The Rise of Shi’ism in Iran

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The intellectual, cultural, and institutional characteristics of Shi’ism within Persia have undergone a transformation from ‘a persecuted minority to established dynasties and majorities.’¹ Currently, Shi’ism is the reigning doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran embodied in the constitution, institutions, and politics. Yet prior to 1501 the religious orientation of Persia was the pre-Islamic teachings of Zarathustra and Mani, followed by the dominance of Sunni Islam with Shi’ism constituting only a numerical minority. This historical unfolding of Shi’ism has been a central focus for investigation in light of contemporary events in Iran, specifically the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The use of a religious framework for historical analysis is instrumental as identified by Dorraj: ‘‘religion [is]... a fundamental factor in the dynamics and teleology of socio-political transformation.’² This is particularly applicable to an Iranian context as Iranian culture and politics originates, evolves, and changes within a primarily religious framework.

Roy argues that the identification of Shi’ism with Iran reflects a historical process that occurred in two phases; the establishment of Shi’ism as the state religion during the Safavid Dynasty and, secondly, the ongoing establishment of an independent hierarchical clergy beginning in the Qajar period.³ This essay will argue that there is a crucial third phrase in the historical genealogy of Shi’ism; the pre-Safavid period which laid the foundation for the establishment of the Shi’i order in Persia through the development of Shi’i theology and

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³ Manochehr Dorraj, From Zarathustra to Khomeini: Populism and Dissent in Iran (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990) 5.
⁴ Olivier Roy, The Failure of Political Islam (Carol Volk trans, Harvard University Press, 1994).
jurisprudence and the, albeit transient, proto-Shi’ite political regimes. This position is posited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.\(^4\) Thus, the parameters for this essay are limited to the late medieval Persian period and the early modern or ‘threshold’ period; focusing chronologically upon the Umayyad Dynasty (666-750), Abbasid (including the Buyid Era) (750-1258), Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), and Qajar dynasty (1796-1921). The rise of Shi’ism during these periods can be measured by a range of factors including the amount of political power, geographical span, numerical amount, and extent of cultural influence. The implementation of Shi’ism was primarily two-fold; an active suppression of Sunnism and popular Sufism, and the simultaneous propagation of Shi’ism accentuated by the rise of nationalist consciousness. This study is rendered more complex as it intertwined with politics, as Mortimer has noted ‘Islam is a political culture.’\(^5\) The emergence of Shi’ism in Iran invites a number of important historical questions, most specifically the paradoxical tension between the quietist inclinations and the activist goals and the relationship between the religious clergy and the State. This evolution of Shi’ism – from the formative or experimental period of Shi’ism pre-1501, to the establishment of a State religion during the Safavid dynasty, followed by the increasingly depoliticised independent hierarchy clergy beginning in the Qajar dynasty – has solidified the position of Shi’ism in Iranian cultural life and national life.

Addressing this question necessitates the clarification of the distinctive character of Shi’ism. Shi’ism, the ‘heterodox’ branch of Islam evolved in conjunction with ‘orthodox’ Sunnism representing together the two main coeval variants of Islam. The origins for this intra-Muslim polemic lie in the aftermath of the death of the Prophet Mohammad, founder of Islam, in 632 CE. Following Mohammad’s death a majority of his followers recognised Abu Bakr as his successor (Caliph) followed by three successors; all four known as ‘the rightly guided Caliphs.’\(^6\) Alternatively, Shi’ites maintained that Mohammad had designated his

\(^4\) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘Religion in Safavid Persia’ (1973) 8 \textit{Iranian Studies} 272, 86.
son-in-law Ali as his successor. Ali’s claim to the caliphate did not achieve political success in the first century of the new Islamic rule, historically launching and inflaming the sense of ‘suffered injustice that pervades Shi’ism.’ As Nasr articulated ‘the history of Shi’ism is the progressive unfolding of that very moment when ‘Ali attended to Muhammad’s burial rather than bid for his right in the Saqifah Bani Sa’idad.’ Therefore, the origins of Shi’ism are, in essence, a political dispute over succession and authority. Yet this conclusion can be misleading, as the dispute also produced important theological differences as articulated by Kramer: ‘what began as a dissident position on the matter of succession … blossomed in time into a full religious tradition.’ The debate illustrated that in Sunni Islam the ultimate source of authority is considered to be the Muslim community, whilst Shi’ites based their claim upon the belief that right guidance could only be had through the Prophet and his descendants, thus the right to leadership was a matter of transmitting divine knowledge.

