

Introduction

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THE ENGAGEMENT of Persianate culture with the Qur'an is as long as Islamic Persia's history. This historical interaction can be pinpointed from as early as classical times. It is visible, for example, in Persian poetry. Such foundational poets as Abū'l-Majd Ṣanā'ī (d. 525/1131) and Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (d. 617/1220) incorporated Qur'anic phrases as standard rhetorical devices in their works; Firdawsī (d. 411/1020 or 416/1025) is argued to have adapted Qur'anic rhythms in his epic poem *Shāh-nāma*;¹ and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) elaborated on Qur'anic material throughout his *Mathnawī*, to the extent that he himself deemed his work to have originated from the same prophetic source as the Book, and the *Mathnawī* in Iran came to be widely referred to as a 'Qur'an in Persian'.² Apart from poetry, many other forms of art in the Persianate cultures have been inspired by the Qur'an and keep drawing on the Book for their sustainment; calligraphy is emblematic in this respect. Other areas which bear testimony to the Persianate culture's engagement with the Qur'an are, of course, Qur'anic exegesis – where large numbers of works produced by Persian scholars, both in Arabic and in Persian, draw on the Book or parts of it – and Persian translations of the Qur'an, exegetical or otherwise.³ In premodern times, roughly up until the mid-nineteenth century, Persian-language commentaries were meant to make the Qur'anic legacy known to as wide as possible an audience in the Persian-speaking milieu so that they could increase their interaction with it. These two elements of accessibility and interplay are the basis of the studies offered in the present volume.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the wide availability of the Qur'anic discourses in Persian was facilitated by the new publication technologies which made it easier to disseminate information. This made it possible for a field that once was only accessible

to a closed circle of learned clerics to reach a larger pool of intellectuals who occupied the middle ground between the traditional intellectual circles and a nascent civil society. This pool of intellectuals started to produce a less technical range of Qur'anic exegeses, or at least of Qur'an-inspired thought, that made its way into the political discourse in the form of debates on constitutional rights in the years preceding and following the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905–11). Long a domain of the clerical classes, exegesis became more and more politicised and embedded in the public discourse under the nationalist regimes of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–79). This was a time when influential intellectuals who operated outside of the clerical milieu, for example Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad (d. 1969), 'Alī Shari'ātī (d. 1977) and Mahdī Bāzārgān (d. 1995), emerged in the public arena, and in different ways and measures took inspiration from the Qur'an. Other names that populated the exegetical landscape are well known, and constitute some of the intellectual pivots of the Islamic republic: Maḥmūd Ṭāliqānī (d. 1979), Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (d. 1979), 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) and Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989) to name a few; they all engaged with the Qur'an in different ways and with different approaches. Some of the works that define Shi'i Iran's understanding of scripture in modern times were produced in these years as a result of religious scholars' and intellectuals' engagement with the challenges posed by the social and political transformations occurring in the country during this period of revolution. One of the works worth noting here is the *Tafsīr-i namūna*, which makes available in Persian a number of classical commentaries, both Shi'i and Sunni, and which has been republished innumerable times in Iran. A result of the collective effort of a number of scholars working over several years prior to the revolution under the direction of the ayatollah Makārim Shīrāzī, the twenty-seven-volume undertaking shows the social and political concerns of the editing committee: it interprets the Qur'an through reference to a number of influential reformist and modernist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, regardless of their denomination.⁴

No matter how much the Qur'an has informed Iranian culture through the ages, in the centuries preceding the revolution the

