



Arbitrary Despotism and Taxation in Iran: Analysing an Iranologist's standpoint

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial Iran has been ruled by a system of arbitrary despotism which, inevitably, has affected all aspects of state and society. A major example was the land tax which normally fleeced the peasants by extracting a heavy rent from them. Willem Floor's is a substantive study of this system and its consequences for the society. He is a distinguished Iranologist. This article is an investigation in this Regard².

Keywords:

Taxation in Iran, Arbitrary
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2. This is extended version of "Iran's Fiscal History and the Nature of State and Society in Iran," by Willem Floor, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 11, 2, 2001.

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1. Introduction

*W*illem Floor's (1998, 2001) latest contribution towards a social and economic history of Iran is substantive and would be most useful to any attempt to reconstruct the history of Iran within a modern, scientific and realistic framework. It is a detailed, painstaking and conscientious study of the fiscal history of Iran, 1500-1925, with aspects and implications which (for reasons discussed below) reach well beyond a fiscal history as this may be understood, for example, from a fiscal history of France. The book begins with a useful introductory chapter on the political economy of Safavid and Qajar Iran. It sets the general framework for the detailed study that follows, and incidentally shows that - despite all the changes that took place in the economy and polity (sometimes, even, over a short period) the nature of the political economy remained essentially the same, i. e. it was what this reviewer has described as an arbitrary state and society, and a 'short term' political economy. The short-term nature of the political economy was itself a product of the arbitrary basis of the state and society. And, as we shall see below, the appellation 'short term political economy', or 'short term society', highlights in an explicit way the reasons for lack of basic, *continuous, long term*, political and economic development.¹

Opening Review of the Discussion: Where there is little security of life and property, let alone of official positions, both logic and sociology explain why there should be a strong urge to acquire as much as possible, and by whatever means, *in the short run*, and spend as much as possible for as long as it has not been taken away, confiscated or plundered. It is the logic and sociology of what, on more than one occasion, Floor cautiously describes as a 'spoils system'. There were both 'good' and 'bad' rulers, governors, landlords, merchants, etc. But the nature of state and society, and the social,

1. See further, Homa Katouzian, 'The Short-Term Society', A Comparative Study in the Long-Term Problems Political and Economic Development in Iran', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, January 2004; reprinted in Homa Katouzian, *IRAN, Politics, History and Literature*, Routledge, Abingdon (UK), USA and Canada, 2013.

political and economic structures, and the culture to which they gave rise, transcended personal ethics and attributes.

The nine chapters of the book discuss the fiscal and administrative systems - the two are closely bound together - of the Safavid and Qajar dynasties, and the intervening decades in the eighteenth century. These include the administrative structure and hierarchy, the tax structure and its changes, the numerous agricultural and urban taxes, imposts, cesses and other techniques of 'fleecing' the *ra'iyat* (meaning 'subjects', both high and low, though it literally means flock), the customs and similar duties, the various forms of revenue assignment and land-holding, and the ways and means of state expenditure. The reason why it was pointed out at the outset that this is more than just a fiscal history of Iran as this might be understood from the same title for a European society is now becoming clear, though it would become clearer later in this review. For, although much space has been devoted to the description of taxes, etc., here we are essentially dealing with something broader and more comprehensive, perhaps a system of political economy, although the word 'system' is used for want of a more appropriate term. The other sections of this article include Key Elements and Fundamental Characteristics of the Subject, Generalization of Findings and supplementary issues and concluding remarks.

2- Key Elements and Fundamental Characteristics of the Subject

Floor- Lambton standpoint: The system as such (mentioned above in introduction), has by now been fairly well documented for the whole of the post-Islamic era, though there is evidence that, in its fundamental aspects, it was the same before Islam as well. Indeed, in her seminal study, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, AKS Lambton observed, regarding the early Islamic period:

The origins of these taxes and the methods by which they must have been assessed must in any cases be sought in local [i. e. Iranian] custom, which dates back to pre-Islamic times. Indeed for the most part the tax regime of the Sasanian empire, in so far as it concerned the land, was taken over [by Arab

rulers], and the task of the [Islamic] jurist in this case also was to rationalise historic precedent and to fit this into the framework of [Islamic] law.¹

