

# Review

**The Future of Iran's Past: Nizam al-Mulk Remembered**, Neguin Yavari, London: Hurst & Company, 2018, ISBN 978-1-84904-820-0 (hbk), 275 pp.

Though undisputedly the most famous political figure of medieval Iran, Abu 'Ali al-Hasan b. 'Ali al-Tusi (d. 1092), best known as Nizam al-Mulk and as the author of the celebrated Persian mirror for princes, the *Siyar al-Muluk* (or *Siyasat-nameh*), has not yet been the subject of a historical biography in a western language. The work under review is not a classical biography of the Iranian vizier. Nor, as one might think after reading the title and the preface presenting the book as a “critical study of life and afterlife of Nizam al-Mulk” (p. xiii), is it a detailed exploration of the memory of his life through medieval and modern Arabic and Persian historiographies—although Chapters 3 and 5 are dedicated to these issues. This condensed, short book (148 pages of text, 70 pages of detailed notes, a chronology, and a comprehensive bibliography) examines a variety of topics related to the context in which Nizam al-Mulk lived and ruled, sometimes surprisingly leading the reader towards subjects they would not expect to encounter. Every topic is interesting per se, but the general structure of the reasoning is not easy to follow, as there is not always a clear link from one subject to the next. Nevertheless, the book is rich and stimulating, and will provoke reflection on many topics, from the historical genre of biography and the origins of the Turkic peoples to Islamic models of a good ruler, and from

the shaping of Sunnism and Shiism to the formation of an Iranian identity well after the eleventh century: all fascinating aspects of intellectual, religious, and political history.

A specialist of Islamic political thought in the medieval period, Neguin Yavari's previous work include research on medieval mirrors for princes in a global perspective. She published *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and coedited with Regula Fosters *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* (Harvard University Press, 2015). As mentioned in the acknowledgements (p. ix), the present book makes use of Neguin Yavari's PhD dissertation, entitled "Nizam al-Mulk Remembered: A Study in Historical Representation," defended in 1992 at Columbia University, under the supervision of Richard Bulliet. The study is solid scholarship, making use of a comprehensive bibliography, mainly in English, Persian, and French. Contemporary debates are well displayed, and often occupy more space than the examination of sources and historical facts themselves. The author uses Arabic and Persian primary sources in the original language, although some Arabic sources seem to be employed mainly through English or Persian translations (e.g. Ibn al-Athir, Ibn Khallikan, al-Tabari, al-Ya'qubi). The general bibliography could be improved, since some titles quoted in the notes are missing.

Yavari argues convincingly, throughout the book, for a new reading of the history and memory of Nizam al-Mulk, stressing the need to maintain throughout an approach grounded in the medieval society he belonged to, and avoiding anachronistic readings as far as possible. She keeps in mind the plasticity of such a medieval personality, and exposes the ways textual sources give it new perspectives, shaped by the demands of the social context. She is unwavering in avoiding any bias introduced by the sources, as well as inherent in the context in which they were read. Investigating the question of historiography, Chapter 1, "Of History and Biography," examines the birth and evolution of the biographical genre up to the medieval period, in the Latin West and in the Islamic world. The *Vita Karoli* by Einhard (d. 840), on Charlemagne (r. 768–814), and the biography of the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (or 'Umar II, r. 717–20) by Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam (d. 829), can be considered models for biographies dedicated to secular rulers. Specific aspects of Islamic biography are discussed here, for example the possible influence of the Greco-Latin tradition on medieval Arabic biographies. The scope of this chapter, summarized in the preface (p. xx), is ambitious ("the distant objective is a new model for international history that has the conceptual arsenal to explain what specific role representations play in the history of the social order"), but the link to Nizam al-Mulk is not made explicit, since Chapter 3, devoted to the great vizier, gives no general overview of the medieval sources on his life.

