

The Ottoman Model: Basra and the Making of Qajar Reform, 1881–1889

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In his 1881–1882 *Khuzestan Travel Book* (*safarnameh*), Qajar engineer Najm al-Molk described for Naser al-Din Shah “places [that] a few years ago were dirty marshes, places of cows and ewes.” He was talking not about Khuzestan, however, but Ottoman ‘Amara, where, “the Ottomans ... became busy making them places of habitation ... the fleeing people of Iran (*re ‘aya-ye motavari-ye Iran*) gradually gathered there.”¹ Throughout the *safarnameh*, and in his account of a second trip seven years later, Najm al-Molk returned to comparisons between Khuzestan and the neighboring Ottoman province of Basra. The engineer emphasized these comparisons because the social and environmental similarities between the two regions suggested possible futures for Khuzestan, and because their deep interconnectivity had shaped the region’s present. His sense that ordinary Iranians were weighing the same comparisons, and that Khuzestan was losing every time, formed the core of his reform strategy for Khuzestan.

In the two travel narratives, Najm al-Molk used the concept of *abadi* (settlement, prosperity, cultivation) to frame the problems he encountered in Khuzestan and articulate solutions. For him, *abadi* described an ideal set of relationships among state, people, and land. In 1882, he saw the region’s lack of *abadi* as a major threat to the cohesion and stability of the Qajar domains. To combat the threat of *kharabi* (ruin), Najm al-Molk prescribed a suite of infrastructural, social, and legal measures, anchored by a project to rebuild the

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¹ Hajj Mirza ‘Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, Mohammad Dabir Siaqi, ed. and introduction (Tehran: Anjoman-e Asar va Mofakhar-e Farhangi, 2006), 18. Note that the vast majority of the journey took place in 1882.

Ahvaz dam and revive irrigated agriculture in the Karun River basin. Throughout, he considered how such measures would affect everyday connections and comparisons between Khuzestan and Basra.

The border that divided Khuzestan from Basra ran through a socially and environmentally connected space. The western part of Khuzestan is geologically considered to be part of the Mesopotamian plain,² and the two provinces were connected by the Karun-Tigris-Euphrates river basin, as well as extensive trans-border marshlands, which supported both local livelihoods and economic and social connections.³ The rivers were the primary basis for agriculture on both sides of the border, supporting extensive date palm cultivation in particular.⁴ Khuzestan and Basra, and especially the urban centers of Mohammereh and Basra, were integral to a larger, economically integrated northern Gulf space.⁵ Both cities were small—in 1902–1903, the Ottoman Government estimated Basra's population, including foreigners, at thirty-five thousand, while Mohammereh was smaller still⁶—but both had thriving international ports and deep connections to other parts of the Gulf.⁷

In the nineteenth century, the province of Khuzestan covered a large area, including mountainous lands dominated by the Bakhtiyari Lurs as well as the riverine lowlands stretching west of Ahvaz from Hoveyze in the north to Abadan in the south.⁸ Some sources use the term “Arabistan” interchangeably with “Khuzestan” to refer to the entire province, while others refer to the lowland and upland portions of the province as Arabistan and Luristan or Bakhtiyari, respectively.⁹ While Najm al-Molk used both terms and switched almost exclusively to “Arabistan” in his second travel narrative, he mostly referred to

² Robert M. Adams, “Agriculture and Urban Life in Early Southwestern Iran,” *Science* 136 (1962): 109–22, 109; Keith McLachlan, *The Neglected Garden: The Politics and Ecology of Agriculture in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), 16.

³ Sabri Ateş, “Bones of Contention: Corpse Traffic and Ottoman-Iranian Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Iraq,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30 (2010): 512–32; Camille Lyans Cole, “Precarious Empires: A Social and Environmental History of Steam Navigation on the Tigris,” *Journal of Social History* 50 (2016): 74–101; İstanbul Üniversitesi Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi (NEK), TY 2373, Hürşid Paşa, “Seyahatname-i Hudud,” 44; İE 1873, Derviş Paşa, “Tahdid-i Hudud-i İran Layiha,” 18–19.

⁴ On date cultivation, see ‘Abd al-Qadir Bash A‘yan al-‘Abbasi, *al-Nakhlā Sayyida al-Shajr* (Baghdad: Matba‘a Dar al-Basri, 1964); ‘Abbas al-‘Azzawi, *al-Nakhlā fi Tarikh al-‘Iraq* (Baghdad: Matba‘a As‘ad, 1962).

⁵ Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf, 1745–1900* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁶ Salname-i Vilayet-i Basra, 1320 (1902/1903), 153.

⁷ Fattah, *Politics of Regional Trade*; Lindsey Stephenson, “Rerouting the Persian Gulf: The Transnationalization of Iranian Migrant Networks, c. 1900–1940” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2018), 45–67.

⁸ On the Bakhtiyari, see Arash Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁹ For example, see British Petroleum Archive, ARC 48005, Translation of Farman, Shawwal 1312 (Apr. 1895), 8–9; British Library (BL), IOR/L/PS/10/132, 11 Dec. 1903, Hardinge to Landsdowne, 202.

“Khuzestan” in the first. Because this article focuses on the earlier work, I follow it in referring to the region as “Khuzestan.”

While some other Qajar statesmen and reformers shared Najm al-Molk’s views on *abadi* as a way to organize reforms, and on the significance of Ottoman Basra as a model, scholars of nineteenth-century Iran have largely characterized Qajar reforms in terms of the rise of nationalism and a (traumatic) encounter with Europe.¹⁰ These scholars, despite their varying perspectives on nationalism, reform, and state centralization, have highlighted a relatively narrow group of intellectuals, many of them exiles who spent significant time in Europe.¹¹ Others have emphasized how Qajar travel narratives circulated knowledge about Europe as a way to note Iran’s deficiencies.¹² For exiles, travelers, and students alike, according to these historians, Europe remained the ultimate touchstone for reform, an object of both fear and fascination.¹³ Certainly, Europe was an important reference, but scholars’ focus on a bounded group of intellectuals and texts has led many to overemphasize its role at the expense of other models for Qajar reform.

Historians have only recently begun to unpack connections and comparisons with the Ottoman lands, from the role of Ottoman thinkers in inspiring and collaborating with Qajar intellectuals to Ottoman reforms as a model for Qajar Iran to the role of the Ottoman institutional context in shaping the thought of exiled Iranians.¹⁴ However, they have mostly focused on Iranian

¹⁰ Noted in Kevin Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History, 1700–1900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 6.

¹¹ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 56; Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 80; Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon, 1993), 155–59, 173–74, 179–84. On thinkers most often viewed as “reformers,” see Roman Seidel, “The Reception of European Philosophy in Qajar Iran,” in Reza Pourjavady, ed., *Philosophy in Qajar Iran* (Boston: Brill, 2019): 313–71.

¹² Naghmeh Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder: Nineteenth-Century Travel Accounts from Iran to Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Monica M. Ringer, “The Quest for the Secret of Strength in Iranian Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature: Rethinking Tradition in the *Safarnameh*,” in Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee, eds., *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002): 146–61; M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 11–37.

¹³ Zia-Ebrahimi, *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 18, 28.

¹⁴ On the Ottoman connection, see Fariba Zarinebaf, “From Istanbul to Tabriz: Modernity and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 28 (2008): 154–69; Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. ch. 1; Thierry Zarcone and Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, eds., *Les Iraniens d’Istanbul* (Paris: Institut Français de Recherches en Iran and Institut Français d’Études Anatoliennes, 1993); Tanya Elal Lawrence, “An Age of Trans-Imperial Vernacularisms: The Iranian Dissident Community of the Late Ottoman Empire” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2018); Hassan Hazrati, “Reflections of Midhat Pasha’s Modernist Thoughts and Practices among Iranian Political

experiences and perceptions of the Ottoman capital.¹⁵ And while Qajar residents of Istanbul referenced similarities between the two “well-protected domains” as the reason to emulate Ottoman experiences, they emphasized broad-strokes affinities and general policy directions.¹⁶ In contrast, Najm al-Molk positioned Basra as a model for Khuzestan through thick description and material comparison. By excavating the Basra-Khuzestan comparison and how it informed Najm al-Molk’s push to make Khuzestan *abadan*, this article traces a competing vision for Qajar reform, forged through dialogue and contact between two peripheries.

In addition to their historical role in shaping Qajar ideas about reform, comparisons with the Ottoman Empire offer new historiographical perspective on the question of nationalism. Scholars of the Qajar period have investigated how nascent nationalist ideologies began to coalesce around a land and people increasingly understood as bordered, granting “narratological centrality” to Iran as an entity.¹⁷ In contrast, historians of the late Ottoman Empire have often taken a state-centric approach, emphasizing center-province relations, and in some cases characterizing the attitudes and policies of Istanbul-based bureaucrats and institutions toward the (mostly Arab) peripheries as Ottoman Orientalism or colonialism.¹⁸ This is partly a result of divergent archival practices. Ottomanists often rely on imperial archives, while many heavily studied Qajar reformers were exiled opponents of the regime. Although scholars have contested both characterizations, the contrast between one historiography seeking nation-state origins, and another trying to explain the persistence of state rule over multiple “nations,” is striking.¹⁹

Elites.” *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi* 2 (2015): 31–41; Daryush Rahmaniyan, “Torkiye Osmani; Madkhali bar-Negah-e Safarnameh Nevisan-e Irani-ye Ruzgar-e Qajariye,” *Fasnameh-ye Tarih-e Ravabit-e Khareji* 52–53 (2013): 29–35.

¹⁵ For exceptions, see, e.g., Zeinab Azarbadegan, “Imagined Geographies, Re-Invented Histories: Ottoman Iraq as Part of Iran,” *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5 (2018): 115–41; Ateş, “Bones of Contention.”

¹⁶ Beyiz Karabulut, “The Politics of Law, Finance, and the Ottomans in the Writings of Mirza Malkum Khan” (MA thesis, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2017), 10, 27–29.

¹⁷ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 97; Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*.

¹⁸ On Ottoman Orientalism and colonialism, see Ussama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 768–96; Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen, 1849–1919* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 2–16; articles by Makdisi, Hanssen, Herzog, and Kuhn in Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, eds., *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 2002); Selim Deringil, “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery”: The Ottoman Empire and the Postcolonial Debate,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003): 311–42. On the center-periphery model, see Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ For contestation: on the Ottomans, see Mostafa Minawi, “Beyond Rhetoric: Reassessing Bedouin-Ottoman Relations along the Route of the Hijaz Telegraph Line at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58 (2015): 75–104; Marc Aymes, “Many a Standard at a Time: The Ottomans’ Leverage with Imperial

More recently, studies of identities and solidarities in the late Ottoman moment have shown that empire remained the primary frame of reference and horizon of possibility for most nineteenth-century thinkers, including those usually classed as Arab nationalists.²⁰ The Qajar experience was not an exact mirror of the Ottoman one. Mana Kia has shown that the articulation of Iran within roughly its current boundaries began in the eighteenth-century aftermath of the Safavid collapse.²¹ But this does not mean that those are the natural borders of an Iranian nation, as evidenced by nineteenth-century worries that Qajar borders would contract still further.²² On the contrary, the Ottoman-Qajar comparison suggests that it might be more fruitful to view Qajar territories and rule as imperial.