It may be asserted with a greater degree of certainty that at no time in Iranian history has there been a feudal system of landownership, or indeed any other system whereby landlords enjoyed independent rights of ownership of land, although in all periods there had been land assignees, revenue farmers and the like who - besides the state which alone had independent right of ownership - had a considerable share in the surplus produce of the peasants. This much may be concluded from the main sources of pre-Islamic Iranian history as well, although there is much less detail regarding the system and its changes than is to be desired. Floor's study, more detailed and more extensive as it is for the period 1500-1925, especially as regard non-agricultural taxes and customs, is nevertheless within the general framework of Lambton's work (although the period studied by Lambton stretches from the Islamic conquest to the eve of the land-reform in the twentieth century). It is therefore not surprising that its broader implications regarding the position of the landlords (in their large variety), the peasants, the nomads and the urban population, and the relationship between the state and all of them taken together - i. e. the relationship of state and society - is basically consistent with the earlier study. This is because landownership - if this be an appropriate term to use - was closely bound up with the country's fiscal system. Landlords did not make up an independent long-term social class, giving rise to an aristocratic hierarchy on whom the state depended. On the contrary, they were usually (direct or indirect) revenue assignees, tax collectors, tax-framers, and other government agents and officials, rather than feudal lords, agricultural gentry, or even free-holding farmers.²

1. See Ann K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia, A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration*, London, New York, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1953: 31.

2. See further, Homa Katouzian, 'The Short-Term Society', and 'Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23, 2003; reprinted in Katouzian, *IRAN, Politics, History and Literature*.

Parallels in Historical Taxation; Iran and England: the status of ownership of almost all of them, both high and low, was somewhat similar to the class of 'tenants-at-will' in traditional English agriculture - before the Enclosure Movement of the eighteenth century - with three important qualifications. One, that these English tenants were themselves peasant cultivators not rent or revenue collectors. Two, that they were tenants of their landlords, who were the rightful owner of the estate, whereas the Iranian landlords ultimately owed their status to the will of the state, the central and provincial government. Three, that though their tenancy was 'at the will of the lord' (i.e. theoretically they could be evicted without further ado) they still enjoyed a certain amount of traditional legal protection. And, let it be emphasised, that these English tenants were no more than a class of peasant cultivators, unlike the Iranian landlords, who were nobles, notables, tribal chiefs, provincial magnates, state officials, religious dignitaries and so on.

More details of Iranian taxes: Taxes and other imposts and dues were indeed numerous. They sometimes changed in definition, the rate at which they were imposed, the class or classes of population on whom they fell, and the method by which they were evaluated. Sometimes a given tax - e.g., the 'tamgha' which dated back to the pre-Safavid Ilkhan period, and which in most cases was once abolished and later restored under the Safavids - was imposed on different activities at the same time. That is, it was a generic tax, but one that might fall on diverse - in some cases unrelated - types of activity. Sometimes, the rate and method of evaluation of the same tax varied in different regions at the same time. The ambiguity and/or variety of purposes for which taxes were imposed, and ways and forms by which they were collected, may be exemplified by one important example (from many), the case of 'mālojehāt'. Originally it had consisted of its two parts, 'māl' va 'jehāt', but it always referred to two types of tax: 'jehāt' was a tax on the agricultural produce, a kind of 'bahreh-ye mālekāneh. This was collected in kind. Whereas 'māl' was 'the tax on looms, trees, houses, domestic animals, wells and mills' (129-133). It fell both on other rural activities (e.g.

mal-e bāghāt) and on urban/and or rural industry (e.g. māl-e asnāf). And it was most likely collected in cash rather than in kind. Hence Floor's definition of 'mālojehāt' as 'agricultural and industrial tax'. Yet it also seems to have been a kind of capital or wealth tax because it was imposed on looms, houses and mills as well. In this case it was the ownership, it seems, that was subject to the tax - whatever it might have earned the owner - rather than the income arising from its use.

It would make no sense to give a sample here of the large number of generic and specific taxes on rural and urban income and wealth, so numerous as they are, and subject to so many variations in almost all their aspects in time as well as place. More interesting from the point of view of the nature of the state, society and political economy are the equally varied imposts, extraordinary duties and other extortions that must be added to the canonical charges to arrive at the total tax burden of peasants, other producers as well as traders. Indeed an example of a regular, 'canonical', yet extortionate practice, stretching from the Ilkhans to the Qajars was the imposition of 'tarh'. This was a generic term for the compulsory sale of agricultural produce by the government to peasants and traders at extortionate prices. It meant that they had to buy dear and sell cheap, for the government to pocket the difference. There seems to have been some doubt in the sources as to the exact nature of tarh, but a poetical letter by Sa'di makes it plain that tarh was indeed forced sale by the government at above-market prices. Under Shams al-Din Tazikuy, military officials 'had got some dates from the peasants at a low price ("beh tas'ir-e andak"), and sold to traders at a high price, by tarh'. Sa'di's brother was one of these unfortunate traders, so the poet wrote to the 'Malek-e 'Ādel':

You are not informed, no doubt, of my brother's plight,
They give him dates by tarh, and he could not be more unfortunate...
Then you send a tax-collector,
A Turk worse than whom it is difficult to find.

