

Nationalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran 1979-2007

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Statement by the candidate

I certify that this thesis is my own original work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Hamish Alan McGregor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Signed: Hamish Alan McGregor

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Abstract

In contrast to the extensive literature on Arab nationalism, that of Iranian nationalism is a considerably smaller corpus of literature. While in recent years there have been a number of insightful studies focusing on the rise of modern Iranian nationalism in the nineteenth century, there has been relatively scant attention paid to the development of nationalism in the post-1979 era. In fact, there is fundamental disagreement over whether nationalism endured at all after the revolution. This thesis seeks to go beyond this debate by offering a multilayered assessment of the evolution of nationalism in the Islamic Republic from 1979 to 2007. It will argue that nationalism has endured and evolved throughout the Islamic Revolution, and within the Islamic Republic which it spawned, as an essential mode of discourse, as an integral element of individual and collective worldviews, and as an important tool of regime political legitimation

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Introduction

Jokes about unsophisticated countryside folk are a staple of Iranian humour. One of Iran's more popular television serials in recent years, *Barareh*, tapped into this popular culture by mercilessly mocking the accents and mores of a village set in Reza Shah's era. The serial's protagonist, a scheming but dim-witted villager brilliantly played by Iran's comic genius, Mehran Modiri, encapsulated the numerous urban stereotypes of *dehatiha* (rural dwellers) as endearingly narrow-minded and childishly avaricious. For others, however, Iran's vast rural population is a bastion of moral virtuousness far removed from the cynicism of urban Iran, and as such a potential reservoir of conservative political support. One political leader who has successfully exploited this constituency is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad whose shock victory in the 2005 presidential election made headlines around the world. Ever since taking office he has criss-crossed Iran's outlying provinces in a determined effort to cultivate support amongst rural voters. Wielding an instinctive grasp of populism and an unpretentious rhetorical style, the President has staged numerous political rallies in rural areas, drawing thousands to hear his stump speeches on the necessity of building a just Islamic society and standing up to bullying Western powers. At each rally he has further ingratiated himself with rural voters by peppering his addresses with promises of new development and infrastructural projects, to the cheers of the thronging crowds.¹

One theme above all others has constantly pervaded Ahmadinejad's speeches during his sojourns across Iran: in rally after rally he has emphasized Iran's national right to possess a civilian nuclear programme. His addresses resound with nationalistic motifs and exude a fierce patriotism designed to imbue similar emotions in his audience. "The enemies of Iran are trying to divide the Iranian nation", he declared

¹ For an excellent account of these rural rallies see S. Tisdall, 'Ahmadinejad roadshow seduces an adoring public', *The Guardian*, August 19 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/aug/19/iran.topstories3>, accessed 29/11/2008

at one rally, “[b]ut they should know the people are wise to this trick. They will not fall for it again. Our main task is to develop and build the Iranian nation. No one will stop us”.² Western coverage of the Iranian President has consistently highlighted this nationalistic side of Ahmadinejad. *The Guardian*, which covers Iran in much greater depth than most Western newspapers, observed that “Ahmadinejad has successfully harnessed the Iranian people's nationalist passion to the nuclear issue - in many ways an unintended gift from his most powerful enemy, George Bush. His seductive message is that, at long last, Iran is strong enough to reject the demands of the great powers that have for so long bedevilled and warped its nationhood”.³

A moment's reflection on this politicking, however, soon brings to mind a number of questions concerning the trajectory of Iranian nationalism in the last three decades. While Western journalists have highlighted Ahmadinejad's adept use of nationalistic speeches to inflame patriotic passions, other commentators have emphasized the extent to which the current President represents a throwback to the radical early years of the Islamic Revolution in which religious zealots, offended by the secular and pre-Islamic emphasis of Pahlavi nationalism and exuding a marked universalistic verve, resolved to export the Islamic Revolution beyond the bounds of Iran to rest of the world. One recent biography of the incumbent President, for example, has portrayed Ahmadinejad as an inveterate Islamic radical dedicated to perpetuating the revolutionary ideals of his role model, Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini, of course, resolutely refused to celebrate the glories of ancient Iran as the Shah had done and instead distinguished himself by regular pronouncements on the necessity of exporting the revolution and building Islamic unity.⁴ In the face of such fiery rhetoric it indeed appeared that Iranian nationalism had been swept away in the maelstrom of revolution. Scholars of fundamentalism, a field which had come to life following the Islamic Revolution, concurred with this apparent symmetry.

² Tisdall, 19/08/06

³ S. Tisdall, 'This is more about national pride than nuclear weapons', *The Guardian*, September 8 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/sep/08/comment.iran>, accessed 29/11/08

⁴ One recent biography of the President described how Ahmadinejad has “adopted a revolutionary persona in the mould of Ayatollah Khomeini in the early days of the Revolution”. See K. Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2008, p. 209

Bruce Lawrence, who wrote one of the first analyses of post-1979 fundamentalism, concluded that nationalism was the “archenemy of fundamentalism”.⁵ “Fundamentalism as a religious ideology”, he confidently opined, “is defined by its unremitting opposition to nationalism”.⁶

Given that Ahmadinejad refers to himself as a ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘principalist’ (*usulgara*), one would expect that today he would have maintained this virulently universalistic line. Instead, as we have glimpsed above, he has taken to expounding on the rights of the Iranian nation in grandly nationalistic speeches across Iran. His predecessor, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, although of a quite different political persuasion, was similarly active in promoting the glories of the Iranian nation and its ancient civilization. Both, however, have constantly stressed their fealty to Khomeini’s legacy. One is forced to ponder, consequently, whether these latter-day Islamic Republican leaders have in fact betrayed Khomeini’s legacy in their eagerness to peddle nationalism. Perhaps, on the other hand, nationalism *was* an integral part of Khomeini’s ideology standing alongside his commitment to universalism, and therefore the scions of the Islamic Republic are indeed staying true to their protégé’s ideals. This seeming contradiction between the era of universalistic revolution and the present in which Islamic Republican leaders such as Ahmadinejad regularly extol the virtues of the Iranian nation raises important questions about the development of Iranian nationalism during the Islamic Revolution and within the Islamic Republic it spawned. The overarching question, therefore, is whether nationalism really was expunged in the paroxysm of revolution or not?

The historiography on this issue offers contrasting perspectives. Ali Ansari, for example, has written “[i]t is important to remember that the movement which resulted in the overthrow of the Shah was fundamentally nationalist in orientation,

⁵ B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1989, p. 83

⁶ Lawrence, p. 89

suffused with a righteous religious energy which sanctified the nation”.⁷ Other scholars, by contrast, have arrived at the opposite conclusion. For Said Amir Arjomand, the Islamic Revolution represented “the culmination of the ousting of nationalism by revolutionary Islam”.⁸

Still other historians and political scientists have tried to steer a middle course by arguing that despite the revolutionaries’ commitment to the Islamic *ummat* (global community of the faithful) and concomitant antipathy towards nationalism, once in control of the nation-state the realities of power compelled them to advance Iran’s national interest. Richard Cottam has declared that the Islamic Revolution was “explicitly anti-nationalist”.⁹ “Seeing nationalism as inextricably associated with secularism”, Cottam maintained, “Khomeini could hardly consider seriously the contention that the ideology of his own regime, which he describes as ‘Islamic’, is in part a product of nationalism”.¹⁰ “Yet”, Cottam went on but without elaborating in much detail, “nationalistic behaviour is clearly manifest in the policies and stance of the Islamic Republic”.¹¹ David Menashri has held a similar line by arguing that from the 1960s Khomeini adopted an increasingly pan-Islamic outlook in contrast to the Shah’s secular nationalistic ideology. Considering the revolution as a vindication of his vision, Khomeini became even more vociferous in his calls to unite Muslims through global Islamic revolution. In short order though, Menashri argues, Khomeini and his ilk were forced to abandon dreams to export the revolution in light of the reluctance of other Moslem states to follow the Iranian example. Indeed when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran to snuff out the revolution, Khomeini and other Iranian leaders began using more nationalist-patriotic terminology to rally Iranians to the defense of the nation. The demands of the post-war reconstruction effort, moreover, further clipped the universalistic wings of the revolutionaries as the

⁷ A. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*, London, Longman, 2003, pp. 201-202

⁸ S. A. Arjomand, ‘Introduction: Social Movements in the Contemporary Near and Middle East’ in S.A. Arjomand (ed.) *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p. 11

⁹ R. Cottam, ‘Nationalism and the Islamic Revolution in Iran’, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 9 (2) Autumn 1982, p. 263

¹⁰ R. Cottam, ‘Nationalism in twentieth-century Iran’ in J. Bill and W.N. Roger Louis (eds.) *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1988, p. 41

¹¹ Cottam, 1988, p. 41

Islamic Republic turned to a more pragmatic foreign policy consonant with the demands of re-building an exhausted nation-state.¹² In Menashri's view, this continuum of revolution ended with the "triumph of national interest".¹³ Fred Halliday has seconded Menashri's views by similarly highlighting how "Islamic internationalism" was steadily supplanted by a "resurgence of nationalist themes" in the ideology and practice of the Islamic Republic, particularly in wake of the Iraqi invasion which prompted an increasing stress on the nationalism in war propaganda.¹⁴ Halliday summed up: "[n]ecessary and recurrent as internationalist goals and actions appear to be in the policy of revolutionary states, the latter are also compelled, by the limits on their influence and the requirements of state survival, to offset this internationalism with an accommodation, of unforeseeable extent, to their own nationalisms and to the national sentiments, particularities, and states of the outside world".¹⁵

As the above disparate analyses demonstrate, we still do not possess a complete picture of nationalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, this historiographical stalemate has been exacerbated by the threadbare and scattered number of works on Iranian nationalism which is in stark contrast to the voluminous literature on Arab nationalism. The standard reference on Iranian nationalism is still Cottam's *Nationalism in Iran* which was published in 1978 just as isolated protests were coalescing into a revolutionary movement.¹⁶ Since that time a smattering of works on Iranian nationalism has appeared offering a more analytical focus than Cottam's largely descriptive work. An obvious starting point was the great nationalist modernizer, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and a number of scholars have offered up

¹² For Menashri's arguments see D. Menashri, 'Khomeini's Vision: Nationalism or World Order' in D. Menashri (ed.) *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 40-57 and D. Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London, Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 227-255

¹³ Menashri, 2001, p. 227

¹⁴ F. Halliday, 'Iranian Foreign Policy since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Revolution' in J. R. Cole and N. Keddie (eds.) *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 107

¹⁵ Halliday, 1986, p. 107

¹⁶ R. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978

analyses of state nationalism in his reign.¹⁷ From the 1990s there appeared a number of often excellent studies on the origins of nationalist discourse in the Qajar era. In *Iran as Imagined Nation*, Mustafa Vaziri argued that the pre-Islamic bias of Pahlavi nationalism derived from the Persian chauvinist discourse of the nineteenth century which itself was heavily influenced by the European Orientalist fascination with the origin of the Indo-European peoples (the ‘Aryan hypothesis’).¹⁸ Firuzeh Kashani-Sabet and Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi presented intelligent analyses of how Iran was “refashioned” and “newly imagined” in the decades leading up to the Constitutional Revolution particularly by reformists and intellectuals who infused old words with new political meanings as a way of proselytizing a modern nationalist consciousness amongst Iranians.¹⁹ Whereas *vatan* and *keshvar* formerly signified nothing more than one’s birthplace, they now acquired the connotation of a discrete territorial unit and were imbued with modern patriotic meanings which implied the inviolability of Iran’s borders. *Mellat*, an older Quranic word which referred to a given religious community, was now recast as the ‘Iranian people’, a new term which upheld popular sovereignty as a marker of nationhood.

Afshin Marashi has built upon these investigations into the intellectual origins of modern Iranian nationalism by arguing that the abstract concept of the Iranian nation, which is today taken for granted by Iranians, grew out of a fundamental realignment of state-society relations in the period 1870-1940. Marashi claims that whereas in Qajar times the state derived its authority and legitimacy from the cosmic and sacred underpinnings of Persian Kingship, by the Pahlavi era the state proclaimed itself to be the representative and agent of a common national culture which bound it to society below. It was through this congruence of state, society and culture – made possible by the greater reach of the modernizing state – that the

¹⁷ H. Katouzian, ‘Nationalist Trends in Iran, 1921-1926’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10 (4), November 1979, pp. 533-551; M. Reza Ghods, ‘Iranian Nationalism and Reza Shah’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 27 (1), 1991, pp. 35-45

¹⁸ M. Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, New York, Paragon House, 1993

¹⁹ F. Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions – Shaping the Iranian Nation 1804-1946*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999; M. Tavakoli-Targhi, ‘Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture during the Constitutional Revolution’, *Iranian Studies*, 23 (1), 1990, pp. 77-101

Pahlavi Shahs finally ‘nationalized’ Iran and presented themselves as the embodiment of an ‘authentic’, immemorial Iranian nation.²⁰

Not all scholars of Iranian nationalism have gone in for such profound analyses. Some have focused on discrete topics such as the importance of archaeology and the role of education in the development of nationalism.²¹ There have been at least two studies of how Islamic Republican leaders blended religion and nationalism into a potent propaganda tool during the Iran-Iraq War.²² Ludwig Paul has also published a very useful semantic study of post-revolution state rhetoric, demonstrating how the Iranian leadership understood and used such terms as ‘nation’, ‘nationality’ and ‘the people’ while at the same time re-infusing them with religious meaning after earlier generations of nationalists had tried to disconnect Islam and Iranian identity.²³

As good as these various studies may be there is still no broader analysis of nationalism in the Islamic Republic which brings us up to the present. This thesis attempts to make a contribution to existing scholarship by providing a more coherent overview of nationalism in the Islamic Revolution as well as offering fresh insights into the role of nationalism in the post-revolutionary era leading up to and including the rise of Ahmadinejad. In particular the thesis will argue that *nationalism has endured and evolved through the Islamic Revolution and the history of the Islamic Republic as an essential mode of discourse, as an integral element of individual and collective worldviews, and as an important tool of regime political legitimation.*

²⁰ A. Marashi, Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State 1870-1940, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008

²¹ K. Abdi, ‘Nationalism, Politics and the Development of Archaeology in Iran’, American Journal of Archaeology, 105 (1), January 2001, pp. 51-76; H. Ram, ‘The immemorial Iranian nation? School textbooks and historical memory in post-revolutionary Iran’, Nations and Nationalism, 6 (1), 2000, pp. 67-90

²² H. Ram, Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran – The Use of the Friday Congregational Sermon, Washington D.C., The American University Press, 1994; S. Geiling, Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran, London, I.B. Taurus, 1999

²³ L. Paul, “‘Iranian Nation’ and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary Ideology”, Die Welt des Islams, New Ser., 39 (2), July 1999, pp. 183-217

Three key themes will underpin our exploration of this hypothesis. The first concerns the *mutability* of nationalism in the Islamic Republic. Nationalism in post-1979 Iran, as was the case across the entire twentieth century, manifested itself in different guises reflecting the influence of successive historical events, alternative styles of political leadership, factionalism, and the Islamic Republic's ongoing effort to maintain legitimacy and popular support. This all sounds like a truism, but it is important to remember that in the Islamic Republic there is not, nor has there ever been, one version of nationalism, and the ways in which it has evolved is in itself a compelling narrative.

This mutability is inherently linked to the intense *contestability* of nationalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the one hand this contestability exists alongside a powerful consensus concerning the perceived antiquity of the Iranian nation which undergirds nationalist discourse and feeling in Iran. Rare is it for a foreigner to travel through Iran without being regaled with effusive reminders of the "2,500 year old Iranian civilization". On the other hand contestation has been a defining motif in the discourse of nationalism in Iran. There has not always been congruence between nationalism as proffered by the state and the multifarious views of nationalism amongst ordinary Iranians. Indeed Cottam argues that modern nationalism came of age in the late nineteenth century when growing unease at the inroads of imperialism bolstered an emerging national consciousness amongst Iranians aghast at the Qajar state's proclivity for issuing economic concessions to foreigners.²⁴ Nationalism, in other words, developed in contradistinction to the state. The growing divide between the *dawlat* (state) and *mellat* ('people' or 'nation'), between a corrupt absolutist state and an increasingly self-conscious and politically aware nation, was a central theme of political discourse in the lead-up to the Constitutional Revolution.

This dichotomy between the state and the people which emerged in the late nineteenth century established a template which would frame the debate about nationalism across the twentieth century. As the power and reach of the modern state

²⁴ Cottam, 1978, pp. 11-15

to implant nationalistic ideology in the wider population gradually expanded - through the media, a national education system, conscription and infrastructural development - so too did its efforts meet with resistance across Iranian society. It was the Pahlavi state which emerged out of the morass of the Constitutional Revolution and the First World War that most obviously exemplified this process. Dispensing with the idea of genuine popular sovereignty, the Pahlavi Shahs instead sought to promote a dynastic nationalism which elevated the monarchy as the unbroken link to Iran's pre-Islamic civilization. Central to this nationalist project was the drive to inculcate a homogenous national identity based around the linguistic dominance of the Persian language and a glorification of the Achaemenid and Sassanian empires. But in a now thoroughly familiar story, the Pahlavi nationalist project prompted a backlash from many sectors of Iranian society. Both father and son incurred the wrath of the clergy for their ambitious modernization programme which brought increasing secularization in its wake. Iran's non-Persian minorities were similarly aggrieved, believing Pahlavi nationalism to be a hegemonic ideology which threatened to obliterate local identities and cultures. The Liberal Nationalists decried the erosion of parliamentary rule before seizing on oil nationalization as the emotive issue with which to challenge the monarchy. In the 1960s and 1970s the New Left took up the cause of national independence by castigating Mohammad Reza Shah for his alliance with the United States (US). Naturally many of these protests were rooted in the complex web of local identities, parochial attachments and corporate interests which made Iran such a complex society. Nonetheless anyone familiar with the rhetoric of Modarres, Mossadegh, Khomeini, Shariati or Bazargan will soon realize that this societal resistance to the Pahlavis was also infused with nationalistic overtones as Iranians grappled with questions of national identity and national independence in a time of rapid social and economic change.²⁵ Reminding us that the Pahlavis never had a monopoly on nationalism despite determined efforts to do so, Ali Ansari aptly sums up:

²⁵ Seyyed Modarres, cleric (1870-1937), Mohammad Mossadegh, Iranian Prime Minister, (1882-1967), Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), Ali Shariati, Iranian intellectual (1933-1977), Mehdi Bazargan, head of post-revolution interim government (1907-1995)

Nationalism was the driving force of mass mobilization in twentieth-century Iran. But the nationalism of the secular elites was not the nationalism of the masses, whose acute sense of traditional identity encompassed a strong religious affiliation which was anathema to those who pursued the Pahlavi project. In short, nationalism remained an essentially contested concept in both theory and practice in Iran, and secular nationalism found itself competing with religious and dynastic forms of nationalism, each appealing to particular sections of Iranian society.²⁶

The contestability of nationalism has in turn sponsored a reflexive interplay between state and society around the issue of nationalism which is evident in the post-1979 era. The Islamic Republic, like the Pahlavi state, attempted to bolster its nationalist credentials by presenting itself as the true defender of the Iranian nation. It also sought to inculcate 'proper' interpretations of nationalism and national identity in contradistinction to the preceding five decades of secular dynastic nationalism. Yet the story of nationalism in post-1979 Iran is not simply one in which the state enjoyed free reign to impose a single construct of nationalism upon a static society. As much as the Islamic Republic endeavoured to reconstruct national identity and generate pro-regime nationalist feeling, it also contended with more diffuse notions of nationalism across Iranian society which at certain junctures accorded with official perspectives and at other times did not. This state of affairs naturally encouraged successive Iranian leaders to be cognizant of demotic nationalist sentiments and to reflect these feelings in their rhetoric. The imperative of maintaining popular support and legitimacy also compelled them to be attuned the public mood and to re-emphasize or re-cast nationalistic themes as the times demanded. Whereas Khomeini successfully tapped into the popular outpouring of nationalist feeling during the climax of the revolution and the early years of the Iran-Iraq War, by the end of the Rafsanjani presidency (1989-1997) there was a widespread feeling that the Islamic Republic had lost its nationalist credentials through corruption and in particular its determined effort to emphasize the country's Islamic heritage above all else. It was Seyed Mohammad Khatami who recognized

²⁶ Ansari, 2003, pp. 14-15

this widening chasm and who offered a reinterpretation of nationalism in the Islamic Republic more in tune with the feelings of ordinary Iranians. After being ejected from the political stage in the factional infighting of the early 1990s, he came back in 1997 to win an astonishing landslide election victory on campaign platform which not only promised democratic rights for all Iranians – “Iran for all Iranians” was the simple but elegant reformist slogan – but also stressed the equally positive legacies of Iran’s pre-Islamic and Islamic civilizations as a corrective to the religious excesses of the revolution’s early years. This same interplay between state and society around the politics of nationalism was evident during the tenure of Khatami’s successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Conscious of the underlying popularity of overt appeals to Iranian nationalism which Khatami was able to articulate, but also aware of the increasing political apathy in much of electorate, Ahmadinejad adeptly manipulated the Iranian nuclear crisis as a means of flaunting the regime’s commitment to nationalist ideals. It is this interplay between state and society over what constitutes nationalism and who has the power to define it that underlies the history of nationalism in the Islamic Republic.

The third overarching theme of this study is the *nexus between religion and nationalism* in the Islamic Republic. Khomeini was fond of repeatedly emphasizing the spiritual aspect of the revolution – “Islam is the religion of politics” he expounded - but beneath this self-consciously religious affectation there was a powerful undercurrent of nationalism which influenced the rhetoric and actions of the revolutionaries and became a constant of Iranian politics thereafter.²⁷ In particular, we will seek to challenge some of the perceived wisdom concerning the relationship between what is referred to as ‘political Islam’ and nationalism. Echoing the studies of fundamentalism, which we briefly observed above, a number of works on political Islam have argued that this religious phenomenon is irreconcilably opposed to nationalism. Even if such movements over time exhibit more nationalistic themes in their rhetoric or behaviour, so this school of thought

²⁷ M.J. Khalili and S.M. Anari (trans. and ed.), Fundamentals of the Islamic Revolution: Selections from the Thoughts and Opinions of Imam Khomeini, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works (International Affairs Department), Tehran, 2000, p. 166

contends, such manifestations should be ascribed to ideological exhaustion and a resigned acceptance of the nation-state boundaries rather than any real acceptance of nationalism. Olivier Roy, for example, whose *The Failure of Political Islam* is a standard reference work in this area, has argued that a supranational outlook is a foundation tenet of Islamic political thought.²⁸ In radical Islamic movements, he claims, “the state is never considered in terms of the territorialized nation-state: the ideal is to have a power that would rule over the entirety of the *umma*, the community of the faithful, while actual power is exercised over a segment of the *umma* whose borders are contingent, provisional, and incomplete”.²⁹ In Roy’s narrative arc, however, such movements are condemned to failure. Unable to address the manifest social and economic ills of the Islamic world, and indeed often exacerbating them, political Islam eventually collapses under the weight of its own self-contradictions. The “emptiness” of the Islamic state is reflected in its inability to change the existing international system of nation-states. Despite pan-Islamic visions, radical Islamic movements across the Muslim world by default retreat into expressions of “Islamism-nationalisms” which merely reiterate the “conflicts of interest among regional states”.³⁰ “Re-Islamization has in no way changed the rules of the political or economic game”, Roy reminds us, for the “geostrategy of the Middle East is connected to the existing states, not to the popular or international Islamic movements”.³¹

While Roy’s book was an important contribution to the study of fundamentalism, his theory on the relationship between political Islam and nationalism now appears overly deterministic and cynical. Can it really be that Islam makes concessions to national realities only when it has been frustrated in its world-devouring designs? On the contrary it will be argued here that there is a demonstrably strong case to be made for the inherent connection between religion and nationalism in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution, that seminal event which many see as the precursor

²⁸ O. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1994

²⁹ Roy, p. 13

³⁰ Roy, pp. 26, 129

³¹ Roy, p. 26

to the rise of political Islam. Roy alludes to this in a passing reference to the fact that the “Iranian nation-state, despite a pan-Islamist rhetoric, was never called into question by the Islamic revolution”.³² This issue, though, is never fully explored in Roy’s book (perhaps understandably given its focus is not solely on Iran). In this thesis we will see how Iranian leaders have fused religious and nationalist themes in their rhetoric, from Khomeini’s elevation of Iran as a vanguard revolutionary nation through to Ahmadinejad’s clever fusion of the memory of the oil nationalization movement and the Shi’ite victimization ethos. We will not be arguing that Shi’ism is somehow an inherently Iranian phenomenon, but in a country where over 90% of the population is Shi’ite, it is obvious that this common bond will influence nationalism, not the least in providing a cultural reservoir of motifs, vocabulary and allegories with which to convey nationalistic sentiments. As Piscatori and Eickelman have correctly pointed out, in a useful rejoinder to Lawrence and Roy, ‘Moslem politics’ “is not predetermined by a template of ideas; it is influenced by a number of factors which, while including scripturally defined precepts, also include national identities, economic circumstances, and social status”.³³ “Islam”, they conclude, “is neither especially religio-political, nor particularly hostile to ethnic and cultural variations. It is neither unprecedentedly revolutionary, nor abnormally resistant to nationalism”.³⁴ Examining nationalism in the Islamic Republic will certainly bear out these astute observations.

Finally, we might add that this study is not a history of the revolution, nor is it a history of the Islamic Republic. The bookshelves already creak under the weight of many such tomes. The focus of this thesis is very much on the evolution of nationalism in Iran since 1979. Fred Halliday once observed that it “is foolhardy in the extreme to discuss the subject of nationalism and the Middle East”.³⁵ Nevertheless the story of nationalism in the Islamic Republic is an endlessly fascinating one, and it deserves telling.

³² Roy, p. 176

³³ D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. ix

³⁴ Eickelman and Piscatori, p. x

³⁵ F. Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2000, p. 31

Before moving on, a final word on transliteration and sources. As there is no standard way of transliterating Persian into English, I have followed the lead of past scholars who have elected to follow a simple transliteration system that dispenses with diacritical marks. For names of important figures – Khomeini, Khamenei and the like – I have decided to stick with common spellings as found in the Western press. Transliterations in cited sources have been retained. Much use has been made of Iranian newspapers. Particularly during the revolution's first decade, newspapers often did not possess titles *per se*; an excerpt of a speech regularly sufficed for the article title. We have preserved this format although readers should not assume that quotes in the text necessarily derive from the title quote (that is, quotes are sometimes taken from the body of the cited newspaper report).

Many of the insights presented in this thesis derive from extensive interviews undertaken in Iran during 2006. Interviews were conducted with very senior clerics, high ranking politicians close to Khomeini during the tumultuous revolutionary era, eminent reformist intellectuals, as well as ordinary Iranians who underwent extraordinary experiences during the revolution and Iran-Iraq War. While there is the temptation to openly cite these interviewees, the current situation in Iran makes it slightly risky to identify those who kindly gave their time and spoke frankly of their experiences. Interviewees will not be identified by name to protect their identities.

The Theory of Nationalism

A single red line traverses the history of the modern world from the fall of the Bastille to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Emerging fitfully in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and Holland, it rises bright and clear in late eighteenth-century France and America. Dividing and redividing lands and peoples, it stretches the length of Central and Latin America, pushes across southern, central, eastern, then northern Europe into Russia, India and the Far East, and then winds its way in many guises into the Middle East, Africa and Australasia. In its wake come protest and terror, war and revolution, the inclusion of some, the exclusion of many. At last, the red line becomes blurred, fragmented, faded, as the world moves on.

The name of the red line is nationalism, and its story is the central thread binding, and dividing, the peoples of the modern world.¹

Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, (1998), p.1

Introduction

Nationalism is one of the most perplexing phenomena of the modern world. Great tomes have been written declaring nationalism to be “one of the most powerful forces in the modern world” or that it has been “one of the formative processes in the creation of the contemporary world”.² Yet despite the obvious importance of nationalism, it has proved enduringly resistant to concrete definition. Moreover this quandary is exacerbated by the fact that nationalism, as Fred Halliday has noted, is unlike most other political doctrines in that it has no clear founding theorist or classical text to provide an orthodox narrative.³ In a sense nationalism is like life itself: we all know it exists but somehow we cannot arrive at a universally-accepted definition of what it is.

¹ A. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, London, Routledge, 1998, p.1

² J. Hutchinson and A. Smith, *Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 3; F. Halliday, ‘Nationalism’ in J. Bayliss and S. Smith (eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics: an introduction to international relations* (3rd ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 521

³ Halliday, 2001, p.524

For all the opaqueness of nationalism there has been no shortage of attempts at analyzing and defining it. Elie Kedourie defined nationalism in this way: “Briefly, the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government”.⁴ Ernest Gellner gave perhaps the most succinct definition when he wrote that nationalism is essentially a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones: “Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent”.⁵ British historian Hugh Seton-Watson captured the duality of nationalism, as both a sentiment and a political movement when he defined it in this way: “As I see it, the word ‘nationalism’ has two basic meanings...One of these meanings is a doctrine about the character, interests, rights and duties of nations. The second meaning is an organized political movement, designed to further the alleged aims and interests of nations”.⁶ For John Breuilly, nationalism is about control of the state. He defined nationalism in this way: “The term ‘nationalism’ is used to refer to political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such actions with nationalist arguments”.⁷

It would appear, however, that the more scholars attempt to authoritatively define nationalism, the slipperier the semantic slope becomes. As Walker Connor has observed, it would be “difficult to name four words more essential to global politics than are state, nation, nation-state, and nationalism”.⁸ “But despite their centrality”, Connor went on, “all four terms are shrouded in ambiguity due to their imprecise, inconsistent, and often totally erroneous usage”.⁹ Setting aside the difficulty of defining an intangible collective such as the nation, the propensity of many scholars

⁴ E. Kedourie, Nationalism, London, Hutchinson, 1960, p.9

⁵ E. Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p.1

⁶ H. Seton-Watson, Nation-States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism, Boulder, Westview Press, 1977, p.3

⁷ J. Breuilly, Nationalism and the State, Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1982, p. 3

⁸ W. Connor, ‘A nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic group....’, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 1 (4), October 1978, p. 378

⁹ Connor, 1978, p. 378. On the confusion surrounding proper definitions of these terms see also L. Barrington, “‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’: The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science”, PS: Political Science and Politics, 30 (4), December 1997, pp. 712-716

to conflate nation and state has proved especially “detrimental to the study of nationalism”.¹⁰ Still, this may be less the fault of careless scholars and more the result of historical evolution. As Connor himself admits when Enlightenment thinkers began to argue that the ‘people’ or the ‘nation’ were the font of political power and sovereignty, the ‘nation’ and ‘state’ became over time almost synonymous. Connor wryly points out that “L’etat c’est moi became l’etat c’est le people”.¹¹ In that sense it was the French Revolution which heralded the rise of the ‘nation-state’, a political community where the borders of the territorial judicial unit (the state) ideally coincide with the territorial distribution of a collective group of people who considered themselves a nation.¹² This emphasis on congruency – to borrow Gellner’s term – has thus firmly implanted in the popular and academic minds the conception that the world is composed of nation-states in which the state is nominally the political extension of the nation, and which therefore explains the widespread tendency to use state and nation interchangeably.

Of course, indiscriminately applying the term ‘nation-state’ to all states is patently absurd considering the many that are multi-national and indeed lurching towards disintegration because of this fact. The only home truth, it appears, which emerges out of the profusion of studies on nationalism is a recognition of its ubiquity. John Hutchinson elaborates:

Today the nation is the dominant form of political organization over much of the world. Accompanying this is a persuasive acceptance of the assumption of nationalism that nations are facts of nature that have differentiated humanity into distinctive cultural communities, each of which has its own territorial habitat and capacities for self-government. Most states justify their independent status by claiming to embody the political aspirations of a nationality; and the world forum of states is called the United Nations.¹³

¹⁰ Connor, 1978, p. 381

¹¹ Connor, 1978, p. 381-382

¹² John Hutchinson writes “Many historians date the rise of nations to the time of the French Revolution which, in supplanting dynastic loyalties with the idea of popular sovereignty, transformed passive subjects into action and self-governing citizens”. See J. Hutchinson, Modern Nationalism, London, Fontana Press, 1994, p. 1

¹³ Hutchinson, p. 1

Hutchinson's claim – particularly the first sentence – once again exemplifies the interchangeable use of such terms as 'nation', 'state' and 'nation-state', for other disciplines, such as international relations theory, would argue that states are the constituent parts of the international system. This quote, however, does outline the just how prevalent the idea of nationalism has become. The 'United Nations' may be a putative fiction but it represents a normative view of the modern international system in which the nation-state and its associated trappings such as passports, national flags and national anthems reign supreme.

The focus of this thesis is on nationalism in Iran, but in order to get a firmer grip on the topic we must first cover some theoretical aspects of nationalism before moving into the empirical study. We do not seek to present an encyclopedia of nationalism theory, for that has been done more than adequately by other scholars. Rather it is useful to sketch some theoretical aspects relevant to our study of nationalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran, namely the modernity of nationalism, the interplay between religion and nationalism, and lastly the malleable nature of national identity.

Nationalism: The Old and the New

If there is a single key development in nationalism theory over the last century, it is the re-orientation of scholars away from the question of *what* is a nation to the secondary question of *when* is a nation. One of the most famous expositions of the former remains Ernest Renan's seminal 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne entitled simply 'What is a Nation?', in which he attempted a systematic definition of this human collectivity.¹⁴ After discounting traditional objective criteria for defining nations such as language, territory or religion, Renan opined that a nation inhered in the collective consciousness of its people. In his estimation a nation existed in the minds of its members who possessed both a shared desire to live together and a

¹⁴ For an extract of Renan's seminal lecture see E. Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' in J. Hutchinson and A. Smith (eds.), Nationalism, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 17-18

national historical memory. For all his attempts, however, to properly analyze nations rather than bolster nationalistic mythology as his intellectual contemporaries were inclined to do, Renan was a product of his contemporary intellectual milieu in which nations were uncritically accepted not only as timeless entities but also as the natural form of human association. In a sense Renan was only a stage removed from his intellectual peers who imbibed the *Zeitgeist* of the Age of Progress by glorifying the long pedigree of their own nations.¹⁵

The tragedy of the First World War focused great attention on the issue of nationalism, particularly its perceived pernicious aspects, but it was not until the 1930s that scholars began to seriously examine the sociological dimensions of nations and nationalism. American historian Carlton Hayes, for example, argued that while nations had existed since time immemorial, the doctrine of nationalism was a modern phenomenon, which first stirred in Europe with the monumental changes ushered in by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. “There have always been”, Hayes wrote, “so far as historians and anthropologists know, human entities that can properly be called nationalities”. But “not until very modern times”, Hayes went on, “have whole people been systematically indoctrinated with the tenets that every human being owes his first and last duty to his nationality”.¹⁶ This process was exacerbated, Hayes argued in a later work, by the progressive decline of religion in the face of modernity. This void was neatly filled by the force of nationalism which elevated the nation as the new object of communal worship in the modern world.¹⁷

Writing after the Second World War Hayes’ compatriot, Hans Kohn, also stressed the idea that nationalism was an inherently modern ideology and phenomenon. “Nationalism as we understand it”, Kohn declared, “is not older than the second half

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Whig and Historicism traditions of the great nineteenth historians such as Macaulay and Meinecke see P. Lawrence, *Nationalism: History and Theory*, Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2005, pp. 20-31

¹⁶ C. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism*, New York, Macmillan, 1926, pp. 6, 26

¹⁷ C. Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1960

of the eighteenth century”.¹⁸ While various ethnic groups throughout history (such as the Jews) did possess a consciousness of common descent, Kohn argued it was only in the eighteenth century with the peculiar nexus of ideas about nationalism and democracy, together with the unprecedented social and economic changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, that entire peoples began to consider themselves as belonging to ‘nations’. Kohn’s work hinted at the link between structural forces such as industrialization and the evolution of political thinking, a connection which the post-war modernist school would hold to be the key to dating the rise of nations and nationalism.

If scholars were now generally in agreement that nationalism was a modern phenomenon, a sentiment backed up yet again by Elie Kedourie’s important study of nationalism which claimed the ideology was invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was but a short step for some scholars to begin investigating whether *modernity itself* created nations and nationalism.¹⁹ ‘Modernization’ was the buzzword in the academic world of the 1950s and 1960s in which many scholars sought to divine how societies become modern and whether the Western paradigm of modernization could be applied to the rest of the world. Many modernization theorists focused on the structural functionalism of modernization as the key to how societies evolved and became modern. Structural functionalism held that all societies are essentially social systems, composed of dependent parts that have a function and which can be broken down and analyzed. When a given society modernizes different functional relationships between the dependent parts of the system come about, which in turn demand new forms of social relations. A number of scholars now began to suspect that nationalism had a *function* in modernization, as a way of re-ordering relationships between people and society. Perhaps, some scholars began to ask, it was modernization that created nations and nationalism.²⁰

¹⁸ H. Kohn, The Idea of Nationalism: a study in its origin and background, New York, Macmillan, 1945, p.3

¹⁹ Kedourie, 1960

²⁰ Lawrence, pp. 133-136

It was Hungarian-born scholar Ernest Gellner who most forcefully made the case for the intrinsic modernity of nations and nationalism. In a thesis first published in a chapter of his 1964 work *Thought and Change*, and later expanded upon in a 1983 book entitled *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner saw nationalism as a concomitant of modernization.²¹ He argued that pre-modern societies were highly stratified and static communities in which individuals remained rooted to their classes or castes, a situation which tended to promote highly parochial identities. This stratification of society and the localized horizons of its inhabitants carried over into the division of labour which was highly specialized and fixed. Industrialization, however, broke down these older stratifications and the fixed specializations. The new division of labour now demanded a pool of literate, interchangeable, obedient workers to man the factories and machines. Gellner wrote of industrial society:

Universal literacy and a high level of numerical, technical and general sophistication are among its functional prerequisites. Its members are and must be mobile, and ready to shift from one activity to another, and must possess that generic training which enables them to follow the manuals and instructions of a new activity or occupation. In the course of their work they must constantly communicate with a large number of other men, with whom they frequently have no previous association, and with whom communication must be explicit, rather than relying on context. They must also be able to communicate by means of written, impersonal, context-free, to-whom-it-may-concern type messages. Hence these communications must be in the same shared and standardized linguistic medium and script.²²

“The minimal requirement for full citizenship”, Gellner neatly summed up, “is literacy”.²³ Only a standardized, mass education system run by a centralized state and bound by a national vernacular could instill such literacy. Furthermore, it was in the state’s interest to gel this new society of interchangeable workers with a broader sense of shared culture and a new identity - a *national* identity – which flowed from possessing a national language. Emphasizing his central tenet that modernity creates nations out of pre-modern communities, Gellner claimed “[n]ationalism is not the

²¹ E. Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964

²² Gellner, 1983, p.35

²³ Gellner, 1964, p.159

awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist...”²⁴

Gellner’s theory was highly influential and by the end of the 1960s the modernist interpretation which viewed nations and nationalism as byproducts of modernity was in the ascendant. This paradigm continued its dominance into the 1970s when Marxist-influenced scholars such as Tom Nairn and Michael Hechter argued that uneven economic development, in their view a concomitant of modernity and capitalism, gave rise to nationalist movements amongst aggrieved and impoverished ethno-linguistic groups along the periphery of empires or existing nation-states.²⁵

It was around this time, however, that the modernist paradigm went off on a new tangent. Seizing on Gellner’s claim that nationalism invents nations, but eschewing the classical modernist position that nations and nationalism are real entities deriving from a unitary model of modernization, a number of scholars began to explore the idea that nations are in fact socially-constructed collectivities. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, wrote that the political and social elites who dominated the modern state molded “proto-national” bonds such as language into the foundations of the modern nation. Amidst the tumultuous socio-economic changes of nineteenth century Europe, Hobsbawm contended, when old traditions and loyalties were crumbling, new national traditions were constructed through recourse to “invention and social engineering”.²⁶ Benedict Anderson further developed this idea by describing nations as cultural artifacts, created at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe due to a complex convergence of technological and economic forces together with linguistic change which for the first time allowed European populations to imagine themselves as part of a wider and timeless ‘national’ community.²⁷

²⁴ Gellner, 1964, p.168

²⁵ M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536-1966*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975; T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*, London, Nlb, 1977

²⁶ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd ed), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 10

²⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the spread of nationalism* (revised ed), New York, Verso, 2006

The concepts of nations and nationalism, and the question of whether they are ancient or modern phenomena, became even murkier in the 1980s as postmodernist thought came of age. Postmodernist thinkers such as Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Roland Barthes argued that the great 'Enlightenment Project' of single, rational, knowable truth had collapsed. In the minds of these luminaries, there were no longer any fixed, objective concepts such as truth, identity, gender, religion apart from that which we have been brought up to believe. Formerly 'essentialist' categories such as gender and ethnicity were now regarded as simply constructs.²⁸ The nation and national identity were obvious targets for postmodernists who saw the world as a montage of constructed identities and 'truths'. Some postmodern thinkers questioned whether there was anything such as 'identity' at all. Scholars such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabba denied the fixed nature of all our supposed identities – class, gender, race and the nation - by arguing that such concepts have no intrinsic link to any objective reality outside representation.²⁹ As Hall noted our identities are not related to any discernible factors, but are simply "a narrative of the self we tell in order to know who we are".³⁰

If the modernist paradigm was withering under the postmodern assault, it was facing another challenge from the primordialist school of nationalism theory which rejected the modernist and postmodernist preoccupation with the 'construction' and 'invention' of nations. While most scholars of nationalism accepted that modernization and industrialization played a role in the emergence of modern nations, others began to plead that there was more to nationalism than simply the

²⁸ See for example W. Sollors, 'The Idea of Ethnicity' in W.T. Anderson (ed.), The Fontana Postmodern Reader, London, Fontana, 1996, p.55

²⁹ H. Bhaba (ed.), Nation and Narration, London, Routledge, 1990; S. Hall, 'Ethnicity: identity and difference', in G. Eley and R. Suny (eds.), Becoming National: A Reader, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.346

³⁰ Hall, p.339. See E. Gellner, Postmodernism, Reason and Religion, London, Routledge, 1992, pp.22-72, where he rebuts the postmodernist assertion that all knowledge is relative. In his view, relativism "leads to sloppy research, appalling prose, much pretentious obscurity, and in any case constitutes a highly ephemeral phenomenon". p., 48

rise of modernity. These scholars surmised that if one could establish the existence of nations before the era of modernization and industrialization in Europe, while at the same time bearing in mind the obvious upsurge in post-industrial nationalist movements in the late twentieth century, then it followed that nations and nationalism must derive from some other historical origin.

Primordialists, as their moniker suggests, hold that that identifiable nations have existed since well before the modern era of nationalism. While accepting that before the eighteenth century nationality remained subordinate to religious and dynastic principles, primordialists insist that many pre-modern peoples boasted a discernable national self-consciousness. In contrast to the strong 'Whig' tradition in nineteenth century historiography which held that particular nations had existed since antiquity, only to be 'awoken' at the appropriate time in history, the primordialist view stemmed largely from anthropological studies of ethnicity by Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz. Extrapolating from small kinship groups to larger modern societies Geertz wrote that societies today do not function purely on the basis of conscious ideas and beliefs, but also via a deeper stratum of identity that binds individuals together, in a fashion not altogether different from the subconscious attachments which connect traditional, kinship-based communities such as tribes. Clifford Geertz called these ties 'primordial attachments'.

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens" – or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed "givens" – of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves.³¹

Such attachments, Geertz insisted, could also underpin relationships between unrelated individuals in larger societies, particularly if a given society *believed* there was some sort of ancestral connection between its members. Historians of

³¹ C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: the quest for modernity in Asia and Africa*, New York, Free Press, 1963, p. 109

nationalism picked up on these ‘primordial attachments’ and wondered if the answer to the origins and durability of nations and nationalism could be found therein. Walker Connor, a prominent member of the primordialist school, argued in a number of articles, and finally in a 1994 book, that too many historians misunderstand the antiquity of nations by conflating nationalism with the state.³² Taking issue with modernists who preached the idea that the modern state inculcated the idea of the ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ in its subjects, Connor pointed out that since the 1970s many so-called ‘nation-states’ have suffered from internal fissures as a result of revolts among their constituent nationalities. Because these states have not been able to inculcate loyalty among all their populations, Connor reasoned, it must indicate that a deeper cultural and ethnic nationalism - ‘ethnonationalism’ – existed apart from the state. This in turn called into question the modernist assertion that nationalism was essentially a creation of the modernizing state. Connor insisted that the nation was not an invention, but rather an ancient, deep-rooted ethnic category stemming from imagined bonds of ancestry that may be intangible but are nevertheless crucial in defining who is a member of the nation and who is not.³³

Primordialist musings on the ancient pedigree of nations were given a further boost by a number of historians in the mid to late 1990s who began to reassess the longevity of nations in Europe. Scholars such as Adrian Hastings and Liah Greenfield argued that England had already emerged as a nation before the key events of modernity – the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution – which the modernists identified as integral to the development of modern nations.³⁴ Insisting that the “original modern idea of the nation emerged in sixteenth-century

³² Connor, 1978; W. Connor, ‘When is a Nation’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13 (1), January 1990, pp.92-103; W. Connor, ‘From Tribe to Nation’, *History of European Ideas*, 13 (1-2), 1991, pp. 5-18; W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1994

³³ Connor wrote: “An extended temporal perspective is especially important as a means of perceiving modern nationalism as part of a cycle of ethnic consciousness”, Connor, 1994, p. 4. Connor in particular stresses the he imagined and self-conscious bonds of ethnonationalism: “...a nation is a self-aware ethnic group. An ethnic group may be readily discernible by an anthropologist or other outside observer, but until members are themselves aware of the group’s uniqueness, it is merely an ethnic group and not a nation.”, Connor, 1978, p.388

³⁴ A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; L. Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1992

England, which was the first nation in the world”, Greenfield posited that it was in fact the nation which forms “the constitutive element of modernity”.³⁵ Inverting the classical modernist position on the emergence of nations, she declared:

In this belief, I reverse the order of precedence, and therefore of causality, which is usually, if sometimes tacitly, assumed to exist between national identity and nations, and nationalism and modernity: namely that national identity is simply the identity characteristic of nations, while nationalism is a product or reflection of major components of modernization. Rather than define nationalism by its modernity, I see modernity defined by nationalism.³⁶

By the 1990s, as Greenfield’s quote exemplifies, nationalism theory had come full circle. In another sense, however, the field was hobbled by an underlying theoretical malaise which the post-Cold War flood of publications on nationalism did little to alleviate, and which lingers to the present day. One-hundred and fifteen years after Renan’s famous lecture, there is still no consensus on what nations are or when they first emerged. While the field of nationalism has become ever more nuanced and sophisticated, preeminent scholars still disagree over the most fundamental issues at the heart of nationalism. Whereas Adrian Hastings declared that “[n]ation-formation and nationalism have in themselves almost nothing to do with modernity”, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that the “basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity”.³⁷ Given such stark disagreement, the chances of an all-encompassing theory of nationalism seem as far away as ever. The latest offering from Umut Ozkirimli describes nationalism as a ‘discourse’, a “particular way of seeing and interpreting the world, a frame of reference that helps us make sense of and structure the reality that surrounds us”.³⁸ This amorphousness evident in such an observation is symptomatic of entire the field of nationalism studies which has all but sunk into a definitional quagmire.