The concept “empire” was foreign to both the Ottoman and Qajar intellectual traditions, though scholars have been more willing to apply it to the Ottoman context.²³ Still, as Christine Philliou has noted, scholars disagree on the nature of that empire: “Was the Ottoman Empire ... one or many? Was it itself, as a polity, more of an ecumene, a colonial empire, or a potential nation that was aborted before it could be born?”²⁴ Ottomanists have embraced this

Studies,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 8 (2013): 26–43. On Iran, some have characterized this period as one of state-building rather than nationalism. Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire*, 197. Others dispute the salience of ethnonationalism in Khuzestan. Shahezrad Ahmadi, “Local Ambivalence in the Arabistan-Basra Frontier, 1881–1925,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48 (2019): 436–54.

²⁰ On the imperial frame of reference, see Cemil Aydin, “The Emergence of Transnational Muslim Thought,” in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 121, 124; Thomas Phillipp, “Participation and Critique: Arab Intellectuals Respond to the Ottoman Revolution,” in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 247; Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). On the *nahda* as an Ottoman phenomenon, see Annie Greene, “Provincial, not Peripheral: Ottoman-Iraqi Intellectuals and Cultural Networks, 1863–1914” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018); Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 88–110; Adam Mestyan, *Arab Patriotism: The Ideology and Culture of Power in Late Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1–7.

²¹ Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 21. Kia argues against Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 15–18; and Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2–8, 13.

²² Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 48, 79, 165; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 105.

²³ Some scholars of the Qajars have used “empire.” See James Gustafson, *Kirman and the Qajar Empire: Local Dimensions of Modernity in Iran, 1794–1914* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7, 16; Assef Ashraf, “From Khan to Shah: State, Society, and Forming the Ties that Made Qajar Iran,” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2016), 34–35, 278; Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire*, 1, 194. For the Safavid period, see Rudi Matthee, “Was Safavid Iran an Empire?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010): 233–65.

²⁴ Christine Philliou, “Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism: Comparison and Commensurability,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 36 (2016): 456–57.

ambiguity, considering how intellectuals, statesmen, and ordinary people interpreted and contested the meaning of “Ottoman.”²⁵ Because “Ottoman” is no longer a viable identity, it is easy to understand these actions and forms of belonging as non-national.

The same is not true of Iran. However, the fact that Qajar statesmen and intellectuals like Najm al-Molk used the term “Iran” does not mean they were thinking about the Iranian nation-state.²⁶ While the Qajars, like many Ottomans, likely did not think of themselves in terms of “empire,” they did assume many of the symbolic trappings of Safavid and Sasanian rule.²⁷ At the same time, James Gustafson has argued that the Qajar period was characterized by strengthened regional identities.²⁸ The parallel consolidation of regional identities in the Ottoman lands often appears as nationalism.²⁹ But across both realms, in the modern period as much as the early modern, authorities aimed to cement rule through difference, not to eradicate it, while provincial intellectuals articulated identities that were simultaneously regional and imperial.³⁰ Rather than try to settle the “empire question,” I use the Ottoman-Qajar comparison to explore how rulers across both domains coped with difference, in a global context marked by colonial competition and capitalist expansion.³¹

²⁵ For the early modern period, see Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman World* (London: Routledge, 2011). On the later period, see Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Phillipp, “Participation and Critique”; Camille Lyans Cole, “Empire on Edge: Land, Law, and Capital in Gilded Age Basra” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2020).

²⁶ Gustafson, *Kirman*, 7.

²⁷ Azarbadegan, “Imagined Geographies,” 125–26, 131; Asraf, “From Khan to Shah,” 34; Talinn Grigor, “Persian Architectural Revivals in the British Raj and Qajar Iran,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 36 (2016): 384–97, 395.

²⁸ James Gustafson, “Geographical Literature in Nineteenth-Century Iran: Regional Identities and the Construction of Space,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (2016): 793–827.

²⁹ For critiques of common narratives on nationalism, see Carol Hakim, *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea: 1840–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), “Introduction.” On non-national regional identities, see Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Reidar Vissar, *Basra, The Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2005).

³⁰ Hala Fattah, “Islamic Universalism and the Construction of Regional Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Basra: Sheikh Ibrahim Haidari’s Book Revisited,” in Leila Fawaz and C. A. Bayly, eds., *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 112–29; Marc Aymes, *A Provincial History of the Ottoman Empire: Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century*, Adrian Morfee, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2014); Greene, “Provincial not Peripheral,” 41, 258.

³¹ Other imperial comparisons, see Adam Mestyan, “A Muslim Dualism? Inter-Imperial History and Austria-Hungary in Ottoman Thought, 1867–1921,” *Contemporary European History* 30 (2021): 478–96.

Responding to critiques of the comparative method, especially its tendency to maintain artificial boundaries between units of comparison, scholars have pioneered approaches like connected history, transnational history, and *histoire croisée*, which share an attention to human and material connections that disrupt common ideas about the spaces and concepts which contain historical change.³² In both following and analyzing Najm al-Molk's use of comparison, this article aims to craft a comparative analytic which emerges from the subject matter. It relies on limited regional and single-city comparisons because those are the units Najm al-Molk used, while remaining attentive to the politics animating his use of comparison. Again following the engineer, the article roots comparison in multi-scalar environmental, cultural, linguistic, and political connections. At the same time, it examines the place of Basra and Khuzestan within the Ottoman and Qajar domains, and so draws out a broader imperial comparison, partly on the basis of shared cultural and intellectual histories. I argue that taking seriously Najm al-Molk's view that the Qajars and Ottomans were comparable can help us use their peripheries to understand late Qajar history outside the national frame of "Iran."

TO MAKE KHUZESTAN ABADAN

The association of the built environment with just rule has a long lineage in Persianate writing. For example, the eleventh-century scholar and de facto ruler of the Seljuq Empire, Nizam al-Mulk, wrote, "[The ruler] will bring to pass that which concerns the advance of civilization, such as constructing underground channels, digging main canals, building bridges across great waters, rehabilitating villages and farms, raising fortifications, building new towns, and erecting lofty buildings and magnificent dwellings."³³ Surveying eighteenth-century place-making literatures, Mana Kia notes that authors usually described two kinds of features when writing about Persianate places: *madaniyat/tamaddun*, which referred to sociopolitical order and proper urban conduct; and *ma'mur/'imarat*, which referred to the built environment and was sometimes associated with the adjective form *abadan*.³⁴ The two features were intertwined, since learned men were understood to animate the built environment, itself an indicator of order and just rule.³⁵ Generally, the

³² Micol Siegel, "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn," *Radical History Review* 91 (2005): 62–90; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735–62; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 30–50.

³³ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The Siyar al-Mulk or Siyasat-nama of Nizam al-Mulk*, Hubert Drake, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

³⁴ Mana Kia, "The Necessary Ornaments of Place: Similarity and Alterity in the Persianate Imaginary," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 13 (2019): 47–73, 57.

³⁵ Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 76–77, 79, 96.

connotations of “built-ness” Kia outlines correspond with Najm al-Molk’s understanding of *abadi* in its insistence that people, land, and rule are interdependent.³⁶

Etymologically, *abadi* and *abadan* are derived from the Middle Persian *apat* (developed, thriving), though they have often been related to the word *ab* (water).³⁷ In addition to referring to specific settlements, *abadi* can be translated as “prosperity” and is usually contrasted to *kharabi* (ruin).³⁸ For Najm al-Molk, when a region was *abadan*, it was prosperous and settled—in the multiple senses of the term—and also orderly, cultivated, peaceful, built-up, and loyal to the Qajar regime.³⁹ This set of associations is reflected in the common use of *-abad* as a place-name suffix, especially for urban places.

Najm al-Molk’s notion of *abadi* combined existing concepts of *‘imarat* and *madaniyyat* with the preoccupations and style of a technical education in geography and engineering, while extending the concepts to incorporate rural as well as urban infrastructures. Both his surveying practices and his belief in progress through landscape modification reflect what Edmund Burke III describes as “the age of engineers.”⁴⁰ Najm al-Molk got his technical education as an early student at the Dar al-Fonun, the “Polytechnic,” or first modern university, in the country.⁴¹ By age twenty, he was an instructor, teaching accounting, engineering, geography, map-making, surveying, castle- and bridge-building, and military measurement.⁴² Today, he is remembered for the more than twenty textbooks he wrote on mathematics, geography, and natural history; and for his work on the first modern census and map of Tehran, rather than as a reformer.⁴³

But Najm al-Molk’s work as an educator was very much part of his thinking about reform, especially in how he deployed his technical education to rework

³⁶ For examples of Najm al-Molk using the terms *ma’mur/‘imarat*, see Hajj Mirza Abd al-Ghaffar Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom-e Najm al-Dawlah beh Khuzestan*, Ahmad Ketabi, ed. and introduction (Tehran: Pazhuheshgah-e ‘ulum-e Insani va Mutala’at-e Farhangi, 2007), 104, 109, 129.

³⁷ Ahmad Ashraf, “Abadi,” *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, <<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/abadi>>.

³⁸ Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 125; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 74.

³⁹ See, for example, Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 72, 74, 85, 90; Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 77–78, 93, 138, 143–44. See also Kia, “Necessary Ornaments,” 57.

⁴⁰ Edmund Burke III, “The Transformation of the Middle Eastern Environment, 1500 B.C.E.–2000 C.E.,” in Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds., *The Environment and World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 98.

⁴¹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, introduction, x.

⁴² Muhammad Hasan Ganji, *Jughrafiyah dar Iran: Az Dar al-Fonun ta Inqelab-e Islami* (Mashhad: Mo’assasah-ye Chap va Intesharat-e Astan-e Qods Rezvi, 1996), 27; *Zindigi-nameh va Khedmat-e ‘Ilmi va Farhangi-ye Mirza ‘Abd al-Ghaffar Khan Najm al-Molk* (Tehran: Anjoman-e Asar va Mofakhar-e Farhangi, 2004), 52.