They beat him [my brother]so much, O Lord
That he cannot step outside his house.¹

That was a regular extortion. Examples of others, both regular and irregular, and the burden they imposed, and responses shown by the subjects, are scattered all over Floor's book, as of Lambton's before him. For example, both authors mention the burden created by government officials as they passed through the country, not only being accommodated, fed, etc., by the subjects but often pillaging them as well. As Lambton writes, for the pre-Safavid Ilkhan period:

Officials of all kinds lived on the country. *Ilchis* with their large trains as they passed through the country made all kinds of requisitions on the peasantry in spite of the fact that the government also levied taxes for their entertainment, and had established post stations...throughout the empire to provide for their needs...They would stir up local disputes (in order to exact money for settling them) and would take the animals of the peasants ...Robbers would even pretend they were *Ilchis* and seize animals from the peasants and others to this extent. The royal hunters, of whom there were large numbers throughout the empire, were another source of oppression. They, too, lived on the country, and like the *Ilchis*, revenue officials and others would seize the peasants' mules and donkeys, a practice that was clearly disastrous to agricultural work...². Lambton then goes on to describe the practice of writing drafts (*barāt*) on provincial districts, and the *private* exploitation resulting from it: 'The writing of drafts on provincial districts was in itself, apart from the methods adopted to collect what was assigned, a fruitful source of peculation and exploitation. The money and goods so collected would be shared between the officials passing through, and the local officials. Revenue was swallowed up in this way, and nothing remitted to the treasury'.³ Floor describes a similar situation regarding official guests under the Safavids (197-198). He gives a graphic description of another kind of extortion and exploitation under the Qajars (though the general

1. *Kolliyat-e Sa'di*, ed. Mohammad Ali Foroghi and Baha al-Din Khorramshahi, Tehran, 1988: 921.

2. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*: 82.

3. See *ibid*.

principles are familiar from all times in the country) which is worth a long quotation. Talking about the sale and purchase of official positions, he writes:

The *pishkesh* was not the only payment that passed between the appointer and appointee; it was only the up-front payment. The system worked as follows. In Jandaq, for example, when the *na'eb al-hokumeh* had been appointed, he appointed in each village a trustworthy person...who was charged to collect the *haqq al-hokumeh* and other extraordinary dues from the population. This sum had to be transferred to the governor. The *na'eb al-hokumeh*, also appointed a range of local officials ...who in turn paid him various dues known as *shirini* and *reshveh*. The *na'eb al-hokumeh*, on handing over the *haqq al-hokumeh* and other dues, had to add his own contribution, known as *ta'arof*. The governor himself, to smooth relations with the central government, sent contributions to Tehran throughout the year...

Floor then quotes a contemporary witness:

Most of these offices are bought and sold. By the amount of the purchase is therefore regulated the rate of oppression. The scale descends; every minor agent is expected to accomplish an appointed task; but is left to choose his own means, *and to have no other controul [sic] but his own conscience*.

The level of exploitation being such, economic activity continued nevertheless, however uncertainly, unpredictably and miraculously, for every system creates its own means of survival, though not necessarily development.

Key report of Taxation in Iran and some Similarities with Europe:

There are sporadic reports from different periods that despite this situation the lot of the ordinary people was, after all, not much worse than European societies. These reports must be treated with caution as they refer to specific observations for specific regions at specific times. It is impossible to have a reasonable idea of 'the standard of living' even for a given period. Yet they must be considered along with the rest of the evidence. Chardin, for example, who is as good a witness as any - foreign or domestic - on the politics and economics of exploitation and insecurity under arbitrary despotism, found the crop-sharing peasants 'living in reasonable comfort, in

