Kingdoms known to man have been governed in two ways: either by a prince and his servants, who, as ministers by his grace and permission, assist in governing the realm; or by a prince and by barons, who hold their positions not by favor of the ruler but by antiquity of blood. Such barons have states and subjects of their own, who recognize them as their lords, and are naturally attached to them. In those states which are governed by a prince and his servants, the prince possesses more authority, because there is no one in the state regarded as superior, and if others are obeyed it is merely as ministers and officials of the prince, and no one regards them with any special affection. Examples of the two kinds of government in our time are those of the Turk and the King of France.

Nicolò dei Machiavelli, *The Prince*

**THE QAJAR STATE**

Nineteenth-century Europeans tended to depict the Qajars as typical “oriental despots.” Their despotism, however, existed mainly in the realm of virtual reality. In theory, the shah may have claimed monopoly over the means of violence, administration, taxation, and adjudication. His word was law. He appointed and dismissed all officials – from court ministers, governor-generals, and tribal chiefs, all the way down to village and ward headmen. He made and unmade all dignitaries, bestowing and withdrawing honors and titles. He even claimed to own all property, treating the country as his own private estate. Lord Curzon, after exploring the country in person and making liberal use of the India Office archives, concluded his monumental *Persia and the Persian Question* with the grand claim that the shah was the “pivot of the entire machinery of public life” and that he fused the “legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government.” In reality, however, the power of the shah was sharply limited – limited by the lack of both a state bureaucracy and a standing army. His real power ran no further
than his capital. What is more, his authority carried little weight at the local level unless backed by regional notables. “The Qajars,” in the words of a recent study, “had few government institutions worthy of the name” and had no choice but to “depend on local notables in dealing with their subjects.” In Machiavelli’s schema, the shah resembled more the French king than the Ottoman sultan.

The Qajars, a Turkic-speaking tribal confederation, conquered the country piece by piece in the 1780–90s, established their capital in Tehran in 1786, founded their dynasty in 1796, and proceeded to reign for more than a century. They presided over the center through ministers (vezirs), courtiers (darbaris), princes (mirzas), hereditary mostowfis (accountants), and nobles (asbras) with such titles as al-saltaneh (of the realm), al-dowleh (of the government), and al-mamaleks (of the kingdom). But they reigned over the rest of the country through local a’ yans (notables) – kbons (tribal chiefs), arbabs (landlords), tojjars (wealthy merchants), and mojtaheds (religious leaders). These notables retained their own sources of local power. Even after a half-century of half-hearted attempts to build state institutions, Nasser al-Din Shah ended his long reign in 1896 leaving behind merely the skeleton of a central government. It amounted to no more than nine small entities – bureaus without bureaucracies. Five ministries (interior, commerce, education and endowments, public works and fine arts, and post and telegraph) were new and existed only on paper. The other four (war, finance, justice, and foreign affairs) were of older vintage but still lacked salaried staffs, regional departments, and even permanent files. They were ministries in name only.

The ministries were sparsely manned by families of scribes who had held similar positions since the early days of the Qajars – some ever since Safavid times in the seventeenth century. They treated government documents as private papers; and, since the monarch did not pay them regular salaries, they considered their positions as assets to be bought and sold to other members of the scribe families. To recognize their sense of corporate identity, Nasser al-Din Shah had decreed that “men of the pen” should wear the kolah – a round grey-shaded bonnet hat. By the end of the century, they were easily distinguishable from the ulama (clerics), sayyeds (descendants of the Prophet), tojjars (merchants), and hajjis (those who had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca) who wore black, white, or green turbans. The kolah was also distinguishable from the red fez worn by officials in the rival Ottoman Empire. This term “men of the pen” carried much significance. It came from ancient Zoroastrian and Greek thought via the Persian genre of “mirror for princes” literature. This literature divided the population into
four classes, each representing the four basic elements in nature as well as the four “humors” in the human body. “Men of the pen” represented air; “men of the sword,” warriors, represented fire; “men of trade,” merchants and tradesmen, represented water; and “men of husbandry,” the peasantry, represented earth. The prince was depicted as a doctor whose main duty was to preserve a healthy balance between the four humors in the human body. In fact, “justice” meant the preservation of a healthy balance.4

The finance ministry, the oldest and most substantial of the four institutions, was staffed both at the center and in the provincial capitals by hereditary mostowfis (accountants) and moshirs (scribes). The Mostowfi al-Mamalek family – whose origins reach back to the Safavids – passed on the central office from father to son throughout the nineteenth century and until the 1920s. Other mandarin families – many of whom came from either the region of Ashtiyan in central Iran or Nur in Mazanderan – assisted the main governors in collecting taxes. The term mostowfi came from ifa and estefa meaning “collector of government payments.” For tax purposes, the country was divided into thirty-eight regions – by the 1910s they had been reduced to eighteen. Each region was “auctioned” every Nowruz (New Year’s Day); and the successful bidder – usually a notable offering the highest pishkesh (gift) – received the royal farman (decree) along with a royal robe making him local governor for the duration of the coming year. As such, he held the fief (tuyul) to collect the maliyat (land tax) – the main source of revenue for the central government. The tuyul was a hybrid fief linked sometimes to the land tax, sometimes to the actual land itself. These tuyul-holding governors had to work closely both with mostowfis, who had to verify the receipts and who possessed tax assessments from previous generations, and with local notables who could hinder the actual collection of taxes. The mostowfis also continued to administer the ever-diminishing state and crown lands. In the words of one historian, “even in 1923 the government continued to farm out taxes simply because it lacked the administrative machinery to collect them.”5 Morgan Shuster, an American brought in to reorganize the finance ministry in 1910, tried in somewhat condescending but useful terms to make sense of the complex mostowfi system:6

There has never been in Persia a tax-register or “Domesday Book” which would give a complete, even if somewhat inaccurate, survey of the sources of internal revenue upon which the Government could count for its support. Persia is divided for taxation purposes into seventeen or eighteen taxation regions each containing a large city or town as its administrative center... Beyond a very indefinite idea in the heads of some of the chief mostowfis, or “government accountant,” at Tehran
as to what proportion of these amounts should come from the first class of districts within the province, the Central Government knows nothing of the sources of the revenue which it is supposed to receive... The chief collector has in his possession what is termed the kitabcha (little book) of the province, and each of the sub-collectors has the kitabcha of his particular district. These little books are written in a peculiar Persian style, on very small pieces of paper, unbound, and are usually carried in the pocket, or at least kept in the personal possession, of the tax-collector. They are purposely so written as to make it most difficult, if not impossible, for any ordinary Persian to understand them. There is in Persia, and has been for many generations past, a particular class of men who are known as mostowfis. The profession or career of mostowfi is, in many cases, hereditary, passing from father to son. These men understand the style in which the kitabcha are written, and the complicated and intricate system by which the local taxes are computed and collected. Whether one of them is a chief collector of a province, or the collector of a taxation district, he considers the corresponding kitabcha to be his personal property, and not as belonging to the Government. He resents most bitterly an attempt on the part of any one to go into details or to seek to find out whence the taxes are derived or what proportion of them he himself retains... It is clear, therefore, that in Persia the Central Government has but a most meager knowledge either of the revenues which it could expect to receive, or of the justice or injustice of the apportionment of the taxes among the people of Persia.

Curzon estimated annual government revenues to have been no more than 52.4 million qrans ($8.2 million) in the late 1890s – 80 percent came from the land tax. The other 20 percent came from the mint and the telegraph system. Expenditures went mostly to the court – its stables, workshops, guards, cavalry, and pensions. They also went to state granaries and subsidies for clerical and tribal leaders. Of the 43 million qran expenditures, 18 million went to the army, 8 million to government pensions, 3 million to the “royal house,” another 5 million to the royal guards, 2 million to pensions for the nobility, 1.5 million to the clergy and the accountants, 600,000 to the Qajar khans, and 1 million to the foreign ministry. The latter, according to Curzon, was the only ministry with a regular full-time staff. It had permanent representatives in Istanbul, London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Washington, Antwerp, and Brussels. It also had representatives in the provincial capitals within Iran – mainly to keep an eye on local governors.