⁴³ *Zindigi-nameh*; Ganji, *Jughrafiyah*, 21–29, 437; Mehdi Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal-e Rejal-e Iran dar Qarn-e 12, 13, va 14 Hijri*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Intesharat-e Zovar, 1992), 273–74. Re: textbooks, see Edward G. Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 157–58.

the concept of *abadi*. Throughout his journey, Najm al-Molk showed himself to be a keen observer of material conditions. Each time his party passed near a dam or other water-work, he stopped to measure it, often describing and mapping technical features and necessary repairs, and estimating how much they would cost.⁴⁴ At Band-qir, he described getting in a small boat to measure the river “with rope and engineering tools.” He repeated this exercise at several locations, collecting data on the width and depth of the Karun for use in determining navigation conditions above Ahvaz.⁴⁵ Najm al-Molk’s surveying practices were standard for the time. In his 1908 diary, British Indian diplomat Arnold Wilson described his meetings with irrigation engineer William Willcocks, who he accompanied on survey missions around Mohammereh and Ahvaz. Inspired, Wilson later conducted surveys on the Karkheh and Karun rivers on his own, describing his experience “swimming from rock to rock” with a line around his neck.⁴⁶

How Najm al-Molk presented information was shaped by Persianate genre conventions, but the techniques he shared with other engineers reflect the nineteenth-century consolidation of a set of global engineering practices and values rooted in experimentation and embodied experience.⁴⁷ At Ahvaz, Najm al-Molk worked with fifteen carpenters, pitch-layers, architects, and other laborers to try out the various processes needed to repair the Ahvaz dam. He used these trials to gather information about labor and costs in making his recommendation to the government.⁴⁸ Again, his method was similar to that employed by R. I. Money, a consulting engineer for Deutsche Bank and the Baghdad Railway, who traveled the region in 1909 compiling data on the different kinds of labor required for railway and water-works, the materials involved, and prevailing wages.⁴⁹ Moreover, Najm al-Molk was by no means

⁴⁴ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 5–6, 14–15, 19–20, 22, 24, 32, 34, 46, 68, 109–10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

⁴⁶ Sir Arnold Wilson, *SW Persia: A Political Officer’s Diary 1907–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 96–97, 101–2.

⁴⁷ On embodied experience, see Darina Martykánová, *Reconstructing Ottoman Engineers: Archaeology of a Profession (1798–1914)* (Pisa: Plus—Pisa University Press, 2010), 117; Canay Ozden, “The Pontifex Minimums: William Willcocks and Engineering British Colonialism,” *Annals of Science* 71 (2014): 183–205; David Gilmartin, “Imperial Rivers: Irrigation and British Visions of Empire,” in Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, eds., *Decentering Empire: Britain, India, and the Transcolonial World* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006): 76–103; David Gilmartin, “Scientific Empire and Imperial Science: Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 1127–49. For tensions between “science” and “practice,” see Kees Gispens, *New Profession, Old Order: Engineers and German Society, 1815–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Jonathan Harwood, “Engineering Education between Science and Practice: Rethinking the Historiography,” *History and Technology* 22 (2006): 53–79. On conflicting engineering styles, see Jennifer L. Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 15–39.

⁴⁸ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 30.

⁴⁹ Royal Geographical Society, R. I. Money papers, SSC/127/1, Mesopotamia Railway, Journal 1, 50, 54, 56, 58.

unique within Iran. Upon reaching Mohammereh, he noted that people understood his mission and purpose. Over the previous two decades, multiple government engineers and architects had passed through the region, making inquiries, drawing maps, and writing pamphlets.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding these previous missions, the engineer faced substantial resistance from opponents at court and in Khuzestan, who tried to derail his projects by casting doubt on his expertise.⁵¹ While they may not have disputed that the government ought to maintain the built environment, or that first-hand experience was a valuable source of knowledge, they challenged the value of Najm al-Molk's education as an engineer. In response, he offered detailed critiques of failing infrastructure, in addition to plans for new projects incorporating major dam repairs and subsidiary works.⁵² For example, he called for the state to build ten or eleven dams and canal systems upstream of Ahvaz to lessen the impact of the flood by siphoning off up to two-thirds of the water for irrigation before the river reached Ahvaz. He insisted that it would be impossible to build a single dam with sufficient capacity to hold the whole Karun flood, and that building a single smaller dam would ultimately cause the stream to divert and change course, leaving Ahvaz dry. Najm al-Molk also suggested major engineering tasks for the Karkheh River and Naseri dam, as well as smaller works on the Karun and marsh clearance near Mohammereh.⁵³ In each case, he aimed to avoid the yearly destruction of shoddy, hastily-built works in the spring floods, a pattern he judged responsible for many of Khuzestan's hydraulic problems.⁵⁴ The detail which characterized Najm al-Molk's plans, as well as the information he collected, both reflected his technical education and helped justify its inclusion in Persianate discourses of place.

In addition to how it incorporated the practical, technical methods and attitudes of "modern" engineering, Najm al-Molk's reformulation of *abadi* is striking because he applied the concept both to the urban built environment and to rural spaces and infrastructures.⁵⁵ His preoccupation with non-urban spaces resonated with other Qajar travelers, who likewise began to focus less on cities and more on the "landscapes in between and beyond."⁵⁶ So, while Najm al-Molk joined other Qajar writers in valuing bathhouses, bazaars, caravanserais, and

⁵⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 55.

⁵¹ Bamdad, *Rejal-e Iran*, 274, quoting E'temad al-Saltaneh; Hosayn Qoli Khan Nizam al-Saltaneh Mafi, *Khaterat va Asnad-e Hosayn Qoli Khan Nizam al-Saltaneh*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 1983), 154.

⁵² For the critique, see, for example, descriptions of failing infrastructure near Shushtar. Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 17, 20–21, 38. For similar rhetoric in 1899, see Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 106, 113, 131–32.

⁵³ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 23, 47, 76, 94.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 20, 38–39, 94; Nizam al-Saltaneh, *Khaterat va Asnad*, 154.

⁵⁵ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 26, 112, 118.

⁵⁶ Christine Noelle-Karimi, "On the Edge: Eastern Khurasan in the Perception of Qajar Officials," *Eurasian Studies* 14 (2016): 135–77, 136.

mosques as markers of *abadi*, he did not stop there.⁵⁷ When he arrived in Ahvaz, where many had fled to Ottoman territory, he argued that repairing the dam would be the cornerstone of any regional reforms, that it would make the country *abadan*, and that “certainly when the Ahvaz dam is closed [those who fled] will return.” If the newly increased population, living on newly habitable land, were provided one “decent” governor who showed “kindness” in taxation, he predicted that the peasants’ hearts and confidence would be drawn from Ottoman soil “towards the homeland” (*be samt-e vatan*).⁵⁸

In assessing the problems with Khuzestan’s cities and countryside, Najm al-Molk saw infrastructure as a necessary first step in a process that would eventually generate revenue for the Qajar state in addition to creating links between land and people—people he described as “canoe[s] floating on water ... they are only attached to cash and their herds, so in times of need they can easily flee and move.”⁵⁹ Like other elites, Najm al-Molk was disturbed by the ease with which some people moved around, including across putative international borders.⁶⁰ Instead of simply condemning them, however, he sought to encourage the kind of bonds that would make Shushtaris and Ahvazis think twice before leaving Qajar land. He did not see the dam alone as sufficient to encourage these bonds but drew on Ottoman experiences to advocate that it be accompanied by cheap and neutral land sales to subjects and the cessation of local government corruption.⁶¹ Najm al-Molk shared those aims with other reformers, both Qajar and Ottoman. But his insistence on centering the practical requirements of irrigation and agriculture as the basis of the state-land-people triangle set him apart from those who focused on law and political institutions.⁶²

Other Qajar subjects, albeit also not prominent reformers, shared Najm al-Molk’s sense that water was the key to Khuzestan. In his report on the 1852 Ottoman-Iranian border commission, Mirza Ja‘far Khan justified the Qajar claim to territories in southern Khuzestan by noting that irrigation waters from the dams at Ahvaz, when in operation, reached Hoveyzeh, Mohammereh, and the lands around the Karkheh and Shatt al-‘Arab rivers. For him, irrigation water and infrastructure cemented territorial sovereignty as the rights of the state over land

⁵⁷ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 74; Noelle-Karimi, “On the Edge,” 157, 162; Gustafson, “Geographical Literature,” 800.

⁵⁸ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 26, 32, 100.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁰ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 105; Sabri Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 311. On cross-border movement and community, see Shaherzad Ahmadi, “Local Ambivalence”; Shaherzad Ahmadi, “Smugglers, Migrants, and Refugees: The Iran-Iraq Border, 1925–1975,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2020): 1–16.

⁶¹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 41–42, 49, 58–59, 69.

⁶² Zia-Ebrahimi, *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 28; Seidel, “Reception of European Philosophy.”

and people.⁶³ Ten years later, during a sojourn in Ottoman Iraq, Qajar prince Seyf al-Dowleh foreshadowed Najm al-Molk's preoccupations, as well as his use of *abadi* to describe them. Describing Baghdad, he wrote that the water of the Euphrates could be "everywhere," allowing the government to extract "many crores of benefit" each year. He echoed the common Ottoman view that Iraq, if developed, could be as productive as Egypt, expressing puzzlement that the Ottoman state was not interested in making the land *abad*.⁶⁴ While Seyf al-Dowleh, writing twenty years before Najm al-Molk, did not share his admiration for the Ottoman administration of Iraq, he did share a sense that settlement, and therefore order and revenue, depended on investment in irrigation.

The Qajar state also embraced the concept of *abadi*. In 1888, the Foreign Ministry announced to the Ottoman embassy in Tehran that the lower Karun River would be opened to the navigation of "merchant steamships" of all nations, with the goal of "the growth of the trade and *abadi* of the country."⁶⁵ Reporting to the Ottoman prime minister, the ambassador rendered this policy as having "the goal of increasing trade and *i'mari*."⁶⁶ *I'mar*, the Ottoman word used to translate the Persian *abadi*, referred to the process of improving a place by cultivating, building, or peopling it, and is closely related to the Persian/Ottoman term *ma'mur*.⁶⁷ According to Darina Martykánová, beginning in the nineteenth century, "*i'mar*" often occurred alongside the words *nafia* (benefit) and *islah/maslahat* (reform), all of which referred to actions taken to improve, put in order, and promote.⁶⁸ Najm al-Molk similarly glossed *abadi* together with *taraqqi* (progress).⁶⁹ Ideas about reform and improvement, and the proper role of the state in those changes, were in flux in the Ottoman and Qajar domains alike. But in both realms, the pursuit of *abadi* and *i'mari* involved linked improvements to agriculture, settlement, and infrastructure. Moreover, the language of *abadi*/

⁶³ Mirza Seyyid Ja'far Khan, *Risaleh-ye Tahqiqat-e Sarhadiyyeh* (Tehran: Intisharat-e Bunyad-e Farhang-e Iran, 1969), 52, 94.

⁶⁴ Sultan Mohammad Seyf al-Dowleh, *Safarnameh-ye Seyf al-Dowleh, Ma'ruf bi Safarnameh-ye Makkah* (Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, 1985), 224. For Ottoman narratives, see, for example, NEK, TY 4266, Cemal Ahmed, "Mufasssal Coğrafya-yı Osmani," 94, 119; TY 4811, "Bağdat Şimendüferi Hakkında Mütalaa-i Siyasiye," 19.