fact doing better than their European counterparts. This is important. Chardin was a contemporary of Louis XIV, the French king who ruled in the most successful era of the French monarchy, the Grand Siècle, the seventeenth century. There is general agreement among historians of the period that, on the whole, 80 per cent of the French agricultural produce was taken in rents, taxes and dues. This is higher than the reports for the same century in Iran, although the burden of 'non-canonical' exaction in Iran must be borne in mind, and although the rate of exploitation in France varied much less from region to region as compared with Iran. All that considered, it is nevertheless clear that the vast majority of the French people under the Sun King were living at a subsistence level in the very traditional sense of that term. In 1661 the peasantry owned about one-fifth of the soil. Taine compared 'the situation of the rural population to that of a man walking through a pond with water up to his chin, a slight fall in the economic level and he goes under.'¹ There were a number of standard taxes, of which the *taille* - the old levy raised in feudal times from sections of the population that did not supply military service - and the *gabelle*, the salt tax, were the most exploitative and widespread. Both of them varied in rate - and sometimes fell on different classes of the population - in different regions and provinces of the country.² Nevertheless the *taille* was borne largely by the rural population and especially by the poorest peasantry. Attempts by men like Colbert to reform it, even to impose it solely on agricultural property, did not succeed.

Peasants frequently were unable to pay, so their cattle and even household effects were seized.³ In 1646 three hundred thousand people had been imprisoned for failing to pay the *taille*.⁴ Sometimes they tried to evade

1. See Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, vol. 1, 1715-1799, London, Penguin Books, 1963: 49.

2. See, *ibid*, p. 58.

3. Maurice Ashley, *Louis XIV and the Greatness of France*, London, The English Universities Press, 1966.

4. *Ibid*: 29.

payment, just as Iranian peasants frequently disappeared on sighting *Illchis* and tax-collectors - running away or hiding in wells and qanats (see Lambton and Floor). '[A]t the sight of a regiment', writes a historian of seventeenth century France, 'a whole village might take to flight.'¹ Sometimes they abandoned their land because they were unable to pay² as did Iranian peasants. The salt tax was no less exploitative and no less uneven across the country's regions. Salt was an important productive input for preserving meat and fish. It was also used as fertiliser, and was fed to cattle to immunise them from the common diseases. Salt was a government monopoly. A certain minimum amount had to be taken for household use, and a coarser variety was supplied for other purposes. A large army of inspectors ensured that the minimum was taken, that the cheaper and coarser variety was not substituted for the finer, and that salt was not made secretly from brine.³ It is just comparable to the Iranian *tarh* mentioned above, except that this was systematic, and arose from the government monopoly of salt trade, which enabled it to fix the price and exploit its user, whether he used it for consumption or as a productive input. Communities of fishermen are known to have abandoned their livelihood, as they could not afford to pay the heavy salt tax. Some even migrated to other countries such as Holland. What then, the reader might ask, was the alleged important difference, claimed by this reviewer, between the French and Iranian systems. For it seems that the vast majority of producers in both counties were subject to a heavy - and at times insufferable - burden of dues, especially when one adds the other dues and obligations of the French peasantry - to their lords, to the church, to royal prerogatives, etc. - to the list? The answer to that question comes from considerations of fundamental differences in social and legal structures, and their changes through time, between the two types of society.

There are two aspects to the matter, one legal, the other sociological, which are closely related to each other. European state and society was based

1. See David Ogg, *Louis XIV*, London, etc., Oxford University Press, 1982: 109.

2. Ahsley, *Louis XIV*.

3. Ibid, p. 29, and Ogg, *Louis XIV*: 103.

in law, although the extent, definition, and social implications of law evolved through the ages. In France, for example, the period of absolutism (or despotism) did not take more than three centuries, from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth century. The power and role of the state, and with it, of the king, increased greatly at the expense of the aristocratic magnates, although - and this is a crucial point - there was a commensurate rise in the rights of the lower gentry and the urban middle classes. The most important point however is that, though the power of the state was absolute it was *not* arbitrary. Absolutism itself was based in law, so that the king and state 'had the absolute power of laying down the law, but [not] the absolute power of exercising lawlessness'.¹ That is, at any moment of time the state could not violate the law in an arbitrary and unpredictable fashion. On the contrary, the law was normally observed, and changes therein were possible along fairly well defined procedures. Louis XIV who was the most powerful absolutist ruler of France could not take the life or property of a nobleman, a government official, a merchant or trader, at will and without recourse to the existing legal framework and procedures.² To this legal aspect corresponded its sociological basis, the fact that, in France, the social classes - and especially those of them that had economic power - were independent from the state. This was possible because there were independent and inalienable rights of property-ownership, so that even in the few centuries of absolutism the state did not monopolise the right of property-ownership, could not confiscate and plunder private wealth, and did not rise above the society. In pre-Islamic Iran, the principle of 'Farr-e Izadi' (Divine Grace, sometimes literally translated as Divine Effulgence)³ legitimised the arbitrary power of the ruler. The power of rulers was both absolute and arbitrary for the simple

1. Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, London and New York, Macmillan and New York University Press, 1981: 21.

