

In Support of a Constitutional Government: Women's Voices in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution*

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Abstract

Topics in the historiography on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 are extensively male-dominated. This dominance is favoured by the written materials that researchers can use, as the predominance of male authors is undeniable when looking at the publications from that time. Consequently, it is more difficult to reconstruct what women thought about the constitutional form of government. At the same time, several scholars who have investigated the origins of feminism in Iran have set its starting point at the time of the Constitutional Revolution. Therefore, this article will reconcile these two historiographies by shedding light on the voices of some women who supported the constitutional government during the revolution. Thanks to archival documents and printed publications, including the memoirs of Tāj al-Soltaneh, the telegram of the Committee of Iranian Women Resident in Istanbul to the Italian Queen, and letters to newspapers, this essay will stress women's involvement in the events both at the domestic and transnational level and devote attention to their role as both thinkers and actors during the Constitutional Revolution.

Keywords: Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Women, Constitutional government, Tāj al-Soltaneh, Komiteh-ye Zanān-e Irāni Moqīmin-e Eslāmbul

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Introduction

The 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution was marked by a large participation of both men and women from several social groups. Despite being prompted by a number of causes, including socio-economic ones, a central theme in the movement was the demand to establish a constitutional government. However, even though accounts from the time, such as the one of Morgan Shuster (1912), or articles in *Habl al-Matin* (Paidar 1995: 57) and *Revue du Monde Musulman*,¹ testify to women's active participation in the revolution, less attention has been devoted to what women thought about the establishment of a constitutional government. In fact, topics in the historiography of the Constitutional Revolution are extensively male-dominated. The crucial actors involved in the events, the main thinkers of constitutionalism, be they lay or religious, and those who reacted to suppress it had one common characteristic: they were men. The male-dominated topics in this historiography are favoured by the written sources at the disposal of the researchers. More than one century after the emergence of the constitutional movement, hearing the voices of the educated men that supported the Constitutional Revolution is an easier task than hearing women's ones, since the dominance of male authors is undeniable among the printed publications of that time. Therefore, while reconstructing the thoughts of prominent constitutionalist thinkers or religious scholars has been facilitated by the extensive number of treatises, articles, and letters written by these men, the same process is more difficult when focusing on women.

10

Sources written by women are much more limited in number (Nazari 2016: 14). This is not only due to their lower level of literacy.² Actually, among educated women, few of them left written accounts. As pointed out by Sanasarian (1985: 89), "some women were permitted by their families to learn to read but were strictly prohibited from writing. It was believed that if women knew how to write they would send love letters to men and disgrace the family". Therefore, while studies that demonstrate women's active involvement in the Constitutional Revolution have emerged over the last decades (Afary 1996; Bayat-Philipp 1978; Berberian 2000; Emami 2011; Paidar 1995; Sedghi 2007), their realisation was possible mainly through the use of articles, records or biographies written by men, while the examination of women's thoughts or, all the more so, activities in the private sphere represented a more difficult task.³ At the same time, this did not prevent historians from understanding the cruciality of the Constitutional Revolution as a starting point for the emergence of the women's movement in Iran (Afary 1989; 1996; Bahar 1983; Bamdad 2013; Bayat-Philipp 1978).⁴ According to Vanzan (2005: 79), it was with the constitutional movement at the beginning of the 20th century that Iranian women started setting up an organised platform to express their anxiety about the renewal of the whole society, especially the component of women.

These two entangled and sometimes overlapping strands of research have put the

attention on two main themes: the women's anti-imperialist stance and their growing attention to women's rights, especially to education. However, I contend that women's participation should be revisited by shedding some more light on their stance towards establishing a constitutional government in Iran. In doing so, this article will particularly focus on how this aspect emerged from two female-authored documents – the *Khāterāt* (Memoirs) of the Qajar princess Tāj al-Soltaneh and a telegram of the Committee of the Iranian Women Resident in Istanbul to the Italian Queen.⁵ Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this article to build a comprehensive history of the Iranian women's stance towards constitutionalism as the limited availability of women-authored sources from that time would cause the risk of generalisations treating women as a monolithic entity and not grasping the different nuances that existed, especially due to their different socio-economic conditions. In fact, the focus on these documents inevitably emphasises the stance of few literate women from the higher social classes. Therefore, through the use of these two main documents, and complementing them with women's letters to newspapers, diplomatic sources and accounts from that time, this essay aims at reflecting on two case studies that offer two possible perspectives on women's stance towards a constitutional government, the first from an insider to the Qajar court and the second at a transnational level.