Shi’ism is by no means an easily definable, monolithic entity; the term ‘Shi’ism’ as an identity category is applicable to a range of movements including Zaydi (or ‘Fivers’), Ismai’li (or ‘Seveners’) and Twelver Shi’ites. This is often overlooked by Western historiography favouring a static formulation of Shi’ism, which has the potential for the kind of Orientalism exposed by Edward Said. Gleave identifies that Shi’ite loyalty can be in three dimensions; political, religious and devotional. These are rarely mutually exclusive, and it is this hybridism that makes Shi’ism a particularly varied historical phenomenon. Shi’ism is often treated as the ‘Iranian’ variant of Islam or the ‘Persianisation’ of Islam, yet its history is far more complex. Contrary to earlier views ascribing the rise of Shi’ism to Persia, it has become increasingly evident that

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8 Hamid Dabashi, Seyed Hossein Nasr and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds), above n 1, ix.
9 Martin Kramer (ed), above n 7, 2.
10 Ibid 48.
13 Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, xi.
Shi’ism had its beginning amongst the Arabs. Importantly, it is amongst the Persians that Shi’ism flourished. Thus, Gobineau articulates Shi’ism as a ‘distinctively Persian encoding of Islam.’

A key theme in Shi’ism is martyrdom (Shahadat), as Dorraj identifies Shi’ism is the religion of ‘an embittered minority, subjugated and persecutory.’ The themes of alienation and injustice provoked by the delay of Ali’s political success were compounded by the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE during the Umayyad reign. Shi’ite accounts detail the massacre of Hosein (or Husayn), grandson of Prophet Mohammad, and his followers and family. Yet there is a difficulty in validating this early event by critical historical analysis due to language barriers and a lack of original sources. Importantly, Lewis distinguishes between three types of history: recovered history, invented history, or remembered history. In this case it is an example of ‘remembered history’ in that it consists of statements about the past ‘rather than history in the strict sense,’ in other words the collective memory of the community. Fischer identifies this founding legend/historical event as the ‘Karbala paradigm’ indicating its role as a rhetorical device; it has been elaborated or abbreviated, and a set of parables and moral lessons is connected with this ‘drama of faith.’ For Shi’ites this event has become the root metaphor upon which many of their religious beliefs and practices are based upon, such as Passion Plays (Ta’azieh), wailing songs (Noh-e Khani), beating on the bare chest (Seeneh Zani), and beating oneself with chains on the back (Zanjir Zani). The theme of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn has been intermittently politicised, as Fischer articulates the Karbala paradigm has an ‘ever-present, latent, political potential to frame or to clothe contemporary discontents.’

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14 Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, xi.
15 Geoffrey Nash, above n 11, 8.
16 Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, 13.
20 Michael M.J. Fisher, above n 18, 13.
The second key theme of Shi’ism is the ‘Hidden Imam’ or ‘Mahdi.’ According to Shi’ia doctrine, the rightful rulers of the Muslim community are a series of twelve Imams, who are the source of infallible political and religious power. It is incorporated into the Twelver Shi’ite faith that the last of the twelve Imams disappeared in 10th century and it is prophesied that he will emerge from ‘occultation’ to ‘fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and tyranny.’

