Experience of political modernity in Qajar Iran

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Article Info	Abstract
	The Qajar era began with significant crises, the most prominent of which were the wars with Russia and the successive defeats Iran suffered. Ostensibly, these were military defeats, but underlying them was a deeper crisis that led some Qajar state officials to recognize deficiencies in state affairs. These deficiencies indicated that the old mechanisms of governance were no longer adequate for managing the country. This was one aspect of the crisis, largely pertaining to traditional modes of governance, and if any reforms were to be enacted, they would inevitably be in this domain—such as the "Nezam-e Jadid" (New Order) reforms of Abbas Mirza in Azerbaijan, which primarily focused on traditional bureaucracy and the military. The other dimension of this crisis emerged through the "observation" of the new world by Iranian travelogue writers, which signaled the beginning of the long and varied "Iranian experience of modernity." Thus, the beginning of the protracted journey of Iranian modernity, along with its multiple and diverse experiences, stems from such observations—this paper offers reflections on the political dimensions of this experience and seeks to provide a framework for understanding it.

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Extended Abstract
1. On the concept of "Experience"
"Experience" is a concept through which the Iranian encounter with modernity can be reinterpreted. In *Dehkhoda's Lexicon*, several definitions of the word are offered, including "to try someone", "to become aware and test someone", "to test", "to experiment and examine", and "to take an exam or test" (Dehkhoda, 1998: 6445). This concept is not the author's invention—it has also been used in other works (Fazeli, 2015). However, its application in this study is distinct. Here, "experience" precisely corresponds to the notion of "testing" as defined by Allameh Dehkhoda.

Various terms have been used to describe Iranian modernity: "encounter", "confrontation", "clash" (Haeri, 2001; Motamed Dezfuli, 2012), "interaction" (Ameri Golestani, 2004), "violent shock" (Vahdat, 2004), "indigenous modernity" (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2016), etc. Each of these terms captures an aspect of Iranian modernity, but none are comprehensive. In their experience of modernity, Iranians both tested themselves and modernity, eventually forming a unique interpretation imbued with Iranian characteristics. For instance, during the Constitutional Revolution, when Seqat-ol-Eslam Tabrizi described constitutionalism in the *Resāleh-ye Lālān*, he characterized it as "Iranian" (Seqat-ol-Eslam Tabrizi, 2008). This Iranian character has, in recent years, been interpreted unfavorably by some (Ajodani, 2003), which itself is a matter of critique. Regardless, this distinctiveness does not imply superiority but rather a difference, much like how both Iran and the Ottoman Empire, despite experiencing modernity around the same time, underwent different trajectories—a topic widely discussed over the past two decades.

Experience is essentially born of a close and direct relationship with a phenomenon. The direct encounter of Iranians with modernity created the most immediate experiences both with modernity and with themselves. This connection is tightly linked to external developments. When one claims that the Iranian pursuit of modernity in the Qajar era was based on "experience", it implies that a significant part of Iranians' understanding of the new world order was rooted in their tangible interactions with its "realities". Iranians could neither escape modernity nor did they wish to. They rightly realized that the times were more "different" than ever. However, the crucial point is that the "understanding" of the demands and consequences of modernity was not something they could grasp precisely or engage with philosophically. Hence, they resorted to "experience" out of necessity, and thus, despite their partial or full comprehension of it, they sought to adapt.

Simultaneously, within the "Iranian experience of modernity", the Iranian intellectual mind aimed to *select* those aspects of modernity that: (1) it could understand or comprehend, (2) could be implemented

or imagined within their society, and (3) met a societal need. This selectiveness led to the discovery of solutions to societal problems through "experience" rather than deep philosophical reflection or strict theorization, as philosophical thinking required intellectual foundations beyond the capacity of the Iranian context. Furthermore, modernity was perceived as a "necessity" for achieving a distinct and progressive societal status. Understanding where such necessities originated and how they interrelated is critical for comprehending the "experience of political modernity". The necessity for law, legislation, constitutionalism, state-building, authority, and the like, all constituted key parts of this "experience"—an experience that in many cases lacked thoroughly "deliberated" components in the strict intellectual sense (Ameri Golestani, 2021: 89-90).