2. For an extended comparative study, see Homa Katouzian, 'Arbitrary Rule, A Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1, 24, 1997 (reprinted in this volume).

3. *Farrah* is the ancient, less familiar, form of the term, *farr* being the more familiar, classical (New Persian) form, although its classical adjective *fārahi*, reflects the ancient form.

reason that, in the first instance, they owed their position to the Grace bestowed upon them directly by the Divine Will. This was true both of the Just and the Unjust rulers, but it was believed that the Unjust would lose the Grace, and somehow fall from power, although in practice this did not necessarily happen. The same theory was used to legitimise Iran's post-Islamic rulers, sometimes the same ancient terms (Farr-e Izadi) being applied, but later its equivalents, Shadow of God, Pivot of Universe, etc, being preferred.¹ When the ruler as the personification of the state is completely independent from the society, there may be no rights independently from him. That is, in the final analysis, no person or class of people may be able to claim any rights except that which is bestowed or reaffirmed by the ruler. And what is bestowed by a ruler may be taken away by him or his successors, so long as they have the power to enforce their will. It follows that there will not be any legal code or procedure that may limit the power of the state, or be invoked against its transgressions. Indeed the very term 'transgression' could not be used in any normal sense, for where there is no independent right it cannot be legally violated, although some arbitrary moral and ethical sense may be used to describe an act as transgression.

This is the simple reason why there was not and there could not be private property in Iran in any sense that that conveys from the history of Europe. 'Khasseh', 'khalesh', and 'divani' lands were directly or indirectly owned by the ruler and state. Their definition and extent changed from one era to the next, from one dynasty to another, sometimes even from one ruler to the next. But both Floor and Lambton before him point out that even in the same period land that belonged to the 'state' could be transferred to the personal properties of the ruler. The revenue assignment systems – eqata', teyol, soyurghal, etc. - also varied among themselves, and within each category through time. Frequently, there were different types of each

1. See Katouzian *ibid*, and 'Farrah-ye Izadi va Haqq-e Elahi-ye Padeshahan', *Ettela'at Siyasi-Eqtisadi*, nos. 129-130, July 1998.

category at the same time. This itself is evidence for the absence of a fairly well defined framework, showing that not only government was arbitrary, but so was its administrative system. It is however clear from both studies that those holding land or enjoying its revenue one way or another enjoyed no independent right to it. It was a *privilege* rather than a *right* which the state (i.e. the ruler, or local governors backed by him) could take away from him at will, so long as they had the physical power to carry it out. Floor (335), refers to the adage 'All that a slave owns belongs to his master' as the logical explanation for such confiscation. Another version of that adage is 'The slave and all that he owns belong to his master'.¹ This is a more appropriate version because (as we shall see below), not only the property but also the person of a subject, however high he might be, was ultimately at the disposal of the ruler, or those who acted within his authority. There were lands (described as 'molk', but perhaps more correctly 'melk') which were supposed to be owned by the landlord. But even this kind of property could be confiscated without much ceremony, and in any case had to have the sanction of the ruler for it to continue. That is why it was never certain to be passed on as inheritance, and seldom would it continue beyond a couple of generations. There were few exceptions, but so few that proved the rule. Private, and - more likely - religious endowments fared somewhat better, but the rule always remained that the 'slave and whatever he owned' belonged to his master, i. e. the ruler owned the country and all that it contained.

Long- vs. Short-Term Societal Orientation: Let us now refer back to the example of seventeenth century France which we briefly discussed above. The level of exploitation was such that the mass of the people had no opportunity to save any of their income. The aristocracy who, together with the government, were its beneficiaries by-and-large indulged in extravagance, and often found themselves in debt because of their wasteful expenditure habits (although, certainly in England, enlightened landlords had