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Qur'an was not as central to public life as it was in Sunni-majority countries. This was probably due to the prominence of the extensive corpus of the sayings of the imams, which represents within Shi'ism an expansion of the notion of scripture. The richness and articulation of that corpus allowed a monumental set of other authoritative voices to exist alongside the Qur'an, within the category of scripture. Besides this element, the Pahlavi dynasty contributed to the marginalisation of the Qur'anic element by promoting a supposedly pure national culture which viewed the Arab elements as alien and imposed. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran has changed this trend, however, predictably triggering an unprecedented host of Qur'an-related activities at every level of society. Describing the entirety of these is beyond the scope and capability of this introduction, but it suffices to say that a number of state agencies – like the state television (IRIB), the Iranian Qur'an News Agency (IQNA) and many others – alongside the more traditional institutions of learning, are active in the promotion, dissemination and elaboration of Qur'anic materials.⁵ A number of government ministries have their own special unit for the promotion of Qur'anic activities, including the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance; the Ministry of Education; and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.⁶ As a result, the promotion of what we may define as 'Qur'anic culture' received a powerful impetus at every level of Iranian society, from the more traditional activities of recitation and memorisation⁷ to software production, exhibitions, and productions of the audiovisual and film industry.

This Volume

The chapters of this volume explore the developments in the conversation between Iran and the Qur'an over roughly the last two centuries. The first section (Power, Authority and Exegesis) covers the understanding, reading and interpretation of the Qur'an in the contemporary era. Exegesis, here, is intended in its wider delineation and not only in the sense of the highly formalised, technically codified genre of *tafsīr*.⁸ It goes without saying that traditional *tafsīrs*, as historically transmitted within the scholarly circle of the *ḥawza*

(the Shi‘i religious seminaries), represent an unavoidable reference even for those scholars who, whether or not they were *ḥawza*-educated at some point in their lives, have moved away from the codified genre of scholarly exegesis *stricto sensu*. The influence, to be sure, is mutual: even *ḥawza*-based *tafsīrs* in modern times, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, bear the signs of an intense conversation with the western hermeneutical studies and Qur’anic studies of scholars within the academic environments of Europe. The three main streams of effort in understanding the Qur’an (i.e. Shi‘i exegesis; Sunni classical and modernist *tafsīr*; and Western research on the Qur’an) are to be found in varying combinations and ratios within most contemporary Iranian exegetical undertakings. The state’s effort to bring about communication between religious and secular intellectuals has been enhanced even further in post-revolutionary Iran, as the Islamic Republic’s policy of positively integrating the *ḥawza* and the universities has increasingly blurred the boundaries between the two: today, it is not unusual to have *ḥawza*-educated scholars teaching in universities, and for subjects traditionally taught in universities to be offered in the *ḥawza* curriculum. The media, as well, have been involved in the propagation of exegetical knowledge. The television show ‘Dars-hā’i az Qur’ān’, hosted by Muḥsin Qarā’atī, has been aired for the past thirty years with the aim of popularising and disseminating Qur’anic exegesis. Iranian radio broadcasts the ayatollah Jawādī Āmulī’s daily lessons on the Qur’an, from which his *Tasnīm* has been extracted. These are only two examples among the most remarkable, but many others would fit the picture.

The discourse on the interpretation of the Qur’an and on who has the authority to interpret its true meaning has a clear political bearing on today’s Iran. This is probably more so now than it was in the past due to the embedding of the doctrine of the *wilāyat-i faqīh* in the Constitution of Iran. This doctrine posits that religious scholars are the sole class who have the authority to interpret the Qur’an, and that the governance of the country should be based on their interpretation. It is for this reason that the first section of this book refers to power and authority. Connected with issues of religious authority are the developments in the areas of classical hermeneutics and

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jurisprudence, both of which have informed, and continue to inform, the practice of Qur'anic exegesis. Seyfeddin Kara's chapter (chapter 1) illustrates this. He points out that the success of Uṣūlism in the late eighteenth century, with its rational-analytical method of jurisprudence, resulted in the adoption of a parallel method of exegesis. This method of exegesis utilised elements borrowed from jurisprudence. Though this was not an exclusively modern phenomenon, it gained momentum in the twentieth century, as exemplified by the *tafsīr* works of two of the most prominent Iranian exegetes of the period, namely *al-Mizān* by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) and *Tasnīm* by 'Abd Allāh Jawādī Āmulī (b. 1933). These highly influential and popular works are partly the product of the success of neo-Uṣūlism and its enshrinement as the unchallenged leading juridical/ideological school of revolutionary Iran.⁹