⁶⁵ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (henceforth BOA), Hariciye (HR), Hukuk Müşavirliği İstişare Odası Belgeleri (HMŞ.İSO) 171.19, 24 Safar 1306 (30 Oct. 1888), Iran foreign ministry to Ottoman embassy Tehran, 2.

⁶⁶ BOA, HR.HMŞ.İSO 171.19, 31 Tişrinievvel 1305 (11 Nov. 1888), Tehran ambassador to sadrazam, 1.

⁶⁷ Sir James W. Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon Shewing in English the Significations of the Turkish Terms* (İstanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 2011), 145; Kia, "Necessary Ornaments," 54.

⁶⁸ Darina Martykánová, *Reconstructing Ottoman Engineers*, 128. See also Abdulhamit Kırmızı, "Going Round the Province for Progress and Prosperity: Inspection Tours and Reports by Late Ottoman Governors," *Studies in Travel Writing* 16 (2012): 387–401, 393; Camille Lyans Cole, "Nafia for the Tigris: The Privy Purse and the Infrastructure of Development in Late Ottoman Iraq, 1882–1914," *History of Science* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275321999265>.

⁶⁹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 123.

i'mar was mutually intelligible across the Ottoman and Qajar lands because they shared both an engineering culture and a broad cultural-intellectual heritage.

As a concept, *abadi* was popularized in nineteenth-century travelogues.⁷⁰ And Najm al-Molk was not the only Qajar official who used a narrative of provincial travel to craft proposals for reform. In fact, his suggestions were similar to those of Firuz Mirza Farman Farma, who traveled to Baluchestan as the provincial governor just two years before Najm al-Molk's trip. In his *safarnameh*, Farman Farma suggested dam construction and increased agriculture as a means to improve local peasant lives and entrench state control and taxation. His focus on combining environmental with political measures evokes the steps Najm al-Molk recommended in Khuzestan two years later.⁷¹ Even if he was unfamiliar with Farman Farma's trip, the similarity of their recommendations suggests a broader conjuncture in Qajar thinking about the possibility for positive feedback loops between development of people, land, and governance.

Moreover, while both Najm al-Molk and Farman Farma were Qajar elites dispatched from Tehran, their reform ideas, which emerged from embodied experiences of the Qajar borderlands, differed substantially from the ideas produced by Qajar exiles in Europe. Those differences suggest that different experiences and itineraries create different conditions of possibility for thought. As Najm al-Molk wrote in 1882, it was a shame that others had not seen Khuzestan, as they would surely think his descriptions exaggerated.⁷²

“ONE WILD AND DISORDERLY CORNER”

Najm al-Molk's understanding of both Khuzestan's current state of ruin and its potential future *abadi* was rooted in his observation of contrasts but also connections between Khuzestan and Basra. The engineer traveled to Basra at least three times: in 1879 on hajj, in 1882, and again in 1888–1889 when Naser al-Din sent him back to the region to finish work on the Ahvaz dam. Najm al-Molk experienced the contrast between Basra and Khuzestan as painful evidence of Qajar failings, especially given the environmental similarities between the two regions, and even, in his view, the natural superiority of Mohammereh in terms of water flow and quality and waterborne access to the city.⁷³ At the same time, however, the successes of Ottoman administration in

⁷⁰ Ashraf, “Abadi.”

⁷¹ Arash Khazeni, “On the Eastern Borderlands of Iran: The Baluch in Nineteenth-Century Persian Travel Books,” *History Compass* 5 (2007): 1399–411, 1401–2, 1405–6.

⁷² Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 62.

Basra and Baghdad, particularly in increasing agricultural output, gave him hope that the Qajars could achieve similar successes in Khuzestan.

Najm al-Molk's travel to Khuzestan and Basra was important not only because he did it, but also because he wrote about it. The nineteenth century has been described as the "heyday" of *safarnameh*-writing in Iran,⁷⁴ and many scholars have studied Persianate travel writing, in the Naseri period and before.⁷⁵ Naghmeb Sohrabi and others have shown how travel narratives, never a bounded genre, became further incorporated into other forms of writing. Despite varying audiences and purposes, texts ranging from court memoirs to engineers' reports shared stylistic and narrative elements, indicating that a broad cross-section of Qajar authors had internalized the tropes of Naseri travel writing.⁷⁶ Similarities notwithstanding, the persistence of the idea that Europe was the primary touchstone for Iranian reform has meant that while Qajar travel narratives to Europe have been mined for ideas about reform, internal travelogues and those to Ottoman Iraq have been read primarily through the aims of legitimacy, diplomacy, and geographical knowledge-production.⁷⁷

But reading Qajar and Ottoman travel writing side by side shows how domestic and close-foreign journeys like those of Najm al-Molk produced a strand of thinking about reform and identity which centered material improvements, especially to the rural built environment, as a means to bolster imperial authority. Many Ottoman officials wrote reports that can be productively compared to works like those of Najm al-Molk and Farman Farma. Abdulhamit Kırmızı, studying Ottoman provincial inspection tours, has noted that governors were central to the articulation of concepts of progress and prosperity, as those in the "core" Anatolian provinces as much as in the Arab "periphery" came to their positions encumbered with cultural baggage which generated a consistent set of arguments about their civilizing

⁷⁴ Ringer, "Quest for the Secret," 147. See also Mansureh Ittihadiye (Nizam Mafi), "Khaterat-e Rejal-e Qajar: Mururi bar Umur-e Darbar va Ravabit-e Darbariyan," *Iran-nameh* 7 (1996): 539–58, 539; Iraj Afshar, "Persian Travelogues: A Description and Bibliography," in Elton L. Daniel, ed., *Society and Culture in Qajar Iran: Studies in Honor of Hafez Farmayan* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 156. For lists of Qajar travelogues, see Iraj Afshar, "Safarnameh-ha-ye Farsi ta Ruzgar-e Isteqrar-e Mashrutiyat: Guneh-ha va Ketab-Shenasi-ye Gozide," in Seyyid Mohammad Torabi, ed., *Jashn-Nameh-ye Ustad Zabih-Allah Safa* (Tehran: Intisharat-e Shehab Saqeb, 1998), 64–82; Tomoko Morikawa, "Bibliographical Note on Safarname Materials in the Qajar Period," *Bulletin of the Society for Western and Southern Asiatic Studies* 55 (2000): 44–68 (in Japanese).

⁷⁵ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nile Green, ed., *Writing Travel in Central Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Afshar, "Persian Travelogues," Roberta Micallef and Sunil Sharma, eds., *On the Wonders of Land and Sea: Persianate Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁷⁶ Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, 82–83, 90, 92, 107, 112. Similarly in South Asia: Arash Khazeni, "Indo-Persian Travel Writing at the Ends of the Mughal World," *Past and Present* 243 (2019): 141–74, 156–57. Re: the early modern period, see Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 21.

⁷⁷ Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, 7–8, 81–82; Rahmaniyan, "Torkiye Osmani," 30.

mission and moral superiority to locals.⁷⁸ Many governors wrote memos outlining ideas for reforms to improve governance, bolster agriculture, and increase revenue in the provinces.⁷⁹

Bureaucrats who were dispatched to the provinces and to foreign lands also recorded their experiences. In 1884, the Ottoman Public Debt administration sent Ali Bey to India via Diyarbekir and Basra to investigate agricultural conditions and imports. His report included descriptions of the places he visited during the journey, including both people and built environments.⁸⁰ In 1909, the inspector (*müfettiş*) Ali Suat spent two years in Iraq and Najd. His report similarly described the conditions of travel and places and people he visited. Like Najm al-Molk, he despaired of the levels of civilization he encountered in the region, but detailed reform programs in progress as well as others he hoped to see in the future.⁸¹ Others, like the Baghdad parliamentary representative İsmail Hakkı Babanzade, published critical travel accounts in Istanbul newspapers, where he used descriptions of outlying parts of the empire to call for reforms.⁸² In Iran, Sohrabi has argued that even fictional travel books could be used effectively to critique the Qajars because of how familiar travel writing had become as a tool of governance.⁸³

Official travel and travel writing served similar purposes in Ottoman and Qajar administration, providing first-hand information to officials based in the capital without relying on potentially untrustworthy or untrained local informants. But travel within the imperial domains also exposed roving bureaucrats to different kinds of people and places, leading them to develop different kinds of ideas about reform and progress, even as they struggled to impose their own standards on the provinces.

In the Ottoman context, some scholars see knowledge-production about the provinces as contributing to a kind of colonial relationship between Istanbul and the rest of the empire, especially the Arab provinces, both rooted in and

⁷⁸ Kırmızı, "Going Round the Province," 387–88, 397.

⁷⁹ On Iraq, see Gökhan Çetinsaya, "The Politics of Reform in Iraq under Abdülhamid II," *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3 (1999): 41–72, 42; Ebubekir Ceylan, "Abdurrahman Nureddin Paşa'nın Osmanlı Irak'ına Dair 1880 Tarihli Layihası Üzerine," *Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 19 (2014): 85–115, 89; Selda Kılıç, "Nusret Paşa'nın Irak'ta İslahat Önerileri," *XIV Uluslararası Türk Tarih Kongresi*, vol. 2 (Ankara, 2002), 761–76.

⁸⁰ Ali Bey, *Dicle'de Kelek ile bir Yolculuk: İstanbul'dan Bağdad'a ve Hindistan'a, min sene 1300 ila sene 1304* (İstanbul: Büke Yayınları, 2003).

⁸¹ "Rihla al-Mufettish al-'Uthmani Ali Su'ad fi al-Khalij wa al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya," Muhammad Harb and Tasnim Muhammad Harb, trans., in *Rihlat 'Uthmaniyya fi al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya wa al-Hind wa Asya al-Wusta: Ma Bayn al-Qarnayn al-Sadis 'Ashr wa al-'Ishrin* (Abu Dhabi: Dar al-Suwaydi li-l-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 2013), vol. 2, 189–92.

⁸² İsmail Hakkı Babanzade, *Beyrut'tan Kuveyt'e Irak Mektupları* (İstanbul: Büke Yayınları, 2002).

