

Ghasem Ghani Collection at Yale

The Ghani Collection in the Manuscripts and Archives of the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University is a rich collection of documents in Persian of the Qajar period (1785-1925). The collection is mostly about state affairs in the latter half of the nineteenth century but also Iran's relations with other countries of the Middle East and with Europe. The renowned Iranian scholar, diplomat and medical doctor, Dr. Qasem Ghani, put together this collection between 1930's to 1950's from diverse sources (such as the heirs to the Qajar nobility). It was purchased by Yale University from Mr. Cyrus Ghani, Dr. Ghasem Ghani's son, through the good offices of Professor Firuz Kazemzadeh in the early 1960's. An extensive hand list was prepared shortly thereafter by Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh, an Iranian career diplomat and scholar.

Qajar era is crucial in modern Iranian history primarily because of Iranian society and state first encountering challenges of modernity. It is also significant because of Iran's precarious sovereignty in the face of imperial powers of that time and especially the Anglo-Russian treatment of Iran as a buffer state. In this and other respects Iran shared comparable characteristics with the neighboring Ottoman Empire and with Egypt, which both appear in the Ghani documents. Yet Qajar Iran reserves sociopolitical and religio-cultural peculiarities well evident in these documents.

The collection consist of more than 1,000 documents including official correspondence of the Qajar rulers and statesmen, important daily notes –such as those addressed to Naser al-Din Shah (1848-1896) by his celebrated premier Amir Kabir as well as financial documents, diplomatic dispatches, intelligence reports, and private letters of such important figures as Mirza Hosein Khan Moshir al-Dowleh, the celebrated statesman of the 1870's, and Mirza 'Ali Asghar Khan Amin al-Soltan, premier in the late 1880's and early 1890's. The private letters of the

celebrated premier of the early 1950's, Mohammad Mosaddeq, in his early career is also part of this collection. Moreover, there are documents about political dissidents and revolutionaries before and during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), as well as correspondence regarding the Babi-Baha'i leadership in the Baghdad exile in the 1860's, Persian merchant communities in Cairo and harassments by diplomatic representatives in the 1870's and 1880's, letters by Qajar elite women and reports on well-known dissidents such as Jamal al-Din Afghani and Mirza Malkom Khan. There are also random royal decrees, petitions to Qajar shahs and officials by the ordinary people and details of litigations brought before the state authorities. The collection also includes a substantial group of letters in grand style and appearance exchanged between Fath 'Ali Shah (1798-1834) and his crown prince 'Abbas Mirza and European courts in early nineteenth century including the British Prince Regent and Napoleon Bonaparte when Persian alliance was sought by both the British and the French and when Iranian provinces in the Caucasus were first exposed to Russian threat and eventual conquest.

The Ghani Collection has remained understudied. Except for Abbas Amanat's two books:

Resurrection and Renewal: Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850 (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1989, 2nd ed., Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, 2005)

Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1836-1896 (University of California Press, 1997, 2nd ed. I.B.Tauris, London and New York, 2009)

little serious work has been done on this collection. Recently a group of the Ghani documents related to the Babis and Baha'is in the Ottoman exile is published along with other related material by Abbas Amanat and Fereyduh Vahman:

Az Tehran ta Akka: Babiyan va Baha'iyān dar Asnad-e Dowran-e Qajar (Ashkaar Publishers, Copenhagen and New Haven, 2016).

Digitization of the Ghani Collection is the first project of the Yale Iranian History Internet Archive (YIHA) which in due course intends to make available other collections at Yale and elsewhere, including the less-accessible and unknown private collection. The Ghani Collection first was electronically transcribed in 2003 by Dr. Fereyduun Vahman, emeritus professor of Iranian at the University of Copenhagen during his stay at Yale as the fellow of the Yale Program in Iranian Studies. Digitization of the Ghani collection and creation of a website as part of YIHA began in 2015 and is expected to be complete by 2019. Dr. Saghar Sadeghian, Associate Director of the YIHA, provided prefaces and annotations to each document and collated the transcripts with the originals. In due course photographic images of all original documents will be added to the transcripts of the documents. Supplementary biographical data will also be included for easier identification of personalities in the documents. A guideline, both in English and Persian, makes the use of this collection more efficient to historians.

The digitization project is supported by a generous grant from Mehrdad and Sholeh Amanat. The advice and support of Ms. Marilyn Wilkes and Ms. Lisa Brennan as well as Ms. Hira Jafri of the MacMillan Center were crucial for the launching of the website and making it searchable. A committee consisting of experts in the field will be consulted on the Ghani project and further projects.

Any citation, direct and indirect, however, should include full reference to The Ghani Collection and Yale University Library as well as to the file and folder numbers.

Abbas Amanat
Professor of History and International Studies
Director, Yale Program in Iranian Studies