The war ministry claimed a mighty force of more than 200,000. In reality, the regular army, the only force with any semblance of discipline and full-time pay, numbered fewer than 8,000. It consisted of a 5,000-man artillery contingent with four outdated guns on display in Cannon Square, Tehran’s main parade ground; and a 2,000-man Cossack Brigade created in 1879 to replace the traditional palace guard of some 4,000
Georgian slaves. These Cossacks were officered by Russians; but their rank and file came partly from the Shahsaven tribe and partly from Turkic-speaking mohajers (immigrants) who in the 1820s had fled the Russian advance into Erivan. Many had received tuyuls in the fertile region of Sefid Rud in Mazanderan in return for serving in the military. The palace guard was supplemented with some 100 Bakhtiyaris officered by their own khan who had married into the Qajar family and received tuyuls in the Chahar Mahal region outside Isfahan. The main governors, such as Prince Zill al-Sultan of Isfahan, retained their own praetorian guards.

The paper army of 200,000 consisted mostly of tribal contingents officered by the own clan leaders. They were equipped with obsolete muzzle-loading guns bought at bargain prices in the 1870s when European armies had converted to the new breech-loading rifles. As one British traveler noted, “the tribes compose the whole military force of the kingdom except for the standing army which is not much more than a body guard for the Shah and his princely governors.” What is more, by the end of the century, the main tribes had increased their relative power vis-à-vis the central government by gaining access to breech-loading rifles. According to British travelers, gun runners did a brisk business in the Gulf smuggling modern rifles to the Bakhtiyaris, Qashqa’is, Boir Ahmadis, Turkmans, Shahsavens, Arabs, and Baluchis. These tribes, it was generally agreed, could now easily “out-gun” the regular army. As Nasser al-Din Shah bemoaned, “I have neither a proper army nor the ammunition to supply a regular army.” Similarly, one of his ministers, Amin al-Dowleh, remarked that “heirs to the ancient Iranian throne would not be able to hold their heads high until they created a proper army.”

The justice ministry, although in existence since 1834, had little presence outside Tehran. Abdallah Mostowfi, a leading accountant, reminisced in his memoirs in somewhat nostalgic terms that society itself managed to take care of legal matters without interference from the central government. Among the tribes, justice was administered by clan khans; among peasants, by kadkhudas (headmen), village elders, and landlords; and among craftsmen and tradesmen, by their own guild elders. In the main cities, the formal judicial system was divided in a somewhat ambiguous fashion into shari’a (religious) and ‘urf (state) courts. The former were headed by clerical qazis (judges) and hereditary sheikh al-islams (heads of Islam); the latter by government-appointed hakims. Shari’a courts dealt with civil and personal matters; ‘urf courts with offenses against the state – these could include theft and drunkenness as well as banditry, sedition, and heresy. The latter could base their verdicts on the shari’a, precedent, reason, circumstantial
evidence, state expediency, and even local custom. In fact, ‘urf could mean customary as well as state law. Curzon even equated it with English “common law.” In theory, only the shah and his immediate representatives – the princely governors possessing the royal dagger – had the authority to take life. In practice, most judicial decisions, even those of life and death, were left to local authorities. What is more, the budget of the justice ministry remained so meager that even at the end of the century provincial departments survived by selling notary stamps.16

A British diplomat observed that the Qajars were willing to leave most legal matters to religious judges, tribal chiefs, village headmen, and guild elders so long as they retained in theory the ultimate authority over life and death.17 This was no small matter in a country where the government had few instruments of control but could use the public gallows to put on gruesome displays. According to one diary covering the period 1873–1904, the provincial capital of Shiraz had 82 public executions – 48 decapitations, 17 hangings, 11 drawing-and-quarterings, 4 live burials, and 2 disembowelings. It also had 118 amputations: 41 of fingers, 39 of feet, and 38 of ears; and 110 public floggings, 11 of which proved fatal. The diary noted that these spectacles were designed to deter criminals as well as to display royal power to the wider public – “especially to nomadic tribesmen prone to rural banditry.”18

The newer ministries were equally modest. The interior ministry had recruited an Austrian and an Italian officer in 1873 to establish a police force in Tehran. By 1900, this force, known as the Nazmieh, had no more than 460 policemen. The Education Ministry spent most of its limited resources on the Dar al-Fanon (Abode of Learning), a high school established in 1852 to train personnel for the army and the civil service. It had explicit instructions to recruit from the “sons of a’yans, ashrafs, khans, and rich families.” By 1900, it had 300 students. One instructor complained that teaching these “pampered children was like bringing order to a bunch of wild desert animals.”19 Instructors were recruited mostly from France to counter British and Russian influence. The commerce ministry was confined to the few ports on the Caspian and the Persian Gulf. The ministry of posts and telegraph – “owned” until the 1910s by the Mukhber al-Dowleh family – was nominally in charge of both the postal system established in 1876 and the telegraph lines introduced by the British in 1856 to link London with Bombay. By 1900 the telegraph had been expanded to link Tehran to all the provincial capitals. Some of these lines, however, were administered by a British firm employing Armenians. According to the Italian police officer: “Only the Ministries of Army, Interior, and Foreign Affairs have any resemblance of formal organizations. The others have no regular place, no
regular employees, and no regular budget. Their ministers move around with servants carrying their papers.”

Curzon identified six men as having most influence in the last years of Nasser al-Din Shah: Muzaffar al-Din, the heir apparent, who in line with tradition governed the strategically vital province of Azerbaijan; Zill al-Sultan, the shah’s forceful son, who governed Isfahan and at one time had also governed Fars, Kurdestan, Arabestan, and Lurestan; Kamran Mirza (Naib al-Sultaneh), the shah’s third son, the governor of Tehran who nominally headed the military both as army minister and as commander-in-chief (Amir Kaber) – he was also married to the daughter of the future Muhammad Ali Shah; Amin al-Sultan, the grandson of a Georgian slave who had risen to become the Sadar A’ zam (Chief Minister) as well as minister of finance and interior and governor of the Persian Gulf ports; Amin al-Dowleh, another Georgian deemed to be Amin al-Sultan’s chief rival; and finally, Mushar al-Dowleh, the shah’s brother-in-law and justice minister, who, being a liberal-inclined mostowfi, had educated his sons in Europe and helped set up the School of Political Science in Tehran. His eldest son, who inherited his title, was to play a major role in the Constitutional Revolution.

The other cabinet posts were held by: Mukhber al-Dowleh, the minister of posts and telegraph, who also held the portfolio for the ministry of education and endowments – he was related to the shah through marriage; and Abbas Mirza, the shah’s eldest brother, who was minister of commerce as well as governor of Qazvin. The other major province, Khurasan, was governed by Rukn al-Dowleh – another royal brother. These governors were entrusted not only with the royal dagger as a symbol of ultimate authority but also with the task of ensuring that the state granaries were well stocked in case of emergencies. In appointing his son governor of Tehran, Nasser al-Din Shah warned him that if food shortages ever afflicted the capital he personally would be held responsible and would be bastinadoed for the whole world to see that “on such a vital issue even the shah’s son could be held accountable.”