Therefore, after a background paragraph on women's participation in the Constitutional Revolution, the following one focuses on Tāj al-Soltaneh and the pages of her *Khāterāt* devoted to the constitutional form of government. In doing so, I contend that her memoirs represent a privileged source to look into the stance towards constitutionalism adopted by a woman that not only resided in Iran but who was even part of the royal family. Conversely, in the subsequent paragraph attention is devoted to the telegram written by the women's committee of Istanbul. Therefore, it examines the transborder dimension of the constitutional movement and adds a new perspective to studies on women's involvement in the Constitutional Revolution, in addition to their anti-imperialist or feminist stance, showing efforts to establish contacts with foreign countries. Finally, this essay concludes that re-reading the few women-written sources available from that time by specifically focusing on their stance towards the constitutional government allows us to grasp further dimensions of women's involvement in the Constitutional Revolution.

Women as Actors in the Constitutional Revolution

Women's political activism in Iran did not start with the Constitutional Revolution. Conversely, it had a long history. Across the previous century, humble women participated in bread riots, even targeting the *shāh*. Bread represented the principal food for the population, especially in large towns and cities, so that, as reported by Shuster (1912: 170), it was "the test by which administrations and cabinets stand or fall". The responsibility for feeding their families made them alert to the price and

quality of bread, so that "there were very few, if any, cases recorded of a bread protest in Iran in which women were not involved" (Cronin 2021: 63). From the end of the 19th century, food protests were sometimes led by women, such as Zeinab Pasha, who revolted against the governor and the merchants who hoarded foodstuff in Tabriz (Nazari 2016: 45). Furthermore, during the Tobacco Revolt, even the women of the royal harem joined the boycott of tobacco (Browne 1910: 52).

Despite their active involvement in some riots, during the Qajar era, women were mainly confined to the household and reproduction, veiled and strictly safeguarded from the public domain (Sedghi 2007: 26). If they were poor, some worked as farmers, carpet weavers, domestic labourers, vendors or seamstresses, but there is no precise quantitative data on this phenomenon (Kār 2001: 15; Sedghi 2007: 30). However, some initial, non-organized forms of a women's movement started before the revolution. Sedghi (2007: 51) locates the first phase of the women's awakening in the first half of the 19th century with the poet, orator, and preacher Tāhereh who was outspoken against the veil, marital positions, and polygamy.⁶ Moreover, in a country in which until the 1940s women authors were virtually non-existent in the literary scene, as pointed out by Vanzan (2002: 88–9), "it is significant that at the outset, female prose was a text of protest". In fact, two decades before the Constitutional Revolution an anonymous author published the booklet *Tā'dib al-Nisvān* (The education of women) that explained how women had to be properly educated towards their husbands and considered the women of the upper class uppity, as they were the first ones to start questioning age-old accepted truths by entering into contact with European ideas (Javadi and Floor 2010: ix). As a result, there was a harsh reaction to the text, so that Bibi Khānom Astarābādi was pressed to write a rejoinder to that booklet, calling it *Ma'āyeib al-Rijāl* (The vices of men) (Javadi and Floor 2010, ix). Therefore, during the 19th century, there were some "feminist" instances of isolated women but they represented only embryonic representations of the more organised and widespread movement that emerged during the time of Constitutional Revolution.

In the initial phase of the Constitutional Revolution, i.e. up to the adoption of the Fundamental Law in December 1906, women's demonstrations were inspired by religious leaders and did not include demands for an improvement of women's condition. When in December 1905, clerics and merchants took *bast* (sanctuary) at the Shāh 'Abd ol-Azim shrine to protest against the government's punishment of a merchant and ask for a House of Justice, women joined the protests, surrounded the *shāh's* carriage and demanded the respect of the clergy (Kasravi 1991: 69). As in the next months demonstrations culminated with the *bast* at the British legation in Tehran, women were prevented from joining it. As stated in a letter from the Secretary of the British Legation Evelyn Grant Duff to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs Edward Grey, "several women, amongst whom are the wives of important Mollahs, wish to take refuge at the legation, but I will prevent this, if possible".⁷

However, women supported the revolution in different ways, such as financially, or they circulated information and news, took part in demonstrations and, more rarely, even took up arms (Najmabadi 1998: 181). Certainly, not all women actively supported the revolution,⁸ but as far as protests are concerned women of different social backgrounds were involved. Some participated despite little education and the lack of family support, but unfortunately it is even more difficult to reconstruct what they thought about the establishment of a constitutional government due to the scarcity of sources.

However, despite their involvement in the protests since the very beginning, the Electoral Laws and the Fundamental Laws disappointed women. The 1906 Electoral Law included women among the groups deprived of electoral rights (art. 3) and debarred from being elected (art. 5). The 1906 Fundamental Law and the 1907 Supplementary Fundamental Laws did not change women's conditions. Article 8 of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws stated that the people enjoyed equal rights before the law but did not explicitly mention women and the provisions of the 1906 Electoral Law continued to be applied and were confirmed in the new 1909 Electoral Law. This prompted women to demand the recognition of their rights more explicitly.