The theme of the permeability of the *tafsīr* genre and of its function in imbuing the exegete with authority is present in Sajjad Rizvi's chapter (chapter 2). Rizvi reviews the exegetical works of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, though not his celebrated *tafsīr*, *al-Mizān*. His close scrutiny of the extant literature by the great scholar and some of those associated with his informal, non-Sufi mystical *ṭarīqa* (order), allows one to better understand how the ideas circulating among those who subscribed to Ṭabāṭabā'ī's apparatus shaped a diffuse interpretation of the Qur'an. It also allows one to better appreciate the strategies adopted by these intellectuals, and Ṭabāṭabā'ī *in primis*, which enabled them to propose an approach to the Qur'an that stayed true to the school's *weltanschauung* while obviating accusations that such a method involved 'interpreting the Qur'an according to one's own ideas'. The mystical and philosophical reading of the Qur'an, against which Ṭabāṭabā'ī himself warns the reader in his introduction to the *Mizān*, comes back to the interpretation of the Book in other works of exegesis without technically being *tafsīr*. In addressing these strategies, Rizvi argues that the *ṭarīqa* in question works as a *dispositif*, or apparatus, in the Foucaultian sense; that is, it encapsulates a given set of structures, modes of comportment, discourses and relationships that govern the projection of self by a specific group, community or sodality. The main point made by Rizvi is that the exegetical use of the Qur'an in some of the staple works of the

apparatus, such as the *Risāla-yi sayr wa sulūk* attributed to Sayyid Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (d. 1212/1797), the *Tadhkirat al-muttaqīn* by Shaykh Muḥammad Bahārī Hamadānī (d. 1907) and the *Risālat al-walāya* by Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, was part of a strategy by the apparatus to present elements of Sufi theory and practice to a Twelver Shi‘i audience that was opposed to Sufism. They accomplished this by deploying authoritative readings of the Qur’an carried out by charismatic figures.

A number of hermeneutical strategies have been triggered by the establishment of the Islamic Republic. How jurisprudence negotiated its way through the practical needs of a modern state and developed hermeneutical strategies to that end is at the heart of Liyakat Takim’s essay on Yūsuf Ṣāni‘ī (b. 1937) and his juridical thought and practice (chapter 3). Takim’s essay explores the theme of the new jurisprudence. He places the idea of revelation at the centre by looking at a specific case of the ruling on the *khul‘* form of divorce *apud* the outspoken reformist cleric Ṣāni‘ī. Takim argues that through an egalitarian and progressive reading of the Qur’an, Ṣāni‘ī challenges the preexisting rulings on the matter and shows how privileging the revelation and its interpretation is key to the development of a flexible jurisprudence.

The negotiability of the meaning, social significance and political clout of the Qur’anic text is made clear in the next chapter. Interpretative efforts to wrest back from the opposing camp religious ideas, concepts or even characters is nothing new in contemporary Iran – for example, one can think of the politically oriented struggle over the meaning of the tragedy of Karbala in the decade preceding the revolution,¹⁰ or the reformist claim to Khomeini’s legacy.¹¹ Nequin Yavari (chapter 4) explores further the theme of the negotiability of the meaning of scripture. She analyses the rereading of the Qur’anic precept of *amr bi’l-ma‘rūf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong) by one of Iran’s most prominent theoreticians of political reform, Muṣṭafā Tājzāda (b. 1956). Yavari argues that Tājzāda’s treatment of the subject represented an attempt ‘to appropriate the mantle of doctrinal orthodoxy and legitimacy for Reformist politics’ and to wrest from the conservatives a concept crucial to the understanding of Muslims’ ethical engagement with society. Pointing out the programmatic centrality of the Qur’an,

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as opposed to the Sunna, as the arbiter of the practice of political Islam in the Muslim world in the twentieth century, Yavari compares Tājzāda's views with those of Khomeini and other religious intellectuals. Her aim in doing so is to study the role of Qur'anic sanction in the political discourse of the Islamic Republic.