⁸³ Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, 121.

productive of ethnic difference.⁸⁴ As Michael Christopher Low has argued, however, the infrastructural projects pursued by governors in these “hot provinces” can be seen as an issue of modern governmentality and bureaucratic rationality, as autonomy on imperial frontiers became increasingly less compatible with the demands of territorial sovereignty and imperial competition. In a parallel to Najm al-Molk’s approach to Khuzestan, Low finds that Ottoman administrators aimed to solve the “biopolitical and juridical weaknesses” of the frontier through modern engineering and ethnographic approaches to local populations.⁸⁵

From this perspective, Najm al-Molk’s efforts and those of other reformers intent on solidifying Qajar control over its territory appear less as incipient ethno-nationalism than as state expansion under pressurized geopolitical conditions.⁸⁶ At the same time, however, scholarship on Iran which takes for granted its identity as a unit can offer a corrective to the Ottomanist tendency to project contemporary difference back onto Ottoman people and identities. In Baluchestan, Qajar travelers wrote about the ethnic diversity and difference they encountered without suggesting that the people they met were incontrovertibly different, instead portraying them as embedded in a broader regional life.⁸⁷ Neither Qajar nor Ottoman travelers expected to encounter sameness within their respective domains, though elites in both realms promoted narratives and projects designed to foment loyalty to regime and land. Studying the Ottoman and Qajar experiences together reveals that despite some differences, officials in both domains understood their domains similarly and favored parallel infrastructural and administrative measures.⁸⁸

In all three of his travel narratives, Najm al-Molk presented extensive comparisons between both rural and urban spaces in Khuzestan and Basra—comparisons from which Basra emerged triumphant. Comparing the Khuzestani town of Mohammereh to Basra, just twenty miles to the north, Najm al-Molk was galled by Mohammereh’s failure to capitalize on what he saw as its superior environmental situation to increase its cultivation, population, and share of trade.

⁸⁴ Deringil, *Well-Protected Domains*; Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics*; Michael Christopher Low, “Ottoman Infrastructures of the Saudi Hydro-State: The Technopolitics of Pilgrimage and Potable Water in the Hijaz,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (2015): 949–53.

⁸⁵ Michael Christopher Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 33–34.

⁸⁶ Some scholars have hinted at this: Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire*, 197; Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 11.

⁸⁷ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Baluchistan: Nature, Ethnicity, and Empire in Iran’s Borderlands,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 4 (2013): 187–204, 199; Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 36; Joanna de Groot, “Inclusion and Exclusion in the ‘Persianate World’: Views of Baluch People in the Nineteenth Century,” in Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf, eds., *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 206, 209–15.

⁸⁸ A few scholars have studied Ottoman Iraq together with Iran. See Ateş, “Bones of Contentment”; Zeinab Azarbadegan, “Imagined Geographies”; Ahmadi, “Local Ambivalence”; Ahmadi, “Smugglers, Migrants, and Refugees.”

He noted in 1882 that though boat traffic and waste from date groves had polluted Basra's 'Ashar creek, it was lined with fruit and date groves. In contrast, Mohammereh's water had better flow and was of drinking quality but supported just one hundred date palms. Moreover, he estimated the population of Mohammereh at three thousand, mostly poor peasants with a few clergymen and merchants. Basra was nearly ten times larger, with greater economic, ethnic, and occupational diversity. Najm al-Molk complained that while practically nothing was sold in Mohammereh, in Basra all the necessities were available, including cheese, pomegranate paste, boats, vegetables, tools, beans, sheep, and drugs. Even the salt marsh around Basra was cultivated, a task he suggested would be too much for the "lazy and artless" denizens of Mohammereh. Ultimately, he proclaimed that while Mohammereh was but a village, Basra was a real city.⁸⁹

Other Qajar officials shared Najm al-Molk's disappointment in Khuzestan and his admiration for the Ottoman administration.⁹⁰ In his 1914 *History of Basra*, longtime Qajar consul Agha Mirza Hasan Khan Badi' warned that anyone traveling on the Shatt al-'Arab from the Persian Gulf would be sure to contrast the ruin and brokenness of the Iranian side unfavorably with the houses and date palms stretched out along the Ottoman shore.⁹¹ Badi' advised Iranian "men of state" to learn about Basra before any other city, because "everything both good and bad is shared between Basra and Arabistan."⁹² It was those similarities that led Najm al-Molk to recommend the reforms he observed in Basra as likely to succeed in Khuzestan. In 1882, he was particularly impressed by what he called the "*tanzimat* councils," which took care of the matters of the city and could not be overruled or bypassed by the governor.⁹³ Other officials shared Najm al-Molk's admiration for the *tanzimat*, adopting the term to describe both specific and general reforms.⁹⁴ And while Najm al-Molk's regard for how the *tanzimat* administration was bound by the rule of law aligned with mainstream calls for reform, it was based in a specific comparison between Basra and Khuzestan. For Najm al-Molk, that contrast provided proof of how oppression (*te'adi*) prevented people from developing strong bonds with land and state.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 62–64.

⁹⁰ Outside Basra, see Karabulut, "Politics of Law," 10, 27–29; Hazrati, "Reflections."

⁹¹ Mirza Agha Hasan Khan Badi', *Tarikh-e Basra* (Calcutta, n.p., 1914), 63. See also Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovvom*, 94.

⁹² Badi', *Tarikh-e Basra*, 1.

⁹³ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 63.

⁹⁴ Mirza Ali Khan Amin al-Dowleh, *Khaterat-e Siyasi*, Hafez Farmanfarma'ian, ed. (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1962), 29, 46, 96–97; Seidel, "Reception of European Philosophy," 331; Karabulut, "Politics of Law," 27.

⁹⁵ On *te'adi*, see Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 26, 31.

In the countryside, Najm al-Molk identified differences in land tenure as a major cause of the gap between law and *abadi* in Basra, and oppression and *kharabi* in Khuzestan. Comparing the towns of Hoveyzeh and ‘Amara, on opposite sides of the Hoveyzeh marsh, he described how the Ottomans had made all the area date groves (*nakhlestan*), while the Qajar lands remained uncultivated. He located the root of the difference in the fact that Ottoman authorities had begun selling land to “lords and peasants,” offering deeds for all transactions, while Khuzestani cultivators remained in a constant state of fear that their landlords would unjustly expropriate their lands.⁹⁶ While this observation radically simplified the conditions of land tenure, it nonetheless demonstrates that, for Najm al-Molk, rule of law was valuable as part of a systemic set of measures to support agricultural development.

Others likewise drew inspiration from Ottoman measures. In 1869, Qajar Foreign Minister Mirza Said Khan wrote to Moshir al-Dowleh, his ambassador in Istanbul, with reference to a previous missive praising the “integrity, zeal, and effort” of Ottoman statesmen in pursuing judicial and infrastructural reforms.⁹⁷ Moshir al-Dowleh was a frequent cheerleader for Ottoman reforms. In 1870, he urged the Shah to make a pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala in order to gain first-hand experience of the reforms in Iraq. Recounting the trip in his memoirs, Amin al-Dowleh, another statesman, recalled that the courtiers expected the Shah to draw the obvious conclusion from the comparison between the “shortcomings and disadvantages of the Iranian situation, and the progresses that were [made] in one wild and disorderly corner” of the Ottoman lands.⁹⁸ Naser al-Din was so impressed with the Ottoman reforms that he recalled his ambassador to the Ottoman Empire to direct a similar reform program at home.⁹⁹ Clearly, Najm al-Molk was not alone in seeing the Ottoman lands, and particularly Ottoman Basra, as a useful example.¹⁰⁰

Najm al-Molk and his peers were also interested in Ottoman Basra because of its deep connections to Khuzestan, and the ease with which people crossed the border. For the engineer, these connections were problematic because the contrast between Khuzestan and Basra fueled a drain of people, customs revenues, and natural resources out of Iran. He was particularly struck by the concentration of “the fleeing people of Iran” in ‘Amara. Even worse, because the newly *abadan* built environment had attracted trade along with the expanded population, a new customs house in the town dominated the import-export trade

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁷ Yale University archive, Ghani Collection, series V, doc. 3, 18 Jumada al-Ula 1286 (26 Aug. 1869), Mirza Said Khan to Moshir al-Dowleh.

⁹⁸ Amin al-Dowleh, *Khaterat-e Siyasi*, 27.

⁹⁹ Lawrence, “Trans-Imperial Vernacularisms,” 1–2.

¹⁰⁰ India was another important model for Qajar statesmen and officials. See Mana Kia and Afshin Marashi, special section on “After the Persianate,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 36 (2016): 379–454, especially the articles by Kia and Vejdani.

of Khuzestan, diverting “Iranian” customs revenue to Ottoman coffers.¹⁰¹ The Qajar consul Badi’ likewise observed that ever since Basra had begun to move toward a state of “settlement,” many Iranians had migrated to the city and even renounced Qajar subjecthood in favor of Ottoman nationality.¹⁰² Other Qajar travelers also observed the concentration of Qajar immigrants in rural areas across southern Iraq, but especially in ‘Amara, where Persian was widely spoken and the Qajar *shahi* was the most common coin.¹⁰³

In addition, in 1882 Najm al-Molk highlighted the problem of illegal sales of timber from the banks of the Karun to Basra, complaining that much of the wood found around Hoveyzeḥ was sold to Mohammereh, where it was bundled by merchants and sent to Basra for use in roofs and other structures.¹⁰⁴ He accused Ottoman peasants of crossing the border to illegally cut and sell wood from Iranian groves. These concerns were shared: in 1882, Ehtesham al-Saltaneh, then governor of Khuzestan, forbade wood sales to Basra, decreeing that only wood needed for construction within Mohammereh could be brought there.¹⁰⁵ In 1889, though, Najm al-Molk was disappointed to note that a second prohibition on the transport of Karun wood to Basra had failed to have any impact. The drain of timber from Khuzestan was problematic not only because it constituted further evidence of Ottoman development but because it contributed to a vicious cycle of destruction as Iranian peasants were forced by lack of timber for their own use to break up furnishings and dwellings to burn.¹⁰⁶ While many Qajar subjects feared losing control over resources, they mostly focused on concessions and the potential for European encroachment.¹⁰⁷ The drain of timber Najm al-Molk observed in Khuzestan was smaller and less shocking, and so called for different solutions. Skeptical that the cross-border movement of people and things could be controlled, Najm al-Molk sought to stanch the flows with measures that would allow Khuzestan to win the comparison with Basra.¹⁰⁸

As much as Najm al-Molk and other Qajar observers were angry at the contrast between Basra and Khuzestan, it also gave them hope that with a few changes the Qajars could attract migrants back.¹⁰⁹ In 1889, the engineer again compared Basra and Mohammereh, noting that there had been more progress in

¹⁰¹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 18, 85. See also Ahmadi, “Local Ambivalence,” 3.

¹⁰² Badi’, *Tarikh-e Basra*, 63, 75. See also Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovjom*, 101; Ahmadi, “Local Ambivalence,” 13.

¹⁰³ Mohammad Ali Khan Minabi Bandar Abbasi Sadid al-Saltaneh, *Safarnameh-ye Sadid al-Saltaneh: al-Tadqiq fi seyr al-Tariq* (Tehran: Intisharat Bahmansher, 1984), 344; Seyf al-Dowleh, *Safarnameh-ye Makkah*, 234.

¹⁰⁴ Previously, it was also burned by the Tigris steamships. University of Washington, Svoboda Diaries, Joseph Mathia Svoboda, Diary 4, 23 Apr. 1865, 101.

¹⁰⁵ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 35, 61.

¹⁰⁶ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovjom*, 79, 98.

