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The Shadow-Texts of National History: Poetic Participation in Iran and Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article analyzes a little-known practice called *iqtirāḥ*—“test of poetic talent” or “poetic competition”—that proliferated in twentieth-century Persian-language periodicals. It examines two case studies: one in Tehran in 1928, which mythologized Nādir Shah (r. 1736–1747), a Turko-Persian monarch, as a national hero, and one in Kabul in 1932, which eulogized Muḥammad Nādir Shah (r. 1920–1933), a ruling monarch at the time, for restoring an Afghan homeland imagined as unified. The article frames *iqtirāḥ* as an afterlife of Persianate modes of sociability that were reconfigured by modern periodicals to serve the demands of romantic nationalism in the twentieth century. By critically examining the ways in which poetic composition interacts with the formation of a national historiography, this article also shows that any clear-cut distinction between the two is arbitrary.

Keywords

Persian poetry – nationalism – journals – modernism – *iqtirāḥ* – *qaṣīdah*

This article analyzes a little-known practice called *iqtirāḥ*, “test of poetic talent” or “poetic competition,” that proliferated in twentieth-century Persian-language periodicals. It does so through two case studies: One in Tehran in 1928, which mythologized Nādir Shah (r. 1736–1747), a Turko-Persian monarch, as an Iranian national hero, and one in Kabul in 1932, which eulogized Muḥammad Nādir Shah (r. 1920–1933) for restoring an Afghan homeland imagined as unified. The article will first elaborate on three interlinked elements that inform my

framework: the Persianate as an analytic category, national history as a modern genre, and the shadow-text as a particular form of intertextuality. It is within this matrix that I situate *iqtirāḥ* and explain its import as a new model of poetic participation and civic engagement.

In the early twentieth century, Afghan and Iranian intellectuals created new social networks and mediums, made possible in part by new technologies of print and engagement with European forms of knowledge. Working within voluntary and state-funded associations or *anjumans*, they staged dynamic and consequential debates about the meaning, utility, and place of their shared Persianate pasts. Afghans and Iranians were able to invent themselves as modern and national subjects only in company and conversation, contrary to the (increasingly challenged) presumption that modernity in the Global South emerged as a result of contact with Europe alone. One concrete example where these connections are made manifest concerns the ways in which Afghans and Iranians deploy shared tools of civic participation and meaning-making, in this case *iqtirāḥ*, albeit to produce different outcomes. I must note that in this period literacy was extremely limited to particular classes, in Iran and even more so in Afghanistan. Scenarios of literary nationalism, forged in the first quarter of the twentieth century primarily in the context of cultural associations, gained much greater circulatory capacity in the 1930s and 40s with the rise of national education.

New mediums—literary histories, encyclopedias, anthologies, educational textbooks, periodicals—constituted a modern literary ecosystem through which Iranians and Afghans transformed the Persianate heritage and tradition to best meet the demands of their emerging and competing national projects. Coined by the historian Marshall Hodgson in 1974, the term “Persianate” refers to a premodern cosmopolis (ca. 1200–1900 CE) with Persian serving as a primary language of cultural importance and artistic and literary production.¹ Recent scholarship, including this special issue, has argued that the Persianate, as defined by embedded literary structures, modes of sociability, and ethical norms, indeed persisted in the cultural form of emerging nation-states.²

National history, one such medium, narrates the story of Afghans and Iranians as unitary peoples who safeguarded their singular culture and native territory against the civilizational—read racial—Other. As this article demonstrates,

1 *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). For recent scholarship, see Kaveh Hemmat, “Completing the Persianate Turn,” *Iranian Studies* 54.3–4 (2021): 633–46.

2 See the following special issues: Afshin Marashi and Mana Kia, “After the Persianate,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36, no. 3 (2016): 379–83; Kevin Schwartz and Aria Fani, “Persianate Pasts, National Presents,” *Iranian Studies* 55, no. 3 (2022): 605–609.

national history took form within the framework of *anjumans*—state-funded and voluntary associations—that forged and disseminated nation-state oriented forms of belonging and identity.³ In Afghanistan, the state created *anjumans* like the Kabul Literary Association, whose poetic competition is examined here, and was able to exert a great deal of control over technologies of print, yet this influence by no means yielded a homogenous discourse.⁴ In Iran, where print culture was spread over a wider social domain, the state in many cases was involved less directly, as evidenced by *Āyandeh*, the journal analyzed here.

Theorized by C. D. Blanton in the context of English poetic modernism, the term ‘shadow-text’ refers to an uncited or omitted allusion that works in the background, operating as the poem’s cultural repertoire.⁵ In spite of its absence, the shadow-text remains crucially operative in order to “do the poem’s political work.”⁶ The *iqtirāḥ* (“poetic competition” or “test of poetic talent”) that I examine in this article invited poets to emulate two poems by Farrukhī Sīstānī, an eleventh-century poet. Early twentieth-century *qaṣīdahs* (panegyrics) composed in response to this *iqtirāḥ* were initially framed as such. However, this intertextual connection was muted in later editions and Farrukhī’s poems retreated into the shadows. Similarly, traces of the Persianate may only linger in the background today, yet it was through engagement with its literary and cultural structures that romantic nationalism generated its own.

What Is *Iqtirāḥ*?

Early twentieth-century journals invented a practice they called *iqtirāḥ*, no doubt shaped and inspired by longstanding oral traditions. Derived from the Arabic term *qariḥa* or “literary disposition,” it denotes a test of poetic talent and improvisation. Its more generic meaning is to ask or poll readers on any given question. Its specific meaning, when accompanied by the adjective *adabī* or “literary,” is poetic or prose competition. Effectively, *iqtirāḥ* invites a certain

3 Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

4 Aria Fani, “Disciplining Persian Literature in Twentieth-century Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies* 55, no. 3 (2022): 675–95.

5 C. D. Blanton has analyzed the specific literary and cultural labor performed by shadow-text in the context of English poetry. See *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10, 18.

6 Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford [CA]: Stanford University Press, 2016), 37.

intertextual relation by which participating poets have to spontaneously emulate the meter, rhyme, theme, or particular style of any given poem.⁷

The modern practice of *iqtirāḥ* seems to have been initiated by the short-lived but highly influential Iranian journal *Dānishkadah* (Site of Knowledge) in the late 1910s.⁸ *Dānishkadah* featured a prose translation of a fragment by Jean de La Fontaine (d. 1695) in 1918, accompanied by a versified translation by its editor, the famed Persian-language poet and scholar Muḥammad Taqī Bahār (d. 1951).⁹ The journal invited readers to compose a poem that would capture the meaning of the French-language fragment, leaving the question of form and meter up to the participants. Bahār articulated the stakes of the *iqtirāḥ* as follows: Iranians may already know their great poets and writers, but it is equally important to learn about the writers and poets of other nations. The journal noted that it would publish poems sent in response and that the writer of the best poem would receive a free subscription to the journal.