1. Respectively, 'Al-'abd ma fī yaduhu li-mawlahu' and 'Al-'abd wa ma fī yaduhu kān-a li-mawlahu'.

a significant role in the Industrial Revolution, both in agriculture and in industry). But there were other, rising classes - mainly the urban classes of merchants, traders, professionals, craftsmen, etc., whom the French described as the bourgeoisie - who saved and invested a considerable proportion of their income. This provided the main channel - in France as well as England and elsewhere - for the long-term accumulation of financial capital, which directly or indirectly provided the funds for the development of the new technology, and its use in modern industrial and agricultural production. It is not possible, nor appropriate, to go beyond this simple statement regarding a matter over which innumerable volumes have been written. The point however is this. If these social classes did not enjoy the right of private property independently from the state, it would not have been possible or indeed desirable for them to accumulate capital, for it would have been taken away from them or their immediate descendants. Or, looking at the same thing from the point of view of law, since government was not arbitrary it could not confiscate their property at will. Hence Europe was a LONG TERM SOCIETY, in which life, property and inheritance was predictable. Iran, on the other hand, was a SHOR TERM SOCIETY. It was a society which lacked a reasonable degree of security, and this made every aspect of living unpredictable beyond the immediate future. Since government was not based in law, power, position, possession and life itself could be taken away at short notice. It was not just the peasantry, the vast majority of the people as they were, who were fair game, and virtually lacked any rights at all, who - using a term frequently used by Floor and some of his sources - were set to be 'fleeced' by their rulers and masters. The structure of insecurity ran through all the orders of society, from the village headman through the local craftsman, the merchant and trader, to the governor and governor-general, the *mostowfi*, the vizier, and not least the shah himself. Unlike Europe where legitimacy was the strongest guarantee for the ruler's power and authority, the 'legitimacy' of Iranian ruler was guaranteed only so long as they could maintain his power and authority by

force. Ultimately, the shah could rule, even survive, so long as he was able to create and maintain (by whatever means) a balance of forces which made that possible, not by long term social structures resulting in laws or entrenched traditions that would guarantee his power and authority. That is why it was never clear who would succeed him as his rightful heir, and there was turmoil and rebellion almost each time a ruler died. That is also why the 'legitimacy' of successful rebels was seldom less than the ruler they replaced. Here is an excellent comment by Floor:

Because the shah was 'the sole ' owner of the country, he also was the owner of its public offices, which were regarded as sources of revenue. It was the shah's right to allow a servant or vassal to buy the office, but it was also right to take it back without justification whenever he wanted.

This arrangement generated a basic insecurity, through lack of contractual obligations, that permeated all layers of Qajar society. Even power and wealth only meant relative security if these were held solely at the shah's pleasure. Appointed officials considered their public office as an opportunity to acquire rather than as a means to attain common social goals. *In this sense they were rather like the shah, who treated the country 'as a property hold of uncertain duration...his only concern [being] how to make the most of his incumbency'*(P. 252, emphasis added).

3. Generalization of Findings and Additional issues

The social and political culture described above was not just typical of the Qajar period, but of Iranian history in general, as it is attested to by Floor's own study for the whole of the period it covers, by Lambton's for the whole of the post-Islamic era, and by the sources of Iranian history for all times. Indeed primary sources of Iranian history are packed with innumerable examples of acute insecurity of not only property but also life itself. Countless viziers and other high officials of the state were killed or otherwise destroyed, and/or their entire property was confiscated, without any legal procedure and leave to appeal, for 'political' reasons. Hasanak, 'Amid al-Molk Kondori, Shams al-Din Jovaini, Rashid al-Din Fazlollah,

Emamqoli Khan, Miraz Ebrahim Kalantar (E'temad al-Dawleh), Qa'em Maqam and Amir Kabir are just the most celebrated examples, respectively under the Ghaznavids, the Seljuqs, the Ilkhanids, the Safavids and the Qajars. These were great officials who, justly or unjustly, had fallen from grace. But the plunder of the nobles' and notables' property did not happen only when they fell from office and grace. It could happen at any time. Master Secretary Bunasr-e Moshkan was a very important and highly respected high official of the state under both Mahmud and Ma'usd of Ghazna. He was also very fortunate to die in bed. Bahihaqi, who wrote his history several centuries before the Safavids, relates that shortly before Bunasr died, the Soltan, prompted by a lesser official, had demanded a number of horses and camels from each of the Persian ('tazik') notables, including Bunasr. Every one of them humbly complied. But Bunasr lost his equanimity, says Beyhaqi, solely because he thought that that lesser official had aimed this scheme at him personally. He sent a list of everything he possessed to the ruler, saying that he had earned them all in his long service to the state, and they were all there for Mas'ud to take and let him be taken into a prison-citadel. The Soltan was angry but decided to overlook the matter and drop his demand in Bunasr's case. Shortly afterwards the latter died, 'and they told all sorts of tales about [the causes] of his death, which I shall not mention'. At any rate, he was mourned in honour. Nevertheless, all of his possessions were transferred to the state. And it is clear from Baihaqi's text that this was normal routine:

And they took his good well-trained slave boys to the Soltan's compound, and put the Soltan's brand on his horses and camels. And [a Treasury official] was told to draw up a list of whatever the man had for the treasury...¹

