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REVIEW ESSAY

Iran at the Paris Peace Conference: International Diplomacy and the Pursuit of Imperial Nationalism. Philip Grobien (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024). Pp. 215. $115 hardcover. ISBN: 9780755651856

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World War I was the period during which decolonization dynamics fully played out in the Muslim world, and the postwar international settlement marked a milestone in nation–state formation in the Middle East. Despite the predominant role played by colonial empires, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 witnessed many previously unrecognized and disempowered nations advancing their goals of independence, resulting in the creation of a radically new international order based on ideas of national sovereignty, self-determination, and global stability. Philip Grobien's *Iran at the Paris Peace Conference* is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on post–World War I international diplomacy that reassesses the Iranian diplomatic agency in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, reminding us of the importance of non-Western actors in the shaping of the contemporary Middle East.

Drawing on a wide array of sources in Persian, English, and French, Philip Grobien convincingly argues that the Iranian activities at the Paris Peace Conference and the negotiations of the Anglo-Persian Agreement (1919) should be seen as two parts of one strategy that sought to affirm Iranian sovereignty and implement reform. Although the argument is not new and Grobien credits Oliver Bast's work on late Qajar foreign policy, the book highlights a number of novel details, such as the role of Ahmad Shah in setting up the delegation for the Peace Conference, the discord between the head of the delegation Moshaver al-Mamalek and the prime minister Vosuq al-Dowleh, and Vosuq al-Dowleh's instrumentation of the Iranian delegation in his negotiations of the Anglo-Persian treaty with Lord Curzon. Most importantly, Grobien conceptualizes the Iranian diplomacy of 1918–19 as an expression of late Qajar imperial nationalism, which combined imperial territorial claims versed in the modern language of civilization, including ideas of modernization, state reform, international law, and national sovereignty. The book also presents a reassessment of the pro-British leanings of Vosuq al-Dowleh and discusses various facets of the decades-long project of Anglo-Persian "association" (104). Grobien views diplomacy as a part of a broader Iranian modernization project in which a diversity of political affiliations and strategies coexisted in a complementary way under the umbrella of Iranian nationalism. He explicitly states his intention to demonstrate the global awareness of late Qajar elites, "disintegrating the 'discourse of disintegration'" on late Qajar Iran, in the words of Oliver Bast (Bast, 2009). It is, however, surprising that Grobien did not include in his bibliography Werner Zürrer's *Persien zwischen England und Russland, 1918–1925*, which makes a similar argument about the realpolitik of Vosuq al-Dowleh.

Iran at the Paris Peace Conference consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, with the text of the *Claims of Persia before the Conference of the Preliminaries of Peace in Paris* provided as an appendix. In the introduction, the author defines "imperial nationalism"