This participatory mode of poetic production dovetailed well with *Dānishkadah*'s broader project of bringing the term *adabīyāt*, which referred to a constellation of *adab*-derived sciences in premodernity (*adab* meaning ethical and aesthetic form),¹⁰ into closer alignment with the late nineteenth-century French concept of *littérature*, denoting a prized canon of writings that embodies a nation's civilizational achievement.¹¹ This conceptual realignment enabled *Dānishkadah* to forge literary history (*tārīkh-i adabī*) as a positivist account of how literature embodies the distinctive spirit of a unitary

7 For more on intertextual practices in Persian poetry, see Paul Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1998).

8 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995). Chapter four examines how Iranian poets deployed *iqtirāḥ* to appropriate European poetic norms and literary lore into an emerging corpus of modernist Persian poetry, see 146–47.

9 *Dānishkadah*, 1.7 (1918): 387–88.

10 Mana Kia, "Adab as Ethics of Literary Form and Social Conduct: Reading the Gulistān in Late Mughal India," in *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Celebration and Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.'s 70th Birthday*, ed. Alireza Korangy and Daniel J. Sheffield (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 281–308.

11 From the mid-seventeenth century, the term "belles-lettres" in French was slowly replaced by that of "littérature," which is then understood as both the ensemble of written knowledge on any given topic, and literature with an aesthetic function in a strictly differentiated sense. See Philippe Caron, *Des Belles-Lettres à la Littérature. Une Archéologie des Signes du Savoir Profane en Langue Française (1680–1760)* (Paris and Leuven: Peeters, Bibliothèque de l'Information Grammaticale n° 23, 1992). I am grateful to Laetitia Nanquette for this reference.

people.¹² Then, to best understand how *iqtirāh* functioned within *Dānish-kadah*'s broader project, Bahār's syntax should be reversed: in order for Persian-language readers to learn *how* they should regard their "own" literary figures, they must look to how European nations regard theirs. "What comes to matter, then," Michael Allan writes, "has less to do with the status of the object under analysis than the literary culture that determines how and in what ways it ought to be assessed and discussed."¹³

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak has examined how Persian-language poets strategically deployed the works of European litterateurs like Boileau as shadow-texts in order to recast late nineteenth-century aesthetic norms, poetic themes, and readers' cultural and literary expectations.¹⁴ Karimi-Hakkak's analysis shows that early and mid-twentieth-century poems that later become integral parts of Iranian literary modernism, anthologized and used in educational textbooks, were in fact part of a dialogical and translational process of cultural production. A nuanced understanding of practices like *iqtirāh* highlights how premodern modes of sociability and orality persisted in the cultural form of nation-states that emerged from the shadows of the Persianate world.

Iqtirāh was derived from the larger processes of *suḥbat* or poetic sociability institutionalized by practices such as *mushā'irahs* or poetic assemblies.¹⁵ *Mushā'irahs* would take place in dynastic courts, literary salons, coffee houses, and private homes wherein poets would recite their poems in the company of

12 For more on the formation of literary history, see Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*; Alexander Jabbari, *The Making of Persianate Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Aria Fani, "Iran's Literary Becoming: Zoka' ol-Molk Forughī and the Literary History That Wasn't," *Iran Namag* 5, no. 3 (2020): 114–44.

13 Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 54.

14 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*.

15 I am grateful to Nathan Tabor for making this insightful point to me. See "A Market for Speech: Poetry in Late Mughal India" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2014); "Heartless Acts: Literary Competition and Multilingual Association at a Graveside Gathering in Eighteenth-Century Delhi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39, no. 1 (2019): 82–95. In Persian, see 'Abdullah Mas'ūdi Ārānī, "Iqtirāh," *Dā'irat ul-ma'ārif-i buzurg-i islāmī*, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3323amxd>, accessed December 3, 2021. Ārānī has charted how *iqtirāh* broadly relates to premodern concepts:

Iqtidā' or *iqtifā'* [modeling] since in *iqtirāh* one embraces the influence of a predecessor's style and follows him/her, *istī'ānat* [utilization] given that one borrows the lines, prosody, meter, rhyme or poetic theme of another poem in imitation of it, *istiqbāl* [welcoming] when the poet welcomes the method and style of a literary predecessor, *tatabbu'* [following] in the sense that *iqtirāh* is a form of an exploration and meditation on the poetic discourse of another poet, and *iqtibās* [adaptation] given that one models a work on a literary example, and *javāb* [response] since one's work responds to a poem.

I am thankful to Somaye Delzendehruy for this reference.

other poets, musicians, and their audience. Poetic recitations were organized in different ways in which poets would cultivate a certain theme, form, rhyme or meter by composing within a set of conventions and aesthetic norms. *Mushā'irahs* provided a platform for poets to display their *qarīḥa* or literary improvisational talent. Poetic sociability, established in part by *mushā'irahs*, was the process by which Persian poetics across time periods and cultural geographies was codified and contested. The practice of *iqtirāḥ* shows the afterlife of long-established cultures of orality.

In the past, scholars would have had to travel to attend *mushā'irahs* in order to record literary exchanges and poems composed within a set intertextual framework (a practice sometimes called *ghazal-i tarḥi*). Literary discussions and debates would then be produced in *tazkirahs* or biographical dictionaries, copied, and disseminated widely. While *mushā'irahs* continue to be held today, literary debates and discussions largely moved into the textual medium of journals in the twentieth century. In that light, periodicals acted as an intermediary between *mushā'irahs*, and associations more broadly, to the writing of literary histories, anthologies, and educational textbooks. *Iqtirāḥ* became a way of establishing a give-and-take relationship with an emerging reading public around a set of shared anxieties and aspirations, one of which was the making of the nation-state as a unit of belonging.¹⁶

Mythologizing Nādir: *Āyandah's* Poetic Competition

Founded in Tehran in 1925, the journal *Āyandah* (Future) was edited by the nationalist-minded intellectual Maḥmūd Afshār (d. 1983).¹⁷ In 1927, *Āyandah* issued the following poetic competition: compose a *qaṣīdah* that eulogizes Nādir Shah's eighteenth-century sack of Delhi.¹⁸ It asked participants to base their response poem on "Fath-i sumanāt" (The Conquest of Somnath), composed by Farrukhī Sīstānī (d. 1037–38).¹⁹ Let me state my thesis at the outset: Through the modern practice of *iqtirāḥ*, Iranian intellectuals recast a

16 On how voluntary associations and their journals in South Asia established a relationship with their readers, see C. Ryan Perkins, "A New Pablik: Abdul Halim Sharar, Volunteerism, and the Anjuman-e Dar-us-Salam in Late Nineteenth-century India," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (2015): 1049–90.

