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Najmi, Nasir. *Tihiran-i Ahd-i Nasiri*. Tehran: Attar, 1985-1986, 607pp.

ABSTRACT

Tehran in the Naseri Era

طهران عهد ناصری

This 607-page book is an ambitious attempt at providing a historical, political, anthropological and sociological account of Tehran, the capital city of Iran, during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, which spanned the latter half of the nineteenth century. The author's choice to focus on this period reflects the widely held belief that Nasir al-Din Shah's rule had an unrivalled impact on the development of Tehran as a modern city.

The book is organised in a somewhat haphazard way. A first glance at the contents pages – six in total – indicates that the book is not divided into chapters, but rather a very large series of topic headings and subheadings. However, the author describes the sections of the book as 'chapters', of which there are a staggering 117. This means that most 'chapters' are no more than a few pages in length.

Najmi begins by offering a concise but informative account of Tehran's history, from the time it was an insignificant village until it became chosen as the capital. He also traces the etymology of the word 'Tehran'. The book then proceeds swiftly through an encyclopaedic

range of topics, covering everything from palaces, bazaars, coffee houses, restaurants and popular streets to magic and superstition, food, medical services, fashion, Tehran's clowns and even methods of execution. In parallel, Najmi aims to highlight key modernising factors reshaping the social landscape of Tehran. He therefore writes, among other things, about the establishment of the banking system and various industries. He also provides glimpses into the personalities and contributions of important political figures of the time, focusing in greater detail on the reforms introduced by Amir Kabir, whilst exploring more generally the life and assassination of the latter. The book is accompanied throughout by photographs of the city, the people and various cultural practices, which provide an entertaining visual dimension.

The book's strength is its ability to mesh descriptions of political affairs in some chapters with more light-hearted, almost anecdotal descriptions of the day-to-day lives of ordinary Tehranis in others. One weakness, however, is the nostalgic tone of these descriptions: Najmi's representation paints a romanticised picture in which people led a 'simple' and 'happy' life. This view however is not substantiated by any historical evidence. Moreover, the author promises that the book will be a 'complete and clear mirror' showing the true face of Tehran during the period in question. This promise, however, remains unfulfilled. For although the attempt is certainly extensive in scope, the topics covered remain at a level of relatively shallow description and as such might be disappointing to scholars, particularly since Najmi's account purports to be not only historical but also anthropological and socio-political. Nevertheless, the book is an entertaining and accurate account of Tehran in an extremely important era and therefore quite useful as a work of general reference.

Reza Gholami