Moreover, the original alliance between women and the clerics found a rupture as soon as some members of the latter group adopted an increasingly anti-constitutionalist stance and even constitutionalist clerics showed hostility to an improvement of women's conditions. Therefore, after the granting of the 1906 Fundamental Law, women's political activism became "more visible and independent" from the clergy through the formation of *anjomans* (Sanasarian 1982: 20).⁹ The American financial advisor to the Iranian government Morgan Shuster (1912: 193) reported the existence of "dozens of more or less secret societies" among women in Tehran, controlled by a central organisation. Despite not knowing the names or the faces of the leaders of these groups, he was aware of the support he received from them, through their "great, though secret influence" (Shuster 1912: 193). According to Sanasarian (1982: 20), "such formal and informal patterns of communication and get-togethers helped women become aware of the nondomestic responsibilities they could assume". In fact, in the patriarchal society of Qajar Iran there was no room for women's social or political activities (Nazari 2016: 34) and urban women lived more secluded than rural ones and had as little contact as possible with male strangers (Nashat 2004: 12-16). Therefore, these new public experiences contributed to the outset of some initial "feminist" demands among a small number of women, in the sense of growing attention to women's education and political role, similar to what was happening in the same period in other parts of the Middle East (Nazari 2016: 65-68). However, differently from the participation in protests, the raising awareness of women's rights did not crosscut all social classes but was mainly limited to wealthy literate women. Also some men stood on the side of women. They supported women's education and opposed polygamy as an element that could contribute to a healthy family environment

(Bayat-Philipp 1978: 296-297). For example, in March 1908, Mirzā Morteza Qoli presented a petition on behalf of the *Anjoman-e Nesvān* (Women's Association), calling for the recognition of women's societies (Afary 1989: 72-73). This request was supported by Hasan Taqizādeh and Vakil al-Ra'āyā Hamadāni who stated that there was no religious prohibition against them (Dehkhodā 2016: 285).¹⁰ Later, in August 1911, Vakil al-Ra'āyā even raised the question of equal rights for women in the *Majles*. It was the first time in Iranian history, so that "the house was shocked at such an open proposal" (Sanasarian 1982: 23). Eventually, conservative forces prevailed.

However, despite the lack of support from the *Majles* for women's demands, women supported the assembly for its nationalist stance against Russia and Britain. This had become particularly clear since just after the adoption of the constitution, when women offered to give their wages and inheritances or to sell their jewellery to raise money for the national bank. They also became involved in the movement to wear native fabrics instead of European textiles in order to free the nation from its dependence on European imports. For instance, one of the women's societies, the *Anjoman-e Mokhaddarāt-e Vatan* (National Ladies' Society), formed in 1910, wrote a petition to the newspaper *Irān-e Now* to collect money and give it to the *Majles* as the country had fallen in a vortex of annihilation and decay due to the unwise interventions of foreigners.¹¹ Among its members, this society included women from prominent constitutionalist families and mainly focused on nationalist issues, such as the opposition to foreign loans and foreign interference in the affairs of the country.

14

During the civil war, women also offered refuge to deputies of the *Majles* and hid volunteer soldiers. Some even joined their ranks. During the siege of Tabriz, there were reports of women dressed in disguise and directly taking part in fights against the enemy, while others remained behind the frontlines to cook, wash or help the wounded (Paidar 1995: 57). However, the height of women's nationalist zeal was reached in December 1911 (Bayat-Philipp 1978: 303). When rumours started spreading that the *Majles* would have yielded to the threats and bribes of Russian emissaries and dismiss Shuster, Shuster himself wrote: "the Persian women performed the crowning act of the noble and patriotic part of which thousands of their sects had been playing since Persia's *risorgimento* began" (Shuster 1912: 191). A large manifestation was organised by women to oppose the imposition from the Russian government to end his advisory activities. Among the speakers there was also Zeinab Amin, the co-founder of the National Women's Society and daughter of a constitutionalist leader (Vanzan 2005: 84). In addition, at the end of the revolution, some women started publishing activities. In 1910, the first newspaper edited by a woman, *Dānesh* (Knowledge), was published. The name of the newspaper itself outlines its focus: women's education. However, in this case, education was not interpreted as a necessary step for women's active role in society, but it was "a domestically-focused knowledge" (Kashani-Sabet 2005: 31). The newspaper did not talk about politics. As reported by Shahidi (2002: 70), this was

one of the commitments made by the publisher to obtain the licence to establish the newspaper. Therefore, *Dānesh* was presented as "moral" and with the mission to educate women and girls on themes such as housekeeping.¹² Two years later, another women's journal, *Shikufeh* (Blossom), was published under the editorship of Maryam Muzayyin al-Soltaneh. Also in this case, themes such as women's education and concerns for their role as daughters, wives, and mothers were elaborated (Vatandust 2006: 25), and "patriotic motherhood" (the identification of women's commitment to the family with the ideals of the nation) was shown as a requisite for modern Iranian women (Kashani-Sabet 2011: 128). Therefore, these publications, despite marking a significant development in Iranian women's history, were more focused on the domestic role of women in the household rather than on their activism in constitutional politics. Conversely, this latter aspect will be at the basis of the next paragraphs.