Chapter 2, "Origins," addresses the context in which Nizam al-Mulk's life and career took place: a fragmented eleventh century when power was shared between Abbasid caliphs, Saljuq sultans, and many local rulers, and where ideological and religious factions fought for social and political supremacy. The part allocated to the Abbasid caliphs is surprisingly brief. Their reign is summarized by a formulation bor-

rowed from Patricia Crone: “effectively 750–861; faineance 861–1258” (p. 32), and thus epitomized: “neither power nor authority resided in Baghdad, the symbolic seat of the dynasty, after the tenth century” (p. 33). A more nuanced view of the Abbasid variation in political authority could have been developed, drawing perhaps on Eric Hanne’s *Putting the Caliph in Its Place: Power, Authority, and the Late Abbasid Caliphate* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), mentioned in the bibliography. Although the non-imperial perspective assumed by Neguin Yavari is perfectly relevant, some of her statements are surprising, such as when she argues that the Abbasids failed to “build a legal infrastructure at the imperial level” (p. 37). Additionally, her assertion that “the instigation of Hanbali riots in Baghdad in the eleventh century is a manifestation of the Abbasid policy of fanning sectarian fire to augment their political standing” (p. 37) warrants further discussion, since these riots (*fitnas*) were the result of a fragile local social balance: the Abbasid religious policy cannot be univocally considered as pro-Hanbali, or as purely sectarian, throughout the whole period.

The second, and main, part of Chapter 2 is dedicated to the Saljuqs and raises captivating issues about Turkic peoples and their political organizations. Neguin Yavari explores, with the help of recent studies, the evolving significance of the terminology used in medieval Arabic sources to label varied components of the Turkic peoples. Turks, Oghuz (Ghuzz) or Turcomans (Turkman) were distinct terms, which progressively became ethnonyms in a context of moving political alliances. The Saljuqs were members of a patrician family, distinguished by their conversion to Islam, and ruling over “a powerful Turkman stratum” to which they were not kin-related (p. 52). All through these developments, Yavari convincingly demonstrates that neither ethnicity—still a kind of social categorization used by medieval historians—nor religion, should be taken as definitive interpretative historical factors. These, rather, were very often a way to designate (or to conceal) political interests or particular policies. One of the consequences is a new, less dogmatic view of Saljuq religious policy.

Chapter 3, “Representations of Nizam al-Mulk,” first leads the reader through the conquests by the Saljuq family in Iran, and through Nizam al-Mulk’s early life and career. Born in Tus (Khurasan, eastern Iran) in 1018, into a family of landowners (*dehqans*), his father held the position of tax-collector for the Ghaznavid local administration. Young Hasan worked for the Ghaznavids, then for the Saljuq governor of Balkh, who recommended him to Alp Arslan. Soon after Alp Arslan obtained the sultanate in 1063, he chose Hasan as his vizier and granted him his *laqab* Nizam al-Mulk, “order of the state.” The Iranian statesman kept his position under the sultan Malik Shah, Alp Arslan’s son. He was briefly dismissed at the end of Malik Shah’s reign, then was murdered in 1092, shortly before the sultan was himself assassinated. In addition to the career of Nizam al-Mulk, Yavari also scrutinizes in this chapter his relations with the Saljuq entourage, with other political dignitaries, such as the previous vizier al-Kunduri (d. 1064), and with the Abbasids. Aspects of his governance as a vizier are discussed, as well as his policy of founding madrasas and *ribats*.

The author considers the foundations of numerous Nizamiyya madrasas, from Khurasan to Iraq, as “the vizier’s instrument for fostering political stability, overcoming factional antagonism, and social control” (p. 94), more than as a tool for developing particular religious or ideological trends, including Ash‘arite Shāfi‘ism. It would have been interesting to include some discussion here of events echoed by the sources, for example the riot (*fitna*) that took place in Baghdad in 469/1077 after an Ash‘arite preacher (*wā‘iz*) used the Nizamiyya madrasa to deliver a public sermon prompting the local Ḥanbalis to send a written protest to Nizam al-Mulk, but the discussion focuses mainly on recent scholarship about the madrasa. Yavari then interestingly nuances the educational legacy of the Nizamiyyas, and emphasizes their role in glorifying their founder, reminding us that they “waned with the fall of Nizam al-Mulk and his protégés” (p. 94).