17 For more on this journal, see Fani, "Becoming Literature," chapter two.

18 Maḥmūd Afshār, *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 488.

19 On Farrukhī, see Domenico Ingenito, "Farrukhi Sīstānī and Sultan Mahmud's Two Sons: Praise, Performance, and Symbolic Immortality at the Early Ghaznavid Court," forthcoming.

contentious and destructive figure as a national hero and reviver of a timeless Iran. This is not to say that Nādir had not been mythologized prior to the twentieth century, but that modern myths specifically cast his legacy in racial and national terms. *Āyandah* leveraged this participatory mode of poetic engagement to spread nationalist discourse in early Pahlavi Iran. This section analyzes *Āyandah*'s poetic competition in three parts: first, the call which contained the prompt; second, Farrukhī's poem as "shadow-text;" and third, the response poems published in *Āyandah*.

Printed in its eighth issue, *Āyandah* asked readers to compose their *qaṣīdah* in the "eloquent, inimitable, and detailed style" of Farrukhī's panegyrics, with an excerpt of "The Conquest of Somnath" appearing in the same issue. According to the call, participants were not required to follow Farrukhī's rhyme and meter scheme, but they were required to valorize Nādir Shah in their poem. *Āyandah* gave readers cues on the type of epic imagery that they wanted to see in response poems: "The vast deserts and soaring mountains that [Nādir's] army traversed, the bravery that they showed, and the spoils that they brought back to Iran, and above all the civility with which Nādir Shah treated the defeated and captive [Mughal] emperor Muḥammad Shah."²⁰ *Āyandah* also provided readers with "credible accounts of Iranian history" to inform their *qaṣīdahs*.²¹ The qualifier "credible" is a reference to a positivist model of historiography, ascendent in the late 1920s and 1930s, which sought to uncover and glorify civilizational history.²² This mode of inquiry was based on the following unproblematized presuppositions: Congruence between language and race, and unmediated access to the past through philological and archaeological inquiry.

In its one-page *iqtirāḥ*, *Āyandah* commemorated Nādir Shah as a "great conqueror and among the notable figures of Iran."²³ Unlike Maḥmūd of Ghaznī (d. 1030), Afshār opined, Nādir Shah did not have talented court poets the likes of Farrukhī and 'Unsurī (d. 1039) who would immortalize his conquests.²⁴ This *iqtirāḥ* would then address this "shortcoming in the world of Iranian literature."²⁵ As such, *Āyandah* laid out a clear framework that would restrict participants from questioning Nādir's glorified legacy. If one of Farrukhī's objectives was to mediate and comment on different aspects of his relationship with the

20 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

21 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

22 Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*; Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

23 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

24 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

25 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

Ghaznavid emperor, then the ultimate objective of twentieth-century poets was to answer the call of their national literature.

Āyandah published several response poems in 1928. The poems were prefaced by Afshār's essay, titled "the Conquest of Delhi," in which he sought to solidify the hermeneutical framework within which the poems would be read. If the text of the call—and its choice for a shadow-text—had directly shaped the featured response poems, Afshār's essay was an effort to dictate how they would be read by anchoring the *qaṣīdahs* within a hagiographical account of Nādir Shah's career. Before examining these poems, it is necessary to read Farrukhī's poem.

"The Conquest of Somnath" was composed on the occasion of Maḥmūd of Ghaznī's attack on the Hindu temple in the northwestern coast of India in 1026. The poem opens with the following couplets:

فسانه گشت و کهن شد حدیث اسکندر / سخن نو آره که نو را حلاوتیست دگر
فسانه کهن و کارنامه به دروغ / به کار ناید رو در دروغ رنج مبر

The tale of Alexander has become an antiquated legend / Put forth a new
(poetic) discourse for what's new is sweeter / An antiquated legend and
false accomplishments / Will not work, go, do not toil in lies²⁶

These lines accord with what Julie Meisami has called the "motif of the lies of the past," whereby the poet remembers a famous figure whose false story—in this case Alexander's—they wish to displace by virtue of a "veracious" story.²⁷ Yet Alexander's widely-known tale is integral to this rhetorical remembrance and the task of immortalizing Maḥmūd. In a way, Farrukhī's poem asked us to remember to forget Alexander, playing on a discursive tension between falsity and veracity whose rhetorical effect was formative to its function.

In addition to its falsity, Alexander's tale had been repeated one too many times. Farrukhī writes: "چو صبر گردد تلخ ار چه / شنیده ام که حدیثی که آن دوباره شود," or "خوش بود چو شکر," or "I have heard that a tale told many a time / becomes bitter

26 A more literal translation of the first line is as follows: The tale of Alexander became an antiquated legend / bring new poetry/discourse, for the new has different sweetness. *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 488.

27 Julie Scott Meisami, "Poetic Microcosms: The Persian Qasida to the End of the Twelfth Century," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, ed. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1:147.

like medicine even if it was sweet as sugar.”²⁸ The story of Maḥmūd, on the other hand, was more compelling precisely because it was novel. Throughout his *qaṣīdah*, Farrukhī referenced the oft-cited tale of Alexander not just as a way of presenting Maḥmūd’s story as more compelling in comparison, but also to remind readers that poetry is what mediates and sustains Alexander’s renown.²⁹ He issued a reminder to the Ghaznavid emperor: If world conquerors are to achieve immortality or even fame, they need talented poets to create (veracious and novel) *sukhan*. It is *sukhan* that regulates fame and novelty; even if you are Alexander the Great, your legacy is not safe from oblivion.

Farrukhī’s poem favored Maḥmūd over Alexander because the latter was on a self-serving quest to find the Water of Life which would have made him immortal. Maḥmūd, on the other hand, was on a selfless mission to spread monotheism by destroying the Temple of Somnath, a site of unbelief. Farrukhī wrote:

بلی سکندر سرتاسر جهان بگرفت / سفرگزید و بیان بُرید و کوه و کمر
و لیک او ز سفر آب زندگانی جست / ملک، رضای خدا و رضای پیغمبر

Yes, Alexander captured all corners of the world / embarked on a journey, cut through desert and mountain passes / however, he sought from his journey the Water of Life / [while] the King [Maḥmūd] sought to appease God and his messenger³⁰

In fact, Maḥmūd was acting on a divine mandate: “خدا حکم چنان کرده بود کان بت را / ز جای بر کند آن شهر یار دین پرور
by that faith-loving king.”³¹ or “God had ruled for that icon / to be torn out

Farrukhī lauded Maḥmūd’s bravery to traverse a dangerous journey to India: “به ما نمودی آن چیزها که یاد کنیم / گمان برپر که این در فسانه بود مگر
possible in legends.”³² Here, the poet gives another nod to the role of *sukhan* in creating the possibility of immortality, for it is his *qaṣīdah* that is able to

28 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 488. In this line, Farrukhī plays a pun on the term *ṣabr* which both means a medicinal plant and tolerance/patience.