Voices from Within: The *Khāterāt* of Tāj al-Soltaneh

This paragraph is devoted to the stance of the princess Tāj al-Soltaneh with regards to constitutionalism revealed in her *Khāterāt*.¹³ So far, these memoirs have been largely studied in relation to the princess' role as one of the first Iranian feminists (Mahdavi 1987; Nateq 1979; Vanzan 2017). However, while the princess is an important figure in the scholarship on the women's movement, less attention has been devoted to her in studies on the constitutional one.

Born in 1884, she was the daughter of Nāser al-Din Shāh (1848-1896) and sister of Mozaffar al-Din Shāh (1896-1907), who was on the throne at the outbreak of the Constitutional Revolution. In the *Khāterāt*, the princess was critical of the Qajar dynasty, but she weighed up those criticisms with "a sort of general forgiveness" as none of them had received an adequate education (Vanzan 2017: xv). Her unhappy marriage led her to go through periods of depression, which she overcame through rebellion to established customs and ideas (Mahdavi 1987: 189). During the revolution, she joined the *Anjoman-e Azādi-ye Zanān* (Association for the Freedom of Women), one of the first organisations in Iran that aimed at the recognition of women's rights, especially higher education (Vanzan 2005: 80). The association was founded by a group of patriots and intellectuals who believed that the progress of the society was strictly related to the improvement in women's educational levels and visibility in the society (Vanzan 2005: 81). Among the members of this *anjoman* there were not only women but also men who joined the meetings together with their wives or daughters.

As a consequence, from the memoirs of Tāj al-Soltaneh a series of themes common to the feminist Iranian women of that time emerge, such as the right to vote, to work outside the home, not to wear the veil, to choose their own husband and the possibility to have an education (Vanzan 2005: 80). However, less attention has been devoted to her thoughts about constitutional developments so far. In fact, the princess was "one of the first emblems of Iranian feminism" (Vanzan 2005: 80), but her feminist activities

were strictly connected with the revolutionary times in which she lived. As a person that personally experienced the years of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, she devoted some pages of her memoirs also to the demand for a constitutional form of government. Tāj al-Soltaneh reported that during the Minor Autocracy (1908-1909), Bakianov, a radical Armenian from Transcaucasia active in the *anjoman* of the *mojahedin* of Tehran (Afary 1996: 196), sent a questionnaire to some Iranian women, including some members of the Royal Family. Among these women, there was also Tāj al-Soltaneh who reported the four questions posed by Bakianov and her answers in her memoirs (Ettehādīeh and Sa'dvandiān 1982: 99). The questionnaire asked questions about constitutionalism (*mashruteh*), progress and the role of women.

At first, the questionnaire asked her what the meaning of constitutionalism was. Tāj al-Soltaneh answered that it was "acting under conditions of national freedom and advancement, without self-interest and treachery" (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993: 286). From this first reply, two main themes emerge that show how her reflections were actually part of a specific spirit of the time that characterised the turn of 20th century Iran. Instead of giving a legal definition of constitutionalism, her primary attention was to "āzādi" (freedom) (Ettehādīeh and Sa'dvandiān 1982: 99), meant as national freedom,¹⁴ which was clearly in line with the anti-imperialist stance against the Russian and British encroachment on Iran that was widespread among the constitutionalists, within the *Majles* and, as pointed out in the previous paragraph, among some women. The second element of her definition of constitutionalism has to do with "*taraqī*" (advancement) (Ettehādīeh and Sa'dvandiān 1982: 99). This is again a common characteristic of the approach to constitutionalism in Iran at that time. Having a constitutional form of government was not considered *per se* as an absolute good to be achieved. Conversely, as stressed by Atabaki and Zürcher (2004: 3), from the 1860s onwards, for the modernist intellectuals in Iran as well as in the Ottoman empire that supported the establishment of a constitutional and parliamentary rule in their countries, "constitution and parliament were a means to further the modernisation process by making the subjects into stakeholding citizens, rather than an end in themselves" .

