

## The Petitioning System in Iran

State, Society and Power Relations in the Late 19th Century

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Irene Schneider

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# Introduction

## Description of the Collection and the Microfilm 2929

The collection upon which this publication is based is preserved on microfilm 2929, which belongs to the Microfilm Department of the Central Library of the University of Tehran. In *Fibrīst-i mīkrūfīlmhā-yi Kitābhāna-yi Markazī-yi Dānišgāh-i Tībrān*<sup>1</sup> this microfilm is inaptly described as *Yādāshthā-yi Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh*. The microfilm contains about 2000 documents. These documents are summaries of petitions to Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, reports, answers and copies,<sup>2</sup> and are dated from 1301/1883 to 1303/1886.<sup>3</sup> ĀDAMIYYAT and NĀṬIQT (1977) have cited some of the petitions preserved on the microfilm. Since they only present a small number of the petitions in their book without referring to the microfilm, there is no absolute certainty that the collection they used is identical with the one I shall be presenting and discussing here.<sup>4</sup> ĀDAMIYYAT and NĀṬIQT describe the collection as consisting of 2016 items dated between 1300/1882 and 1303/1886.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they point to another much smaller collection containing petitions from 1304–1306/1886–1888, also not documented on the microfilm.<sup>6</sup> It is conceivable that ĀDAMIYYAT and NĀṬIQT had access to the original collection, which contained more material than is on the microfilm.

ETTEHADIEH (1989) deals with the *mazālim* system and the petitions to Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh in a short article entitled “The Council for the Investigation of Grievances: a Case Study of Nineteenth-Century Iranian Social History.” She does not refer to Ādamiyyat’s and Nāṭiq’s book, but bases her account on a collection of 1836 petitions, which according to her were preserved in the Central Library of the University of Tehran. She mentions another collection in the Malik Library.<sup>7</sup> The collection upon which ETTEHADIEH bases her study is identical with the documents on microfilm 2929, which also constitutes the basis of the present study. She compiled a statistical table on the locations of

1 DĀNISHPAŽŪH 1969, p. 275.

2 For an exact description of these documents see pp. 39–52.

3 Folio 7 of the sample published here should, however, be dated to the year 1300/1882–1883, see p. 141, n. 38.

4 ĀDAMIYYAT/NĀṬIQT 1977, p. 376, n. 3; p. 377, n. 2.

5 ĀDAMIYYAT/NĀṬIQT 1977, pp. 375–413.

6 FLOOR 1983a, p. 122, mentions the collection with reference to ĀDAMIYYAT/NĀṬIQT.

7 ETTEHADIEH 1989, p. 52.

the petitions and used both formal criteria and content to categorise them.<sup>8</sup> Although Sheikholeslami mentions the existence of the microfilm in his book *The Structure of Central Authority in Qajar Iran*,<sup>9</sup> he did not examine the petitions. Thus, even though this collection has been known for some time, it has only been dealt with marginally and is yet to be subjected to a thorough analysis.

Since the original documents have obviously been lost, microfilm no. 2929 gains the status of an “original” document and needs to be examined in detail. The microfilm is in very poor condition. A copy of it was made for me, which is of even poorer quality. The film has been cut several times and stuck together without maintaining the numerical or chronological order of the folios. The microfilm starts with several undated documents, followed by some numbered folios containing the summaries of petitions from Shavvāl 1303/July 1886. It ends with several petitions from Rabi‘ al-avval 1302/December 1884. When I visited Tehran in the summer of 2002, this old microfilm had disappeared, only to be replaced by a new copy. The order of the documents had once again been slightly changed, most likely due to pasting together the torn up parts into a different sequence before making the new copy. The documents on the microfilm are not numbered continuously, so that locating documents on the microfilm can prove a difficult task.

The headlines of some of the folios state that the petitions summarised on the folios came from the provinces of Iran. Some of the folios are dated with the month and/or the year, others are undated. Fortunately, it was not difficult to reconstruct the largest section of the original chronological order covered by the documents. The places where the segments of film were stuck together were easily identifiable and the proper order of the segments determinable by the dates found on the folios in each segment. Wherever undated folios were found among a number of dated folios, I assumed that those undated folios would date from the same month as the neighbouring folios, unless I found an indication to the contrary. There are, however, samples of undated folios, e.g. at the beginning of the microfilm. The folios contain between 4 and sometimes more than 20 summaries of petitions, reports, answers, and copies mostly arranged in one or two rows. The handwriting is mostly *shikasta* and difficult to read. I detected several different handwritings, displaying variations in size, style and legibility. The Shāh’s ruling is usually written in the margin next to the summary of the petition, or space allowing, directly underneath in a handwriting that is even more difficult to decipher.

8 ETTEHADIEH 1989, pp. 54–56.

9 SHEIKHOLESAMI 1997, p. 69, n. 19. While mentioning the microfilm he also states that only 800 documents are preserved on it.