29 This is a motif that Jerome Clinton calls the “poetically sustained immortality” of Alexander. *The Divan of Manuchthri Damghani: A Critical Study* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1972), 16.

30 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 466.

31 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 467.

32 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 467.

present Alexander's conquest as lies of the past while validating Maḥmūd's accomplishments as a true legend. It is my poetic discourse, Farrukhī is saying here, that commemorates your deeds as the true legend of our time. And he does so by persuading his audience that Maḥmūd's journey was far more dangerous and his motives far more noble than Alexander's. In the world of this *qaṣīdah*, Maḥmūd is superior to Alexander precisely because when the latter was conquering the world, "prophethood had not been sealed yet."³³ In other words, Maḥmūd was an Islamic sovereign while Alexander was a nonbeliever.

According to the poem, Maḥmūd was following in the footsteps of the Prophet of Islam, who, in the advent of Islam, had destroyed idols in Mecca. According to the poem, out of the three idols in Mecca, Muḥammad broke two of them and the third, Manāt, was taken to India where it continued to be worshiped. Manāt remained intact for centuries until Maḥmūd of Ghaznī attacked Somnath, or as Farrukhī's hyperbolic poem presented it:

منات را ز میان کافران بدزدیدند / بکشوری دگر انداختند از آن کشور
بجایگاهی کز روزگار آدم باز / بر آن زمین نشست و زلفت جز کافر

The infidels stole Manāt from the midst / they took [her] from that country to another / to a place where from the days of Adam / no one went except for infidels³⁴

Farrukhī's poem aims to show how Maḥmūd picked up where the Prophet had left off, spreading monotheism.

Maḥmūd had expert historians such as al-Bīrūnī with him who carefully described his campaign, but it was Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah* that turned his attack on Somnath into an established motif. Other Persian-language poets referenced Maḥmūd's conquest of idolatry when praising their own patrons or contemporaries, as Anvarī did in the twelfth century. Farrukhī powerfully combined Qur'anic references to idols with his apocalyptic imagery and the motif of the lies of the past to compose a persuasive poem that would cast Maḥmūd's shadow on the literary legacy of Alexander. The next section shows how twentieth-century response poems deployed various aspects of Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah* as a shadow-text.

33 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 467. The full couplet is as follows: / وقت آنکه سکندر همی امارت کرد / نبد نبوت را بر نهاده قفل بدر

34 *Āyandah* 2.7 (1927): 467. The idea that Somnath is in fact the same as the Meccan idol Manāt, repeated later in the *Bustān* of Sa'dī, is highly dubious.

Āyandah's Response Poems

Six *qaṣīdahs* appear in *Āyandah*, all of which closely accorded with Maḥmūd Afshār's hagiographical narrative. Yet, the journal framed the poems as "improvised compositions" (*iqtirāhan-i sākhtah shudah*), printed as received.³⁵ I will later problematize this framing and meditate on its function. The submissions were not just from Tehran, but also from Tabriz, Shiraz, and Mashhad. Thanks to the medium of the journal, the poems were circulated across Iranian cities and beyond.

By framing the Ghaznavid emperor's attack on Somnath as a righteous campaign to spread monotheism, Farrukhī set out not only to idealize Maḥmūd of Ghaznī, but also to create a motivation for him, an important aspect of *qaṣīdah* as a poetic genre.³⁶ Muḥammad Taqī Bahār's twentieth-century *qaṣīdah* not only idealized Nādir's life-giving powers, but also created a motivation for him by mythologizing his military campaign as an effort to defend the homeland against imagined outsiders:

بکشید و پیکارها کرد صعب / ز بیگانگان کرد صافی وطن
 ز دنبال افغان سوی قندهار / شد و کرد بنگاهشان مرعزن
 شنید آنکه دارای دهلی کند / ز افغان حمایت بسیر و علن
 از ایزرو پی دفع آنان کشید / بغزین و کابل سپاهی کُشن

He strove hard and fought battles / purged the homeland clean of foreigners / He chased the Afghans toward Kandahar / And turned their base into a graveyard / He heard that the ruler of Delhi / has conspicuously supported Afghans / So to drive them further away / Took a big army toward Ghaznī and Kabul.³⁷

If Farrukhī and other Ghaznavid court poets had cast Maḥmūd as a *ghāzī* (holy warrior), then early modern poets like Bahār cast Nādir Shah as the sanctified warrior of an emerging nation-state called Iran. Bahār does so in part through a rhetorical device called *murā'āt-i naẓīr* or the "observance of the similar." It produces harmonic juxtaposition for words that belong to a shared semantic

35 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

36 Julie Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1987), 46.

37 Muḥammad Taqī Bahār, "Dar vaṣf-i urdibihisht va madḥ-i Nādir Shah-i Afshār, dar fatḥ-i Dihlī," *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847, 849.

group, giving the poem *tanāsub* or balance, a key feature of classical Persian poetry.³⁸ In Bahār's poem, there are terms that signify ethno-geographic categories—Delhi, Kabul, Ghaznī—marking the imagined limits of the nation. Then, there are the two key terms in the poem's opening line: "foreigners" and "homeland." If Maḥmūd sought to appease God and the Prophet by spreading monotheism, Bahār's *qaṣīdah* framed Nādir as an Iranian sovereign who cleansed his homeland of "foreign" elements. Through the "observance of the similar," Bahār sought to persuade his reader to view the imagined frontiers of the homeland as its weakest point, a place inhabited by the racial Other.

Fighting on behalf of Iran, an idea informed by Aryanness, is the poetically invented motivation for Nādir's military campaign to India.³⁹ Lutf'alī Ṣuratgar began his *qaṣīdah* by bemoaning the lost glory of ancient Persia:

بخون پارسیان خون تازیان آمیخت / زگشتِ چرخِ دگرگونه گشتان گوهر
 /.../
 شکوه پیشین زین مردمان سست مجوی / که جنگجویِ دگر بود و شهریارِ دگر

The blood of Persians mixed with the blood of Arabs / From the turn of the wheel [of destiny] our essence changed /.../ Do not look for lost glory in weak folks / For [this] was another [kind of] warrior, another [kind of] king⁴⁰

Ṣuratgar is alluding to the Qajar monarchs who, in the eyes of early Pahlavi intellectuals, were politically weak and morally compromised. His poem referenced Nādir as a monarch who revived Persia's glory:

"از آن میانه یکی داستان نادره است / اگر شگفتی جویی از آن بگیر خبر" or "Amongst those [kings] one is the unique story of Nādir / If you seek astonishment, try to learn about it."⁴¹

Ṣuratgar's Nādir was created in the image of Farrukhī's Maḥmūd for both could not do any wrong by default: the latter was fighting an Islamic holy war while the former was defending his homeland. Ṣuratgar writes:

38 Domenico Ingenito, "Hafez's "Shirāzi Turk:" A Geopoetical Approach," *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 6 (2018): 18.