Lacking a central bureaucracy, the Qajars relied on local notables – tribal chiefs, clerical leaders, big merchants, and large landlords. In most localities, whether town, village, or tribal areas, local elites enjoyed their own sources of power as well as links to the central court. Some were related to the royal family through marriage or blood. Fath Ali Shah, the second Qajar ruler, had systematically created bonds between himself and the provincial families by marrying more than one thousand wives and leaving behind some hundred children. Nasser al-Din Shah was more modest; he married only
seventy times. “Every region,” people quipped, “is infested with camels, fleas, and royal princes (shahzadehs).” Local notables also bought titles, offices, and tuyuls. Mostowfi complained that the creation of some two hundred honorific names flooded the market and by the end of the century “anyone who was anyone claimed to have a title.”

These notables can be described as a landed aristocracy. They derived much of their income from agriculture and were known colloquially as arbabs (land proprietors) and omdeh-e maleks (large landowners). Mehdi Bambad, in his multi-volume biographies of the Qajar era, identifies 1,283 personages. Of these, 771 (60 percent) were state functionaries – courtiers, mostowfis, and monshis (scribes); 286 (23 percent) were literary and scholarly figures – almost all linked to the court; 98 (8 percent) were princes; another 98 were ulama; and 19 (1 percent) were merchants. Although Bambad is not specific about their finances, almost all, including the ulama, had investments in agriculture – either as owners of large estates or part-owners of villages.

In addition to owning land, the senior ulama enjoyed extensive authority. As maraj-e taqlids (sources of emulation), they were respected as spiritual and legal guides. The devout consulted them on personal and ethical as well as legal and religious matters. As nayeb-e imams (imam’s representatives), they received two types of tithes – the Shi’i khoms known as the “Imam’s share” and the regular Muslim zakat earmarked for the poor. Contributions came mostly from landlords, merchants, and guild elders. As heads of religious endowments (awqafs), they supervised mosques, shrines, seminaries, and Koranic schools. Endowments came mostly in the form of agricultural and urban land. And as mojtaheds, they taught at the seminaries, distributed scholarships, and helped appoint shari’a judges, mosque preachers, prayer leaders, and school teachers. In short, the Shi’i ulama, in contrast to their counterpart in the Sunni world, enjoyed their own sources of income. Thus they were more independent of the central government.

To counter this, the Qajars shrouded themselves in a religious aura. They declared themselves Protectors of Shi’ism, Keepers of the Koran, Commanders of the Faithful, and Girders of Imam Ali’s Sword. They made well-publicized pilgrimages to Shi’i shrines – to the Imam Reza Mosque in Mashed where the Eighth Imam was supposedly buried; to the Fatemeh Mosque in Qom where Imam Reza’s sister was interred; and even to the Ottoman Empire to visit Karbala where Imam Hussein had been martyred, Najaf where Imam Ali was buried, and Samarra where the Twelfth Imam had lived. They gold-plated the large dome at the Samarra Mosque. They also built up Mashed, which literally means the “place of
martyrs,” to rival Mecca and Medina. They patronized theological centers in Najaf, Mashed, and Isfahan, and in Qom they founded the Fayzieh Seminary. They buried their own relatives at the Shah Abdul ‘Azim Mosque on the outskirts of Tehran which was reputed to contain not only their own ancestor but also the Seventh Imam’s son. They built the country’s very first rail line connecting Tehran to this Abdul ‘Azim Mosque. Of course, they continued to appoint members of the ulama to be qazis, sheikh al-islams, and imam jum’ehs (heads of the main Friday mosques). The imam jum’eh of Tehran married into the royal family. Samuel Benjamin, the first official American representative in Iran, claimed in somewhat exaggerated terms that the most senior mojtaheh in Tehran was so powerful – even though he rode a mule and had only one attendant – that “with one word he could hurl down the Shah.”

The Qajars also perpetuated the Safavid practice of inventing genealogies linking themselves both to ancient Iranian dynasties and to the Shi’i Imams. Equally important, they continued to popularize the myth that Imam Hussein had married Shahbanou, the daughter of the last Sassanid shah. Thus the Fourth Imam and his heirs were all supposedly direct descendants not only of the holy Prophet but also of the Sassanid shahs.

What is more, the Qajars patronized the annual Muharram ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. They financed dastehs (flagellations), rowzechkhanis (recitations), taziyehs (passion plays), husseiniyehs (religious centers), and takiyehs (theaters). After his 1873 tour of Europe, Nasser al-Din Shah built the vast Takiyeh Dowlat (Government Theater) in Tehran to house the annual passion plays. This canvas-covered rotunda was so grand it could house 20,000 spectators – some thought it was inspired by London’s Albert Hall. The American representative claimed that it featured a life-sized portrait of Prophet Muhammad. It was probably the portrait of Imam Ali or Imam Hussein. The passion plays, whose origins go back to the Safavid era, dramatized in blow-by-blow accounts the final days of Imam Hussein and his seventy-two companions. They began on 1st Muharram with Imam Hussein arriving on the plains of Karbala near the town of Kufa, and raising the black banner of revolt against Yezid, the Umayyid Caliph. They end on Ashura, 10th Muharram, with Imam Hussein willingly accepting his martyrdom – a fate which according to tradition he had predetermined even before his arrival at Karbala.

Nasser al-Din Shah built other takiyehs. Tehran alone had more than forty of them throughout the various wards – many were financed by local notables. Rowzechkhanis also reenacted powerful scenes from the life of Imam Hussein and his companions. By the end of the century, taziyehs
incorporated happier scenes to celebrate such joyous occasions as safe returns from travel or recoveries from serious illness. Although Muharram was a solemn occasion, street actors were not averse to entertaining the public with parodies. What is more, Ashura was immediately followed with the Feast of Zahra, also known as the Feast of Laughter, celebrating Caliph Omar’s assassination at the hands of a Persian Muslim. Colorful clothes replaced dark ones, women painted their nails, men dyed their hair, the rich put on firework displays, and neighborhood children burnt effigies of Caliph Omar on large bonfires. English visitors found the scene familiar.

Muharram commemorations also bore striking similarities to medieval Christian passion plays. Both were seen as the fulfillment of divine predestination. Both depicted holy martyrs dying for human sins. Both exemplified human frailty as neither the people of Kufa nor those of Jerusalem rose to the occasion. Both deaths were seen as redemptive acts through which penitent believers could gain salvation in the next world. Both also fostered a sense of community against the outside world and thereby drew the masses closer to the elite. Nasser al-Din Shah dutifully attended the annual play in the Government Theater, and from the royal box watched with binoculars not only the actors but also the audience – all sitting according to rank and class. Some joked that he took a special interest in the women. Actors often improvised. They clothed the enemy in Ottoman dress, referred to Imam Hussein’s infants as shahzadehs (royal princes), and introduced Europeans who were so moved by Imam Hussein’s tribulations that they promptly converted to Shi’ism. Street flagellators, meanwhile, cursed and stomped on the names of the Sunni Caliphs – Abu Bakr, Omar, and ‘Uthman. Senior clerics shied away, deeming such displays unseemly, inflammatory, and, perhaps most important of all, encroachments on to their own turf. The American representative reported that it was mostly the “ignorant classes who joined in these processions.”