³⁵ Greenfield, pp. 14, 18

³⁶ Greenfield, p. 18

³⁷ Hobsbawm, p. 14; Hastings, p. 205

³⁸ U. Ozkirimli, *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A Critical Engagement*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p.30

Nationalism and Religion

The modernist school's contention that nationalism arose in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries has also conditioned the view of many nationalism scholars on the relationship between nationalism and religion. John Hutchinson, for example, noted that nationalism "has succeeded the great religions as the primary legitimation of the social order across the globe".³⁹ However by subscribing to this view that nationalism emerged out of the Enlightenment which elevated the power of human reason over divine omniscience, many scholars in effect construct an oversimplified chronology whereby nationalism replaced religion as the preeminent matrix of human affairs. The French Revolution in particular has provided much of the inspiration for this modernist thinking; Robespierre's 'Cult of the Supreme Being' was an obvious attempt to supplant Christianity with a civil religion predicated on the 'worship' of the nation. In the revolutionary frenzy of de-Christianization, God was replaced by the nation as the supreme object of worship and adulation. Given this historical example, scholars such as Elie Kedourie claim that nationalism and religion are ultimately incompatible since the former is an avowedly modern and secular ideology dedicated to seeping aside the enervating superstitions of the latter. Humans no longer had to seek salvation through God, but rather could achieve salvation in their own nation. Nationalism, in other words, meant emancipation from the tyranny of religion.⁴⁰

At first glance Kedourie's contention that religion has little import in the development and spread of modern nationalism is backed up by the historical record. The great nationalist movements in France, Turkey, Mexico, Cuba, and the numerous anti-colonial nationalisms of the Third World were, after all, profoundly secular, often anti-clerical, and steadfast in the belief that their newly-liberated nations were far more relevant than the old deities. Kedourie's view of the incompatibility of nationalism and religion is subscribed to by later modernists such

³⁹ Hutchinson, p. 68

⁴⁰ Kedourie, 1960; for discussion of Kedourie see A. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, chapter 1.

as Gellner, Breuille, Hobsbawm, Nairn, Hechter and others for whom “nations and nationalism are treated as wholly recent and novel phenomena, and a secular, anthropocentric, and anticlerical modernity is always counter-posed to tradition and traditional society with its emphasis on custom and religion”.⁴¹ Even where there are cases of seemingly close interconnections between nationalism and religion, the modernists argue this is but an anachronistic appropriation of religion which confirms in their minds once again the idea that nationalism is a great act of manipulation and invention.⁴²

Such a convenient theoretical bifurcation, however, flies in the face of numerous examples of a symbiosis between religion and nationalism throughout history. While the radical wing of the French Revolution may have been defiantly secular, many subsequent nationalist movements openly asserted the intimate ties between religion and their own national movements. The case of Israel is an obvious case of an intertwining of national identity, religion and nationalism, for while Zionism was on the surface a secular movement its central tenet that the Jewish people were ordained to return to the Holy Land and found a new nation was patently suffused with religious undertones.⁴³ Afrikaner nationalism was also underlain by a religious verve in which the Protestant Afrikaners saw themselves as the new Israelites, establishing their own Kingdom of God deep in Southern Africa.⁴⁴ Catholicism was a similar vessel for national feeling in various European countries such as Ireland, Poland, Croatia, and Lithuania.⁴⁵ Likewise Orthodox Christianity fuelled national

⁴¹ Smith, 2003, p.10

⁴² Hutchinson, p.68-69; Smith, 2003, p.12

⁴³ Anthony Smith writes of the redemptive sense of destiny espoused by many Zionists: “...as with so many other nationalisms, beneath the secular garb and historicist framework of Zionism, the language and intent of the original Abrahamic covenant can be clearly discerned”. See Smith, 2003, p. 93

⁴⁴ J.A. Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910*, Westport (Conn.), Greenwood Press, 1984

⁴⁵ C. O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices – Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.24; J. Lukowski and H. Zawadski, *A Concise History of Poland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.149, 157, 277; V. C. Chrypinski, ‘Church and Nationality in Postwar Poland’ in P. Ramet (ed.) *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1989, pp.241-263; P. Ramet, ‘Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslavia’ in P Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1989, pp.239-327; K. Girmius, ‘Catholicism and Nationalism in

sentiment in Bulgaria and Serbia, while in Lebanon Christianity proved a touchstone of national identity amongst Maronite Christians particularly in that country's civil war.⁴⁶ In India, meanwhile, Hindu nationalism has become a major political force in recent decades and has steadily chipped away at the secular, non-sectarian nationalist legacy of the Indian National Congress.⁴⁷ As this panoply of examples demonstrates, while the great religions make claims to universality, across history there has been a tendency towards the fusion of the universal and the particular.

Given the abundant evidence in the historical record for the relationship between nationalism and religion, many scholars have offered profound critiques of the modernist assumption which denies this linkage. Van der Veer and Lehmann, for example, accuse Gellner in particular of perpetuating the obsolete tenets of classical modernization theory in which nations and nationalism are uncritically assumed to be the secular progeny of Western capitalism. Gellner's focus on the evolution of traditional agrarian societies into modern nations via a process of industrialization based upon a scientific and technocratic worldview, Van der Veer and Lehmann point out, leads him to assume an *a priori* distinction between the secular nationalism of modernity and the religious imagination of the pre-modern era. In upholding the nation-state as the symbol of modernity, they claim, Gellner not only propagates the mistaken view that Western-style secular modernization constitutes the only path of development; he also artificially bifurcates nationalism and religion and in so doing ignores the complex interrelationship between the two in many societies.⁴⁸

Lithuania', in P. Ramet (ed.) Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics, Durham, Duke University Press, 1989, pp.109-137

⁴⁶ Ramet, 1989; S.T. Raikin, 'Nationalism and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church', in P Ramet (ed.) Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics, Durham, Duke University Press, 1989, pp.352-377; W. Phares, Lebanese Christian Nationalism: The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Resistance, Boulder (Col.) Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995

⁴⁷ P. van der Veer, Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994

⁴⁸ P. Van der Veer and H. Lehmann, Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 3-6

Such interconnections between nationalism and religion have been analyzed from a number of perspectives. Anthony Smith, for example, rejects the rash modernist assumption that religion is simply a false ally of nationalism, and instead stresses the genuine link between nationalism and religion in the modern world which in many nations has derived from the more ancient nexus between ethnicity and religion. Smith identifies three ways in which religion served as a “symbolic code of communications and focus for social organization among premodern communities”.⁴⁹ Firstly, there was often a close relationship between the origin myths of pre-modern ethnic communities and their communal religious beliefs about creation. The Jews are an obvious example of this, claiming descent from the biblical patriarch Abraham and possessing a special covenant with God as His chosen people. Secondly there was the phenomenon of religious sectarianism, which throughout history has facilitated the ethnicization of various religious sects and schisms such as the Druze, Sikhs and Copts. Thirdly, organized religion has played an institutional role across time in supplying the personnel and communication channels for the diffusion of ethnic myths, symbols and sentiments. Priesthoods, long the only literate class among many societies, were crucial in recording, preserving and transmitting the traditions, rites, symbols, feasts, ceremonies, myths, and laws of a given ethnic group to future generations. In so doing they played a vital role in reaffirming the identity of a community with its homeland and deities.⁵⁰ In light of the undeniable importance of religion as a badge of identity and essential institutional presence in most societies, it stands to reason that nationalism and religion would emerge inextricably entwined in the modern era.

Another take on the links between nationalism and religion is the idea that the former is not a replacement of the latter but rather a variant of religion in itself - a ‘political religion’. This argument sees nationalism as a heterodox, secular ‘religion’ which opposes traditional religions but co-opts many of their features such as symbols, liturgies, rituals, group spirit and messianic fervour. The idea of

⁴⁹ Smith, 1986, pp.34-35

⁵⁰ Smith, 1986, pp.35-37

nationalism as a secular or political religion derived in large part from the efforts of the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim who conducted seminal research into the sociological function of religion. Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”.⁵¹ He went on:

Thus there is something eternal in religion that is destined to outlive the succession of particular symbols in which religious thought has clothed itself. There can be no society that does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality. This moral remaking can be achieved only through meeting, assemblies, and congregations in which the individuals, pressing close to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments. Such is the origin of ceremonies that, by their object, by their results, and by the techniques used, are not different in kind from ceremonies that are specifically religious. What basic difference is there between Christians' celebrating the principal dates of Christ's life, Jews' celebrating the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a citizens' meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event of national life?⁵²

This concept of religion as a means of bonding and mobilizing a community naturally prompted comparison with the analogous function of nationalism and this theme was further explored from the 1960s onwards by nationalism historians such as Carlton Hayes, and political scientists studying the new nationalisms of the Third World such as David Apter.⁵³

In *Chosen Peoples* (2003) Anthony Smith expanded upon this intellectual legacy by arguing that nationalism is itself a belief system which comprises essential elements derived from the great religions. The myth of ethnic selection for a divine covenant or mission, a long standing attachment to a particular territory regarded by the community as sacred, a yearning to recapture the spirit of a bygone golden age, together with a belief in the regenerative power of sacrifice and commemoration of

⁵¹ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (translated by K. Fields), New York, The Free Press, 1995, p.44

⁵² Durkheim, p.429

⁵³ Hayes, 1960; D. Apter 'Political Religion in the New Nations', in C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States*, New York, Free Press, 1963, pp.57-104

fallen heroes and heroines were all cultural resources found in religions, particularly the Western Eurasian religions such as Judaism, that nationalists consciously or unconsciously incorporated into nationalist ideologies. Smith was not arguing a simple *post hoc ergo propta hoc* case of pre-modern religious traditions directly giving rise to nationalism. Rather, Smith claims, these pervasive spiritual symbols, myths and traditions provided a cultural reservoir which nationalists utilized, albeit “duly sifted and reinterpreted”, to construct and proselytize their own national identities.⁵⁴

Smith argues that a kind of parallelism has occurred whereby the quest for an authentic nation functions as the nationalist equivalent of the idea of holiness in the great religions. In religion, believers distinguish between the sacred and the profane; in the nationalist belief-system similar importance is attached to the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic national identity. A nation, nationalists claim, must cultivate its true self and native genius, in other words its *authenticity*, to fully realize its destiny. In this view, moreover, a nation can only be authentic when it is free and vice versa. This nationalist cult of authenticity ultimately promises salvation – a term drenched in religious symbolism - in the modern world, or as Smith writes “a model of regeneration through the restoration of old virtues and restraints”.⁵⁵ By drawing on the sacred elements of old religions and incorporating them into the nationalist belief-system, nationalists reify the nation itself, holding it up as the ultimate earthly virtue for which to strive. Nationalism thus becomes a ‘religion of the people’ in which the object of ‘worship’ becomes the authentic nation: as Durkheim asserted the nation indeed manifests itself as a congregation “in which the individuals, pressing close to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments”.

Smith’s study of ‘chosen’ peoples also dovetails with van der Veer and Lehmann’s observations on the “notion of chosenness by God” which they see as an enduring

⁵⁴ Smith, 2003, p. 42

⁵⁵ Smith, 2003, p. 178. For extended discussion of these ideas see Smith, 2003, chapters 1, 2 and conclusion.

motif in the “transformation of religious notions...from a purely religious context to the sphere of national politics”.⁵⁶ Pointing out that “[m]odernizing religion and emerging nationalism formed a kind of vibrant symbiosis”, van der Veer and Lehman flesh out Smith’s theory by exploring how nationalist movements have adopted the ‘chosen’ mantra of religion to justify imperialism and in other cases to provide a stimulus for national liberation.⁵⁷ As we shall see below, Khomeini’s project to recreate within the Islamic Republic of Iran the virtues of the Prophet’s rule aptly demonstrated this modern-day infusion of nationalism and religion in the name of national liberation *against* imperialism.

Nationalism in the Islamic World

The question of nationalism in the Islamic world provides a fascinating case study of the relationship between religion and nationalism. We shall focus on Iran from chapter two onwards but here a brief overview of the rise of nationalism in this region will serve as both a useful comparison and a contextual basis for the rest of this study.

The development of nationalism in the Islamic world was intimately linked with the rise of the West and the encroaching tentacles of imperialism. As William Cleveland notes, by the end of the nineteenth century most of the major political units of Islam languished under some form of European political or economic control, with even the nominally independent states such as Iran subject to extensive European control over their economies.⁵⁸ The West’s overwhelming military, political and cultural dominance provoked deep soul-searching amongst Moslems and the challenge of confronting this leviathan became “the major preoccupation of thinkers and activists” within the House of Islam.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Van der Veer and Lehmann, pp. 6-7

⁵⁷ Van der Veer and Lehmann, p. 9

⁵⁸ W. Cleveland, A History of the Modern Middle East (2nd ed.), Boulder, Westview Press, 2000, p. 117; on the decline of the Islamic world vis-à-vis the West see also P. Mansfield, A History of the Middle East (2nd ed.), London, Penguin, 2003, pp. 35-45

⁵⁹ M. Ruthven, Islam in the World (2nd ed.), New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 284

Islam, as John Esposito perceptively argues, has possessed since its earliest days a tradition of revival and reform and it was these two fundamental principles which would underlie the response of Moslems to the rise of the West and the terminal decline of the Islamic world.⁶⁰ From the eighteenth century onwards there arose a number of militant revivalist movements which advocated for a return to the pristine tenets of Islam as exemplified by the Prophet himself in seventh-century Arabia. The Wahhabi movement of the eighteenth century Arabia and the Sudanese Mahdi rebellion of nineteenth century, to name but two of the most prominent revivalist movements, preached that Islam's decline was due less to the perniciousness of the European powers and more the fault of Moslems themselves who had allegedly strayed away from Islam's original message. The solution, these groups urged, was to purge Islam of superfluous accretions such as superstition and the mindless imitation of corrupt orthodoxy which had both robbed Islam of its original dynamism and invited Western encroachment.⁶¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the pace and scope of European colonialism exposed the deep malaise within the Islamic world, another vein of thinking emerged which sought to confront Western supremacy but in a quite different fashion from the pugnacious and violent self-belief of the revivalist movements. Islamic modernism, as many scholars term the movement, sought to chart a middle course between the uncritical acceptance of Western civilization and the total rejection of it. Upholding Islam's other great intellectual legacy – reformism – Islamic modernists pointed to Islam's inherent capacity for dynamism and flexibility which they claimed provided the basis for religious tenets to be continually reinterpreted as modern conditions dictated. By selectively adopting elements of Western civilization which accorded with fundamental precepts of Islam, the Islamic modernists maintained, Moslems could be true to their own

⁶⁰ J. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 117-118

⁶¹ On these militant revivalist movements see Esposito, 1988, pp. 117-127 and Y. Choueri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, London, Pinter Publishers, 1990, pp. 16-30

religion and arrest the Islamic world's downward trajectory.⁶² Islamic modernism was also the intellectual parent which gave birth to modern nationalism in much of the Islamic world and it is this aspect we shall explore below.

One of the first polities in which Islamic modernism emerged was the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire whose precipitous decline vis-à-vis the European powers mirrored that of Islam as a whole. In 1839 an edict issued in the name of Sultan Abdülmecid I heralded the Tanzimat (literally 'reorganization') movement. Reflecting the Ottoman fear of, and fascination with, Europe's unbridled military and economic strength, the Tanzimat movement instituted a series of administrative reforms aimed at rationalizing and strengthening the Ottoman state. In particular there was an effort to institutionalize the rule of law which some perceptive Ottoman officials believed was the secret to the West's prosperity and power. At the forefront of this effort to embed a new body of laws was a drive to strip away the age-old differentiation of society by religious categories. A new penal code, for example, unveiled in 1843 applied equally to Moslems and non-Moslems, a signal development repeated in other reforms such as the overhaul of the taxation system in which all subjects – regardless of faith – were to be taxed on the same basis. At a stroke the ancient division between true believers and infidels ended, for now all who resided in the empire were equal 'subjects' a neologism which betrayed the growing influence of European political vocabulary and principles. While the Sultan still reigned as the Defender of Islam, religious categories were now being slowly eroded in the face of an official drive to inculcate Western-style patriotism and therefore encourage subjects to identify themselves with the Ottoman state.⁶³

The Young Ottomans who emerged from the Tanzimat movement sought to propel this reformist impulse even further. Convinced that Europe's technological prowess derived from its embrace of freedom, the Young Ottomans advocated for the ideals they observed in the Western nation-states namely personal freedoms, the separation

⁶² Esposito, 1988, pp. 128-129

⁶³ On the Tanzimat reform movement see A. Black, The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present, New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 280-284

of powers, the sanctity of private property and the sovereignty of the nation – in this instance uneasily transposed to the ethnically diverse Ottoman empire. These ideals, the Young Ottomans were at pains to point out, were in fact based on core Islamic values: legislative independence and popular sovereignty, for example, they equated with the Quranic principles of consensus and interpretative reasoning. Nevertheless, while this reform effort was intended to strengthen the Ottoman state, ultimately it would contribute to the Sublime Porte's eventual demise, for by highlighting the idea that sovereignty resided in the people and not a dynasty, it was but a short step for the empire's subject peoples to begin agitating for self-determination.⁶⁴

This dilemma of Islamic modernism – the knowledge that fusing Western and Islamic values might only further divide the *ummat* – was evident in the legacy of the famous Islamic modernist, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani.⁶⁵ Throughout the second-half of the nineteenth century al-Afghani traveled across the Islamic world preaching a message of Pan-Islamism and enjoining Moslems to unite and resist Western imperialism.⁶⁶ Like the Young Ottomans, al-Afghani believed the Islamic world could shake off its torpor by rediscovering the original dynamism and progressive nature of Islam which would allow Moslems to re-embrace reason, science and technology in a manner the West had so successfully demonstrated. By his reckoning Moslems could reassert their religious identity but at the same time selectively adopt aspects of Western modernity which would allow the Islamic world to confront the West on its own terms. Reformed and revitalized from within, al-Afghani believed, the Islamic world could throw off the yoke of colonial rule and interference.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Black, pp. 292-295

⁶⁵ John Esposito notes that al-Afghani “was an outstanding figure of nineteenth-century Islam and a major catalyst for Islamic reform”. Esposito, 1988, p. 130

⁶⁶ For a detailed study of al-Afghani see N. Keddie, Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī" : a political biography, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972

⁶⁷ Interestingly, in an intellectual exchange with Ernest Renan, whom we met above, al-Afghani was not nearly convinced that Islam could embrace reason. He lamented: “It is permissible, however, to ask oneself why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished; why this torch has not been relit since; and why the Arab world still remains buried in profound darkness. Here the responsibility of the Muslim religion appears complete. It is clear that wherever it became established, this religion tried to stifle the sciences and it was marvellously served in its designs by despotism.” See “The Exchange with Ernest Renan’ in N.

While al-Afghani espoused a Pan-Islamic message, his constant refrains to agitate for independence and the abolition of tyranny naturally sparked more localized yearnings for national freedom which fed off the example of European nationalism as much as al-Afghani's own entreaties. Nikki Keddie argues that al-Afghani's anti-imperialist agitation was a kind of proto-nationalism which acted as "an important phase in preparing minds and spirits for local nationalisms" yet to come.⁶⁸ As strange an epithet as it sounds for the great exponent of Pan-Islamism, John Esposito calls al-Afghani the "Father of Muslim nationalism".⁶⁹ Al-Afghani was indeed a father figure, for many of his disciples who would go on to become some of the greatest thinkers of the Islamic world and it was they who would wrestle with the logic of reconciling Islam and nationalism.

Some Moslems, however, were quite prepared to disconnect the two. The most visible and radical change came in Turkey where the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War spurred a new generation of reformers to supplant the discredited Ottoman state patriotism with a secular and Turkicized nationalism. Symbolizing the war's catalytic effect on the rise of secular nationalism, from 1923-1924 the National Assembly under war hero Mustafa Kemal swiftly abolished the Sultanate and the Caliphate and in its place declared a secular republic based around the idea of a Turkish nation. "Sovereignty", the Assembly proudly and self-consciously declared, "belongs without reservation or condition to the nation".⁷⁰

This watershed moment in Islamic history provoked both unease and inspiration across the Islamic world. For the great Egyptian thinker and disciple of al-Afghani, Rashid Rida, the dawning age of nationalism threatened to engulf the Islamic

Keddie, An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani', Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968, p.88

⁶⁸ N. Keddie, 'Pan-Islam as Proto-Nationalism', The Journal of Modern History, 41 (2), March 1969, p. 27

⁶⁹ Esposito, 1988, p. 132

⁷⁰ Black, p. 215. For a more complete survey see B. Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey, (3rd ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 239-291

modernist project which was predicated on the idea that only certain aspects of Western civilization should be adopted by Moslems. In their haste to dispense with the Ottoman dynasty, Rida feared, the Turks had injudiciously accepted a raft of Western paradigms which threatened Islamic unity. Rida grudgingly accepted the reality of patriotism and nationalism, so long as it did not sever the universal bond of Islam, but over time he veered towards an increasingly conservative position and even called for the restoration of the caliphate.⁷¹

Many of Rida's fellow Egyptian intellectuals were not so bashful about the idea of secular nationalism which the Turks had so wholeheartedly accepted. Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, Taha Hussein and others, while influenced by the ideas of al-Afghani and his Egyptian protégé Mohammad Abduh, dismissed the utility of a Pan-Islamic entity and instead urged Moslems to embrace local, territorial nationalism – in this case a purely Egyptian nationalism - as a step towards true independence. Lutfi al-Sayyid, for example, exemplified this increasing attraction of Western ideas for Moslem thinkers by completely jettisoning the concept of the *ummat*, calling instead for Moslems to embrace the idea of nationalism:

Among our forefathers were those who maintained that the land of Islam is the fatherland of all Muslims, however, that is a colonialist formula used to advantage by every colonizing nation that seeks to expand its possessions and to extend its influence daily over neighboring countries....In the present situation, the formula has no *raison d'être* because it fits neither the present state of affairs in Islamic nations nor their aspirations. One option remains to replace this formula by the only doctrine that is in accord with every Eastern nation which possesses a clearly defined sense of fatherland. The doctrine is nationalism.⁷²

⁷¹ The type of patriotism that should adorn Muslim youth is that he be a good example for the people of the homeland, no matter what their religious affiliation, cooperating with them in every legitimate action for independence, for developing science, virtue, force, and resources on the basis of the Islamic law of preferring the closest relations in rights and duties. In his service of his homeland and his people he must not, however, neglect Islam which has honored him and raised him up by making him a brother to hundreds of millions of Muslims in the world. He is a member of a body greater than his people, and his personal homeland is part of the homeland of his religious community. He must be intent on making the progress of the part a means for the progress of the whole". See R. Rida, 'Patriotism, Nationalism, and Group Spirit in Islam' in J. Donohue and J. Esposito (eds.) Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 57-59.

⁷² Quoted in J. Esposito, Islam and Politics, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1984, p. 65

In the Maghreb, by contrast, there was less of a stark contrast between Islam and nationalism, for the two nourished each other in the various anti-French national independence movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the nationalist leaders such as the Moroccan Allal al Fasi or Hamid Ben Budis were influenced by the Islamic modernist ideals of al-Afghani and Abduh but unlike the Egyptian secularists, these leaders viewed Islam as an integral part of their respective national identities and a priceless tool for mobilizing the people against their colonial masters. In Algeria, for example, one of the key political organizations of the 1930s was the Algerian Association of Ulama whose motto was “Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my fatherland”.⁷³

Arab nationalism, too, exemplified the converging influences of Islamic modernism, European nationalism, and its Turkish imitation. As Albert Hourani noted, there was a veritable chain reaction in which one brand of nationalism inspired rival versions. “By reaction against the new Turkish nationalism”, Hourani pointed out, “that of Armenians was strengthened, that of the Arabs, Albanians, and Kurds came to political life”.⁷⁴ Arab nationalism’s roots stretched back to the nineteenth century but by the 1920s it had bloomed into a fully fledged political movement epitomized by thinkers such as Sati al-Husri who provided it with a firm intellectual basis. Al-Husri was the preeminent theorist of Arab nationalism and his ideas of the Arab nation, based less on a shared religion and more upon a shared mother tongue, were clearly influenced by German cultural nationalism.⁷⁵ Such a notion appeared dangerously secular and potentially divisive to many Arabs who were already suspicious of the prominent role of many Arab Christians in the movement. It fell, therefore, to other thinkers to dispel these fears by stressing the perfect harmony between Arab nationalism and Islam. Iraqi historian and politician, ‘Abd Al-Rahman Al-Bazzaz, for example, stressed that Arab nationalism and Islam were in

⁷³ On Islam and nationalism in the Maghreb see Esposito, 1984, pp. 73-80

⁷⁴ A. Hourani, *Arabic thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 282

⁷⁵ Arab nationalism has a large literature of its own. On Al-Husri see A. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 49-74

accord because the Arabs and their holy language were in fact the backbone of Islam. "It is clear", Bazzaz exclaimed,

that the Arabs are the backbone of Islam. They were the first to be addressed in the verses of the Revelation; they were the Muhajirin and the Ansar; their swords conquered countries and lands, and on the whole they are as 'Umar has described in a saying of his: "Do not attack the Arabs and humiliate them for they are the essence of Islam."⁷⁶

Dismissing the notion that religion and nationalism were antithetical, Bazzaz declared that there is "no fundamental contradiction or clear opposition exists between Arab nationalism and Islam".⁷⁷ Islam, he maintained, was a reflection of the Arab soul, and as such rejuvenating one simultaneously revitalized the other. In this way many Arab nationalists sought to maintain a link to al-Afghani's Pan-Islamic impulse and his calls for cultural revival and independence which had impelled them in the first instance.

The fusion of Islam and nationalism in the Subcontinent is another instructive example. There the Moslem elites proffered different interpretations on the question of independence and nationalism. The more traditional ulama such as Sayyid Abdul Hassan Ali Nadwi condemned nationalism, even the Moslem variant, as an insult to Islamic universalism. Others such as the great poet-philosopher Mohammad Iqbal and Mohammad Ali Jinnah were initially Indian nationalists, committed to expelling the Raj and establishing a multi-faith India. By the 1930s, however, fears of post-independence Hindu domination led both to call for a Moslem homeland, 'Pakistan', for the Subcontinent's Moslem minority. For Iqbal in particular the situation posed a grave conundrum. In a united India only a secular nationalism could guarantee the rights of the Moslem minority in the midst of a Hindu majority, but such polity would by definition restrict the role of Islam in public life. The only solution to the conundrum of Indian nationalism was Moslem nationalism in the form of Pakistan.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ A. Al-Bazzaz, 'Islam and Arab Nationalism' in Esposito and Donohue, pp. 84-90

⁷⁷ Al-Bazzaz, pp. 84-90

⁷⁸ Esposito, 1984, pp. 85-93

Pakistan gained its independence in 1947 but its subsequent turbulent history symbolized the post-colonial history of many of the new nation-states of the Islamic world.⁷⁹ While modernization proceeded apace in these countries, political development often lagged behind leaving millions aggrieved at the lack of economic opportunity, political rights and social justice.⁸⁰ Political leaders endeavoured to mobilize support through recourse to various ideologies – Arab nationalism, socialism, territorial nationalism, secular nationalism, monarchism – but nation-building in many states produced decidedly mixed results, leading one scholar to term the 1918-1967 era as the ‘crisis of the nation-state’. “[T]he crisis of the nation-state in the Islamic world”, Baram Tibi explained, “stems either from failed development policies (Algeria and Iran), from the effects of war and dictatorship (Iraq and Syria), or simply from local ethnic strife (Sudan) or the repercussions of foreign occupation (Afghanistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories)”.⁸¹

The glaring defeat of the Arab states in the Six Day War of 1967 in many ways epitomized the hollowness of these post-independence ideologies, particularly Arab nationalism, and it was in this milieu that a number of Islamist thinkers and politicians struck out in a more radical direction to redress the continuing downward spiral of the Islamic world. ‘Islamic radicalism’ or ‘revivalism’ as this intellectual and political force is often known, to be sure, had multiple economic, political and cultural causes but its common *bete-noire* was nationalism and the nation-state system.⁸² For these radical thinkers, nationalism and the modern nation-state were

⁷⁹ Sami Zubaida remarked that the “nation-state has been a compulsory model at independence of former colonies and dependencies, partly for lack of any other respectable models of statehood”. See S. Zubaida, *Islam, the People, and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1993, p. 121

⁸⁰ On the dichotomy between modernization and political development in the Middle East see J. Bill and R. Springboard, *Politics in the Middle East* (4th ed.), New York, Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 3-21

⁸¹ B. Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p. 119

⁸² R. H. Dekmejian, ‘Islamic Revival: Catalysts, Categories, and Consequences’ in S. Hunter (ed.), *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism: Diversity and Unity*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp.3-19

Western constructs which had been violently imposed upon Moslems by colonialism and its local agents. To the chagrin of these radicals, and despite the prominence of Islamic symbols, slogans and actors in many national independence movements, “the post-independence period witnessed the emergence of modern Muslim states whose pattern of development was heavily influenced by and indebted to Western secular paradigms or models”.⁸³ In these newly-independent states, Islam increasingly lost its position in the face of governments determined to relegate religion to the private sphere. This secular direction, together with the rhetorical commitment to constitutionalism and parliamentary government in many such societies which failed to erect a genuine social contract between rulers and the ruled, fuelled the perception amongst Islamic radicals that God’s order has been grossly usurped.⁸⁴ Two of the most vociferous and influential critics of nationalism whose oeuvre gained particular resonance in the post-1967 era were Maulana Abu’l Ala Maududi and Sayyid Qutb.

A prominent Moslem journalist, scholar and politician during the final decades of the Raj, Maududi held ambivalent and often hostile views on nationalism.⁸⁵ While no friend of British imperialism, he harboured deep-seated concerns about the benefits of Indian nationalism for Indian Moslems. Contradicting the Indian National Congress’ (INC) position, Maududi denied that Moslems of the subcontinent comprised a nation together with Hindus. Moslems, he insisted, had only one identity and nationality, and that was Islam, a bond which overrode all other ties of race, geography, language and culture. Maududi reminded his fellow believers:

The Law of God (the Shari’a) has always aimed at bringing together mankind into one moral and spiritual frame-work and make them mutually assistant to one another on a universal scale. But nationalism at once demolishes this

⁸³ J. Esposito, ‘Introduction: Islam and Secularism in the Twenty-First Century’ in A. Tamimi and J. Esposito (eds.) *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, London, Hurst and Co., 2000, p. 2. See also N. Keddie, ‘Secularism and its Discontents’, *Daedalus*, 132 (3), Summer 2003, pp. 14-30

⁸⁴ Choueri, p. 55

⁸⁵ For an excellent treatment of Maududi’s views and beliefs see C. Adams, ‘Maududi and the Islamic State’ in J. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.99-131

frame-work with the noxious instruments of racial and national distinction, and by creating bitterness and hatred between nations makes them fight and exterminate rather than help one another.⁸⁶

Moreover, Maududi went on, the Moslems were not a nation in the Western sense based upon ethnicity or territoriality, but a community “based on principles and upon a theory”.⁸⁷ Joining the INC’s national liberation struggle, Maududi believed, would detract from Moslems’ true calling which was to follow the will of God. He was insistent that in embracing the INC-led independence struggle, Indian Moslems would be merely trading British imperial yoke for that of the tyranny of a Hindu majority. Maududi therefore urged Indian Moslems not to participate in the nationalist struggles of either the INC or Jinnah’s Moslem League. Instead he foresaw salvation for Moslems in simply becoming better Moslems, and completely submitting to God’s will and the sharia. As it turned out Indian Moslems voted with their feet for a separate homeland, a fact Maududi’s party, Jamiat-e Islami was later forced to accept.

That other great theoretician of Islamic radicalism and ideologue of the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, attacked the doctrine of nationalism in even more forceful terms than Maududi.⁸⁸ While Qutb had at first supported Nasser’s Arab nationalism as a bridge towards wider Islamic unity, the Egyptian President’s subsequent crackdown on the Brotherhood prompted a vitriolic response from Qutb and his followers who began to vilify the concept of nationalism upon which the regime’s ideology was predicated. In a thinly veiled reference to Nasser, Qutb compared adherents of nationalism with “animals” hopelessly trapped in a quagmire. In Qutb’s reckoning, while Islam had made Arabs an extraordinary people, they had since been overtaken in the realm of reason and technology by Europe. Hence it was imperative to focus not on Arabism, but on what had made the Arabs great in the first place: Islam.

⁸⁶ A. Maududi, ‘Nationalism and Islam’ in Donohue and Esposito, p. 95

⁸⁷ Adams, p.104

⁸⁸ For discussion of Qutb’s political views see Y. Haddad, ‘Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival’, in J. Esposito (ed.), Voices of Resurgent Islam

The brilliance of medieval Islamic civilization that had once been the most advanced society on earth, Qutb believed, totally transcended the bounds of race, colour and language. Like Maududi, he believed that by recapturing the pristine tenets of Islam, Moslems could revitalize their own lives, their own societies and eventually the worldwide Islamic community, the *ummat*. Nationalism, by contrast, was directly responsible for Islam's modern atrophy, for Moslems were rejecting the sovereignty of God and substituting it for the heretical concept of sovereignty of the people. At his trial in 1965 before his execution a year later, Qutb shot back at the Prosecutor:

I believe that the bonds of ideology and belief are more sturdy than those of patriotism based upon region and that this false distinction among Muslims on a regional basis is but one consequence of crusading and Zionist imperialism which must be eradicated.⁸⁹

In Qutb's estimation a Moslem possessed no nationality except Islam. In accepting nationalism and territorial divisions, Moslems had turned their back on God and had lapsed back into ignorance, or *jahiliyah*, as Qutb famously called it, using the old Quranic term for the time of ignorance before the coming of Prophet Mohammad's final and complete revelation.⁹⁰

Given the widely perceived failure of nationalist ideologies in the Islamic world and the stinging denunciations of secular nationalism by Islamic radicals, many scholars now consider it axiomatic that Islam and nationalism are incompatible. Noting that "Muslim fundamentalists" have challenged both secular nationalism and the existing nation-states as unwanted institutions imposed upon their homelands, Baram Tibi concludes that the "current crisis of the nation-state in the contemporary Middle East derives from the fact that this modern institution is alien to that region of the world and was virtually imposed on its parts".⁹¹ P.J. Vatikiotis likewise notes that the "idea of the nation-state...remains a European import at variance with the traditions of

⁸⁹ Quoted in S. Zubaida, 'Islam and Nationalism: continuities and contradictions', Nations and Nationalism, 10 (4), 2004, p.407

⁹⁰ W. Shepard, 'Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of *Jahilliyah*', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 35, 2003, pp.521-545

⁹¹ Tibi, pp. 116-117

Islam”.⁹² “Islam and nationalism”, he notes, “are mutually exclusive terms”.⁹³ Bernard Lewis has kept up a similar line: “it remains broadly true that in Europe and the Americas, identity and loyalty are defined in terms of nationality”. He goes on to say however:

This has not been so in the Islamic world. Descent, language, and habitation were all of secondary importance, and it is only during the last century that under European influence, the concept of the political nation has begun to make headway. For Muslims, the basic division – the touchstone by which men are separated from one another, by which one distinguishes between brother and stranger – is that of faith, of membership in a religious community.⁹⁴

While all these authors are correct in pointing to the European origin of modern nationalism and its eventual osmosis into the Middle East is it really the case, therefore, that Islam and nationalism are inherently and forever opposed to each other?

Dubious dichotomies?

Having traversed the main themes of contemporary nationalism theory and explored some facets of nationalism’s spread across the Islamic world, we shall here begin to draw together some relevant threads for the present study. The first dichotomy we must attempt to reconcile is the perennialist-modernist chasm which has bedeviled nationalism theory for two decades. One scholar who has tried to bridge the divide is British sociologist Anthony Smith whose opus has grown to include several key books on nationalism theory.⁹⁵ Smith concurs with the modernist supposition that nations and nationalism are modern creations, but he seeks to present a more nuanced explanation of their origins by arguing that in order to fully understand the emotive power of nationalism and the ubiquity of nations we must comprehend their pre-modern origins. “To understand nationalism”, Smith writes, “and its emotional

⁹² P.J. Vatikiotis, *Islam and the State*, London, Croom Helm, 1987, p. 38

⁹³ Vatikiotis, p. 42

⁹⁴ B. Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 72

⁹⁵ A. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1986; A. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, New York, Harper and Row, 1971; Smith, 1998. Smith’s thinking is nicely summed up in A. Smith, *National Identity*, London, Penguin, 1991.

power and appeal as a political force, we need to understand the pre-modern antecedents of modern nations and the foundations of national identity”.⁹⁶ Smith argues that pre-modern ethnic communities – what he terms *ethnies* – constituted the antecedents of modern nations.⁹⁷ He does not, it must be pointed out, suggest that *ethnies* and nations form some kind of continuum in which all of the former necessarily metamorphose into the latter. While *ethnies* and nations share obvious commonalities, most often in religion, language or culture, *ethnies* do not necessarily possess a compact territorial homeland, a common public culture, or a common economy all of which Smith sees as the constituent elements of the modern nation. Differentiating the two, Smith defines the nation as: “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members”.⁹⁸

Smith proceeds to present a more subtle theory on the process through which nations arose out of *ethnies*. He contends that *ethnies* inhere in their myths, symbols, historical memories and values – what he collectively terms the “myth-symbol complex” - which over time become “permanent cultural attributes” that are immortalized and passed down to future generations through customs, laws, language and art.⁹⁹ It is these cultural attributes which, suitably reinterpreted and accorded new meanings by nationalists, become the constituent elements of modern national identities. Smith is at pains to point out that there is no simple linear process of historical development of nationalism. The reinvention of *ethnies* into nations, he argues, occurred in the context of the “triple revolution” of modernity which initially took root in Europe and thereafter spread around the globe. According to Smith it was the rise of capitalism, the development of the modern state and the decline of the Church in Europe which became the catalysts for the intellectual, administrative and social transition from *ethnies* and their myth-symbol

⁹⁶ Smith, 1991, p. vii

⁹⁷ On his conception of *ethnies* see Smith, 1991, p. 21

⁹⁸ Smith, 1991, p. 14

⁹⁹ Smith, 1996, p. 15

complexes to nation-states and national identities.¹⁰⁰ Thus while Smith upholds the notion that nations are modern entities, he also identifies an important historical and sociological relationship between *ethnies* and nations which contradicts the modernist view that the latter are simply constructs. Rather, Smith suggests, we should view *ethnies* as essential elements in the story of nationalism for by acting as a national ‘cultural tool box’ they both facilitated and constrained the extent to which later generations of nationalists were able to construct their own nations.

Smith charts two main routes along which *ethnies* were transformed into nations through the great forces of modernity. The first nation-states, Smith claims, emerged from ‘lateral *ethnies*’ in which aristocratic elites utilized their control over the state to incorporate outlying regions and disseminate elite culture as the cultural basis of the embryonic nation. Smith sees England as the example *par excellence* of this process of “bureaucratic incorporation” in which the original Norman state and its peculiar blend of French and Anglo-Saxon cultures was over many centuries wrought into a modern nation through the Industrial revolution, the expansion of the modern education system, the extension of suffrage and the myriad other appendages of modernity.¹⁰¹ The rise of nations also required a concomitant intellectual evolution and it was in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, Smith argues, that the core doctrines of nationalism – the idea that the world is divided into nations each with its own individual character, history and destiny – were lodged firmly in political discourse.¹⁰²

Evincing the influence of Hans Kohn’s thinking, Smith argues that in other regions of the world ‘vertical *ethnies*’, in which individuals of all classes were united by common cultural traditions, were the precursors to modern nations. Here he takes the example of the Arabs whose national consciousness was molded not by a bureaucratic state (there was never a singular state which ruled over all Arabs in any case) but rather by intellectuals who, inspired by the example of European nations,

¹⁰⁰ On this historical transition see Smith, 1986, pp. 130-152

¹⁰¹ Smith, 1991, pp. 55-61

¹⁰² Smith, 1991, pp. 74-75

reified the people and their vernacular into the authentic expression of nationalism.¹⁰³ Smith hastens to add that this dual path to nationhood is somewhat idealized and that some nations have indeed formed without any antecedent *ethnies*, the United States being a notable example. He points out, however, that the first nations of Western Europe (England and France in particular) became a model for other societies around the world which explains the diversity of the world of nation-states but also the similarities in nomenclature, symbolism and form.¹⁰⁴

Given his intention to provide a holistic theory of the rise of nationalism, Smith tends to use the example of Iran in a scattergun fashion at various points in his works. Smith writes that the basis of the Iranian nation was the Achaemenid lateral aristocratic *ethnie* which infused a sense of common ancestry and history across the Iranian plateau and subsequently “remained to shape the special Iranian nature”.¹⁰⁵ The high culture of the Persian Empire, Smith contends, filtered down to the population below, cementing a diffuse but enduring Iranian identity. “This does not mean”, he writes, “that in a pre-literate age, every Iranian peasant was conversant with the epic of Firdausi or identified with the law of the state, only that an Iranian identity was present in many areas, alongside the more immediate ties of village and kin, and the larger Islamic allegiance”.¹⁰⁶ This lateral *ethnie* and the identity it rendered waxed and waned across Iranian history; Smith for example goes on to demonstrate how it was reborn under the Sassanians who re-established a “Persian ethnic state”, an identity which continued even after the arrival of Islam swept away the Sassanian Empire.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately Islam and this older Iranian identity fused for it was the Safavids who centuries later, according to Smith, ‘nationalized’ Islam’s minority sect, Shi’ism, as the state religion as well as maintaining ancient Persian court customs and culture.¹⁰⁸ At a stroke Persian identity was kept alive but it was also at this juncture imbued with Shi’ism, a connection that theretofore had not

¹⁰³ Smith, 1991, pp. 61-68

¹⁰⁴ Smith, 1991, pp. 41-42

¹⁰⁵ A. Smith, The Ethnic Origin of Nations, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 107

¹⁰⁶ Smith, 1986, p. 90

¹⁰⁷ Smith, 1986, p. 82

¹⁰⁸ Smith, 1986, pp. 143, 159-160

existed but which now permanently distinguished Iran from the rest of the Islamic world. The penultimate element of Smith's focus on the rise of the Iranian nation occurs in the late-nineteenth century when imperial encroachment proved the catalyst for a surge in national feeling which crystallized during the Constitutional Revolution. The Pahlavis, Smith concludes, added the final chapter to the story of Iranian nationalism by importing Western territorial concepts of the nation from Europe which they imposed upon Iran.¹⁰⁹

One could point to inconsistencies in Smith's argument. For example, he argues in most of his works that only in Western Europe did lateral *ethnies* become the basis for the first nations, whereas outside Europe it was vertical *ethnies* which developed into nations by mimicking European structures of nationalism. Smith seems to imply that Iran, with its ancient lateral *ethnie*, was the exception to this rule. One could also hold Smith to account for using 'Persian' and 'Iranian' interchangeably as the above overview suggests. But as we shall see in the following chapter, the bare outlines of Smith's observations that Iran does indeed have a very ancient identity which has been transmitted and reinterpreted in the modern era are essentially correct.

Smith's wider body of work is not without its critics. Scholars of the modernist school accuse Smith of exaggerating the strength of ethnic consciousness amongst pre-modern societies in his quest to locate the origins of nations. Resolute in their belief that the modern state is the principle catalyst of nationalism, modernists question Smith's theory which holds that older ethnic identities have played a formative role in the development of modern nations and nationalism.¹¹⁰ Even if Smith is astute enough not to assume a causal connection between *ethnies* and nations, modernists still reject the idea that a viable 'ethno-history' is a necessary ingredient for the development of nationalism; many nationalist movements, they claim, have developed in the absence of such a legacy. As John Breuilly points out

¹⁰⁹ Smith, 1986, p. 143

¹¹⁰ For a concise summary of the historiographical debates over Smith's theories see G. Day and A. Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 74-83

“many powerful nationalist movements of modern times have succeeded despite having very little in the way of a rich national history”.¹¹¹

Day and Thompson point out, however, that Smith’s theory still holds considerable merit even if it is under sustained attack from the modernist school. On the one hand it avoids the pitfalls inherent in the perennialist school which argues unconvincingly for the antiquity of nations while at the same time acting as a corrective to the modernist outlook that would have us believe nations are but modern constructs devoid of links with the past.¹¹² The example of Iran – repeatedly alluded to by Smith in his works - and its undeniably strong sense of national self bolstered by its ancient history would certainly appear to support his assertions that the ability of a national identity to take root in a given population is to a large degree influenced by the nature and durability of pre-modern *ethnies* whose attributes are over time assimilated into national identities. Certainly a glimpse at some of Iran’s neighbours whose own national identities remain rather brittle would bear this point out. Furthermore, Smith’s focus on how nationalist movements and modern states ‘reconstruct’ elements of pre-modern ethnic cultures – religion especially - into national identities and fuse them with modern ideologies is a useful way of understanding the mutability of nationalism. Smith observes that it is precisely this process of reflecting older identities and cultures through the prism of the modern nation which underlies the ever-changing and contested nature of contemporary nationalism. This is nowhere more so than across the Middle East in which multiple identities, some of ancient pedigrees, intersect with modern political ideologies to create an ongoing and contested discourse on nationalism and national identity: as Bernard Lewis reminds us, the Middle East is a “region of old and deep-rooted identities, which in modern times have undergone crucial changes”.¹¹³ Echoing Lewis, and eloquently encapsulating the multifarious nature of nationalism which will become readily apparent in our study of Iran, Smith concludes:

¹¹¹ J. Breuilly, ‘Approaches to Nationalism’ in G. Balakrishnan (ed.) Mapping the Nation, London, Verso, 1996, p. 151

¹¹² Day and Thompson, p. 81

¹¹³ B. Lewis, The Multiple Identities of the Middle East, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998, p.

The nation, in fact, draws on elements of other kinds of collective identity, which accounts not only for the way in which national identity can be combined with these other types of identity – class, religion or ethnic – but also for the chameleon-like permutations of nationalism, the ideology, with other ideologies like liberalism, fascism and communism. A national identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional; it can never be reduced to a single element, even by a particular faction of nationalists, nor can it be easily or swiftly induced in a population by artificial means.¹¹⁴

Smith rounds off by offering a definition of nationalism which is useful to bear in mind as this study progresses: “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation”.¹¹⁵

The second dichotomy we seek to bridge in this study is the supposed incompatibility between Islam and nationalism. As we saw above, despite the obvious role of Islam in the development of seminal nationalist movements, the eventual emergence of Islamic radicalism upon the ashes of many post-WWII secular nationalist movements has convinced many scholars that Islam and nationalism are inherently antithetical. There are, however, more nuanced views on this issue. Halim Barakat concurs that the history of the modern Middle East has been marked by an ongoing struggle between the forces of secular nationalism and religious fundamentalism with the gradual exhaustion of the former opening up political space for the latter in the 1970s. At the same time, he reminds us, the great symbolic divide between the ages of nationalism and fundamentalism represented by the Islamic Revolution should not detract from a deeper realization that the discourse of nationalism was in fact imbued with both elements of religion *as well as* secular ideas of the nation.¹¹⁶ Malise Ruthven, to take another example, astutely observes that while nationalism and ‘fundamentalism’ (as he terms it) are theoretically

¹¹⁴ Smith, 1991, p. 14

¹¹⁵ Smith, 1991, p. 73

¹¹⁶ Barakat writes: “...nationalism is defined by local versus regional versus pan-Arab references. It has been given either secular or apologetically religious overtones. It carries socialist versus capitalist of leftist versus rightist or progressive versus conservative implications. Nationalist goals can be reactionary or reformist or revolutionary”. H. Barakat, The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 162

ideological opposites, in reality they are often barely indistinguishable. Many Islamic radical movements, Ruthven points out, have espoused a desire for national independence and an authentic national culture no less forcefully than did their secular nationalist predecessors. Moreover the stance of these radical groups towards the nation-state is decidedly ambiguous, even hypocritical. In opposition these movements have often castigated the nation-state as a European invention designed to divide and weaken the Islamic world. Once in power, however, they see their own nation-state as a supreme instrument of salvation for their own peoples and at the same time remain wedded to the notion that only a return to God can save the nation. Highlighting a phenomenon we shall see in the coming pages, Ruthven writes “[f]ar from being counter-nationalist in the sense of opposing the ‘secular’ national states imposed on the Islamic world since decolonization, Islamism in practice mostly reveals itself as an alternative form of nationalism”.¹¹⁷ Ruthven’s views are backed up by other scholars such as Sami Zubaida who argues “Islam as nationalism...does not pertain to territory or state, but is often raised in the context of particular countries and their politics. Its logic is pan-Islamic, but its reality is often particular”.¹¹⁸

In stressing the complementary relationship between Islam and nationalism we must make a caveat. Unity *is* a central theme of Islam. The profession of a Moslem’s faith, the *shahadat*, is a simple but eloquent admission of this principle: *La ilaha illa’Llah* (there is no God but Allah). There is but one God, who is all-knowing and all-powerful. The Quran hails this omnipresent God in numerous passages, for example Sura 37:4 “Verily, verily, your God/ is One! – / Lord of the heavens/ And of the earth,/ And all between them,/ And Lord of every point/ At the rising of the sun!”¹¹⁹ This principle of the oneness of God and His creation is called *tawhid*. The community of believers in Islam is referred to as the *ummat*, and its unity – *wahdat*

¹¹⁷ M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 150. For Ruthven’s extended discussion on this issue see pages 127-151

¹¹⁸ S. Zubaida, ‘Islam and Nationalism: continuities and contradictions’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 10 (4), 2004, p.409

¹¹⁹ *The Holy Qur-an: English translation of the meanings and Commentary*, revised and edited by The Presidency of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and Guidance, published by The Ministry of Hajj and Endowments, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1410 (H), Sura 37:4

(derived from the Arabic word *tawhid*) – is considered by Moslems to be of paramount importance. The solidarity of the Islamic *ummat* resides in its acceptance of the Quranic message of Divine Oneness and sovereignty, the message of the Prophet Mohammad and Divine Law (*al-Sharia*'), but most of all from the belief that God created everything, infusing all creation with an innate unity. This brotherhood, therefore, proceeds from the basis of religious belief, and not shared language, ethnicity or kinship. There are Moslems from nearly all the world's major language groups and ethnicities, and they are all considered part of the *umma* regardless of these differences.¹²⁰ The Quran urges Moslems to “hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of God and do not separate” (3:103).¹²¹ To proclaim, hail or exaggerate differences among believers is thus for many Moslems, to commit a most egregious crime of directly contradicting the tenets of Islam and God's divine plan.

