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Book Review Roundtable

Abbas Amanat's *Iran: A Modern History*

Opening Remarks

The present book review roundtable features a set of reviews of Abbas Amanat's *Iran: A Modern History* (Yale University Press, 2017), which has been widely praised for its contributions to the current state of the field in modern Iranian history. Given the book's breadth and the scope of its venture, and its ambitious endeavor to question a host of current political and cultural *idées reçues*, the roundtable format, offering views from scholars with different disciplinary interests and expertise, seemed most appropriate.

Over the years, Amanat's books have made significant contributions to the understanding of Iran's modern history, particularly during the nineteenth century and the reign of the Qajar Dynasty. In *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Cornell University Press, 1989) and *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896* (University of California Press, 1997), as well as numerous other publications, Amanat has set a high standard of originality and method in approaching the history of Qajar Iran. In *Iran: A Modern History*, he takes the study of modern Iran further back, to the Safavid period. Whereas most overviews of Iran's modern history have often treated the Safavid and the Qajar periods as mere preludes or stepping stones in the narrative of the emergence of modern Iranian politics, respectively as the beginnings of the

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state's formal adherence to Shi'ism in Iran and the era of European imperial domination, Amanat delves deeper into these formative times to trace the antecedents of Iran's past, from its land and sovereignty to its society, culture, and art. The result is a richly textured narrative of the *longue durée* that substantively explores the history of modern Iran from the sixteenth century to the present. Drawing upon some of the most recent scholarship on the political, social, and cultural as well as environmental history of modern Iran, Amanat synthesizes the existing historiographical contours and state of the field.

The reviewers participating in this roundtable specialize in different periods and aspects of the history of modern Iran, ranging chronologically from the Safavid period to the Qajar period to the twentieth century, and thematically from economic history and the history of art and architecture to the history of gender and social movements. The reviewers, Rudi Matthee, Sussan Babaie, Janet Afary, and Afshin Matin-Asgari, presented their reviews (along with a retrospective offered by Negar Mottahedeh) at a roundtable panel, chaired by Arash Khazeni, in conjunction with the Association for Iranian Studies Biennial Conference, held at the University of California, Irvine in August 2018. While recognizing Amanat's *Iran: A Modern History* as a tour de force that conveys the history of a nation with a breadth of documentation and analysis, at the same time synthesizing diverse scholarly approaches in the field, all of the reviewers suggest ways that the history of modern Iran could develop further and in new directions in the future: such as more deeply grounding history in visual and material culture, offering more gendered views of historical structures, and even disrupting the accepted tenets of nationalist historiography altogether.

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Iran: A Modern History, Abbas Amanat, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-300-11254-2 (hbk), 979 pp.

Abbas Amanat's magisterial work distills decades of interpretative research and teaching into a grand overview of Iranian history from 1501, when the country acquired the contours of its modern identity as the world's only Twelver Shi'i state, to the current Islamic Republic. This time frame is unusual. Overviews of modern Iranian history usually start with the "dawn of colonial modernity," associated with the rise to power of the Qajars and the effect of their confrontation with Russian and British power in the early nine-

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