It is interesting to note how momentous the notion of the flexibility of the meaning of the revelation is in this context: the meaning here generates authority and is susceptible to being accommodated to a specific political agenda. It is within this same framework that religious intellectuals in contemporary Iran have sought to provide a Qur'anic basis for their political position and criticism of the state of affairs in the Islamic Republic. This theme is tackled in the two following chapters, through the analysis of two case studies whose common denominator is that they both gravitate around the milieu of the Iranian Religious Intellectual Movement, albeit with different characteristics. In the first (chapter 5), Banafsheh Madaninejad examines the intellectual trajectory of Abū'l-Qāsim Fanā'ī (b. 1959), one of the 'rising stars' of the current Iranian religious intelligentsia, in the context of the wider debates on secularism, religiosity, rationality and commitment that were occurring in Iran in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Well versed in both the Twelver Shi'ī religious tradition and Western philosophy,¹² Fanā'ī works within the non-radical (he is still considered as operating from 'within the orthodoxy') end of the ideological spectrum of the religious intellectual movement. He develops an innovative approach to jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in order to argue for a 'more adaptable Qur'an', one whose hermeneutics would allow the basis of the exegetical undertaking to be updated. Along with Fanā'ī, Madaninejad highlights the case of other Iranian religious intellectuals well known to the Western public interested in the debate, namely Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959) and Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), showing how they share some of their hermeneutical strategies with Western Muslim feminist intellectuals. The case is different for Soroush, the established star of the pleiad of Iranian religious intellectuals, whose approach to the Islamic revelation is addressed in detail and from another perspective in the chapter authored by Yaser Mirdamadi (chapter 6). In inverting the terms traditionally ascribed to the 'orthodox dogma', by affirming that the

revelation is human and accidental (*‘aradī*) in nature rather than divine and essential (*dhātī*), Soroush challenges the very core of the idea of ‘holiness’ in Islam. Mirdamadi assesses Soroush’s thought on the Qur’anic revelation against the history of theology, namely by comparing it to similar ideas found among Mu‘tazilī theologians and looking at its implications for pressing contemporary issues, such as the relationship between religion and science and the broadening of the juridical horizon of today’s Shi‘i jurists. Mirdamadi’s analysis of the Soroushian theory of revelation shows that attempts have been made throughout history to desacralise the letter of the Qur’an while preserving the sacrality of its inspirational source. This desacralisation perhaps helps to explain why Soroush’s ideas have been met with criticism by the religious authorities in the Islamic Republic and have been scarcely influential in precipitating a substantial change within juridical practice in a religious, Twelver Shi‘i environment where the sacrality of the very form of the imam is so dear both in theology and in popular devotion. If one thinks of the imam as the Perfect Man and as the iconic ‘proof of God’, statuses traditionally attributed to him by theologians and mystics, it is easy to understand why the sacrality of the form is often jealously preserved.