Diversity, however, has been as much a touchstone of the Islamic experience as unity, and it is this principle which is essential to keep in mind when considering the interplay between Islam and nationalism. The concepts of the nation-state and nationalism were not, of course, discussed in classical Islamic thought but the idea that humankind was divided into varying nations, colours and languages was well-established. Sura 49:13, for example states “O mankind! We created/ You from a single (pair)/ Of a male and a female,/ And made you into/ Nations and tribes, that/ Ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise/ Each other)”.¹²² Sura 30:22, speaking of the diversity of God's creation, announced “And among His Signs/ Is the creation of the heavens/ And the earth, and the variations/ In your languages/ And your colours”.¹²³ Medieval thinkers such as the great historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 AD) accepted the existence of pluralism within the House of Islam. He argued that cracks within the realm of Islam were entirely natural and indeed part of God's will. Borders, Khaldun pointed out, would not make Moslems any less

¹²⁰ S. H. Nasr, Islam: Religion, History and Civilization, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 2003, p.15

¹²¹ The Holy Qur-an, 3:103

¹²² The Holy Qur-an, 49:13

¹²³ The Holy Qur-an, 30:22

devout.¹²⁴ Side-by-side with the emphasis on unity, therefore, has been an acceptance of pluralism within the *ummat* which underpins today's reality of Islam in a world of nation-states.¹²⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined some of the key theoretical foundations for the empirical study which follows. It has been argued here that nationalism is a modern phenomenon but one which derives from pre-modern foundations that have lent to it a multi-dimensionality evident in the ever-changing permutations of national identities and nationalist politics. This infusion of pre-modern identities and cultures reflected through the strictures of modernity is demonstrated by the frequent merging of nationalism and religion. Many nationalist movements were avowedly secular, but for every atheistic nationalist there were others for whom religion remained an essential component of their national identity and struggle for national liberation. The development of nationalism in the Middle East in particular starkly illuminates this continually evolving dialectic.

Building on these theoretical foundations, some salient themes will become apparent in the subsequent study. The countless ways in which the nation can be interpreted and reconstructed has resulted in the ongoing mutability of nationalism in many countries, with sometimes wild swings in official interpretations of what constitutes national identity. The ubiquitous nation-state is central to the identities of billions of people around the globe but the principle upon which it is founded, nationalism, is a contested discourse in most, if not all, of these societies. The interplay between nationalism and religion, together with the mutability and contestability of nationalism, will become central themes in our study.

¹²⁴ J. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.48

¹²⁵ Piscatori's 1986 work is the best work on this subject.

Iranian Nationalism: Legend and Modernity

Introduction

Having examined Islam and nationalism in a wider context, it is time to direct our attention towards nationalism in Iran. While the focus of our study is on the Islamic Republic, it is essential to grasp the historical roots of Iranian nationalism which reach back into the nineteenth century and beyond. As we shall see below, one can argue that a very diffuse collective notion of 'Iran' has existed for centuries across the Iranian plateau. This historical memory, encoded in myth, language and literature, endured into modern times to inform the discourses of Iranian nationalism. Endeavouring to impute the modern notion of nationalism to this consciousness, however, is an intellectual exercise fraught with the pitfalls of anachronism. Most recent studies of Iranian nationalism have persuasively argued that a firm conception of Iran as a national political and cultural community developed only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This extended process of "nationalizing" Iran is crucial for without it there may not have been an Iranian nationalism to speak of before, during or after 1979.

Ancient Iran, Orientalism, and Nationalism

Reflecting the perennialist/modernist division of its parent discipline, the study of Iranian nationalism has hitherto been polarized between an older generation scholars which sought to locate the birth of the Iranian nation in ancient times and a newer generation insistent that nationalism in Iran is modern construct. As Afshin Marashi notes, "[t]he conventions of Iranian historiography consider nationalism in either of two ways: it is something primordial to Iranian consciousness from the earliest times or it is tied narrowly to the state-building effects of Reza Shah between 1921 and 1941".¹ This dichotomy is particularly evident in the relish with which some within the modernist school of Iranian nationalism pour scorn on the primordialist assumptions of the great Persianist scholars. Mostafa Vaziri, for example, devotes

¹ Marashi, p. 7

many a line in his 1993 book to rubbishing the claims of the “monumental edifice of Orientalism” which in its long fascination with Ancient Persia and the ‘Aryan hypothesis’ anachronistically conceived a continuity of Iranian national identity across history.² Not pulling his punches, Vaziri scolds these “narrow-minded scholars” who resorted to the “retroactive European injection of nationalism into the past”.³ Up to a point Vaziri is correct, for some scholars did engage in unsubstantiated generalizations about the allegedly timeless pedigree of the Iranian nation. Consider, for example, Roger Stevens’ part-history/part-travelogue which made the following observation about the Iranian nation:

Through twenty-six centuries of history, the Iranian nation has displayed astonishing powers of survival. Situated at a cross-roads on the great land mass of Europe and Asia, it has at times over-expanded beyond its strength, at other times been buffeted, punctured or largely swallowed by competing empires of prospective world conquerors. Yet, protected by mountains and deserts, and sustained by the resilient quality of its peoples and institutions, the nation has throughout preserved an unmistakable identity, which distinguishes it from its Turkish, Arab, Slav, Mongol and Indian neighbours.⁴

Nevertheless Vaziri’s blanket criticism of Orientalism – the alacrity with which he uses the term is revealing of just how pejorative it has become since Edward Said’s searing treatise on the subject – is not wholly deserved.⁵ The great American Iranologist Richard Frye, to take another example, is criticized by Vaziri for, among other alleged anachronisms, depicting the Tahirid, Saffarid and Samanid monarchies in the eastern part of the Abbasid Caliphate as “Iranian national dynasties” whose interest in the Persian language revival and pre-Islamic notions of Persian kingship was extrapolated by Frye into an enduring nationalist consciousness.⁶ A considerate and careful reading of Frye’s work, however, reveals a more nuanced perspective on the evolution of the Iranian civilization. For one, Frye explicitly stated that the eastern Iranian dynasties were not in any way expressions of anti-Islamic Iranian nationalism; quite the opposite in fact. Through their embrace of Islam and loyalty to the Abbasid Caliph together with their patronage of the Persian literary revival (particularly the Saffarid and Samanid dynasties), these dynasties were in his words

² Vaziri, p. 2

³ Vaziri, pp. 107, 135

⁴ R. Stevens, *The Land of the Great Sophy*, London, Meuthen and Co., 1962, pp. 33-34

⁵ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978

⁶ For example see Vaziri p. 136

the “instruments of the internationalization of Islam, pointing the way for the spread of Islam anywhere in the world without the native people giving up their language or culture for Arabic”.⁷ Overall, Frye concluded, the manifold Iranian contributions to Islamic culture in the fields of political thought, administration, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics and Arabic grammar and prose – what he called the “Persian conquest of Islam” – was less a nationalistic impulse and more an effort to rescue Islam from a “narrow bedouin” outlook and create a truly universal religious culture.⁸ For Frye this was the “fundamental contribution of the Iranians to Islam”.⁹

In rendering this service to Islam the Iranians at the same time preserved their old heritage to an extent unmatched by other peoples in the Middle East. The vessel for this historical memory – we must be careful not to ascribe to this phenomenon ‘nationalistic’ motivations – was of course the Persian language. While in the centuries after the Islamic invasions the Iranian plateau was divided amongst various potentates, the Persian language survived to become a major literary language in its own right. At the same time the Iranian belle-lettrists embraced Arabic and made seminal contributions to the holy language of Islam. Ibn Muqaffa, for example, the great eighth century Iranian scholar compiled one of the finest Arabic grammatical tracts and became a leading figure in the *Shu’ubiyya* movement which decried the Arab-centric tendencies of the Umayyads and instead promoted the universal equality of all Moslems.¹⁰ It has been debated the extent to which the *Shu’ubiyya* movement was an anti-Arab nationalist phenomenon amongst the disenchanting Iranian intellectuals who held high office under the Caliphs, but perhaps its most enduring legacy was not differentiation but rather cross-fertilization: the *Shu’ubiyya* acolytes who perfected Arabic all the while resolutely retaining their Persian tongue

⁷ R. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, p. 186

⁸ R. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, pp. 234-255; R. Frye ‘Preface’ in R. Frye (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Iran vol. 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Seljuqs*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. xi

⁹ Frye, 1975, p. xi

¹⁰ F. Gabrieli, ‘Ibn al-Mukaffa’ in Lewis, Manage, Pellat and Sehacht (eds.) *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* vol III (new edn), Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1971, pp. 883-885; S. Enderwitz, ‘al-Shu’ubiyya’ in Bosworth, Donzel, Heinrichs, Lecomte (eds.) *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* vol IX (new edn.), Leiden, Brill, 1997, pp. 513-516

set the stage for the latter's revival in later centuries.¹¹ By the tenth century, as Frye again points out, Persian underwent a renaissance as the revitalizing influx of Arabic loan-words and grammatical structures, together with the Arabic script, fashioned a poetical language with even greater scope for literary expression which paved the way for many of the greatest cultural expressions of Medieval Islam namely the poetry of Hafez, Sa'adi, Khayyam and Rumi. This fusion of Arabic with Middle Persian deriving from Sassanian era, still the lingua franca of the majority of the Iranian plateau's peoples, would create the 'New Persian' language of the tenth and eleventh centuries which became the dominant cultural language of the eastern Islamic world.¹²

A renaissance, though, required a princely patron and it was the Samanid court in Bukhara which eagerly patronized Persian poets and in so doing firmly entrenched this blossoming of New Persian. The finest expression of this literary renaissance would come courtesy of another patron, Mahmoud of Ghazni, who commissioned Ferdowsi's magnum opus, the *Shahnameh*. Regarded by many Iranians today as the foundation text of Iranian nationalism, the *Shahnameh* recounts centuries of Iranian history from the mystical Iranian kings at the dawn of history, to the Achaemenids and Alexander the Great's invasion, through to the Sassanians and finally the Arab invasions of the seventh century. It is the story of the rise of the Iranian people and their struggle against enemies within and without. The text abounds with larger-than-life charismatic Kings and villains, and is suffused with timeless values of patriotism, heroism, honour, and justice. Few Iranians today are unfamiliar with the penultimate scenes in the *Shahnameh* when the Iranian General Rostam senses the coming victory of the Arabs at Qadisiyya and mourns his country's inevitable defeat.¹³ Despite the nationalistic bent modern audiences may attribute to the epic, it

¹¹ Enderwitz, p. 514. See Lazard who rejects the notion that the Shu'ubiyya movement was "linguistic nationalism"; G. Lazard, 'Rise of the New Persian Language' in R. Frye (ed.) The Cambridge History of Iran vol. 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Seljuqs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 603. On the contribution of Iranian scholars to the Arabic language see V. Danner, 'Arab Literature in Iran' in R. Frye (ed.) The Cambridge History of Iran vol. 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Seljuqs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 566-594

¹² For a succinct overview of the New Persian renaissance see Frye, 1962, pp. 252-255. See also Lazard.

¹³ For Rostam's mournful letter to his brother see A. Ferdowsi, Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings, trans by D. Davis, New York, Penguin, 2006, pp. 832-837

would not be correct to depict Ferdousi as an anti-Islamic or anti-Arab nationalist – the New Persian renaissance which culminated in the *Shahnameh* was both a process of internationalizing Islam as well as preserving the essential cultural touchstones of the Iranian civilization. Writing in the Arabic script, accepting the religion of the Arabs, and at the same time preserving for future generations the great legends of pre-Islamic Iran was the real genius of poets like Ferdousi. In preserving and transmitting the legend of Iran, Ferdousi would become a legend himself.¹⁴

The ‘legend’ of Iran, then, is perhaps the most appropriate way to encapsulate the continuities across time and space on the Iranian plateau. As Iran limped into the Early Modern era, her civilization retarded by centuries of Mongol and Timurid depredations and her lands divided amongst various kingdoms and khanates, one could scarcely speak of a coherent and contiguous Iranian nation.¹⁵ But through a deep cultural reservoir nourished by the Persian language, and a historical memory preserved in epics such as the *Shahnameh* which were transmitted orally between generations, the legend of Iran as a brilliant civilization and collective identity persisted, however vague and misunderstood it may have been. Correctly refraining from casually referring to a ‘nation’ Peter Avery summed up:

...Iran has to a remarkable degree unfailingly betrayed signs of a basic continuity in attitudes and ideals; although it must be remembered that this is a matter of abstractions, assumed as a refuge by the people, or perverted by individuals in the pursuit of power, as a recurring pattern of historical exigencies has enhanced their appeal. Nevertheless a distinctive Iranian civilization has persisted from the Oxus to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and from the Caucasus to Northwest India, and from this two things may be understood: first, the resilience of those who have become heirs of the Iranian legend, and second, the tenacious loyalty this legend has evoked.¹⁶

¹⁴ As a favourite epic amongst Western audiences, the *Shahnameh* has been extensively studied. For a good overview of its structure and themes see R. Levy, *An Introduction to Persian Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 64-81. On the *Shahnameh*'s meaning for Iranian audiences past and present see S. Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation*, New York, Plume, 1998, pp. 62-65

¹⁵ C. Irving, *Crossroads of Civilization: 3000 Years of Persian History*, London, Book Club Associates, 1979, p. 146

¹⁶ P. Avery, *Modern Iran*, London, Ernest Benn, 1965, p. 14

The riddle of Iran and Shi'ism

In some quarters it is thought that Ferdousi himself was a Shi'ite, an assumption which has perpetuated the long-standing myth that Iranians, chafing under the yoke of Sunni Arab domination, naturally gravitated towards Shi'ism because it spoke to their own cultural values and offered them a way to maintain a national identity while remaining Moslems.¹⁷ According to this view, when the first Safavid ruler, Shah Ismail, imposed Twelver Shi'ism upon Iran by decree in 1501, Iranians, who had allegedly sympathized with the underlying values of this sect for many centuries, eagerly converted en masse to the new state religion and accepted it as an integral part of Iranian identity. Such a perspective has long existed in Western historiography on Iran. A number of scholars have spoken of a "Persian Islam" defined by the interlocking strands of Shi'ism and Sufism despite the fact that Shi'ism was splintered into a variety of sects strewn across the Iranian plateau in the centuries leading up to the Safavid era, and was not necessarily pro-Sufi in outlook.¹⁸ In a similar vein Edward Browne captured the essence of this thinking when he credited the rise of the Safavid dynasty with "the restoration of the Persian Empire and the re-creation of the Persian nationality after an eclipse of more than eight centuries and a half".¹⁹

Another, more recent, author who has examined the link between Shi'ism and Iranian nationalism is Sandra Mackey who observes that "[i]n the most simplistic terms, Sunni orthodoxy portrays Arab culture, Shi'ite nonconformity mirrors Persian culture".²⁰ She then proceeds to outline the multiple ways in which Shi'ism and Iranianness (*Iraniyyat*) were uniquely harmonized and why, therefore, Iranians

¹⁷ See for example Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, 'Ferdowsi' in E. Yarshater (ed.) Encyclopaedia Iranica vol. IX, New York, Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1999, p. 519

¹⁸ See for example G.M. Wickens, 'Religion', in A. J. Arberry (ed.) The Legacy of Persia, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 150. On the diversity of religion, particularly amongst the various Shi'ite sects, in Iran during the medieval Islamic era see W. Mandelung, 'Minor Dynasties in Northern Iran' in R. Frye (ed.) The Cambridge History of Iran vol. 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Seljuqs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 198-249 and also A. Bausani, 'Religion in the Saljuq Period', in J.A. Boyle (ed.) The Cambridge History of Iran vol 5: The Seljuq and Mongol Periods, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 283-302

¹⁹E. Browne, A Literary History of Persia, vol. IV, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959 (5th ed.), p.1

²⁰ Mackey, p. 41

embraced religious schism in order to assert their national identity. Firstly, Mackey maintains, Shi'ism gave Iran "the specific territorial and political identity" Iranians had been yearning for since the Arab invasions of the seventh century. At a deeper level, Mackey goes on, Shi'ism and Iraniyyat possessed a number of striking philosophical and cultural parallels which endeared the minority sect of Islam to Iranians. Iranians equated the martyrdom of Ali and Hossein, two of the most revered Shi'ite Imams, with their own experience as a defeated and subjugated people. In the Imams the Iranians also saw their archetype style of political leadership, namely that of authoritarian charismatic rule dedicated to restoring justice and leading the forces of good against evil, all of which converged with the ancient ideals of Persian Kingship.²¹ The parallels did not stop there. Mackey also claims that there were profound eschatological similarities between Shi'ism and the pre-Islamic religion of Zoroastrianism: just as in the latter the Last Judgement will be announced by the messiah Saoshyant who will overthrow the forces of evil led by Ahriman, in Shi'ism the Twelfth Imam will return at the end of time to preside over the final battle between Satan and Imam Ali. Finally, the esoteric aspects of Shi'ism with its belief in divinely-ordained charismatic leadership that boasts knowledge of the 'hidden' meanings of Islam dovetailed with the enduring Iranian interest in the outward expression of Islamic mysticism, Sufism.²² Out of this multifaceted union between Shi'ism and Iranian culture, Mackey concludes, emerged modern Iran's "emotional and aesthetic nationalism".²³

Such romantic notions of the links between Shi'ism and Iranian national identity have been cast aside by other scholars of Iranian history. Yann Richard notes that however strong the attachment between Iran and Shi'ism may appear today, in

²¹ Other scholars have endeavoured to demonstrate the fundamental similarities between Shi'ism and Iranian political culture. Mohammad Reza Behnam argues that Iranian politics is conditioned by two underlying tendencies: an authoritarian political culture (monarchical rule, hierarchical religious institutions) and an anti-authoritarian political culture (the desire to challenge corrupt authority and establish just rule). Both of these tendencies, he argues, are buttressed by the dual quietist/activist streak in Shi'ism. See M. Reza Behnam, *Cultural Foundations of Iranian Politics*, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1986

²² Others have seized on the links between Shi'ism and Sufism. Sayyed Hossein Nasr writes, "Shi'ism and Sufism, then, possess a common parentage in that they are both linked with the esoteric dimension of the Islamic revelation and in their earliest history drew inspiration from the same sources". See S.H. Nasr, 'Shi'ism and Sufism' in S.H. Nasr, H. Dabashi and S.V.R. Nasr (eds.) *Shi'ism – doctrines, thought and spirituality*, Albany, State University of New York, 1988, p.107

²³ Mackey, pp. 65, 85-86, 93-100

reality the latter does not give the slightest encouragement to any Iranian tendency.²⁴ Shi'ism began as a movement in support of the rights of Ali and his descendants to be the rightful Caliphs, which by Imam Hossein's time had become essentially an Arab civil war. The Quran, the Hadiths and the prayers are all of course in Arabic. Moreover the holiest cities in Shi'ism, Najaf and Karbala, are situated in Iraq. Last but not least, such thinking ignores the millions of Shi'ites in other countries for whom equating their religion with Iranian culture would seem downright strange if not offensive.²⁵ Endeavouring to intrinsically link Shi'ism with Iranian nationalism, therefore, is a somewhat risky intellectual task.

The eminent scholar of religion in Iran, Alessandro Bausani, has resolutely dispelled this romantic notion of Shi'ite Islam as an expression of Iraniyyat. He scorned the attempts by other scholars to discover in Shi'ism an 'Aryan' Persian reaction to Arab Sunnism, and insisted that the origins of Shi'ism had no innate connection with Iranian culture. "On the contrary", Bausani dryly noted, "...it was an Arab form of religion imposed on Persia by a Turkish dynasty".²⁶ Ultimately, in Bausani's view, the Safavid "Shi'itization" of Iran came down to the imperatives of state-building and "had nothing to do with the Iranian spirit, with learned Shi'ite theology, or with earlier traditional Persian centers of Shi'ism".²⁷ Such an analysis accords with the view of historians who have studied the rise of the Safavids from their origins as a Sufi order on the banks of the Caspian Sea to Shah Ismail's eventual coronation as Shah of Iran in 1501 in Tabriz. The declaration of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of state was less a culmination of Shi'ite Iranian nationalism and more a convenient political ideology for the Safavids which provided the essential foundations of their legitimacy. Through an elaborately concocted genealogy, the Safavid Shahs claimed descent from Imam Ali through the seventh Imam, Musa ibn Jafar Kazim, which in turn bolstered their claims to be the representatives on Earth of the Hidden Imam. The Safavids also proffered the old Iranian legend that Ali's younger son, Hossein, had married the daughter of Yazdigerd III, the last Sassanian

²⁴ Mackey, p. 41; Y. Richard, *Shi'ite Islam: polity, ideology and creed*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p.77

²⁵ See G. Fuller and R. Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999.

²⁶ A. Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, New York, Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000, p. 299

²⁷ Bausani, pp. 701-702

Emperor. In one swoop the Safavids cleverly presented themselves as both familial Earthly representatives of the Hidden Imam, and the rightful heirs of the ancient Persian Kings who ruled with divine sanction as the 'Shadow of God on Earth'.²⁸ For Shah Ismail, at least, there could be no greater mark of legitimacy in the Iranian mind.

But Ismail did not make such a momentous decision for dynastic reasons alone. Harnessing a dynamic religious ideology in the service of the state over time gave his new realm a unity, direction, purpose and strength. In 1501, of course, Ismail's kingdom scarcely extended outside Tabriz and it would take two more decades of bitter fighting before the Safavids conquered Iran. But this sense of religious fervour and determination was an important factor in the eventual success of the Safavid enterprise. Twelver Shi'ism also gave the Safavid state a distinct territorial and political identity, differentiating it from surrounding Sunni states. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Ismail's nascent Shi'ite state soon raised the hackles of the Sunni Ottoman Turks who accused the Safavids of, among other things, stirring unrest among the Turkmen of Ottoman Anatolia. In August 1514 Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim invaded Iran with a huge army of 200,000 men and resoundingly defeated the Safavid Army personally commanded by Shah Ismail.²⁹ While the Ottomans eventually withdrew, the defeat shattered Ismail's quasi-divine status amongst his soldiers, and he spent the rest of his days as a depressed alcoholic. Nevertheless, by the time of his death on May 23 1524, Shah Ismail had launched Iran on an irreversible course towards becoming a Shi'ite nation.³⁰ It would take another 200 years for the majority of Iranians to convert to Shi'ite Islam, but over time the Safavids would succeed in their quest to implant Shi'ism within Iran. As Roger Savory notes, "[I]n short, the imposition by the Safavids of Ithna 'Ashari [Twelver] Shi'ism as the official religion of the state had the effect of producing a

²⁸ R. Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 27

²⁹ Savory, p.40

³⁰ There are a number of very good histories of the rise of the Safavids on which this very short overview is based. In addition to Savory see D. Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797*, London, Longman, 1988, chapters 11-12 and H.R. Roemer, 'The Safavid Period', in Jackson and Lockhart (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Iran vol. 6: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 189-350

greater awareness of national identity, and thus creating a stronger and more centralized government".³¹

While it is debatable just how quickly a "national identity" took root, Savory is correct in highlighting that Shi'ism was ultimately *imposed* upon Iran rather than organically emerging from within. Iran became a Shi'ite nation because of historical circumstance - and in particular because of a political decision taken by a Turkish dynasty which began life as a Sufi Order - not because of some dormant yearning in the Iranian soul. Iran, in other words, did indeed become a Shi'ite nation, forever cut off from its Sunni neighbours, but to ascribe this development to an enduring national consciousness is to read history backwards. Moreover such intellectual forays into the reputed links between Iranian identity and Shi'ism in Iran have long since become pointless. As Richard Cottam notes, it would require a team of "poets and social psychologists" to explain why Iranians in the sixteenth century "responded so naturally and warmheartedly" to the Shi'ite sect.³² Ultimately, it seems, the issue has not only been romanticized but also over-analyzed: instead of accepting the vagaries and happenstance of history which created the Shi'ite nation of Iran today, historians have been chasing red herrings and searching for esoteric explanations which often do not exist. We can safely conclude, however, that whatever the underlying reasons for this mass conversion, the common bond of religion had "manifold" consequences for nationalism in the modern era not the least of which was providing the basis of a unified national community and a cultural reservoir of motifs, imagery and language which would influence the discourse of nationalism in the centuries to come.³³ There was nothing inevitable about the Iranian conversion to Shi'ism but by implanting the sect within their realm the Safavids ensured that over time it became a national religion, a historical watershed which would be reflected in the combined religious and nationalist discourses of the Islamic Republic.³⁴

³¹ Savory, p.30

³² Cottam, 1978, p. 134

³³ Cottam writes of the "Ninety per cent of the Iranian people are Shiites; and the consequences of this statistic for nationalism are manifold". See Cottam, 1978, p. 134

³⁴ Hamid Algar, for example, writes that the "elevation of Shi'ism to the station of national religion in Iran by the Safavids in the early sixteenth century brought a turning point in its history: it became finally and indelibly associated with Iran as its homeland and stronghold" H. Algar, Religion and

The Rise of Modern Iranian Nationalism

The third facet of Iranian nationalism which demands some investigation is the question of its emergence in the modern era. As we noted above until recent times there was a traditional dichotomy between those who claimed nationalism extended far back into Iranian history, and others who believed it was a modern phenomenon epitomized by Reza Shah's iron-fisted nation-building. Richard Cottam's *Nationalism in Iran*, long the standard reference work in English on the subject, steered a middle course by arguing that while the "roots of nationalism" reached back to the Achaemenid era, it was only by the 1890s that modern nationalism became a "significant force in Iran".³⁵ In the last decade, however, a new generation of Iranian scholars has explored the emergence of nationalism in nineteenth century Iran in much greater detail and with more theoretical sophistication. In essence this new historiography sees Iranian nationalism as a multifaceted phenomenon which, rather than suddenly manifesting in the 1890s or the 1920s, was the result of a much longer process of intellectual development extending back into the mid-nineteenth century. Understanding the development of the nationalist discourse and praxis in this era is the key to fully comprehending nationalism in the Islamic Republic.

As in many other parts of the Islamic world, nationalism in Iran emerged from a milieu of abject weakness vis-à-vis the West, and it was this chronic decline which sponsored a growing reformist tendency intent on borrowing certain aspects of Western modernity to arrest Iran's growing backwardness. Such a decline had long roots and presented a great challenge to those nineteenth reformers who wished to reverse the country's steep decline. The chaotic eighteenth century had witnessed the eclipse of the ailing Safavid dynasty, the violent reign of Nadir Shah (1732-1747), and the eventual triumph of the Qajar tribal confederation whose cruel leader, Agha Mohammad Khan, finally disposed of the rival Zand dynasty of Shiraz in 1796 to assert a measure of suzerainty over the realm. Agha Mohammad Khan was assassinated in 1797 – an indication once again of how fraught Iran's political

State in Iran 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, p. 5

³⁵ Cottam, 1978, p. 11

situation remained after years of war and dynastic change – and was succeeded by Fath Ali Shah whose long reign (1797-1834) brought a measure of stability to the country.³⁶ Nevertheless, as Clive Irving notes, the extent of Iran's stagnation at the dawn of the nineteenth century rendered any sense of 'nation' extremely fragile.³⁷ The weakness of the state, the parlous condition of the economy and the widespread breakdown of law and order meant Iran was, to recall Anthony Smith's argument, more an *ethnie* than a nation. The shell of Iran remained but it was being progressively chipped away from the outside by the Ottomans and Russians. Within, the lack of a single political culture, unified economy, mass media and education system, or a unified legal code of common rights barely merited the label 'nation'.

Upon taking power the Qajars soon realized that their power was heavily circumscribed by internal and external challenges which conspired to debilitate Iran further. On the domestic front the state's prerogative was limited by the entrenched power of the Shi'ite clergy, a legacy of the Safavids who had supported the growth of clerical power as a means of entrenching Shi'ism within Iran. The imported Bahraini and Lebanese Shi'ite jurists, together with the native Iranian religious administrative elites patronized by the Safavid Shahs, had over time evolved into a powerful corporate institution, one of the very few to survive the upheavals of the eighteenth century.³⁸ Whereas under the Safavids the clergy was obliged to accept the patronage and therefore religious pretensions of the Shahs who arrogated to themselves spiritual legitimacy through a claimed descent from the Imams, the Qajars disavowed such claims. The Qajar Shahs, most notably the famously pious Fath Ali Shah, implicitly accepted that the Qajar polity had two poles of power: the Shah as temporal ruler and the clergy as the custodians of the state religion. Such a bifurcation was given religious justification by prominent jurists who argued that the political and religious authority of the Hidden Imam

³⁶ Nevertheless one scholar still likened Fath Ali Shah's kingdom to a "derelict estate" so weak was royal writ. See G. Hambly, 'Iran during the reigns of Fath Ali Shah and Muhammad Shah' in P. Avery, G. Hambly and C. Melville (eds.), The Cambridge History of Iran: vol. VII, From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 144

³⁷ Irving, pp. 181-183

³⁸ For a very detailed study of the rise of the Shi'ite clergy in the Safavid era and thereafter see S. Arjomand, The shadow of God and the Hidden Imam : religion, political order, and societal change in Shi'ite Iran from the beginning to 1890, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984

devolved to the Shah and the clerics through respective “specified vice-regencies” in which the Shah recognized the uncontested religious authority of the clergy who in return legitimized the Shah’s purely temporal authority.³⁹ This theoretical dichotomy was reflected in the very real power the clergy possessed in Iranian society ranging from control over the education and Sharia court systems through to the significant financial resources and land endowments wielded by senior clerics.⁴⁰

While the Qajars learned to live with a powerful clergy, however much that enfeebled their prerogatives, external powers posed a clear threat to Iran’s territorial integrity. Despite military modernization efforts launched by Crown Prince Abbas Mirza, Iran was quickly defeated in the two Russo-Persian Wars of 1804-1813 and 1826-1828 which compelled it to cede land to the Tsar on both occasions.⁴¹ If there was any victor at all on the Iranian side it was the clergy who had so successfully aroused passions for war and had even goaded Fath Ali Shah into declaring the second conflict a jihad. In contrast to the feckless Shahs upon whom the shame of defeat rested, the clerics had revealed their potential role as the real leaders of a new entity which was coalescing in the minds of many Iranians – the nation.⁴² Nevertheless the clerics missed an opportunity to assert their enduring leadership over the nation, for while it was easy for them to criticize the land losses, extraterritoriality agreements, and tariff concessions imposed by the British and Russians, the clergy refused to endorse the desperately-needed reform and modernization efforts. Instead the clergy was gleefully distracted by leading the mid-century suppression of the Babi heresy. Admittedly the great modernizer and Naser-ed Din Shah’s Chief Minister, Amir Kabir, was heavily involved in this crackdown too, but it was the clergy, along with scheming courtiers and powerful

³⁹ Arjomand, 1984, p. 226-230

⁴⁰ On the clergy’s status in society see Algar, 1969, pp. 1-22

⁴¹ N. Keddie and Y. Richard, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 35-41. While Mirza did launch a New Army (*nezam-e jadid*), staffed with European officers, it performed poorly. Keddie concludes that overall “strikingly little attention” was given to developing a modern military. See N. Keddie, ‘Iran under the later Qajars, 1848-1922’ in P. Avery, G. Hambly and C. Melville (eds.), The Cambridge History of Iran: vol. VII. From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 176-177. See also Hambly, pp. 158-159

⁴² Hamid Algar writes: “The ulama had been used initially as instruments for the arousing of religious emotions; but their success in arousing these emotions revealed their potential strength as leaders of the nation”. Algar, 1969, p. 93

landlords, which sabotaged the Minister's proposed wholesale military, financial and economic reforms and encouraged the Shah to have him murdered.⁴³ This event was symptomatic of the Qajar approach for the rest of the century. By seeking refuge in the false security of the informal territorial guarantees given by the British and Russians, the Shahs resisted fundamental reforms which they assumed would only antagonize vested interests in Iranian society and might spark revolutionary protest.⁴⁴

The Qajars and clergy thus shared a strange relationship at once antagonistic and mutually dependent. The Qajars relied on the clerical recognition of temporal authority and the ability of the clerics to arouse popular support for the Shahs' misguided military adventures. The clergy in return expected the Shahs to protect Iran from the encroaching infidel powers and to resist modernizing reforms which might undercut clerical standing in Iranian society. The catch was that in refusing to embark on reforms the Qajars perpetuated Iran's backwardness which in turn only exacerbated further imperialist control over Iran's politics and economy. This state of affairs would bring rebukes from the clergy later in the century, but for much of the 1800s the clerics and Qajars shared an essential conception of Iran as a conservative Shi'ite realm. In the second half of the nineteenth century this notion of Iran would be completely re-evaluated.

The "refashioning" and "rescripting" of Iran as a modern nation encompassed a number of dimensions, discourses and actors.⁴⁵ The first sphere in which Iran was "newly imagined" was geography.⁴⁶ As Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet argues, the contraction of Iran's frontiers in the wars with Russia prompted an interest in recording, mapping and preserving the country's frontiers and landscapes – what she terms the "new geography" of the Qajar era. It was the Qajar state endeavoured to promote this new field, in particular by establishing a new technical college in Tehran at the behest of Amir Kabir. Dar al-Funun, opened in 1851, was modeled on the military staff colleges of Europe and offered such subjects as geography and

⁴³ Keddie, 2003, pp. 37-57. See also Keddie 1991, p. 182

⁴⁴ Keddie, 2003, pp. 49-50

⁴⁵ See Tavakoli-Targhi

⁴⁶ Tavakoli-Targhi, p. 77

topography to better prepare Qajar diplomats and bureaucrats in the arts of boundary delimitation and international negotiations in which Iran had theretofore hardly distinguished itself. Qajar diplomats' schooling in the finer points of cartography was bolstered by a proliferation of geography journals and other scientific papers on physical and political geography replete with European geographic terms. The state's growing interest in frontiers and national sovereignty was further exemplified by the issuance of travel documents as a means of regulating who came in and out of the country. In 1900, for example, a law was promulgated which stipulated that all Iranians who wished to travel abroad would have to apply for a passport, the right to which was dependent on verifiable citizenship (*tab'iyat*). For the first time, by contrast, foreigners were now required to possess visas for entry into Iran, a symbolic if meaningless assertion of sovereignty.⁴⁷

This interest in the patriotic themes of geography was not only confined to the state. Naser-ed Din Shah's famous expeditions across the length and breadth of Iran encouraged an upsurge in travelogue writing which reached a peak during his reign. Newspapers inside and outside Iran seconded such literary celebrations by chiming with patriotic calls for its readership to embrace the love of the homeland (*vatan*), a slogan which became increasingly popular in discussions of Iran's plight. One newspaper, for example, effusively described the homeland as the fount of Iranians' collective and individual pride, honour, dignity and identity. By endowing the homeland in such heroic terms, readers were left in no doubt as to the necessity of defending its contracting domains.⁴⁸

If the patriotic ideal of extolling and defending the *vatan* "provided the primary impetus for Iranian nationalist discourse", the gradual influence of European ideas of nationalism saw a greater focus over time amongst Iranian intellectuals on the *mellat* – the 'Iranian people' – as the embodiment of a new political and cultural community: the nation.⁴⁹ As Ahmad Ashraf rightly points out (and in doing so confirming Smith's observations on nationalism as a whole) the foundations or

⁴⁷ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 48-74

⁴⁸ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 50-63

⁴⁹ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p. 7

building blocks of Iranian nationalism already existed. ‘Iran’ was not wholly invented nor conjured out of thin air, for the “mythic image of Iran” had long been nourished in the historical memory of Iranians across many centuries by legends and epic poetry.⁵⁰ In medieval maps the Iranian plateau was named ‘*Iranzamin*’ or ‘*Iranshahr*’, an indication of the undisputed antiquity of Iranian civilization.⁵¹ Nevertheless in several profound ways the Iranian *mellat* was re-conceptualized by eminent intellectuals into a modern nation, boasting an illustrious past, and which, they imagined, could recapture its former glory if only the yoke of tradition and superstition could be overcome.

The starting point for these nineteenth century intellectuals was Iran’s patent backwardness which they ascribed to the Arab invasions centuries before. Contrasting the abject political, cultural and economic decay of the Qajar era, such thinkers as Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878) held up Iran’s pre-Islamic civilization as a golden age of might, justice and progress. Akhundzadeh claimed, for example, that the Persian Empire was so progressive that it had in place a system of social welfare for its subjects. In Qajar Iran, by contrast, the progressive and modernizing spirit had been strangled by the clergy which resisted change and encouraged fatalism instead of dynamism. The centuries-long association with Arab-Islamic culture, Akhundzadeh argued, had grievously retarded Iran’s development.⁵²

Glorifying ancient Iran served as both a comment on Qajar Iran and a form of escapism. Iranian historians endeavoured to cultivate this passion for ancient Iran by publishing histories which lauded the exploits of the Great Kings and the grandeur of the Persian Empire. A publishing boom in Iran and India during the nineteenth century fed this appetite for pre-Islamic Iran by releasing multiple editions of the *Shahnameh* which were recited in coffeehouses across Iran.

⁵⁰ A. Ahmad, ‘The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran’, *Iranian Studies*, 26 (1), 1993, p. 160

⁵¹ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 15-18

⁵² On Akhundzadeh see F. Kashani-Sabet, ‘Cultures of Iranianness: The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism’ in N. Keddie and R. Mathee (eds.), *Iran and the Surrounding World – Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002, pp. 162-181 and Marashi, pp. 66-76

Reflecting this literary renaissance, a number of Qajar Princes took the names Firaydun, Jamshid and the like after their namesake heroes in Ferdousi's epic. The fetish for pre-Islamic Iran even prompted a renewed interest in Zoroastrianism amongst the intelligentsia for whom Iran's primordial religion was a marker of national distinction, unsullied by the intrusion of Islam.⁵³

At heart of this revival was a re-conception of historical time. While Iran's epic poetry had perpetuated the legend of a timeless Iran, official historiography, usually centred around the court, was predicated on the cyclical history of succeeding dynasties and the overarching "sacred time" of Islam. Akhundzadeh and his ilk challenged these "Islamicate narratives" of Iranian history and instead conceptualized a metanarrative in which the Iranian people constituted a self-conscious collectivity across several millennia.⁵⁴ It was within this metanarrative, moreover, that these thinkers charted Iran's rise and decline. Before the arrival of Islam, they claimed, the Iranians possessed the same progressive tendencies of Western civilization ranging from a talent for technical invention through to a supposed interest in the foundations of constitutional politics; even the refined custom of dining at a table was supposedly Iranian in origin. Highlighting this manufactured link between Iran and the West, another historian, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, argued that the French and Iranian nations were "born from the same father and mother".⁵⁵ Such sentiments demonstrated the desire of Kermani and others to appropriate desirable Western manners of European culture together with the underpinnings of modernity by presenting them as originally Iranian. By contrast the manifest ills of Qajar Iran were represented as the result of an externally-imposed malady, the Arab invasions of the seventh century, a decay which was in turn perpetuated by reactionary elements in Iranian society, namely the clergy. By dissociating Iran from the Arab-Islamic culture, Akhundzadeh, Kermani and other thinkers emphasized that the metanarrative in effect could resume its march: shorn of the retarding influence of Islamic strictures Iran could once again

⁵³ Tavakoli-Targhi, pp. 80-93. On 'neo-Zoroastrianism' see also Marashi, pp. 60-63

⁵⁴ Marashi, pp. 66-69; Tavakoli-Targhi, pp. 78-79

⁵⁵ Quoted in Tavakoli-Targhi, p. 83

become a beacon of progress and “an equal and authentic member of a trans-European modernity”.⁵⁶

Such effusive talk of modernity and progress in the works of these thinkers demonstrated the profound influence of European thought on the evolving discourse of modern Iranian nationalism. Akhundzadeh’s religious iconoclasm and his penchant for lacing his Farsi works with French vocabulary, to take but one example, obviously stemmed from his familiarity with the ideas of the French Enlightenment which he and other scholars accessed through Russian, English and Persian translations. Vaziri, however, argues that the nationalistic themes which flowed from the pens of Akhundzadeh, Kermani and others did not derive simply from a passing knowledge of European political and intellectual trends. He argues that this entire discourse of Iranian nationalism was a construct based on the dubious edifice of European Orientalism.⁵⁷ Far from proffering a national identity rooted in reality, these self-styled Iranian nationalists were in fact parroting the anachronistic and racist theories of British historians such as Sir John Malcolm who anachronistically ascribed a primordial national consciousness to the people of antiquity.⁵⁸ Exposed to this Orientalist historiography in exile or through the few works trickling into Iranian libraries (such as the one at the Dar al-Funun) Kermani and other historians uncritically imitated this European conceptualization of Iran’s long history. In particular they seized on the Orientalist fascination with the Aryan hypothesis which elevated the Indo-European peoples – Iranians included – as a uniquely civilized and talented race. Such a theory, of course, conveniently validated the desire to dissociate the ‘backward’ Semitic Arab culture from Iran’s own ‘authentic’ national culture. In doing so, Vaziri insists, these Iranian pseudo-historians were simply falling for the allure of the “simplistically linear view of history” expounded by European Orientalists.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Marashi, pp. 66-71

⁵⁷ Vaziri, pp. 99-142

⁵⁸ Sir John wrote “Though no country has undergone, during the last twenty centuries, more revolutions than Persia, there is perhaps none less altered in its condition....the Persians, so far as we have the means of judging, are not at present a very different people from what they were in the time of Darius...”. J. Malcolm, The History of Persia, from the most early period to the present time: containing an account of the religion, government, usages and character of the inhabitants of that kingdom, London, John Murray, 1829, p. 451

⁵⁹ Vaziri, p. 5

There is no doubt that the new spokesman for this burgeoning feeling of Iranian nationalism, the “hybridized” intelligentsia as Afshin Marashi labels them, were overly-enthralled by European ideals of nationalism and moreover by European notions of Iran’s supposedly primordial sense of nationhood.⁶⁰ In striving for an authentic national consciousness they were in fact reaching far outside their own homeland for intellectual inspiration, a paradox we shall observe again in the Pahlavi era. Engrossed in European-inflected fantasies of Iran’s past glory elicited from Orientalist literature, these intellectuals existed in a rarefied intellectual atmosphere far above the station of Iran’s masses. By contrast, Mostafa Vaziri argues, it was Islam rather than any kind of consciousness resembling modern nationalism which informed the worldview of the overwhelming majority of Iranians in this era.⁶¹ Richard Cottam concurs that nationalism remained an insignificant force in Iran before the 1890s; even by the turn of the century, he claims, only a small percentage of the population possessed a “frame of reference broad enough to comprehend nationalism”.⁶² Cottam, however, also points out that “nascent” nationalistic sentiments were beginning to coalesce, nourished by the historical memory of Iran’s great civilization together with the linguistic bond of Persian, and inflamed by an increasing awareness of the depredations of the imperial powers.⁶³ Ironically it was less the virtues of ancient Persia and more the vice of tobacco around which these sentiments would eventually emerge.

In 1891 Naser-ed Din Shah dispatched soldiers to a shrine south of Tehran to arrest one of his most trenchant critics, none other than Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who had incurred the monarch’s wrath for criticizing the Qajar practice of selling economic concessions to the Western powers. Convinced that an anti-regime leaflet attacking the government for such expedients was penned by al-Afghani, the Shah ordered his soldiers to drag the famed anti-imperialist agitator out of the shrine and force-march him across Iran in the depths of winter to the border with Ottoman Iraq where he was unceremoniously sent into exile. If the Shah imagined he had removed a major

⁶⁰ Marashi, p. 57

⁶¹ Vaziri, p. 175

⁶² Cottam, 1978, pp. 7-11

⁶³ Cottam, 1978, p. 13

irritant he was sorely mistaken. The year before he had conceded a monopoly over the production and distribution of tobacco to a British national. For a time the monopoly was kept secret but by the winter of 1891 political activists, many of whom were al-Afghani's disciples, were peddling pamphlets and underground newspapers, including al-Afghani's offending leaflet, which severely criticized the concession. As the scale of the concession on a product sold by the most powerful merchants and the lowliest shopkeepers dawned on the Iranian public, the growing discontent boiled over into protest. The first manifestation of open protest appeared in Shiraz whereupon the government sent the city's eminent cleric, Hajj Mirza Hasan Shirazi, into exile in Iraq. Waiting in Iraq, of course, was al-Afghani himself who took the opportunity to confer with Ayatollah Shirazi; he eventually wrote a famous letter to Shirazi calling on him to denounce the Shah's craven surrender to imperialism. A *fatwa*, attributed to Shirazi, and which urged all Iranians to desist from selling or using tobacco, galvanized opposition across Iran and led to a successful nationwide boycott. The revolt, considered the first successful mass protest movement in modern Iran, was also notable for the way in which the protests were coordinated by telegraph, offering an interesting perspective on the role of technology in the development of nascent nationalist sentiment. In the face of this nationwide outrage the Shah sheepishly withdrew the concession a year later.⁶⁴

Whether the Tobacco Concession revolt was, as Cottam argues, more an outpouring of wounded religious sensitivities than an expression of nationalist outrage aroused by the inroads of imperialism, there is no doubt that the event heralded a process in which parochial horizons were being gradually superseded by a growing national consciousness.⁶⁵ The older consciousness of Iran which permeated the folklore and epic poetry remained a staple of popular culture, but upon this bedrock now came the idea that Iranians constituted a coherent mass capable of collective action. Yet this new consciousness had yet to acquire concrete political definition, and while the clerics basked in the glory of their undisputed power to mobilize Iranians against a feckless state which abided increasing foreign encroachment, other groups within

⁶⁴ For a brisk account of the Tobacco Concession revolt see Keddie, 2003, pp. 60-63 and Keddie, 1991, pp. 195-200

⁶⁵ Cottam, 1978, pp. 13-14

the loose anti-Qajar coalition were beginning to re-conceptualize state-society relations in the dawning age of Iranian nationalism.⁶⁶

This re-conceptualization derived from the breakdown of the fragile relationship between state and society which the impact of the West had exacerbated. Hitherto the Qajar Shahs had been able to maintain their control by balancing the mutual jealousies and divisions within Iranians society. By the late nineteenth century, however, the increasing influence of imperialism unleashed a chain reaction in Iran's political economy. Ironically Iran's very backwardness somewhat inured it to European economic penetration but in short order the concessions and commercial capitulations made by the Qajar Shahs resulted in an influx of European goods into Iran which in turn dragged its pre-capitalist economy into the world economic system.⁶⁷ The myriad of regional economies became increasingly integrated into an ailing national economy, and given the Qajar Shahs' self-evident inability to launch meaningful reform to combat Iran's decline, grievances became increasingly national in scope, as the Tobacco Concession revolt demonstrated.⁶⁸ For the Qajars the old divide-and-rule policy was fast losing its efficacy in the modern age. The political space, by contrast, was gradually fracturing into "antagonistic poles" of the state and an ever more self-aware populace.⁶⁹ It was this *dawlat/mellat* divide which became a central feature of the emerging discourse of nationalism in the Constitutional Revolution.

The Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) was led by a similar coalition which had been in the vanguard of the Tobacco Concession revolt, namely certain high-ranking

⁶⁶ Hamid Algar argues that the traditional role of the clergy in opposing the state and resisting foreign encroachment found its greatest expression in the Tobacco Concession revolt. He also notes "If before the agitation, the struggle of the ulama with the state had been one of the recurring themes of Qajar history, it was thereafter the dominant one until the granting of the constitution". Algar, 1969, pp. 205-206

⁶⁷ C. Issawi, 'European Economic Penetration, 1872-1921' in P. Avery, G. Hambly and C. Melville (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: vol. VII. From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 590

⁶⁸ This link between the influence of imperialism, economic changes and the new political economy is deftly analyzed by Ervand Abrahamian. See. E. Abrahamian, 'The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 10 (3), August 1979, pp. 381-414

⁶⁹ Tavakoli-Targhi, pp. 94-95

clerics, merchants and the intelligentsia.⁷⁰ The great clerics and merchants were once again crucial in leading the movement but compared with the Tobacco Concession revolt the influence of the intelligentsia this time around more evident, particularly in the ideas which infused the discourse of the revolution. As we saw above, the intellectuals had long proffered a notion of an immemorial Iranian nation. The revolutionary agitation against the despotic Shah, however, encouraged intellectuals to re-define the nation as a modern political entity. Constitutional newspapers contrasted the despotic state with the ‘oppressed’, ‘justice-seeking’ nation – the *mellat* – which intellectuals and reformers regarded as the locus of sovereignty. These thinkers made clever use of the double articulation of *mellat* to coax the support of the reformist-minded clerics such as Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabaiee and Ayatollah Mir Hossein Na’ini who were also convinced that royal absolutism had to be countered by a consultative assembly of some description. *Mellat*, originally a term used to refer to a religious community, was now reformulated to uphold the ideals of revolutionary equality and national sovereignty espoused in the French Revolution. Whereas the concept of the ancient Iranian nation as found in the Orientalist-infused writings of Iranian intellectuals remained restricted to the upper echelons of the intelligentsia, these new conceptions of Iran as a national political community percolated down to the lower classes. Appropriately, when Mohammad Shah grudgingly inaugurated the National Assembly (*majles-e shura-ye melli*) crowds outside shouted “long live the people of Iran” (*zende bad mellat-e Iran*).⁷¹ The Constitutional press disseminated this new ideology across Iran, extolling Iranians to set aside ethnic and local attachments and subscribe to the heroic myth of a justice seeking, freedom-loving constitutional nation of Iran. This feeling of creating a ‘new’ homeland was encapsulated in the Fundamental Laws which established a new national flag and proudly boasted that Iran’s boundaries were forever after immutable.⁷²

⁷⁰ We will not exhaustively chronicle the revolution here; there exists several detailed works on the subject among them V. Martin, *Islam and Modernism: the Iranian Revolution of 1906*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1989 and M. Bayat, *Iran’s first revolution: Shi’ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991

⁷¹ Tavakoli-Targhi, pp. 93-99

⁷² Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 113-118

The triumph and ultimate tragedy of the Constitutional movement is well known and only the bare outlines need exposition here. In 1908 the Royalist forces bombarded the Majles in an attempt to snuff out the Constitutional movement which prompted an unlikely alliance of reformists, merchants, and tribesmen to march on Tehran and restore the Majles. Mohammad Ali Shah was forced to abdicate in favour of his youthful son, Ahmad Shah, who would become the last Qajar Shah. Conservative forces remained powerful, however, and with Russian connivance the Majles was forcibly dissolved in 1911. But what did constitutionalism mean for the developing discourse of Iranian nationalism? Much is often made of the supposed growing divide between Islam and nationalism in this era. In this line of thinking it was conservative clerics such as Fazlollah Nuri, aghast at the implications of constitutionalism which granted equality to all Iranians, non-Moslems included, who eventually came out against nationalism and in so doing created a permanent fissure between religion and nationalism in Iranian politics.⁷³ This view is somewhat oversimplified. It is true that Nuri and his ilk refused to countenance the idea of the equality of all Iranians and popular sovereignty which was implicit in the nationalist ideology of the Constitutionalists. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the clerics were from this point on forever opposed to the idea of nationalism and the concept of Iran as a distinct nation; rejecting popular sovereignty was not the same as rejecting nationalism for the two were never synonymous. Iranian nationalists were not averse to championing dictatorship if it served to advance their dreams of national glory as the following decade would demonstrate. By the same token the clerics were inclined to throw their lot in with other nationalist figures when they deemed prudent, the rise of Reza Shah being a case in point. While the Constitutional Revolution seemed to indicate that the relationship between Islam and nationalism was fraying, in truth the two remained tightly coiled together in this overwhelming Shi'ite nation.

This bigoted streak in Iranian nationalism which would culminate in the rise of Reza Shah was evident in the cultural policies of the Constitutionalists. As much as they

⁷³ Tavakoli-Targhi, for example, referring to the conservative forces as the Shariatists writes "The Shariatists' insistence on an Islamic consultative assembly and the Constitutionalists' insistence on a national consultative assembly resulted in the intensification of the antagonism between Islam and *millat-e Islam*". Tavakoli-Targhi, p. 101

bellowed loudly about popular sovereignty, egalitarianism and national unity in truth their conception of Iranian nationalism was predicated on the universalization of Persianism. The Fundamental Laws, for example, stipulated that Majles deputies be literate in Persian, and declared Shi'ite Islam as the nation's official religion.⁷⁴ In elevating the Shi'ite Persian core, however, the Constitutionalist willingly ignored the diversity of the Iranian nation which included, among others, Sunni Kurds and Azeri Turks who did not necessarily subscribe to the idea of a Shi'ite Persian nation. For all their modernist posturing the Constitutionalist remained closer to the conservative clerics than they might have imagined. In spite of the ongoing debate about whether or not the Constitutional Revolution was 'nationalist', Kashani-Sabet perhaps offers the most astute observation when she argues that the revolution shifted perceptions of Iran's territorial delineation. What was formerly an empire with a diffuse sense of cultural and historical distinctiveness was now a nation encompassing a geographically-bounded and politically self aware populace.⁷⁵ The Constitutional Revolution was in this respect a key milestone in the development of Iranian nationalism.

The aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution did not, however, bring national greatness. Instead the First World War brought continued national humiliation when British and Russian troops occupied the country, confirming once more the preponderant control over Iranian affairs these two powers had wielded. The government in Tehran declared neutrality in the conflict, while nationalists of various stripes who had coalesced into the Democratic Party established an alternative but ineffectual government in Kermanshah. In exile other Iranian nationalists published newspapers which were smuggled into Iran to rouse patriotic spirits by calling for a national jihad, once again endowing religious concepts with national meaning.⁷⁶ These exile newspapers, such as *Kaveh* published in Berlin by the noted nationalist Hasan Taqizadeh, sought a familiar solace in extolling the greatness of Ancient Iran as a forlornly hopeful panacea for wartime decrepitude.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 102-111

⁷⁵ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p. 143

⁷⁶ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p. 148

⁷⁷ Marashi, pp. 77-83

Iran's plight did not improve with the cessation of hostilities. At the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference the Iranian delegation was pointedly ignored by the victor nations, and in the same year the Anglo-Persian Treaty was foisted upon the weak government in Tehran, giving considerable control over Iran's internal affairs to Britain. The Treaty was overwhelmingly rejected by the Iranian public and the visceral reaction to it fed an aggrieved sense of nationalism which remained a staple of post-war newspapers whose editorials lamented the regression of the *mellat* and *vatan*.⁷⁸ Pent-up frustration with the central government's inability to arrest national decline manifested in two major post-war revolts, one led by Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani in Iranian Azerbaijan and the other headed by Mirza Kuchek Khan in Gilan. While both movements gave the appearance of being separatist movements by establishing breakaway republics (Khiabani established Azadistan and Kuchek Khan, the Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic) in reality they were decidedly patriotic, dedicated to restoring constitutional rights and ridding Iran of occupying forces.⁷⁹ It was the misfortune of Kuchek Khan, celebrated today as a true patriot, to enter an alliance of convenience with Red Army troops stationed in North Iran when Lenin was already secretly negotiating with the central government to withdraw from Iran.⁸⁰ Discredited and bereft of support, he froze to death in the icy wastes of the Alborz Mountains pursued relentlessly by a new strongman who would come to re-define Iranian nationalism in twentieth century Iran.

The Commander of the Cossack Brigade which suppressed these two uprisings was a no-nonsense, six-foot-four career officer named Reza Khan. Established by Tsarist officers in the nineteenth century, the Cossack Brigade was by 1920 the only remaining disciplined Iranian military force in the country, but what the central government may have imagined was its last saving grace in fact became the path to power for the ambitious Colonel. By 1925, having cleverly represented himself as the only figure capable of restoring law and order, and having also ingratiated

⁷⁸ Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p.p. 156-157; Katouzian, 1979, p. 537

⁷⁹ Homayoun Katouzian, for example, describes Kuchek Khan in this way: "A Shi'ite Muslim and unyielding patriot, Kuchek was an indefatigable fighter and an incorruptible leader whose sole ambition was to rid the country of foreign imperial domination and domestic administrative corruption". See Katouzian, 1979, p. 534. See also Cottam, 1978, pp. 102-106; Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p. 155

⁸⁰ Keddie, 2003, p.p. 77-82

himself with senior clerics to allay their fears of a republican takeover, Reza Khan seized the reigns of power and anointed himself as the new monarch, Reza Shah Pahlavi.⁸¹ The hapless Ahmad Qajar Shah was packed off to Europe.⁸²

It is important to remember that while Reza Shah became the paragon of modern Iranian nationalism in the post-Constitutional Revolution/post-First World War milieu, there were in fact various strands of nationalism within Iranian politics of this era. Homayoun Katouzian has identified three 'nationalist' trends in this period which emanated from the Constitutional Revolution and beyond. The first strand was the 'progressive nationalism' of Reza Shah and his acolytes, a heterogeneous group of westernized bureaucrats, intellectuals, poets, journalists and military officers who sought to cast aside the stultifying effect of traditional culture and transform Iran into a modern nation-state fired with the vision of the country's imperial greatness millennia before.⁸³ 'Liberal nationalism', with its deep commitment to the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution which represented a "synthesis between Shi'ite anti-despotism and western pluralism", embodied the second tendency. It contained within its ranks such future luminaries as Dr Mohammad Mossadegh who would later become a nationalist figurehead in his own right, as great as, if not more than, Reza Shah himself.⁸⁴ The third tendency, 'conservative nationalism', was exemplified by the towering figure of Seyyed Hasan Mudarris who had been Reza Khan's most dogged opponent in the Majles before his rise to the throne, although it could not be said that all conservative nationalists were so ill-disposed towards the future Shah, and certainly many of Modarres' clerical colleagues quietly supported the rise of a new monarch.⁸⁵ Yet in spite of Modarres' electrifying oratory which highlighted the dangers of despotism and untrammelled power, it was a measure of Iran's parlous post-war condition that many Iranians, desperate for an end to lawlessness and national humiliation, applauded the rise of

⁸¹ For an account of the exceedingly shrewd fashion in which Reza Shah assumed power see M. Faghfoory, 'Ulama-State Relations in Iran 1921-41', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19 (4), November 1987, pp. 413-432

⁸² For the rise of Reza Shah see C. Ghani, *Iran and the rise of Reza Shah : from Qajar collapse to Pahlavi power*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1998. For more succinct summaries see Keddie (2003) chapter 5 and Ansari, 2003 chapters 2-3

⁸³ Katouzian, 1979, pp. 541-542

⁸⁴ Katouzian, 1979, p. 544

⁸⁵ Katouzian, 1979, p. 544-551

Reza Shah. Even many liberal nationalists were early admirers of Reza Shah – the antithesis of constitutionalism – as a veritable national saviour who would bring the country back from the precipice.⁸⁶ Such approbation, moreover, reflected the post-war political climate in which Iran's political culture had become markedly militarized. The prodigious violence and upheaval during the war years was particularly auspicious for Reza Shah who deftly took on the mantle of the military hero destined to restore national greatness. Dispensing with the idea of redefining the nation through constitutionalism, Reza Shah believed that only strong central authority had the wherewithal to oversee the re-building of Iran. Upon assuming power Reza Shah moved quickly to launch a wide-ranging modernization programme under his firm hand. Convinced that modernization demanded a ruthless pursuit of centralized power and a concomitant assimilation of parochial identities, Reza Shah's government set about forcibly settling nomadic tribes and enforcing conscription to provide manpower for the national army and instill patriotic pride in Iran's menfolk. A crash programme of industrialization and infrastructure development was launched, ranging from the Shah's prized Trans-Iranian railway through to new power plants, roads, urban boulevards and universities. To oversee these ambitious reforms ten new ministries were established to replace the creaking Qajar bureaucracy, and a National Bank was founded to direct funds into modernization as well as providing a visible symbol of the state's determination to loosen British control over Iran's economy.⁸⁷

Reza Shah's reign is an important juncture in the history of Iranian nationalism for it was in this era that Iran made the final transition from being a traditional monarchy to a modern nation-state. Whereas the Qajar Shahs ruled as the 'Shadow of God on Earth', a title which implied the chasm between the monarchy and the society over which it ruled, Reza Shah ruled as self-conscious national monarch whose state-building efforts were predicated on the claim that the state was a representative and agent of this new common 'Iranian' culture. The Shah in other words was not so much above the people as a member a uniform collectivity, a social abstraction

⁸⁶M. Reza Ghods writes "Though the first Pahlavi monarch certainly exploited political divisions in his rise to power, both liberal and conservative Iranian nationalists were among Reza Khan's most outspoken early admirers". See Ghods, p. 35. See also Ansari, 2003, p. 32

⁸⁷ Ansari, 2003, pp. 42-59

known as the Iranian nation, and it was this very abstraction that the Pahlavi state, armed with greater bureaucratic muscle, endeavoured to inculcate in the population. Marashi sees this realignment of state-society relations, coiled around the concept of modern nationalism, as the “fundamental transformative experience of Iranian history”.⁸⁸

This “transformative experience” – buttressed by the historical intersection of the rise of the modern state, technological development, and various strands of nationalist intellectualism - was encapsulated by Reza Shah’s attempt to mold a uniform national identity. Even more than the national army, Reza Shah envisaged a national education system as a means of binding state and society through a singular national culture. In the effort to disseminate a new vision of Iran, the socialization of school pupils assumed a critical importance and to this end the state invested heavily in the education sector. The Ministry of Education soon became one of the most important ministries in the Pahlavi state, and it presided over a massive expansion of the primary, secondary and tertiary education system. As Cyrus Ghani notes, the number of elementary schools quadrupled between 1925 and 1939, a figure only surpassed by the six-fold increase in the number of secondary schools. Teachers colleges and various technical schools were also established, and in 1935 the University of Tehran was inaugurated as the preeminent higher education institution in the land.⁸⁹ The manner in which the administration of education was taken out the clergy’s hands was matched by the complete reorientation of the syllabus. While the Shah never possessed a scholarly bent or a detailed knowledge of the nationalist historiography of previous decades, his view of Iranian history was influenced by the fetish for pre-Islamic Iran which had flourished in high Tehran society for decades. Enamoured of the exploits of the Great Kings and the superlative achievements of Ancient Iran, the Shah resolved to develop a nationalist ideology which elevated the glory of pre-Islamic Iran and in so doing link this imperial heritage to his own contemporary dynasty. Developing a national curriculum to reflect this impulse became a top priority and in 1923 an eight-member Education Commission was appointed to begin the process of drafting

⁸⁸ Marashi, p. 6

⁸⁹ Ghani, p. 399

textbooks for Iran's schools. Iranian nationalists who had been in exile for years returned to Iran to take part in this effort and particular attention was paid to publishing a new history book that would reflect the underpinnings of Pahlavi nationalism. The first history textbook off the press was predictably a survey of Ancient Iran, focusing on the glories of the Aryan nation before the arrival of less civilized Arabs, the implication being that the arrival of Islam ushered in a Dark Age. Endeavouring to create a modernist historiography the authors relied less on Ferdowsi and more on scientific evidence such as numismatics, which once again betrayed the influence of Orientalist historiography.⁹⁰ A concomitant of this curricular renaissance was an emphasis on Persianizing the education system. Just as the constitutionalists conflated nationalizing with Persianizing, the Shah demanded that lessons be delivered in standard Persian with a view to gelling the nation together and suppressing minority cultures. To facilitate this linguistic nationalist drive, and to establish rules for creating Persian neologisms unleashed by modernization, a Persian Language Academy was established in the capital which worked assiduously to remove 'impure' Arabic words and replace them with older, 'purer' Persian words.⁹¹ By rediscovering this 'lost' authenticity and upholding the idea that Iran had been powerful and progressive before the arrival of Islam, the state echoed the outlook of the nineteenth century Iranian Orientalists who had stressed the compatibility of ancient Iran and the ideals of modernity. This curious juxtaposition of celebrating the old and hastening for the new would be the defining characteristic of Pahlavi nationalism, under both father and son.

Not only did Reza Shah seek to create a national consciousness among school pupils. In 1938 the Ministry of Public Enlightenment was established to promote patriotic feeling across Iran, and in so doing create a whole new national public culture. Through lectures, festivals and publications the Ministry extolled the virtues of patriotism, hard work, respect for the law, and loyalty to the state and ultimately the Shah himself. Such efforts built upon the national Ferdousi

⁹⁰ Marashi, pp. 88-109

⁹¹ On this exercise in "linguistic engineering" see J. Perry, 'Language Reform in Turkey and Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (3), August 1985, pp. 295-311 and M. Kia, 'Persian Nationalism and the campaign for language purification', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34 (2), April 1998, pp. 9-36

commemoration of 1934 in which lavish celebrations were staged marking the millennial anniversary of Iran's great poet. At Tus, outside Mashhad, Reza Shah had given a speech at Ferdousi's refurbished tomb, lauding the poet as the emissary of Iran's historical memory and national identity. A film biopic and international conference were also staged to mark the anniversary, while across Iran urban planners erected statues of Ferdousi and named streets after the great poet. New editions of the *Shanameh* rolled off printing presses. All these efforts highlighted Reza Shah's determination to join state and society through a secular national culture which denigrated Iran's Islamic culture in favour of pre-Islamic Iran whose towering achievements the Shah believed revealed the Iranian capacity for revival in the modern era.⁹²

Yet for all Reza Shah's considerable achievements in modernizing Iran, it was perhaps inevitable that the imperious manner in which he proceeded with modernization would provoke opposition from different sectors of Iranian society. As early as the late-1920s, Iran was rocked by anti-conscription riots in major urban centres, and insurrections in the countryside amongst peasants and the nomadic tribes.⁹³ It did not take long either for the Shah's reforms to raise the ire of the clergy which had initially supported the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty. Uneasy about the scope and pace of the Shah's modernization programme, the clerics were particularly aggrieved at the secularization of the education and judicial systems which had long been an essential preserve of clerical power in Iranian social and cultural life. Even more galling was the banning of the veil and the official proclamation which forced men to adopt the European-style brimmed 'Pahlavi caps'. Both impositions were seen as a swipe at Islam by many conservatives; the first an assault on female modesty, the second a devious ploy to prevent prayer since the brims prevented prostration during prayers. The massacre of anti-regime demonstrators at the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad in 1935, together with Reza Shah's infamous thrashing of a senior cleric in Qom for allegedly insulting the improperly veiled Queen appeared to confirm in many conservative minds the anti-

⁹² Marashi, pp. 104-132

⁹³ S. Cronin, 'Modernity, Change and Dictatorship in Iran: The New Order and its Opponents, 1927-29', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39 (2) April 2003, pp. 1-36

Islamic direction of the new order.⁹⁴ Reza Shah never considered himself agnostic or anti-religious, yet the combination of modernization policies designed to circumscribe the traditional role of the clergy alongside perceived affronts against religion conspired to create the impression that the Pahlavi state was determined to undermine Islam. Despite initially supporting Reza Shah's rise to power, many clerics were now sensing a growing divide between Pahlavi nationalism and Islam which would reverberate across the twentieth century.⁹⁵

Conclusion

In 1935 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decreed that thenceforth 'Persia' should be referred to around the world as 'Iran'.⁹⁶ For the Shah, the change in nomenclature represented a clean break with the past – the Qajar past – which he had been so determined to efface. In his mind 'Iran' was modern, progressive, and therefore worthy of respect. 'Persia', the Shah assumed, would only perpetuate Western stereotypes about his country: feeble, corrupt, despotic, and quaint. 'Iran', moreover, advertised the contrived continuation of the timeless Aryan nation whose ancient glories the Shah hoped would inspire Iranians along the road of rapid modernization. The inherent paradoxes of this ideology – seeking inspiration for the new from the old, together with the construction of a link between the values of ancient Iran and the ideals of modernity – would be a continuing theme of Pahlavi nationalism.

This openly flaunted fetish for the Aryans led to the Shah's ill-advised dalliance with Nazi Germany. By 1941, however, the Allies refused to tolerate such posturing any longer, fearing an undue German influence in a country that was a vital supply corridor to the hard-pressed Soviet Union. Once again British and Russian troops occupied the country; Reza Shah was forced into exile in South Africa. Yet despite his demise, Reza Shah's reign had witnessed the fruition of modern Iranian nationalism which had been a century in the making. By 1941 a much more holistic

⁹⁴ On the Mashhad massacre see Irving, p. 198; on the Qom incident see Ansari, 2003, p. 47

⁹⁵ Ghani, pp. 399-400. Faghfoory, pp. 413-432

⁹⁶ Ansari, 2003, p. 65

concept of the Iranian nation bound state and society together. That said, there was by no means a consensus on what exactly Iranian nationalism was. If most Iranians implicitly understood the concept of an Iranian nation, the exact identity of this nation remained contested. However much the state tried to inculcate its own version of nationalism, the multifarious identities of Iranians which reached back into the distant past negated such efforts to impose a modern construct. For some Iran was a Persian nation. For others, it was a modern nation bound by a constitutionalism which considered all who lived on the plateau as 'Iranians'. For the clerics, Iran remained a Shi'ite nation. The chameleon-like nature of national identity which boasted both ancient and modern influences meant that nationalism would become one of the key dialectics governing relations between state and society for decades to come. Nevertheless, as Cottam argues, once the discourse of nationalism seeped across the political spectrum and down into society, it carried a dynamic of its own. In a short space of time nationalistic values began to incorporate themselves into the "value systems" of Iranians, even the more traditional-minded.⁹⁷ In a word, a national template, contested in style but accepted in substance, had been created. Marashi aptly sums up this historical development and his conclusion deserves extended quotation before we begin our own study of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic:

[I]t was between 1870 and 1940 that the convergence between state, society, and culture made it possible for social actors to make political claims to speak on behalf of the nation. Such actors might include a constitutionalist activist in 1906 invoking "the nation" in the newly emerging radical press, Mohammad Mosaddeq in his attempt, from the bully pulpit of the premiership, to nationalize "Iranian oil" in the early 1950s, and Mohammad Reza Shah, with his 1971 pretensions at the tomb of Cyrus. They might also include Ayatollah Khomeini, claiming to speak on behalf of God and the nation during the revolution of 1978-79 and, more recently, President Ahmadinejad, asserting that developing a nuclear program was rooted in Iran's "national rights". None of these political claims could have been made without the social, cultural, and political realignments that took place between 1870 and 1940, realignments that were prerequisites for nationalism. More broadly, this is the period in which we can

⁹⁷ Cottam, 1978, p. 6

identify the emergence of modern politics in Iran, a politics that takes as its basic assumption the existence of the social abstraction known as the nation.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Marashi, p. 8

Nationalism and Revolution

Introduction

As we noted at the outset, one of the more baffling questions in the historiography of modern Iran is the extent to which nationalism – both as a collective sentiment and as a political discourse – manifested itself within and influenced the course of the Islamic Revolution. To reiterate an observation from our literature review, the revolution has been characterized as either “explicitly anti-nationalist” or “fundamentally nationalist”.¹ Whatever stark distinction scholars may draw, at first glance it seems obvious that undercurrents of nationalism did permeate the revolutionary movement. Khomeini did, after all, pepper his rousing speeches with entreaties to the ‘noble nation of Iran’ while on the streets the revolutionary crowds did vociferously demand national freedom and independence. But reconciling these manifestations of nationalism with the zealous religiosity of the revolution and its universal pretensions is no easy intellectual task, and together with the sheer difficulty of penetrating the arcane world of Iranian politics, it is perhaps no surprise that there are contrasting analyses of the role of nationalism in the revolution.

This chapter seeks to draw together these competing historiographical threads by providing a cohesive answer to the aforementioned question. In particular it highlights the often overlooked, but nevertheless palpable, sense of demotic nationalist spirit which animated the millions of Iranians, irrespective of their individual political inclinations and religiosity, who marched in the streets during the revolution. This grass-roots nationalist spirit in turn influenced high politics where the various actors within the heterogeneous revolutionary coalition sought to mobilize such sentiment by presenting themselves as not only pious but also fervently patriotic. Ayatollah Khomeini, in particular, possessed a compelling ability to embody the qualities of piety and patriotism that captured the imaginations

¹ See Ansari, 2003, p. 201 and Cottam, 1982, p. 263

of so many ordinary Iranians, a fact which makes an awareness of the politics of nationalism crucial to understanding the course of the revolution as a whole. We shall endeavour, therefore, to make a closer examination of this concept of 'religious nationalism' that impelled the revolutionaries in their quest to remake the Iranian nation. 'Religious nationalism' sounds a conveniently vague and imprecise term but properly fleshed out, as we shall attempt below, it indeed encapsulates the thinking of Khomeini and his band of revolutionaries, for as much as Islamists sought to differentiate themselves from the Shah, they too were just as devoted to elevating the 'great' Iranian nation. This seems counterintuitive given Khomeini's penchant for using 'nationalist' as a pejorative term against political rivals in the wake of the Shah's fall. As we shall see below, however, in the inchoate rhetorical environment of revolutionary Iran such ringing denunciations evidenced the clever 'use and abuse' of nationalism rather than a negation of it.

In attempting to analyze the development of nationalism during and after the revolution, however, we cannot simply begin our story in 1978 when the first protests erupted. To fully understand the nexus between nationalism and revolution we must go back in time to the early years of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule and the Mossadegh interregnum. There are of course dozens of general histories of modern Iran and a myriad of monographs purporting to explain the revolution, and here we shall not attempt to traverse such well-trodden ground.² Instead we shall focus on the various conceptions of nationalism which saturated state ideology, inflected the discourse of opposition groups, and informed the worldview of ordinary Iranians who brought down the Shah in history's last great revolution.³

² Among them are A. Saikal, The Rise and Fall of the Shah, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980; S.A. Arjomand, The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988

³ R. Wright, The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran, New York, A.A. Knopf, 2000

The Ghost of Ahmadabad

The year 1967 was an eventful one around the world. Communist China ratcheted up Cold War tensions by detonating its first hydrogen bomb. In the Middle East, Israel won an astonishing victory in the Six Day War by simultaneously trouncing Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The South African cardiac surgeon Christian Barnard, meanwhile, performed the world's first successful heart transplant, although his patient survived only eighteen more days. On March 5th of that year in the sleepy farming hamlet of Ahmadabad, eighty kilometres west of Tehran, another sickly but altogether more famous individual finally passed away after years of being confined to his villa under house arrest. Mohammad Reza Shah forbade any kind of public mourning hoping the death of this illustrious figure would pass unnoticed. His name was Dr Mohammad Mossadegh.

It was an obscure end for a man who sixteen years previously had become the most popular figure in modern Iranian history. In 1951, as Prime Minister and head of the largest parliamentary coalition, the National Front, Mossadegh announced the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Given the company's status in the Iranian mind as a symbol of rapacious imperialism, Mossadegh's nationalization was a wildly popular move. The West looked on with bemusement at the upstart Prime Minister who had a habit of weeping and even fainting while delivering melodramatic nationalistic speeches in the Majles. Reflecting latent American sympathy for a Third World leader who sought to humble perceived British colonial arrogance, *Time* magazine named Mossadegh as its 'Man of the Year' in 1952, and even bestowed on him the epithet of the "Iranian George Washington". All the same, *Time* sarcastically likened the Prime Minister's alleged childish tantrums to those of a "willful little boy".⁴ Inside Iran, by contrast, his effortless charisma and incorruptible style drew adoration from the street which had long believed Iran's backwardness derived from imperialist intrigue and exploitation. In transforming oil nationalization into an emotive call for national

⁴ See *Time*, LIX (1) January 7th 1952

unity and sovereignty, Mossadegh personified his nation's demand for dignity unlike any other Iranian leader of his generation.

Given Mossadegh's undoubted popularity, the Shah persisted with him as long as possible, but ultimately the gulf between the autocrat and the avowed constitutionalist remained unbridgeable. During a terse meeting between the two at the Sa'adabad Palace, Mossadegh offered the boyish Shah some prescient words of advice: "You could go down in history as an immensely popular Shah if you cooperated with democratic and nationalist forces".⁵ Fate, however, dictated that it was Mossadegh who would go down first. By 1953 his nationalistic posturing and political miscalculations had incurred the enmity of a diverse range of foes. While the Shah vacillated in deciding whether or not to dismiss Mossadegh, royalists around the monarch and amongst the higher echelons of the officer corps were busy plotting against the Prime Minister. Conservative clerics such as Ayatollah Behbehani had also worked assiduously to undermine Mossadegh through recourse to street mob activity and violence which intimidated many Iranians who might otherwise have supported the Prime Minister. More critically, by late-1952 and early 1953 defections of key individuals began to seriously weaken the National Front. The defection to the royalist cause of Majles Speaker and former Mossadegh ally, Ayatollah Kashani, with whom Mossadegh had never enjoyed an especially warm relationship, was a serious blow to the embattled Prime Minister.⁶ Mossadegh's plight was not helped by his erratic political acumen. Brilliant at riling patriotic anger against imperialism, Mossadegh tolerated the increasingly visible and rancorous activities of the left-wing Tudeh Party which not only gave the impression that Mossadegh was somehow beholden to Moscow but also that he appeared to be losing control of the country amidst the breakdown of law and order.⁷ As Iran reeled

⁵ Quoted in S. Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, Hoboken (NJ), John Wiley and Sons, 2003, p. 141

⁶ On the constellation of foes arrayed against Mossadegh in these years see F. Azimi, 'Unseating Mossadegh: The Configuration and Role of Domestic Forces' in M. Gasiorowski and M. Byrne (eds.) *Mohammad Mossadegh and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2004, pp. 27-101

⁷ Recent scholarship suggests that the Tudeh party had neither the means nor capability to seize control of the state. Instead it was the perception of the Tudeh's unruly activities both inside Iran and

from economic malaise and political street violence between the Tudeh, security forces and pro- and anti-Shah mobs, Mossadegh defiantly retained his position despite a decree issued by the jittery Shah removing him from power. The ongoing chaos, meanwhile, prompted fears in Washington of a communist takeover of this strategically vital, oil-producing nation. The exigencies of the Cold War, therefore, gradually overrode initial American sympathy for Mossadegh's anti-imperialist stance, and on April 19 1953 a CIA-MI6 inspired coup d'etat codenamed Operation Ajax, mounted with the support of royalists in the government and military, deposed Mossadegh.⁸ The Shah, who had earlier fled Iran following an abortive first coup d'etat, resumed his place on the throne and ordered Mossadegh's arrest. Mossadegh, who had stolen the show at the United Nations in 1951 with his denunciations of imperialism, reserved his greatest performance for last. In front of the military tribunal where he was charged with treason, the fallen Prime Minister took on the mantle of the great martyr of Iranian nationalism, imploring the judges that his only crime was to nationalize Iran's oil industry and remove the hand of colonialism. It was to no avail as he was promptly found guilty and sentenced to house arrest for life at his villa in Ahmadabad.⁹

The events of 1951-1953 are consistently portrayed as a key turning point in twentieth century Iranian history. Sometimes this focus can lapse into hyperbole and absurdity, such as Stephen Kinzer's assertion that "[i]t is not far fetched to draw a line from Operation Ajax through the Shah's repressive regime and the Islamic Revolution to the fireballs that engulfed the World Trade Centre in New York".¹⁰ This is obviously a very dubious proposition, yet the signal importance of the Mossadegh era remains. As Mark Gasiorowski has written the coup arrested Iran's political development and heralded the rise of Mohammad Reza Shah's repressive

in Western capitals which became a key element in the unfolding drama. See M. Behrooz, 'The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh', in M. Gasiorowski and M. Byrne (eds.) Mohammad Mossadegh and the 1953 Coup in Iran, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2004pp. 102-125

⁸ On the final days of the coup and the role of domestic and foreign actors see F. Mokhtari, 'Iran's 1953 Coup Revisited: Internal Dynamics versus External Intrigue', Middle East Journal, 62 (3), Summer 2008, pp. 457-488

⁹ Kinzer, pp. 193-216

¹⁰ Kinzer, pp. 203-204.

and American-backed rule that formed the back-drop to the political and religious discourses of the succeeding 25 years:

The 1953 coup ended the slow, halting progress that Iran had been making since the early 1900s toward a more representative form of government and toward freedom from foreign interference. These two aspirations were embodied in Mossadeq's movement; with the coup, he became a martyr to these causes....The 1953 coup was thus a decisive turning point in Iranian history. Had the coup not occurred, Iran's future would undoubtedly have been vastly different. Similarly, the U.S. role in the coup and in the subsequent consolidation of the Shah's dictatorship were decisive for the future of U.S. relations with Iran. U.S. complicity in these events figured prominently in the terrorist attacks on American citizens and installations that occurred in Iran in the early 1970s, in the anti-American character of the 1978-1979 revolution, and in the many anti-American incidents that emanated from Iran after the revolution, including, most notably, the embassy hostage crisis.¹¹

This is not to say that Mossadegh's downfall directly resulted in the Islamic revolution. It is to say, however, that the nationalistic echoes of the oil nationalization movement, and the stigma which rubbed off on the Shah's American-backed regime, percolated through succeeding decades and into the minds of those who may not have subscribed to Mossadegh's liberal nationalism, but who fervently believed in the necessity of removing the stain of imperialism from Iran. As much as the Shah tried to perpetuate the myth that a national uprising had restored him to the throne, it was the other equally fatuous myth – that Mossadegh was overthrown in a purely foreign-led conspiracy – which resonated in the Iranian mind.¹² In defeat, therefore, Mossadegh's aura became even more legendary. All those who later agitated for national independence owed an intellectual and historical debt of some kind to the lanky, aquiline-faced Prime Minister whose star slowly faded away in Ahmadabad but whose lingering presence haunted the Shah until 1967 and beyond. Mossadegh's clarion call for national independence, to put it

¹¹ M. Gasiorowski, 'The 1953 Coup d'état in Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19, 1987, pp. 278-279

¹² Mark Gasiorowski has observed: "[a]lthough foreign actors therefore were crucial to Mossadegh's downfall, their role generally has been overemphasized, while the role of Iranian actors in these events has been underemphasized". See M. Gasiorowski, 'Conclusion: Why Did Mossadegh Fall?' in M. Gasiorowski and M. Byrne (eds.) *Mohammad Mossadegh and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2004, p. 275. In a similar vein, and referring to the allegedly pitiful sum of money it took the CIA to mount the coup, Fakhreddin Azimi has written: "[t]o dismiss or even discount the widespread resentment of Mossadegh's government is to claim that Iran had been devoid of internal national dynamics, and that Iranians had sold themselves mindlessly for a mere one hundred thousand dollars". See Azimi, p. 484

another way, resided at the heart of nationalist politics in twentieth century Iran. Roy Mottahedeh has summed up: “[f]or his many admirers Mossadegh was unquestionably a lion of God and a hero like Rostam, the son of Zal. But for all Iranians – admirers and deprecators – he was more: he was the lodestone, the magnetic field, the lightning rod of the twentieth century. Nearly everyone was pulled or pushed, attracted into or repelled out of his orbit. Virtually no one passed through the period of his influence unaffected by his presence”.¹³

Mohammad Reza Shah: Dynastic Nationalism

Following the Mossadegh interlude, the chastened Shah quickly set about re-imposing his authority. There was no question, however, of dispensing with American backing which had returned him to power, and in the aftermath of the coup d’etat the US, anxious for the Shah to reassert his dominance and keep Iran within the Western sphere of influence, wasted no time in propping-up the recently reinstalled monarch. In an ironic way the coup d’etat to a large extent achieved Mossadegh’s dream of eliminating British influence in Iran for in the succeeding two and half decades it was the US which acquired a preponderant role in Iranian affairs. No sooner had President Eisenhower sent the Shah a congratulatory message than millions of dollars of American aid began flowing in to cover the expenses of the new government headed by General Zahedi, the royalist officer who had conspired with the CIA and MI6 to bring down Mossadegh, in return for which he received the premiership. In the 1954 financial year alone American military and economic aid grants comprised 60% of the Iranian government’s expenditure, a sum which was but a precursor to the hundreds of millions of dollars the US would lavish upon the Shah over the next decade.¹⁴ This American largesse enabled the regime to cover its budget, pay salaries in the bureaucracy and oil industry, finance development projects, provide social services and amenities, develop infrastructure,

¹³ R. Mottahedeh, The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran, London, Chatto and Windus, 1986, pp. 115-116

¹⁴ M. Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 104

bolster the Iranian military and, perhaps most importantly, establish the fearsome secret police known as SAVAK (*sazman-e etela'at va aminyyat-e keshvar*). In the context of the Cold War, Washington now considered Iran of signal importance to US national security, which compelled succeeding administrations to back the Shah's regime and guarantee Iran's political stability, in effect making Iran an American 'client state'. Such a state of affairs, however, inevitably retarded the domestic politics of the junior partner. Flush with American aid, the Pahlavi state became, in effect, autonomous from its own society, able to deflect societal pressure from below to open up the political system, but never fully committed to addressing the underlying discontent that could boil over into protest at certain junctures. The irony of the patron-client relationship was that efforts to ensure stability ended up precipitating instability, as the events of the revolution would ultimately bear out.¹⁵

While in his memoirs the Shah portrayed the events of 1953 coup as evidence of heartfelt support among the Iranian populace for the monarchy, in reality he never lived down the ignominy of fleeing Iran after the failure of the first coup.¹⁶ For the rest of his reign he tried desperately to efface this memory by promoting an imperious form of dynastic nationalism which embraced two seemingly incongruous cults: the cult of modernization which foresaw a future Iran as one of the world's industrial powers, and the cult of Persian Kingship in which the Shah self-consciously modeled himself on the great Achaemenid kings. This nationalistic philosophy, which later inspired such visceral hatred among the revolutionaries, is worthy of a deeper look if we are to understand the trajectory of nationalism before, during and after the events of 1978-79.

The first pillar of Mohammad Reza Shah's dynastic nationalism, the cult of modernization, was not immediately in the offing after 1953. The Shah spent the

¹⁵ Gasiorowski's 1991 book elaborates on the post-1953 backing of the Shah and the irony of the patron-client relationship designed to promote stability.

¹⁶ "On 22 August 1953, three days after General Zahedi had assumed control, I returned to Teheran and to a heart-warming, tumultuous welcome. I was greatly moved and touched by this expression of affection, a spontaneous ovation in such contrast to the regimented demonstrations in which Mossadegh and the Tudeh Party had excelled". M. R. S. Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, London, Hutchinson, 1961, p. 105

latter years of this decade quietly re-establishing his control over the political system by dispensing measured doses of political patronage to selected allies and using SAVAK to intimidate political opponents. Washington, however, was never entirely confident that the Shah had consolidated his shaky rule and by 1960 the Kennedy administration, a firm believer in the transformative power of modernization, urged him to adopt a vigorous program of reform to raise living standards and head off an explosion of simmering political discontent. If the Shah would not countenance genuine constitutionalism, American advisers reasoned, then socio-economic reform would serve instead to expand the monarchy's domestic political base.¹⁷

Under pressure from Washington, the Shah appointed the reform-minded Dr Ali Amini to the premiership whose cabinet colleague, agricultural minister Hasan Arsanjani, launched Iran's first serious land reform program in which plots of land belonging to the great landed families were bought by the government and sold to smaller farmers in the hope that a new pro-regime yeoman class would take root. Despite such ambitious goals, the Amini premiership lasted a bare fourteen months. By pruning the military budget to save money, Amini incurred the Shah's displeasure, and his wider austerity measures only increased the economic pain of the lower classes whose rising anger frightened the Shah into preserving his authority once more through dictatorial means. Amini was quickly replaced by Assadollah Alam who promptly set about rigging elections for the new Majles to ensure a compliant conservative majority. Land reform, moreover, was watered down to maintain the loyalty of the grandees.¹⁸

To gloss over such back-sliding the Shah, by nature a timid man but increasingly confident and sure of his rule, resorted to classic political theatre: he launched his own revolution. In the belief that a King should lead a revolution and not suffer one,

¹⁷ E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, pp.422-423. It is also useful to examine some of the modernization theorists of the time who provided the theoretical rationale for such efforts. Scholars such as Cyril Black, who wrote during the mid-1960s epitomized this paradigm which sought to typologize the modernization trajectories of all nations and compare them against a Western template. See C. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966, pp. 88-123

¹⁸ Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 424-425

the Shah organized a January 1963 national referendum in which 99.9% of Iranians 'endorsed' a six-point reform package known as the White Revolution.¹⁹ In the wake of this staged referendum the Shah quickly unveiled a raft of new initiatives to shake Iran out of its underdeveloped torpor and set the country on the path to modernization. Land reform continued, albeit in a manner more agreeable to the Shah's cautious instincts. Forests, pastures and waterways were nationalized and earmarked for development. Women were enfranchised for the first time, and under the health and literacy corps programme, teams of young Iranians were deployed to rural areas to combat disease and illiteracy. The government also promoted industrialization together with profit sharing incentives for industrial workers, and rapidly expanded the country's education system to educate a new generation of managers.²⁰

Beneath this surfeit of Western-inspired modernization – “[s]elective and judicious Westernization” as the Shah called it – lay a calculated political impulse.²¹ By launching such a wide-ranging process of modernization and repeatedly lauding Iran's rapid progress, the Shah sought to appropriate for himself the revolutionary mantle. In his estimation no longer would revolutionary constitutionalists or rabble-rousing clerics upstage the throne, for the Shah himself would be the epitome of revolution. By remaining the paramount figure of the White Revolution, furthermore, the Shah endeavoured to broaden his political base by co-opting support through the provision of greater socio-economic opportunities which he hoped 'his' revolution would render. At the same time he indulged in extolling his virtues as a democratic monarch through a propaganda campaign which depicted an indissoluble link between himself as the benevolent autocrat and the 'liberated' populace.²² By harnessing a carefully controlled national consensus to the cult of modernization embodied in the White Revolution, the Shah imagined he could

¹⁹ Abrahamian, 1982, p. 424

²⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the White Revolution see Saikal, 1980, pp.82-88

²¹ Pahlavi, 1961, p. 160

²² On the Shah's own views of his democratic credentials see Pahlavi, 1961, pp. 161-195

emerge as the champion of revolutionary nationalism and eclipse the memory of oil nationalization.²³

Such posturing was not entirely misplaced. By the Six Day War Iran was emerging as a major oil power and was briefly OPEC's largest producer.²⁴ It was only after a subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict, however, that the Shah could truly unleash Iran's oil potential and fire his by now insatiable appetite for modernization. The OPEC oil embargo imposed during the 1973 Yom Kippur War tripled overnight the global price of Iran's most precious export. While the Shah's declared policy of "positive nationalism" on the international stage implied he would not hold the West hostage over a barrel of oil in quite the same fashion as Mossadegh's "negative" nationalism, it did all the same demand Iran maximize its national interests.²⁵ Increasingly confident and reveling in the extra billions which were flowing into his coffers, the Shah announced to his subjects: "We do not expect Iranians to tighten their belts, eat

²³ Ali Ansari has written: "The Shah was anxious to be seen not only as a 'democratic' monarch, progressive and benign, always with the welfare of his people in mind – a characterization he had pursued to variable effect in the post-Mussaddiq period – but as a 'revolutionary' monarch. In doing so, he would appropriate the myths of the Left and National Front as a champion of revolutionary nationalism which would assist in legitimizing himself and his dynasty. As the founder and guarantor of a new order for Iran, he would consolidate his dynasty's position within the political system, which he would argue was dependent upon the continuation and consolidation of his dynasty. 'Modernism' and 'Pahlavism' were to merge and become both synonymous and mutually dependent." See A. Ansari, 'The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 37 (3), 2001, p. 3

²⁴ Saikal, 1980, p. 106

²⁵ "So gradually we have evolved a new policy, one of greater national virility. I call it positive nationalism.....Positive nationalism, as I conceive it, implied a policy of maximum political and economic independence consistent with the interests of one's country. On the other hand, it does not mean non-alignment or sitting on the fence. It means that we make any agreement which is in our interests, regardless of the wishes or policies of others. We are not intimidated by anybody who tries to tell us whom we should have as our friends, and we make no alliances merely for the sake of alliances or of vague principles, but only on support of our enlightened self-interest....When Mossadegh and his followers cried like women and indulged in hysterical tirades against the British, many sincerely thought at first that this was nationalism. But as time went by, patriots realized that Mossadegh was in fact opening wide the door for imperialist subversion. His negative policies led straight to the sort of political and economic chaos which foreign agents found ideal for their purposes....If Mossadegh's conduct could be defined as nationalism, then obviously a new term for real nationalism must be invented. Mossadegh's policy was of course one of negativism, not nationalism in any valid sense; nevertheless, the term positive nationalism I think helps distinguish between his conduct and that of the true patriot....Certainly one lesson we have learned is that those who preach negative nationalism are automatically suspect. Anybody can tear down; fewer can build up....[W]e have found that any pretended nationalist who attacks only one kind of imperialism is again automatically suspect". Pahlavi, 1961, pp. 125-127

less and labour away for the promised heaven which is put off by a year every day. We try to offer the nation the welfare and care we have promised – today”.²⁶

The scale of Iran’s economic development in the mid 1970s is a familiar story and need not delay us long here.²⁷ Suffice to say the massive jump in oil revenues, the breakneck industrialization, the impressive gains in productivity, the growing consumerism of a modernizing society together with rapid urbanization convinced the Shah that his dream of transforming Iran into a world economic power was tantalizingly within reach.²⁸ In particular the bulging treasury allowed the Shah to indulge his fascination for military technology which he took to be the marker of a truly modern and powerful nation. He took full advantage by spending vast sums on the latest American military technology, and in doing so overtly re-advertised his enduring dependence on Washington as thousands of American military advisors and businessmen seeking fat contracts poured in as fast as Iran’s oil revenues seemed to be flowing out.²⁹ Despite such profligacy, the Shah insisted on presenting the dizzying course of modernization as an epic national triumph. By gifting this cult of modernization to his grateful subjects, so he imagined, Iran would resurrect its rarefied place in history as the “Great Civilization”, the grandiose terminus of his own dynastic nationalist vision.³⁰

As futuristic as this ideology of dynastic nationalism may have appeared, it was also permeated with another cult which reached back, by contrast, to the distant past. By the 1970s, flush with oil money and seemingly impregnable on his throne, the Shah

²⁶ Quoted in R. Graham, *Iran: The Illusion of Power*, London, Croom Helm, 1979, p. 101

²⁷ Iran’s impressive - but nonetheless lop-sided - economic development in the 1970s is a staple of much of the historiography. See Gasiorowski, 1991; Abrahamian, 1982

²⁸ In exile the Shah ruefully noted of this era: “In the diverse fields of politics, education, social welfare and development we were ahead of all developing countries. The last five-year plan foretold an annual growth rate of 26%. In 1975 it reached 42% in current prices, that is four times the growth rate of Japan....For the last twenty-five years, the country has been a vast building site producing the indispensable elements of modernization: universities, schools and professional institutions, hospitals, roads, railways, dams, power stations, gas mains and pipelines, factories, industrial, cultural and sports complexes, co-operatives, new towns and new villages”. See M. R. Pahlavi, *The Shah’s Story*, London, Michael Joseph, 1980, p. 150.

