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CONSTITUTIONALISM TO STRENGTHEN  
THE STATE: Book Review of Nader Sohrabi,  
*Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman  
Empire and Iran*

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### CONSTITUTIONALISM TO STRENGTHEN THE STATE

Nader Sohrabi: *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp.vii, 447.)

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As revolutions are unfolding in different regions of the Middle East and North Africa, Nader Sohrabi's timely brilliant and sophisticated comparative study of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Iranian Constitutional

Revolution of 1905–1911 comes to provide us with an innovative template to think about constitutional revolutions around the globe in general and in the Middle East in particular. The book constructs a framework that allows an in-depth understanding of the revolutions in the Middle East and argues that the Young Turk and the Iranian revolutions were products of negotiation with the global model and a hybrid result of interaction, absorption, and adaptation to regional and local exigencies (19). The author argues that the global model represented by the French Revolution and its aura of success prompted similar demands that led to the creation of comparable institutions in the Ottoman Empire and Iran. On the regional level, constitutionalism became the only hope for self-strengthening. In this process, a negotiation took place between global constitutionalism with similar religious and cultural traditions with Iran and the Ottoman Empire. On the local level, the difference of the composition of the population of both countries and the institutional makeup played an important role in the outcomes of the revolution. While the Young Turk Revolution gave priority to the global discourse of constitutionalism and negotiated it with regional and local cultural notions, the Iranian revolution began its negotiation from the bottom up, meaning from monarchic and religious-centered notions of justice (367).

The book, which draws extensively on archival material, is divided into two large sections, five chapters of which deal with the Ottoman Empire and the other two with Iran. In the first chapter Sohrabi analyzes the seeds of the revolution which were cast during the reform era of the nineteenth century. One important result of these reforms was the emergence of a modern middle class, absorbed in large numbers by the military and bureaucracy both of which felt the strains of blocked mobility within their respective institutions. Sohrabi sheds important light on the severe tensions that existed between this middle class and the neopatrimonial practices of the Hamidian regime. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the main Young Turk party, committed itself to solve these tensions in a radical way by overhauling both institutions as part of state transformation. For this the CUP did not shy away from taking illiberal measures because it “viewed constitutionalism first and foremost as a means to save the empire and not as an end in itself” (61). Chapter 2 of the book discusses the impact of the global waves of revolutions on the Young Turk Revolution. Though in the beginning the CUP adhered to action from above, the idea became more complex as a result of other contingent events that took place in the region and had a profound impact over the course of the revolution. These events suggested violence and mass participation as supplements to military intervention (74). Hence, contrary to portrayal of the revolution as a narrowly based, coup-like event, Sohrabi examines in detail the extensive popular participation and support in the region of Macedonia. The third chapter discusses the constitutional and extra-constitutional struggles after the revolution. An important theme that runs through this chapter is the role of CUP as a “government within the

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government" and as the "guardian" of the revolution and the constitution. In chapter 4, Sohrabi reveals how the CUP, through massive purges of state and provincial officers assisted by its vast network, made the army and bureaucracy more efficient and consolidated its position within the empire. The last chapter, which mainly deals with the counterrevolution and its aftermath, argues that the counterrevolution took place mainly as a result of the antagonism between the military officers and the bureaucrats. Thus, his argument that without institutional conflict neither a revolution nor a counterrevolution would have taken place ought to be considered as a major contribution to the historiography of the Young Turk Revolution (243). In the aftermath of the counterrevolution the CUP curtailed freedom of association and the press. In doing so, it intensified its authoritarian tendencies.

The second section of the book examines the Iranian revolution from the perspective of the global, regional, and local layers. Unlike the case of the Ottoman Empire, the level of institutional development during the reform era of the nineteenth century was extremely low and failed to create institutional differentiation between the monarchy and the executive. Despite the fact that both revolutions had some similarities, the major difference between the two is to be found in their state structures. The challenges facing the constitutionalists in Iran were more daunting because of the minimally reformed, decentralized, and patrimonial state structure (336). Sohrabi demonstrates how in the case of Iran the state penetration into the society remained weak, increasing tremendously the clerical institution's influence over the Iranian populace. One of Sohrabi's major contributions to the Iranian case is his outstanding analysis of the traditional monarch-centered notion of politics, the Circle of Justice. Sohrabi argues that the Iranian Assembly was equated with the House of Justice, an institution associated with the culture of kingship. As in the case of the Young Turks, the Iranian constitutionalists, with the aid of the legislature, aimed at radical reorganization of the political structure and culture by subduing the traditional centers of power.

Despite its excellent analysis, I deem it necessary to raise a couple of minor points. The first deals with the relation between authoritarianism and constitutionalism, specifically, Sohrabi's interpretation of the CUP's authoritarian tendencies. One notices that Sohrabi's approach toward the CUP is deterministic in that he argues that the CUP did not take over the executive because it "found it impossible to cast constitutionalism aside, especially when there were no other successful global alternatives." Furthermore, he justifies the extralegal means of the CUP on the grounds that it "offered a safeguard against anti-constitutional tendencies" (153). Second, Sohrabi does not dwell thoroughly on the repercussions of the counterrevolution in Anatolia, specifically, the Adana massacres of 1909. Third, Sohrabi's take on the Young Turks' Ottomanism as devoid of ethnic chauvinism is a bit unpersuasive and minimizes the complexity of the subject, which remains a contentious issue within the historiography. One gets the impression that Sohrabi

inclines more toward the *rationale* of CUP in its attempt to construct its own version of Ottomanism.

In the end, Sohrabi's work should be regarded as a major contribution to the historiography of revolutions, constitutionalism, late Ottoman history, and Iranian history. The book is a must for every graduate student, scholar, historian, and social scientist interested in exploring the different dimensions of revolutions and the consolidation of constitutional regimes. Sohrabi's book has charted new ground and displays a level of scholarship equal to the sophisticated studies that have been undertaken by the likes of William H. Sewell Jr., Marshall Sahlins, and James C. Scott in their respective fields.

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