

YAVARI Neguin
*The Future of Iran's Past:
 Nizām al-Mulk Remembered*

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At the centre of Neguin Yavari's highly original and deeply stimulating book is the figure of Nizām al-Mulk (1018-92), the celebrated vizier who, for several decades in the eleventh century, shaped and effectively ruled the Seljuk empire. With an emphasis on the lasting effects of the vizier's actions and the adaptations of his memory in a variety of later contexts, *The Future of Iran's Past: Nizām al-Mulk Remembered* is by no means a straightforward work of political biography: among its most distinctive features are the author's extensive use of comparative history, and her insightful linking of the past with the present. Each of the book's five chapters provides a thoughtful consideration of a historical problem (or set of problems), and each of these discussions constitutes an important accompaniment to Yavari's analyses of the Persian and Arabic sources. Her references to medieval European history in particular enable her to reframe questions and to integrate new perspectives into her study of Seljuk history.

Consistently attentive to the complex nature of medieval texts and the risks of over-confidence in their apparent surface-level meanings, Yavari devotes her first chapter, 'Of history and biography', to biographical writing – its forms, qualities and functions, and its place in relation to other modes of historical writing. With reference to a diverse range of primary and secondary sources, and further informed by current theoretical discussions, she explores the character and trajectories of biographical writing in premodern and modern contexts, and in Christian and Muslim milieux. At the heart of this preliminary chapter is a comparative study of two premodern examples, drawn respectively from a Christian and a Muslim setting: the *Vita Karoli* of Einhard (d. 840), a writer who was acquainted personally with his subject, Charlemagne (r. 768-814); and the biography of the Umayyad Caliph 'Umar II (r. 717-20), compiled by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 882) on the basis of lectures delivered by his father, 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 829). Notwithstanding – and in part because of – the acknowledged differences between the two texts, Yavari's comparison proves both interesting and productive. Both Einhard's and Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's works, Yavari notes, contributed significantly to the

creation of the emblematic images of the two rulers, and initiated new developments in biographical writing in their respective cultural contexts. Her thorough discussion of the two texts leads Yavari to affirm an intrinsically 'secular' quality in biographical writing, and furthermore – in a point that underlies many parts of this book – to subvert assumptions of Islamic exceptionalism.

Chapter Two, 'Origins', opens with a survey of historical developments concerning the Abbasids and the Seljuks, with a particular focus on the 'fissures and fractures' (p. 31) that, by the time of Nizām al-Mulk, had emerged in the political, social and ideological realms. Although the outlines of this history are broadly familiar, Yavari's analysis is enriched by comparisons with the histories of other regions of the world, and by ideas developed in different scholarly disciplines, principally anthropology. Necessarily, Yavari devotes a sizable portion of this chapter to Turkic political culture and to her sources' deployment of ethnic designations, including the categories of 'Turk' and 'Turkman'. In discussing representations of 'Turks' in literary sources of the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, she observes 'a flavor of alterity and difference'. Regarding these predominantly negative depictions of Turks as largely rhetorical, she looks beyond the surface of the texts in order to identify the tensions within them. By locating elements that seem at odds with the texts' apparent meanings, Yavari produces readings that reflect more nuanced and varied strands in the milieux that created them.

It is only in Chapter Three, more than a third of the way into *The Future of Iran's Past*, that Yavari focuses her attention directly on the figure of Nizām al-Mulk. Running to forty-three pages, 'Representations of Nizām al-Mulk' is also by far the longest chapter in the book. Noting the conventional nature of most accounts of Nizām al-Mulk's life and their often exemplary purposes, she identifies rhetorical elements in the texts and discerns patterns. In a particularly skilful section of her analysis, Yavari discusses the profuse pre-figurations, premonitions and veridical dreams reported in the sources. She also brings a fresh perspective to several episodes and themes of Seljuk history, such as the execution of Kundurī (d. after 1063), Nizām al-Mulk's predecessor in the vizierate, and the relations between the Seljuk dynasty and the Abbasids. The chapter includes several correctives to prevailing assumptions: Yavari points out, for example, that the Nizāmiyya *madrassa*-s, frequently regarded as instruments of lasting ideological and political transformation, fell into disrepair and insignificance soon after the death of their founder. Her interpretation of

Nizām al-Mulk's conduct in office places a consistent emphasis on its secularity: rather than representing his pursuit of a 'religious policy', the vizier's actions reflect his search for a 'politically expedient accommodation'. This reading supports the extended discussion of Nizām al-Mulk's attitudes and policies towards particular groups that Yavari singles out for attention in the chapter that follows.

In her fourth chapter, 'Nizām al-Mulk and alterity', Yavari examines Nizām al-Mulk's record in relation to four prominent categories: Turks, caliphs, heretics and Sufis. In each case, she juxtaposes his writings, principally in his *Siyar al-mulūk*, with his actions, reported in a variety of contemporary and later sources. Notwithstanding the seemingly polemical nature of parts of *Siyar al-mulūk* (particularly the lengthy treatments of heretics), Yavari qualifies the impression of dogmatic intolerance created by these passages by drawing attention to aspects of Nizām al-Mulk's behaviour that suggest a different outlook (for example, his visits to Shi'i shrines and his family's marriages with Shi'i families). The result is a more complicated image of a figure who, in Yavari's portrayal, strived to manage the numerous strains within the polity that he governed, to establish a stable, central ground among competing factions – in short, to rule with justice, in a context that required constant compromise.

Yavari's fifth and final chapter, 'Nizām al-Mulk remembered', explores the shaping of Nizām al-Mulk's legacy in the millennium since he died. She documents the process whereby, notwithstanding the several criticisms contained in the medieval sources, the vizier becomes identified with 'the Islamic political *imaginaire*' (p. 130), the quintessential exponent of a just Islamic statecraft. In this chapter, Yavari pays particular attention to the interplay of politics and religion, whether in Nizām al-Mulk's lifetime or in perceptions of his lasting significance in various medieval and modern contexts. Yavari develops her depiction of a statesman who sought to transcend the divisions within the society that he governed; his upholding of Islam, she finds, derived less from commitment to a strident religious agenda than from its usefulness as a means to transcend confessional, ethnic and regional divides. Noting in brief the major transformations that occurred in Iran in the centuries that followed Nizām al-Mulk's death, she charts the changing reception of Nizām al-Mulk's memory, including in the contemporary post-revolutionary period, in relation to which she provides a fascinating portrayal of 'a coming of age of a nation armed with its past' (p. 148).

It is evident that *The Future of Iran's Past* is the result of years of research and reflection. Behind the 148 pages of the main text are seventy pages of notes and an extensive and wide-ranging bibliography; the book also includes a useful chronology. Written in fluent, clear and compelling prose, the book contains several arresting turns of phrase. Specialists will also appreciate the engagement with numerous issues of scholarly debate conducted in the notes.

Yavari's Nizām al-Mulk emerges as a figure who sought to avoid factionalism and partisanship in order to promote justice and stability. The author depicts the vizier as an individual who perceived changes that were already underway, adapted to them, and was able to shape and direct them. In her thoughtful commentary, Yavari demonstrates Nizām al-Mulk's continuing importance as a point of reference in political discourse over the course of a millennium. *The Future of Iran's Past* constitutes an invaluable contribution to the study of Iran's history, into the contemporary period.

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