¹⁰⁷ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, ch. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovjom*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ Amin al-Dowleh, *Khaterat-e Siyasi*, 27.

the Ottoman lands, with more date groves, houses, caravanserais, bazaars, and gardens, as well as merchants trading from all over Europe and even the New World. Although Mohammereh remained ruined and dilapidated (*kharab o viran*), Najm al-Molk suggested that all the Iranians in Basra were ready to return there if only the persistent lack of security could be remedied.¹¹⁰ In surveying Iranian migration to Ottoman Basra, as well as the possibilities for reverse migration, Najm al-Molk implied that in addition to people and resources, information moved easily around the region, enabling ordinary people to vote with their feet and choose reform and settlement over tyranny and ruin.

Najm al-Molk was not only interested in bringing Iranians back to Iran, but also saw potential in the tribes who straddled the border.¹¹¹ In 1882, the engineer met with one of the leaders of the Muntafik confederacy, resident primarily on Ottoman soil. The leader informed him that the Ottoman state was oppressing him, offering that if the Qajar government made the Karkheh River flow productively again, the group would send several of its tribes to live there. While the plan never came to fruition, Najm al-Molk's openness to bringing in Muntafik and other tribal migrants shows how *abadi* fit into an idea of imperial rule as incorporating different kinds of people, bound by a shared interest in maintaining justice and prosperity through the built environment.¹¹²

Many other Ottoman tribes did come to Khuzestan, and in some cases it seems that Qajar authorities made a point of trying to attract Ottoman tribes to settle permanently. Thousands of members of the Bani Lam, another confederation which mostly resided on Ottoman territory, migrated to Qajar territory from 1885–1891, the mid-1890s–1901, and 1901–1914.¹¹³ According to Ottoman reports from the 1852 border commission, thousands more Bani Lam households had moved to Iran around 1790.¹¹⁴ It is plausible that they and other tribes made similar moves in the intervening years. In 1911 and again in 1912, Faliḥ al-Sayhud, another 'Amara-area borderlands shaykh, reminded the Ottoman government that although he was an Ottoman subject, he and his followers had experienced respect and protection (*hurmet ve ri'ayet*)

¹¹⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 89–90.

¹¹¹ For subsequent experiences with resettlement from Iraq to Iran, see Ahmadi, "Smugglers, Migrants, and Refugees."

¹¹² Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 50. Najm al-Molk renders the name "Muntafij," reflecting Iraqi-dialect pronunciation.

¹¹³ Gökhan Çetinsaya, *The Ottoman Administration of Iraq 1890–1908* (London: Routledge, 2006), 93; Burcu Kurt, "Irak'ta 'Muktedir' ve 'Müşteki' bir İttihatçı: Süleyman Nazif Bey'in Basra Valiliği," *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 7 (2012): 155–79, 166; BOA, Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası (BEO) 1560.116982, 25 Eylül 1316 (8 Oct. 1900), Bab-i Ali to Dahiliye; Dahiliye Mektubi Kalemî (DH. MKT) 2433.131, 19 Teşrinisani 1316 (2 Dec. 1900), Dahiliye to Bab-i Ali; Dahiliye İdare Kısım Belgeleri (DH.İD) 182.19, 23 Kanunuevvel 1329 (5 Jan. 1914), Ghadban al-Bunyan to Dahiliye, 5.

¹¹⁴ NEK, İE 1873, Derviş Paşa, *Tahdid-i Hudud*, 18–19.

in Qajar exile, while Ottoman authorities had not offered his tribes even 1 percent of the aids to affluence (*terfih*) they received in Iran.¹¹⁵

Neither Falih al-Sayhud's complaints nor Najm al-Molk's laments should be taken as conclusive evidence of the character of cross-border migration. Rather, they indicate the extent to which both Ottoman and Qajar authorities worried over the porosity of their border. In fact, Ottoman authorities in Basra were as convinced as their Qajar counterparts that they were losing population across the border.¹¹⁶ And while Najm al-Molk worried that 'Amara was monopolizing rightfully-Qajar customs revenues, Ottoman authorities fretted that merchants might send their goods via Mohammereh instead of Basra. In 1908, the Sublime Porte suggested that Ottoman steamships decrease their prices and ensure incoming goods to Basra be sent on quickly instead of piling up on the jetties, to convince merchants of the value of the Basra route.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Ottoman officials at Basra believed cross-border smuggling put such a dent in *their* customs revenues that they refused to tax goods destined for Khuzestan at the 1 percent transit rate, insisting on levying the 8 percent internal consumption rate. As the Foreign Ministry explained, "the topographical situation in the region" made it impossible to distinguish goods destined for Ottoman and Qajar consumers.¹¹⁸ When the measures were appealed, the Ottoman Council of Ministers claimed that the fact that "there are many places on the small canals and empty riverbanks" where goods could be smuggled back into Ottoman territory would cause major losses for the Basra customs.¹¹⁹

Like Najm al-Molk, Ottoman authorities in Basra and Istanbul believed that effective border control was unlikely. Still, although Qajar and Ottoman officials recognized that the border presented no obstacle to the movement of goods, people, and ideas, each wanted to keep population, resources, and revenues within their own territory. With that in mind, Najm al-Molk and his Ottoman counterparts focused, if often unsuccessfully, on convincing the ordinary people—town-dwellers and rural tribes alike—who they saw as routinely making the Basra-Khuzestan comparison to reassess and cross the border to settle once and for all. For Najm al-Molk, Basra was both a primary cause of Khuzestan's ruined present, and evidence of the possibility for a settled, *abadan* future.

¹¹⁵ BOA, ML.EEM 1064.10, n.d. Falih al-Sayhud to Bab-ı Ali, 1. The date is known from the rest of file. See a similar statement from 1911: BOA, DH.İD 182.4, 23 Eylül 1327 (6 Oct. 1911), Falih al-Sayhud to Hariciye, 43.

¹¹⁶ al-Qadi Ahmad Nur al-Ansari, *al-Nusra fi Akhbar al-Basra, taqrir qadamahu sana 1277H ila Munib Basha Wali al-Basra*, Yusuf 'Izz al-Din, ed. (Baghdad: Matba'a al-Sha'b, 1972), 42.

¹¹⁷ BOA, BEO 3272.245350, 2 Mart 1324 (16 Mar. 1908), Bab-ı Ali to Hitta-yı Irakiye Heyet-i Islahiye, 1.

¹¹⁸ BOA, HR.İD 898.56, n.d., Hariciye to British Embassy, 9–10.

¹¹⁹ BOA, Meclis-i Vükela 79.50, 20 Şubat 1309 (4 Mar. 1894), Meclis-i Vükela decision.

PART OF IRAN IN NAME ONLY

For Najm al-Molk, making Khuzestan *abadan* was important primarily as a means to strengthen Iran as a whole. His descriptions of what kinds of things were needed to both make Khuzestan *abadan* and to make it “Iranian” fit into Persianate discourse about proper imperial rule. The engineer maintained that Khuzestan could not truly be considered part of Iran because of its lack of infrastructure, settlement, and order.¹²⁰ Inspecting the Naseri dam, he wrote, “We cannot count Khuzestan as part of Iran as long as the necessities of life—hammam, bazaar, caravanserai, mosques—are not built; as long as villages don’t attract ‘*ajamis*’; as long as ‘*ajami*’ peasants are not scattered all around; as long as there is not real agriculture; as long as the arts of war and guarding the border are not practiced.”¹²¹

For Najm al-Molk, the question of settlement and Iranian-ness, embodied in the provincial built environment, was especially pressing because of Khuzestan’s precarious political situation in the pressurized geopolitical atmosphere of the late nineteenth century. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has noted the extent to which Qajar losses of territory and sovereignty propelled the growth of disciplines like geography in Iran, since the court was concerned that Iranians know and properly value their lands.¹²² With his travel book, Najm al-Molk took this concern one step further, seeing in Khuzestan’s lack of *abadi* a potential threat to the country’s cohesion. That is, he viewed the lack of Qajar investment in Khuzestan’s material fabric as further weakening relationships between people, land, and state. Especially given that barely thirty years earlier, powerful figures had testified to the Ottoman-Iranian border commission that large swathes of Khuzestan belonged to the Ottoman Empire, Najm al-Molk viewed locals’ lack of rootedness in the land or ties to the state as politically dangerous.¹²³ To protect against the loss of Khuzestan, whether to the Ottomans, the British, or local rulers, he pushed for the Qajar state to invest in making Khuzestan more *abadan*.

In describing his plans for Khuzestan, Najm al-Molk frequently used the terms “Iran,” “Arab,” and “‘*ajam*,” an Arabic word meaning “mute” that has often been used as a slur against non-native Arabic speakers, particularly Persian-speakers. However, Najm al-Molk’s use of these terms suggests that he used them at least partly to denote settlement and relation to the imperial government, rather than as simple ethnic markers. This is visible in his association of ‘*ajamis*’ with a settled lifestyle. For example, he advocated that

¹²⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 73.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²² Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 53, 65.

¹²³ Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 118–19; John Perry, “The Banu Ka’b: An Amphibious Brigand State in Khuzistan,” in *Le Monde Iranien et l’Islam*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1971). See also NEK, IE 1873, “Tahdid-i Hudud,” 26.

in order to increase the agricultural revenue of Mohammereh and its surroundings, the land be filled with *'ajamis* of all types—tradespeople, craftsmen, peasants, administrators, merchants, and others—until they became a majority.¹²⁴ Here, Najm al-Molk primarily associated being *'ajami* with the occupations of settled life, both urban and rural, which he suggested made them more suited to promoting *abadi*. Together with his statement that Basra's greater variety of occupational groupings was evidence of its superiority over Mohammereh, this suggests that he saw the presence of the occupations of settled life as indicating prosperity and just rule. More than that, his identification of Basra as superior to Mohammereh in this respect suggests that, while he associated settlement first with *'ajamis*, he recognized *abadi* among Arabs too.¹²⁵

Najm al-Molk's plans for *abadi* in Khuzestan represented a kind of civilizing mission, but not a straightforwardly racial or ethnic one. Like his Ottoman counterparts who emphasized the fundamental similarities between "civilizing" officials and their subjects, even in a place as distant as Yemen, Najm al-Molk readily acknowledged that the Arabs of Khuzestan shared much with their *'ajami* brethren.¹²⁶ Moreover, he exhibited a familiar "metropolitan arrogance," centered on the built environment, when faced with Turkish- and Persian-speaking peasants. In Razan, he described the people as "liv[ing] like wild beasts. They are far from civilization (*tarbiyeh*). They have no hammams; they are not clean."¹²⁷ Ottoman governors likewise exhibited parallel attitudes towards tribes in Anatolia and tribes in Syria and Iraq, suggesting that these attitudes were not ethnically differentiated.¹²⁸ In fact, as Christoph Herzog has noted, while the ethnonyms "Turk" and "Arab" appeared in the French-language version of Ottoman reformer Midhat Paşa's memoirs, they were absent from the Ottoman version.¹²⁹ Although Najm al-Molk did use words we now understand as straightforward ethnic indicators, it seems likely that he intended them as more complex markers of occupation, language, and settlement.