The Occultation period left a vacuum of power in which no temporal legitimate government could exist. This has resulted in two divergent views of Shi’ism; the quietist strain of waiting until the insurrection of the hidden Imam for a just society and, alternatively, the activist politically radical strain that persists in revolting against authority. It has gradually been developed that during this ‘Occultation’ period the Imam’s duties including the interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, collection of religious taxes and distribution of money are delegated to the ‘ulama or mojtaheds (the learned scholars of Islamic jurisprudence), leading to the creation of a clerical hierarchy.

The late medieval period of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties were the formative periods of Shi’ism. Qazi al-Shushtari argues that pre-Safavid Iran was predominately Twelver Shi’ite and that many celebrated scholars renowned as Sunnis, were in actual fact Twelvers operating under the cloak of taqiyya or dissimulation. This appears to have been an exaggeration of Shi’ite influence, as when Shah Isma’il I entered Tabriz it is purported that he was able to find only a single manuscript on Twelver jurisprudence. Thus, a more appropriate explanation of Shi’ism in the pre-Safavid period is, as Gleave articulates, a period of ‘Shi’ite experimentation,’ meaning it was tremendously diverse or heterodox. During this period, Shi’ism was growing numerically and was beginning to crystallise into a definable set of

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22 M. Amjad, above n 19, 37.
26 Robert Gleave, above n 12, 92.
sectarian groupings. However, its religious power and freedom still depended upon local conditions and the rulers of the time. The Shi’ite political regimes were for the most part transient phenomena and their Shi’ism was either nominal or heterodox.\(^{27}\)

The first evidence of this conclusion is the use of Shi’ism as a political tool in the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty by the Abbasids in 749-50, calling for the rights of the family of the Prophet.\(^{28}\) The basis of the dynasty’s claim to legitimacy was staked upon the testament from Abu Hashim (grandson to ‘Ali) to Muhammad ‘Ali (grandson of Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbas) whereby he transferred the leadership of his Shi’a to Muhammad ‘Ali.\(^{29}\) During this period the Abbasids made extensive use of popular Shi’i sentiments such as the ‘Karabla paradigm,’ black flags and legends and slogans. However, whilst initially sympathetic to Shi’ites, Abbasid rulers increasingly viewed Shi’ism as a threat to their legitimacy. For example, during the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847-861) he ordered the demolition of the tomb of the third Imam in Karbala.\(^{30}\)

The weakness of the central Abbasid government and the appearance of the Buyid rulers in Iran and Iraq greatly aided the spread and strengthening of Shi’ism. Whilst maintaining the Abbasid caliphs as titular heads of state, the Buyids created a confederation of several principalities intermittently patronising the Shi’ites in Baghdad. Shi’ite scholars put Shi’ite hadith law and theology into written form and new communal rituals became established, most notably the public mourning for the death of Husayn, the public cursing of the first three caliphs and pilgrimages to the tombs of Ali’s family.\(^{31}\) Nasr argues that whilst this was not a Shi’i century in the sense that Shi’ism was dominant in political or social life, it stands out as a time of ‘creative

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\(^{27}\) Colin Turner, above n 24, 48.

\(^{28}\) Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Religion and politics under the early ‘Abbāsids: The emergence of the Proto-Sunni elite (E.J. Brill, 1997) 34.


\(^{30}\) Hamid Dabashi, Seyed Hossein Nasr and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds) above n 1, 151.

religious writing' due to the disproportionate number of the scholars and writers who were Shi’ites. However the fortunes of the Shi’ite population remained precarious as the Buyids never tried to set up Twelver Shi’ism as the state religion or install Shi’i law.