Greater attention to the legal aspects of constitutionalism emerges from the second answer to the questionnaire, in which the princess had to evaluate which between despotism and constitutionalism was better. It is from this answer onwards that the most striking elements in the princess' approach to the events emerge. In fact, despite being a member of the royal family and even the sister of the *shāh* who was ruling at the beginning of the revolution, the princess openly opposed despotism. Her answer was the following: "[t]he restitution of its people's rights is the duty of every progressive nation. When can it have its rights restored? When the country functions under constitutionalism and a proper system. What brings forth progress? The rule of law. And when are laws implemented? When despotism is overthrown. Therefore, we see from this that constitutionalism is preferable to despotism" (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993: 286).

Through a series of rhetorical questions, she elaborated an answer that stressed concepts such as "people's rights"¹⁵ and "rule of law" (*qānun*) that clearly positioned her on the side of the constitutionalists that were demanding to restrain the power of the *shāh*, accused of ruling the country arbitrarily. This effort to bring down an arbitrary rule with a "positive programme" of replacing it with the rule of law was the great novelty of the Constitutional Revolution in comparison to past revolts (Katouzian 1997: 70). However, as a similar reasoning originated from one of the members of the Qajar dynasty, the novelty, the nonconformism and, all the more so considering that she was female, the bravery of adopting such a position that could contrast with the pragmatic interests of her family, all contribute to grasping another element of innovation in Tāj al-Soltaneh's thought in addition to her role as one of the first Iranian feminists.

Moreover, also when looking at her reflections on constitutionalism, Tāj al-Soltaneh did not leave women's issues aside. As previously mentioned, her preliminary definition of constitutionalism showed it in connection with national freedom and advancement. Bakianov's third question had specifically to do with the second one and, more in detail, which was the path of progress of Iran. It is in articulating her opinion on the path of progress that her feminist ideas came to the fore. In fact, she first stressed that the preliminary conditions for progress were the overcoming of "individual self-interest, destructive intrigues, and the pursuit of profit". Then, she enlisted a series of practical steps to take in different economic sectors, such as factories, agriculture, mining, and at the state level (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993: 286). However, here she added another dimension to the previous traditional ones: "the freedom of women to lay aside the veil and to support and cooperate with men as equals" (*ibid.*). Her attention to women's rights also emerged in the answer to Bakianov's question on the duties of Iranian women. Her answer mixed traditional women's tasks such as "educating their children", "helping the men", and "remaining chaste and unblemished" with feminist and patriotic demands. She included elements aimed at improving the conditions of women and favouring the progress of the county, two elements that were therefore strictly connected. Among these elements, there were "insisting on their rights", "being patriotic", "serving their kind", "eradicating laziness and a sedentary lifestyle", and - finally - "removing the veil" (*ibid.*: 286-288). While the request to abolish the veil was not so common among Iranian women of that time, Tāj al-Soltaneh outlined her request for constitutionalism and women's rights in strict connection with the abolition of the veil.

What emerged from a reading of the princess' answers to the questionnaire allows us to grasp the peculiarities of a woman that, despite being part of the royal family and economically negatively impacted by the revolutionary events, praised constitutionalism by interpreting it in strict relation to the advancement of the country and stressed the duty of the nation to restore "the people's rights" (*ibid.*: 286). While acknowledging the centrality of feminist issues, for example in connection with the progress of the country, the most interesting aspect that emerges from a reading of her thoughts about

constitutionalism is that she appeared as an outsider to the court, who praised the rule of law and opposed the despotism, so that its overthrow was, according to her, the preliminary condition for the implementation of laws. In doing so, when writing her answers to the questionnaire, she seemed so distant from the support of the Qajar despotic rule and so supportive of "the people", that one may question whether her stance was either unwise as in contrast with her own family interest or if she was completely aware of this risk but supported it anyway since, as a female member of the royal family, she felt to be a subject herself.

Women's Voices Beyond Borders: the Transnational Connections of the Women's *Anjomans*

Not only women within Iran but also Iranian women who lived beyond its borders were actively involved in the Constitutional Revolution. This was specifically the case of a group of Iranian women resident in the capital of the Ottoman empire, Istanbul, who tried to establish transnational contacts in support of the Revolution.

Differently from the large amount of works based on British and Russian sources, Italian diplomatic sources have not been extensively used in studies on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.¹⁶ This notwithstanding, these archives keep the folder "Dame Persiane" (Persian Ladies) which is particularly valuable in exemplifying both women's activism during the Constitutional Revolution and the transborder dimension of the Iranian constitutional movement. This folder has already received the attention of Scarcia Amoretti (1993) who devoted a short chapter to it. However, Scarcia Amoretti reported the content of some of the documents in the folder but did not present them in the wider context of the ongoing constitutional developments. This shortcoming was probably due to the time in which her chapter was written, as studies on the transborder connections of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution were still in an embryonic phase, and the edited book in which the chapter was included, Zarcone and Zarinebaf-Shahr's *Les Iraniens d'Istanbul* (1993), represented one of the seminal works appeared in the 1990s that investigated the crucial role of the Iranians in the Ottoman Empire before and during the Constitutional Revolution.¹⁷ Therefore, instead of looking at this telegram in a vacuum, this paragraph will set it in the wider framework of the relevance of the Iranian communities abroad in supporting the constitutional movement.

