

The Sending of Iranian Students to Europe
1811-1906

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Introduction

The expansion of European influence in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Iran in the nineteenth century left a significant impact on those societies. Their traditional subsistence economies were transformed and grew increasingly dependent on commodities imported from Europe and elsewhere. New armies were created after the European model, and the old administrative system underwent drastic change and gave way to modern bureaucracies. The educational system was also transformed as European-style institutions were founded and gained popularity. Modern education produced a new generation of intelligentsia which became the new ruling elite in those countries. This encounter with European culture was a complicated and multi-dimensional process that encompassed all aspects of the people's lives. Far from being uniform, the transformation took on a distinctive character in each of the countries of the region, and happened at a different pace in each society. Understanding this transformation that continues to date requires a broad study involving various disciplines.

In the nineteenth century, the most important vehicle for the introduction of European culture to the region was a combination of sending student missions to Europe, creation of

institutions of elementary, secondary, and higher education, as well as modern military schools. The introduction of modern education in nineteenth century Iran began with the sending of student missions to Europe in 1811. The establishment of European-style institutions of higher education followed in 1851 with the founding of the Dar al-Funun, while new elementary and secondary schools did not appear until the last decade of the century. Missionary schools emerged during the 1830s and 1840s, and were in operation for a century.

It is the sending of Iranian students to Europe in the nineteenth century that this work attempts to examine. The reasons that justify such a study seem obvious. The students returning from Europe introduced various elements of European culture to Iranian society, from printing press and journalism, to modern medicine and ideas of representative government. Many of the students later occupied the highest positions of power in the country, and thus influenced the turn of events on the social, economic, and political scenes. Others turned activist in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and were elected to the post-revolution parliaments, and played a critical role in drawing up the draft of the constitution. An examination of the actual role these young men played, and the extent of their involvement in the transformation of Iranian society is essential in understanding this complicated process.

understanding this complicated process.

Despite this, a detailed and comprehensive study of the subject, the reasons for sending the students abroad, their preparation, experience in Europe, and contribution to Iranian society after their return, has not yet been made. The pioneering work of Muhammad Muhit Tabataba'i in a series of articles in *Shafaq-i Surkh*¹ drew attention to the subject for the first time. Others such as Majd al-Islam Kirmani dealt with it in a general survey.² Mujtaba Minuwi's article in *Yaghma* examined in more detail the first student mission to Europe.³ Muhammad Husayn Mahbubi Ardakani's valuable work *Tarikh-i Mu'assasat-i Tamadduni-i Jadid dar Iran* is the most comprehensive study related to the subject. Yet it deals with the issue in the context of the general theme of the introduction of modern civil institutions in Iran. Furthermore, it is mainly concerned with the government sponsored student missions, and does not include the students sent abroad independently, and those sent during the reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah in the years immediately preceding the Constitutional Revolution.

The present work seeks to shed some light on this aspect

¹ Muhit Tabataba'i, Muhammad, "Tarikhchah-i I'zam-i Muhassil bi Urupa", *Shafaq-i Surkh*, no. 2392-2437.

² Majd al-Islam Kirmani, "Muhasssilin-i Irani dar Urupa dar Zaman-i Nasir al-Din Shah", *Amuzish wa Parwarish*, Vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 36-44.

³ Minuwi, Mujtaba, "Awwalin Kariwan-i Ma'rifat", *Yaghma*, Vol. 6, pp. 181-185, 232-237, 274-278, 313-318, 351-353.

of the encounter with European culture, namely the sending of students to Europe. It is an attempt to search in the official documents, histories, memoirs, and travel diaries written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in order to identify every Iranian student that was sent abroad. It covers the period between 1811, when the first students were sent to Britain, and 1906, the year of the signing of the Constitution. It further attempts to trace each student's background, his experience in Europe, his professional career after his return home, and his contribution to his society.

Chapter one provides a brief overview of the state of education in Iran before the introduction of modern education in the nineteenth century, and of the founding of mission schools. Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five cover the sending of students to Europe during the reigns of Fath 'Ali Shah, Muhammad Shah, Nasir al-Din Shah, and Muzaffar al-Din Shah, respectively. The final chapter is a comparative look at the experiment in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt. Even though it appears last, it is an important part of this study.