2. A general overview of the experience of political modernity

The characterization of Qajar-era modernization as an "experience" reflects an intuitive understanding of modernity. Due to various reasons, Iranians lacked the tools to comprehend the full essence and depth of Western modernity. Neither their conceptual frameworks nor their traditional intellectual resources could account for the events of the modern world. Prior to the period in question, there was little awareness of modern intellectual and political developments. Consequently, when Iranians traveled abroad and observed the manifestations of the new world—directly or indirectly—a kind of intuitive response can be discerned in their reflections, particularly in the case of Abbas Mirza, who, from the "horizon of defeat", partially understood the modern world without a theoretical approach to the matter. This understanding had a widespread impact, at least among certain state actors.

This "horizon of defeat", which is crucial to understanding the political modernization of Qajar Iran, framed the Iranian perception of the modern world. This viewpoint pushed them toward crisis consciousness and a recognition of the logic of political failure, expanding into theoretical reflections. The "horizon of defeat" was a continuation of the intuition Iranians developed through various encounters, which, over time, manifested in political thought and practice. As evident from that era, "state" and "law" were two fundamental and central concepts in political modernization, around which much of political thought and action revolved.

A key aspect of this "experience" lies in the perspective held by both modernists and anti-modernists in Qajar Iran regarding governance. The weakness of society and the dominance of the state, alongside "comparisons" with modernizing governments elsewhere, led many to perceive the fate of society as bound to the state. In Iranian political modernity, this was reflected in the concept of "state-building" and was primarily concerned with efforts to establish a modern state, adjusted to

the realities of the time. This endeavor was fragmented, reflecting a lack of coherence in Iran's political modernization. Nonetheless, since it aimed at political reform, its significance for Iran's political future—both during and after the Qajar period—was immense.

Thus, state-building held significant importance within this "experience". By the end of the Qajar period, it was the state—or more precisely, the government—that possessed the capacity for transformation, not society. This should be noted from the outset: after the Safavid era, the Iranian state became a "weak state", and this weakness permeated all political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions, increasingly so over time. The rise of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar was both a sign of this weakness and a reaction to it. This "weak state" was unable to utilize societal resources and faced foreign powers at the height of their colonial ambitions, with strategic and well-targeted policies. These ambitions directly affected Iran, and the weak Iranian state could not resist them. The loss of some of Iran's most vital territories was a direct result and symbol of this "weakness"—both a symptom and a consequence of "crisis". This weakness, inseparable from crisis, marked the beginning of new "experiences" for Iranians across various domains.

The experience of political modernization in Iran was a process of trial and error, albeit one accompanied by a form of "empirical intuition". Iranian modernists in their various forms realized that they had to "test" multiple paths, even if they involved "errors" that they were aware of. Figures like Mirza Malkam Khan Nazem al-Dowleh and, in a different way, Akhundzadeh, stood precisely at the intersection of this trial-and-error approach. These two can be seen as pioneers of such an approach to political modernization. These trials and errors reflected the exceptional situation Iranians had become conscious of, and in order to escape it—both in the political and non-political realms of modernity—they sought to explore different routes for improving their situation. A notable and perhaps important non-political example was the various attempts to reform the Persian script, extended by some, like Akhundzadeh, even to complete script change. These efforts were grounded in the idea of progress, with the spread of knowledge requiring increased literacy, which was hindered by the "difficulty of the alphabet". Thus, eliminating this barrier through reform—or in its radical form, through changing the script—was a key example of the many attempts Iranian modernists made to improve the existing disorder.

Political modernization was a methodological approach that, considering the contemporary outlook on political categories such as state, sovereignty, crisis, war, law, order, and discipline, began to form a new intellectual foundation for politics. Without relying on these fundamental concepts, there was no possibility of reforming the political structure. Therefore, this path, in parallel with Iran's

intellectual modernization, was tested through the political modernization process.

To better understand the experience of political modernity in Iran, one must consider that this transformation manifested within a context that, although introduced from outside the intellectual boundaries of Iran, was significantly shaped and expanded by the internal socio-cultural texture of Iranian society. The growing awareness of Iran's disordered condition—manifesting politically, intellectually, and through the concrete realities of daily life such as wars, famines, widespread diseases, and other crises—prompted a significant portion of Iranian thought to seek the underlying layers of this transformation. However, their efforts largely failed to reach their intended goals.

This situation was, to a great extent, natural. The concepts of classical Iranian thought were inadequate in responding to these new conditions, while modern concepts were still "at the threshold". Some early indications of new modes of thinking appeared in travelogues and more explicitly in the writings of Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh—particularly his Maktubat and several of his shorter treatises—signaling the emergence of a new discourse that required new conceptual frameworks to be understood and articulated. Here, attention must be paid to a secondary but significant element in the Iranian experience of political modernity: translation. This translation took place both in its formal sense—through the translation of books and texts—and more critically, through treatises and writings produced by Iranian modernists of the time.