In forms and ways different to those deployed by theologians and jurists, the centrality of the imam as the holy guide of the faithful is a theme frequented by the mystics. The latter’s diverse approaches to the Book, which can be considered non-mainstream for reasons ranging from their beliefs to their intellectual outlook, are reflected in the second section of this volume (Alternative Approaches: Between Marginality and Legitimacy). The personalities on which the contributions in this section focus are only tangential, in different ways, to the universe of formal Shi‘i religious education. A number of these personalities are responsible for some of the most original and influential pieces of work that deal with the Qur’an, interpreting, revisiting and even defending it. One such defence comes from a master of the Ni‘matullāhī order, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Iṣfahānī (d. 1818), known by the *ṭarīqa* sobriquet Ḥusayn ‘Alī Shāh. He was requested by the Qajar ruler of Persia, Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh (r. 1797–1834), to compose a response to a refutation of Islam and the Qur’an written in Persian by the Anglican missionary Henry Martyn (d. 1812), as discussed

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by Reza Tabandeh (chapter 7). Martyn's contentious work, the *Mīzān al-ḥaqq*, was influential in the early eighteenth century, to the extent that the court, unable to take direct action against the missionary for diplomatic reasons, found it necessary to appoint Shi'i scholars to respond in kind by writing rebuttals of the treatise. The sovereign's initiative gave rise to the *radd-i pādrī* (refutations of the priest), which can be considered a sort of literary genre in its own right, of which the Sufi master Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's work is the first written example. Tabandeh contends that Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's rebuttal of Martyn is important not only because it served as a model for the subsequent responses to Martyn's attack on the Qur'an and Islam, but also because it gives us a sample of the dialectical strategies of a resurgent Sufism jostling for position within the wider context of Shi'i orthodoxy. Tabandeh shows how Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's *Radd-i pādrī* is more theological than mystical, though Sufi elements are interspersed throughout the pages in a veiled fashion. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, it is worth noting, was the first *quṭb* (grand master) of the Ni'matullāhī renaissance to be an Iranian and, for good measure, a trained jurist. His defence of the Qur'an – his only written work – is an appropriate specimen of the cautious way the Sufi masters negotiated the transition from charismatic and somehow antinomian characters to a more mature Twelver Shi'i religious identity.

Religious identity from both within and without one's own denomination is a major theme in this second section of the book, and the next chapter addresses it from the dogmatically crucial standpoint of the authenticity, integrity and inalterability of the Qur'anic text. With regard to this, the contribution of Rainer Brunner (chapter 8) is essential in our overview because it offers a glimpse of the most important contemporary Shi'i contributions on the issue of whether the Qur'an that came down to us is the authentic one that God entrusted to Muslims or whether it is inauthentic because it had been subject to degrees of falsification (*tahrīf*). By looking at the works of some of the most influential Shi'i 'ulamā' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Brunner unveils a picture of problemat�icity, where the diplomatic necessity to discard *tahrīf* as a fancy theory of some maverick scholar of the past clashes with the abundance of hints from the past and the sometimes ambiguous references by

contemporary theologians which suggest otherwise. *Tahrīf* may have well been a marginal topic in the history of Shi'i theology, but contemporary Shi'i scholars, from Ḥusayn Taqī al-Nūrī al-Ṭabrisī (d. 1902) to Khomeini, cannot ignore that the corpus of the sayings of the imams is evidence that the problem cannot be entirely discarded. The sensitivity of the matter, however, as Brunner points out, is attested by the fact that apart from Nūrī in his *Faṣl al-khiṭāb fī tahrīf Kitāb Rabb al-ʿarbāb*, no Twelver Shi'i scholar after him has publicly endorsed the thesis that the Qur'an was falsified or altered. Nūrī's stance, therefore, can to some extent be considered 'marginal', at least concerning the last century.

