, pp. 39–49.

70. G. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Longmans, Green, 1892), 1: 305.

71. *Ibid.*, 1:306.

72. Nasir al-Din Shah, *Safarnamah-i Iraq-i 'Ajam* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Titaraj, 1362/1983), pp. 158–159.

73. Mirza Mehdi Khan, "Notes on Persian Beluchistan," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 9 (1877): 154.

74. *Ruznamah-i Dawlat-i 'Illyah-i Iran*, nos. 568 and 569, 1281/1864.

75. Muhammad Hasan Ganji, *Jughrafiya dar Iran: Az Dar al-Funun ta Inqilab-i Islami* (Mashhad: Intisharat-i Astan-i Quds Razavi, 1367/1988), pp. 26–29.

76. *Farhang* (Isfahan) no. 41, 27 Rabi' al-Thani 1297/8 April 1880, p. 1.

77. Hajj 'Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Mulk, *Safarnamah-i Khuzistan* (Tehran, 1341/1962), p. 1. Reflecting further interest in Khuzistan, the newspaper *Farhang* published excerpts from a treatise on the geography and history of Khuzistan in several issues. For two such examples, see *Farhang*, no. 187, 15 Rabi' al-Awwal 1300 A.H./25 January 1883, p. 2, and no. 188, 22 Rabi' al-Awwal 1300/1 February 1883, p. 2. This booklet was written by Mirza Taqi Khan Sartip Hakimbashi, the manager of *Farhang*. Earlier, *Farhang* had also reported that Mirza Taqi Khan Hakimbashi had been sent to Fars, 'Arabistan, and Luristan and upon returning had drawn an "extensive" map of the region. See *Farhang*, no. 147, 2 Jumada al-Ukhra 1299/20 April 1882, p. 1.

78. Najm al-Mulk, *Safarnamah-i Khuzistan*, p. 107.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–112.

81. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Mir'at al-Buldan*, ed. 'Abd al-Husayn Nava'i (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1367/1988), 1:6. Afsaneh Najmabadi also discusses I'timad al-Saltanah's geographical study in "The Erotic *Vatan* [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, To Possess, and to Protect," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39, no. 3 (July 1997): 442–467.

82. See I'timad al-Saltanah, *Tarikh-i Muntazam-i Nasiri* (Tehran: Dunya-yi Kitab, 1363/1984), 1: 492. Also cited in introduction to *Mir'at al-Buldan*, 1:34–5.

83. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Mir'at al-buldan*, 1:3.

84. Hyacinth Louis Rabino claims that *Ittila'* was a semiofficial organ of the Iranian government and a twin brother of the official Iranian gazette. As head of the Press and Translation Ministry, I'timad al-Saltanah oversaw the paper: H. L. Rabino, *Ruznamahha-yi Iran*, trans. Ja'far Khumamizadah (Tehran: Intisharat-i Ittila'at, 1373/1994), p. 64.

85. *Ittila'*, no. 10, 26 Rajab 1298/24 June 1881, pp. 1–2. Also, see *Ruznamah-i 'Ilmiya-i Dawlat-i Iran*, which devoted several articles to promoting the sciences, including astronomy, medicine, agriculture, and geography. It was