

Project Summary

Political Knowledge across Imperial Frontiers: Statecraft and the Making of Modernity in Qajar Iran (1796–1925)

Project Overview

How was modern political knowledge created? Conventional histories continue to answer this question primarily through a European narrative, portraying concepts such as sovereignty, constitutionalism, reform, citizenship, and the modern state as intellectual products that emerged in Europe before spreading to the rest of the world. Although recent scholarship has increasingly embraced global and connected histories, nineteenth-century Iran remains largely absent from these broader accounts. Consequently, modern political knowledge is still frequently presented as a European achievement transmitted to non-European societies.

This project challenges that interpretation.

It argues that modern political knowledge was not simply exported from Europe; rather, it was continually negotiated, translated, adapted, and transformed through encounters across imperial frontiers. Qajar Iran (1796–1925) offers a uniquely documented historical setting in which to reconstruct these processes. Situated between the expanding Russian and British Empires while maintaining its political independence, Iran became an arena in which political concepts were debated, reinterpreted, and integrated into existing Persian and Islamic intellectual traditions. Instead of viewing Iranian reformers as passive recipients of European ideas, the project examines them as active participants in the production of modern political knowledge.

Research Questions

The project addresses four interrelated questions:

1. How were modern political concepts translated and redefined within Persian intellectual and administrative traditions?
2. In what ways did encounters with European imperial powers reshape political language and statecraft in Qajar Iran?
3. How did Iranian intellectuals, diplomats, administrators, and religious scholars negotiate competing understandings of sovereignty, reform, law, and political authority?
4. What does the Iranian experience reveal about the broader global formation of modern political knowledge?

Rather than treating Iran as a peripheral case study, these questions position it as an integral component of a wider history of political modernity.

Originality

The principal originality of this project lies in its methodological approach.

Most existing studies rely predominantly on either European diplomatic records or Persian historical sources. As a result, the intellectual dialogue between Iran and Europe has often been reconstructed from only one documentary tradition.

This project proposes a genuinely integrated archival methodology. Drawing upon my long-standing experience working with Iranian archival repositories, manuscript collections, governmental records, and historical libraries, I will combine Persian primary sources with British diplomatic correspondence, Foreign Office records, Parliamentary Papers, missionary archives, travel accounts, commercial reports, and private collections preserved in the United Kingdom.

Reading these archives together enables the reconstruction of political conversations that unfolded simultaneously across different languages, institutions, and imperial perspectives. Rather than privileging one archive over another, the project treats both as complementary historical voices.

Methodological Framework

The project combines approaches from Intellectual History, Conceptual History, the History of Knowledge, Connected History, and Archival Studies.

Inspired by the contextual methodology associated with the Cambridge School while engaging recent developments in Global Intellectual History, the research investigates political concepts as historically situated languages whose meanings changed as they travelled across cultural and imperial boundaries.

Rather than asking whether European ideas influenced Iran, the project examines how concepts themselves were transformed through processes of translation, adaptation, negotiation, and reinterpretation.

Scholarly Contribution

Empirically, the research introduces underutilized Persian archival materials into international scholarship and connects them with British archival collections that have seldom been studied together.

Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating parallel archival traditions in reconstructing the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Iran.

Conceptually, it argues that modern political knowledge should be understood as a product of interconnected historical encounters rather than unilateral intellectual diffusion.

The project therefore contributes simultaneously to Iranian Studies, Intellectual History, Global Intellectual History, Colonial and Imperial History, Middle Eastern History, and the History of Political Thought.

Why This Project Matters

Current debates on global intellectual history increasingly question narratives that place Europe at the exclusive centre of political modernity. Yet these debates still rely disproportionately on European experiences.

Qajar Iran represents an exceptional historical case. It confronted sustained imperial pressure without formal colonization, engaged extensively with European political ideas while preserving its own intellectual traditions, and produced a rich documentary record in both Persian and European archives.

By reconstructing these interconnected intellectual worlds, the project seeks not simply to enrich the history of nineteenth-century Iran, but to contribute to a broader reconsideration of how modern political knowledge was created.

Rather than adding another regional case to an existing narrative, the project proposes that the narrative itself requires revision. Modern political knowledge did not move from Europe to the world in a linear fashion; it emerged through continuous negotiation across imperial frontiers. Qajar Iran provides one of the clearest historical laboratories in which that process can be studied.