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as a "modern" set of ideas and practices that were developed in the West and then appropriated by Iranians, whose knowledge of Europe grew increasingly throughout the nineteenth century. According to Grobien, Iranian imperial nationalism was rooted in the modern phenomenon of territorial nationalism and took shape simultaneously with the ideology of the "civilizational state," although this differed considerably from imperial nationalism, imperial nationalism rejecting authoritarian rule and endorsing the modern state (8). Iranian nationalism is conceived of by Grobien as a means to achieve modernization, its imperial nature being manifest in Iranian post–World War I territorial claims that included areas historically inhabited by Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, and Turkic peoples. Chapter 1 resumes Grobien's reading of the Anglo-Russian "Great Game," in which Iran had to deal with Russia's "single-minded" expansion (33) and Britain's "short-sighted and naïve" India-centered policy (23). Despite the Qajars' failure to implement an efficient policy of modernization, Iran moved, according to the author, from "tribal authority" and "classical patrimonialism" to a modern national state (27), Iranian nationalism presented by the author as a product of the encounter with Western imperialist powers. In chapter 2 Grobien addresses the evolution of Qajar political thought within the modernization paradigm adapted from the West and reformulated by Malkam Khan, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh, and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani. He highlights the force of Iranian anti-imperialism, born out of the decades of Anglo-Russian understanding and further fueled by foreign occupation and unlawful management of concessions during World War I. In chapter 3, Grobien delineates Iran's first efforts to gain visibility and affirm her sovereignty on the international scene starting in June 1917 and resulting in the departure, despite unequivocal British opposition, of the Iranian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in December 1918. Chapter 4 offers a fair appreciation of Iranian diplomatic activities in Europe from January to April 1919, such as the attempts to reach out to President Woodrow Wilson, efforts to attract the sympathies of the French *parti colonial*, Mohammad Ali Foroughi's address to the League of Nations, and Hasan Taqizadeh's speech in the Hague. Meanwhile, the delegation's undertakings were slowed by Vosuq al-Dowleh's commitment to negotiations with the British, who were blocking Iran's access to the peace conference and simultaneously exerting influence on their French and American allies. Chapter 5 focuses on Iranian sovereignty claims in the Anglo-Persian Agreement negotiations, and in Chapter 6 the author examines the continuity between those claims and Nosrat al-Dowleh's pursuits in Europe as the new head of the Iranian delegation, from September to November 1919. Finally, Grobien revisits the "anglophile" and "corrupt" nature of the Iranian triumvirate government by insisting on its pragmatism and continuous desire to advance territorial claims in Kurdistan, Transcaucasia, and former tsarist Turkestan.

Grobien's narrative is rich in detail, and his attention to the outlook of different actors constitutes the book's best merit. We learn, for instance, about the role of Kurdish and Azerbaijani representatives in the formulation of Iranian demands, the disagreement over the Iranian territorial claims within the delegation, the centrality of security issues in Nosrat al-Dowleh's discourse, and the Iranian reference to the postwar recognition of Finland and Poland as independent sovereign states. However, these nuances tend to weaken Grobien's main argument on imperial nationalism: Iranian territorial claims appear more anchored in the unique regional and international *rapport de forces* born out of World War I and a series of revolutionary upheavals in the European land empires than in the modernization paradigm of empire and civilization. Iranian statesmen were clearly using Western diplomatic language of the early twentieth century, but their motivation and vision of Iran's place in the global order did not necessarily fit with Western concepts of nation and empire. Grobien himself remarks that Iran's politics of imperial nationalism "ended when they firstly could not get a hearing at the Peace Conference in Paris" (145), calling into question his own definition of imperial nationalism as a deeply rooted ideology of territorial sovereignty, modernization, and *mission civilisatrice*.

Portraying late Qajar statesmen as globally aware staunch nationalists rather than corrupt Orientals or mere pawns of colonial powers, Grobien's book joins the growing body of

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scholarship on Middle Eastern modernities arguing against the underdevelopment thesis. However, despite this laudable intention to restore justice to late Qajar statesmen, Grobien's approach to Iranian agency suffers from a number of inconsistencies. First, his affirmation of Qajar political backwardness as well as his framing of Iranian nationalism as a mere adaptation of Western concepts raises questions about the origin of Iranian modernity which, according to the author, are found in the West. Second, Grobien's portrayal of complex late Qajar individuals as mere nationalists obfuscates the profound impact of Western supremacy discourse on the Iranian elite's self-image. Foroughi's reference to Iran as a country that "protected the Western world from the danger of their [Eastern] barbaric attacks" (86) reveals that behind Iranian administrators' anti-imperialism and quest for independence was a deep frustration at not being a part of the West, which fueled Qajar diplomatic pragmatism as much as national interest. Finally, by stressing Iranian agency in the conception and realization of the Anglo-Persian association projects, Grobien downplays the colonial nature of British policy behind the mask of "paternalistic imperialism" (104): the cost of the Britain-led modernization of Iran was to be paid from the country's custom revenues and various concessions, and any material compensation for the British occupation remained out of the question.

Iran at the Paris Peace Conference is a valuable addition to the field of late Qajar history despite its theoretical ambiguity. Written with lively language and relying on a broad collection of primary sources, it would nicely fit any syllabus on modern Iranian history or on the global history of diplomacy and international relations.

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