The example is important for some fairly obvious reasons, but most important of all because it shows that the appropriation of the estate of a man such as Bunasr, even though he had died in honour, was normal exercise. There are countless examples of this kind from Iranian history, showing that

1. See *Tarikh-e Beyhaqi*, ed. Ali Akbar Fayyaz, Tehran, Ershad, 1995: 791-799.

a man's property, dead or alive, was always in danger of confiscation, in part or as a whole, even if he had not incurred the wrath of the shah, or whoever could exercise arbitrary power over him. Here are a few examples, from the nineteenth century - in fact, all except the first one from late nineteenth century - when many leaders of the state and society, including at times the shah himself, were convinced that the country's salvation was in establishing orderly, responsible and lawful government. After death in office (under Mohammad Shah) of Manuchehr Khan Gorji, Mo'tamed al-Dawleh, the very powerful governor-general of Isfahan, his estate 'was confiscated by the state, and his body was buried in Qom, in his own special tomb'.¹ Asef al-Dawleh, one-time governor of Khorasan, who, because of a major rebellion against his injustices, had been withdrawn from his post, appeared to have gone mad. He had a large fortune, and rumour had it that he was pretending to be mad for fear that Naser al-Din Shah would take his wealth from him. When he died, Amin al-Soltan, the Grand Vizier, had his personal treasury sealed off on the Shah's orders, so that there was no access even to the special shroud he had purchased for himself, but in the end they opened the seal, got the shroud, and sealed the treasury again. Eventually, they got a total of 150,000 tomans from his heirs.² Mostafa Khan-e Amir Tuman, governor of Ardabil and Khoy died. 'The Shah expressed much regret. I have subsequently heard that he sent a man to seal off his house, because they say he has a lot of money'.³ Yahya Khan Khajeh Nuri had endowed most of his property for fear that the Shah would take them after his death.⁴ Mehdi Khan was an official who had amassed a large fortune. When he died, the Shah had his house sealed off, and took a large amount of his wealth.⁵ Kamran Mirza, the Shah's third son and Minister of War, jailed the wife of

1. See Mehdi Bamdad, *Sharah-e Hal-e Rejal-e Iran, dar Qarn-e 12, 13 va 14 Hejri*, vol. 4, Tehran, Zavvar, 1992: 162.

2. See Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal*, vol. 2, pp. 301-317; *Ruznameh-ye Khaterat-e E'temad al-Saltaneh*, ed. Iraj Afshar, Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1966: 345-545.

3. See E'temad al-Saltaneh, *ibid.*:543.

4. See Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal*, vol. 5:333.

5. Bamdad, vol. 5: 303. For a somewhat different, though not contradictory, version see E'temad al-Saltaneh: 601.

the Commander of Artillery after his death to obtain money from her. She refused to pay 70,000 tomans, and he eventually accepted 3000. Having heard this, Nezam al-Dawleh, who was then the richest commander in the army, endowed the whole of his property.¹ On the eve of the Constitutional Revolution Mirza Mahmud Khan Hakim al-Molk, Mozaffar al-Din Shah's long-standing physician and favourite, and recently minister of the royal court, who was hated by Amin al-Soltan, then Chief Vazir and Chancellor, died as governor of Gilan. He was believed to have amassed a fortune of about two and a half million tomans. Rumours were rife that he had been poisoned. His entire fortune was sealed off on the orders of Amin al-Soltan.² Once again, it is important to bear in mind the logic of the system for, according to Mokhber al-Saltaneh, since much of the riches amassed by state officials were themselves due to 'plunder', confiscations from their property by the state was not viewed as an extraordinary violation of their rights.³

These are just a few examples of plunder of property when the victim had not fallen from office or grace, and was not an object of wrath by the ruler. They are examples of cases when the ruler demanded money from an otherwise 'innocent' notable. But there were other occasions when the ruler traded the life of an 'innocent' notable or official for money, 'innocent' here meaning that the ruler himself did not have the slightest anger or grudge against the notable. Ravandi says that Soltan Mohammad of the Seljuqs was a good-natured ruler 'but he had a great love for accumulating riches'. Zia' al-Molk, son of Nezam al-Molk and currently the Soltan's vizier, had offered him 500,000 dinars, to put a very important man (who was also a sayyed) 'at his disposal' and the Soltan had agreed. Having got wind of the situation in time, the sayyed quickly saw the Soltan, and offered 800,000 for him to put

1. Bamdad, vol. 5, pp. 291-92, and vol. 1: 151-53.

2. See, Abdolhossein Khan Sepehr, *Mer'at al-waqaye'-e Moza'ffari va Yaddasht-ha-ye Malek al-Movarrekhin*, ed. Abdolhossein Nava'i, Tehran: Zarrin, 1989, Part 2: 28; Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal-e Rejal*, vol. 4: 35-38.