The pitch to popular religion resonated well since more than 85 percent of the country was Shi’i. Sunnis, who constituted less than 10 percent, were confined to the periphery: Baluchis in the southeast; Turkmans in the northeast; some Kurds in the northwest; and some Arabs in the southwest. Non-Muslims, meanwhile, constituted less than 5 percent of the country (see Table 2). They included some 80,000 Assyrian Christians around Lake Urmiah; 90,000 Armenians in and near Isfahan, as well as in Rasht, Tehran, and western Azerbaijan; 50,000 Jews in Yazd, Shiraz, Tehran, Isfahan, and Hamadan; and 15,000 Zoroastrians in Yazd, Kerman, Tehran, and Isfahan. The Qajars continued the Safavid tradition of treating their Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian minorities as legitimate “People of the Book” – legitimate
Table 2 *Communal composition of Iran, 1900*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main language groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persians</td>
<td>6,000,000 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azeris</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazanderanis</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilakis</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taleshis</td>
<td>20,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tatis</td>
<td>20,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major tribes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kurds</td>
<td>850,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs</td>
<td>450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakhtiyaris</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qashqais</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baluchis</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurs</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boir Ahmadis</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamasanis</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afshars</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahsavens</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazaras (Berberis)</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timouris</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmans</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qareh Daghis</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghans</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basseris</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamshidis</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajiks</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qareh Pakhs</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Smaller tribes |  |
| Qajars, Bayats, Qarahgozlus, Baharlus, Imanlus, Nafars, Kamatchis, Maqadadamis, Javanshiris, Shakkaks |

| Non-Muslims |  |
| Bahais      | 100,000          |
| Assyrians   | 90,000           |
| Armenians   | 80,000           |
| Jews        | 50,000           |
| Zoroastrians| 15,000           |

Note: Since no national censuses were taken in the nineteenth century and traveler accounts are highly impressionistic, these estimates are educated guesses using scattered reports in the British Foreign Office, taking into account migration, and projecting back the first state census of 1956. For attempts to estimate the size of the tribes, see H. Field, *Contribution to the Anthropology of Iran* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1939); and S. I. Bruk, “The Ethnic Composition of the Countries of Western Asia,” *Central Asian Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1960), pp. 417–20.
both because they had their own holy books and because they were recognized as such in the Koran and the shari’a. They were permitted to have their own leaders and organizations, their own schools and tax levies, and their own laws and places of worship. The shahs transacted with them through their own religious leaders. The Armenians were represented by their Archbishop in Isfahan, the Assyrians by their Patriarch in Urmiah, the Jews by their Grand Rabbi in Yazd, and the Zoroastrians by their High Priest also in Yazd.

The largest minority, the Bahais, however, lacked legal status. Initially known as Babis, they originated in the 1840s when a merchant from Shiraz had declared himself to be the Bab (Gate) to Imam Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam who had gone into Occultation. He claimed to have come to herald Judgment Day and the reappearance of the Mahdi. Although he was executed and his followers were mercilessly persecuted as heretics, especially after they tried to assassinate Nasser al-Din Shah in 1852, the movement managed to survive under the Bab’s heir who took the name Baha’allah (Glory of God) and preached strict abstinence from all active politics. He declared himself to be the Hidden Imam as well as Christ, with an entirely new message propagating social reform as well as respect for established authority. He published his own holy book, replacing the Koran and the Bible. His brother, however, named himself Sub-e Azal (Morn of Eternity), declared himself to be the Bab’s true heir, and continued to denounce the whole establishment. Thus the Babi movement split into the activist Azali and the quietist Bahai sects. The former survived mostly in Tehran; the latter in Yazd, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Najafabad. Estimates for their total numbers in the late nineteenth century vary from 100,000 to 1 million. Both sects were clandestine. Both were headed by leaders who took refuge in the Ottoman Empire. And both were demonized by the authorities, especially the clergy, not only as foreign-connected conspiracies but also as mortal threats to Shi’i Islam.

The Qajars also tapped into pre-Islamic Iranian sentiments. They patronized public readings of the Shahnnameh and even renamed the crown after the mythical Kayan dynasty described in that epic. They named sons after Ferdowsi heroes – names such as Kamran, Bahman, Ardashir, and Jahanger. They discovered genealogical links between themselves and the ancient Parthians. They celebrated the ancient Nowruz (New Year) with fireworks. They decorated their palaces with Achaemenid and Sassanid motifs. They designed a new coat of arms bearing the Lion and Sun, and, in bestowing knighthoods, declared this insignia to have been the mark of “distinction between good and evil since the days of Zoroaster.” They improvised on the ancient insignia, placing Imam Ali’s famed two-fanged sword in the
palm of the Lion.\textsuperscript{37} Even though some clerics objected that this Lion and Sun originated in Armenia, the insignia soon became the national symbol, clearly distinguishable from the Ottoman Crescent Moon.\textsuperscript{38}

The Qajars also emulated the Achaeminids and Sassanids by commissioning huge carvings of themselves on mountain cliffs — some right next to the ancient rock reliefs. Fath Ali Shah placed one on the well-trodden road to Abdul ʿAzim Mosque. One court chronicler argued that the “pious” shah commissioned this because “rulers from ancient times had left pictures of themselves cut in stone.”\textsuperscript{39} What is more, the Qajars recruited Persian mostowfis into their court administration, describing them as “men of the pen” to distinguish them from their “men of the sword” — the Turkic tribal chiefs. This literati was well versed not only in Firdowsi but also in such famed Persian poets as Hafez, Mowlavi, Rumi, and Saʿadi. The appeal to Persian literature resonated well among not only mostowfi families but also the Persian-speaking population in the central heartlands — in Isfahan, Shiraz, Kerman, Qom, Yazd, and Ashtian. Europeans were surprised to find that even off the beaten track the rural population could cite — however incorrectly — long passages from the \textit{Shahnameh}.\textsuperscript{40} Edward Browne, the famed English historian of Persian literature and no fan of Firdowsi, conceded that the \textit{Shahnameh} “enjoyed from the first until the present day an unchanging and unrivalled popularity” throughout Iran.\textsuperscript{41} Of course, such blatant exploitation of Persian and Shiʿi sentiments did not always work. For example, in one of his periodic pilgrimages to Shah Abdul ʿAzim Mosque, Nasser al-Din Shah found himself pelted with stones thrown by soldiers angry for being left in arrears. Even the Shadow of God was not exempt from earthly wrath.

\section*{Qajar Society}

The Qajars governed not so much through religion and bureaucracy as through local notables. Sir John Malcolm, a British diplomat, in a perceptive aside noted that the shahs in theory appointed all tribal chiefs, governors, magistrates, and town ward headmen, but in practice had to choose those already “respected” in their own community — “just as members of corporation are in any English town.”\textsuperscript{42}

Although these officers are not formally elected, the voice of the people always points them out: and if the king should appoint a magistrate disagreeable to the citizens, he could not perform his duties, which require all the weight he derives from personal consideration to aid the authority of office. In some towns or villages the voice of the people in nominating their kadkhuda, or head, is still more decided;
if one is named of whom they do not approve, their clamour produces either his resignation or removal. These facts are important; for no privilege is more essential to the welfare of the people, than that of choosing or influencing the choice of their magistrates. It is true, these magistrates cannot always screen them from the hand of power, and are often compelled to become the instruments of oppression; still their popularity with their fellow-citizens, which caused their elevation, continues to be their strength; and in the common exercise of their duties they attend to their comfort, happiness and interests. In every city or town of any consequence, the merchants, tradesmen, mechanics, and labourers have each a head, or rather a representative, who is charged with the peculiar interests of his class. He is chosen by the community he belongs to, and is appointed by the king.

The population lived in small face-to-face communities with their own structures, hierarchies, languages and dialects, and, often, until the late nineteenth century, self-sufficient economies. Physical geography lay at the root of this social mosaic. The large central desert famous as the Kaver, the four formidable mountain ranges known as the Zagros, Elborz, Mekran, and the Uplands, as well as the marked lack of navigable rivers, lakes, and rainfed agriculture, all played a part in fragmenting the population into small self-contained tribes, villages, and towns.