Iranian communities were present in different territories outside the Qajar Empire¹⁸. At the end of the 19th century, about 16,000 Iranians lived in Istanbul, most of them (eighty per cent) were of Azerbaijani origins, and smaller communities existed also in other cities of the Ottoman Empire (Sāsāni 1982: 94-98). During the period of the counter-revolution of 1908, several politicians and intellectuals left Iran and moved to neighbour territories, such as the Ottoman Empire, India, and Egypt to avoid persecution and organise the opposition (Zarcone 1993: 58). As within the borders of Iran, Iranians abroad established *anjomans* in Baghdad, in Egypt, in the Caucasus, in Paris, and in

Istanbul that acted as connectors of the Iranian opposition in foreign territories and within Iran. As pointed out by Browne (1910: 245), *anjomans* abroad, especially the *Anjoman-e Sa'adat* of Istanbul, "kept foreign countries informed of the progress of events and helped to dispel the false news industriously circulated by certain interested persons".

The *Anjoman-e Sa'adat* of Istanbul was the most important *anjoman* outside Iran and included among its members political exiles that had moved to Istanbul during the counter-revolution and liberals (Zarcone 1993: 71). However, while being the most important, the *Anjoman-e Sa'adat* was not the only one existing in Istanbul and establishing foreign contacts. The presence of the folder "Dame Persiane" at the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs testifies that also a group of women was involved in similar activities in the Ottoman capital: the *Komiteh-ye Zanān-e Irāni Moqimīn-e Eslāmbul* (Committee of Iranian Women Resident in Istanbul), also known as *Komiteh-ye Nesvān-e Irāni* (Committee of Iranian Women).¹⁹

On 8 September 1908, some months after the *coup d'état* of June 1908, a group of Iranian women that introduced themselves as "Dames persanes de Constantinople" sent a telegram in French to the Italian Queen Elena.²⁰ In this telegram, taking in consideration "their sisters in Persia", they made a "humble" appeal to the queen "on behalf of the women and the humanity to condescend to use her refined influence to intervene for our sisters with the aim to end the massacres and the bloodshed in Persia".²¹ Those repressions were presented as an "indescribable cruelty" on their sisters and women explicitly accused the troops under "direct order of the Shah" for these developments.²²

The statements of these women did not receive much attention from the Italian Foreign Ministry. The correspondence between the Minister of the *Real Casa* Emilio Ponzio Vaglia and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Tommaso Tittoni demonstrates that news from the Italian legation in Tehran, and more specifically from the diplomat Camillo Romano Avezana, were more cautious in talking about "massacres". In fact, Romano Avezana wrote that "the accusations of cruelty attributed to the Persian government were, in most cases, baseless or exaggerated".²³

However, despite the scarce attention received by the Italian ministry, this telegram represents an important document to stress some elements of women's activism in the revolutionary struggle. In fact, the time of the sending of the telegram to the Italian Queen, coincided with a period marked by other transnational contacts of the women's associations. It was not haphazard or a completely autonomous choice that the Iranian women resident in Istanbul sent that telegram to the representative of a foreign state. Conversely, this demand probably originated from Tabriz, a city which due to its geographical position and involvement in the revolution represented a bridge in connecting Iranian constitutionalists across imperial borders.

In March 1907, *Revue du Monde Musulman* reported that the previous month, the

women of Tabriz had joined together by creating an assembly of 150 people "to fight old habits, damaging and opposed to progress".²⁴ During the civil war, the *Anjoman-e Zanān* (Women's Association) in Tabriz sent a telegram to the Iranian Women's Committee in Istanbul to ask them for support in informing the world public opinion about the dangers threatening Tabriz (Paidar 1995: 57). Therefore, the Iranian Women's Committee in Istanbul sent telegrams to European countries, including the Italian Queen, asking for help against the repression of Muhammad Ali Shāh.²⁵ A new technology such as the telegraph allowed to establish bonds between both women's associations in Iran and abroad and between these associations and foreign governments. In this way, their voices resonated far beyond the borders of the Qajar empire, and news about repressions did not remain silent. Furthermore, these women's telegrams were not isolated. Both the Italian and the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs received telegrams from "male" *anjomans* located in different parts of the Ottoman empire.²⁶