In the chapter authored by Nicholas Boylston (chapter 9), a different kind of marginality is analysed, one which stems from a mystical and poetical approach to the understanding of the Qur'an. In his exploration of the *tafsīr* by the Ni'matullāhī master Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh (d. 1898), the singularity of the work under scrutiny is highlighted. The *Tafsīr-i Ṣafī* is the first known translation-cum-commentary of the entire Qur'an in the Persian language. While the use of the vernacular in Qur'anic exegesis has a long and, at times, noble history,¹³ this is the first significant commentary written entirely in Persian rhyming couplets by a charismatic Sufi master after the resurgence of the Ni'matullāhī order and its return from India to Iran in the late eighteenth century. Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh's *tafsīr* was completed in 1890, but its literary value and exegetical significance had been long overlooked in both Western and Iranian scholarship. Boylston's examination of it, therefore, is a valuable attempt to do justice to a work too long absent from the histories of literature and of exegesis. The author of the *tafsīr*, as shown by Boylston, does not aim to situate his work within the scholarly madrasa-centred tradition. For Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh, writing a poetic commentary on the Qur'an was an act of worship fully within the framework of his role as a Sufi master, and he drew more upon the tradition of mystical Persian poetry than that of highly technical Qur'anic exegesis (although he sought, through the intercession of the Qajar ruler Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh [r. 1848–96], a fatwa on the legitimacy of translating the Qur'an into poetry, which was granted by the celebrated Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥasan Shīrāzī [d. 1896]).

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The variety of approaches to the Qur'an in Iran in the late nineteenth century, as well as the creativity of the protagonists, is attested by Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh's coeval Sufi master Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh Gunābādī (d. 1909). Head of another branch of the Ni'matullāhī Sufi order, Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh composed, among many other mystical works, a hitherto understudied Qur'anic commentary, the *Tafsīr Bayān al-sāda fī maqāmāt al-'ibāda*, which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to the *Tafsīr-i Ṣafī* in terms of its formal aspects and intended audience. The commentary, presented in my contribution (chapter 10), was penned according to the entirety of the formal codes of the *tafsīr* genre: it is written in Arabic, it covers different aspects of each verse (semantic, lexicological, historical, etc.), it comments on the whole of the Qur'an, and it is in conversation with the exegetical tradition. Its specificity lies, however, in the fact that the focus of the discussion is evidently the esoteric meaning of the Book, which is expounded by referring to and conflating three sources of inspiration: the mystical, stemming from classical Sufism; the philosophical/theosophical, stemming from the legacy of Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh's long-standing and fruitful studentship with the most important philosophers of the school of Ibn 'Arabī in Iran and the 'School of Isfahan'; and the Twelver Shi'i Hadith-based juridical and theological tradition. The result has been monumental and hugely influential in Iran throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, despite a long period of ostracism due to the Shi'i 'ulamā's disparagement of Sufism. The chapter offers an overview of the main themes of the commentary and contextualises it within the intellectual history of contemporary Iran. It illustrates how Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh's reading of the Qur'an had been crucial to his positioning of himself and his order within the mainstream landscape of Twelver Shi'ism.

The next chapter brings the second section to a close with a temporal leap of about one century. It offers an analysis of a unique work by one of the most renowned public intellectuals in Iran today, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ilāhī Ghomshei (b. 1940). In his contribution (chapter 11), Leonard Lewisohn discusses Ghomshei's work *365 Days in the Company of the Qur'an*. Although not a *tafsīr* in the technical sense, the book is a commentary on 365 passages of the Book – one for

each day of the year; the result is a voluminous work of exegesis *sui generis*. Lewisohn, with a fine sensibility for things poetical, allows us to appreciate in the English language Ghomshei's novel yet traditional approach to the scripture, and situates the work within the spiritual, social and political context of twentieth-century Iran. Lewisohn points out that Ghomshei's lyrical reading of the Qur'an draws on the wealth of Persian mystical literature to shed light on the meaning of the Book. This allows him to bring it alive and simultaneously make it comprehensible to a general public not versed in the subtleties of the language of the *hawza* while leaving its interpretation open to the creative imagination of classical Persian mysticism.