The tribes, totaling as much as 25–30 percent of the population, consisted of some fifteen major entities known as ilds – Qajars, Kurds, Turkmans, Baluchis, Arabs, Qashqa’is, Bakhtiyaris, Lurs, Mamasanis, Boir Ahmadis, Hazaras, Shahsavans, Afshars, Timouris, and Khamsehs. In some sense they were “imagined communities” claiming descent from a common mythological ancestor. In actual fact, they were fluid political entities, constantly losing and absorbing members. Most had their own dialects and languages, customs and traditions, histories and genealogies, local saints and pilgrimage sights, clothes and head gear. It is hard to gauge their real size. As one Qashqa’i chief admitted, he did not know how big his tribe was, nor did he want to know since the true figure could bring on higher taxation. The nomads tended to be confined to marginal regions too mountainous or too dry to sustain year-round agriculture.

Although most tribes were either nomadic or semi-nomadic, some were fully settled. For example, the Kurds were mostly settled farmers in the valleys of Kermanshah and western Azerbaijan. Similarly, the Arabs were mostly villagers living along the Persian Gulf and in the southern province of Arabestan. The Qajars themselves had experienced the typical passage into urban life outlined by the classical scholar ibn Khaldun. Having established their dynasty, they had settled in the capital and in due course merged into the urban population. Some tribes – notably the Qashqa’is, Bakhtiyaris, and Boir Ahmadis – were large confederations headed by...
paramount chiefs using the Turkic title of ilkhani. Others had multiple chiefs with the lesser title of khan. Arabs tended to call their chiefs sheikhs; Kurds theirs beks, agbas, or mirs; and Baluchis, who spoke an Iranian dialect but paradoxically traced their descent to the Prophet’s heroic uncle Hamza, referred to their chiefs as amirs, another Arabic term.\textsuperscript{44}

But whether led by paramount or lesser chiefs, each il was segmented into clans known as tirehs or tayefehs – these terms were also sometimes used to mean tribe. Each in turn was further segmented into migratory camps and villages formed of extended families. The Bakhtiyaris had seven major clans, each large enough to be described as a tireh. The Qashqa’is had twenty tirehs; the Arabs of Arabestan seventy; and the Kurds on the Ottoman border region sixty. One Qajar document enumerated twelve substantial tayefehs among the Baluchis on the Afghan border – some with as many as a hundred extended families.\textsuperscript{45} Clans often had their own villages, grazing lands, and migratory routes; and their own hierarchy of chiefs, kalantars (bailiffs), kadkhudas (headmen), and rish sefids (white-beards). Many also had distinct religious identities. For example, some Kurdish clans were Sunni; some Shi’i; some Ali-Illahi – a sect that deified Imam Ali; some Qaderi – a Sufi order; and some Naqshbandi – a rival Sufi order. Here religion tended to reinforce clan identity.

For all practical purposes, the tribes were autonomous entities. In the words of one British official, the shah in theory could appoint the Qashqa’i Ilkhani, but his choice was limited to their leading families and often to the khan already favored by these families. “The Government,” he explained, “either acknowledges or is unable to oppose their appointment and sometimes face-savingly grants them a mandate to keep the peace in their territory, a responsibility it cannot itself undertake.” He added: “Taxes are not paid to the government but tribute is rendered to the khans. Tribesmen signify their support for the Ilkhani by the offering of ‘presents’ which are really in the nature of a voluntary tax.”\textsuperscript{46}

The full complexity of the tribal system can be seen among the Bakhtiyaris. They inhabited a large area in the very heart of the country with Isfahan in the east, Chahar Mahal in the north, Lurestan in the east, Arabestan in the southwest, and Qashqa’i territories in the south. Most Bakhtiyari tribes spoke Persian mixed heavily with Lur and Kurdish words. Some, however, spoke Arabic or Turkic. These tribes had probably joined the confederation in more recent times. At various occasions in the seventeenth century, the Bakhtiyaris had been the main power behind the Safavid throne in Isfahan. At one point they had even raided Tehran. The confederation as a whole was divided into two branches – the Haft Lang (Seven Feet) and the Chahar
Lang (Four Feet). According to one oral tradition, the founder of the tribe, after leading his followers from Syria to its present location, left behind two rival families – one with seven sons, the other with four. According to another tradition, the numbers referred to tax payments owed to the paramount chief, with the richer branch paying one fourth and the poorer branch one seventh.

The Haft Lang was divided into four major tayefehs; the Chahar Lang into three. Each tayefeh had its own khan. These seven tayefehs, in turn, were divided into more than one hundred tirehs – each with a kadkhuda. Although these kadkhudas were confirmed in their offices by the Ilkhani, most were senior elders already prominent within their clan – some were even related by marriage to their khans. Some tirehs contained as many as 2,500 families; others as few as 50 families. Many were migratory, living in camps and moving each year from winter to summer grazing lands. A few lived in permanent settlements – mostly within the Bakhtiyari territories. After a period of internal strife, the Haft Lang and the Chahar Lang had agreed to share top positions. The title of ilkhani went to the Haft Lang; and that of ilbegi, his deputy, to the Chahar Lang. The wealthier khans owned villages outside Bakhtiyari territories – especially in neighboring Fars, Lurestan, and Arabestan. According to British reports, the shahs had little influence within the Bakhtiyari territories. They confirmed the offices of ilkhani and ilbegi for the obvious candidates; sometimes married their daughters to the leading families; appointed the khans to be regional hakims (governors); and, most important of all, did their utmost to keep alive the Haft Lang–Chahar Lang rivalries. In short, the Bakhtiyaris, like the other tribal groups, lived in a world unto themselves.

The peasants, who constituted more than half the population, were mostly sharecroppers. In much of the country, the annual crop was normally divided into five equal portions – for labor, land, oxen, seed, and irrigated water. According to custom, village residents enjoyed the right to work on particular strips of land even though that land in theory belonged to the landlord. “Peasants,” wrote one British traveler, “do not claim proprietary rights but expect to retain possession of their strips of land during their lifetime and to hand them down to their heirs. The Persian tenant enjoys security so long as he pays his share of the rent.” In other words, these sharecroppers – unlike their counterparts in other parts of the world – enjoyed some semblance of security. Peasants who supplied their own seed and oxen received as much as three-fifths of the harvest. In villages dependent on qanats (underground canals), landlords invariably took the fifth allocated for irrigated water.
The relationship between landlords and peasants was invariably influenced by the availability of labor. In the late nineteenth century, especially after the catastrophic 1870 famine, peasants could threaten to move to underpopulated regions since they, unlike medieval European serfs, were not legally bound to the land. But population growth over the course of the next century eroded their bargaining power. This helps explain the sharp contrast drawn by nineteenth- and twentieth-century European travelers. Whereas the latter invariably found rural living conditions to be abysmally poor, the former had described them as reasonably good. As peasants became more indebted, especially for seeds, they became more like bonded serfs. Lady Sheil, traveling in the 1850s with her diplomat husband, reported that peasants enjoyed a “considerable air of substantial comfort which I often envied for our countrymen.”49 Benjamin, the American diplomat, wrote that landlords could not extort too much simply because peasants had the ability to escape to other villages. “This,” he explained, is why people are “not poor” and “speak up their minds ... paupers are less numerous in Persia than in Italy or Spain.”50 Another visitor wrote that the “cultivator” was on the whole well compensated, well fed, well dressed, and well housed.51 The same visitor wrote that landlords often had no choice but to bid against each other to keep the peasants:52

Where population is so thin as in Persia, and where cultivation can only be achieved at the expense of steady industry and toil — not indeed in the labour upon the land itself as in digging and maintaining qanats, and in regulating the measured supply — it is to the interest of the landowner to be on the best of terms with his tenant; and the Persian peasant, even if he can justly complain of government exaction, has not found any one to teach him the gospel of landlord tyranny. He is poor, illiterate, and solid; but in appearance robust, in strength he is like an ox, he usually has clothes to his back, and he is seldom a beggar.