²⁹ On the growing American presence in Iran during the 1970s see Mackey, pp. 250-252

³⁰ For the Shah’s own views of what the “Great Civilization” entailed see M.R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 124

chose to indulge not only his love of military hardware but also his father's fetish for pre-Islamic Persia. Like Reza Shah, the Shah sought to fashion an anachronistic connection between his reign and that of the Achaemenid Kings in the vain hope that the glow of Cyrus the Great in the Iranian historical memory would render a shimmering legitimacy to his own regime. Indeed the two cults merged as the drive towards modernization and the associated improvements in communications provided greater scope for the state to project such propaganda into the lives of ordinary Iranians. In the ever-expanding education system, more and more school pupils were regaled with the "Pahlavi nationalist narrative" which upheld the notion of an immemorial Iranian nation, home to the glories of the Aryan civilization of ancient Persia and possessing an unbroken dynastic link down to the Pahlavis.³¹ To feed this project in anachronistic national myth making the state assiduously patronized academic institutions, imperial academies and publishing houses which promoted the same interpretation of monarchical continuity across Iran's long history and glorified Iran's pre-Islamic past at the expense of the intervening 'dark age' of Muslim rule.³² Thus while Queen Farah Diba promoted avante garde cultural events such as the Shiraz Arts Festival which featured troupes of performers from around the world as if to emphasize the progressive nature of Iranian culture in the modern world, museums in Tehran dusted off pre-Islamic artifacts to satisfy the regime's Aryan fantasies and the curiosity of closely shepherded Western tourists. Many intellectuals, discerning the Western orientalist inflection of the regime's cultural propaganda, roundly condemned such an artificial attempt to embody 'authentic' culture and did not consider it at all genuinely nationalistic.³³ Despite such sneers the Shah did not appear at all reticent: in shops, schools and offices across Iran his photo and key mantra – *Khoda, Shah, Mihan* – were on ubiquitous

³¹ For a fascinating insight into the way the Pahlavi state indoctrinated children with its nationalist narrative see Ram, 2000, pp. 67-90

³² Vaziri, pp. 162-163

³³ On the intellectuals' stance towards Pahlavi cultural politics see N. Nabavi, Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2003, pp. 111-123

display, a testament to his determination to “personalize” nationalism just as Mossadegh had done.³⁴

The height of this nationalistic excess, of course, was the 1971 ceremonies at Persepolis and Pasargadae to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the monarchy. In front of a glittering array of heads of state from around the world, the Shah shamelessly adopted the mantle of the Achaemenids by declaring:

Cyrus, great king, king of kings, Achaemenian king, king of the land of Iran, from me, King of kings of Iran and from my nation, I send greetings...you, the eternal hero of Iranian history, the founder of the oldest monarchy in the world, the great freedom giver of the world, the worthy son of mankind, we send greetings!...Cyrus, we have gathered here today at your eternal tomb to tell you: sleep in peace because we are awake and we will always be awake to look after our proud inheritance.³⁵

As the assembled dignitaries settled down to their pigeon breasts and truffles prepared by Maxims of Paris, the Shah must have relished this high point of his reign. The nervous, awkward youth who had lived so long in his father’s giant shadow was now an imperious monarch convinced of both his nation’s burgeoning power and the indissoluble ties between himself and the masses.³⁶

If anything was grand, it was less the Shah and more the ironies that lay beneath the veneer of dynastic nationalism. The most immediately apparent irony was the Shah’s decision to prevent his own subjects from witnessing the festivities due to security fears, all the while constantly stressing throughout the lavish ceremonies the supposed bonds between himself and the nation. The deeper irony concerned the very essence of dynastic nationalism itself, for in the drive to instill a sense of nationalism among his compatriots, the Shah’s modernization effort did indeed link Iranians together in a national community to a much greater degree than ever before. The abstract notion of Iran as a modern nation, which we explored in the previous

³⁴ G. Garthwaite, *The Persians*, Malden, Blackwell, 2005, p. 250

³⁵ Quoted in Ansari, 2003, p. 173

³⁶ For an insightful analysis of Mohammad Reza Shah’s psychological makeup see M. Zonis, *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991

chapter, was becoming ever more strongly entrenched in the body politic. Through the media, conscription, education, rural-urban migration and overseas travel millions of Iranians became much more conscious of what it meant to be ‘Iranian’ notwithstanding the regime’s specific intention to weld this nationalist feeling to the monarchy. However this growing sense of demotic nationalism, underpinned by the historical memory of Iran’s ancient past and now buttressed by the technological and administrative advances of modern state-building, did not necessarily mean that the monarchy and the people were becoming closer. Similarly for Iran’s ethnic minorities, the aggressive expansion of the state’s coercive powers together with a pronounced unwillingness to seriously address the periphery’s underdevelopment, fed a growing ethnic consciousness in contradistinction to the Persian Shia majority culture.³⁷ These unintended effects and ironies of dynastic nationalism would figure prominently in the revolution.

Nationalism in Opposition

There is a persistent view in the historiography that the Shah’s unbridled attempt to infuse his brand of dynastic nationalism throughout Iranian society automatically triggered an unbridgeable ideological and cultural gulf between Iranian nationalism and Islam. Shireen Hunter, for example, writes that as a result of the Shah’s modernization policies which aroused the ire of the clerics an “open conflict emerged between Islam and Iranian nationalism”.³⁸ A corollary of this theory is the argument that the clerics and lay religious intellectuals, affronted by the Shah’s bombastic dynastic nationalism which downplayed the legacy of Islam in Iranian society, channeled their frustrations into a singular revolutionary Islamic counter-discourse.³⁹ Working back from the Islamic revolution – as scholars are wont to do in their quest to find the origins of today’s theocracy - the rise of this

³⁷ Abrahamian, 1982, p. 428

³⁸ S. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 12

³⁹ See for example M. Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 130-131; H. Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, New Brunswick, Transaction, 2006, pp. 1-7

Islamic revolutionary ideology which faced off with the Shah and his brand of nationalism, seems to present a neat chronological and analytical fit. Yet upon closer examination the tenets of such theories do not hold up. As we shall see below, Iran's rapid modernization and the suffocating political atmosphere of Pahlavi Iran did indeed encourage many activists and thinkers to seek refuge in an Islamic alternative. That said, to lump together the thinking of such diverse figures as Khomeini, Shariati and Bani-Sadr into a singular revolutionary ideology renders a false impression of ideological unity. Moreover the juxtaposition of this revolutionary Islamic ideology against Pahlavi dynastic nationalism once again falsely bifurcates the interconnected discourses of religion and nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s, which are important to comprehend if we are to fully understand the *mélange* of patriotism and piety which manifested in the revolution of 1979.

To be sure liberal nationalism was a waning political force by the late 1950s. While the memory of oil nationalization would linger long in the collective Iranian memory, Mossadegh's arrest deprived the National Front of an irreplaceable leader who had been able to unite the left and right wings of the heterogeneous coalition by sheer dint of both his personality and undoubted popularity amongst the electorate. Mossadegh's descent into melancholy at his Ahmadabad villa was mirrored by the sliding fortunes of the National Front which in addition to regime proscription was beset by factionalism and infighting.⁴⁰ The demise of liberal nationalism from within and its suppression from without did not, however, confer upon the Shah a monopoly in nationalist discourse. The very diffuseness of nationalism within Iranian political culture made it impossible for the Shah to arrogate nationalist legitimacy wholly to himself, and indeed his determination to do so in the face of his obvious reliance on American support provoked the indignation of his opponents who infused their own discourses with nationalistic themes designed to appeal to the patriotic instincts of their fellow Iranians.

⁴⁰ On the demise of liberal nationalism and its standard bearer, the National Front, see S. Siavoshi, Liberal Nationalism in Iran: The Failure of a Movement, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 105-122

The Shah's withering assault on the corporate privileges of the clergy during the White Revolution, ranging from the crackdown on landed endowments to the enfranchisement of women which many clerics considered a secular insult against divine law, naturally provoked a profound clerical distaste for dynastic nationalism.⁴¹ It does not follow, however, that the clerics were incorrigible opponents of the principle of nationalism and somehow averse to the very idea of 'Iran'. The clergy, it must be emphasized, was a highly stratified institution divided between an older generation of clerics who were deeply conservative in social and political matters, and a younger generation less reticent about confronting the creeping secularism of the Shah's modernization program.⁴² Ayatollah Borujerdi, the pre-eminent cleric of his time exemplified the traditionalist line by scrupulously shying away from direct involvement in politics (but as a landowner endeavouring, all the same, to water down land reform). His more radical protégé, Ayatollah Khomeini was far less retiring about criticizing the Shah's policies as an attack on Iran and Islam. During the 1963 riots, the first instance of serious nationwide anti-regime protest since 1953, Khomeini excoriated the Shah for his alleged corruption, election-rigging, suppression of press and political freedoms and undermining of Islam.⁴³

Despite such contrasting viewpoints, a deeply felt, if not explicitly articulated, sense of religious nationalism bound all such strata of Iran's third estate. Borujerdi, for example, in lamenting the supposed Baha'i propagandizing against Islam, was adamant that Islam "is a cause of the unity of [our] nationalism".⁴⁴ The younger generation of clerics, meanwhile, were attempting to counter the reach of the growing Pahlavi state and the socio-economic changes it had unleashed by proselytizing a more activist Islamic consciousness in journals, religious societies,

⁴¹ For the Pahlavi state's growing confrontation with the clergy from the 1960s onwards see S. Akhavi, Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1980, especially chapters four and five.

⁴² On the class divisions within the clergy see M. Moaddel, 'The Shi'i Ulama and the State in Iran', Theory and Society, 15 (4), July 1986, pp. 519-556

⁴³ On the 1963 riots see Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 424-426

⁴⁴ On Borujerdi see Akhavi, p. 78

Quranic schools and charities where the example of Imam Hossein's fight against tyranny and oppression was held up as the model of inspiration.⁴⁵ Yet this debate was suffused with similar themes of religious nationalism as exemplified by Ayatollah Muttahari whose book *The Mutual Services of Iran and Islam* stressed the manifold inter-connections between Iran and Islam and boasted of the former's numerous contributions to Islamic civilization.⁴⁶ Khomeini, like Muttahari, was a driving force behind this burgeoning Islamic underground movement, the *Nehzat-e Islami*, but it was his searing, emotively nationalistic denunciations of the Shah which won him greater renown. His famous 1964 speech attacking the American extraterritoriality agreement as an assault on Iran's independence touched many a patriotic Iranian nerve sensitive to the perceived succession of indignities inflicted upon Iran by colonial powers. Criticizing the Majles for acquiescing in an extraterritoriality agreement in return for an American loan, Khomeini declared "The government has sold our independence, reduced us to the level of a colony, and made the Muslim nation of Iran appear more backward than savages in the eyes of the world".⁴⁷ Khomeini had by now stepped out of the shadow of the late Ayatollah Borujurdi but the speech's rousing call for the preservation of Iran's independence and sovereignty and its wide acclaim amongst the population bespoke the influence of Mossadegh. Khomeini would remain distrustful of liberal nationalism but his speech re-emphasized once again that Islam and Iranian nationalism were indeed inseparable.

The question of the radical intellectuals' stance on nationalism in the post-1953 era is somewhat more opaque. Iran's intellectuals, of course, had played an essential role in the development of nationalism since the Constitutional Revolution,

⁴⁵ On the growth of Khomeini's underground Islamic Movement (*Nehzat-e Islami*) see V. Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2003, pp. 53-72; On the evolving debate about Imam Hossein's martyrdom and its applicability to Pahlavi times see K. S. Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2004, chapter five; K. Aghaie, 'The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 12 (2), 2001, pp. 151-176

⁴⁶ M. Muttahari, *Khedamat-e Motaqabel-e Islam va Iran*, Qom, Sadra, 1362/1983

⁴⁷ 'The granting of Capitulatory Rights to the US', H. Algar (trans.) *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1981, pp. 181-188

particularly in popularizing the vocabulary of nationalism amongst the wider population through newspapers, pamphlets and books. By the 1960s, however, due to the Pahlavi state's attempt to glorify dynastic nationalism, explicit references to 'nationalism' in intellectual discourse decreased.⁴⁸ Reflecting both this antagonism to the official ideology of the day, and the yearning for a viable counter-discourse of Islamism, the great Islamist intellectual Ali Shariati declared:

Some may conclude that we Iranians should return to our racial [Aryan] roots. I reject this conclusion. I oppose racism, fascism and reaction. Moreover, Islamic civilization has cut us off from our pre-Islamic past. Archaeologists and ancient historians may have studied a great deal about the Sassanids and Achaemenids, but Iranians know nothing of such things. We do not find our roots in such civilizations, and are unmoved by the ancient inscriptions and historical monuments of these ancient empires. We do not care to learn about these pre-Islamic civilizations.....Therefore, for us to return to our roots means a return to our Shia Islamic roots.⁴⁹

But does this mean, *a la* Hunter, that Islam and nationalism were moving ever further apart in this era? While here we do not intend to traverse Iran's post-WWII intellectual history, we should be cognizant of the subtle but enduring nationalistic impulses which flowed through the pens of the radical intellectuals and anti-regime activists.⁵⁰

The great issue which occupied the minds of Iran's radical intellectuals in this age was not nationalism *per se*, but rather the necessity of confronting a Westernized modernity which threatened to overwhelm Iran's traditional culture and values. As the Shah embarked on a crash course in Western-inspired modernization and precipitated profound change in Iranian society, accommodating modernity and reconciling it with its Western origins became the overriding motif of intellectual

⁴⁸ A. Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1998, p. 5

⁴⁹ A. Shariati, *Bazgasht*, Tehran, Elham and *Bonyad-e Farhangi ye Doktor Ali Shariati*, 1381, pp. 28-31

⁵⁰ For an overview of political, intellectual and literary thought in this era see Keddie, 2003, chapter eight. A highly detailed and valuable reference work is Dabashi, 2006

discourse.⁵¹ By debating and forging a synthesis between European-style progress and Iranian identity these intellectuals hoped to discover a new Iranian modernity, rooted in the local culture and thus able to offer a modern future without entailing a capitulation to the political, social, economic and cultural dominance of the West.

Of all the radical intellectuals of the 1960s, it was Jalal Al Ahmad who brought the debate on modernity into stark focus. Influenced by the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and other French thinkers who believed intellectuals should be committed to solving contemporary problems rather than studying the irrelevancies of history, Al Ahmad argued that the superficial imitation of Western-style modernity being foisted upon Iran by the Shah was inexorably destroying the country's traditional culture and in so doing heralding a bleak future of alienation. Al Ahmad foresaw Iranian society descending into the purgatory of anomie and nihilism characteristic of the atomized capitalistic societies of the West, a condition he called 'occidentosis' (*gharbzadegi*), the title of his most famous work.⁵² By confusing modernization with westernization, Al Ahmad, maintained, the Shah's regime and its 'pseudo-intellectual' supporters were precipitating a crisis of Iran's soul. Al Ahmad consistently likened occidentosis as a 'disease', a 'plague', or an 'infection', the only cure for which, he believed, was an indigenous self assertion and spiritual regeneration through a return to Iran's traditional Islamic culture.⁵³ Only Islam, Al Ahmad passionately argued, provided a defense against the alienating and homogenizing effects of Western-style modernity and the insidious forces of neocolonialism which followed in its wake.⁵⁴

Al Ahmad's book was enduringly popular and its central theme of a return to the faith was taken up by the most prominent Islamist intellectual of the 1970s, Ali

⁵¹ A. Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization – Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 54-55

⁵² J. Al Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, translated by R. Campbell, Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1984

⁵³ The opening line of the book reads "I speak of "occidentosis" as of tuberculosis". Al Ahmad, p. 27

⁵⁴ Al Ahmad has been extensively profiled by a number of authors. Among them see: Gheissari, 1998, pp. 88-97; Mirsepassi, pp. 96-109 and A. Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, 'The Crisis of Secular Politics and the Rise of Political Islam in Iran', *Social Text*, 38, Spring 1994, pp. 51-84

Shariati. Likewise influenced by French ideas of the ‘committed’ public intellectual, Shariati pleaded for a return to a rejuvenated Islam in order to avert the alienation of Westernized modernity.⁵⁵ Believing that the clerics deliberately peddled a quietist, conservative interpretation of Islam to preserve their own corporate interests, Shariati re-conceptualized Islam as a modern and progressive ideology with which Iranians could battle oppression and create a fraternal society based around an ‘Islamized’ Iranian modernity.⁵⁶

What of the linkages between Islam and nationalism amongst these two luminaries of radical intellectualism? Given the richness of their intellectual discourse to which this very brief overview does not do justice, to what extent can we characterize it as nationalistic? As we saw above, Shariati for one rejected the idea of an ancient link with Iran’s pre-Islamic past. To suggest, however, that the radical intellectuals were somehow anti-nationalist would be to impugn their deeper logic. While Al Ahmad and Shariati have been endlessly profiled as exponents of Islamic revivalism such typecasting tends to overstate just how eclectic their intellectual oeuvre was. Al Ahmad’s own intellectual wanderings exemplified this eclecticism, having dabbled in socialism and secularism before arriving back at Islam later in life.⁵⁷ If there was one constant in both mens’ thought, it was the decidedly national perspective which informed their writings and lectures, for as much as they urged a return to an authentic Islamic cultural tradition, the end goal remained a modern, independent Iran free from the retarding influence of imperialism. It is all too easy to view Al Ahmad and Shariati as both exponents of Islamic revivalism and irascible opponents of the nationalist-minded Shah. In reality, if anyone was seeking to violently impose a universalizing ideology it was not these intellectuals but rather the Shah himself who, in the eyes of Al Ahmad and Shariati, was pushing a

⁵⁵ On the concept of the ‘committed’ intellectual in the intellectual discourse of 1960s and 1970s Iran see K. Talatoff, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, Ithaca, Syracuse University Press, 1999, pp. 66-67 and Nabavi, pp. 70-78

⁵⁶ Shariati has been endlessly profiled. In addition to the authors mentioned in fn 46 see A. Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1998 and A. Sachedina, ‘Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution’ in J. Esposito (ed) *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 191-214

⁵⁷ On Al Ahmad’s life story see Dabashi, 2006, pp. 39-102

Western-style modernity against which they were seeking to uphold Iran's national independence and its own localized, authentic, national identity. A continuing theme, therefore, running through Al Ahmad's *Occidentosis* was a concern to protect Iran's indigenous culture which he argued was being devoured by the Western 'machine'. In a phrase designed to shock Iranian nationalist sensibilities which relied on the smug assumption of a rich national culture and heritage, Al Ahmad pointed that Iranians "now resemble an alien people, with unfamiliar customs, a culture with no roots in our land and no chance of blossoming here".⁵⁸ The fascination of Al Ahmad and Shariati with the Third World national liberation movements in Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam is also instructive here for while both sought to transcend Marxism and draw the new generation of Iranians back to a revitalized Islam, they also hoped to achieve national liberation and set Iran on a trajectory towards a culturally authentic and prosperous future just as India and Japan were then enjoying.⁵⁹ Shariati's idea of "return", to highlight but one theme in his work and one heavily influenced by the leading theoretician of Third World anti-colonialism Franz Fanon, was as much a call for national independence as an impassioned plea to follow the revolutionary example of Imam Hossein. Indeed such radical intellectualism and anti-authoritarian defiance - considered 'unpatriotic' in the West by those who stared down their noses at the counter-culture - was in Iran worn as a patriotic badge of honour given that the Shah was so self-evidently backed by the forces of imperialism.

Nationalism infused not only the great radical intellectuals but also their impressionable youth audience. While Shariati and Al Ahmad endeavoured to coax the Iranian youth away from leftist ideologies, the very idealism they embodied

⁵⁸ Al Ahmad, p. 64. Elsewhere he inveighed: "Yet we occidentotics leave our own music unexplored, calling it pointless twanging and blathering about symphonies and rhapsodies. We remain ignorant of Iranian painting - representational and miniature painting - but, in imitation of the biennial exhibitions, we regard even fauvism and cubism as dated. We have forsaken Iranian architecture with its symmetries, its ponds and fountains, its gardens, its cellars, its enclosed pools, its guest rooms with their stained-glass windows, its sash windows and lattice windows. We have closed the zurkhana and forgotten polo" (p. 128)

⁵⁹ On this fascination with Third World national liberation movements see Nabavi, p. 83 and Talatoff, pp. 67-85

encouraged many young Iranians to join the burgeoning leftist guerilla movement of the 1970s. The movement itself was highly fractured with a plethora of groups exhibiting varying shades of Marxism and Islamism, but what united them (besides a common view that they and not the working class constituted the new revolutionary vanguard) was a pronounced “radical nationalistic frame of thought”.⁶⁰ Disdaining the traditional party-based tactics of the Tudeh and its preoccupation with the urban proletariat, and similarly inspired by the national liberation movements in Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba, these ‘New Left’ guerilla groups vowed to use force to bring down the regime in doing so create an independent Iran. This implicit “radical Third Worldist nationalism” elevated the goal of national independence above international class solidarity: in the New Left discourse Marx’s communist utopia became the utopia of a nation free from imperialistic clutches of international capitalism and in control of its own destiny.⁶¹

The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (The People’s Mojahedin), the most prominent New Left guerilla group of this era, exemplified this salient nationalist spirit. Believing in Marx’s analysis of the oppressive nature of capitalism and imperialism, but without accepting its atheistic logic, the Mojahedin espoused the Shariati notion that Islam was a revolutionary ideology which compelled believers to cast off the yoke of oppression and create a classless society just as the Prophet had done centuries before. The Mojahedin, however, conceptualized oppression in a national context. By courting American support for his autocratic rule and modernization fantasies, the Mojahedin charged, the Shah had created an unholy alliance of imperialism and capitalism which was steadily exploiting Iran’s resources, creating endemic social inequality, promoting vacuous consumerism, and giving rise to an unwelcome influx of Western cultural influences. By sacrificing national independence, in other words, the Mojahedin judged the Shah guilty of exacerbating the oppressive effects of capitalism which were permeating throughout Iranian society. The solution, the Mojahedin reasoned, lay in launching a crusade of national liberation to expel

⁶⁰ M. Mashayekhi, ‘The Politics of Nationalism and Political Culture’ in S. Farhoun and M. Mashayekhi (eds), *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 84

⁶¹ Mashayekhi, p. 84

American imperialism and topple its local agent, the Shah, which would in turn restore Iran's dignity and alleviate the injurious consequences of capitalist oppression inside Iran. Class awareness in the Mojahedin's ideology, therefore, was intimately related to national awareness.⁶²

In addition to their regular harangues against American imperialism and violent attacks against government installations, the Mojahedin accordingly sought to inculcate a patriotic and nationalist spirit amongst Iranians. The organization's logo, for instance, advertised its nationalist sentiments by superimposing Quranic script, the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* epithet, a rifle and clenched fist (demonstrating the commitment to struggle), and the sickle and anvil (for the peasants and working class) upon an outline of Iran. Seeking to pull patriotic heartstrings, its captured activists boldly proclaimed in closed military courts their readiness to be martyrs in the cause of national liberation. The Mojahedin also lauded the past great heroes of Iranian nationalism such as Kuchek Khan and Seyyed Modarres and staged annual commemorations of the oil nationalization movement which so closely matched the Mojahedin's own stance on economic independence. Mojahedin members also fastidiously observed the Persian New Year festival of *No Ruz* to contrast their own nationalist credentials with the Shah whom they criticized for undermining Iranian national identity. By 1975 an internal schism caused the Mojahedin split into its Marxist and Islamic wings – a development which reflected the New Left's often uneasy fusion of Marxism and radical Islamism – but both groups would carry into the coming revolution the belief in the absolute necessity of national independence.⁶³

There was one more opposition group which epitomized above all others the rhetorical and emotional links between Islam and nationalism in this era. In 1960 the reformist cleric Ayatollah Taleqani and the Islamic modernist intellectual Mehdi Bazargan, together with a number of former members of the National Front and its post-1953 reincarnation, the National Resistance Movement, established the

⁶² On the Mojahedin see E. Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989

⁶³ Abrahamian, 1989, pp. 89-103

Liberation Movement of Iran (*Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran*). When the remnants of the National Front took advantage of the relaxation of regime repression in the early 1960s to found the Second National Front, the Liberation Movement immediately elected to come under its umbrella. The Second National Front soon wilted under resumed regime repression and internal dissension, but the Liberation Movement would outlast its host. Amongst the Iranian diaspora the Liberation Movement nurtured a growing profile in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the efforts of a range of individuals who went on to play an active role in the Islamic Revolution, or at least cast their long shadows over it. Through their agitation for freedom and independence, Liberation Movement figures such as Ibrahim Yazdi in the United States, together with Abolhasan Bani-Sadr and Shariati in France, all proved the essential truth that Iranian nationalism was something Mohammad Reza Shah never had a monopoly on. The Liberation Movement's own founding principle was an appropriate paean not only to the enduring influence of Mohammad Mossadegh, but also to the idea that Islam and nationalism were mutually inclusive propositions:

We are Muslims, Iranians, constitutionalists, and Mossadeqists: Muslims because we refuse to divorce our principles from our politics; Iranians because we respect our national heritage; constitutionalists because we demand freedom of thought, expression, and association; Mossadeqists because we want national independence.⁶⁴

Nationalism and the contingency of revolution

As history's first explicitly religious revolution and one which presaged the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in many other countries, the Islamic Revolution has been the object of countless attempts at explanation. Whether it was caused by the contradictions inherent in the Shah's program of modernization, a clash between the growing state and the 'clerical hierarchy', or the development of a unitary Islamic

⁶⁴ On the Liberation Movement of Iran see Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 460-466. Taleqani was a particularly important figure who acted as a bridge between the secular nationalists, the Islamic modernists, the New Left and the radical clerics such as Khomeini. See M. Bayat, 'Mahmud Taleqani and the Iranian Revolution' in M. Kramer (ed) *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1987, pp. 67-94 and also A. Vakily, 'In Search of "Revolutionary Islam": The Case of Taleqani and the Mojahedin', *The Muslim World*, LXXXVIII (1), January 1998, pp. 22-46

revolutionary ideology that rose to prominence on the coattails of socio-economic inequality, the list of theories purporting to explain the outbreak of the revolution appears endless.⁶⁵ The Islamic Revolution also shook up the wider debate on the theory of revolution within the social sciences. The year 1979 saw the publication of Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* which intensified this debate by arguing that structural forces (such as economic decline or class structures), as opposed to voluntarist forces (the forces of human agency such as individuals or groups and their ideologies), are the predominant determinants of revolutions.⁶⁶ Skocpol later published a *mea culpa* admitting that the Islamic Revolution demonstrated the important causal role of ideology, and while the debate on the theory of revolution has wound on, many scholars now emphasize the decidedly common-sense approach that revolutions are caused by structural *and* voluntaristic forces.⁶⁷ Indeed such equivocalness reflects the realization amongst many scholars that there is probably no overarching theory of revolution, much less the Islamic Revolution.⁶⁸ The words of the Polish foreign correspondent, Ryszard Kapuscinski, who covered the dramatic final days of the Shah's reign, are especially instructive on this point:

All books about all revolutions begin with a chapter that describes the decay of tottering authority or the misery and sufferings of the people.

⁶⁵ See Saikal, 1980; Arjomand, 1988; Moaddel, 1993

⁶⁶ T. Skocpol *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979

⁶⁷ T. Skocpol, 'Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution', *Theory and Society*, 11 (3), May 1982, pp. 265-283. Mehran Kamrava has written: "The debate basically boils down to the question of the role of institutions compared with that of human agency. Are revolutions caused by historical and structural forces that are inherent to the old regime, and therefore largely outside human control, or are they products of deliberate human action and initiative?" He goes on to conclude that "[R]evolutions are caused neither by structural factors alone nor are they only the products of human agency. They are caused by both". M. Kamrava, 'Revolution Revisited: The Structuralist-Voluntarist Debate', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 32 (2) June 1999, pp. 317, 323. The literature on the theory of revolution, sometimes referred to as the sociology of revolution is large. For a recent volume which brings together the thinking of some of the eminent scholars in the field see N. Keddie (ed.), *Debating Revolutions*, New York, New York University Press, 1995. On the vexing question of ideological causation see the debate between W.H. Sewell and Skocpol in *The Journal of Modern History*: W.H. Sewell, 'Review: Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case', *The Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1) March 1985, pp. 57-85 and T. Skocpol, 'Review: Cultural Idioms and Political Ideologies in the Revolutionary Reconstruction of State Power: A Rejoinder to Sewell', *The Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1), March 1985, pp. 86-96

⁶⁸ Charles Kurzman has written: "Ultimately, I don't believe social scientists will ever be able to predict revolutions..." See C. Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 11

They should begin with a psychological chapter, one that shows how a harassed, terrified man suddenly breaks his terror, stops being afraid. This unusual process, sometimes accomplished in an instant like a shock or a lustration, demands illuminating. Man gets rid of fear and feels free. Without that there would be no revolution.

This contemporaneous view of the revolution, in fact, accords with some of the more recent scholarship on the Islamic Revolution. As Charles Kurzmann perceptively notes, to say that the Shah had lost legitimacy, or that his regime was beset by innumerable internal contradictions is not in itself an explanation of the revolution; by the late 1970s Iran's socio-economic and political ills were hardly greater than other Middle Eastern countries which were not subsequently convulsed by revolution.⁶⁹ For all the importance of structural flaws within the ancient regime and the coalescing of revolutionary collations, revolutions culminate when, as the above quote states, ordinary people decide to defy the state and take to the streets. Kurzmann, drawing on social psychology and collective behaviour theories, posits a theory of 'critical mass' to explain why protests in Qom in 1977 eventually grew into a revolutionary movement which brought down the Shah. As a small but boisterous number of Iranians instigated the protests, the revolutionary movement became, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy as other Iranians were attracted to the movement not only because they assumed other like-minded compatriots would do so and thus afford safety in numbers, but because the burgeoning crowds on the streets heightened the popular perception of the viability of bringing an end to Pahlavi rule. The unthinkable revolution became quite suddenly an inevitable revolution.⁷⁰

Whatever one makes of Kurzmann's theory, his central point concerning the contingency of revolutions holds a special significance for our discussion of nationalism during the Islamic Revolution, a facet which scholars have tended to downplay in the historiography. This oversight is perhaps not surprising given that the spectacle of a modernizing society tumultuously metamorphosing into a

⁶⁹ "If poverty caused revolution, we should have seen massive uprisings elsewhere in the Islamic world as well." Kurzmann, p. 85

⁷⁰ Kurzmann, pp. 127-142

theocracy prompted many scholars to locate the wellsprings of the revolution in Shia Islam and its spiritual custodians, the clergy. Following on from academic debates about the supposedly inherent messianic tendency within Shi'ite Islam and the related assumption that throughout history the Shi'ite clergy was irrevocably hostile to the state, a number of studies of the Islamic Revolution have seized on the idea that Shi'ite Islam and its great passion play, the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at Karbala, provided an inspirational cultural reservoir of motifs and allegories from which the revolutionary crowds derived their courage and coherence.⁷¹ The clerics, according to this view, shrewdly fanned and directed such potent emotions to mobilize the masses and demonize the Shah as the modern reincarnation of Shi'ite Islam's great villain, Yazid. The massive street marches during the Ashura festival of November and December 1978, in this conception, were a testament not only to the inordinate power of the clergy to direct protests but also their genius for transforming religious ritual and iconography into revolutionary political action.

⁷¹ Michael Fischer argues that a "Karbala paradigm" was the central cultural narrative of the revolution. He writes: "Shi'ite preaching had been honed into a highly effective technique for maintaining a high level of consciousness about the injustice of the Pahlavi regime and for coordinating demonstrations. The Karbala paradigm helped unite disparate interest groups into a mass movement against an entrenched tyranny." M. Fischer, Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.183. See also J. Swenson, 'Martyrdom: Mytho-Cathexis and the Mobilization of the Masses in the Iranian Revolution', Ethos, 13 (2), Summer 1985, pp. 121-149

Nikki Keddie and Hamid Algar have written extensively on the allegedly revolutionary and messianic tendencies within Shia Islam and the corresponding potential for the Shia clergy to adopt a revolutionary stance towards the state. See for example: N. Keddie, Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution, New York, New York University Press, 1995, pp. 154-173; N. Keddie, 'Introduction' in ' in Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution N. Keddie (ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 1-21; N. Keddie, 'The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran' in Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500, N. Keddie (ed.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, pp. 211-228; H. Algar, 'The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran' in Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500 Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972. Willem Floor, by contrast, does not ascribe to the clergy such a revolutionary character, and this theme is backed up by S.A Arjomand who argues that the pious antipathy to temporal power inspired not a revolutionary agenda but actually a withdrawal from profane politics. See W. M. Floor 'The Revolutionary Character of the Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality?' in Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983; S. A. Arjomand, 'Religion, Political Action and Legitimate Domination in Shi'ite Iran: Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries A.D.', European Journal of Sociology, 20, 1979, pp. 59-109

Whether Shi'ite Islam was actually conducive to a revolutionary mindset or whether scholars are simply reading history backward and calling this religious culture 'revolutionary' because the clerics made it appear so, it is difficult to disagree with Shahrough Akhavi's proposition that "[t]he passion play has played a central role in the dynamics of the Iranian revolution".⁷² However this repeated focus on the religious impulse of the revolution has tended to overshadow the fact that a genuinely nationalistic verve sustained the revolutionary movement. The reasons, of course, why individual Iranians joined the movement varied greatly, ranging from economic discontent and political frustration to idealism and ideological zeal, but what united the south Tehran slum dweller who listened to Khomeini's clandestine taped lectures, the radical Esfahani student who read Al Ahmad, and the Shirazi middle class professional who travelled to Shariati's lectures, was a palpable national feeling (*ehsas-e melli*) which surged through the revolutionary movement.⁷³ For a people often cynically disposed towards politics and given to explaining events by recourse to conspiracy theories, this "intoxicating" national euphoria after decades spent languishing under autocratic rule translated into a veritable sense of national pride as millions partook in what they imagined to be a rare opportunity for the nation to shape its own destiny.⁷⁴ Western media coverage of the time highlighted these very sentiments; *The Economist* reported how the huge protests in Tehran December 1978 witnessed Iranians "of all classes and social backgrounds" taking part, "from the president of a leading bank to the humblest of new arrivals in the slums of south Tehran".⁷⁵ *The New York Times*, perhaps underplaying the extent

⁷² S. Akhavi, 'The Ideology and Praxis of Shi'ism in the Iranian Revolution', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 25, 1983, p. 220. On the debate about whether Shia Islam provided an pre-existing cultural reservoir of revolutionary ideology, or was created as such by the revolutionary movement, see Kurzmann, pp. 54-79

⁷³ On the various impulses which motivated Iranians of different social classes see M. Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1989. The heterogeneity of the revolutionary movement was reiterated in an interview with a Political Science Professor, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, 7 February 2006

⁷⁴ Roy Mottahedeh has written of the "intoxicating euphoria of those scenes in which the Iranian masses saw themselves for the first time as actors on the stage of history". See Mottahedeh, p. 378. On the question of Iranian 'national character – for some a dubious proposition - and penchant for conspiracy theories see D. Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle Eastern Fears of Conspiracy*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, chapters four and five; and G. Fuller, *The "Center of the Universe": The Geopolitics of Iran*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1991, pp. 21-23.

⁷⁵ 'Voting with the stamping feet', *The Economist*, 269 (7059), December 16 1978, pp. 51-52

of anti-American feeling, noted that the “rising sentiment against foreign involvement in Iran appears to be motivated chiefly by nationalism rather than anti-Western feeling”.⁷⁶ In the same vein the revolutionaries who seized the state television and radio stations perfectly captured the mood of the moment when they began their first broadcast with the immortal words “[t]his is the true voice of the Iranian nation”.⁷⁷

While emphasizing the diversity of actors and motivations within the revolutionary coalition, Iranian interlocutors also confirmed the existence of this grass-roots or ‘popular’ nationalism during the revolution which stood in deliberate contradistinction to the dynastic nationalism of the Shah. In the eyes of most Iranians this national feeling derived not from the Shah’s own delusions of grandeur but from a more diffuse notion of the “pure soil of Iran”, the Persian language, the country’s ethnic mosaic, and Shi’ite Islam, the latter which many considered inseparable from Iranianness.⁷⁸ Iranians, in other words, possessed their own ideas on what constituted national identity and nationalism which were quite distinct from the imbalanced notions of nationalism espoused by the Shah. The Islamic Revolution may not have been a modern political nationalist movement as we understand it to be in the West, but from the Iranian perspective a distinct popular nationalism which drew on Iran’s geography, history and culture, and which bound Iranians together in their demands for national liberation, was an essential part of the revolutionary experience. This nationalist feeling which derived from within was in turn directed against the United States as the chief backer of the hated Shah. As one editor of a prominent daily newspaper recalled, the Islamic Revolution was indeed “an Islamic and nationalist movement against the United States”.⁷⁹ Even clerics couch the events of 1978-79 in such terms, as both a nationalist revolution which sought Iran’s independence and as an Islamic revolution which demanded the

⁷⁶ Y. Ibrahim, ‘Despite Army’s Presence, Iranian oil town is challenging the Shah’, The New York Times, November 19, 1978, p. 20

⁷⁷ Mottahedeh, p. 12

⁷⁸ Interview with three Humanities Professors, University of Tehran, Tehran, 21 February 2006

⁷⁹ Interview with newspaper editor, Tehran, 22 May 2006

creation of an authentic Islamic society.⁸⁰ One high-ranking member of the Liberation Movement and a close confidant of Khomeini in the early months of the revolution evoked this popular nationalist feeling which derived its ardor from patriotic pride as well as an antipathy to the nexus of domestic despotism and foreign domination which had stained much of Iran's modern history:

Iranians themselves are very nationalistic; it is deeply rooted in their psyche. Iran is situated at the crossroads of four continents, and it has suffered continuous invasion throughout its history. Iranians have developed two important capabilities in this regard. The first is their superb ability to absorb the positive elements of the invaders, to incorporate and domesticate. Iranian culture is so much the richer for this. Secondly, Iranians have a strong sensitivity towards foreign domination.... After 1953 the fight became one against foreign domination and domestic despotism. The Iranians were fighting for national sovereignty, freedom and greater rights and independence against foreign domination. There were 45,000 Americans in the country as a constant reminder of foreign power.⁸¹

This national anti-American feeling was reflected not only in the crude cries of "Death to America" but also in revolutionary posters and pamphlets which called on the "Yankee" to "go home". Night letters (*shabnameha*) posted on the doors of foreigners brave enough to sit out the revolutionary upheaval called on them to leave now that "all Iranians have joined hands in their efforts against the Shah" notwithstanding those Iranophiles who "would like to see our nation succeed in its efforts to gain independence and freedom".⁸²

Ultimately the revolutionary movement became a simultaneous exercise in the creation of nationalist spontaneity and the smashing of nationalistic abstractions. When in the summer of 1978 the Shah flew over Tehran by helicopter and stared down in disbelief at the massive protests on the streets below he had pause for thought, perhaps, on the poignant symmetry of the situation: for all his efforts to personalize nationalism it was now the populace and not the monarchy which

⁸⁰ Interview Ayatollah, Qom, 29 April 2006; Interview with cleric, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 31 May 2006

⁸¹ Interview with Senior *Nehzat-e Azadi* official, 10 May 2006

⁸² For an example of a night-letter and poster see "'Get Rid of the Shah" was the Cry Throughout the Country', *MERIP Reports*, 75/76: Iran in Revolution, March-April 1979, pp. 13-16

embodied the nation.⁸³ This is not to say there was a consensus across the revolutionary movement on all aspects of Iranian nationalism, but the desire for national liberation and the urge to expel American influence was a visceral feeling shared across the political spectrum. The anachronistic abstractions of dynastic nationalism which the Shah had laboured so long to construct had now been shattered by a revolutionary movement which had itself reinvented Iran, however briefly, as a nation united in “the collective will to resist power”.⁸⁴

The diffusiveness of this nationalistic feeling is all the more important to understand given that it underpinned the rapidly coalescing ideology of revolution. As Gene Burns argues in an astute analysis of the revolutionary process in Iran, the sudden collapse of the tottering Pahlavi state and the rapid mass mobilization of the revolutionary crowds did not allow for the development of an elaborate program or detailed consensus amongst the revolutionaries. What rhetorical unity there was found expression in the under-specified revolutionary catch-cries such as the famous “*Azadi, Esteghlal, Jomhuri-ye Islami*” (“Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic”). The idea of an “Islamic Republic” at this point remained conveniently ambiguous but it was the incontrovertible nationalistic principles of “Freedom” and “Independence” which provided the true unifying motifs of the revolutionary movement. “*Azadi, Esteghlal, Jomhuri-ye Islami*” in turn became the maxim which linked the popular nationalism of the masses with the patriotic bents of the individual group ideologies in the sprawling revolutionary coalition. As the crowds held aloft pictures of Mossadegh alongside those of Khomeini and Shariati to remind the world of the simultaneous Islamic and nationalist undercurrents of the revolutionary movement, the various organizations within the revolutionary coalition pandered to such sentiments by chiming in with nationalistic calls which reflected both their own values and their desire to maintain the unity of the coalition.

⁸³ D. Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 1

⁸⁴ Hamid Dabashi has recently written: “We have become a nation not by virtue of European colonizing or Orientalists writing about us, but by virtue of resisting colonialism, talking back to senile Orientalists, reminding them of where we come from, striking back at the imperial hubris that has denied us agency. We are a nation by virtue of our collective will to resist power, and we are a modern nation by virtue of an anti-colonial modernity that locates us in defiant disposition of our current history”. H. Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, New York, The New Press, 2007, p. 25

Khomeini's rants against the Shah's American backing, the Mojahedin's quasi-Marxist and Mossadeghist call to excise malignant imperialism through the nationalization of the economy, and Taleqani's demands for national freedom can all be viewed in this light. As Burns notes, though, while the mobs demanded national independence and gleefully screamed "Death to America" and "Death to the Shah", they did not realize the extent to which apparent allies were attempting to implement quite different interpretations of such an ambiguous revolutionary ideology. Much of the post-revolutionary strife in Iran would result from the painful transformation of such an underspecified ideology into a specific revolutionary state program.⁸⁵

In stressing this link between revolution and nationalism there is one final caveat to be made. The nationalistic catharsis we have described above was common to millions in Iran's cities and towns but it is important to remember that while the revolution was predominantly an urban affair, it was not entirely so: "freedom" and "independence" meant something rather different across the country's ethnic mosaic in which Persians constituted only a bare majority. The collapse of the Pahlavi state unleashed centrifugal forces along Iran's ethnic periphery as various groups such as the Kurdish Democratic Party, the 'Cultural and Political Society of the Turkoman People' and the 'Cultural, Political and Tribal Organization of the Arab People in Khuzestan' took advantage of the withering state power to clamour for greater administrative, economic and cultural rights.⁸⁶

A double paradox was at play here. As we saw above, through better communications and the expanding reach of the media and education system which were concomitants of his own modernization program, the Shah succeeded in implanting amongst most of the population a greater national awareness of being 'Iranian'. Even the Shah himself admitted the media had played an important role in

⁸⁵ G. Burns, 'Ideology, Culture and Ambiguity: The Revolutionary Process in Iran', Theory and Society, 25 (3), June 1996, pp. 349-388

⁸⁶ Hiro, p. 103. On the wider question of Iran's ethnicities and the question of Iranian nationalism see A. Ashraf, 'The crisis of national and ethnic identities in contemporary Iran', Iranian Studies, 26 (1), 1993, pp. 159 - 164; T. Atabaki, 'Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity of Iran: Domestic Harmony and Regional Challenges', Iranian Studies, 38 (1) 2005, pp. 23-44

the revolution by broadcasting images and linking Iranians together as the protests gathered pace.⁸⁷ A reverse process, however, operated amongst the country's ethnic groups. Much of Iran's periphery remained superficially integrated into the growing economy of the 1960s and 1970s. Such uneven development left a legacy of backwardness and poverty which were reflected in poor economic, education and health indicators among many of Iran's ethnic groups.⁸⁸ This fuelled a sense of simmering resentment against the centralizing state, a sentiment exacerbated by the Shah's almost racist nationalist ideology which by emphasizing the "Aryan" Persian traits of the Iranian nation denied its true cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity.⁸⁹ Indeed some scholars argue that the Shah's policies, particularly the emphasis on Persianizing the education system, constituted a "cultural genocide" against Iran's minority languages and cultures.⁹⁰ Thus while on the one hand the Shah – notwithstanding his widely derided imperial posturing – was bringing the nation together by virtue of modernization, on the other he was driving it apart by fuelling growing ethno-nationalisms in which ethnic leaders and intellectuals took advantage of modern communications to re-define their own ethnic identities. As the Shah jetted off into exile, the question again came to the fore: was Iran *really* a nation? In the end it was only the Kurds who mounted a serious insurrection against central authority, but the ferocity of the rebellion would focus the attention of the Islamic Republican leadership on the necessity of carefully re-conceptualizing and rebuilding the Iranian nation in the aftermath of the revolutionary upheaval.⁹¹

⁸⁷ "The mass media played an important part in the unfolding events in my country during the last three years". See Pahlavi, 1980, p. 161

⁸⁸ A. Aghajanian 'Ethnic Inequality in Iran: An Overview', International Journal of Middle East Studies, 15 (2) May 1983, pp. 211-224

⁸⁹ S. Mojab and A. Hassanpour, 'The Politics of Nationality and Ethnic Diversity' in S. Rahnema and S. Behdad, Iran After the Revolution: Crisis of an Islamic State, London, I.B. Taurus, 1995, p. 230-233

⁹⁰ Mojab and Hassanpour, p. 230-233

⁹¹ On the rise of Kurdish nationalism see A. Vali, 'The Making of Kurdish Identity in Iran', Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 4 (7) 1995, pp. 1-22

Down with Nationalism?

The lingering idea that the Islamic Revolution represented the eclipse of Iranian nationalism can perhaps be definitively traced to the bitter, terminally-ill Shah who wrote from exile that:

The Iranian flag, which does not date from our dynasty, and beneath whose folds millions of Iranians throughout history have sacrificed themselves, is now derided by the leaders of the so-called revolution, as are the ancient kings who led Persia through the triumphs and tribulations of one of the world's most glorious histories....Nothing causes me more pain than the realization of this terrible threat which hangs over the national identity and the cultural and spiritual heritage of Iran. For these are our great advantages, the essential foundations from which everything else could eventually be won back, but without which all is lost.⁹²

This impression was seemingly confirmed by an infamous anecdote concerning Ayatollah Khomeini whose other-worldly calmness and detachment during the nerve-racking return to Iran in January 1979 on board a chartered Air France Boeing 747 provoked bewildered reactions from the Western press corps. Asked how he felt upon returning to Iran after so many years in exile he gruffly replied “*hichi*” (nothing), giving the impression of a man so ascetically devout he cared nothing for his own homeland.⁹³ Such a quip is regularly invoked by Iranians inside and outside Iran who object to the idea that the ‘mullahs’ could possibly exhibit nationalistic feeling. The postscript to this anecdote is worthy of quoting at length, for after touching down at Mehrabad airport in Tehran, the same airport from which the tearful Shah had ignominiously departed but weeks before, Khomeini addressed the nation with a rousing nationalist speech:

I thank the various classes of the nation for the feelings they have expressed towards me. The debt of gratitude I owe to the Iranian people weighs heavily upon my shoulders, and I can in no way repay it.

⁹² Pahlavi, 1980, p. 210

⁹³ A description of this footnote to history is given by the British journalist John Simpson who was among the press corps on that historic flight. See J. Simpson, Behind Iranian Lines, London, Robson Books, 1988, p. 28

I offer my thanks to all classes of the nation: to the religious scholars, who have toiled with such devotion during these recent events; to the students, who have suffered so heavily; to the merchants and traders, who have undergone hardship; to the youths in the bazaars, universities, and madrasas of the country, who have shed their blood in the course of these events; to the professors, judges, and civil servants; to the workers and peasants. You have triumphed because of your extraordinary efforts and unity of purpose.

You have accomplished the first step towards a complete victory by removing Mohammad Riza, the chief traitor, from the scene....He has exploited our country and made it more backward than it was before, destroyed our agriculture and ruined our land, and made our army subordinate to foreign advisers. Our triumph will come when all forms of foreign control have been plucked out of the soil of our land....We must thank all classes of the nation. Victory has been attained by the unity of purpose not only of the Muslims, but also of the religious minorities, and by the unity of the religious leaders and politicians. Unity of purpose is the secret of victory. Let us not lose this secret by permitting demons in human form to create dissension in our ranks.⁹⁴

Such a patriotic rhetorical flourish, coming shortly after the “*hichi*” quip, seems to suggest that the real trajectory of Iranian nationalism after the triumph of the revolution is somewhat more complicated than the Shah’s dualistic characterization. What follows is not a history of post-revolutionary Iran, which has been comprehensively covered by other scholars, but a more thematic inquiry into the nature of nationalism in Iran’s first and only theocracy.