The Qur'an, as we have seen, continues to be a source of inspiration for Iranians at the spiritual, religious, political and intellectual levels, but it has also been inspirational at the level of material culture. This is the theme of the contributions in the third section of this volume (The Arts, Material Culture and Everyday Life). There is little surprise, therefore, in the fact that the artistic vanguards have continued to engage with the Qur'an in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Saqqākhāna movement stands out as one of the most significant and successful popular artistic movements in Iran that encapsulated the Qur'anic fabric of that country. Alice Bombardier (chapter 12) offers an overview of a very important yet little-known work by one of the most successful artists associated with this particular form of 'spiritual pop art', Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), who illustrated the French translation of the Qur'an by Jean Grosjean (d. 2006). This work was published, under Bombardier's direction, in 1972, and her article contributes to the rediscovery of an important chapter in the reception of the Qur'an in a milieu close to an Iranian artistic vanguard. Bombardier's outline shows us how the conflation of modern artistic inspiration and traditional forms of Qur'anic art (from Sufi symbolism to miniature painting and Qur'anic illumination) can generate an outstanding 'visual companion' to the Qur'an. Bombardier's analysis of Zenderoudi's illustrations shows how, in a contemporary Iranian context, the Qur'an can function as the fulcrum where a number of streams of inspiration come together in

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a coherent unicum, visually representing the Book and reinventing traditions.

Continuing this focus on the visual aspect of the reception of the Qur'an, the contribution by Anna Vanzan (chapter 13) looks at calligraphy in contemporary Iran from a new perspective. It specifically discusses calligraphy as a space for the expression of the female self within religion. Vanzan argues the translating the Qur'an into visuals through the traditional medium of calligraphic script is a means through which women can transcend the limitations imposed on them by the patriarchal Iranian society. Placing interviews with a number of women calligraphers within a historical perspective, the author of the chapter shows that calligraphy is envisaged by women as an interpretive practice and a devotional act; it is also a powerful means for them to rediscover the emancipatory force of Islam and challenge the top-down version of religion sub-ministered by the state – a state which, it is worth noting, has acted as a generous supporter of the Qur'anic arts since its inception, triggering a movement that reached as far as the entertainment industry.

In the chapter that follows (chapter 14), Nacim Pak-Shiraz persuasively argues that the cinematic genre of the Iranian 'religious epic' offers a Qur'anic version of Biblical stories already explored in Western cinema and provides at the same time a new development in the genre of Biblical films. The phenomenon of the Muslim religious epic in the film industry in Iran is a telling example of how the Qur'an is considered central to the promotion of a national religious culture and how it is credited with the potential to offer a counter-narrative of the highest quality to the dominant cultural artefacts of the Western film industry. Pak-Shiraz looks at Shahriar Bahrani's 2010 film *The Kingdom of Solomon* to illustrate the way a collaborative work between the film industry and the clergy could bring about highly polished results in the genre in Iran. Cinema, which earlier in the twentieth century had been looked at with suspicion as a 'Western medium', has now taken on a religious and political function in Iran.

The next two chapters of this volume are ethnographical accounts of the everyday Qur'an-related religious practices and rituals of Iranian women. Niloofar Haeri's contribution (chapter 15) is based

on fieldwork that the author undertook in Tehran between 2008 and 2013. During that time, Haeri interacted with a group of middle-class women in their sixties, sitting in on their Qur'an classes as well as their classes on Rūmī's mystical poetry. Based on her observations and interviews with these students, Haeri draws a lively portrait of the way they negotiate their place within the Twelver Shi'i community at large and within the hermeneutical tradition. The rituals and performances of the women in these groups, Haeri argues, have an impact on the way they read the Qur'an, recite it in prayers and understand it; not only is their understanding of the Qur'an – aided by the commentary provided by Rūmī's mystical poetry – informed by the way they perform the prayer, but their performance of the prayer is in turn modified by the elements introduced within the classes.