The countryside was formed of some 10,000 villages owned wholly or partly by absentee landlords — by the crown, royal family, religious endowments, tribal chiefs, government accountants, rich merchants, and plain landlords known as arbabs, maleks, and omdeh maleks. Independent farmers were found mostly in isolated mountain valleys and rainfed villages. Not surprisingly, the landowning system became known by the early twentieth century as fudal (feudal). An American “military advisor” employed by a Khurasan landlord wrote in the 1920s that this was “feudalism” similar to “medieval Europe” since landlords owned numerous villages, treated peasants as “serfs,” and retained their own armies. His own employer lived in a castle with a private army of 45 full-time soldiers and 800 part-timers. “These soldiers,” he commented, “were the worst scoundrels in the region.”53
Landed notables controlled many regions. Sultanabad and western Mazanderan were owned by the famous Ashtiyani families; eastern Mazanderan by Vali Khan Sepahdar; Sistan and Baluchestan by Amir Alam, famous as “the lord of the eastern marches”\textsuperscript{54}; Arabestan by Sheikh Khaz’al of the Shi’i Ka’ab tribe; Isfahan and Fars by Prince Zill al-Sultan, the Bakhtiyari khans, Qavam al-Mulk, the Khamseh chief, and Sowlat al-Dowleh, the Qashqa’i leader; Gilan by Amin al-Dowleh; Kermanshah by the Ardalans, a Kurdish Shi’i clan; and Kerman, Fars, as well as central Azerbaijan by the Farmanfarmas – Abdul Hussein Mirza Farmanfarma, the family patriarch, was Fath Ali Shah’s grandson. Meanwhile, western Azerbaijan was dominated by the Khans of Maku, who, according to Mostowfi, lived like German junkers but wore the Persian hat and prevented government officials from trespassing on their domains. He added that they had ruled the region since Safavid times and had not paid taxes since the beginning of the Qajar era.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, eastern Azerbaijan, especially the Maragheh region, was controlled by the Moqadams, who pre-dated the Qajars and had married into the royal family soon after the establishment of the new dynasty. According to a recent study of Maragheh:\textsuperscript{56}

Though the Crown Prince was seated in Tabriz, only eighty kilometers or a few days’ journey from Maragheh, the Moqadams continued to monopolize the roles of governor, judge, tax collector, troop commander, and landlord throughout the nineteenth century. This must be attributed in part to the fact that they never rebelled against the Qajar dynasty after their initial conquest of Maragheh. No direct controls were imposed by the central government over Moqadam rule, nor did the Qajar shahs significantly aid them in their provincial administration, or in their frequent military campaigns against the rebellious Kurds who threatened their territories. Initial attempts at rationalizing authority and administration under Nasser al-Din Shah had little impact on the style of provincial patrimonial rule of the Moqadams. Just as such reforms were unsuccessful in other parts of the empire beyond the fringes of Tehran, so too were they unsuccessful in Maragheh.

Some European historians have argued that these landlords did not constitute a true aristocracy on the grounds they lacked proper pedigrees. In fact, their pedigrees could compete with those of their European counterparts. In addition to the Ashtiyanis, who had been court accountants since the early Safavid era, many others boasted illustrious origins. The Moqadams traced themselves back to a Caucasian chief and had been prominent in Maragheh long before the emergence of the Qajars. The Alams claimed descent from an Arab chieftain sent to subdue the area in the eighth century. They continued to speak with their clients in their patois Arabic.\textsuperscript{57} The Khaz’als of Arabestan had been signing treaties with the
British since 1761. Sepahdar, deemed the “richest landlord in the country,” claimed descent from the bearer of Imam Ali’s robe. His family had owned land in Mazanderan since the eighteenth century. Qavam al-Mulk was the great-grandson of a wealthy eighteenth-century merchant in Shiraz. His grandfather had been a minister under the first Qajar shah. His father had been named Ilkhani of the Khamseh tribe. The Zarasvands, the paramount Bakhtiyari family, had been important since the seventeenth century. A recent study finds that almost all office-holders in Fars had been substantial landowners long before attaining any official titles. By the mid-twentieth century, the landed “feudal” class became known as the hezar famil (one thousand families). In fact, they numbered fewer than one hundred families.

The rural settlements formed close-knit communities. With the exception of those in close proximity to cities, most villages remained self-contained geographically, economically, and culturally. Even late nineteenth-century travelers were struck by their isolation. They produced their own basic foods, their own clothes, and even their own utensils. New consumer goods—notably tea, coffee, sugar, and Manchester textiles—had not yet reached them. An 1850s inventory of goods owned by prosperous peasants in the central region indicates that almost all possessions—knife, lamp, clay pipe, earthen cooking wares, spade, harness, wooden plough, skin water container, quilt, felt cap, shoes, and bracelets—had been produced locally. “The villagers,” the inventory concluded, “produce their own food—wheat, barley, corn, rice, milk, butter, eggs, and chicken—and buy from the outside only salt, pepper, and tobacco.”

Economic isolation was reinforced by social divisions. Even in non-tribal areas, some villages were inhabited by specific clans. For example, the region of Tunkabun in Mazanderan was populated by eleven Khalatbari clans headed by the famous Sepahdar. The three hundred villages constituting Fereidun and Chahar Mahal near Isfahan were inhabited exclusively by Persians, Turkic-speakers, Lurs, Kurds, Bakhtiyari Haft Lang, Bakhtiyari Chahar Lang, Armenians, and Georgians. The Georgians, like the Armenians, had been transported there in the early seventeenth century, but had converted to Islam in the course of the eighteenth century. A British survey described thirty-six of the villages as exclusively Armenian and nine as Georgian. While most irrigated villages were owned by landlords, some rainfed villages were owned by the peasants themselves. Many villages dotted in and around the Kaver Desert were inhabited exclusively by Persians, Turkmans, Baluchis, Kurds, Arabs, Afghans, Hazaras, Afshars, Timouris, and even Bahais. European visitors found it was “dangerous” for Turkmans
and Persians to venture into each others’ territory. One traveler reported in 1841 that Sunni Turkmans “consider it perfectly lawful to carry off” Persian Shi’i girls and sell them as “slaves” in Central Asia. Such fears lasted well into the next century. Look-out turrets in Persian-speaking villages continued to be known as “Turkman towers.”

Each village was led by a kadkhuda (headman). Edward Burgess, an Englishman overseeing crown lands in Azerbaijan, described their appointment:

If a large majority are determined to have the kadkhuda out, not I nor even the Prince, nor the Shah himself, can prevent their doing so . . . I give the term elections to this business because I have no other word for it, but they do not meet and vote. The thing is arranged amongst themselves, they meet and talk the matter over and whenever a large majority is in favour of one man the authorities can not resist their wish, if they did the people would stand upon their rights and would not pay taxes. If, as not infrequently happens, the governor is a tyrant, he might catch and punish two or three of the ringleaders, but he could get no good by this, and all men of sense find it better to let the village have its own way.

