

## Preface

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When visiting Iran in the summer of 1999 I came across a woman in the public restrooms in Isfahan's bazaar whom I shall always remember. After a wonderful day of wandering around Isfahan, my hair started to fall loose from the obligatory headscarf. I walked into the restroom, feeling hot and tired, and started to pin it back into place. I noticed a woman, who was wearing the proper *hejāb*, a black chador and black stockings, staring at me. I began to feel uncomfortable as she continued to look at me, up and down, in a seemingly disapproving manner. Many questions came to mind. Was it my style of dress – the colourful headscarf and thin overcoat – she didn't like? Was I showing too much hair? Was she one of those 'hardliners' one reads about in newspapers (but I had failed to come across throughout my visit)? Did she have problems with Western women? I said 'Excuse me' in Persian, *bebakhshid*, several times as I finished tying my scarf. When I started to walk out she stopped me and with a mischievous look on her face, she slowly took off her chador. Her hair was purple (not from henna), *really* purple, and styled in a punk-like fashion. She giggled and said, '*doost dâri?*' [Do you like it]. As we laughed together it became clear that she was making a point of showing me that much was happening in Iranian society.

In many ways my experience in Isfahan symbolises the time I have spent with Iranians over the years. By means of many questions and exchanges it has been a pleasure breaking through many of the existing stereotypes and misconceptions held between Iranian and Western cultures and societies. This book is a small attempt at understanding some of the rich and complex layers of Iranian history and culture and how they continue to be lived on and through networks of Iranians who live in Britain.