In addition, Najm al-Molk suggested that Khuzestanians associated the term *'ajam* specifically with the state. He wrote that the people of Ahvaz were confused about his identity, saying, "You are neither an *'ajam*, nor an officer of the state." He attributed this confusion, along with the generalized fear of

¹²⁴ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 73–74.

¹²⁵ On characteristics of foreign places as fundamentally similar, see Kia, "Necessary Ornaments."

¹²⁶ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 73. On Yemen, see Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics*, 13, 218.

¹²⁷ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 10. The phrase "metropolitan arrogance" is from Christoph Herzog, "Nineteenth-Century Baghdad through Ottoman Eyes," in Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, eds., *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 2002), 328.

¹²⁸ Kırmızı, "Going Round the Province."

¹²⁹ Herzog, "Nineteenth-Century Baghdad," 312, 323.

'*ajamis* he encountered in the region, to the fact that the locals only had experience with bad government and official oppression.¹³⁰ This linking of '*ajam* specifically with Qajar officialdom indicates that, for locals, it referred more to the experience of imperial sovereignty than to an incipient ethnic-national identity. By disentangling these terms from their narrow contemporary meanings, we can recover the late-imperial context in which Najm al-Molk articulated *abadi* as the overarching aim for the Qajar state in Khuzestan.

By the time of Najm al-Molk's second trip to Khuzestan in 1888–1889, however, he was forced to set aside plans to make Khuzestan part of Iran by promoting *abadi* in order to preserve Qajar sovereignty in the short term. When the engineer, recently promoted to Najm al-Dowleh, returned, he encountered a Khuzestan transformed by the opening of the Karun River to international navigation.¹³¹ He remained committed to his vision of Khuzestan's future, trying to convince local notables of the value of a repaired Ahvaz dam and commenting repeatedly on ruined dams and other infrastructure, but he was forced to also attend to the rapid expansion of the British presence in the province.¹³² Although the opening of the Karun entailed increases to trade and infrastructure, changes Najm al-Molk might have supported under other circumstances, he opposed them as trojan horses for British imperial encroachment. All of a sudden, the threat of losing the province to the British had become more pressing than its material condition.

Ironically, the Qajar state explained the opening of the Karun in language similar to that Najm al-Molk had employed in 1882. The 1888 announcement of the decision began with a statement that the opening was "in order to ease trade and increase the wealth of the country."¹³³ Elsewhere, the Foreign Ministry referred to the need to build up (*ma'mureti*) the country and make it *abadan*.¹³⁴ The Qajars enacted numerous rules meant to protect their sovereignty over the region, including limiting the range of foreign ships; requiring that all steamship employees be registered; and forbidding foreigners from building shipping infrastructure, taking Iranians under

¹³⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 26, 59.

¹³¹ On the opening of the Karun, see Shahbaz Shahnavaaz, *Britain and the Opening Up of South-West Persia: A Study in Imperialism and Economic Dependence* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 35; Shahbaz Shahnavaaz, "The Karun River iii: The Opening of the Karun," *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/karun_3>; Heidi Walcher, *In the Shadow of the King: Zill al-Sultan and Isfahan under the Qajars* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), ch. 1.

¹³² Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 108, 112, 129, 131, 133–34, 135.

¹³³ BOA, Hariciye, Tercüme Odası Belgeleri (HR.TO) 392.41, 7 Şubat 1304 (19 Feb. 1889), Translation of Iranian karar-name. See also Walcher, *Shadow of the King*, 73.

¹³⁴ BOA, HR.HMŞ.İSO 171.19, 24 Safar 1306 (30 Oct. 1888), Iran Foreign Ministry to Ottoman Embassy Tehran, 2; HR.TO 104.74, 20 Safar 1306 (26 Oct. 1888), Iranian Foreign Ministry to Ottoman Embassy Tehran.

protection, or extending loans secured against local property.¹³⁵ For the most part, they stuck to these rules. In 1887, Qajar merchant Malek al-Tujjar (Haji Mohammed Ali Khan) received a concession and monopoly to trade on the Karun.¹³⁶ The Naseri Company he co-owned with his brother had exclusive rights on the Karun above Ahvaz, and held contracts to construct a quay, caravanserai, and tramway at Ahvaz.¹³⁷ The government also built wharves, jetties, and warehouses along the Karun to cater to the increase in trade.¹³⁸ But even with the restrictions, the new built environment was accompanied by an increasingly aggressive English presence.

Najm al-Molk first encountered the changes in Ahvaz, where he boarded the *Blosse Lynch*, a steamship owned by the British Lynch company.¹³⁹ Although the company had permission to run the ship on the lower Karun, Najm al-Molk reported that it also ran several ships on the river's Bahmishir branch without permission.¹⁴⁰ The company, which operated several steamships on the lower Tigris, pursued a similar strategy in Ottoman Iraq, illicitly expanding operations and then demanding British diplomatic support. It participated in a British model of empire which used trade networks to establish footholds around the Indian Ocean.¹⁴¹ Najm al-Molk was well aware of this strategy. When the Lynch agent Tyler pressed him about building trade houses in Mohammereh, Shushtar, and Ahvaz, he agreed on condition that the buildings revert to the Qajar state after ten years, a significantly shorter period than those agreed upon in many concession contracts.¹⁴² Najm al-Molk was strict with the English because he thought trade was just an excuse for them to establish a presence in and perhaps completely take over Mohammereh. His anxieties were piqued by Tyler's repeated attempts to bribe him and engage in

¹³⁵ BOA, HR.TO 392.41, 7 Şubat 1304 (19 Feb. 1889), Translation of Iranian karar-name.

¹³⁶ Name; see *al-'Umran*, 9 June 1908, 566. Sources refer alternately to Ra'is al-Tujjar and Malek al-Tujjar, who seems to be the same person; e.g., BL, IOR/L/PS/P1552 1904, 12 Sept. 1906, Grant Duff Dulahek to Grey, 272.

¹³⁷ Shahnava, *Britain and the Opening Up of South-West Persia*, 171. Walcher dates the founding of the Naseri company to 1889, in *Shadow of the King*, 75–76. See also Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 106–7. The brother (Moin al-Tujjar) is more often cited as an important figure.

¹³⁸ Mostafa Ansari, "The History of Khuzistan 1878–1925: A Study in Provincial Autonomy and Change" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1974), 120. Khazeni says this was Nizam al-Saltaneh personally, in *Tribes and Empire*, 102.

¹³⁹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 82. On the Lynch company, see Cole, "Precarious Empires."

¹⁴⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 83.

¹⁴¹ Camille Cole, "Controversial Investments: Trade and Infrastructure in Ottoman-British Relations in Iraq, 1861–1918," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54 (2018): 746–50.

¹⁴² Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovvom*, 96. For comparison, see Anglo-Persian Oil Company lease agreements in Mohammereh: British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71723, file 13: Shaykh of Muhammerah, 16 Jul 1909, Abadan Agreement 109–11; 3 Sept. 1918, 114–15; n.d. agreement, 120–21.

ta'rof (ritual politeness),¹⁴³ and only intensified over time, as he linked British control over communications infrastructure and lack of respect for Qajar statesmen and rules to the potential for future territorial loss.¹⁴⁴

Najm al-Molk was equally worried that Khuzestan might be lost to a local potentate like Miz'al, the shaykh of Mohammereh. As early as 1879, the engineer blamed Miz'al's father Jabir for the ruin of Mohammereh, charging that the shaykh's substantial Ottoman property holdings made him a "barrier" to the progress of Khuzestan.¹⁴⁵ Again in 1882, Najm al-Molk noted Miz'al's autonomy, worrying that he might flee to Ottoman soil or bring Ottoman soldiers to Iran if pressed too hard by the Qajars.¹⁴⁶ While he did not elaborate on the link between autonomy and *abadi*, a 1909 Karun irrigation plan was abandoned on the grounds that it would threaten the irrigation of Ottoman date groves, especially those belonging to Miz'al's brother and successor.¹⁴⁷ In that light, the shaykh's autonomy and links to Basra were risky because they meant he always had another option; he did not need to invest in Khuzestan, or capitulate to Qajar demands. Najm al-Molk saw Miz'al as both exemplifying and exacerbating Khuzestan's problems. As long as the shaykh could play on his connections to Basra, including potentially taking refuge on Ottoman territory, to negotiate with Qajar authorities, Najm al-Molk believed he would never contribute to making Khuzestan *abadi*. Nonetheless, because Qajar rule depended on negotiating power with local leaders and wealthy families, in Khuzestan and elsewhere, they did not try to oust Miz'al and focused instead on drawing him into the networks and relationships that anchored Qajar power.¹⁴⁸

However, Miz'al's negotiated semi-autonomy still raised worries about Khuzestan's vulnerability. Upon arriving in Ahvaz in 1889, Najm al-Molk received a message from Miz'al threatening to defect to the Ottoman Empire over a dispute about customs revenue. In response, he scolded the shaykh, telling him that as an Iranian he was obliged to obey Qajar officials, and threatening that there was no way to come back from being an Ottoman.¹⁴⁹ Once Najm al-Molk

¹⁴³ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovvom*, 95–96.

¹⁴⁴ On telegraphs, see Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Dovvom*, 106, 122, 130. On the lack of respect for Qajar rules, see 109–10, 118. On English intentions to colonize Khuzestan, 114–15, 120.

¹⁴⁵ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Hajj*, 192–93.

¹⁴⁶ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye Khuzestan*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/41/2, 27 Mar. 1909, McDouall to Barclay, 88; 26 Mar. 1909, Willcocks to Cox, 90.

¹⁴⁸ Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest, and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018); Gustafson, *Kirman*. Relationships as the basis of Qajar rule, see Ashraf, "From Khan to Shah," 22.

¹⁴⁹ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovvom*, 76. Ironically, there is evidence that Miz'al was an Ottoman subject. Talib Jasim Muhammad al-Gharib, *al-Sulta wa al-Mujtama'a wa al-Ard fi al-Basra awakhir al-'ahd al-'Uthmani ila nihayat al-intidab al-Baritani* (al-Basra: Jami'a al-Basra, Markaz Dirasat al-Basra, 2011), 101–2; BOA, DH.MKT 2210.161, 2 Haziran 1316 (15 June 1900), Dahiliye to defter-i hakani.

arrived in Mohammereh, Miz'al was careful to portray himself as a great supporter of the state, boasting of his vigilance against English infractions of the rules around steamships. But Najm al-Molk blamed the shaykh for the lack of security and *abadi* in Mohammereh, a major reason he believed Khuzestanians stayed in Basra. Beyond that, the engineer worried that the English could exploit a "lack of agreement among Iranians."¹⁵⁰ Although he did not explicitly reference tensions between Miz'al and then-governor Nizam al-Saltaneh, their ongoing disagreements offered an obvious opening for the British.