39 On the role of race and race-thinking in Iranian nationalism, see Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

40 Lutf'alī Ṣuratgar, *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 852.

41 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 853. Ṣuratgar plays on the meaning of Nādir which means unique or rare.

از آن پس که ز ایران گروه افغان را / براند نادر تا قندهار و پشاور
هری گرفت و به کابل رسید و دزدان را / نماند جای اقامت به نادری کشور

After a group of Afghans in Iran / was chased away by Nādir to Kandahar and Peshawar / He captured Herat and got to Kabul so the thieves / had no place to stay in Nādir's country⁴²

If Somnath demarcated the limits of *Dār al-Islam* or the domain of Islam in Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah*, early twentieth-century poets reified the frontiers of their imagined homeland by alluding to Kabul, Kandahar, and Peshawar, a domain that reflected the political and racial limits of early Pahlavi Iran. In Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah*, Nādir's military excursion to India became the spiritual odyssey of a national hero on a mission to defend and revive his country's lost glory. Instead of Islamdom, we see a novel rhetorical entity called *vaṭan* or homeland in these response poems.

Overall, Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah* functioned as a base for early modern panegyrics. It created a mode of remembrance designed to marginalize Alexander's fame and instead lionize Maḥmūd's. The *qaṣīdah* presented Alexander's fame as "lies of the past," and bolstered Maḥmūd's credentials as a holy warrior by celebrating his act of destroying Somnath, a den of unbelief. Maḥmūd's story was not just one of righteousness, but it was, unlike Alexander's antiquated legend, novel and hence sweeter. Through Farrukhī's shadow-text, early twentieth-century poets mapped the story of Nādir onto the rhetorical landscape charted by the legends of Maḥmūd and Alexander.

Farrukhī's shadow-text had established from the outset that Nādir's tale was sweeter than Maḥmūd's (and Alexander's) because of its novelty. Amīr ul-Shu'arā Nādirī even referenced this idea directly in his poem: "به فتح دهلی / نادر کشید چون لشکر / بجا نماند ز محمود و سومنات اثر / Recount less the story of Maḥmūd and Somnath / for Nādir's conquest of Delhi is greater than his."⁴³ In the mold of Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah*, Nādir's military excursion to India becomes the spiritual odyssey of a national king on a mission to defend and restore his country's lost glory. Instead of Islamdom, a novel rhetorical entity called *vaṭan* or homeland enters these early twentieth-century *qaṣīdahs*. The use of *vaṭan* introduced an important rhetorical moment in the Persian *qaṣīdah*. Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

42 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 853.

43 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 901.

centuries, Persian-language poets such as Iraj Mirzā (d. 1926), ‘Ārif Qazvīnī (d. 1934), ‘Alī Akbar Dihkhudā (d. 1934), and Bahār, drawing on the cultural repository of classical Persian poetry, began to compose patriotic poems.⁴⁴

Every response poem that appeared in *Āyandah* was closely aligned with Afshār’s hagiography. In Bahār’s *qaṣīdah*, Nādir decided to sack Delhi only after his diplomatic efforts failed.⁴⁵ In Ṣuratgar’s poem, Nādir’s motive to sack Delhi was to ensure that Afghans would be deprived of a haven from which to attack Iran.⁴⁶ His poem praised Nādir’s generosity in forgiving the Mughal emperor and his integrity for not looting India’s riches.⁴⁷ Upon publication, *Āyandah* celebrated the *qaṣīdah* poems as “improvised compositions” (*iqtirāḥ sākhtah shudah*).⁴⁸ But as demonstrated above, the *iqtirāḥ* was not in this instance a test of poetic spontaneity. It was staged within a set framework that required accepting its core premise: The celebration of Nādir Shah as a reviver of a timeless Iranian homeland. Like premodern *mushā’irahs*, the practice of *iqtirāḥ* served as a participatory mode through which literary, cultural, and political debates were settled.

The *qaṣīdah* featured in *Āyandah* were later republished with a muted connection to Farrukhī’s shadow-text, their designated “shadow-text.” In the collected poems of Muḥammad Taqī Bahār, for instance, his *qaṣīdah* “The Conquest of Delhi,” is prefaced with a note indicating that the poem was originally composed in response to an *iqtirāḥ*.⁴⁹ In the case of Bahār’s *qaṣīdah*, which made no direct references to Farrukhī’s poem, many readers would later have lacked the context to recall the terms of the poem’s composition. Future republications

44 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Preservation and Presentation: Continuity and Creativity in the Contemporary Persian Qasida,” in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, ed. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1:260. The twentieth-century *qaṣīdah* may have employed different instruments for its poetic expression than its earlier examples, but as a genre it remained a “locus for imagining absolutes.” In other words, though the contemporary *qaṣīdah* may have expressed an array of political and social views, it was nonetheless a site for “imagining an ethos,” “posit[ing] an absolute truth,” “remain[ing] by and large resistant to enunciating an ideology it terms of contingencies, either of judgment or of value.” The authoritative voice of the *qaṣīdah* poet was thus suitable for the eulogization of Nādir’s mythologized conquest, celebrated without any ideological equivocation by Afshār’s *iqtirāḥ*. “Preservation and Presentation,” 253–80.

45 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 849.

46 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 853.

47 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 897–898. This includes the story of Nādir reprimanding a soldier who stole an Indian woman’s earrings.

48 *Āyandah* 2.12 (1928): 847.

49 Muḥammad Taqī Bahār, *Divān-i ‘ash‘ār-i shādravān Muḥammad Taqī Bahār ‘Malik ul-Shu‘arā’* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1956), 1:479.

did not mention the *iqtirāḥ* altogether, as evidenced by the popular online platform *Ganjoor*.⁵⁰ This is how readers gradually came to forget the participatory mode through which a Turco-Persian monarch was nationalized, rendering Bahār's *qaṣīdah* standalone.⁵¹

Āyandah's poetic competition took place only two years after Reza Shah had assumed power, and the Pahlavi elites were invested in framing the Qajars as unpatriotic and weak monarchs who plundered the country's resources and brought about territorial losses. The celebration of a destructive figure like Nādir Shah as a proto-nationalist and patriotic king who set out to establish a unified state in the aftermath of post-Safavid chaos should be understood within this context.⁵² Informed by the anxiety of belated modernity, early Pahlavi intellectuals sought to construct an alternate history by returning to the past to right the wrongs of history. The next section turns to Muṣāhibān-era Afghanistan, showing that cultural uniformity and wholeness—desired by romantic nationalism—was far from peculiar to Pahlavi Iran.