The imperial adoption and institutionalisation of Twelver Shi’ism as the State religion of Persia in 1501 by Shah Isma’il I (1501-1524) was the key politico-religious metamorphosis. The world historian McNeill compares this development to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The Safavid dynasty rose to power in the ‘increasingly rootless and alienated tribal sector’ between the Caspian and Black Sea following the power vacuum left after the Mongol invasions. It was Sufi in origin and Shi’ite in belief. Scholarly consensus is that the adoption of Twelver Shi’ism was a result of pragmatic politics responding to the need for doctrinal uniformity for the Safavid retention of power in this vacuum. The state religion of Shi’ism was able to clearly differentiate the Safavid state from the Sunni Ottoman Empire to the West and the Uzbeks to the East, giving it a territorial and political identity. As Savory argues ‘the imposition by the Safavids of Shi’ism as the official religion of the State had the effect of producing a greater awareness of national identity and thus creating a more stronger and centralised government.’ Thus, Turner identifies that religious change was no more than a pretext for the political ambitions of Safavid rulers. This is evident, as when Isma’il declared Twelver to be the state religion, he and his advisers were ignorant of Twelver Shi’ite law. Isma’il’s poetry, written under the pen-name Khata’I, reflects this orientation; ‘I am Very God, Very God, Very God! Come now, O blind man who has lost the path, behold the

32 Hamid Dabashi, Seyeed Hossein Nasr and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds), above n 1, 156.
36 Roger Savory, Iran Under the Safavids (Cambridge University Press, 1980) 30; Colin Turner, above n 24, 74.
37 Roger Savory, above n 36, 30.
38 Colin Turner, above n 24, 60-61.
Truth! I am that *agens Absolutus* of whom they speak.’

The subsequent history of the Safavid rule was one of continuous Shi’ite religious rule. The one ‘great anomaly’ was that of Shah Isma’il II (1576-77), yet Gholsorkhi argues that Ima’il II favouring of Sunni Islam appears to be a political manoeuvre to frustrate the powerful Shi’ite scholars and their supporters, rather than a bona fide commitment to Sunni tenets.

Shah Shah Abbas I (1588-1629) was arguably the most politically adept and strategically astute of the Safavid rulers removing any form of religious heterogeneity through the elimination of the earlier support base of the Sufism and bringing two key religious functions under the control of the Imami legal scholars; the prayer leaders of small towns and villages and the ‘Elder of Islam’ (the highest regional religious authority) in the capital of the empire and the provinces.

With two thirds of the population of Tabriz (the capital) of Sunni orientation, the ‘conversion’ of Persia to Shi’ism during the Safavid dynasty had to be accomplished by a dual process of persuasion and coercion. Dorraj titles this the ‘carrot and stick policy… those who joined the Shi’ite sect were rewarded and those who resisted it were ruthlessly persecuted.’ The rule of Shah Isma’il, dominated by theocracy and militarism, was particularly brutal. As Mackey articulates Shi’ism was imposed through ‘examples, zeal, massacre, pillage and torture.’ Isma’il is purported to have stated ‘If the people utter one word of protest, I will draw the sword and leave not one of them alive.’ This is because Isma’il ‘equated belief in the right religion with loyalty to the state,’ as illustrated through the policy of *nasufigari*

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39 Colin Turner, above n 24, 72.
41 Colin Turner, above n 24, 99.
44 Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, 84.
46 Roger Savory, above n 36, 29.
47 Anthony Black, above n 35, 221.
(deviationism or conduct unbecoming of a Sufi) which was a capital offence.48

This large-scale conversion was also achieved through the creation of politico-religious positions to incorporate Shi’ite clergy into the constitution and bureaucracy of the state. This, in essence, made them parties to its rule; ‘sub- political.’49 The highest of posts was the ministerial post of Sadr in charge of the propaganda of Shi’ism, the administration of religious endowments, appointment of religious authorities in the major towns and the appointment of the heads of the Sayyids.50

Additionally, under Safavid patronage Shi’ite religious scholars were able to lay a solid intellectual and institutional foundation for the religion. Shi’a theologians were imported from Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon to generate ideological support for their rule and to indoctrinate people to Shi’ism.51 As Keddie observed these theologians, who were ‘paid directly or indirectly by the government and had few ties with the local population were a firm pillar of political support.’52 Major theological centres were built up in Esfahan, Najaf, Oom and Meshed.53 Shah Abbas commissioned a leading Jurist to compile a handbook on the shari’a and this became ‘the officially recognised guide for the religious courts of the realm.’54 Shi’i symbols and rituals were also important in the self-definition of the Safavid Shi’ite dynasty. Ritual cursing in the early days of the revolutionary fervour was widespread, with individuals put to death on the spot if they did not respond with