3. See Mokhber al-Saltaneh (Mehdiqoli Hedayat), *Khaterat va Khatarat*, Tehran: Zavvar, 1984, which is a good, fairly detached, source on the political culture of the Qajar and early Pahlavi period.

Zia' al-Molk at his disposal instead. This is how he made his bargain. He told the Soltan:

'I have heard that Khajeh Ahmad [Zia al-Molk] has bought this slave of yours [i.e. himself] for five hundred tomans. I wish that the Lord of the Universe [i. e. the Soltan] shall not see fit to sell this descendent of the Prophet. I should raise the five hundred dinars to eight hundred on the condition that you would put *him* at my disposal'. The love of money proved stronger to the Soltan than the preservation of the vizier. He agreed [to the offer] and delivered Khajeh Ahmad to the Sayyed, who rightly took his revenge from him, and he [Ahmad] suffered Everything he had thought of doing to Amir the Sayyed.¹

That was nine hundred years ago. Now at the close of the nineteenth century, Rokn al-Dawleh, a borther of Naser al-Din Shah had been governor of Fars for only seven months when he heard that the Shah was thinking of giving his post to someone else who was offering a bigger *Pishkesh*. He took various steps - most effective of all, using the influence of the Shah's favourite wife - to stop that. However, he bore a deep grudge against Qavam al-Molk, the biggest landlord and most important magnate in the province, had the soles of his feet beaten by sticks and thrown him in jail. He had then offered 100,000 tomans to the Shah and 30, 000 to the Grand Vizier, Amin al-Soltan, to 'sell' Qavam al-Molk to him. They did not accept, partly because of the influence of his uncle, and partly - perhaps mainly - because of probable adverse comments by Europeans. E'temad al-Saltaneh writes in his diaries:

After entering Shiraz, Rokn al-Dawleh had had [Qavam al-Molk] bastinadoed and imprisoned, and then written a letter to Tehran saying that he would pay 100,000 tomans to the Shah and 30,000 to Amin al-Soltan to sell Qavam to him, that is, for him to have the life and property of Qavam at his disposal. But he did not manage to buy Qavam, since he is a nephew of Sahab-Divan, and, apart from that, this is not like the age of Fath' ali

1. See Mohammad ibn Ali Soleyman Ravandi, *Rahat al-Sudur*, ed. Muhammad Iqbal, London, Luzac, 1921: 162-165.

Shah to be possible to buy and sell the magnates and notables; the Europeans would make a fuss. He did not manage to buy Qavam...¹

This happened in the early 1890's. The reference to the sale of important people by Fath'ali Shah is not spurious, for Amin al-Dowleh writes in his memoirs quite independently:

...The Shah [i. e. Fath'ali] even used to sell the court officials and state dignitaries to each other...[since], as Iranian sycophants keep repeating, life and private possessions were the rightful property of the Shah-an-shah.²

But, as the above example from the Seljuq period shows, this was by no means a Qajar invention. In fact such things had been part of the country's social structure and it is difficult to believe that they had not been practised at any length of time. For that reason, it would be a mistake to attribute them to the personal moral dejection of rulers, viziers, governors, or whoever. No doubt some of these were less kind or more greedy than the others. But the matter was deep-seated and systemic. It is succinctly captured by the above-quoted adage, 'The slave and all that he owns belong to his master'.

4. Concluding remarks

There is a great deal of detailed information in Floor's book which have taken much effort to compile, and which are of historical interest in their own right, although precisely because of the nature of the subject, they could, and probably would, be fruitfully used only by a limited number of interested scholars. Some of it, on the other hand - together with asides, allusions and insights by the author and his primary European sources - may be used for discerning the fundamental characteristics of Iranian history and, hence, of the nature of state and society in Iran. No serious and realistic history of Iran, as a whole or in part, could dispense with the recognition of the essentially non-European features of Iranian society and history.

1. See E'temad al-Saltaneh, *Ruznameh-ye Khaterat*, pp. 939-940; Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal*, vol. 5: 403.

2. See, *Khaterat-e Siyasi-e Mirza Ali Khan Amin al-Dowleh*, Hafiz Farmanfarmaian, ed., Tehran, 1991: 6.

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