Ingvild Flaskerud's chapter (chapter 16), on the other hand, discusses the engagement of a network of pious women in Shiraz with the Qur'an. This chapter, too, is the result of field research. Flaskerud, between 1999 and 2003, had the opportunity to attend a number of Qur'anic classes and other Twelver Shi'i rituals frequented by pious women. Using the ethnographic data she gathered, she reflects on how the 'everyday' Qur'an experiences of the subjects of her study represent a form of living exegesis, where typically Shi'i elements such as the imam's proximity to the Book, the concept of the imam as the 'speaking Qur'an' and others, are incorporated in the devotional performance. Flaskerud argues that the Qur'an becomes, in practice, a living text whose spiritual, protective and miraculous efficacy is granted through the faithful's devotion to the *ahl al-bayt* (the People of the House). In the settings observed, everyday needs are addressed in the context of ritual, which in turn affects the behavioural patterns in everyday life. The centrality of the Book in the lives of a section (albeit circumscribed) of today's Iranian society is thus reinstated.

It goes without saying that the Qur'an, as much as it is positively placed centre stage in the lives of the most religious segments of society, is also marginalised, ignored by or even removed from the lives of other segments of the same society. The offering of different approaches to the Book in this volume is an attempt to reflect this

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diversity, which resonates in the last contribution of this volume. Giovanni De Zorzi (chapter 17) offers a fascinating examination of the oral/aural universe represented by the strong connection between the Qur'an and music in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Iran, as he illustrates how most classical musicians in contemporary Iran have a background in one of the sciences of Qur'anic recitation. Without going as far as equating it with the fate that befell Mushtāq 'Ālī Shāh (d. 1791),¹⁴ De Zorzi's essay is an apt testimony of the consequence of the Qur'an in religious, political, social and cultural life in contemporary Iran.

NOTES

- 1 See Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Sukhan wa sukhanwarān* (Tehran, 1387 Sh./2008–9), pp. 51–2.
- 2 Rūmī's *Mathnawī* was first dubbed a 'Qur'an in Persian' by the Persian poet and scholar Jāmī (d. 849/1492), and that reference became embedded in the popular Iranian conception of the work.
- 3 See Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford, 2012) and idem, 'Persian Qur'anic Networks and the Writings of "an Iranian Lady", Nusrat Amin Khanum', in Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *The Qur'an and its Readers Worldwide: Contemporary Commentaries and Translations* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 275–323 (in particular the opening section).
- 4 *Tafsīr-i namūna*, under the direction of Nāṣir Makārim Shīrāzī (Tehran, 1362–74 Sh./1983–95).
- 5 The IQNA is reported to publish articles and news on the Qur'an in thirty-five languages. See the excellent overview in Morteza Karimi-Nia, 'Contemporary Qur'anic Studies in Iran and its Relationship with Qur'anic Studies in the West', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2012), pp. 45–72, esp. pp. 46–9.
- 6 Ibid., p. 46.
- 7 For example, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance tests biannually the memorisation, translation and understanding of the Qur'an. Those who pass are awarded the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree in Qur'anic Studies, without their having to gain a university education. Ibid., p. 47.
- 8 On the issue of *tafsīr* as a genre in the context of Islamic intellectual history, an issue clearly relevant to our approach here, see Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, eds, *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre* (London, 2014).
- 9 For more on 'neo-Uṣūlism', see Zackery Heern, *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran* (London, 2015).
- 10 The context of the debate is reported in Roy P. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York, 1985), p. 353.
- 11 See Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago, 2001).

- 12 Fanā'ī is a qualified mujtahid who was educated in the Iranian religious seminary (*hawza 'ilmiyya*). He also has a degree in philosophy, which he earned in the United Kingdom, where he lived for fifteen years.
- 13 See Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*.
- 14 Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh was a charismatic Ni'matullāhī dervish who was killed by a mob in Kirmān. The killing was instigated by a fanatical cleric who could not tolerate the mystic wandering around his town declaiming ecstatic poetry and the Qur'an accompanied by music. Muḥammad Ma'ṣūm Shīrāzī (Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh), *Tarā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq* (Tehran, 1382 Sh./2003–4), vol. III, pp. 188–92.