“The Conquest of Kabul:” A Poetic Competition

Kābul, published in the 1930s by the Kabul Literary Association, deployed visual tools such as graphic illustrations to introduce and reify modern concepts such as *adabiyāt* (literature) and *tārīkh* (history) to its readers.⁵³ For instance, *tārīkh* often appeared next to a drawing of the gate of Ghaznī and the minaret of Jam in Ghor as historical symbols in search of a national referent. *Kābul* used the same visual symbol, with the addition of the Buddhas of Bamīyān, on its cover for several issues. *Adabiyāt*, on the other hand, appeared next to a drawing of a bird nest with baby birds asking their mother for food. This gendered visualization sought to assign history to the domain of physical monuments and literature to the domain of cultivation and care-taking.

50 See <https://ganjoor.net/bahar/ghasidebk/sh185/>, accessed April 13, 2023.

51 Please note that not all Pahlavi-era intellectuals overlooked and justified Nādir's brutality. For instance, see 'Abbās Iqbāl-Āshtiyānī, “Aqibat-i Nādir Shah,” *Yādīgār* 2.2 (Sep.–Oct. 1945): 31–43.

52 Twentieth-century Pahlavi intellectuals in Iran were not the only appropriators of Nādir's historical legacy. For his religious import to nineteenth-century Central Asian intellectuals, see James Pickett, “Nadir Shah's Peculiar Central Asian Legacy: Empire, Conversion Narratives, and the Rise of New Scholarly Dynasties,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (2016): 491–510.

53 The term *tārīkh* encompassed a constellation of premodern genres that were annalistic, mythical, dynastic, or genealogical in nature. *Tārīkh* as positivist history which articulated the nation-state as its historical subject emerged in the twentieth century.



FIGURE 1 *Kābul* 2.6 (1932): 71

EXTRACTED FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Similarly, *Kābul's* visualization of *iqtirāḥ* forcefully conveyed the participatory nature of this novel practice by showing different hands engaged in an act of composing.

In June 1932, *Kābul* featured two calls aimed at building “closer relations” with its readers.⁵⁴ Its first prompt asked readers to explain the reasons for the “decline of Islam” (*inhiṭāt-i Islām*) and the second asked poets to commemorate the “Conquest of Kabul” (*fath-i Kābul*) in 1929 by Muḥammad Nādir Shah (r. 1929–1933). The first call was to be composed in prose and the second in verse. The rubric for assessment of the essay included “scientific reasoning” (*istidlāl-i ʿilmī*) while the criteria for the poetic competition were outlined as follows: a *qaṣīdah*, ranging from fifty to a hundred couplets, fashioned after *shuʿarā-yi Maḥmūdī* or Ghaznavid poets.⁵⁵

A couplet from Farrukhī Sistānī's panegyric dedicated to a local prince called Ṭāḥir Chaghānī was cited as a model for prosodic meter, refrain and rhyme. In addition to monetary gifts (ranging from three hundred rupees to a thousand), *Kābul* reminded poets that the publication of their works in a mass-circulated medium (*Majallah-yi kaṣīr al-intishār*) would gain national visibility and recognition.⁵⁶ The poems, the editorial note stated, would be recited in an

54 *Kābul* 2.6 (1932): 71–72.

55 *Kābul* 2.6 (1932): 73.

56 *Kābul* 2.6 (1932): 73.

assembly attended by the Afghan monarch, members of the literary association, and other people of literary taste and learning. Perhaps humorously, the journal also reassured participants that *Kābul* would not publicize the names or poems of the losers. This section will examine Farrukhī's shadow-text, "Dāghgāh" or the "Branding-ground."

Kābul only published the *maṭla'* or opening couplet of Farrukhī's *qaṣīdah* which implies that enough copies of his *dīvān* must have been in circulation among early twentieth-century Afghan elites.⁵⁷ "Dāghgāh" or "Branding-ground" is one of Farrukhī's earlier works. The poem celebrates branding horses as a princely ritual and idealized representation of kingship. The *qaṣīdah's* *nasīb* or opening begins with a deeply sensory description of nature:

چون پرند نیلگون بر روی پوشد مَرغزار / پر نیان هفت رنگ اندر سر آرد کوهسار
 خاک را چون ناف آهو مشک زاید بی قیاس / بید را چون پر طوطی برگ روید بیشمار
 دوش وقت نیمشب بوی بهار آورد باد / حَبْذا باد شمال و خرما بوی بهار
 باد گویی مشک سوده دارد اندر آستین / باغ گویی لعبتان ساده دارد در کنار⁵⁸

When the indigo-colored silk covers the meadow / the seven-hued silk rises from the mountains⁵⁹ / the ground generates sublime musk as pure as the deer's / the poplar generates leaves as numerous as the parrot's feathers / the wind brought the scent of the spring yesterday at night / how wonderful [is] the north wind and how joyful [is] the scent of spring / it's as if the wind has rubbed musk up its sleeves / it's as if the garden has smooth-faced dolls in its embrace ...

The opening paints a generative world during springtime. The idealized and naturalistic prelude then shifts in the second hemistich of the eighth couplet, the poem's *gurizgāh* or banishing point, to the subject of praise: "راست پنداری," or "که خلعتهای رنگین یافتند / باغهای پر نگار از داغگاه شهریار" or "You would rightly

57 Copies of Farrukhī's collected works were not always accessible. An eleventh-century poet, he was rediscovered in the seventeenth century which led to renewed interest in his poetry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On Ghaznavid poetry as a source for historiography, see Gillies Tetley, *The Ghaznavid and Seljuq Turks: Poetry As a Source for Iranian History* (London: Routledge, 2009).

58 Muḥammad Dabīr Sayyāqī, ed., *Dīvān-i Ḥakīm Farrukhī-yi Sīstānī* (Tehran: Zavvār, 2009), 175.

59 Silk in the first hemistich [*parand*] is likely a metaphor for the clouds, whereas in the second [*parniyān*] it refers to grass.

imagine that gardens full of statues / received colorful robes of honor from the branding-ground of the king.”⁶⁰

The rest of the poem focuses on the ritual of branding horses. In Farrukhī's time, Ṭāḥir Chaghānī controlled a small yet strategic province between Termez and Samarqand, located today in southern Uzbekistan. Seen as a rough and less imperial ritual, branding is not celebrated in many Persian poems. Farrukhī's poem is the best-known example. In the context of a local province, branding was an important custom and was presided over by the prince as his unique prerogative. It also held a metaphorical meaning that was important to the prince's power and rule. Horses, one of the finest properties of the king, were branded to signify their belonging to the kingdom. At a time of ever-shifting boundaries in eleventh-century Central Asia, the horses in a way mark the frontiers of the political domain wherever they roamed by virtue of their brand.