The kadkhuda – with the help of rish sefids (white-beards), paykars (sheriffs), and mirabs (water regulators) – carried out an impressive array of tasks. He mediated disputes, formulated collective decisions, and enforced them. He represented the village to the outside world, especially to landlords, tribal chiefs, and city officials. He helped deliver water to the fields. He maintained common lands, woods, public baths, mosques (if there were any), and, most important of all, the village walls which most settlements had for protection. He supervised the annual rotation of strips to ensure that families had fair access to fertile lands. Peasant ethos stressed equality; in the words of an India Office report, “peasants were assigned a strip or strips so as to make the apportionment fair.” The kadkhuda also coordinated plough teams known as bonehs which pooled resources not only to cultivate the land but also to pay the local blacksmith, coppersmith, carpenter, barber, and bath attendant. According to tradition, village residency entitled peasants to boneh membership; and boneh membership entitled them to land as well as to communal pastures, woods, and water. Moreover, the kadkhuda helped the village kalantar (bailiff) – appointed by the landlord – to collect the latter’s share of the harvest, and, where custom permitted, his labor dues. The kadkhuda also assisted local authorities in collecting taxes. Although mostowfis determined how much each village was to pay in taxes, it was the local kadkhuda who decided how much each household was to contribute. In short, the kadkhuda wore many hats – that of judge, policeman, administrator, diplomat, and tax collector.
Urban dwellers, living in thirty-six towns, totaled less than 20 percent of the population. Towns varied in size from Tehran and Tabriz, with 200,000 and 110,000 respectively, to middling urban centers like Isfahan, Yazd, Mashed, Qazvin, Kerman, Qom, Shiraz, and Kermanshah, with between 20,000 and 80,000, and to smaller centers such as Semnan, Bushire, Ardabel, Amol, and Kashan, each with fewer than 20,000. Many boasted special “personality traits”: their own accents and dialects; their own culinary tastes; and their own heroes and reasons for local pride. Some at one time or another had been the country’s capital city. By the mid-twentieth century, publishing houses did a brisk trade in regional histories stressing the theme of local resistance against outsiders – whether Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Russians, and even the central authorities.

The provincial capitals had governor-generals (valis). Other towns had ordinary governors (bakims). What is more, towns were divided into distinct maballehs (wards), each with its own kadkhudah. The ward kadkhudah played a role analogous to that of the village and tribal headman. He represented his community in its dealings with the outside world – especially with neighboring wards and the government. He mediated internal disputes and collected taxes. He coordinated his activities not only with notables who happened to reside in his ward, but also with the town qazi, imam jum’eh, sheikh al-islam, darugheh (bazaar supervisor), and muhtaseb (weight-and-measure inspector). He supervised local tea-houses, hamams (baths), and guilds (asnafs). These guilds had their own kadkhudas, their own elders (rish sefids), their own arbitration courts, their own small bazaars, and sometimes even their own cemeteries. Moreover, the ward kadkhudah attended weekly gathering (hayats) which not only arranged prayer meetings, weddings, and receptions for returning pilgrims, but also collected money for the needy and for the repair of local mosques, schools, and takiyehs.

In addition, the ward kadkhudah helped oversee local zurkhanehs (gyms) frequented by wrestlers and body-builders known as lutis. Many of these lutis worked in the bazaar as petty tradesmen. They also served as night watchmen, wall guards, and Muharram procession organizers. They displayed special symbols – scarves from Kashan and notched chains from Yazd. They joined the main Sufi orders – either the Haydaris or the Nematis. In their initiation ceremonies, they vowed to live by their chivalrous code of ethics, defending the weak against the powerful, protecting the ward against the outside world, and avoiding such “dishonorable” activities as “labouring, cotton-beating, and well-digging.” During workout sessions, they recited choice verses from the Shahnameh – even in the
Turkic-speaking city of Tabriz. For some, lutis were folk-heroes; for others, they were no better than thugs. The term eventually became synonymous with petty thievery and knife-wielding (chaqakeshi).

Tehran contained five separate wards or mahallehs – Ark (Citadel), Bazaar, Ud Lajan, Chal Maydan, and Sangalaj. The 1885 census of Tehran – the first ever taken – calculated the population to be 147,206. The five wards were surrounded by a polygon-shaped wall twenty feet high and eleven miles long. Each ward had its own outer gate. Ark had additional fortifications to defend the royal compound with its palace, workshops, granaries, armory, mint, imperial mosque, Cannon Square, and the Drum Tower from which, every sunset, kettle drums and blaring horns heralded the shah’s royal presence. Tradition claimed that this ritual originated from Zoroastrian times. Ark also contained a recently built Haussman-like avenue connecting Cannon Square with the Dar al-Fanon, Government Theater, Cossack barracks, police headquarters, foreign office, telegraph office, and the British-owned Imperial Bank. Thus Ark became known as the “government” as well as the “royal mahalleh.” In contrast, the Bazaar mahalleh was formed of narrow winding side-streets full of homes, stores, workshops, and specialty market places. Guild members tended to live and work in the same side-streets. It also contained the execution square and the main caravansary – traditional hotel for travelers. The other three mahallehs were less distinctive. They housed notables with mansions and large gardens – many streets were named after such resident notables. They also had mosques, shops, public baths, bakeries, and takiyehs – often named after the community that frequented them. These wards were crisscrossed with side-streets, winding alleys, and cul-de-sacs – often ending at the gates of aristocratic mansions.

Tehran’s census counted 101,893 home-owners and 45,363 renters – in other words, 70 percent were home-owners. Households were formed of extended families with at least ten members including servants. The census listed 47 mosques, 35 madrasehs, 34 takiyehs, 170 bakeries, 190 public baths, 130 caravansaries, 20 ice-houses, 70 brick furnaces, 277 stables, and 160 Jewish homes. It described 42,638 residents as agayan va kasbeh (gentlemen and tradesmen), 756 as ghulam-e siyah (black slaves), 10,568 as nokar (servants), 46,063 as zanan-e mohtarameh (honorable women), 2,525 as kaniz-e siyah (black females), and 3,802 as kedmatkar (wage earners). It counted 1,578 Jews, 1,006 Christians, 123 Zoroastrians, and 30 “foreigners.” It estimated that new immigrants constituted as much as 27 percent of the population – 9,900 came from Isfahan, 8,201 from Azerbaijan, 2,008 from the Qajar tribe, and the others mostly from Kashan, Kurdistan, and
Arabestan. A contemporary map marked various alleyways with such labels as Turkmans, Arabs, Shirazis, Jews, Armenians, foreigners, and the “Shah’s Household Slaves.”

Provincial towns were equally segregated. Malcolm, the British diplomat, reported that large towns were divided into Haydari and Nemati wards, which he traced back to Sufi orders going back to Safavid times: “There is at all times a jealousy between the parties, and during the last days of Muharram they attack each other. If a mosque is decorated by one party, the other, if they can, drives them from it, and destroys their flags and ornaments.”

A detailed tax report on Isfahan described how every year on the Day of Sacrifice (‘Aid-e Qurban) thousands of the Haydaris and Nematis – led by their ward lutis – would clash in the main city square. In terms of occupation, the report listed 100 clerical households – many with seminary students; 15 high-ranking officials – some with lineages going back to the Safavids; 8 princely families; 25 hakims (traditional doctors); 15 prayer reciters; and 197 trade and craft guilds – including those for weavers, cotton-beaters, goldsmiths, saddlers, hatters, tent-makers, silversmiths, book-binders, leather-shoe cloggers, canvas-shoe cloggers, and loose-sleeve coat makers. In terms of language, it divided the population into Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Bakhtiyari, Kayani (an ancient Persian dialect), and Ebri (patois spoken by the local Jews). It noted that some guilds kept records in their own secret terminology. And in terms of religion, it divided the population into Shi’i, Christian, Jewish, Babi, Sheikhi (another recent offshoot of Shi’ism), and seven Sufi orders – two of whom, the Haydaris and Nematis, it blamed for the annual disturbances.