Given Khomeini’s status as the founder of the Islamic Republic, the question of his own exact position on nationalism has aroused the interest of scholars. David Menashri, for example, argues that between the 1940s and the 1970s, Khomeini’s views on nationalism underwent a radical shift. In response to the overt nationalist platform of the Shah, Menashri writes, and becoming increasingly influenced by radical Sunni and Shia thinkers who stressed the need for greater global Islamic unity, Khomeini himself gradually moved towards a more pronounced pan-Islamic outlook which viewed nationalism as “alien”.⁹⁵ James Piscatori, while putting Khomeini in together with other ‘non-conformist’ radical Islamic thinkers who upheld the idea of the *ummat* over and above a world of nation-states, concedes that

⁹⁴ ‘Declaration Upon Arrival at Tehran’ in Algar, 1981, pp. 252-253

⁹⁵ Menashri, 1990, pp. 40-57

Khomeini's complex thought consisted of intertwined strands of nationalism and universalism which owed much to his awkward position of being both a revolutionary Islamic leader devoted to raising up oppressed Moslems around the world, and a head of state obliged to strengthen and protect Iran. According to Piscatori, Khomeini implicitly believed that Islam stimulated a stronger attachment than nationalism, and his constant refrain to export the revolution evinced the hope that other Moslems would embrace Islamic revolution in their own countries.⁹⁶ Nevertheless if it remained unclear exactly how much importance Khomeini accorded to national attachments in his own mind, in public he constantly waxed lyrical about the Iranian nation. His signature work, *Islamic Government*, may have contained little trace of national pride, but during and after the revolution, as we saw above, in almost every speech Khomeini was effusive in his praise for the noble nation of Iran.⁹⁷ Khomeini did, however, make a caveat:

To love one's fatherland and its people and to protect its frontiers are both quite unobjectionable, but nationalism, involving hostility to other Muslim nations, is something quite different. It is contrary to the Noble Qu'ran and the orders of the most Noble Messenger. Nationalism that results in the creation of enmity between Muslims and splits the ranks of the believers is against Islam and the interests of Muslims. It is a stratagem concocted by foreigners who are disturbed by the spread of Islam.⁹⁸

A careful reading between the lines, however, renders a different meaning from the denunciation of nationalism it appears to be at first glance. When Khomeini spoke on the subject of nationalism, usually in sneering references to the National Front and the Liberation Movement whose loyalty to the new regime he regarded as suspect, the Ayatollah tended to offer a very bald definition: "Islam opposes nationalism....[t]he meaning of nationalism is that we want the nation, we want nationalism, and we do not want Islam".⁹⁹ The implication, however, was that one could have his nation and fete it too. Elsewhere, for example, Khomeini reassured

⁹⁶ Piscatori, 1986, pp. 111-116

⁹⁷ Imam Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist*, Tehran, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2002

⁹⁸ Quoted in Algar, 1981, p. 302

⁹⁹ See Khomeini's speech in Khalili and Anari, p. 447

Iranians that “[a]ccording to Islam one should honour his home country, his mother country, but he should not set it against Islam”.¹⁰⁰ Khomeini rejected ‘nationalism’ which invoked the hostility of other Muslims, but put beside the almost daily entreaties to the Iranian nation – “I daringly say”, he opined, “that the Iranian nation, the Iranian millions of masses, at this present age, are better than the nation of al-Hijaz at the time of the Messenger of Allah” - his statements made clear that Khomeini implicitly believed in the strengthening the righteous Iranian nation so as to act as the vanguard Islamic revolutionary nation and serve as the shining example to the *ummat*.¹⁰¹ Khomeini denounced both Pahlavi nationalism which derived its chauvinistic streak from European-style nationalism, and the suspiciously ‘liberal’ nationalism of the National Front and the Liberation Movement, but an indigenous, religious-based nationalism was quite legitimate in the eyes of Iran’s new leader. To his dying day Khomeini lauded the Iranian nation, and it was this belief in Iran’s great national mission which was to underlay his conception of religious nationalism.¹⁰²

Away from Khomeini’s incandescent rhetoric, it was another senior cleric, Ayatollah Eshraqi, who rendered a more thoughtful analysis of nationalism in a special interview with the *Keyhan* newspaper, a notably conservative post-revolution newspaper and certainly no bastion of liberal or dynastic nationalism.¹⁰³ Asked whether nationalism is in conflict with Islam, Eshraqi replied with an emphatic “no”. In the convoluted, but nevertheless carefully measured tones in which Iranian clerics speak, Eshraqi systematically explained how religion and nationalism are in fact

¹⁰⁰ Khalili and Anari, p. 162

¹⁰¹ Khalili and Anari, p. 336

¹⁰² In his last will and testament Khomeini wrote: “At the conclusion of this testament once more I say to the honorable Iranian nation that in this world the vastness one’s pains, sufferings, devotion, deprivations, and sacrifices is commensurate with the vastness of one’s cause and its value and station. What you, the crusading and noble nation have risen and given of your lives and wealth for, is the noblest, the most sublime, and the most valuable cause that has been put forth since time began, nor will a similar cause be ever presented again. That cause is the ‘school of divinity’ in its broad sense and meaning.” See R. Khomeini, The Last Message: The Political and Divine Will of His Holiness Imam Khomeini (PBUH), Tehran, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini (pbuh) International Affairs Division Translation Unit, 1998, p. 93

¹⁰³ *Keyhan*, Wednesday 2nd Mehr 1359, No. 11101, p. 1

complementary. He started off by reminding readers of a simple reality: the world is composed of different peoples and each has their own national homeland. “A nation which lives in a particular geographical location”, Eshraqi declared, “will derive a special identity from that same location”:

For example it will be called the ‘nation of Iran’, meaning the people which live in that particular geographical location bounded by the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf in the south. The location which gives identity to the people is called the country [*vatan*] and an ‘Iranian’ is someone who lives in the country of Iran.

But nations, countries and nationalism, in Eshraqi’s estimation, did not derive their singular importance from mere geographical reality. Eshraqi quoted the famous hadith of the Prophet Mohammad who purportedly said “the love of the country is part of the faith” to remind Iranians that the homeland holds an essential emotional attachment. This link between religion and the nation is underscored, Eshraqi reminded Iranians, by the Quran itself which relates the celebrated story of the Talut (Saul) and the Israelites who fought to expel foreign invaders from their country and in doing so were credited as fighting in the way of God. “When we see the Talut story”, Eshraqi enjoined, “if the country held no value in Islam, fighting to retake the country would not be categorized as fighting ‘in the way of God’”. “Therefore”, the Ayatollah concluded, “love of the country, loyalty to Iranianness – being Iranian, ‘nationalism’ – from the perspective of Islam all have value”.

Ayatollah Eshraqi, however, warned against nationalism for its own sake. A human being’s identity also inheres in the metaphysical dimension, particularly in the sublime qualities of thought, reflection, intellect and insight which allow the true believer to “discover the unknown aspects of the world and conquer other states of being in alternative dimensions”. Such attributes of humanity, Eshraqi argued, are not contingent upon national borders or nationalism: Islam makes the person, not ‘nationalism’ per se. Together, however, Islam and nationalism would constitute a powerful force. “Islam makes the human being”, Eshraqi noted, cleverly capturing the essence of this new religious nationalism which applied religious tradition and justifications to the world of modern nation-states, “and a nation which is composed

of such people is well regarded by Islam”. Naturally, in creating an Islamic Iranian nation, Eshraqi and his fellow revolutionaries assumed other peoples should follow this example. He summed up:

When we say that our revolution must be exported, we don't mean to erase borders, or that countries should alter their borders, or that we are against 'nationalism'. Instead, our goal is exporting the revolution of humanity to the whole world. In other words, by applying the Koran and Islamic teachings to all levels of society we will have excellent human beings full of nobility, generosity and full of faith to God. On the other hand exporting the revolution will rid societies of evil, rapaciousness, ignorance, tyranny and possess peoples with faith, enlightenment, justice and virtue. Therefore Islam agrees with nationalism as well as trying to expand the Quran's program to the whole world and result in perfect societies. Islam does not threaten nor make others anxious, respects and is loyal to all countries' borders, and doesn't allow the invasion of one country by another without good reason – it simply tries to bring the Quran's principles to the world.

By exploring the explicit and implicit dimensions of this religious nationalism, not only do the scholarly prognoses of the 'end' of nationalism fall flat, but many of the apparent contradictions which other scholars have latched on to suddenly become comprehensible. Yann Richard, for example, stressed the supposed "ambiguity" of the nascent Islamic Republic's constitution which "vacillates" between the "sovereignty of God and the legitimacy of the rights of the nation" by announcing Iran's desire to bring about the unity of the Islamic world while at the same time upholding the principle of Iran's inviolable territorial integrity.¹⁰⁴ Cheryl Bernard and Zalmay Khalilzad took this to mean that "[w]hile the Shah emphasized Iranian nationalism, the new regime emphasizes Islamic internationalism, rejecting Iranian nationalism in favor of pan-Islamism".¹⁰⁵

In their own estimation, however, the revolutionaries who eventually drafted the constitution considered they had suitably fused religion and nationalism. One high-ranking foreign affairs official recalled that the constitution had pulled off a

¹⁰⁴ Y. Richard, 'The Relevance of "Nationalism" in Contemporary Iran', *Middle East Review*, 21 (4) Summer 1989, pp. 33-34

¹⁰⁵ C. Bernard and Z. Khalilzad, *'The Government of God' – Iran's Islamic Republic*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, pp. 146-147

successful balance “between the confines of the nation-state and the comprehensive calling of the Islamic ummah”:

the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on a combination of Islam, republicanism and nationalism. Although these elements might seem to be incompatible, the Constitution of Iran achieves a workable balance by sensible mechanisms and a defined structure.¹⁰⁶

The key articles of the constitution bear this point out. Just as Article 15, for example, announced that Persian remained the country’s official language, Article 115 declared that only an Iranian could run for the presidency.¹⁰⁷ In a nod to the sentiments of the recent revolution and the Oil Nationalization movement two and a half decades before, Article 43 committed the new government to the “prevention of foreign economic domination over the country’s economy”. It was articles nine and ten, though, which were the most stark, but which have hamstrung scholars ever since:

Article 9

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from each other, and their preservation is the duty of the government and of all individual citizens. No individual, group, or authority has the right to infringe in the slightest way upon the political, cultural, economic, and military independence or the territorial integrity of Iran under the pretext of exercising freedom. Similarly, no authority has the right to withdraw legitimate freedoms, even by establishing laws and regulations for that purpose, under the pretext of preserving the independence and territorial integrity of the country.

Article 10

In accordance with the verse “This your nation is a single nation, and I am your Lord, so worship me”, all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to the merging and union of all Muslim peoples, and must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ G. Khoshroo, ‘The Experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran’ in V. Hooker and A. Saikal (eds) *Islamic Perspectives on the New Millennium*, Singapore, ISEAS Publications, 2004, pp. 152,154.

¹⁰⁷ For these articles and others see H. Algar (trans.), *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1980

¹⁰⁸ See fn. 107

It is these two articles which many have seized upon to indicate the death of Iranian nationalism. Much of the confusion, as the above translated articles make obvious, stems from the issue of how to accurately render *ummat* in English. Rather than translate *ummat* as a 'nation', in the Iranian context it was and is taken to mean the 'global community of the faithful', an altogether broader conception which did not imply the disavowal of 'Iran': Iranian revolutionaries recognized that within one *ummat* there were many *mellal* (plural of *mellat*, nations) and *keshvarha* (countries) reflecting the diversity of mankind.¹⁰⁹ The new constitution, therefore, retained an inherent logic. The commitment to Islamic unity did not, as Ayatollah Eshraqi pointed out, entail the elimination of national borders and the establishment of a pan-Islamic state. Moreover, the "political, economic and cultural unity of the Islamic world", was suitably vague to mean anything from praising the Palestinian resistance to politicizing the hajj and incurring the ire of the Saudi Arabian authorities. This is not to deny the genuine internationalist instincts of Khomeini and his cohort who wanted to ameliorate the unfortunate plight of many Moslems around the world, but here we want to emphasize that this notion came second to the absolute determination of the new regime to uphold the existence, legitimacy and exemplar status of the Islamic Iranian nation.

The interconnection of nationalism and revolution, however, did not dwell solely in these constitutional articles. In the post-revolutionary milieu the constitution itself became an ideological bone of contention amongst the fraying revolutionary coalition and thus the object of the 'use and abuse' of nationalism. Despite the fact that over 98% of Iranians voted for an 'Islamic Republic' in the April 1979 referendum, the revolutionary consensus, formerly buttressed by "conveniently ambiguous" anti-imperialist nationalism and hatred of the Shah, steadily eroded as revolutionaries at both ends of the political spectrum sought to impose their own

¹⁰⁹ Interview with cleric, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 31 May 2006

widely diverging interpretations of what an ‘Islamic Republic’ entailed.¹¹⁰ The fractious debate over the constitution, therefore, became an integral part of the radicalizing of the revolution, a phenomenon noted by the eminent theorist of revolution Crane Brinton who argued that all the great historical revolutions witnessed the “accession of the extremists”.¹¹¹ Iran’s descent into radicalism and virtual civil war has been explained at length elsewhere but what interests us here is the curious ability of Khomeini and his Islamist clique to simultaneously disparage rivals as mere ‘nationalists’ and whip up nationalist fervour for their own ends.¹¹²

Upon his return to Iran, Khomeini appointed the Liberation Movement stalwart Mehdi Bazargan to head the Provisional Government and in so doing replace the Shah’s caretaker government under the National Front veteran Shahpour Bakhtiar whose rapid flight from Iran symbolized the decrepit and rudderless condition of the old National Front. No sooner, however, was Bazargan appointed that the Islamists around Khomeini began to undermine the Provisional Government. The Islamists controlled Iran’s most powerful political party, the Islamic Republican Party, and the shadowy Council of the Islamic Revolution that had arrogated to itself the power to act as an interim parliament to ‘pass’ legislation. Both institutions held a deep suspicion of the Provisional government and feared rivals in the revolutionary coalition were intent on sidelining the clerics. In order to get a stranglehold over post-revolutionary Iran, the Islamists set about creating parallel institutions to outmuscle the Provisional government. They created the *Hezbollah* and *Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Islami* to break up rival rallies and intimidate outspoken opposition groups. Khomeini’s acolytes also founded the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp as an alternative military force to ward off the threat of a coup from within the regular armed forces. The Islamists also brought under their control the neighborhood revolutionary vigilante groups – the *komiteha* – to enforce Islamic

¹¹⁰ On the referendum see S. Bakhsh, The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Republic, New York, Basic Books, 1984, p. 73

¹¹¹ See C. Brinton, The Anatomy of Revolution, London, Jonathan Cape, 1953, chapter six

¹¹² On the post-revolutionary experience see Bakhsh, 1984; Ansari, 2003; M. Milani, The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic (2nd ed.), Boulder, Westview Press, 1994

morals at the local level. Khomeini saw to it that his candidates were appointed to the positions of Friday Prayer leaders and Director of Television and Radio. Finally, regime foes were arraigned and executed at the behest of the revolutionary courts that meted out lethal revolutionary justice. Bazargan railed against such strong-arm tactics but he was ultimately powerless to prevent the rise of this radical Islamist mini-state.¹¹³

The true extent of this mini-state's aims for the state as whole became startlingly clear by August 1979 when an Assembly of Experts convened to deliberate on the draft constitution prepared by the Provisional Government. The first draft was based upon the old 1906 constitution and the French Fifth Republic, minus of course the recently-toppled institution of the monarchy. This was clearly insufficient for Khomeini and his supporters who were now aiming to erect a theocracy as prescribed in Khomeini's 1971 book. Khomeini finally played his hand, until then kept close to his chest, by acquiescing to his supporters in the Assembly introducing a new constitutional article making him the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

During the Occultation of the Lord of the Age (may God hasten his renewed manifestation!), the governance and leadership of the nation devolve upon the just and pious *faqih* who is acquainted with the circumstances of his age; courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability; and recognized and accepted as leader by the majority of the people.¹¹⁴

The Assembly, stacked with pro-Khomeini clerics and adroitly controlled by Khomeini's chief lieutenant Ayatollah Beheshti, overwhelmingly endorsed the new constitution, but the problem remained how to convince the wider population which had not envisaged the establishment of a theocracy.¹¹⁵ At this juncture fate intervened, for in October of that year the Shah's allies in the American corridors of

¹¹³ On the fall of the Provisional government see Milani, 1994, chapter eight

¹¹⁴ See fn. 107

¹¹⁵ On the creation of the new constitution and reservations of critics inside and outside the assembly see see A. Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and State in the Islamic Republic*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1997, pp. 45-55. See also Bakhash, pp. 79-86

power successfully pressed for the ailing monarch to be allowed into the US for medical treatment. This development prompted deep fears inside Iran that Washington would again intervene and reinstate their old client as it had in 1953. It was the final cue for a group of student radicals who proceeded to invade the American embassy in Tehran and hold its diplomats hostage.¹¹⁶ Khomeini and his lieutenants quickly identified the benefits of stoking anti-American hysteria and molding it into a highly-charged xenophobic nationalism with which to smother opposition to the new constitution. In a country where, as Mohsen Milani notes, the perception of being the champion of anti-imperialism often guarantees political success, Khomeini and his supporters deftly exploited the hysterical atmosphere of the embassy siege to propound the notion that they were the true anti-American patriots and guardians of the Iranian nation, and that opposition to the proposed constitution was tantamount to collaborating with the US and undermining the revolution.¹¹⁷ The students inside the embassy obliged by releasing CIA documents purportedly demonstrating the covert links between the 'Great Satan' and liberal nationalists such as Bazargan (who resigned in disgust after the invasion of the embassy) and Abolhasan Bani-Sadr who became the first President of the Islamic Republic in January 1980 but whose tenure was marked by a rocky relationship with his clerical colleagues in government. The leftists, too, joined in the smear campaign by criticizing the liberal nationalists and supporting the embassy siege as a way to humiliate American imperialism. The Carter administration contributed to the suffocation of the moderates by launching an ill-fated hostage rescue attempt, although at this juncture the revised constitution had long been approved in a another referendum boycotted by the National Front, the Mojahedin-e Khalq, and Khomeini's chief clerical rival, Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari and his Moslem People's Republican Party.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ The embassy siege is part and parcel of all surveys of revolutionary Iran. For the most recent full length monograph devoted to the affair see M. Bowden, Guests of the Ayatollah: the first battle in America's war with militant Islam, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006

¹¹⁷ Milani, 1994, p. 171

¹¹⁸ Milani, 1994, pp. 172-175

In terms of nationalism a curious dichotomy was at play here. On the one hand Khomeini and the Islamists relished indulging in nationalist political theatre which spoke to the deepest recesses of Iranian national culture. As William Beeman notes, the ‘Great Satan’ epithet was Khomeini’s signature “symbolic construction” that came to dominate the rhetoric of the revolution, and far from being a religious rant, it was in fact a “brilliant rhetorical device” which resounded with a number of uniquely Iranian cultural motifs.¹¹⁹ Beeman argues that Iranian culture is underpinned by a dualist streak between the exterior (*zaher*) and the interior (*baten*). In this cultural conception, the inner self guards a sense of purity and refuge from the manifold threats and risks lurking in the outside world. This dualistic outlook has informed the Iranian approach towards religion, particularly in the Shi’ite refrain to maintain inner purity against the corrupting influence of illegitimate authority. It has also underlined Iranians’ conception of their history in which powerful external enemies have sought to conquer Iran, only to witness Iran’s rich civilization emerge once again from the ashes like a phoenix.¹²⁰ In a culture where “a powerful culture of imagery and symbolism” was “already part of the national heritage”, Khomeini endeavoured to transpose this internal/external distinction which resided in the political, religious and historical consciousness of Iranians to the modern age in the form of a metaphor which painted the United States as the ultimate external threat to Iran’s inner self.¹²¹ Even for those many Iranians who may not have been enamoured of the clerics, the ‘Great Satan’ metaphor continued to channel their frustrations at America’s exploitative behaviour during the Pahlavi era.¹²² With its overt religious theme dedicated to combating evil through sacrifice and martyrdom, and its historical reference which saddled the United States with the role of the new imperialist enemy, the ‘Great Satan’ epithet remained the central summation of the revolutionaries’ religious nationalist viewpoint.

¹¹⁹ W. Beeman, The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and Iran demonize each other, Westport (Conn.), Praeger, 2005, pp. 49, 119

¹²⁰ Beeman, pp. 49-63; 120-123

¹²¹ Beeman, p. 50

¹²² Beeman, p. 25

On the other hand these same pro-Khomeini Islamists poisoned the political atmosphere by transforming the debate over the constitution into a Manichean battle between their version of 'Islam' and the 'liberal nationalism' of Bazargan and his moderate brethren which Khomeini in particular delighted in disparaging as spiritually inferior to his own ideology. Of this period Khomeini recalled:

We are aware that the superpowers have implanted in various communities agents in different guises such as 'nationalists', 'pan-Iranists', 'liberals', 'pseudo-intellectuals', and 'pseudo-clerics'.....Since the triumph of the Revolution, our people have seen such agents under the titles of 'Mojahed-e-Khalq', 'Fadai-ye-Khalq', the 'Tudeh', and other such appellations. It is necessary that the whole nation cooperate in neutralizing such conspiracies.¹²³

Such rhetorical gymnastics were underpinned by a very selective interpretation of the role of the clergy in Iran's modern history: in upholding the clerics as the indefatigable defenders of Iranian sovereignty Khomeini blatantly glossed over the memories of Nuri and Kashani who had sided with forces of autocracy and imperialism.¹²⁴ There was further cause for such politicking after the embassy siege when the Islamic Republic experienced a virtual civil war between the regime and the Mojahedin who while still a powerful political force were being inexorably sidelined by the Islamists. Cities across Iran were rocked by guerilla strikes, street clashes, assassinations and bombings, most notably the massive June 28 1981 attack that eliminated much of the higher echelon of the Islamic Republican leadership. Once again Khomeini turned to his old tactic of impugning the patriotism of his rivals. The regime, implicitly contrasting the perfidy of the guerillas with the patriotic defense of Iran by the radical Islamists, ruthlessly crushed the Mojahedin-e Khalq and disparaged them as "American mercenaries".¹²⁵ Other regime enemies were rounded up, namely the entire leadership of the Tudeh party which was arraigned in a revolutionary court on charges of spying for the USSR. When the threat loomed, however, of various opposition groups banding together once more to

¹²³ Khomeini, 1998, pp. 58-59

¹²⁴ E. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1993, chapter four

¹²⁵ On this violent era in Iran's history see R. Wright, *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade*, London, Bloomsbury, 1990, chapter three

confront the Islamists, Khomeini adroitly shifted his rhetorical stance by juxtaposing ‘mere’ nationalism with his own righteous Islamic ideology. In June 1981 the National Front made a last-gasp effort to bolster its waning influence by rallying in support of the embattled Bani-Sadr and signaling their opposition to the imposition of Sharia law. Khomeini got in first by making a national address which belittled the National Front for always elevating ‘nationalism’ over Islam and pointedly warned Bani-Sadr from getting involved.¹²⁶ By manipulating the affair into a standoff between ‘nationalism’ and ‘Islam’, Khomeini undercut the ideological pillars of the movement and ensured its demise. With the vicious innuendo about his alleged contacts with the CIA still swirling, and suffering from an increasingly fraught relationship with the Islamists who called for his impeachment, Bani-Sadr later went into hiding and fled Iran for France, removing Khomeini’s last serious rival from the Iranian political scene. Recalling this era, a Liberation Movement leader ruefully noted that “after the revolution the clergy cleverly made it a battle between religion and nationalism, in the context of the post-revolution power struggle”.¹²⁷ In truth Khomeini’s stratagem was slightly more nuanced; by quite literally using and abusing nationalism he successfully consolidated his paramount rule.

Safely ensconced in power Khomeini and his supporters quickly set about Islamizing Iranian society. In 1980 Khomeini announced the ‘cultural revolution’ to cleanse the Iranian nation of un-Islamic influences and create the perfect Islamic society.¹²⁸ Measures included the compulsory veiling of women, the overhauling of the legal system to bring it into line with the Sharia and a revamp of the entire education curriculum to include more Quranic studies and Arabic language lessons. Universities, given their status as the barometers of the country’s cultural development, were shut for two years while the entire tertiary sector was Islamized. Some have seen in this upheaval a wholesale change from nationalistic values to

¹²⁶ Milani, 1994, pp. 181-184

¹²⁷ Interview with Senior *Nehzhat-e Azadi* official, 10 May 2006

¹²⁸ For Khomeini’s conception of the Cultural Revolution see his speech ‘The Meaning of the Cultural Revolution’ in Algar, 1981, pp. 295-299

religious ones, or indeed a symptom of a deeper cultural schizophrenia in the Iranian soul.¹²⁹ While such pronouncements have a grain of truth to them, it is important not to extrapolate from them the idea that the cultural revolution was an exercise in obliterating Iran's national culture to create some sort of Islamic *tabula rasa*. The revolutionaries naturally sought to play down the Shah's emphasis on pre-Islamic Iran and root Iran's national identity in Shi'ite Islam just as Al Ahmad and Shariati had called for years before, but this process was not one of de-nationalization but rather an effort in de-Pahlavification. When the revolutionaries hacked into Reza Shah's tomb in South Tehran and stripped the imperial lion off the national flag they were effacing the old regime not the nation of Iran - Mohammad Reza Shah's disgust with such a spectacle reflected only the failure of a King who had tried to arrogate the nation's identity to himself. School children, for one, still learned about the history of the ancient Iranian nation, although the new curriculum came with a heavy Islamic tone and without the glorification of Kings.¹³⁰ In this regard one can locate the post-revolution reorientation of Iran's national identity as part of the "evolving polemic of Iranian nationalism".¹³¹

Before we conclude this discussion of nationalism and revolution, there is one last issue to be canvassed. Soon after the revolution, as Aytollah Eshraqi alluded to

¹²⁹ Richard Cottam has written of the "major alteration in the focus of identity" after the revolution. "Before the revolution", he writes, "the focus was the national community of which the modern business and professional class was the core societal element. Now the focus of identity for supporters of the revolution is the Islamic community of which the urban lower middle class is the core element." See R. Cottam, 'The Iranian Revolution' in J. Cole and N. Keddie (eds.) *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 55-56; see also Sandra Mackey who writes "The Iranians are a people claiming two complex and interlocking traditions. One comes out of ancient Persia, the other out of Islam. Like a tormented Janus, Iran has survived since the seventh century with its Persian and Islamic faces sometimes relaxed in harmony but as often creased with tension. In the twentieth century, the traditions of Persia and Islam became swords with which the Iranians have fenced in an often deadly struggle over control of Iranian culture and government. In important ways, the Iranian revolution of 1979 as well as the ideology and behaviour of the Islamic Republic represents an intense, sometimes brutal, context between two powerful traditions competing for possession of a nation", Mackey, p. 5

¹³⁰ As Haggay Ram argues "even though history in the IRI begins with the rise of the Prophet, the Iranian nation, as it emerges in the textbooks, remains a distinct community of people whose destiny is at once inexorably linked to Islamic history and at the same time predates it, and even persists in separation from it". See Ram, p. 78

¹³¹ F. Kashani-Sabet, 'Cultures of Iranianness: The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism' in N. Keddie and R. Matthee (eds.) *Iran and the Surrounding World – Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002, pp. 162-181

above, Islamic Republic leaders began calling for the export of the revolution across the world. Reflecting an irresistible urge to proselytize, the Islamists naturally assumed that the perfect order they had created in Iran was something to which other peoples could and should aspire. Indeed as Ramazani notes, while the Iranian revolutionaries may have viewed their revolution as on a totally different spiritual plane from those of the other great revolutions of history, the fact was that “the concept of exporting revolution is a corollary of the phenomenon of revolution throughout world history”.¹³² Notwithstanding the assurances from Iranian leaders that they did not seek to export the revolution by force, this pan-Islamic verve was viewed in many quarters as a grave threat to the international order.¹³³ Not only did the West have to contend with the red menace but now the ‘green menace’ of radical Islam was poised to undermine the international system of states.¹³⁴ This revolutionary messianism is sometimes considered the hallmark of a fanatical and therefore illogical worldview but there was perhaps less of a foreign policy dilemma here than it first seems. When Khomeini boasted that “we shall confront the world with our ideology” one can detect not a faint whiff of nationalistic superiority sitting comfortably just beneath the surface of the pan-Islamic thrust of such rhetoric.¹³⁵ We have noted above Khomeini’s almost startling boast that the Iranian nation surpassed the Prophet’s own community. The Iranian urge to export the revolution, in other words, derived less from the alleged delirium of radical Islam and more from a sense of Iranian particularism under the guise of religion. Such “nationalistic universalism”, in the words of Hans Morgenthau, would accord with the underlying

¹³² R. Ramazani, ‘Iran’s Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends and Means’ in J. Esposito (ed) The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact, Miami, Florida International University Press, 1990, p. 41

¹³³ Khomeini regularly crowed that “[w]e must strive to export our Revolution to the world”. On the other hand he also declared that [w]hen we say that our Revolution is to be exported everywhere, it should not be erroneously understood as to say that we are after conquering other countries. We regards all the Islamic countries like ours. All countries should remain in their own station. We only want to see this thing which happened in Iran, this wakefulness which happened in Iran, and their separating themselves from the Super Powers and cutting their hands short off their treasures, we want to see them happening in all countries”. See Imam Khomeini, 2000, p. 486. On the attitude of Iranian leaders to the export of the revolution see also F. Rajaei, ‘Iranian Ideology and Worldview: The Cultural Export of Revolution’ in J. Esposito (ed) The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact, Miami, Florida International University Press, 1990, pp. 63-75

¹³⁴ On the conjuring of this new ‘menace’ see L. Hadar, ‘What Green Peril’, Foreign Affairs, 72 (2) Spring 1993, pp. 27-42

¹³⁵ Khomeini: “We shall confront the world with our ideology”, MERIP Reports, 88, June 1980, pp. 22-25

motifs of Iranian political culture which remained constant despite the change of regime.¹³⁶ As constructivist theorists of international relations have rightly argued, identity assumes an important place in the formation and practice of foreign policy, and it is the embryonic Islamic Republic which provides a paradigmatic example of the extent to which national self-perception, in this case fortified with a messianic fervour, can influence nation-state behaviour.¹³⁷ Realists are correct in that all nation-states seek material interests such as wealth and security, yet the way in which they do so is influenced by national identities and perspectives which can induce similar worldviews in successive regimes. In this regard, historian Graham Fuller has argued that the legacy of Iran's ancient sense of nationhood conditioned its leaders – of whatever political or religious persuasion – to believe Iran wields “the historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region where classic Persian empires once held sway”.¹³⁸ Considering this grand vision which resides at the heart of the Iranian national character, it was entirely appropriate that the same transnational pretensions which fired the imaginations of the great Kings also shaped the worldview of the Ayatollahs who similarly conceived of Iran's role in a “global sense”.¹³⁹ Just as Mohammad Reza Shah's heirs were once referred to as the ‘Centre of the Universe’, it was to a similarly presumptuous mantle that Khomeini arguably aspired, reminding us that there were nationalistic commonalities which bound these mortal foes.

Conclusion

While here we have tried to unlock many of contradictions of nationalism and revolution which other scholars and observers have highlighted, there is one such

¹³⁶ For a description of nationalistic universalism, a term Morgenthau uses frequently throughout his classic text on international relations see H. J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (4th ed.), New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, p. 246

¹³⁷ “Identity matters”, Louise Fawcett writes, “and constructivism has done Middle East studies a service in providing a theoretical approach for understanding it in the region”. See L. Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 169. For more on the constructivist approach to the Middle East see S. Telhami and M. Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002

¹³⁸ G. Fuller, p. 241

¹³⁹ Fuller, p. 246

contradiction within the constitution which is inescapable. The constitution made due reference to the rights of the people and their representative institutions such as the new parliament or 'National Consultative Assembly', but it was Article 69 which contained a quite different interpretation of where sovereignty lay in the new polity by declaring that "absolute sovereignty over the world and man belongs to God".

Both Article 69 and article 5 which upheld the all-powerful office of the *faqih*, sat uneasily with the ideal of the sovereignty of the people and although the revolutionaries may have been content with this co-existence at the outset, over time a growing contradiction began to emerge. Asghar Schirazi pulled no punches when he noted that "[t]he sovereignty of the people was eliminated from the constitution not only as a result of the concentration of power in the hands of the leader but also because the institutions set up by the constitution to represent the people (parliament, the presidency, and the Assembly of Leadership Experts) either lost their representative character as a result of rigged elections or ceded their powers to other state organs not chosen by the people".¹⁴⁰ As much as Khomeini and his clique invoked the nation in their desire to appear the most patriotic, in reality their constitutional mendacity resulted in the denial of rights to the very *mellat* they were supposed to be leading to liberation. It was this contradiction – "the impotence of the people" - which would eat away at the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic in future years and come back to haunt its leaders.¹⁴¹ Even so, there was scant opportunity to resolve this issue in the hysterical atmosphere of 1979-1980 during which time the revolutionaries erected new institutions of power and defended them against internal enemies and phantasmagorical imperialist foes. There was nothing ghost-like, however, about the new enemy the Islamic Republic would soon be forced to confront. On September 22 1980 the bucolic calm of Mossadegh's old villa in Ahmadabad was shattered by a crescendo of Iraqi fighter bombers as they flew in low on their way to bombing runs against Mehrabad airport in Tehran's west. The new era of nationalism and war was about to begin.

¹⁴⁰ Schirazi, p. 86

¹⁴¹ Schirazi, p. 86

Nationalism and War

Introduction

War, it is often asserted, is part of the human condition and given the centrality of nations and nationalism to humanity one can argue that war and nationalism share an intimate link.¹ Historians, for one, have long noted the symbiotic relationship between war and the origins of the modern nation-state, especially in Early Modern Europe.² The necessity of mobilizing men and materiel to pursue war, according to this theory, spurred the inexorable increase in the power and authority of the state. In replacing mercenaries and private armies with centrally controlled military forces the classic definition of statehood was born: the monopolization of violence within a given territory. This connection between war and the nation-state fully manifested itself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when states resorted to the ideology of nationalism as a means of rallying jingoistic support amongst citizens. The French revolutionaries who fought to defend their revolution against foreign invasion, for example, or the Italian patriots who battled to unify the loose conglomeration of kingdoms and principalities into a nation demonstrated that modern war had now become “an expression of nationalism, rather than dynasticism”.³ Whereas wars were once declared at the whim of monarchs and princes, war in the modern world was now a national cause, dedicated to achieving national independence, national greatness or even a national identity. The American Civil War was the example *par excellence* of this process. The fratricidal violence functioned in a paradoxical way to create a new sense of national unity and identity out of the ashes of war. Even in a semantic sense the war made the United States a singular noun; before the war Americans spoke in terms of the United States *are*; after the war it was always the United States *is*.⁴ The great American literary figure Walt Whitman captured this point when he wrote “[s]trange, (is it not?) that battles,

¹ C. Gochman, ‘Prometheus Bound: The State and War’ in C. Gochman and A. Sabrosky (eds.) *Prisoners of War? Nation-States in the Modern Era*, Massachusetts, Lexington Books, 1990, p. 288

² Jeremy Black writes “[w]ar as the cause, course and consequence of state-building is an established and currently fashionable means of approaching history”. See J. Black, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents 1450-2000*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 203

³ Black, p. 229

⁴ S. Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Red River to Appomattox*, New York, Vintage Books, 1986, p. 1042

martyrs, agonies, blood, even assassination, should so condense – perhaps only really, lastingly condense – a Nationality”.⁵

It was the violent twentieth century that most of all exemplified this triumvirate of war, the nation-state and nationalism.⁶ The scale of the violence and the atrocities carried out in the name of militant nationalism had, it seemed, condemned the nation-state to being a ‘prisoner of war’.⁷ The pathos that the First World War, in particular, begot in the historical memory and culture of many combatant nations also reminds us of the power of war to shape national identity.⁸ For New Zealand and Australia, to take but two examples, the Great War was and still is treated as a vital touchstone of their respective nationalisms, a time when an embryonic national identities were forged out of wartime sacrifice.

Revolution and war have also been tightly bound together throughout history; as Stephen Walt has argued “war is extremely likely in the aftermath of a revolutionary upheaval”.⁹ He went on:-

Revolutions cause war by increasing the level of threat between the revolutionary state and its rivals and by encouraging both sides to view the use of force as an effective way to eliminate the threat. By altering the balance of power and making it more difficult for states to measure the balance accurately, revolutions increase the danger of miscalculation. Revolutions also encourage both sides to exaggerate the other’s hostility, thus further increasing each side’s perception of threat. Finally, revolutions lead both sides simultaneously to exaggerate their own vulnerability to attack or subversion and to overstate the vulnerability of the other side. As a result, war is likely to be seen as necessary to reduce the threat and also relatively easy to win. These expectations are usually mistaken, however. Revolutions are harder to reverse or to export than either side expects; that is, the increased level of threat that accompanies a revolution in part illusory.¹⁰

The historical record would appear to bear out Walt’s assertion. Wars have followed many of history’s major revolutions, from the French Revolutionary Wars of

⁵ W. Whitman, *Complete Prose Works - Specimen Days and Collect, November Boughs and Good Bye My Fancy*, Boston, Small, Maynard and Company, 1907, pp. 308-309. On the mid-nineteenth century wars of national liberation in Europe see D. Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon*, London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 204-320

⁶ Precisely why this century was so violent has received its fair share of scholarly scrutiny, recently with Niall Ferguson’s latest magnum opus. See N. Ferguson, *The War of the World: History’s Age of Hatred*, London, Penguin, 2007

⁷ See fn. 1

⁸ See P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975

⁹ S. Walt, ‘Revolution and War’, *World Politics*, 44 April 1992, p.323

¹⁰ Walt, pp.322-323

1792-1793, to the Russian Civil War of 1919-1920, through to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1975.¹¹

The Iran-Iraq war is the subject of this chapter. In light of what we have discussed above, we shall examine the nexus between war and nationalism from the Iranian perspective. In this context nationalism, revolution and religion all intersected to create an extraordinary vortex of violence in what became the longest conventional conflict of the twentieth century. Disentangling these various elements is not easy, but the central truth, as will be seen below, is that the Iran-Iraq war left an indelible imprint on nationalism in Iran just as it has left an imprimatur on the nationalisms of other countries in times of conflict.¹²

Nationalism from Above?: The Divine Nation

The Iran-Iraq War has long been described as a Manichean battle of irreconcilable ideological opposites. Over and above the Arab-Persian ethnic divide and the stubborn personalities of Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini, the driving force behind the bloody conflict, according to this line of thought, was an unceasing clash between a socialist-infused Arab nationalism on the one hand and a fanatical, almost antediluvian, universalist Islamic ideology on the other. Dilip Hiro, for example, summed up the war in this fashion:

The Gulf conflict was not about territory – as was the case, say, with Argentina and Britain over the Falkland Islands in 1982 – or hostile ideologies like capitalism and socialism, as in the 1950-53 war between North Korea and South Korea. It was a violent manifestation of the struggle between the secular Arab nationalism of Iraq and the universalist, religious ideology of Iran’s revolutionary Islamic regime.¹³

Other scholars have also seized upon the ideological underpinnings of the conflict, particularly those of the Islamic Republic whose apocalyptic rhetoric and reckless squandering of soldiers’ lives seemed to encapsulate the perplexing and ultimately pointless nature of the war. Ruhollah Ramazani, for instance, warned against stereotyping Iran’s behaviour as simply “fanaticism”, but all the same described

¹¹ Walt, p.325

¹² The key ideas in this chapter derive in large part from an interview with an Ayatollah in Qom, 29 April 2006

¹³ D. Hiro, The Longest War – The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, London, Grafton Books, 1989, p. xxi

Iran's war effort as an "ideological crusade".¹⁴ Similarly Mohssen Massarrat linked Iran's wartime rhetoric to the long tradition of pan-Islamism. "At no point", Massarrat wrote, "did Khomeini use international law to justify the continuation of the war; it was always theology".¹⁵ While domestic and power politics played a role in the outbreak of the war, Massarrat argued that "the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to construct a pan-Islamic justification for its uncompromising insistence on the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and the destruction of his regime".¹⁶

Iran's rhetoric from the outset of the conflict seemingly confirmed such academic assumptions. The Iraqi surprise attack, coming as it did in the midst of the Islamic Republic's reconstruction of Iranian identity, society and the state along Islamic lines, encouraged the Iranian leadership to bestow an Islamic "aura" upon the war effort.¹⁷ Sensing Saddam was a Western lackey leading a proxy assault against Islam, Khomeini responded with his customary hyperbole by declaring that "for Islam we must resist" and that "Islam is ready to unite all Islamic nations into a global Islamic community so the imperialists cannot dominate Moslems and keep them divided which is in contravention of Islam and the Quran".¹⁸ As the war wound on Khomeini maintained this religiously-tinged language. In a famous speech he declared the war was a "blessing" for Iran. "The War", Khomeini expounded, "confronted our people with great difficulties but made our people more committed to the revolution and hardened their will and determination so that in every hamlet and neighbourhood, martyrs of the revolution are to be found".¹⁹

Historical allusions with famous events from the Prophet Mohammad's time were favoured rhetorical devices. Ali Khamenei, for example, made expressed comparisons with the famous Battle of the Trench when Mohammad foresaw that

¹⁴ R. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 19

¹⁵ M. Massarrat, 'The Ideological Context of the Iran-Iraq War: Pan-Islamism versus Pan-Arabism', in H. Amirahmadi and N. Entessar (eds.) *Iran and the Arab World*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1993, p. 30

¹⁶ Masarrat., p. 39

¹⁷ Ram, 1994, p.207

¹⁸ 'Imam: tamam-e moslemin ba ham baradarand va barabarand', *Keyhan*, Shanbe 6th Dey (December 27th 1980), No. 11176, p. 9; 'Imam: ba tamam-e moshkelat kar ziad shode, albate kambudhayi hast va gerani ham besiar ast va mardom az inha narahatand vali bayad bekhater-e Islam moghavemat kard', *Keyhan*, Panjshanbe 5th Khordad 1362 (May 26th 1983), No. 11877, p. 26

¹⁹ Quoted in S. Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 158

Islam would triumph well beyond the borders of Arabia. While digging a defensive trench in preparation for the looming battle against the Meccan forces that were bearing down upon the nascent Islamic community, Mohammad's pick struck a stone causing sparks to fly in which he glimpsed the Moslems' future victories over the Byzantine and Persian Empires. It boded well for the Moslems because they indeed defeated the Meccan commander Ibn Abdud and went on to conquer their powerful neighbours. The Islamic Republic, Khamenei declared, was facing a very similar historical circumstance:

Today, Ibn Abdud is present in the battlefield of Iran. This deluded ignorant fanatic has advanced forward to the battlefield [but] the brave warriors of Islam are standing up against kufr [disbelief]....It has been established today that the gate through which we will be dispatched to the palaces of Caesar and Khosrow has been opened. O the armies of Allah! It has been established that we are pursuing the conquest of the...region, "one party fighting in the way of Allah"...it is fighting for the Qur'an, it is fighting for the Islamic Republic"

Khamenei finished off with a flourish, saying that the "gate for the global conquests of Islam is Iraq....The road for the roaring flood, which must proceed toward the palaces of oppression, is Iraq".²⁰ The fact that Khamenei, an Iranian, would extol the overthrow of one of the great Persian Kings (Khosrow) demonstrates the extent to which Islamic Republic leaders were willing to Islamize the war effort.

There were a number of reasons for this Islamization of the war effort. As the above passage suggests, Khomeini and other revolutionary leaders came to see the war as a great spiritual test for Iran and her people in which the banal matters of day-to-day living would be superseded by a more pure and austere commitment to Islam. In the crucible of war, the regime envisaged, soldiers in particular would undergo a kind of mystical transcendence in which they would recapture the qualities of self-sacrifice and faith that marked key moments of Shi'ite history.²¹ In wartime propaganda a consistent parallel was made between the Iraqi invasion and the battle of Karbala in 683 AD during which the supreme martyr of Shi'ite Islam, Imam Hossein, gave up his life for the faith rather than submit to tyranny.²² In keeping with this historical

²⁰ Quoted in Ram, p.208

²¹ D. Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle or Reform in Iran*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 123

²² See for example the front page of *Keyhan*, Chaharshanbe 29th Dey 1361 (January 19th 1983), No. 11777 which features a photo of Iranian soldiers marching to the front with an accompanying headline "Capturing Karbala!"

example and the belief in spiritual regeneration, Khomeini boasted that the trenches along the frontline “are centres for the worship of God”.²³

Secondly, the Islamization of the war was designed to inculcate a deep-rooted sense of unity in Iranian society undergoing the twin shocks of internal subversion and external attack. By encouraging Iranians to fight for Islam, the government could call upon greater reserves of loyalty, commitment and fortitude amongst a predominantly conservative and pious population. In this vein, Khomeini declared: “I hope the Iranian nation with the same soul of unity and brotherhood which have helped them through all the difficulties thus far, can pass this divine test”.²⁴ Similarly, by making it a war for the faith, the government instantly transformed opponents into enemies not only of the nation and the revolution, but ultimately of Islam. We have already noted in the previous chapter the conflict between the newly-established Islamic Republic and the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* which was excluded from power. The war only made the necessity of rooting out such ‘traitors’ and ‘fifth columnists’ even more urgent. Pointing to these internal enemies Khomeini thundered that “opposition to the government, the Majles, and the organs of government is opposition to Islam”, while Montazeri warned that “the nation must become familiar with the fifth columnists dispersed across the country and prevent their activities”.²⁵

Islamizing the war also solved another potentially vexatious legal issue for the new Islamic Republic: how to prosecute a war against another Moslem state. Islamic law tends to shy away from a comprehensive treatment of the issue of war between Moslems.²⁶ The Prophet Mohammad’s overriding task, after all, was to preserve the *unity* of his fledgling Islamic community, not debate the finer legal points of wars *between* sovereign Islamic states, a development he could not have foreseen from his vantage point in the seventh century. The Quran simply states in the *al Hujurat* 49:9

²³ Quoted in Brumberg, p. 130

²⁴ ‘Imam: mellat-e moghavam e Iran na az tahdid abr ghodratha mitarsad na az mohasereha va kambudha va na az bombaran shahrha’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 18th Bahman 1360 (February 7th 1982), No. 16906, p. 1

²⁵ ‘Imam: e’laam mikonam, emruz mokhalefat ba doulat, majles va organhaye jomhuri-ye islam mokhaalefat ba islam ast’, *Keyhan*, Yekshanbe 7th Azar 1361 (November 28th 1982), p. 15; ‘Ayatollah Montazeri: Faghie-ye alighadr dar ghesmati az khotbe-ye aval namaz zemn-e inke az mardom khast ke az keshvar va din-e khod defa’ konand’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 26th Mehr 1359 (October 18th 1980), No. 11120, p. 3

²⁶ Geiling, p.41

If two groups of believers come to fight one another, promote peace between them. Then if one of them turns aggressive against the other, fight against it the aggressive party till it returns to God's authority. If it does so, make peace among them equitably and be impartial.²⁷

But, as James Piscatori points out, territorial divisions soon became an inescapable reality of Islamic history, and Moslems found themselves on opposing sides in armed conflicts.²⁸ Islamic law, however, specifically outlawed the shedding of another Moslem's blood. The semantic sleight of hand used to get around this problem was brutally simple: declare your side as fighting for Islam, and castigate the other side as un-Islamic. This the Islamic Republic did with relish by presenting itself as fighting in the way of the true faith and tarring Saddam Hussein as the representative of disbelief, or *kufir*, a term generally interpreted as the refusal to recognize or acknowledge Allah. Khomeini constantly pushed this theme and declared "we will keep fighting with Saddam the nonbeliever to the end and we will not accept peace".²⁹ In another address to the nation Khomeini declared "We will fight to the end....You are fighting for Islam and he [Saddam] is fighting for Islam's extinction".³⁰ Cast by the Islamic Republic as a non-believer, all kinds of taunts and insults were hurled at the Iraqi leader. For Iranians, Saddam Hussein was an agent of *batil* ('falsehood'), against the *haqq* ('righteousness') of the Islamic Republic. Saddam Hussein may have called himself a Moslem, but in the view of Iranian leaders he was a hypocrite, who sought to destroy Islam from within, and was therefore even more dangerous than an infidel. In this regard the Iraqi dictator constituted a host of evils; other epithets for him were *zalim* (wrong-doer), *fasiq* (sinner), *mushrik* (polytheist) and *mulhid* (heretic). In the opinion of the Iranian leadership he was ultimately a *taghuti*, a peddler of idolatry, who subscribed to a secular Baathist ideology that moreover had a Christian (Michael Aflaq) as its chief ideologue! The Shah, too, had been called a *taghuti* by Khomeini, and in this sense the war was a continuation of Khomeini's battle against what he saw as *kufir*.³¹

²⁷ Al-Hurjurat 49:9 in *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, translated by A. Ali, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 443

²⁸ Piscatori, 1986, pp. 49-55

²⁹ 'Imam Khomeini: ba Saddam-e kafer ta akhar mijangim ba mosalehe nakhahim kard', *Keyhan*, Panshanbe 17th Tir 1361 (July 8th 1982), No. 11621, p. 1

³⁰ 'Imam: Ma ta akhir ba anha jang khahim kard', *Keyhan*, Chaharshanbe 9th Mehr 1359 (October 1st 1989), No. 11106, pp. 1, 3

³¹ Geiling, pp.81-86

Most of all, in Islamizing the war, Iranian leaders re-emphasized the revolution's universal applicability and validity. Far from disabusing Iranian leaders of their universalist perspective in the wake of the revolution's triumph, Saddam's initial attack only made the Islamic Republic more determined to defend the revolution it felt all oppressed peoples should embrace and which was seemingly under attack by the global forces of 'oppression'. The attempts by the 'oppressors' – particularly the US which Tehran believed was goading Iraq to attack in retaliation for the embassy siege - to undermine the revolution only confirmed in the minds of Iranian leaders the righteousness of their position.³² Referring to the embassy siege, but tangentially to the concurrent war, the Islamic Republic boasted that the "bitter struggle waged by Islam against the greatest tyrannical force in the world to raise the word of right and to obliterate the signs of falsehood and aggression is the best example for humanity to follow in its journey toward right and justice".³³

As the self-proclaimed champions of 'belief' and authentic Islamic government the Iranian leadership naturally viewed the defense to be of something higher than mere territory or race and it therefore assiduously avoided replying in kind to Saddam Hussein's racist provocations. While Saddam Hussein had also declared the war a 'jihad', and referred to the conflict as a Second Qadisiya in memory of the Battle of Qadisiya in 637 when the Moslem Arab armies had crushed the last Sassanian Zoroastrian empire, he also played the racist card by referring to the Iranians as 'aggressor Magians, collaborators with the lunatic Khomeini'.³⁴ Iraqi generals spoke of Iranian soldiers as "harmful magian insects".³⁵ Khomeini and others, though, were careful not to fall into the Iraqi propaganda trap by confirming the conflict as an Arab-Persian one. The Iranian leadership insisted that "all Moslems were

³² During the war with Iraq, the US continued to be a favourite target of Iranian invective. Khomeini, for example, announced with characteristic cantankerousness "The Iranian nation will put America's threats in the street and walk over them". See *Imam: mellat-e ma harche shoma (doshmanan) ta aknun kardid va harche jenaayat kardid didid ke mohkamtar shode*, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 1st Tir (May 27th 1984), p. 19

³³ Quoted in 'Text excerpts from remarks by Iran's radio', *Special to the New York Times*, Late City Final Edition 5, November 1st 1980.