Not only the denunciation of the *shāh's* repressions of the constitutional movement but also the other themes of women's activism during the revolution crossed imperial borders. For example, on 31 October 1909, an Iranian woman and poet, Shams Kasmā'i wrote a letter to the newspaper *Irān-e now* from Ashgabat, at that time part of the Russian empire, hoping for an improvement of women's education that allowed them not only to study subjects such as reading and writing, calligraphy, arithmetic, and geography but also new subjects such as dentistry.²⁷ She was also in favour of women's employment.²⁸

20

Interestingly, also when looking at anti-imperialism it is possible to grasp the transborder contact of the constitutional movement. In the same period of the sending of the telegram to the Italian Queen, a non-further specified "Committee of Persian Women" also sent a telegram to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs Sir Edward Grey, asking for support against the intervention of Russia in the domestic policy of their country (Bayat-Philipp 1978: 299). Considering the request of the Women's Committee of Tabriz to that of Istanbul to send telegrams to foreign governments and that the signature corresponds to that of the telegram to the Italian Queen, there are reasons to believe that it may have originated from the same women's committee. Furthermore, in 1911 the Iranian Women's Society also wrote to other European women's groups, including the Women's Suffragettes' committee of London. As reported by Bayat-Philipp, that telegram stated: "[t]he Russian government by an ultimatum demands us to surrender to her our independence; the ears of the men of Europe are deaf to our cries; could you women not come to our help?" (*ibid.*).

These efforts to establish "diplomatic" contacts with foreign governments in opposition to the repression of the protests mark an important difference in the general understanding of women's participation in the revolution. In fact, they show that they did not simply oppose anti-imperialism locally but acted to find external help against the Russian encroachment and the *shāh's* repression of the movement. However, what

makes the telegram to the Italian Queen particularly valuable in this panorama is the fact the anti-imperialist approach is not even mentioned as part of its text. These Iranian women asked for help not against a foreign state, but against the "massacres" and "bloodshed" committed by the *shāh*.²⁹ In this telegram, anti-imperialism exclusively left space for a desperate request to protect women from the Qajar government.

Conclusion

The memoirs of Tāj al-Soltaneh and the telegram of the women's committee of Istanbul showed two different dimensions of women's support for a constitutional government: the former from an insider to the Qajar family and the second from a group of Iranian women who, despite residing in a foreign country, actively supported the revolution. These examples prove that, despite the existence of few women-written sources from the time, their use may contribute to the history of women's involvement in the movement that is not only based on accounts written by men but that complements them with documents that report the first-hand experience of those women with revolutionary times.

These documents proved useful to demonstrate that feminism and anti-imperialism were undoubtedly crucial themes in women's active involvement in the protests but that they were not the only ones. Focusing exclusively on the demands for women's education would risk presenting women as a separate group detached from wider political themes impacting the whole nation. At the same time, their anti-imperialist stance shows their activism only as an oppositional one and, therefore, hides some Iranian women's proactive thoughts and actions during the Revolution. In fact, women also developed ideas about the advantages of a constitutional government and tried to establish transnational contacts that could help resist repression. In doing so, the case studies were particularly significant. The re-reading of the *Khāterāt* by focusing on the princess' thoughts about constitutionalism allowed to outline the picture of a princess that was an insider to the court due to blood ties, but that approached the events as an outsider, i.e., as if she were part of the wider Iranian people when reflecting on the advantages of constitutionalism compared to despotism. At the same time, the telegram of the Iranian Women's Committee in Istanbul illustrated that women's activism was not only in opposition to foreign interference but that women's *anjomans*, in the same way as men's ones, were aware of the importance of sharing news about the ongoing repressions by contacting foreign states and associations and asking them support. In doing so, these case studies contributed to outlining a more nuanced view of women's activism in support of the Constitutional Revolution. Hopefully, women's voices in support of a constitutional government will receive further scholarly attention in the future.

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Notes:

- 1 - *Journal d'un Persan*, "Revue du Monde Musulman", vol. 2, March 1907, p. 213; *La Femme persane*, "Revue du Monde Musulman", vol. 12, September 1910, pp. 282-84.
- 2 - Sanasarian (1985: 88) reports that by 1925 only three per cent of Iranian women were literate.
- 3 - Some exceptions are the works of Nateq and Vatandust. Nateq (1979) discussed the writings of Bibi Khānom Astarābādi and Tāj al-Soltaneh as two advocates of women's issues, while Vatandust (2006) collected several articles and letters written by women.
- 4 - For an opposing view, see McElrone (2005).
- 5 - The reflections on the *Khāterāt* of Tāj al-Soltaneh are based on the reading of the published Persian-language version (Ettehādieh and Sa'dvandiyan 1982) and on the translations into English and Italian (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993; 2017). Long quotations of the text are extracts from the translation into English of Vanzan and Neshati in the edited book of Amanat (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993), while for specific words I quote the original Persian text to clarify their meaning. Conversely, the telegram of the Committee of the Iranian Women Resident in Istanbul is part of the folder "Dame Persiane" preserved at the Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Esteri (hereafter ASDMAE) in Rome. The translation into English of parts of this telegram as well as the other documents that are quoted was done by the author of this article.
- 6 - On the life of Tāhereh, see Milani (2014: 9-29).
- 7 - The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/112, Grant Duff to Grey, 24 July 1906.
- 8 - Some of them were even hired by the secret police as undercover informants (Amin 2002: 21).
- 9 - The *anjomans* were either secret or public revolutionary associations that proliferated since the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution.
- 10 - *Charand-o parand*, "Sur-e Esrafil", 11 June 1908, pp. 7-9.
- 11 - "Irān-e now", 2 April 1910.
- 12 - "Dānesh", 7 September 1910, p. 1.
- 13 - The *Khāterāt* were probably written in 1914 or 1924, but their dating is not clear (Najmabadi 1990: 67). First published in an edited book based on a manuscript copy held at the library of the University of Tehran by Ettehādieh and Sa'dvandiyan (Ettehādieh and Sa'dvandiyan 1982), it was Vanzan who first translated them into English as part of her PhD thesis (Vanzan 1990). A translation of Vanzan and Neshati was later published in a volume edited by Amanat (Tāj al-Soltaneh 1993). Vanzan was also the translator and editor of the Italian version of the memoirs where she wrote an introduction on Tāj al-Soltaneh's life, the novelty represented by the *Khāterāt* and the debate on their authenticity (Vanzan 2017: vii-xxvi). Vanzan's translations represent an invaluable source to read the history of the turn of 20th century Iran through an autobiographical lens that allows us to look at what happened within the *harem* of the *shāh* and how an educated and feminist woman from that time experienced the ongoing developments.
- 14 - In the original Persian version, Tāj al-Soltaneh stated: "āzādi va taraqi-ye yek mellati" (freedom and advancement of one nation) (Ettehādieh and Sa'dvandiyan 1982: 99).
- 15 - In the original Persian version, Tāj al-Soltaneh used the expression "*hoquq-e u*" (her rights) referring to the word "*mellat*" (nation) present at the beginning of the sentence (Ettehādieh and Sa'dvandiyan 1982: 99).
- 16 - An exception is the book of Pasqualini (1992) on the Italian approach towards the early constitutional developments in Iran.
- 17 - In the same decade, also the works of Pistor-Hatam (1992; 1999) extensively contributed to shed some more light on this theme.
- 18 - In the diary of his pilgrimage to Mecca, Farāhāni (1983) wrote a detailed account of the presence of Iranians in different parts of the Caucasus and Anatolia that he met during his travel. Iranian communities, both stable and temporary, were one of the channels of transmission of reformist and constitutional ideas into Qajar Iran. For an account of the "routes of transregional contacts" (the Ottoman empire, the Caucasus and India) in addition to Europe on which the Iranian constitutional movement drew intellectually, see Gheissari (2016: 22).
- 19 - See Zarcone (1993: 74).

- 20 - Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Esteri (hereafter ASDMAE), Affari Politici 1891-1916, Serie P, Busta 521, "Persia - rapporti politici", Dames Persanes de Constantinople to Regina Elena, 8 September 1908.
- 21 - *Ibid.*
- 22 - *Ibid.*
- 23 - ASDMAE, Affari Politici 1891-1916, Serie P, Busta 521, "Persia - rapporti politici", Romano Avezzana to Tittoni, 31 October 1908.
- 24 - *Journal d'un persan*, in "Revue du Monde Musulman", vol. 2, March 1907, p. 213.
- 25 - Nazari wrote that on 8th September 1908, the same date of the telegram to the Italian Queen, a telegram was sent by the Iranian women in Istanbul to the British and German queens and to a French women's association to denounce the repression of Mohammad 'Ali Shāh (2016: 59). Nazari did not include the Italian Queen in this list, but there are reasons to believe that the same telegram was sent to multiple recipients due to the common author, date and theme.
- 26 - Examples of these letters can be found in ASDMAE, Affari Politici 1891-1916, Serie P, Busta 521, "Persia - rapporti politici", 1908 and TNA FO 371/809.
- 27 - *Maktub-e yek khānom-e mosalmān*, "Irān-e now", 31 October 1909.
- 28 - *Ibidem.*
- 29 - ASDMAE, Affari Politici 1891-1916, Serie P, Busta 521, "Persia - rapporti politici", Dames Persanes de Constantinople to Regina Elena, 8 September 1908.

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