Lady Sheil found the town of Sarab in Azerbaijan torn apart every Muharram with clashes between Haydaris and Nematis. Each side augmented their flagellation processions by bringing in recruits from nearby villages. Ahmad Kasravi, the well-known historian, writes that many towns in the late nineteenth century were racked by these Nemati–Haydari feuds, with each striving to place their candidates in town offices, expand their wards, lower their tax assessments, and win over neighboring villages and tribes. Ali Shamin, another historian, remembers how these Haydari–Nemati riots disrupted his home town of Hamadan. Kasravi’s own hometown, Tabriz, was divided into two rival blocs: wards controlled by the Sheikhis versus those run by the orthodox Shi’is known locally as the Mutasheris. They too clashed during Muharram; competed for city offices; married exclusively within their own community; and avoided shops, teahouses, gymnasiums, bath-houses, takiyehs, and mosques frequented by the others. Such clashes became less frequent in Tehran only because the shah
had explicitly ordered the ward kadkhudas to keep the flagellation processes strictly within their own districts. In short, the urban wards of nineteenth-century Iran constituted communities within communities. Some Western social scientists claim that traditional Iran lacked “civil society.” But Iranian historians such as Kasravi could well retort that it suffered from a surfeit of such society.

**STATE AND SOCIETY**

Since the Qajars lacked real instruments of coercion and administration, they survived by systematically exploiting social divisions. They described themselves as Supreme Arbitrators, and did their best to channel aristocratic feuds into the court. In fact, notables sought to have a presence there by either sending *vakels* (representatives) or marrying into the royal family. Outsiders could easily fall prey to insiders. Exclusion of Turkman khans from the court goes a long way towards explaining their persistent unrest. As one Afshar khan admitted to a British diplomat, he did not dare attack his rivals simply because they too enjoyed court protection: “You must know this tribe and mine have a long-standing feud . . . At present we do not fight like brave men but like sneaking rascals, by intrigues and plots at court.”

The Qajars also took advantage of communal divisions on the local level. In some towns, such as Shiraz and Qazvin, these divisions ran along Nemati–Haydari lines. In other towns, especially Tabriz and Kerman, they ran along Sheikhi–Mutasheri ones. In some provinces, they reflected town versus country interests. In other provinces, they reflected long-standing strains between nomadic pastoralists and settled agriculturalists. In some rural regions, the divisions demarcated ethnicity, especially when neighboring villages spoke different dialects or languages. In other regions, they reflected tribal rivalries, both between major tribes and between clans within the same tribe. Since the nomads were well armed and well organized, these conflicts had greater impact on the wider society than their numbers would warrant – even though their numbers were in themselves considerable.

Qajar manipulation of tribal rivalries can best be seen in their zigzagging policies towards the Bakhtiyaris. The era began with Asad Khan, the Haft Lang chief, posing a major threat to the new dynasty, and even laying siege to Tehran. The Qajars, however, saved themselves by allowing him considerable independence – a force of 3,000 men, direct dealings with the British, and an English officer to train his private army. At the same time,
they built up the rival Chahar Lang by giving their leader, Muhammad Taqi Khan, control over neighboring Lur and Kurdish villages. By 1851, Muhammad Taqi Khan had become so powerful that the Qajars found it expedient to assassinate him and his immediate heirs. “The Chahar Lang,” said a British report, “never recovered from this blow and since that time have always remained of secondary importance to the Haft Lang.”

The Qajars followed up these assassinations by rehabilitating Asad Khan’s son, Jafar Quli Khan. The latter promptly eliminated thirteen members of his family; crushed the rival Duraki clan; and handed down the chieftainship to his son, Hussein Quli Khan, who in 1867 obtained the ilkhan title. But in 1882 Zill al-Sultan, the governor of Isfahan, strangled him; incarcerated his heir, Esfandiar Khan; and diminished his authority by creating the post of ilbegi (lieutenant ilkhan). At first, the two posts were shared by Esfandiar Khan’s rival uncles. Then in 1888, Nasser al-Din Shah released Esfandiar Khan and helped him oust his two uncles. The shah bestowed on him not only the title of ilkhan but also that of Samsam al-Saltaneh (Sword of the Kingdom). In 1890, the shah again shifted support. He transferred the ilkhanship to Imam Quli Khan, one of the deposed uncles, and appointed Reza Quli Khan, the other deposed uncle, as governor of the newly created district of Chahar Mahal. A British report tried to make sense of these complicated intrigues:

Out of the killing of Hussein Quli Khan, who is still spoken of as the “late Ilkhan” by the older khans, and of the consequent jealousy between his descendants and the family of Imam Quli Khan, who succeeded him and who was known as “the Haji Ilkhan” from having made the pilgrimage to Mecca soon after his appointment as Ilkhan, has arisen the other great rift in the Bakhtiari tribe and one which, although it only concerns the Haft Lang, is of much greater importance even today than the rivalry between Chahar Lang and Haft Lang. This is the rift between what are now known as the Haji Ilkhan families and the Ilkhan families. In view of this rivalry, often, in fact, usually amounting to hatred, it became the custom after a time that the offices of Ilkhan and Ilbegi should never be held by members of the same side of the family. Thus if one of the Ilkhan khans was Ilkhan one of the Haji Ilkhan khans would be Ilbegi . . . From 1890 onwards no great change has come over Bakhtiari tribal politics. The Chahar Lang gradually declined into complete though somewhat unwilling subservience to the Haft Lang, a process which was helped by inter-marriage between the khans. The Ilkhan–Haji Ilkhan feud has however continued undiminished to the present day, in spite of much inter-marriage.

The manipulative hand of the Qajars can also be seen in the creation of the Khamseh confederacy. At the beginning of the century, Qajar power in Fars was threatened by the formidable Qashqa’is. The shah lacked
ready-made allies to counterbalance them. The Bakhtiyaris to the north were themselves dangerous; the Boir Ahmadis to the east were in the midst of a civil war; and the Zands, who had formerly ruled Fars, had disintegrated to the point that the body of their last leader lay buried under the palace balcony so that the shah could trample on it every day. To neutralize the Qashqa’is, the shah created the Khamseh (The Five Together) out of five separate tribes – the Persian-speaking Basseri, the Arab Il-e Arab, and the Turkic Nafar, Ainlu, and Baharlul – each of which felt threatened by the Qashqa’is. He named as their Ilkhan Qavam al-Mulk, the governor of Fars, even though the latter had no ties to them. Indeed it was rumored that he had Jewish ancestry. One forefather had been a wealthy merchant in Shiraz; another had been a ward kadkhuda; and another had served the Zands as a chief minister. With the formation of the Khamseh, the Qajars were able effectively to counterbalance the Qashqa’is. In the words of one European visitor: “The Shah and his governor hope to uphold their authority by keeping alive the animosity between the two rival parties, and in this respect they only follow the policy pursued all over the empire, and that which appears time immemorial to have been the system of government in Persia.” Similarly, a modern anthropologist writes: “As erstwhile Governors of Fars, the Qavams came into conflict with the increasingly important and powerful Qashqa’i confederacy; and it was to counter balance the Qashqa’is, as well as to protect his caravan routes to the southern ports, that Ali Muhammad Qavam al-Mulk caused the Khamseh confederacy to be formed with himself as its chief.” In other words, the Qavam family, whose founder had been a merchant-turned-governor, served as the shah’s main counterweight against the Qashqa’is for the rest of the century and even well into the next.

Thus the Qajars governed Iran less through bureaucratic institutions, coercion, or grand appeals to divinity and history – although they were not averse to invoking them – than through the systematic manipulation of social divisions, especially clan, tribal, ethnic, regional, and sectarian differences. Their state – if it can be called that – hovered above rather than controlled and penetrated into society. It claimed pompous, bombastic, and highly inflated powers. Its real jurisdiction, however, was sharply restricted to the vicinity of the capital. It was often depicted as a prototypical “oriental despotism.” But its real authority rested heavily on local magnates, some of whom married into the royal family and most of whom had their own independent sources of power. The shah, the proud owner of sundry titles including that of Supreme Arbitrator, could well have appropriated for himself yet another one – that of Grand Manipulator. He was Shah-in-Shah, King of Kings, in more senses than one.