Entitled “Nizam al-Mulk and Alterity,” Chapter 4 addresses specific aspects of Nizam al-Mulk’s governance as a vizier, and of his political views as expressed in his *Siyar al-muluk*. The author interprets the religious policy of the sultans, in particular their attitude towards Shii Muslims, as “a complex and multi-faceted ... policy, at times complacent, at times belligerent, sometimes propagandizing, and always compromising” (p. 111). She ascribes this flexibility to their vizier, since the Saljuqs acted “under Nizam al-Mulk’s guidance” (p. 111). The links between Nizam al-Mulk and eminent Sufi masters of his time are then described, and interpreted as echoing “Nizam al-Mulk’s commitment to non-partisan policies” (p. 118) as well as protecting the vizier from “the possibility of religious challenges to his rule” (p. 125). His choice to seek the vicinity of the Sufis is depicted as excellent, given the weight “Sufi brotherhoods” were to take in Muslim societies from the thirteenth century on: it allows Yavari to depict Nizam al-Mulk as a “forward-looking vizier” (p. 125). Teleological bias, difficult to avoid in reading the past through the lens of later developments, sneaks in on occasion.

The legacy of Nizam al-Mulk’s governance, ideas, and memory is at the core of Chapter 5, “Nizam al-Mulk Remembered,” unexpectedly the shortest one in the book. The Iranian statesman is firstly epitomized as “everyone’s hero” (p. 130) in his time—“everyone” comprising Abbasid caliphs, ‘*ulama*’, and Sufis, but doubtful in the case of Ismailis, Fatimids, or political foes. The focus then shifts to the evolution of Iran’s history after Nizam al-Mulk’s period, an evolution Yavari characterizes as marked by regionalization and political fragmentation, and by the growing role played by Alids and Sufis, the latter evolving as trans-sectarian forces (pp. 133–4). Iran also forged a new identity, or “Iranianness,” linked to its pre-Islamic past, and embodied by the New Persian language, which supplanted Arabic as a new *lingua franca* in Islamic Asia (pp. 135–6). She insists that this identity was much more political than ethnic: “Rather than an ethnicity, Iranianness is forged as an identity to wield power against rivals and competitors” (p. 137). Nizam al-Mulk and his memory are remarkably absent in these developments. Then the analysis returns to the subject of the book, offering an interesting discussion of the progressive “shiization” of the vizier’s memory starting from the Safavid period and continuing well into present times, and underlining the emphasis recent Iranian publications and political

eulogies put on his pragmatism and non-sectarianism. In the Sunni world, by contrast, Nizam al-Mulk is celebrated for his anti-heretical policy and appears as personifying a “utopian vision of a Sunni-dominated golden age” (p. 147), a vision that Neguin Yavari unexpectedly parallels with “recent revivals of the caliphate among ISIS and other *takfiri* groups” (p. 147). Eventually, Nizam al-Mulk arises as one of the forefathers in the emergence of modern Iran (p. 148). This assertion points up the fact that Yavari’s book, as well stated by its title, addresses the subject of Iranian history as a whole as much as, or maybe even more than, it does Nizam al-Mulk, “the laureled vizier” (p. 148). The reader may regret it, or may enjoy the original reflection opened up by the author about the history of medieval and modern Iran. *The Future of Iran’s Past*, in this perspective, can be considered as a stimulating, well-documented milestone contributing to the integration of Nizam al-Mulk’s memory into academic scholarship, by shaping a tolerant, pragmatic, and modern image of the Saljuqs’ vizier—an image that echoes today’s concerns even more than strictly medieval issues.

Vanessa Van Renterghem

Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (Inalco)

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Iranian Studies. Originally published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1835317>