³⁴ Hiro, 1989, p.44

³⁵ Hiro, 1989, p. 108; For a useful overview of the ways in which Iraq disseminated racist propaganda during the war and constructed an image of Iranians as, ironically, "Zionists" and "fire-worshippers" intent on undermining the Arab "nation", see A. Adib-Moghaddam, *Inventions of the Iran-Iraq War*, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16 (1), March 2007, pp. 63-83

brothers and all were equal”, and could only be differentiated by the level of faith, not ethnicity or colour.³⁶ Overtly ‘Persian’ nationalistic war rhetoric booming out of Tehran would only ethnicize the conflict and underscore Saddam Hussein’s self-proclaimed mantle as the protector of the eastern flank of the Arab world against the Iranians. By avoiding the appearance of a chauvinistic vengefulness and instead Islamizing the war as one of belief against unbelief, of good versus evil, Tehran could persist in the illusion that the revolution would indeed be ‘exported to the world’ through moral example if not actual force of arms.

The subtlety of Iran’s position, however, was smothered by the rambunctious manner in which it was articulated. The religiously-infused rhetoric booming out of Tehran fuelled Western and conservative Arab fears of a violent, fanatical and unbridled Islamic colossus intent on sweeping away national borders. As Edward Said noted, the “xenophobically reductive” Western media coverage of the era was especially culpable in perpetuating this notion of revolutionary Iran as an aberrant, irrational entity completely beyond the pale of international norms.³⁷ With the embassy siege playing out nightly on American television screens, network news and the print media abounded with hyperbolic vocabulary to describe the ‘mad’ Iranians and their neurotic revolutionary antics, ranging from ‘Muslim hatred’, ‘crescent of crisis’, ‘whirlwind’ and ‘the rage of thwarted religious passion’ to ‘Islam amok’, ‘the Islam explosion’. Much was made of the allegedly all-powerful and therefore all-embracing motivation of the Shi’ite ‘martyrdom complex’ that sat conveniently with the regular images of Iranian mobs screaming in hatred and burning the American flag.³⁸ Coverage of the embassy siege merged imperceptibly with coverage of the war, which also presented Iran as a bastion of chaos and cruelty where medieval punishments were meted out as justice, child soldiers were considered expendable, and regime opponents were mercilessly hunted down and executed.³⁹ Moreover, despite Iraq having started the war, reports regularly implied

³⁶ ‘*Imam: tamam-e moslemin ba ham baradarand va barabarand*’, Keyhan, Shanbe 6th Dey (December 27th 1980), No. 11176, p. 9

³⁷ E. Said, Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World, London, Vintage, 1997, p. 106

³⁸ Said, pp. 81-94

³⁹ See for example: F. Lewis, ‘Foreign Affairs; Iran’s Gluttonous Revolution’, The New York Times, June 15th 1981; ‘Iran’s Politics of Death’, The New York Times, July 18th 1981; J. Kifner, ‘In Iran’s War, Youth and Islam’, The New York Times, April 7th 1982; J. Kifner, ‘Iran is back in that old

that Iran was the real danger, constantly seeking to ‘escalate’ the war and posing a major ‘threat’ to regional security.⁴⁰ *The New York Times* dutifully quoted the Iraqi regime – the original aggressor - when it declared in 1982 that it was now fighting to contain the “aggressive and expansionist” Islamic Revolution!⁴¹

This digression is important for the underlying theme of such media coverage was that Iran represented a rootless and rabid pan-Islamic force, a kind of anti-nationalist Islamic Comintern. The alleged 1981 Iranian-backed coup attempt in Bahrain and the dispatch of Revolutionary Guardsmen to Lebanon the following year only heightened anxiety in Arab and Western capitals that the Islamic Republic was determined less to defend the Iranian nation than undermine the entire system of nation-states across the Middle East and beyond.⁴² The idea that the leadership in Tehran was indeed a virulent and anarchical universalist force intent on sacrificing Iran for pan-Islamic utopianism – that revolutionary Iran would cut off its nose to spite its face - gained wide currency during and after the war. Sandra Mackey, an American Middle East correspondent, categorized Iran’s behaviour during the war in this way:

Moving Iran from a pre-Revolutionary foreign policy aimed at maximizing Iran’s national interest, Khomeini and the clerics of the Islamic Republic directed foreign policy toward the creation of a new Islamic world order....In essence, Iran was no longer the distinctive nation celebrated by passionate Iranian nationalism but the vanguard of the Islamic revival that would free the oppressed from their oppressors. Khomeini, as the theoretician of Muslim unity, dropped the term *mellat-e Iran*, the Iranian nation, to address Iranians as the *ummat-e Islam*, the nation of Islam. In this nation in which all believers are brothers, there was no room for nationalism, a Western creation that Khomeini charged intended to divide the Muslims.⁴³

Such a perspective, however, runs counter to the historical record and completely misunderstands the role of nationalism in Iran during the war years. Upon the outbreak of the war, Iranian leaders drenched their rhetoric with nationalist references. Barely a week after the beginning of the Iraqi invasion Khomeini declared in an “important message from the Leader of the Islamic Revolution to the

familiar chaos, *The New York Times*, July 5th 1981; ‘Cleric sworn in as Iran’s president amid cries of ‘Death to America’, *The New York Times*, October 14th 1981.

⁴⁰ See for example: B. Gwertzman, ‘Saudis worried that Iran-Iraq War may expand’, *The New York Times*, May 18th 1984; D. Ignatius, ‘U.S. says Iran-Iraq War is intensifying; it fears oil-flow disruption from Gulf’, *Wall Street Journal*, February 17th 1984;

⁴¹ T. Friedman, ‘Persian Gulf: Iran arouses fear in Arabs’, *The New York Times*, June 1st 1982

⁴² On Iran’s alleged meddling across the Middle East in the early 1980s see Wright, 1989, pp. 82-129

⁴³ Mackey, p. 310

champion nation of Iran” that “we will fight them to the end”.⁴⁴ Thereafter Khomeini regularly appealed to patriotic feeling by constantly invoking the ‘nation’ in his daily addresses:

- We must all try to give this nation hope.⁴⁵
- Today the people and the government of Iran are standing together.⁴⁶
- Blessings on the great and honourable nation of Iran which possesses brave children who sacrifice for their country’s victory.⁴⁷
- We see that whatever the enemy does and whatever crime it commits, our nation only becomes stronger.⁴⁸
- The people have shown that Iran will not accept any oppression and will not flee the battle under any threats.⁴⁹
- The brave Iranian nation is not afraid of imperialist threats, blockades, scarcities or the bombardment of cities.⁵⁰

Other Iranian leaders professed similarly overt nationalistic sentiments. President Bani-Sadr declared that “our nation is ready to tolerate war hardships and is willing to endure the loss of those who make the ultimate sacrifice”.⁵¹ In another speech a

⁴⁴ See fn. 21

⁴⁵ *‘Imam: hame bayad bekushim dar in mellatomid ijad konim’*, Keyhan, Yekshanbe 5th Bahman 1359 (January 25th 1981), No. 11199, p. 1

⁴⁶ *‘Imam: emruz mellat va dawlat-e Iran mohkam istade ast ta Saddam amal fesad mantaghe ra sarkub va hamianesh ra rasva konad’*, Keyhan, Doshanbe 16th Khordad (June 6th 1983), No. 11884, p. 1

⁴⁷ Keyhan, Special Supplement on anniversary of Khorramshahr’s recapture, Chaharshanbe 6th Khordad (May 27th 1984), p. 2

⁴⁸ *‘Imam: mellat-e moghavem-e Iran na az tahdid-e abar ghodratha mitarsad na az mohasereha va kambudha va na az bombaraan shahrha’*, Keyhan, Shanbe 18th Bahman 1360 (February 7th 1982), No. 16906, p. 1

⁴⁹ *‘Imam: mardom dar Ruz-e Ghods sabet kardand ke Iran zir bar hich zulmy nemiravad va ba hich tahdidid lidan ra khali nemikonad’*, Keyhan, Shanbe 1st Tir (June 22nd 1985), No. 12477, p. 19

⁵⁰ *‘Imam: mellat-e moghavem-e Iran na az tahdid abar ghodratha mitarsad na az mohasereha va kambudha va na az bombaraan shahrha’*, Keyhan, Shanbe 18th Bahman 1360 (February 7th 1982), No. 16906, p. 1

⁵¹ *‘Bani-Sadr: mellat –e ma amade ast sakhtyha-ye jang ra tahammol konad, amade ast ghorbaaniha ra tahammol konad’*, Keyhan, Panjshanbe 29th Aban (November 20th 1980), No. 11145, p. 5

subsequent President, Ali Khamenei, urged Iranians to maintain under wartime conditions the same spirit of determination they exemplified during the revolution: “We threw out America and we are not going to take orders from any other country....With a nation of forty million we have the capability to fight any foreign power”.⁵² In 1987 Khamenei explicitly defined the Islamic Republic’s conception of Iranian nationalism in the midst of war. ‘Negative nationalism’, Khamenei declared, which denied the nationalism of others and sought through racism or chauvinism to divide Muslims was quite wrong, but ‘positive nationalism’ in which Iranians fulfilled their patriotic duty to defend the Iranian motherland was to be actively encouraged. Not mincing his words, and in a most intriguing choice of words, Khamenei chose to transliterate the English word ‘nationalism’ into Persian when he spoke of *nasionalism-e mosbat* (positive nationalism).⁵³ During the war, therefore, the Islamic Republic boldly stated it was fighting for both Iran *and* Islam. A closer examination of how Iranian leaders conceived ‘Iran’ exemplifies this intrinsic connection between nation and religion.

One can comprehend this connection in two ways. The first is to examine the notion of jihad as understood and articulated by Iranian leaders. While the effusive religious rhetoric and threats to liberate Iraq’s holy cities and Jerusalem suggested that Tehran viewed the conflict purely in terms of faith - not territory - in reality the defense of Iran constituted an essential end in itself. The byword for the jihad, after all, was the ‘sacred defense’ (*defa’-ye moqaddas*) in which the holy element was obvious, as was the connotation of simultaneously defending Iran. The necessity of defending both Islam and Iran and the idea that patriotism was a religious obligation were, therefore, constant themes in the rhetoric of the war years. Montazeri, for example, bluntly declared that “defending the country is the duty of Moslems”, a conviction backed up by Rafsanjani who announced to Iranians that “our soldiers are the guardians of Islam and the country”.⁵⁴ In a rare moment of agreement with the

⁵² ‘*Ra’is jomhur: ma Amrika ra birun kardim va haazer nistim az hich keshvari zur beshnavim*’, Keyhan, Seshanbe 9th Farvardin 1362 (March 29th 1983), p. 3

⁵³ ‘*Kanferans-e vahdat- e Islami ba sokhanan-e rais jomhuri dar Tehran gashayash yaft*’, Ettela’at, 16th Aban 1366 (November 7th 1987), No. 18310, p. 2

⁵⁴ For Montazeri see ‘*Ayatollah Montazeri: Faghie-ye alighadr dar ghesmati az khotbe-ye aval namaz zemn-e inke az mardom khast ke az keshvar va din-e khod defa’ konand*’, Keyhan, Shanbe 26th Mehr 1359 (October 18th 1980), No. 11120, p. 3; For Rafsanjani see ‘*Hashemi Rafsanjani: ‘Hichkas nemitavanad mellati ra ke baraye din va mihan-e khod khedamat mikonad nabud konad*’, Keyhan, Doshanbe 29th Farvardin 1367 (April 18th 1988), No. 13299, p. 15

clerics, Bani-Sadr also emphasized the symbiosis between religion and the nation by proclaiming “without Islam you cannot preserve independence”.⁵⁵ Khomeini also subscribed to such a rationale as evidenced by his salute to the Iranian soldiers: “now I pray to God and pray for you devoted soldiers of the great Quran and dear homeland of Iran – I pray for your health and victory”.⁵⁶

There were theological justifications and historical precedents for this conception of the ‘sacred defense’. The Islamic Republic did stress it was fighting for belief, but this did not necessarily entail an endless war to propagate Islam across the globe. Centuries of Shi’ite jurisprudence had rendered a consensus among Iranian clerics – one accepted implicitly by Khomeini himself – that an offensive jihad could only be declared by one of the Imams.⁵⁷ During the occultation the Shi’ite clergy were permitted to declare jihad only as a defensive measure in the face of aggression. As Iran was, from Safavid times, a Shi’ite state surrounded by Sunni neighbours, an act of aggression against Iranian territory was at once considered an attack on ‘true’ – that is, Shi’ite – Islam. The necessity of defending Islam and Iranian territory imperceptibly merged which in turn rendered to the clergy the role as national guardians. As we glimpsed in chapter two, during the Russo-Persian Wars of the nineteenth century leading clerics were moved to declare a defensive jihad to protect the diminishing lands of the Shi’ite nation of Iran. By virtue of such a clarion call, the clerics essentially took on the mantle of leaders of the nation at a time of growing national consciousness and simmering discontent over the Qajar state’s feckless attempts to preserve the country’s territorial and sovereign integrity.⁵⁸

Following on from this historical legacy, and the more recent experience of the revolution, the Iran-Iraq War witnessed a continuation of the clergy’s self-proclaimed status as guardians of the faith and the nation. Recalling the memory of countless foreign invasions and giving a distinctly patriotic hue to the latest defensive jihad, Ayatollah Ardebili, to quote but one example, announced to Iranians:

⁵⁵ ‘*Ra’is jomhur: bedun-e Islam ghadr be hefz esteghlal nakhahid shod*’, Keyhan, Panjshanbe 23rd Bahman 1359 (February 12th 1981), No. 11214, p. 1

⁵⁶ ‘*Imam: mobarakbaad va hezaraan bar mobarakbaad bar shoma azizan va nur-e cheshman Islam, in fath va nasr-e azim*’, Keyhan, Seshanbe 4th Khordad 1361 (May 25th 1982), No. 11587, p. 14

⁵⁷ Ram, 1994, p. 214

⁵⁸ Algar, 1969, p. 90

Do you not see...that the boundaries of your state are getting shorter and shorter daily and parts of your country are being snatched and usurped...and your cities are being invaded?....Do you not see Abadan; do you not see Qasr-i Shirin; do you not see other towns?...Do you not see [how] they shed the blood of your youth on the soil of your country? You must resist the aggression committed by global *istikbar* and imperialism against your independence and territorial integrity.⁵⁹

Another sermon during the war similarly upheld the necessity of fighting for national independence in the way of defensive jihad:

Yes, when aggression is committed against your country, when aggression is committed against your sacrosanct things (*muqaddasat*), when injustice is committed against your religion, against your faith, God allows you to go to war, to revolt and to fight....The issue of defense is both a religious and a rational obligation (*vajib-e shar'i va-'aqli*). When the enemy commits...aggression against the Islamic community and the Islamic country, [all must]...rise up in defense and mobilize their resources for defense; and, until...they drive away the enemy, they should not sit down...if the enemy commits aggression, the result of which [people] are expelled from their homeland...and from their towns, you must rise up and fight, until the last of the enemy's men is driven away.⁶⁰

Rafsanjani also outlined just how bound up the defense of both religion and the nation was in the Iranian conception of defensive jihad. "No one", he confidently enunciated, "can destroy a people which is devoted to their religion and to their nation".⁶¹

This precise conjoining of Islam and the nation was a staple of Islamic Republic propaganda during the war yearsthis time. Time and again sermons and speeches spoke of the 'Islamic country', the 'Islamic nation of Iran', or even the 'national unity of the devoted Islamic community of Iran'.⁶² One scholar opined that it was as if "the very notion of 'nation', in Persian, "cannot be clearly detached from the religious sphere".⁶³ During the sacred defense, in other words, Iranians could not have imagined "themselves in purely secular terms".⁶⁴ For the clergy in particular,

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ram, 1994, p. 215

⁶⁰ Quoted in Ram, 1994, p. 216

⁶¹ 'Hashemi Rafsanjani: *hichkas nemitavanad mellati ra ke baraye din va mihan e khod khedmat mikonad nabud konad*', *Keyhan*, Doshanbe 29 farvardin 1367, no. 13299, p. 10

⁶² Ludwig Paul provides a good overview of the semantics of Islamic Republic rhetoric. See Paul, pp. 183-217. See also Ram who quotes Taleghani: "Greetings to our Kurdish brothers and sisters who, despite many years of oppression...have kept their Islamic and Iranian character....[T]here is no significance to such terms as Kurds, Persians, Turks, Baluchis, Shi'is and Sunnis. We are all brothers. We are all sons of the Iranian motherland and we all belong to the Islamic nation of Iran". Quoted in Ram, 1994, p. 200

⁶³ Paul, p. 194

⁶⁴ Paul, p. 194

there was a further semantic reason for this convergence. As mentioned previously *mellat*, an old Aramaic and Syraic word that found its way into classical Arabic, originally meant ‘religion’ or ‘religious community’.⁶⁵ Whereas during the Constitutional secular nationalists had appropriated *mellat* to characterize the Iranian nation and dissociate the term from its original religious connotation, during the Iran-Iraq War Islamic Republican leaders sought to reconnect the terms. Furthermore, Iranian religious leaders continued to occasionally use it interchangeably with *ummat* - the more traditional word to describe the global community of the faithful – as in *mellat-e-Islam*.⁶⁶ This meant that while constantly stressing that Islam stood above all boundaries of colour, race and ethnicity, the close association between *mellat* and *Islam* in a way semantically boxed Iranian leaders in and prevented them from declaring that religion totally superseded the nation. Not even the most bombastic of revolutionary rhetoric, in other words, could efface the Iranian nation.

Iranian leaders, moreover, were cognizant of the various constituent elements of the Iranian nation, and tailored their words accordingly. There were constant entreaties to the Kurdish, Baluch and Arab ethnic groups urging them to disregard ‘enemy plots’ to sow discord among Iran’s diverse population. At other junctures the civic and political rights accorded to Iran’s non-Moslem Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities were specifically outlined to counter opposition claims of discrimination in the wake of the revolution. The commitment, furthermore, of these minorities to the sacred defense was also lauded as evidence of genuine national unity in a time of crisis.⁶⁷

Whatever the diversity of the Iranian nation - and here we come to the second of our observations on the connection between religion and the nation during the war - there was one national characteristic that in the eyes of the Iranian leadership

⁶⁵ F. Buhl, ‘Milla’, in Bearson et. al. (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Brill Online www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-5199, Accessed 14 December 2007

⁶⁶ Paul, pp. 192-193

⁶⁷ Paul, pp. 195-203. Paul’s conclusions are backed up by interviews with clerics in contemporary Iran. A cleric at Terhan’s Tarbiyyat Modarres University noted: “Overall we fought for the defense of our land [sarzamin-e Iran]. It was a ‘defensive war’. The enemy had invaded our country and we were obliged to defend ourselves; Moslems have no right to invade the territory of other Moslems. But it was also a war for Islam and the revolution. At the same time, Iranians of all denominations fought in the war. Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians all fought, and all are considered martyrs by us”. Interview with cleric, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 31 May 2006

overrode all else: Iran's divinity. Following the revolution, which in the estimation of Khomeini and others made Iran the only true Islamic society in the world, the Islamic Republic consistently lauded Iran as God's chosen nation, a sentiment that became even more entrenched during the war. By sacralizing the war as a jihad, Khomeini and other leaders in effect sacralized the nation. Iran became the 'divine nation', supported by God, and singularly obliged to protect the true faith others had corrupted.⁶⁸ Just as God had made the Iranian people the "leaders and exemplars for all the world's oppressed" in the wake of the revolution, so a similar notion of Iran as a standard bearer for Islam persisted during the war years.⁶⁹ Khomeini captured this spirit of Iranian exceptionalism when he declared that "in the event the Islamic Republic is defeated, so will Islam have been defeated".⁷⁰ Indeed so 'unique' was the Islamic Republic that in the minds of its leaders Iran surpassed all other achievements in Islamic history – "there is nothing in history which is equal to us" Khomeini implored – which is an interesting point to note considering the common misconception that 'fundamentalists' seek to drag their societies back to a supposed golden age in the distant past.⁷¹ For the Islamic Republic the golden age was here and now in which Iranians had a religious obligation and patriotic duty to defend Iran, Islam and the revolution. It was Montazeri who aptly captured this intense feeling of religious nationalism so rapturously encouraged by the leadership: "The fate of Islam and Iran is related to victory in this war. For this victory all militias, the army and the people must be united".⁷²

In discussing nationalism, however, there is one more major question we must address, namely the controversial decision by the Islamic Republic to carry the war into Iraq after 1982. After successfully rallying the nation and retaking much of the territory initially lost to the Iraqis, especially the southern city of Khorramshahr whose recapture was treated as a monumental national epic, many hawks on the Supreme Defence Council which oversaw the war effort decided that the nation's

⁶⁸ Khomeini and other leaders consistently likened the Islamic Republic as identical to the Kingdom of the Hidden Imam, and lauded Iran as the *mellat-e elahi* (the divine nation). See Geiling, p. 152

⁶⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini 'The First Day of God's Government' in Algar, 1981, p. 265

⁷⁰ 'Imam: *chenanche jomhuri-ye Islami shekast bekhoradIslam shekast khorde ast*', *Keyhan*, Shanbe 17th Aban1359 (November 8th 1980), No. 11136, p. 1

⁷¹ Khomeini quoted in Geiling, p. 149

⁷² 'Montazeri: *sarnevishi-e Islam va Iran vabeste be jang ast, baraye piruzi tamam-e niruhaye nezami, entezaami, mardomi bayad motahed shavand*', *Keyhan*, Shanbe 29th Farvardin 1366 (April 18th 1987), No. 13004, p. 17

revolutionary zeal could be directed towards attacking Iraq. Some professional officers expressed reservations about whether Iran possessed the military capability to undertake such a mission. Others in the leadership wondered if Iran would relinquish its moral standing and popular sympathy garnered in the wake of Saddam's aggression. The doves also fretted over whether the spirit of national unity aroused thus far would evaporate in the event Iran herself attacked another country. The hawks countered that extending the war would indeed *prolong* this sense of national unity, to say nothing of the fact that Iraq was still shelling Iranian territory and might invade again if given the opportunity.⁷³

To the outside world it seemed that in a fit of hubris and religious passion the Islamic Republic was at last giving full vent to its pan-Islamic fantasies of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and extending the revolution into Iraq. Despite protestations that the war was for the faith and not territorial aggrandizement, Iran certainly gave this impression, with Khomeini declaring "dear nation of Iraq, rise up! The noble nation of Iran will come and help you to be in charge of your own fate".⁷⁴ The slippery logic of extending the war rested on the fact that Iran was not invading another country, but removing a source of evil. "We strengthen our armed forces not to attack other nations", Khomeini implored, "but in order to remove the consequences of the presence of oppressive forces of the world within the land of Islam".⁷⁵ Ultimately we might never know the real motivations behind this fateful decision to extend the war for it remains unclear just who authorized this change of strategy, and there is no documentary evidence that Khomeini himself gave his assent.⁷⁶ In an undoubtedly self-serving but nevertheless revealing 2002 interview Hashemi Rafsanjani confirmed that no minutes existed of the key 1982 meeting between Khomeini and his senior political lieutenants and military commanders during which the decision was taken to invade Iraq. Rafsanjani nonetheless outlined the various impulses behind the Iranian calculus at this juncture. Uppermost in the minds of Iranian leaders, in addition to the domestic pressure from Iranian families

⁷³ Hiro, 1989, pp. 86-87

⁷⁴ 'Imam: baraye nejat-e Iraq az javanan khast be jebheha, hojum barand', Keyhan, Panjshanbe 24th Tir 1361 (July 15th 1982), No. 11626, p. 1

⁷⁵ Quoted in Zabih, p. 154

⁷⁶ Christopher De Bellaigue discusses this issue which he has investigated during his extensive reporting from the Islamic Republic. See C. de Bellaigue, In The Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran, London, Harper Collins Publishers, 2004, pp. 125-128

which had lost relatives and were demanding revenge, was the necessity of standing firm against the “world’s oppressors” and “reclaiming our right” which Rafsanjani implied to mean the defeat of Iraq and the extraction of war reparations. The second strategic rationale for carrying the war into Iraq and one which military commanders impressed upon Khomeini, Rafsanjani claimed, was the idea that if Iran did not attack Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s army would feel secure behind its own border and remain poised to attack Iran. There was a need, therefore, to maintain pressure on Iraq and fool it into thinking a drive on Baghdad was a specific Iranian war aim. Rafsanjani emphasized that continuing the war was not an attempt to occupy Iraq and determine its political future; in a circumlocutory assessment he noted that while it was “natural” all Iranians wanted the war to end with Saddam’s downfall, this was secondary to the broader war aim of reclaiming Iran’s ‘right’. To this end Khomeini, according to Rafsanjani, ordered that Iranian forces avoid ground attacks of Iraqi urban centres and focus instead on maintaining pressure on Iraq until it was forced to sue for peace.⁷⁷

What the above discussion demonstrates is that however circuitous or utopian the logic of Khomeini’s war aims may have been, the Islamic Republic never *abrogated* the nation to pursue pan-Islamic aims. The Islamic Republic’s dilemma was quite the opposite: in sanctifying the nation, Iran’s leaders believed that God would deliver nothing but a complete victory befitting the ‘divine nation’. It would take six more years of war and the massive loss of life and property to disabuse Khomeini and his cabal of this illusion.⁷⁸ It is now time to examine those whose lives were most directly affected by the decisions of Iranian leaders, the Iranian people.

Nationalism from Below?

Given these constant exhortations from political leaders to defend the sanctified Iranian nation to what extent can we speak of ‘nationalism from below’? What

⁷⁷ For Rafsanjani recollections of the war years contained in this paragraph see G. Rahmani, *Bi-parde ba Hashemi Rafsanjani* (2nd ed.), Tehran, Entesharat Keyhan, 1383 (2004), pp. 62-76

⁷⁸ Some scholars delight in heaping total blame on Khomeini’s intransigence for the continuation of the war. See for example G. Hossein Razi who writes “Khomeini seems to be considerably more concerned with revenge and taking pleasure in his actual and imagined enemies’ predicaments than with the consequences of his behaviour for the Iranian people”. See G. Hossein Razi, ‘An Alternative paradigm to State Rationality: the Iran-Iraq War, *Political Research Quarterly*, 41 (689), 1988, p. 704

motivated ordinary Iranians to go to the front, or stay behind and produce guns and butter? Such questions merit our attention particularly in light of the fact that much of the literature on revolutionary Iran focuses on high politics to the exclusion of the plight of common people. One of the themes of this study, moreover, is the enduring interaction between state and society around the discourse of nationalism in which state articulations of nationalism were at turns in agreement with, or contradistinction to, demotic nationalist sentiments in Iranian society. In this respect the war years exemplified broad nationalist consensus in which the proclamations of Khomeini, Khamenei and others had resonance in large part because Saddam Hussein's invasion "tripped all the switches of Iranian nationalism" amongst the masses.⁷⁹

To a large extent Khomeini was right when he boasted that "in this war it has been proved that from one end of the country to the other all are united".⁸⁰ As Iraqi forces moved deeper into Iranian territory, the media carried lurid stories detailing the rape of Iranian women by Iraqi soldiers which provoked an outpouring of visceral hatred towards the invaders.⁸¹ Such reports, whether apocryphal or not, stoked the strong Iranian sensitivity to foreign domination and invasion that had long underlain nationalist feeling in Iran. It was not only outrages against Iran's womenfolk that scandalized national opinion. The destruction of reliefs, mosques, architecture, museums, tombs and ruins, particularly in southwest Iran which was the cradle of ancient Persian civilization, incensed patriotic Iranians for whom the "identity of a nation is made up of its cultural heritage".⁸² Notwithstanding the continuing internal conflict between the regime and the Mojahedin, therefore, the invasion ensured most Iranians rallied around the government to defend the nation. High-ranking military officers and pilots imprisoned by the regime petitioned Khomeini to be released from incarceration to fight the invaders.⁸³ Even the exiled Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi, sent a message to Tehran offering his services as a fighter pilot, although

⁷⁹ Mackey, p. 318

⁸⁰ 'Imam: Ma ta akhar ba unha jang khahim kard', Keyhan, Chaharshanbe 9th Mehr, 1359 (October 1st 1980), No. 11106

⁸¹ Interview with Baseej war veterans, Tehran, 10 April 2006

⁸² M. Hojjat, 'Cultural Identity in Danger' in F. Rajaei (ed), The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1993, p. 41

⁸³ Interview with Senior Nezhat-e Azad official, 10 May 2006

naturally the regime declined his offer to join the war effort.⁸⁴ Such a petition, however, did demonstrate the extent to which most Iranians deeply felt Saddam Hussein's insult to Iranian national honour.

As the war dragged on, this initial sense of national indignation transformed into a feeling of national sacrifice and suffering. While modern Iranian history was replete with episodes of violence, internal disorder, civil war, foreign occupation and revolution, the Iran-Iraq war was Iran's first real taste of total war in which the sheer scale of the fighting and the size of the armies involved demanded the complete mobilization of Iranian society to prosecute the war. Defending its nascent revolution against invasion, the Islamic Republic found itself in similarly dire straits as did revolutionary France whose *levee en masse* seemed just as applicable in 1793 as 1980:

Young men will go to battle; married men will forge arms and transport supplies; women will make tents, uniforms, and serve in the hospitals; children will pick rags; old men will have themselves carried to public squares, to inspire the courage of the warriors, and to preach the hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.⁸⁵

Likewise Khomeini demanded the "general mobilization" of the nation, for in his view the defensive jihad was an individual obligation incumbent on all Iranians, not just soldiers, reflecting the true meaning of jihad which was less about combat *per se* and more about exerting one's maximum effort for a holy cause.⁸⁶ While hundreds of thousands of volunteers from across Iran were mobilized, trained and dispatched to the front, the government repeatedly called upon the home front to contribute whatever they could to the national war effort, even declaring a financial jihad in which citizens were able to sponsor a soldier at the front out of their own pocket and thus alleviate the drain on the state treasury.⁸⁷ We have already seen how President

⁸⁴ Mackey, p. 321

⁸⁵ Quoted in J. Lynn, 'Nations in Arms' in G. Parker (ed.) *Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare – The Triumph of the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.193

⁸⁶ 'Imam khastar amade bash mellat baraye basij-e amu mishod', *Keyhan*, Seshanbe 29th Mehr 1359 (October 21st 1980), No. 11122, p. 1. On the incumbency of defensive jihad in Iran during the war see Geiling, p. 41. On the meaning of 'jihad' see Firestone who argues the term does not necessarily imply combat, and indeed there is no such semantic connection in the Arabic language. It means "exerting one's utmost power, efforts, endeavours, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation". See R. Firestone, *Jihad: The Origins of Holy War in Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 16

⁸⁷ Hiro, 1989, p. 194. Iran instituted conscription of men of military age, but did not, contrary to popular perception, conscript the child soldiers of the Baseej units. See Ansari, 2003, pp. 234-235.

Bani-Sadr underlined this collective determination to expend untold sums of blood and treasure when he announced that “our nation is ready to tolerate war hardships...”⁸⁸ Such ‘war hardships’, though, steadily weighed down on Iranians across the 1980s. Besides the appalling casualties at the front (the hometown funerals for which were constantly covered in the newspapers of the time) Iraqi attacks on Iran’s oil industry and the general downturn in world oil prices in the mid-1980s imposed severe fiscal strains on the Iranian state. With a growing deficit, the government slashed imports which in turn led to a general decline in economic activity. As factories and businesses closed due to a lack of imported industrial goods and spares, so unemployment increased causing further economic pain for Iranian families struggling to adapt to high inflation, rationing and electricity cuts.⁸⁹

Most frightening of all, the importance of the home front to the war effort dictated that it would be the target of enemy attacks, and Iraq proceeded to mount strategic bombing campaigns against Iranian urban areas and infrastructure, culminating in the ‘war of the cities’ in which Saddam Hussein’s airforce hit Tehran no fewer than 43 times in the first half of 1985.⁹⁰ Together with Iraq’s use of chemical weapons on the frontline, deliberate attacks on Iranian civilian targets continued to fuel a sense of national agony and fury towards the invader that “was at fault not only for launching the war but in its conduct of the war”.⁹¹ Capturing the public mood at the time, Khomeini thundered: “The brave Iranian nation is not afraid of imperialist threats, scarcities, or the bombardment of cities”.⁹² Ayatollah Montazeri, too, reflected the sentiments of most Iranians who believed external powers were prodding Saddam to extinguish the revolution. “East and West” he declared, “have

⁸⁸ On Bani-Sadr’s quote see *‘Ra’is jomhur: mella- e ma amade ast sakhtiha-ye jang ra tahammol konad, amade ast ghorbanha ra tahammol konad’*, Keyhan, Panjshanbe 29th Aban 1359 (November 20th 1980), No. 11145, p. 5

⁸⁹ On the deleterious effects of the war on the Iranian economy see Hiro, 1989, pp. 139-140, 175-177 and S. Chubin and C. Tripp, Iran and Iraq at War, London, I.B. Taurus, 1988, pp. 123-138

⁹⁰ Hiro, 1989, pp. 134-136

⁹¹ S. Taheri Shemirani, ‘The War of the Cities’ in F. Rajaei (ed.), The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1993, p. 32; For other perspectives on Saddam’s calumny in the eyes of Iranians see N. Yavari, ‘National, Ethnic, and Sectarian Issues in the War’ and H. Seifzadeh, ‘Revolution, Ideology, and the War’ both in F. Rajaei (ed.), Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997 pp. 75-89; 90-97

⁹² See fn. 15

united against the revolution – we must talk less and do more until we reach victory”.⁹³

In a war that became a byword for stalemate and bloody attrition, Iran’s rare outright victories were indeed an occasion for an outpouring of national emotion and pride. The high point for the Islamic Republic came in 1982 when Iranian forces recaptured the strategic port city of Khorramshahr, seized by Iraqi forces during the early weeks of the war. As Ali Ansari noted, the victory was treated as a supreme national achievement which engendered a euphoric sense of empowerment in Iranians of all political persuasions, as well as demonstrating what a united nation could achieve in spite of great odds.⁹⁴ Regularly commemorated in the following years, this battlefield triumph gave birth to a new ‘national narrative’ which symbolized a deeper underlying truth: that the war, for all the different motivations or political outlooks of ordinary Iranians, was one of only two great “national projects” in modern Iranian history in which Iranians displayed a sense of national unity and spirit last seen in the oil nationalization movement.⁹⁵

Can one speak of a similar spirit of Iranian nationalism among the soldiers on the frontline? Like all fighting men throughout history a variety of motivations lay behind the decision of the Iranian men and boys to enlist in the ranks. For some soldiers the age-old youthful desire for adventure was the biggest motivator. One veteran recalled the allure of excitement as war broke out:

On the television they would show a young boy dressed as a soldier, carrying a gun and wearing the red headband of the basij. He would say how wonderful it was to be a soldier for Islam, fighting for freedom against the Iraqis. Then he would curse the Iraqis and all

⁹³ ‘Montazeri: shargh va gharb alihe enghelab mottahed shodeand, kamtar harf bezanim va bishtar kar konim ta piruzi shavim’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 15th Farvardin 1366 (April 4th 1987), No. 12993, p. 1

⁹⁴ Ansari writes: “It is difficult to underestimate the catalytic effect which the capture of Khorramshahr had on Iranian society. It engendered a sense of euphoric empowerment second only to the departure of the Shah. In fact its impact may have been greater since it was a military triumph Iranians of all political hues could truly share. For a nation inured to decades, if not centuries, of military defeat, the ‘conquest of Khorramshahr’ showed what a nation, when determined and focused, could achieve, even in the absence of international support. As far as the Islamic Republic was concerned, it was the event which confirmed the righteousness and sanctity of the Republic. Yet for all the religious righteousness of much of the rhetoric, Khorramshahr marked the moment when the national narrative was born. For while this was a triumph for the Islamic Iranian nation, it was in essence a national achievement, and provided Iranians with a military victory, socialised and committed to collective memory, which was distinct from the annual commemoration of Karbala”.

See Ansari, 2003, p., 235

⁹⁵ Interview with Tehran-based Political Analyst, Tehran, 11 June 2006

Arabs, saying they were not good Muslims. Next he would tell us to join him and come to war. We didn't understand the words 'patriotism' or 'martyrdom', or at least I didn't. It was just an exciting game and a chance to prove to your friends that you'd grown up and were no longer a child. But we were really only children.⁹⁶

Other soldiers, by contrast, were very much motivated by patriotism, despite the popular preconception that all Iranian soldiers were driven by a desire for martyrdom.

It's true that martyrdom is important to Shi'ites – we all learn about the Imams and how they died – but I didn't go to war to die for Islam. I went to defend Iran and I think most of my friends went for the same reason.⁹⁷

In anecdotal terms, however, it would appear that most Iranian soldiers who joined the war effort did so out of fidelity to both Iran and Islam. One could argue that the soldiers, in fact, exemplified a more authentic nexus between Shi'ism and 'Iranianism' (*Iraniyyat*) than the Islamic Republic's leadership. Khomeini and others, while wholeheartedly emphasizing the link between religion and nation and making constant references to the motifs of sacrifice which permeated Shi'ite Islam, sought to avoid charges of Shi'ite sectarianism by consciously stressing that Iran fought for 'Islam' as a whole. The majority of the common soldiers, by contrast, unencumbered by the strictures of high politics, experienced a more visceral and innate sense of what it meant to be a patriotic Iranian Shi'ite. One newspaper report at the height of the war, for example, quoted a group of frontline soldiers who exclaimed that "Iran is our country and its soil will be our burial shroud", a remark which in its religious imagery poignantly encapsulated the devotion to God and the nation.⁹⁸ Another Tehrani Basiji veteran, who went to war soon after the Iraqis captured Khorramshahr, recalled the intertwining of religion and patriotism during the war years:

When the Iraqis invaded Iran, it was as if they had invaded 'our' homes and families. Khorramshahr was like Tehran; the people there were like my brothers. I felt an obligation to fight. It was a personal responsibility....Religion was not a barrier to fighting against other Moslems, it was in fact the motivating force to defend one's nation and way of life....I had this deep feeling and belief in Imam Khomeini. It is a difficult feeling to explain. When the Imam said it was a dangerous situation, and that all men should go to the front, basjis went in their droves....Implicit in his rhetoric was the

⁹⁶ Quoted in E. Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, Oxford, Osprey, 2002, p. 64

⁹⁷ Quoted in Karsh, p. 64

⁹⁸ '*Iran vatan-e mast, khakesh kafan-e mast*', *Keyhan*, Doshanbe, 12th Aban 1359, (November 3rd 1980), No. 11132, p. 5. The religious symbolism here is particularly important; in Persian to don a shroud – *kafanpush* – connotes preparing for holy war.

understanding that both religion and the country were in danger, and that defending both was paramount. There was a feeling that Iran and Islam existed beside each other, and that if one was lost, all was lost.⁹⁹

This belief in Khomeini as the epitome of Islamic and patriotic ideals drew widespread support. Another veteran recalled:

I support the Imam because he has made Iran an independent country again. In the days of the Shah, Iran was almost a state of America.... When the Imam came back, he got rid of the Americans and made Iran independent.¹⁰⁰

This combustible mix of religion and patriotism may even be beyond the powers of Westerners to truly understand. “All Iranians”, a veteran reminisced with a Western interviewer, “came to war to defend their country from the Iraqi invasion”,

That is the normal thing to do. I think British people did the same in the Second World War against Germany. There is another reason we came to war which is probably difficult for you to understand. We are Shiite Muslims, not Sunni. Only a small proportion of Muslims are Shiite, but ours is the true faith. Since the beginning of Islam, we have been fighting and dying for our rights. Imam Ali became the leader of the Muslims, but was martyred while reading the Qur'an. Imam Hussein was decapitated at Karbala, trying to defend our religion. We are not afraid to be martyred for Islam. On the contrary, we are proud to do so, because we are following our Imam's and doing our duty for the whole Shiite community. It is something more than patriotism we feel when we go to fight. We want to die for Islam, not Iran, like Imam Hussein.¹⁰¹

Despite such testimony, some studies of combat troops reject the idea that such high-minded religious and patriotic ideals are important motivators in the midst of combat. A famous sociological study of soldiers in the Second World War, for example, argued that what sustained a soldier in combat was an intense loyalty to his immediate section and platoon comrades. As the terrible realities of war exposed the hollowness of jingoistic patriotism and political ideology, so this theory went, the ‘primary group loyalty’ between individual soldiers in small units engendered an ethos of camaraderie and enforced a code of honour in which soldiers fought purely for each other.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Interview with Baseej veteran, Tehran, 14 March 2006

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in I. Brown, *Khomeini's Forgotten Sons – The Story of Iran's Boy Soldiers*, London, Grey Seal, 1990, p. 79

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Brown, p. 86

¹⁰² S. Stouffer, *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath* (vol. 2), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1949

The broader canon of combat motivation studies, however, does not support such a one-dimensional explanation of why soldiers fight.¹⁰³ If anything is to be gained from the multitude of military historians, evolutionary biologists, sociologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists and ethnologists who have examined this subject, it is that not only does a range of factors compel soldiers to engage in combat – instinctive aggression, a desire to prove one’s manhood, discipline, professionalism, and leadership to name a few – but that frontline camaraderie is indeed bolstered by higher ideals such as patriotism and religion. As the above testimonies show, religion was a powerful sustaining force for many Iranian soldiers during the war, proving once again the old maxim that “there are no atheists in foxholes”. Fused with this religious fervour was a similarly palpable feeling of patriotism that encouraged the various units of soldiers dispersed across the frontline to think of themselves as an Iranian ‘band of brothers’. Whatever the relative levels of religious zeal amongst the troops, this sense of national camaraderie was an essential part of the sacred defense for all Iranian soldiers, as the following veteran recalled:

In our revolution in 1979, anti-dictatorial slogans were our cries against the Shah. But the war with Iraq completed this process of nation-building. At the top of a hill under shellfire, we would have guys from Baluchistan and Kurdistan and other provinces all together. We all had to defend the same hill. And we had a lot of immigrants because of the war, people from Khuzestan driven out of their homes by the Iraqis, who fled to Tehran and Tabriz. There was this interaction with the rest of the population, an ethnic infusion. In this war, we were isolated, abandoned by everyone else, so we came to the conclusion that it was good to be alone – and we learnt about our fellow citizens, we felt united for the first time.¹⁰⁴

Such sentiments are today on display in some of the Islamic Republic’s most hallowed war memorials such as Tehran’s Martyrs Museum which contains a photograph of Iranian Muslim and Armenian soldiers posing together beside an Armenian cleric. The plaque below it reads:

¹⁰³ The literature on combat motivation, military psychiatry and ‘frontline’ military history accounts of the common soldier is vast. See for example S.L.A. Marshall, Men Against Fire: the problem of battle command, New York, William Morrow and Co., 1947, J. Keegan, The Face of Battle, London, Jonathan Cape, 1976; J. Ellis, Eye-Deep in Hell, London, Croom Helm, 1976; J. Ellis, The Sharp End of War: the fighting man in World War II, Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1980; P. Watson, War on the Mind: The Military Uses and Abuses of Psychology, London, Hutchison, 1978; R. Holmes, Firing Line, London, Pimlico, 1994, T. Nadelson, Trained to Kill: Soldiers at War, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in R. Fisk, The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East, London, Fourth Estate, 2005, pp.353-354

Armenian soldiers and their Muslim brothers together fought in the war of truth against falsehood, and for the integrity of the land of Iran with their Muslim brothers shed their blood.

This blend of religion and nationalism amongst the soldiers was reflected in the organizational ethos of the Islamic Republic's armed forces. Prior to the Iraqi invasion, Iran's armed forces underwent considerable upheaval as the discovery of alleged coup plots within the old Pahlavi military led to purges of the officer corps and an intense program of ideological indoctrination to Islamize the military and ensure its loyalty to the new republic.¹⁰⁵ As we outlined in the previous chapter, Khomeini's fear of military intervention in politics prompted him to establish a parallel Islamic military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, in May 1979 as a counterweight to the regular armed forces whose loyalty remained questionable in the eyes of the clerics.¹⁰⁶ Saddam's sudden attack, however, demanded unity, not recriminations, and both arms of Iran's armed forces were immediately committed to the defense of the country, although tension between professional officers of the regular forces and the more ideologically zealous Revolutionary Guards and Baseej commanders simmered for some time. In particular the latter's propensity for wasteful human wave assaults against well-fortified Iraqi positions caused consternation among the regular forces which were much more cognizant of the fact that religious zeal could not carry the day on the modern battlefield. To smooth over such differences between the two prongs of the armed forces and to assuage the bitterness created by the bloody purges, Iranian leaders took to lauding the entire military as a truly Islamic and patriotic force. Whereas, in the eyes of Iran's revolutionary leaders, the Shah's military was the prop of his evil rule and a bastion of undue American cultural and political influence, the armed forces of the Islamic Republic by contrast represented a genuine 'people's army' which was loyal to Islam, the revolution and the nation. Before the war, while serving as Deputy Defense Minister for Revolutionary Affairs, Khamenei declared:

The armed forces of the Islamic Republic should be the antithesis of the Imperial Armed Forces. What is important for the new Islamic military is to become part and parcel of the

¹⁰⁵ On the ideological indoctrination of the Iranian armed forces see Zabih, pp. 136-153

¹⁰⁶ N. Entessar, 'The Military and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran' in H. Amirahmadi and M. Parvin (eds.) *Post-revolutionary Iran*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, pp. 65-67

larger society within which it operates – it should transform itself into a people’s armed forces.¹⁰⁷

After hostilities broke out, Khameneii, among others, kept up this theme of the armed forces as brave, patriotic warriors. On the anniversary of the June 1963 uprising in Qom, he remarked in a speech to assembled military personnel:

You and the people were guided by the same belief and values, unlike the old regime when the military was indoctrinated to protect the Shah while people wanted to get rid of him. Today people and the armed forces have the same ideology. The military is like the sharp tip of a powerful sword which is the entire nation. Since the revolution, whenever the bonds between the people and the military have been strong, the latter has been successful and whenever the bonds have been weak it has been less successful. Your difficult task is to protect the country’s territorial integrity. To perform this task well you must utilize the power of revolution. Revolutionary power is a miraculous power. Revolutionary belief, revolutionary behaviour and planning will help you surmount all difficulties.¹⁰⁸

In the Iran-Iraq war, therefore, a new breed of Iranian soldier was born. Unlike the passive soldiers of Reza Shah’s army who surrendered to the Allied occupation of the Second World War, the soldiers of the Islamic Republic were authentic ‘citizen-soldiers’ for whom discharging one’s political responsibilities demanded participating in the war to defend the nation and the revolution which it had sanctified. As they trudged up to the frontline, grimly determined to fight for their comrades, families, faith and country, all the while singing nationalistic songs and chanting Shi’ite hymns, the soldiers themselves epitomized this collective revolutionary religious nationalism that was something never before seen in Iranian military history. The government, seeking to infuse this new aesthetic into Iranian hearts, began broadcasting the popular nationalistic anthem *Ei Iran*:

*Oh Iran, oh bejeweled land
Oh, your soil is the wellspring of the arts
Far from you may the thoughts of rivals be
May your lasting eternal be
Oh enemy, if you are of stone
I am of iron
May my life be sacrificed for my pure motherland
Your love is my calling
My thoughts are never far from you
In your cause, when do our lives have value?
May the land of our Iran be eternal.*¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Entessar, p. 56

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Zabih, pp. 255-156

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Social science researcher, Tehran, 19 June 2006.