The poem then describes the environment in which the custom of branding is performed:

داغگاه شهریار اکنون چنان خرم بود / کاندرواز نیکویی حیران بماند روزگار
 سبزه اندر سبزه بینی، چون سپهر اندر سپهر / خیمه اندر خیمه بینی، چون حصار اندر
 حصار
 سبزه ها با بانگ رود مطربان چربدست / خیمه ها با بانگ نوش ساقیان میگسار
 هر کجا خیمه ست خفته عاشقی با دوست مست / هر کجا سبزه ست شادان یاری
 از دیدار یار⁶¹

The branding-ground of the king was so joyous that / in it, time became astonished by beauty / You see greenery within greenery like celestial spheres in the sky / royal tents within tents like castles within castles / the gardens [are filled with] the sound of the lutes of deft musicians / the tents [are full of] the melody of wine-serving cupbearers / whenever there is a tent, a lover lays asleep with an intoxicated beloved / whenever there is greenery, a lover rejoices at seeing their beloved.

The poem seamlessly shifts from the earthly gardens to the cosmic dimension of the spheres and then back to the actual moment of branding, crystallized by the presence of royal tents, the branding-ground, and ultimately to an idealized representation of kingship in the form of castles. In other words, the

60 *Dīvān*, 175.

61 *Dīvān*, 176.

poem frames kingship as a linkage between the natural, the cosmic, and the temporal, made manifest, in this case, by the ritual of branding.

The poem then develops an intricate metaphor: “اندر آن دریا سُمارى وان” / “سُماری جانور / وندر آن گردون ستاره وان ستاره بی مدار [are] boats within boats [that are] moving / and within the sky stars within stars are orbitless.”⁶² The boats in the sea are like the roaming horses—also without a pivot—and the stars in the sky resemble the sparkles produced by charcoal that is used in the branding-ground. The poem references the celestial spheres and the sea to describe the steppe where this ritual is staged. What links the earth to the sky is the idea of kingship and the horses, the prince’s most prized subjects, represent a mundane extension of the king’s power. The *qaṣīdah* ends with *du‘ā-yi tābīd* or an immortality prayer, wishing upon the king—and by extension the poem—longevity and success:⁶³ “بزم تو از” / “ساقیان سرو قد چون بوستان / قصر تو از لعبتان قندلب چون قندهار feasts [look like] a garden [filled with] cyprus-figured cupbearers / may your palace [look like] Gandhara [thanks to] sweet-lipped dolls.”⁶⁴

In November 1931, *Kābul* printed two response poems, one by the country’s poet laureate, Qārī ‘Abdullāh Khān (d. 1943), and the other by Sardār ‘Azīzullāh Khān. Per *iqtirāh*’s mandate, both poems celebrated Muḥammad Nādir Shah, who had begun his rule only three years earlier, for ending the short-lived rule of ‘Abdullāh Kalakānī (r. Jan. 1929–Oct. 1929), known pejoratively as *bachah-yi saqqāw* or the “water-carrier’s son.” In the late 1920s, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with Shah Amānullāh’s (r. 1919–1926) reforms among certain segments of the population, particularly in rural areas. Unrest grew in parts of the country, and a former soldier turned rebel, ‘Abdullāh Kalakānī and his men marched toward Kabul, seized the seat of power, and held it for nine months.⁶⁵

Both response poems retained Farrukhī’s *ravī* or the last letter(s) of the rhyme (*ār*). Also like Farrukhī’s “Branding-ground,” Qārī ‘Abdullāh’s *qaṣīdah* begins with idealized descriptions of nature:

62 *Dīvān*, 176.

63 I thank Domenico Ingenito for this insight.

64 *Dīvān*, 180. This is not a reference to the city of Kandahar, but an ancient region famed for its Buddhist cultural production that existed in the first millennium BCE until the beginning of the second. Gandhara encompassed the city of Kandahar.

65 This historical event was recorded by Fayz Muḥammad Kātib Hazārah in his *Kabul Under Siege: Fayz Muhammad’s Account of the 1929 Uprising*, trans. R. D. McChesney (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1999). Also see Mir Ghulām Muḥammad Ghubār, *Afghanistan dar masir-i tārikh*, vols 1–2 (Kabul: Intishārāt-i jumhūrī, 1999). McChesney’s introduction references other authors such as Muḥī ul-Dīn Anīs who recorded the 1929 uprising.

گر زمردگون شود از فیض نیسان کوهسار / می شود از برگ ریزان هم زرافشان
 مرغزار
 چون شود از طرف مشرق پرچم صبح آشکار / قوه شب را نماید شاه انجم تار
 و مار

Once the grace of April makes mountains emerald-colored / falling leaves
 will make a gold-scattering plane / Once the morning flag becomes vis-
 ible from the East / the sun eviscerates the night's power⁶⁶

In this new season, water is pure, trees bear big juicy fruits, and gardens are bountiful. As nature undergoes such monumental changes, *i'tidāl* or equilibrium is restored.⁶⁷ Idealized nature in Farrukhī's shadow-text served as an extension of the aesthetics of kingship. Similarly here, Qārī 'Abdullāh depicts a natural world that is coming to harmonic equilibrium after a disruptive period, a reference to the brief rule of 'Abdullāh Kalakānī. 'Azīzullāh Khān's *qaṣīdah* follows the same logic.

The banishing point of Qārī 'Abdullāh's *qaṣīdah* is marked by the arrival of a new monarch:

گویی از سمت جنوبی می وزد باد ظفر / میرساند مرثدگانی از قدوم شهریار
 بهر فتح کابل شاه افغان میرسد / در رکابش نصر و اقبال از یمین و از یسار

The winds of victory appear to be blowing from the south / heralding the footsteps of the king / the Afghan king coming to seize Kabul / with victory and fortune riding with him from the east and west⁶⁸

These couplets also mark a transition into a historically informed part of the panegyric. Unlike the literary competition in Tehran, in Kabul the accounts of 'Abdullāh Kalakānī's military campaign and brief rule had not yet been settled. Staging this *iqtirāḥ* was not just a means of celebrating and framing Muḥammad Nādir Shah as the country's savior, but crucially, an effort to imagine and reify the homeland as territorially and socio-politically whole.

Once 'Abdullāh Kalakānī took hold of Kabul, Qārī 'Abdullāh writes,

66 *Kābul* 2.11 (1932): 8.

67 *Kābul* 2.11 (1932): 8.

68 *Kābul* 2.11 (1932): 9.