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50 Michael M.J. Fisher, above n 18, 29.
53 Roger Savory, above n 36, 30.
'may [the cursing] be more and not less!'\textsuperscript{55} The late Safavid period also saw the development of popular passion plays dealing with the martyrdom of Shi’ite imams and saints, in particular the Karbala paradigm.\textsuperscript{56} Shrines in the cities of pilgrimage were restored throughout Persia and Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{57} For example Shah Abbas I rebuilt and developed the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad, which was damaged by the Uzbeks.

The final key phrase of Shi’ite development in the late medieval and early modern period was the Qajar dynasty. The importance of this historical period is the change of the dynamic between religion and the monarchy in Iran, transforming the religious clergy from a mechanism of state control, to that of the states’ counterbalance often acting as the force of opposition. Nasr argues that it was in the Qajar period era that Shi’ism became ‘an important political force, serving as a check on the power of the shahs, the activities of foreigners, and the modernising tendencies of the elite.’\textsuperscript{58}

This change in the role of Shi’ism in the social and political life of Iran was triggered by the collapse of the Safavid dynasty and the invasion of Sunni Afghans in 1722 due to internal disruption. In the first half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, under the Sunni Afghans and later Nader Shah, the Shi’ite ‘ulama lost most of the power gained under the Safavids. Shi’ite leaders were persecuted or forced to flee to sanctuaries of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq. Under Nada Shah’s rule, Shi’ism was demoted to the status of a fifth orthodox school alongside the four Sunni schools. In his attempt to deinstitutionalize Shi’ism, Nada Shah confiscated Shi’ite endowment properties weakening the power of the ‘ulama.\textsuperscript{59} Due to this instability in the relationship between Shi’ism and the State, the scholars and religious clergy developed an institutional structure which could

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\textsuperscript{55} R. M. Savory, ‘Iran, a 2500-year historical and cultural tradition’ in C. J. Adams (ed), \textit{Iranian Civilization and Culture} (McGill University, 1972) 85.
\textsuperscript{57} Dwight M. Donaldson, \textit{The Shi’ite religion : a history of Islam in Persia and Irak} (Luzac & Co., 1933) 298.
\textsuperscript{58} Hamid Dabashi, Seyeed Hossein Nasr and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds), above n 1, 192.
\textsuperscript{59} Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, 88.
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survive independently of government sponsorship.\textsuperscript{60} Therefore, when the Qajar tribe re-established stability in Iran in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century, Shi’ite scholars had an autonomous structure that no longer required the patronage of Shahs and sultans.\textsuperscript{61} Some of the Qajar rulers formally carried the title of ‘the shadow of God,’ yet they no longer claimed to be representatives of the Hidden Imam.\textsuperscript{62}

The scholars had developed a set of religious doctrines and a series of social structures which ensured that their role as community leaders was, to an extent, protected from any challenge by Qajar political power.\textsuperscript{63} Certain reports from the Imams were interpreted to imply that the Imams had delegated the ‘ulama as their representatives in certain areas of the Law. For example, religious taxes such as zakah or khums, which could be given directly to the Imam when he was present, were transferred to the ‘ulama.\textsuperscript{64} As Litvak articulates ‘doctrines such as these not only legitimised the leadership role of the ‘ulama within the community; they also provided a source of financial income which could be used to fund scholarly activities.’\textsuperscript{65} The ‘ulama had to be wooed by the Qajar Shahs to provide religious justification for the actions of the Qajar state, for example during the wars between Russia and Iran when the ‘ulama were requested to issue fatwas justifying the wars from a legal perspective, and declaring them to be jihads.\textsuperscript{66} Arjomand identifies that the advantages of independence were balanced by the disadvantage of a lack of access to mechanisms of social control held by the State.\textsuperscript{67} For example, during the Safavid period Twelver scholars had been able to