The intersection of domestic and foreign threats to the Qajar hold on Khuzestan prevented Najm al-Molk from focusing on making the region *abadan*—and thereby organically strengthening its ties to the state. Worried that the persistent rumors that the English were interested in buying Khidhr Island (Abadan), the "key to Arabistan," presaged imminent provincial disintegration, Najm al-Molk tried to shore up local political ties to the regime.¹⁵¹ But he found that Nizam al-Saltaneh and many local notables staunchly opposed his infrastructure plans. The governor argued that it would be difficult to gather the funds for construction, that there was not really that much water in the river or people to farm the land, and that if left untended—as they inevitably would be—the new irrigation canals would become marshes and cause even more problems. However, where Nizam al-Saltaneh saw compounding problems of state, population, and land, Najm al-Molk saw self-reinforcing solutions. He replied that if the state provided water and land, people would inevitably gather and farm, which would guard against the danger of marsh-formation.¹⁵²

Ultimately, Najm al-Molk's optimistic view of Khuzestan's promise, and belief in the power of *abadi* to solve its economic, administrative, and political problems, lost out to local pessimism about the availability of imperial funds for infrastructure. Tehran fulfilled those negative expectations, agreeing to pay for only a few smaller projects.¹⁵³ Given that statesmen like E'temad al-Saltaneh also denigrated Najm al-Molk's expertise and ability to complete the Ahvaz dam project, it seems possible that, in addition to general budget constraints, Tehran-based courtiers were unable to sympathize with his vision for transforming Khuzestan through modern engineering. Echoing Najm al-Molk, Qajar consul Badi' wrote in 1914, "The fertility of Iranian Arabistan is such that any description of it will automatically be assumed to be poetic exaggeration."¹⁵⁴ At the same time, while Nizam al-Saltaneh had plenty of experience in

¹⁵⁰ Najm al-Molk, *Safarnameh-ye dovvom*, 86–87, 89–93.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37, 79–80, 88.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77, 81–82, 101, 111; Nizam al-Saltaneh, *Khaterat va Asnad*, 154–56.

¹⁵⁴ Badi', *Tarikh-e Basra*, 63.

Khuzestan, he clearly disagreed with Najm al-Molk's vision of the Qajar state as willing and financially able to maintain the built environment.

Faced with such substantial domestic opposition, as well as the looming threat of British encroachment, Najm al-Molk abandoned the dam project. As much as he saw the lack of *abadi* in the province—in itself and in contrast to Ottoman Basra—as a threat to the cohesion and financial stability of the Qajar realm as a whole, it would be impossible to remedy that without sovereignty over Khuzestan. For Najm al-Molk, the question of what it meant for Khuzestan to be and stay part of Iran had two answers. The first was that Khuzestan had to be *abadan* to be part of Iran. This idea reflected a kind of civilizing mission, adapting modern engineering to bolster existing Persianate discourses about the relationship between legitimate rule and settled life. It was also practical, in that he believed *abadi* would tie the land and people of Khuzestan more deeply to the Qajar regime. The second answer was that Khuzestan had to remain under Qajar sovereignty. In the face of increasingly muscular British encroachment, that meant a continued reliance on the kind of local negotiation of power Vanessa Martin and James Gustafson have identified as typifying Qajar rule.¹⁵⁵ Both approaches, however, reflect the engineer's understanding of Iran in terms of Qajar sovereignty. In advocating for *abadi* as a way to maintain that sovereignty, Najm al-Molk drew on both Persianate discourses of just rule and modern engineering practices as a counterweight to the risks of local autonomy under conditions of colonial threat.¹⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

In the 1950s, the Pahlavi state embarked on an integrated irrigation infrastructure project for Khuzestan, centered on the Dez dam.¹⁵⁷ Based on the TVA model, project managers advertised the dam as a “technical tool for social change” which embodied the potential for economic growth to spur democratic politics.¹⁵⁸ In other words, the Dez dam was meant to reconfigure the

¹⁵⁵ Gustafson, *Kirman*, 7, 59; Martin, *Qajar Pact*.

¹⁵⁶ On legal risks of autonomy, see Aimee M. Genell, “Autonomous Provinces and the Problem of ‘Semi-Sovereignty’ in European International Law,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18 (2016): 533–49.

¹⁵⁷ David E. Lilienthal, “Enterprise in Iran: An Experiment in Economic Development,” *Foreign Affairs* 38 (1959): 132–39; Gordon R. Clapp, “A TVA for the Khuzestan Region,” *Middle East Journal* 11 (1957): 1–11. Bryan Sitzes, “Sanitized Modernity: Rural Public Health in Mid-Twentieth Century Khuzestan,” *Iranian Studies* 53 (2020): 43–72, 51–54; Shima Houshyar, “Engineering Water: Dams, Modularity, and State Power in Cold War Iran,” *Jadaliyya*, 16 Nov. 2020, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41997/Engineering-Water-Dams,-Modularity,-and-State-Power-in-Cold-War-Iran-41997> (last accessed 3 Nov. 2021).

¹⁵⁸ On other TVA-inspired projects in the Middle East, see Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox, “The Cold War, the US Bureau of Reclamation, and the Technopolitics of River Basin Development, 1950–1970,” *Political Geography* 30 (2011): 450–60; Ahmad Shokr, “Hydropolitics, Economy, and the Aswan High Dam in Mid-Century Egypt,” *Arab Studies Journal* 17 (2009): 9–31; Don Peretz,

relationships between people, state, and land. While it emerged from a separate set of intellectual antecedents than those which underpinned Najm al-Molk's advocacy for Ahvaz, the two projects resonated in many ways. The Dez project was intended to integrate Khuzestan more firmly into the Iranian national economy, while playing a major role in state planning and the construction of the economy as a national unit. Katayoun Shafiee has even noted that *Ab*, an Iranian hydraulic engineering journal, mixed technical practices with ideas about progress in its coverage of the dam project.¹⁵⁹

An outlook which mixed the technical with the ideological would have been familiar to Najm al-Molk, whose advocacy for making Khuzestan *abadan* added the style and preoccupations of modern engineering to familiar Persianate concerns with the built environment as an indicator of and factor in social life and governance. However, while shared in part with other Qajar officials, Najm al-Molk's ideas were unsuccessful during his lifetime. Instead of the built environment, the 1905 Constitutional Revolution focused on administrative and political reforms.¹⁶⁰ But the failure of his plans does not mean they are not worth studying. Writing about Ottoman colonialism in East Africa and the Hijaz, Mostafa Minawi argues that historical narratives that focus only on failure hide "many more informative stories ... under the heavy narrative of what never materializes."¹⁶¹ In this case, Najm al-Molk's writings help disrupt the seeming inevitability of the Iranian national idea, and demonstrate intersections and accommodations between "modern" science and Persianate ideologies of imperial rule, while also opening up new avenues for comparing late imperial governance and "improvement" in the Qajar and Ottoman domains.

In Najm al-Molk's first narrative, the engineer developed the concept of Iran as *abadi*—a social, political, and material condition encompassing land, people, and state. His advocacy for making Khuzestan *abadan* was aimed at integrating the region more fully into Iran, understood as the domain of the Qajar dynasty. Read alongside his second *safarnameh*, which foregrounded the potential loss of Khuzestan, it is clear that Najm al-Molk's overarching aim was consolidating the Qajar domains as a political unit. In thinking about what was necessary to make Khuzestan *abadan*, the engineer's major reference point was Ottoman Basra. Traveling around the Basra-Khuzestan borderlands helped Najm al-Molk frame the Ottoman Empire as both an example for the Qajar future and a factor in producing the Qajar present. And because he focused

"Development of the Jordan Valley Waters," *Middle East Journal* 9 (1955): 397–412; Feliks Bochenski and William Diamon, "TVA's in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 4 (1950): 52–82.

¹⁵⁹ Katayoun Shafiee, "Cost-Benefit Analysis at the Floodgates: Governing Democratic Futures through the Reassembly of Iran's Waterways," *Social Studies of Science* 50 (2020): 94–120, 95, 99, 102, 113.

¹⁶⁰ With some few land reforms: McLachlan, *Neglected Garden*, 7, 28.

¹⁶¹ Mostafa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 142.

on Ottoman-Iranian connections and comparisons, Najm al-Molk sought inspiration from an “other” he understood to be fundamentally similar. As such, his vision for Qajar rule hinged on the material similarities and connections of the Qajar and Ottoman peripheries.

The article builds on Najm al-Molk’s view that Ottoman governance was the best model for Qajar reform, especially in their connected Gulf provinces, to compare the broader late imperial moment in Ottoman and Qajar administration. Finding similarities in official uses of travel and travel narratives and identifying shared discourses around improvement and settlement rooted in a common intellectual heritage, it argues that the two governments adopted comparable approaches to governing their peripheries in this moment of heightened colonial threat. They continued to rule through difference, negotiating power with local actors, while also promoting a kind of civilizing mission which aimed to increase both imperial revenues and local ties to the state. Considering Qajar governance in light of these similarities helps clarify how Najm al-Molk pursued *abadi* to consolidate state sovereignty and offers a new context for interpreting his seemingly-national language. The Ottoman comparison, by offering an approach to Qajar history rooted in the problems and possibilities of the nineteenth century, opens up new ways to understand the late imperial moment on its own terms.

Abstract: In the nineteenth century, Qajar Iran was beset by both internal and external threats to its cohesion. In considering Qajar responses to this condition of threat, scholars have largely emphasized the rise of nationalism and a traumatic encounter with Europe. In this article, instead, I use the two Khuzestan travel narratives of royal engineer Najm al-Molk to draw out an alternative thread of reform discourse based on comparisons and connections with the Ottoman Empire. In his *safarnamehs*, Najm al-Molk joined the style and preoccupations of modern engineering to existing Persianate discourses on rule to elaborate the concept of *abadi*, a social, political, and material condition encompassing land, people, and state. His advocacy for making Khuzestan *abadan* was aimed at integrating the region more fully into the Qajar domains. In thinking about what constituted *abadi* and why it was missing in Khuzestan, the engineer's major reference point was Ottoman Basra. Traveling around the Basra-Khuzestan borderlands helped Najm al-Molk frame the Ottoman Empire as an example for the Qajar future and a factor in producing the Qajar present. The article both analyzes and follows Najm al-Molk's use of comparison in order to draw out a broader imperial comparison between late imperial rule in the Ottoman and Qajar lands. I argue that taking seriously Najm al-Molk's view that the Qajars and Ottomans were comparable can help us use their peripheries to understand late Qajar history outside the national frame of "Iran."

Key words: Qajar, Khuzestan, Ottoman, Basra, infrastructure, empire, travel writing, reform, comparison