The experience of political modernity during the Qajar period, and subsequently during the Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi era, possessed a key characteristic: the attempt to restore Iran's position in the modern world. From the beginning of the Qajar era, Iranians became increasingly aware, for various reasons, that the place they stood was far removed from where they ought to stand. The gap between these two perceptions emerged through the observation of the modern world and the realization of internal societal crises. For Iranian modernists, seeking this rightful place required an orientation toward the modern world while also grounding their efforts in the foundations of "national identity". They did not accept everything in the new world uncritically, but rather, sought those elements that were necessary and useful. This was because, for them, standing in a place—a position of historical and national relevance—was of great importance.

Early Iranian modernists viewed this dislocation as a natural condition for a state such as Iran. This marked the beginning of a new national consciousness in Iran. The negative dimension of this consciousness can be seen in the writings of Akhundzadeh, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, and Jalal al-Din Mirza, while its more affirmative dimensions are reflected in the thought of modernists such as Malkam Khan, Mostashar al-Dowleh, Sepahsalar, Talebof, and others. This

"national issue" emerged within the framework of a new national self-awareness, which was significantly influenced by the catastrophic defeat Iran suffered at the hands of Russia. Simultaneously, the reconstruction of the existing political system and the establishment of a government based on law and order became central to this project of national restoration and cast a long shadow over all aspects of Iran's experience of political modernity during this period.

3. Conclusion

The crisis-thinking and reflections on the "state of exception" during the Qajar era—evident from the very beginning—were rooted in the realities of both domestic and foreign politics. Notably, Iran's profoundly unstable condition outside its borders, and the loss of several crucial territories during this time, were all irreparable defeats. The defeat by Russia was devastating, and it was followed by the failure in Herat, despite three unsuccessful attempts to reclaim it. The understanding of these crises and the comprehension of this exceptional, crisis-ridden condition—both in theory and practice—cast a deep shadow over Iranian political thought.

Contrary to popular assumptions about the Qajars, they were consistently in search of ways to overcome these challenges, especially in the realm of foreign policy. It was at this juncture that certain Iranian modernists—who were also politically active—began to interpret the weakness and stagnation in foreign policy as a direct result of, and continuation of, internal crises. Consequently, in their broader project of political modernity, they considered adopting a suitable stance toward foreign powers—particularly Russia and Britain—as not just necessary but vital. This reveals an important feature of the Iranian experience of political modernity: its systemic nature, involving the interconnectedness of its core and peripheral elements.

The experience of political modernity constitutes a form of foundational history for modern Iran—a period in which the existing order (or disorder) of Iranian political thought and practice was fundamentally transformed. The discrediting of traditional principles of classical politics paved the way for the emergence of a new kind of political practice—one that arose from chaos and disorder. As such, the dominance of the concept of law within the political modernization of the Qajar era culminated in the evolution of this new foundational history.

This foundational nature lies in the fact that the core concepts of Iranian political modernity attained a historical dimension, following a specific and to some extent unique path of transformation. In this process, various themes emerged, shaped by both internal and external socio-political developments, which together laid the foundations for a distinctive form of modernity. Since many of these new meanings and themes originated in intellectual systems vastly different from those of

traditional Iranian thought, a sense of confusion and intellectual disarray became highly visible in both theory and practice.

Efforts to resolve contradictions between the old and new concepts—particularly the notions of law and freedom—became central to this experience. The attempts by figures like Malkam Khan, Mostashar al-Dowleh, and Talebof to reconcile these tensions marked significant efforts toward understanding this conceptual disorder. In contrast, Akhundzadeh, by entirely rejecting the old in favor of the new in his Qeritqa, pursued a different path. While his approach had anti-religious dimensions that can be set aside, the critical spirit it embodied was one of the fundamental cornerstones of political modernity in Iran and played a key role in comprehending new concepts and the new meanings of old ones.

In any case, the history of modern Iran is a history of the continuation of defeat and the struggle to overcome it. Political modernity was comprised of theoretical, practical, and hybrid efforts aimed at constructing a new understanding of political relations—an understanding that could provide remedies for the deep wounds inflicted by repeated failures. It is for this reason that, as the foundational concepts of modernity evolved, law emerged as the "one word" that could cure all ills. And thus, the most significant political-intellectual movement in modern Iranian history—the Constitutional Revolution—with all its interpretations, ultimately found meaning in and through the concept of law

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Data availability
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