کرد نیروی سپاه نادى فتحى بزرگ / آنچهان فتحى كه در تاريخ ماند يادگار
/.../

زاغتشاش آشوبگهى گشت سرتاسر وطن / نى مزار از فتنه خالى نه هرى نه قندهار

Nādir's army made a big conquest / such a conquest that history will remember

/.../ riot turned the entire country into a place of terror / No place was spared from rebellion: not Mazar, not Herat or Kandahar⁶⁹

If branded horses roaming in the valley determined the shifting boundaries of Ṭāhīr Chaghānī's political domain, as envisioned by Farrukhī, then Qārī 'Abdullāh's *qaṣīdah* imagines a singular Afghan homeland evenly impacted by a violent rebellion in Kabul. In other words, the poem casts a unified Afghan nation in which Kabul's central rule is not only strategically or politically significant, but symbolically and culturally vital.⁷⁰ McChesney's reading of Fayḏ Muḥammad Kātib's first-hand account of the 1929 uprising is particularly instructive here:

One finds little hint of common interests that might be presumed to derive from living in a unified territory in a nominal nation-state. Kabul, rather than representing the interests of the country as a whole, seems mostly to have stood in people's minds as the key to power and, through power, wealth for their own group.⁷¹

Briefly put, Qārī 'Abdullāh's celebration of a unified cultural and political territory saved by a charismatic king closely reflected his own positionality within the Kabul state apparatus.

Qārī 'Abdullāh's poem was published in the cultural context of the 1920s and 30s, a period during which the state and intellectuals took on the question of who was considered an Afghan and what constituted Afghan literary

69 *Kābul* 2.11 (1932): 10–11.

70 Sardār 'Azizullāh Khān went one step further in writing that the Afghan nation collectively "voted" to have 'Abdullah Kalakānī executed. He writes, "*Chunkih millat jumligi bar kushitanash dādand rāy / hukm bar 'idām-i ū farmūd shah-i nāmdār,*" or "As the nation collectively voted/called for his killing / the famed monarch ordered his execution." *Kābul* 2.11 (1932): 15. In reality, Nādir Khān, later Muḥammad Nādir Shah, rescinded his pardon and killed 'Abdullāh Kalakānī and nine others.

71 Kātib Hazārah, *Kabul Under Siege*, 3.

and cultural history.⁷² This *iqtirāḥ* took place within the institutional site of the Kabul Literary Association, a modern state-sponsored organization with bylaws, a library, and a printing press that published books and multiple periodicals. The association was officially tasked with raising Persian and Pashto as fixtures of an emerging Afghan national identity. Its members included distinguished intellectuals, poets, educators, translators, and artists.

Between 1930–1940, the Kabul Literary Association set out to produce a cohesive national identity and historical genealogy for Afghanistan as a nation-state.⁷³ Similar to Iran, the process of nationalizing Afghanistan's Persianate heritage took place within a distinctly transregional, multilingual, and collaborative space.⁷⁴ For instance, Maḥmūd Afshār, the architect of *Āyandah's* poetic competition, visited Kabul and met with members of the Kabul Literary Association in the early 1930s. Prior to Afshār's visit, he exchanged a number of letters with Afghan intellectuals in which they discussed and debated aspects of their shared cultural heritage, each in an effort to produce a past needed by their present.⁷⁵ Among the topics discussed was Iran and Afghanistan's shared claim to the Ghaznavid dynasty and its cultural patrimony.⁷⁶ Treating the nation-states as a singular unit of analysis often leads to the erasure of transregional and participatory processes that lie at the core of literary and cultural production across national boundaries.

Conclusion: The Persianate as Shadow-Text

This article has illustrated how early twentieth-century Afghan and Iranian intellectuals created a mode of poetic engagement within the institutionalized

72 The Afghan Constitution of 1923 is one framework within which this question was addressed. See Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft Between the Ottoman and British Empires* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

73 See Senzil Nawid, "Writing National History: Afghan Historiography in the Twentieth Century," *Afghan History Through Afghan Eyes*, ed. Nile Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 185–210; Nile Green, "From Persianate Pasts to Aryan Antiquity Transnationalism and Transformation in Afghan Intellectual History, c. 1880–1940," *Afghanistan* 1, no. 1 (2018): 26–67.

74 Alexander Jabbari, "From Persianate Cosmopolis to Persianate Modernity: Translating from Urdu to Persian in Twentieth-Century Iran and Afghanistan," *Iranian Studies* 55, no. 3 (2022): 611–30.

75 See chapter four in Aria Fani's "Becoming Literature: The Formation of *Adabiyāt* as an Academic Discipline in Iran and Afghanistan (1895–1945)" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

76 I treat this topic in great detail in *Spaces Between Nations: Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024).

form of the journal that enabled them to express nationalist ideas of both local and transnational import. Practices like the *iqtirāḥ* set in motion a participatory mode of historiography that posited Iran and Afghanistan as timeless and ethnically homogenous units of belonging and political sovereignty. *Iqtirāḥ* was made possible by the persistence and transformation of long-established Persianate norms marked by *shuḥbat* or poetic sociability. Understanding how such practices function enables one to better understand how early twentieth-century reading publics coalesced around a set of shared social anxieties and political aspirations. In this case: an obsession with military figures such as Nādir Shah Afshār and Muḥammad Nādir Shah, framed as national figures in Iran and Afghanistan respectively.

The point of underlining the importance of *iqtirāḥ* and its connections to Persianate modes of sociability is not to offer a distinctly new or separate iteration of modernity. The point is to show the ways in which romantic nationalism, as an outgrowth of colonial modernity, is made thinkable when placed against the backdrop of older conventions and aesthetic norms. Modern *qaṣīdahs* allowed new heroes—predicated on a hypermasculine national character—to emerge while simultaneously relying on and suppressing their shadow texts (i.e., the Persianate heritage and tradition). Put briefly, this article has shown how shared geography and spatial connections in the Persianate world became the site of a poetic contest of a masculinized and hyper-militaristic modernity.

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to rethink the study of nationalism as a political and cultural phenomenon in twentieth-century Iran and Afghanistan. Instead of presenting nationalism as a static, fixed and ready-made discourse that proliferated in a linear and top-down manner, new studies frame nationalism as highly contingent, both historically and geographically, and its rise as dynamic and uncertain. Foregrounding the role of reader-participants shows how literary nationalism was co-produced by European Orientalists *and* communities of scholars, subscribers, and readers.

Romantic nationalism in Persian-speaking societies did not unfold through or as a result of severed cultural ties. Instead, it created new technologies and sites of cultural production and exchange that intensified contact within (formerly) Persianate societies. With the rise of the nation-state, cultural and political centers of gravity and the ways in which literary production mattered shifted in monumental ways. However, Persian poetry remained central to how emerging national collectives defined their modern selves through devices such as national history. In other words, Persian poetry in general and *qaṣīdah* in particular have retained its cultural status in spite of the rise of the novel and free verse. Its complex interplay with national historiography is a

particularly rich and undertheorized site from which to appreciate its participation in national modes of meaning making and civic participation.

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