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\item[\textsuperscript{60}] Robert Gleave. ‘Shi’i’ in Youssef M. A. Choueiri (ed), above n 12, 94.
\item[\textsuperscript{61}] Hamid Algar, Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period (University of California Press, 1969).
\item[\textsuperscript{62}] Manochehr Dorraj, above n 2, 88.
\item[\textsuperscript{63}] Moojan Momen, An Introduction to Shi’I Islam (Yale University Press, 1985)
\item[\textsuperscript{64}] Norman Calder, “Khums in Imami Shi’I jurisprudence from the 10\textsuperscript{th} to the 16\textsuperscript{th} century AD’ (1982) 45:1 Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 39; Norman Calder “Zakat in Imami Shi’I Jurisprudence from the Tenth to the Sixteenth Century AD’ (1981) 44:1 Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 469.
\item[\textsuperscript{66}] Robert Gleave, ‘jihad and the Religious Legitimacy of the Early Qajar State’ in Robert Gleave (ed) Religion and Society in Qajar Iran (Routledge, 2005) 156.
\item[\textsuperscript{67}] Said Amir Arjomand, above n 54, 69.
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suppress religious challenges such as Sufism or Sunnism through the organs of the state. Thus the ‘ulama were more independent, yet at first less politically powerful.

The autonomy of Shi‘ite hierocracy gained in the Qajar period assured its survival despite pressure from the State in the 19th and 20th century. This was accentuated by the penetration of foreign capital and political domination of Iran by European powers which allowed the ‘ulama to establish themselves as ‘defenders of nationalism and independence in Iran.’ Arjomand argues that following the separation of the Shi‘ite clergy from the State, the next logical possibility was to assert the superiority of the clergy over the state by expanding the clerical authority into the political sphere. This was explored by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1979 Islamic Revolution in which the Shi‘ite clergy was able to take over the state. Thus, the roots of these contemporary revolutionary events are contained within the Shi‘ite tradition established in the above analysed Abbasid, Safavid and Qajar dynasties.

The key historical debate in the history of Iran is when and how the inhabitants ‘converted’ to Shi‘ism and how shift and permanent this change was. A simplified historical account pinpoints the establishment of Shi‘ism as the state religion in 1501 during the Safavid dynasty as the emergence of Shi‘ism, as it was at this point that the Shi‘a ceased to be a sectarian minority and received significant support, protection and funding. Whilst recognising, as Nasr does, that this was a ‘sudden establishment of Shi‘ism,’ this was not without origins in the pre-Safavid period. Shi‘ism had been spreading politically, geographically and culturally since the 7th century with a growth in Shi‘i theology and jurisprudence, the intertwining of Sufism and Shi‘ism and the, albeit transient, Shi‘ite political rules during the Abbasid periods. The framework of Shi‘ism centres upon the founding events of the political debate over succession and authority following Mohammad’s death and the Battle of Karbala introducing the two key themes of martyrdom and the ‘Hidden Imam’ which were intermittently politicised and a rallying

point for political protest. As Fuller and Francke identify Shi’ism as an ‘admixture of religious belief, political experience, social isolation, developed cultural heritage, and communal grievance’ creating an intrinsic abstract identity. These abstract elements are sharpened and radicalised by different state policies and social conditions that prevail in different historical periods; thus Shi’ism has evolved into a politicised religion with intense emotional appeal of both historical and contemporary significance.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr Seyed Mohammad Torabi, the lecturer and tutor for the course Iranian History and Culture, for his support and guidance. He has a strong background in Persian literature and language and his input into my research paper was invaluable. He was an enthusiastic and interesting lecturer which made taking this course a pleasure.

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