For the text of the anthem see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ey_Iran, accessed 9/12/2006

Conclusion

In the crucible of Iran's holy defense, nationalism and religion became tightly bound. Having established what they saw as the world's only true Islamic state, Khomeini and other senior leaders cast the war as a defense of both Islam and Iran by sanctifying the latter as a divine nation whose demise would signal that of the former. In a wartime atmosphere suffused with bombastic religious rhetoric, the Islamic Republic's propaganda was permeated with a pronounced nationalistic flavour designed to rally all Iranians to the defense against the Iraqi invasion without giving the appearance of falling back into ethnic Persian chauvinism. In that sense it was a continuation of the heady days of the revolution in which Khomeini and other leaders regularly praised the 'noble Iranian nation' for following the path of Islam. The sacred defense, too, also saw the utilization of other elements of nationalistic propaganda and rhetoric, such as the 'Ei Iran' anthem, which the revolutionaries would probably have not resorted to had the invasion not occurred. Whether royalist, Islamist or secular, few Iranians would have remained unmoved by such lines as "may the land of our Iran be eternal".

The war also demonstrated the continuing reflexive interplay between state and society around the discourse of nationalism. The war, like the revolution itself, triggered widespread outpourings of nationalist and religious feeling which the Islamic Republic sought to mobilize and build legitimacy upon. Nationalistic themes constantly percolated down through the state's rhetoric, but also filtered upwards from the intense camaraderie of soldiers at the frontline and across the home front which was experiencing total war for the first time. What remained to be seen, however, was the extent to which the Islamic Republic would be able to perpetuate this sense of religious nationalism and popular support after the war.

Nationalism and Reconstruction

Introduction

A prevalent assumption in the literature of post-revolution Iranian foreign policy is that the exhaustion induced by the war with Iraq forced the Islamic Republic's leadership to forego its ideological goals of global Islamic unity and instead focus more pragmatically on advancing the national interests of Iran, an epiphany which constituted the 'return' of nationalism after the utopianism of the revolution and war years. In 1990, for example, Shireen Hunter described the Islamic Republic's foreign policy over the preceding decade in this fashion: "The Islamic regime's behaviour has been much more influenced by certain Islamic aspirations, at times at great national costs".¹ Two years later, however, she had this to say about the postwar 'restoration' of balance between Islam and Iranianism which heralded the comeback of Iranian nationalism: "[A] reassertion of Iranianism, coupled with the rise of statism, has already led to an approach that is more nationalist – in the sense that Iran's national interest has been given priority over other considerations".² The implicit rationale for such a thesis derived from international relations theorists such as Kenneth Waltz who claimed that over time revolutionary states become 'socialized' to the international system by learning that regime security is best served by pursuing material interests rather than impossibly utopian and destabilizing ideological goals.³

There are, however, a number of objections to be made regarding this supposed dichotomy between an initial 'ideological' phase of foreign policy followed by the awakening of pragmatism and nationalism which compelled the Islamic Republic to elevate national interests over pan-Islamic considerations. Firstly, as Kaveh

¹ S. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 13

² S. Hunter, *Iran after Khomeini*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1992, p., xv

³ K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading (Mass.), Addison-Wesley, 1979, pp. 127-128

Afrasiabi notes, the assumption that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy in the 1980s was driven solely by ideological considerations is an exercise in cultural reductionism which ignores a host of other factors – public opinion and bureaucratic politics to name but two – which play a role in the foreign policy making process.⁴ Indeed some scholars such as Brenda Shaffer and James Piscatori argue that material interests, rationalized as national interests, were paramount all along, despite rhetorical commitments to endless revolution and allegiance to trans-national communities:

The Islamic Republic of Iran could conceivably be the poster child for the proponents of cultural explanations of foreign policy and of those who claim that Islam is the guiding force of foreign policy formation of Muslim-populated states. Few states in the international system today have so clearly articulated, as Iran has, an official religious creed and the view that the state should serve as an instrument of that belief system. In actuality, however, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran challenges the culturalists' line. The material interests of the state and, specifically, of the ruling regime serve as the overwhelming determinates of Iran's foreign policy choices; cultural and ideological goals are rarely promoted at significant expense to those material interests.⁵

Muslim statesmen, like all statesmen, are guided more by the cold calculation of national interests than by the passionate commitment to ideological values.⁶

Secondly, Hunter's simplistic transition from an ideological stance to a pragmatic one does not account for the manifold instances in the historical record of pragmatic behaviour during the 1980s which in her reckoning was the most ideologically-driven era. As Ruhollah Ramazani points out, ideology and pragmatic state interests have long coexisted throughout Iranian history, and none more so in the Islamic Republic which at the height of the 'sacred defense' against Iraq chose to negotiate a secret weapons purchase agreement with its other avowed enemies, Israel and the United States, in an episode known as the 'Iran-Contra' affair.⁷

⁴ Afrasiabi, p. 11

⁵ B. Shaffer, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is It Really?' in B. Shaffer (ed.) *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 2006, p. 219

⁶ J. Piscatori, 'Islam in the International Order', in H. Bull and A. Watson (eds.) *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 320

⁷ R. Ramazani, 'Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy', *Middle East Journal*, 38 (4), Autumn 2004, pp. 549-559

Thirdly, a more sophisticated rebuttal to the Hunter thesis can be found in the constructivist school of international relations theory which holds that ideology and cultural norms are crucial in articulating and projecting – not smothering or detracting from – a given state’s material interests.⁸ As Fred Halliday notes, ideology is very much an instrument of state power, nowhere more so than in the case of the Islamic Republic which was “...always careful to restrict its appeal for Islamic solidarity to cases where this was consonant with its interests”.⁹ It is thus a fallacy to conceptually or chronologically distinguish between ideological interests on the one hand, and material interests on the other, because both inform each other.

Overall, Hunter superficially equates the pursuit of the national interest with nationalism, without ever really explaining if these terms are interchangeable or not. Identifying a nation-state’s pragmatic pursuit of the national interest on the international stage does not completely explain how ruling elites may be using or redefining nationalistic discourse within their own societies.¹⁰ In this regard, the study of international relations, which focuses on the systemic level, does not provide a complete picture of nationalism. Yet in the demolition of the ‘ideological-universalist/pragmatic-nationalist’ thesis, no clear conceptual answer has emerged.¹¹ The major problem is one of definition. As hinted above, what some refer to as ‘material interest’ (Shaffer) is described by others as ‘national interest’ (Piscatori) or ‘state interest’ (Halliday and Ramazani). A notable example of this conceptual

⁸ For an overview of this school of thought in relation to the Middle East see L. Fawcett, International Relations of the Middle East, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, chapter 7; as well as Telhami and Barnett

⁹ F. Halliday, The Middle East in International Relations, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 65

¹⁰ For a concise discussion on the distinction between nationalism and national interest, see K. Goldman, ‘Nationalism and Internationalism in Post-Cold War Europe’, European Journal of International Relations, 3 (259), 1997, p. 264

¹¹ See for example the unsatisfactory compromise posited by a Rand study which claimed that: “Since the Islamic Republic’s establishment, two factors—revolutionary Islam and Persian nationalism—have driven it into confrontation with its neighbors, with the superpowers, and with a host of governments in the Muslim and broader world. These two sources of adventurism are still strong today in Iran, particularly among key sectors of the elite. Nevertheless, their overall influence on Iran’s foreign policy has declined”. Byman et al, Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era, www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1320, pp. 7-8, accessed 5/04/2009

slipperiness is found in Afrasiabi's analysis which argues that the "disparate logics" of "pan-Islamic" and "nationalist" norms were uneasily fused in the crucible of the Iran-Iraq War, an "entanglement" balanced by the sheer force of Khomeini's charisma, but which demanded a definitive resolution upon the cessation of hostilities and the Imam's passing. In seeking to overturn Hunter's schema, however, by arguing for a two-track "state-making" process of "pan-Islamic revolutionism" and "nationalist state-making", whereby nationalism had "found a new and unstable anchorage" under the banner of Islamic government, Afrasiabi sinks into a definitional morass. Terms such as "nationalism", "raison d'etat", "nationalism state-making", "nationalist impulses", "nationalist norms", and "nationalist needs" begin to blur and lose explanatory clarity or efficacy.¹² This leads some scholars to question whether religious 'fundamentalists' and their behaviour can be at all described as 'nationalist'. In a rebuttal to both Hunter and Afrasiabi, Arjomand denies that the actions of those who happen to preside over a nation-state can be necessarily construed as nationalistic:

It is not nationalism but popular sovereignty and legislation as the basis of the rule of law that constitute the normative foundations of the modern state. *Etatism*, or statism, would have been a better a term because it would capture the widespread preoccupation with an alternative to the secular state but without implying that the nation is the ultimate source of identity and loyalty. The begrudging acceptance of the principles of the nation-state does not make the religious activists *nationalists*; it only makes them *statists*.¹³

For Arjomand, therefore, it is a moot point whether Islamic Republic leaders displayed nationalist proclivities during the ideological era of the 1980s or the pragmatic era thereafter because in his estimation they were only ever statist.

While Arjomand is correct to distinguish between the ideal of nationalism and the machinery of a modern nation-state – as we saw in the theory chapter there were states long before there were 'nations' – it is a basic truth of modernity and the world of nation-states in which we live, that the state arrogates to itself the right to

¹² K. Afrasiabi, After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy, Boulder, Westview Press, 1994, pp. 10-20

¹³ S.A. Arjomand, 'Review: Fundamentalism, Religious Nationalism, or Populism', Contemporary Sociology, 23 (5), September 1994, p. 673

speak for and act in the name of the nation. The eliding of such terms as state interest, material interest, national interest and nationalism merely confirms this conjoining of state and nation as an international norm (if not a concrete reality in the case of many fractured nation-states in the modern world). The international relations theory preoccupation with the question of whether or not a revolutionary state is compelled to become more nationalistic as a result of systemic pressures (Hunter says it does, Arjomand says it matters not one iota) is superfluous because nationalism is as much a phenomenon of domestic legitimacy as it is an ideology of disseminating the 'national interest' on the world stage.

Having dispensed with the notion that only pragmatism, moderation and rationality constitute nationalism, we shall examine in this chapter the continued trajectory of nationalism in the Islamic Republic and specifically the transformation it underwent during the watershed presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Firstly, however, we must chart the major structural and ideological changes instituted as Khomeini's rule came to an end and which resulted in the rise of the 'second republic'.

A Chastened Republic

As the Iran-Iraq War entered its eighth year, total victory seemed further away than ever for the Islamic Republic. On the battlefield, Iran was not able to sustain a victorious campaign to force the Iraqis to the negotiating table. While there were some local successes, such as the capture of the al-Faw peninsula in 1986 or the seizure of Kirkuk in 1987, Iran was never able to preserve these gains in the face of dogged Iraqi resistance and counterattacks. By carrying the war into Iraq, the Iranians only encouraged the Iraqis to put up stiffer resistance in defence of their homeland, a sustaining motivation the Iranians had enjoyed earlier in the war. The unsuccessful and costly Iranian attempt to capture Basra in the *Karbala V* operation

of early 1987 – the largest and most carefully planned Iranian offensive of the war – highlighted the military stalemate confronting the Islamic Republic.¹⁴

Worse still for Iran, global political opinion was increasingly mobilizing against any possibility of an Iranian victory. In particular the US, still reeling from the humiliating revelations of the Iran-Contra affair, decided to throw its military weight behind Saddam Hussein and openly confront Iran in the Persian Gulf with the ultimate aim of ensuring Tehran's defeat. By re-flagging Kuwaiti oil tankers under the stars-and-stripes and providing naval escorts, the US was soon engaged in skirmishes with the Iranian navy. As the 'tanker war' played out on the high seas, Iraq re-launched the 'war of the cities' by raining down newly-imported Soviet scud missiles upon Iranian cities, causing further demoralization amongst the Iranian populace. The US also ensured that Iraq did not sustain censure from the United Nations for its targeting of civilians or its use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and Iraqi Kurds. To compound Iranian anger and foreboding, on July 3 1988 the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian airbus en route from Bandar Abbas to Dubai. Despite American protestations of innocence, many in Iran interpreted the tragedy as a deliberate signal from Washington that it would employ brute force to end the war. Iran's inability to arouse international outrage over the shooting down of a civilian airliner indicated just how isolated it had become in the shadow of American might.¹⁵

The Islamic Republic's domestic plight was just as dire. By 1988 the war was consuming over 30% of total government expenditures and was dictating all aspects of economic life.¹⁶ As Kaveh Ehsani notes, the economy had deteriorated to such an extent that the government was reduced to managing it purely on a day-by-day basis.¹⁷ Oil prices, moreover, remained relatively low which, together with Iraqi

¹⁴ Hiro, , 1989, p. 183

¹⁵ Milani, 1994, pp. 210-214

¹⁶ S. Chubin and C. Tripp, *Iran and Iraq At War*, London, IB Taurus, 1988, p. 75

¹⁷ K. Ehsani, "'Tilt but Don't Spill': Iran's Development and Reconstruction Dilemma', *Middle East Report*, No. 191 November-December 1994, p. 17

attacks on Iran's oil exporting facilities, imposed fiscal strains on the Iranian state.¹⁸ Despite the increased reach and extractive power of the state during wartime conditions, therefore, there were fewer and fewer resources to go around, resulting in ever-increasing economic pressures and social strains amongst the burgeoning population that had grown significantly since the revolution.¹⁹ No amount of ingenuity or slashing of non-essential imports could prevent hardship on the home front in the form of power cuts and rationing. Inflation reached critical levels which brought in its wake increased hoarding and black market profiteering. Infrastructure, starved of funds siphoned off by the war effort, steadily decayed, and in a further sign of economic distress, agricultural production stagnated. The rising urban population suffered from housing shortages and a deteriorating education system. The fact that the lower classes – the *mostaza'fin* in whose name the revolution had been carried out according to Khomeini – bore the brunt of these economic pressures was not lost on anxious and frustrated Iranian leaders, particularly when simmering resentments spilled over into street protests. While the Islamic Republic certainly benefited from a wartime spirit of self-sacrifice, austerity and unity which entrenched the regime's authority and distracted attention from policy failings, there were clearly limits to the patience of the war-weary Iranian people. With between 200,000 to 250,000 soldiers and civilians dead, and having bled an estimated \$627 billion in direct and indirect war costs, the Iranian leadership began to realize that the longer the Islamic Republic chose to prosecute total war, the more the risk of total collapse loomed.²⁰

On July 14 1988 an extraordinary meeting of Iran's top political, military and religious leaders took place at the presidential residence in Tehran. The meeting had but a single agenda: whether the Islamic Republic should unconditionally accept the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution Number 598, passed the

¹⁸ Chubin and Tripp, p. 136

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 74

²⁰ Hiro, 1989, pp. 250-251; For the economic costs and strains of the war upon Iran see Chubin and Tripp chapters 5 and 7; D. Menashri, 'Iran: Doctrine and Reality' in E. Karsh (ed.) The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan in association with the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1989, pp. 42-57

previous year, calling upon both combatants to cease hostilities and retreat to pre-war borders. In light of the immense strains imposed by the war, the assembled delegates came to the conclusion that Iran had to accept the resolution. After the cabinet and the Assembly of Experts endorsed the decision, Hashemi Rafsanjani, vice-chairman of this Assembly in addition to his other roles as Majles Speaker and acting commander-in-chief, conveyed the decision to Khomeini.²¹ After gaining Khomeini's consent, President Khamenei then wrote to the United Nations Secretary-General indicating Iran's acceptance of UNSC resolution 598 on 17 July.²² Khomeini himself rued that "taking this decision was more deadly than taking poison. I submitted myself to God's will and drank this drink for his satisfaction.....[t]o me, it would have been more bearable to accept death and martyrdom".²³ With that flourishing quote, broadcast on Iranian state radio, the war was over.

The Second Republic

Seven months later Khomeini embarked upon his last grand gesture to remind the world of his unrepentant revolutionary tendencies. In February 1989 the Islamic Republic announced that Khomeini had issued a fatwa condemning to death Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses*, for allegedly blaspheming the Prophet Mohammad.²⁴ While many in the West took this episode as yet another example of the Iranian radicalism, behind the scenes in Tehran seismic changes were in train that would dramatically alter the future direction of the Islamic Republic. As Khomeini, who had endured ongoing ill-health since 1987, approached the end of his life, the regime began to plan for the unthinkable: an Islamic Republic bereft of its founder.

²¹ Hiro, p. 242

²² For the text of Khamenei's letter to the United Nations Secretary-General see 'Text of Iranian Letter to UN, *The New York Times*, July 19 1988, p. A9

²³ R. Pear, 'Khomeini accepts 'poison' of ending war the war with Iraq; U.N. sending mission', *The New York Times*, July 21 1988, p. A1

²⁴ See D. Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: the novel, the Ayatollah, and the West*, New York, Carol, 1990

Naturally the first question was who his successor would be. Considering none of the other Grand Ayatollahs subscribed to the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* and refused to be nominated for such a position, the incoming successor would presumably lack Khomeini's religious credentials and any semblance of charismatic authority needed to preside over a theocracy. This notion of an Islamic Republic without the unequalled charismatic authority of Khomeini carried with it profound implications, for the prospect of a less prestigious *faqih* ascending to Khomeini's position raised the further question of whether a such a successor could manage the intense factionalism which marred Iranian politics by the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Khomeini's varied ideological legacy and temperament – zigzagging between wartime messianism and the desire to consolidate the machinery of republican government - lent itself to divergent interpretations in socio-economic and foreign policy affairs as we shall see below. This in turn encouraged competing factions dispersed across the multiple centres of power within the Islamic Republic to outdo one another by representing their positions as the authentic expression of Khomeini's values, something the Imam himself could manipulate to maintain a certain balance within the system. Both Khomeini's own ideology and his style of leadership, in other words, perpetuated factional divisions within the Islamic Republic and exacerbated a sense of domestic political drift concealed by the hysteria of fighting an external invader. While he was alive, his unassailable authority ensured factional fighting did not overwhelm the republic. There was no guarantee, however, that his successor would have the same abilities to forestall political stalemate and possible collapse.²⁵ The exigencies of reconstruction and the impending death of Khomeini, therefore, created a rare cross-factional consensus for constitutional reform to ensure the Islamic Republic's survival beyond the passing of its founder.²⁶

It was Khomeini himself who first publicly aired the necessity of rationalizing the Islamic Republic. In early 1988 following internal debate within the regime over the

²⁵ A. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Second Islamic Republic*, London, Routledge, 1995, pp. 2-5; Brumberg, pp. 122-125

²⁶ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 24

issue of balancing the state and private sectors in the economy, Khomeini announced one of his most important fatwas. Coming down firmly on the side of an all-powerful interventionist state, he declared:

The government [state] that is a part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God is one of the primary injunctions of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayers, fasting, and *haj'*. The ruler is authorized to demolish a mosque or a house that is in the path of a road and to compensate the owner for his house. The ruler can close down a mosque if need be, or can even demolish a mosque that is a source of harm if its harm cannot be remedied without demolition. The government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any shari'a agreement that it has conducted with people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or Islam.²⁷

While the fatwa granted unparalleled powers to the *faqih*, it in fact undermined the religious basis of the regime by allowing for the state to use its discretion to override the pillars of Islam if it served the national interest. In elevating the state over the precepts of Islam, Khomeini's fatwa broke with centuries of tradition within the clergy which had prided itself on its independence from state ordinances. Khomeini, though, was not to be deterred: the requirement to rationalize and extend the interventionist powers of the state took precedence over the traditionalist grumblings of the conservative clerics.²⁸

The transition to a post-Khomeini republic, nonetheless, demanded more than curt fatwas. In April 1989 Khomeini ordered the formation of the 'Assembly for Reconsideration of the Constitution', confessing that while he had been aware of the defects inherent within the 1979 constitution, he had remained silent in order to focus on the war effort.²⁹ In a matter of weeks the Assembly, guided by President Khamenei and Majles Speaker Rafsanjani who were to emerge the real winners of the whole process, thoroughly revamped the original constitution. No fewer than

²⁷ Quoted in M. Moslem, Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2002, p., 74

²⁸ Quoted in Moslem, p. 74

²⁹ M. Milani, 'The Evolution of the Iranian Presidency: From Bani-Sadr to Rafsanjani', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 20 (1) 1993, p. 92

fifty amendments and revisions were instituted, the most far-reaching of which related to the positions of *faqih* and the President.³⁰

The resignation of Khomeini's anointed heir, Ayatollah Montazeri, in March 1989 following his very public criticism of the regime's human rights abuses, presented a conundrum for the ailing Leader. Ideally Khomeini's successor would come from the ranks of the other eminent Grand Ayatollahs. The problem, as we saw, was that Khomeini's peers did not necessarily subscribe to his theory of government, and none, moreover, were experienced in governing a state or balancing political factions. In the end Khomeini was compelled to choose political skill over religious eminence and he settled upon his acolyte and incumbent president, Khamenei. As a comparatively low-ranking theologian (*hojjat al-islam*), Khamenei did not have the religious charisma of Khomeini, and it became necessary for the constitutional provisions relating to the *velayat-e faqih* to be revised. On Khomeini's direction, the specially-convened Assembly proceeded to dispense with the prerequisite that the *faqih* be an object of emulation (*marja al-taqlid*) and instead formulated a constitutional article stating that the incumbent need only possess an 'expert' knowledge of jurisprudence and appropriate political skills. The position of *faqih* was in effect institutionalized so that his authority would derive not from religious charisma but from constitutional and legal principle.³¹

This 'routinization' of charisma was simultaneously buttressed by the rationalization of the executive branch of government.³² Despite the bitter memory of the Bani-Sadr era in which a lay President had attempted to circumscribe the power of the Islamists, by this juncture Khamenei and Rafsanjani were both agitating for a powerful presidency. Khamenei argued in the assembly that Iran's problems derived in large part from a weak and divided executive branch in which the buck was

³⁰ Ehteshami, 1995, pp.39-40

³¹ For an overview of Khamenei's elevation to the position of Supreme Leader see K. Sadjadpour, Reading Khamenei: the worldview of Iran's most powerful leader, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, pp. 1-35

http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf, accessed 30/03/2009

³² Brumberg, p. 120-122

passed back and forth between the Prime Minister and the President.³³ Besides exacerbating factionalism and policy paralysis, this constitutional defect bred a lack of accountability within the system because no-one knew who to blame. Rafsanjani backed up Khamenei's calls for a strong presidency by reminding the delegates of the challenges of reconstruction which only a strong executive could address:

We need to think of getting more powerful. And please do not think I am paving the way for myself as president. The *Majles* deputies used to call me *Vakil od-Douleh* [defender of the government] because...I consistently supported the executive branch....With the war's end, in the next fifteen years, major work has to be done by the executive branch. The *Majles* will not have any problems or responsibilities because it can question everyone but no one can question it.³⁴

The plan for a smooth transition of power to the 'second republic' was soon put into action. On June 3 1989 Khomeini died, sparking a massive outpouring of grief in Iran. Two days later Khamenei was selected as the new *faqih*. The following month the presidential election was brought forward and held simultaneously with the national referendum on the new constitution which outlined the new leadership structure of the Islamic Republic. Rafsanjani won in a landslide, and the new constitution was approved. While the position of the *faqih* was detached from the principle of the *marja'aiyat*, the new Supreme Leader enjoyed unrivalled power at the apex of the republican pyramid. He determined the general policies of the Islamic republic; was commander-in-chief of the armed forces; appointed the Guardians Council, the Head of the Judiciary, the Director of State television and radio, and the Chief of Staff of the Revolutionary Guards Corps; and finally had the power to impeach the President.³⁵

As the new President, Rafsanjani also enjoyed increased powers. The office of the Prime Minister was abolished and its functions and powers transferred to the President. The President was now in charge of general government policy, and had the freedom to appoint his own cabinet subject to approval by the *Majles*.

³³ Milani, 1993, p. 94

³⁴ Quoted in Milani, 1993, pp. 94-95

³⁵ Ehteshami, 1995, pp. 34, 50

Rafsanjani was also given charge of the Supreme National Security Council which coordinated defence, intelligence and foreign policy. Most importantly the new incumbent gained control of the Planning and Budget Organization.³⁶ Khomeini and Rafsanjani, the emerging pillars of the post-Khomeini Islamic Republic, had now consolidated their positions and were ready to lead Iran in a new direction by embarking upon the mammoth task of reconstruction. The resolution of the succession dilemma, however, was not simply a question of who would succeed Khomeini after his death: it entailed a radical shift in national priorities, one that would intensify factional conflict even further. As Ehteshami notes the issue was an “elemental battle between strands of ideology and policy which had evolved through the revolutionary process, each of which now sought to mark the revolution as its own”.³⁷ Ironically, the process by which Khomeini had begun to de-revolutionize the Islamic Republic and put it on a firmer footing became the beginning of a new revolution, a fresh crusade.

Rafsanjani and Reconstruction: A New Direction

As Mehdi Moslem correctly opines, the rise of Rafsanjani was the most significant development in post-Khomeini Iran. Taking advantage of Khomeini's weak credentials, he skillfully positioned himself as the “architect and manager” of a new Iran and in short order acquired the influence to set the direction and principles of the Islamic Republic in a way Khomeini once did.³⁸ Rafsanjani was in many ways the ideal candidate to lead Iran away from the excesses of revolution and towards reconstruction. As Speaker of the Majles during the tumultuous years of the 1980s, his silky political skills were widely respected if not admired. His own background, moreover, displayed a penchant for pragmatism and moderation, as well as a keen interest in economic affairs. From the early 1960s, for example, while engaging in

³⁶ Milani, 1993, p.95

³⁷ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 23

³⁸ Moslem, p. 142

anti-Shah political activities, Rafsanjani had at the same time supporting his family through managing a small pistachio business.³⁹

Armed with a whopping 94.1% majority in the 1989 presidential election Rafsanjani set about crafting his own vision of a new Iran.⁴⁰ As to what this 'new' Iran would be, however, remained the subject of intense factional debate. The victory of the Islamists over the liberal nationalists, Islamic modernists, and the New left did not entail ideological unity amongst the ruling elite on what the ultimate goals of the Islamic Revolution should be, a conundrum exacerbated by Khomeini's constant oscillation between the heterogeneous principles of his own ideology. Amongst the Islamists there was unanimity over the necessity of the *velayat-e faqih*, but in the socio-economic affairs there were widely divergent interpretations of what constituted an Islamic society. In particular, the debate focused on the role of the state in the economy, an issue the various schools of Islamic economics had hitherto not seriously addressed, but which in an 'Islamic Republic' raised important questions about the future political economy.⁴¹

The more junior clerics and lay revolutionaries of the radical Islamist left upheld the notion of a strong redistributive state and a command economy that would eradicate socio-economic injustice and benefit the *mostaza'fin*. The Islamist left belief in the necessity and inevitability of a grassroots transformation of Iranian society assumed that the Islamic Revolution would also herald a social revolution, and in the wake of the Shah's flight, such an idea increasingly gained traction.⁴² Large areas of the Iranian countryside witnessed peasant attempts to seize the estates of the great landowners. In the cities, restive labour movements, conscious of their role in the massive strikes that brought down the Shah, began establishing workers' councils to

³⁹ Milani, 1994, p. 226

⁴⁰ 'Hashemi Rafsanjani ra'is jomhur- e Iran shod', *Keyhan*, Yekshanbe 8th Mordad 1368 (June 30th 1989), No. 13672, p. 1

⁴¹ S. Behdad, 'The Post-Revolutionary Economic Crisis' in S. Rahnema and S. Behdad (eds.), *Iran After The Islamic Revolution: Crisis Of An Islamic State*, London, IB Taurus, 1995, pp. 97-98; On Islamic economics see S. Behdad, 'Disputed Utopia: Islamic Economics in Revolutionary Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36 (4), October 1994, pp. 775-813

⁴² For an overview of this incipient social revolution see Moaddel, 1993, pp. 199-264

agitate for better pay and conditions. Such actions derived encouragement from the clerical leadership itself. Khomeini repeatedly declared that the “country belongs to the slum dwellers”, while Beheshti weighed in by announcing that “the line of the revolution is anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and anti-feudalism”.⁴³ This rhetoric, together with the massive confiscation of Pahlavi assets and the nationalization of large sectors of the economy, convinced many on the Islamist left that their dream of establishing a truly egalitarian model of economic development was imminent.

The conservative clerics of the Islamist right and their allies in the bazaar, by contrast, believed anything resembling total state control veered dangerously close to ‘un-Islamic’ socialism.⁴⁴ Chafing under the war-induced ‘import compression’ policies of the government which aimed to preserve precious foreign exchange income from oil exports, they called for minimal state intervention in the economy, low taxation, light regulation and the free reign of market forces.⁴⁵ Under the banner of orthodox Islam and wielding the excuse of wartime exigency, the conservative clergy, bazaaris and wealthy landowners pressured Khomeini to arrest the movement towards a radical social revolution and the nationalization of much of the economy. In April 1982, for example, the Majles passed a bill nationalizing of foreign trade but following pressure by conservative groups, the Guardian Council vetoed this bill, claiming that trade nationalization was “against Islam”. Attempts to establish workers’ councils met with similar conservative resistance, and a drive from below to step up land reform in the countryside was finally suspended by Khomeini as the war began. For all revolutionary rhetoric about improving the plight of the ‘oppressed’, there were clearly powerful conservative forces inside the new regime which did not necessarily wish to encourage a profound social revolution.⁴⁶

⁴³ Quoted in Moaddel, 1993, p. 229

⁴⁴ This distinction between the Islamist Left and Right is covered in greater detail by Moslem, chapters four, five and six

⁴⁵ M. Pesaran, ‘The Iranian Foreign Exchange Policy and the Black Market for Dollars’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24 (1), February 1992, p. 101; Moslem, pp. 100-115

⁴⁶ For Khomeini’s quote see Ehteshami, 1995, p. 92. For an overview of this era see Moslem, pp. 64-67; Moaddel, 1993, pp.223-238

The remainder of the decade witnessed this continued factional sniping between the left and right over the role of the state in the Iranian economy. Islamist leftists tried to extend state control over the economy even further through rationing and price controls. For them the plight of the *mostaza'fin* – within Iran and without – remained of paramount concern hence their undying determination to prosecute the war and in so doing export the revolution. The Islamist right, meanwhile, continued to clamour for the de-nationalization of the vast sectors of the economy under state control. This spiteful debate torpedoed all hope of a logical and rational economic plan for the nation, and it was eventually shelved in 1986 after three years of protracted wrangling.⁴⁷ The cost and distraction of war, as we noted above, also militated against consistent economic policy, and there was quiet relief among conservatives, therefore, when the ceasefire and constitutional revision saw acolytes of radical state intervention in the economy, such as Prime Minister Musavi, walk away leaving a legacy of economic decay.⁴⁸

Into this void stepped Rafsanjani and the technocrats of the 'modern right'. Rafsanjani's ultimate vision was of a modern, industrial, export-led economy, sustained by quality infrastructure and a modern banking system, and presided over by a strong executive working in tandem with the private sector.⁴⁹ Dispensing with vain search for an 'Islamic' model of development, Rafsanjani embraced a conventional economic liberalization/privatization/export promotion model that was far removed from the command economy of the war years, but not quite the traditional *laissez-faire* economy dear to conservative hearts.⁵⁰ Sensing the national mood, he quickly announced an ambitious five year economic plan to bring the peace dividend war-weary Iranians were desperately coveting.⁵¹

The moribund Iranian economy, Rafsanjani reasoned, could only be kick-started by embarking upon a sustained program of economic liberalization. To this end, his

⁴⁷ Behdad, 1995, pp. 112-113

⁴⁸ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 98

⁴⁹ Moslem, pp. 129-134

⁵⁰ Ehsani, p. 18

⁵¹ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 42; Ehsani, p. 18

first five year plan (1989-1993) had two overarching goals: reducing the fiscal burden on the government, and promoting vigorous economic growth. Explaining the rationale of the new economic order, the then director of the Central Bank declared that the President's economic team was committed to "privatization, liberalization and rationalization".⁵² In order to decrease the strain imposed on the public purse, hundreds of unprofitable state-owned enterprises were earmarked for sale to the private sector whose share in the economy was predicted to rise from 25% to at least 75% in the following decade.⁵³ The plan also detailed a gradual reduction in subsidies – an outlay that was fuelling a growing government deficit – and more efficient tax collection to bring in higher revenues.⁵⁴

Any unemployment resulting from de-nationalization, or economic hardship brought on by subsidy reductions would, according to the plan, be ameliorated by a forecasted GDP growth rate of over 8% per annum.⁵⁵ The key to sparking greater GDP growth was to encourage greater private sector investment in the economy, and the plan therefore called for extensive deregulation of the banking and financial sectors, as well as an expansion of the Tehran stock exchange, to coax private capital out of its wartime hibernation. Rafsanjani even called on exiled Iranians to return home and invest their capital and expertise in the reconstruction effort.⁵⁶ Overturning a fundamental economic principle of the revolutionary era, Rafsanjani also indicated that Iran would eagerly seek foreign direct investment by allowing foreign capital to own up to 49% of Iranian companies. The President also encouraged the establishment of free trade zones in the Persian Gulf where foreign capital would be lured by tax exemptions and low duties.⁵⁷ Similarly, the Islamic Republic announced its intention to apply for World Bank loans as another source of

⁵² J. Miller, *After the War: Islamic radicals lose their tight grip on Iran*, *The New York Times*, April 8 1991, p. A.1

⁵³ Ehteshami, 1995, pp. 103-104

⁵⁴ M. Ghasimi, 'The Iranian Economy after the Revolution: An Economic Appraisal of the Five-Year Plan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24 (4), November 1994, pp. 599-601

⁵⁵ Ghasimi, p. 600

⁵⁶ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 104

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111

credit for reconstruction projects.⁵⁸ As a means of priming the domestic economy, the plan heralded a lifting of import restrictions in order to allow Iranian companies to procure raw materials and technology for industrialization and manufacturing. The plan, furthermore, set an ambitious target of 21.4% growth in non-oil export earnings which demanded a devaluation of the rial to increase the international competitiveness of Iran's non-oil exports.⁵⁹ As a prerequisite for Iran joining the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the government announced its intention to merge the various Rial exchange rates which were the obvious source of many of the distortions inherent in the Iranian economy.⁶⁰ Finally, the entire basis of the plan was predicated on steadily increasing oil revenues which the government hoped to reinvest in Iran's dilapidated oil sector and therefore improve output.⁶¹

Despite this ambitious five year plan of economic reconstruction which signaled move away from the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic's first decade, Khamenei was determined to preserve a veneer of continuity with the revolutionary years by assuring Iranians that "our path is the path of Imam Khomeini".⁶² Nevertheless there was a distinct change of vocabulary with the inauguration of the Rafsanjani presidency. Gone were the wild slogans of the revolution: 'Neither West nor East, but Islam', '*Mostaza'fin* of the world unite', 'We are for Islam, not for capitalism and feudalism'.⁶³ Rafsanjani's speeches were peppered with references to 'realism', 'work discipline', 'managerial skills', 'modern technology', 'expertise and competence', 'individual self-reliance', 'entrepreneurship' and 'stability'.⁶⁴ This concern for *laissez-faire* economics and technical competence was also reflected in Rafsanjani's first 'cabinet of reconstruction' in which technocrats outnumbered

⁵⁸ By 1994 Iran had received over \$1 billion in World Bank loans. See Behdad, 1995, p. 116

⁵⁹ Ghasimi, p. 601

⁶⁰ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 104. On Iran's arcane exchange rate system see M. Pesaran, pp. 101-125

⁶¹ On Iran's oil sector see D. Salehi-Isfahani, 'The Oil Sector after the Revolution' in S. Rahnema and S. Behdad (eds.), *Iran After The Revolution: Crisis Of An Islamic State*, London, IB Taurus, 1995, pp. 150-173

⁶² '*Ayatollah Khamenei: ra- e ma, rah-e imam Khomeini ast*', *Keyhan*, Yekshanbe 28th Khordad 1368 (June 18th 1989) No. 13638, p. 1

⁶³ E. Abrahamian, 'Khomeini: Fundamentalist or Populist?', *New Left Review*, 1 (186), March-April 1991, pp. 113-114

⁶⁴ Abrahamian, 1993, p.138

clerics, a “de-ideologisation” of the executive to which even the Majles gave its eager assent.⁶⁵

What was particularly novel about the new President’s language was his desire to re-embrace the pursuit of wealth as a means of promoting the public good. Looking back on his first term, and stressing a purported link with Khomeini’s own outlook, Rafsanjani recalled his aim was to encourage Iranians to leave behind the cult of austerity enforced upon them by the exigencies of war. He wanted his countrymen to enjoy life once more and to dispense with the idea that there was nobility in poverty; it was wrong, he pointed out, to purposefully wear rags, for God enjoined Moslems to make use of their individual gifts and in so doing create a better life. Echoing Khomeini, Rafsanjani stressed that the *mosta’zafin* must be brought out of poverty and not left to the fate of being “barefoot Moslems”.⁶⁶

The most glaring departure from the rhetoric of 1979 was the new outlook on Iran’s foreign policy. Initially it appeared that the Islamic Republic’s stance on promoting ‘Islamic solidarity’ had altered little. During the early 1990s the Islamic Republic signaled its ongoing commitment to pan-Islamic causes by lavishing hundreds of millions of dollars on Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the al-Bashir regime in the Sudan.⁶⁷ While such actions appeared to constitute a continuing effort to export the revolution by subversion, in reality Rafsanjani was not about to let fanaticism erode the national interest which in his mind was firmly rooted in the overriding importance of economic reconstruction. The urgency to rebuild a war-ravaged nation demanded that the Islamic Republic seek international loans and direct foreign investment to pump sorely needed capital into the Iranian economy.⁶⁸ The ability to attract loans and capital, in turn, depended upon better relations with the outside world. As Khomeini’s successor, Khamenei was perhaps obliged to perpetuate the former’s uncompromising language; addressing the US, he bellowed

⁶⁵ Ehteshami, 1995, p. 55

⁶⁶ Rahmani, pp. 159-160

⁶⁷ J. Calabrese, Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran, New York, St Martin’s Press, 1994, pp. 144-163

⁶⁸ Ehsani, p. 18

“next to the usurper regime ruling over occupied Palestine, you are the most hated government in the eyes of the Iranian people....no-one in the Islamic Republic will hold talks with you”.⁶⁹ With an eye on reconstruction, however, Rafsanjani and his Ministers set off on a quite different tack. At a 1991 oil industry conference featuring American and British oil executives, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati announced “from a global perspective, a new order is gradually superseding in which economic considerations overshadow political priorities”; Rafsanjani’s message, read out to delegates was just as cordial, “the concluding years of the 20th century are marked by world events that have replaced the previous bipolar system by a new order...if this order is to persist cooperation should replace confrontation”.⁷⁰ This was a far cry from the Rafsanjani who during the war years vowed “we will extirpate Saddam and the Ba’th Party on the ground and, God willing, we shall liberate the Iraqi people”.⁷¹

No sooner had Rafsanjani entered office, therefore, than a flurry of diplomatic efforts was launched to mend Iran’s relations with the outside world. Despite Khamenei’s strident language, Rafsanjani reached out to the U.S soon after entering office by offering to help solve the plight of Western hostages in Lebanon: “I wish to say – I address the White House – that Lebanon has a solution; the freedom of the hostages is solvable”.⁷² The following year full diplomatic relations with Britain were restored: in an effort to resolve one of the sticking points in the diplomatic relationship, Rafsanjani himself promised Iran would “abide by international law” even if he could not rescind the fatwa against Salman Rushdie which had become an article of faith amongst radicals in Iran.⁷³ In August 1989 the Omani foreign minister quietly slipped into Tehran for talks on security in the Persian Gulf, a move which

⁶⁹ N. Boustany, ‘Ayatollah in Tehran lashes U.S.; statement conflicts with other clerics’, The New York Times, August 15 1989, p. A12

⁷⁰ Y. Ibrahim, ‘Iran’s leaders ask for wide cooperation and ties to West’, The New York Times, May 28 1991, p. A1

⁷¹ ‘Rafsanjani Discusses Timing of Next Iranian Offensive’, MERIP Reports, No. 125/126 The Strange War in the Gulf, July – September 1984, p. 43

⁷² B. Weinraub, ‘Iran’s President offers U.S. help in hostage crisis’, The New York Times, August 5 1989, p. 1.1

⁷³ G. Frankel, ‘Britain, Iran to resume diplomatic ties despite Rushdie affair’, The Washington Post, September 28 1990, p. A23

presaged warmer relations between Iran and the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The following month Iran upgraded relations with Kuwait and Bahrain and held secret talks with Saudi Arabia, a country once consistently singled out for castigation by Khomeini.⁷⁴

This pragmatic take on foreign policy was startlingly evident during and after the Second Gulf War of 1991. Prior to the conflict Rafsanjani exchanged letters with Saddam Hussein regarding the expansion of mutual ties, an astonishing step considering the recent war between the two countries. The memory of the conflict, however, was too visceral to allow for genuinely warm relations and when the Iraqi dictator embarked upon another military misadventure by invading Kuwait, Iran chose to side with the international community against Iraq. Iran condemned the outrage and demanded the crisis be resolved through the UN, although it maintained a convenient neutrality the following year when the Western coalition achieved in hours what the Iranians were unable to do in eight years: the complete rout of the Iraqi armed forces. Iran's restraint and tact was rewarded with better relations with other Arab countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt.⁷⁵ As yet another sweetener for the international community, in February 1991 Rafsanjani also offered to serve as a mediator between the US and Iraq in the aftermath of the war, an initiative that was met coolly by both sides but nevertheless indicated a sincerity on the Iranian President's part to act constructively on the international stage.⁷⁶ The Islamic Republic's cautious and moderate stance was starkly demonstrated when Saddam Hussein turned on the Iraqi Shia, a crackdown which brought scarcely a whimper from Tehran, prompting one Western diplomat based in Tehran at the time to note: "The revolution is finally over. It died a month ago when Iraq bombed holy shrines in Najaf and Karbala, cities sacred to Iranian Shiites, without an Iranian response. It died when Iraq began massacring Iraqi Shiites without a single protest

⁷⁴ For an overview of Iran's post-1989 foreign policy see Ehteshami, 1995, pp. 135-160 and also M. Milani, 'Iran's Gulf Policy: From Idealism and Confrontation to Pragmatism and Moderation' in J. Al-Suwaidi (ed) *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*, Abu Dhabi, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1996, pp. 83-98

⁷⁵ Ehteshami, 1995, pp. 152-154

⁷⁶ T. Friedman, 'War in the Gulf: Iran; Iran's President offers to broker Gulf settlement', *The New York Times*, February 5 1991, p. A1.

march in this overwhelmingly Shiite society, and only a belated peep from its leader".⁷⁷ For the Islamic Republic, the precious resources and energy needed for reconstruction were simply too important to waste upon an idealistic quest to save its Shia brethren.

While the Islamic Republic maintained its noisy pronouncements on the Arab-Israeli dispute, Tehran's studious silence in the face of Saddam Hussein's butchering of the Iraqi Shia emphasized the extent to which 'pan-Islamism' in the Rafsanjani era was merely an instrumental appendage to Iran's national interest now overwhelmingly devoted to economic reconstruction. In January 1990, for example, when Soviet troops killed scores of Azerbaijani Moslems during an operation to quell increasingly violent separatist sentiments, the Islamic Republic responded with notable restraint. Weary of inflaming Azeri ethnic feeling which could have provoked unrest in Iranian Azerbaijan, and determined to maintain a cordial relationship with the USSR despite its increasingly precarious existence, Tehran shrewdly played down the Azeri nationalist angle. Khamenei, while ordinarily given to inflammatory language, drew this distinction by announcing that "anyone who thinks (the Soviet problems) are ethnic or nationalist is making a big mistake....There sentiments are Islamic and the Soviet leadership should face the fact with realism".⁷⁸ In September 1991, a matter of a few months before the Soviet Union collapsed, Rafsanjani outlined Iran's pragmatic stance which deliberately shied away from stoking revolutionary Islam amongst Central Asian republics:

We are not upset about the collapse of Marxism at all. As to the future of the Soviet Union, what is important is the will of the people. If they decide for all the republics to live together, we will be content and be a good neighbour for them. If the people want to be independent and live in separate republics, again we are ready to cooperate with all of them. It makes not much difference for us.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ J. Miller, *After the War; Islamic Radicals lose their tight grip on Iran*, The New York Times, April 8th 1991, p. A.1

⁷⁸ A. McCabe, 'Iranian moderates fear spillover from Azerbaijan', The Ottawa Citizen, January 27 1990, p. B6

⁷⁹ P. Tyler, 'Iran is cautious on Soviet Muslims', The New York Times, September 19 1991, p. A13

While radical elements in Tehran continued to agitate for a more aggressive foreign policy, the above comments demonstrated the extent to which the Islamic Republic was prepared to mute its pan-Islamic sentiments in favour of pursuing material interests. Iran's reconstruction, its leaders reasoned, would not be well-served by stoking chaos along its northern border, a scenario which portended possible irredentist movements among the Iran's ethnic minorities. Iran, therefore, chose to side with Christian Armenia in its fight against Shia Moslem Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabagh corridor, in large part because a distracted Azerbaijan would not be able to stir up trouble amongst fellow Azeris in Iran. Furthermore, Iranian leaders such as Rafsanjani with a keen sense of trade possibilities counted Russia as an important trading partner and enforcer of stability in Central Asia. Tehran quite happily cast aside Islamic scruples in assiduously cultivating its relationship with Moscow despite the Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1994 in which thousands of Moslems perished.⁸⁰

The Reconstruction of Nationalism and the Nationalism of Reconstruction

There is no doubt that the radical re-ordering of economic and foreign policy priorities in Rafsanjani's first term constituted a triumph of pragmatism and moderation over revolutionary utopianism. As Ali Ansari notes, "...this renewed affectation for pragmatism made itself felt through a gradual reassertion of national interest....with priorities firmly fixed on economic reconstruction".⁸¹ But, to return to our question broached at the beginning of this chapter, can this overt pursuit of national interest and the downplaying of global Islamic revolution be defined as nationalism, and if so, was it the 'beginning' of nationalism in the Islamic Republic or a transformation of it? Certainly all that we have argued thus far concerning the

⁸⁰ For Iran's foreign policy tilt towards Russia, and its relations with Central Asia see M. Mesbahi, 'Iran and Central Asia: paradigm and policy', *Central Asian Survey*, 23 (2) June 2004, pp. 109-139; M.. Mesbahi, 'Iran's Foreign Policy Toward Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus' in J. Esposito and R. Ramazani (eds), *Iran at the Crossroads*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 149-174

⁸¹ Ansari, 2006, pp. 252-253; Even book titles encapsulate this point, see A. Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy Since 1990: Pragmatism Supersedes Islamic Ideology*, New York, Nova Science Publishers, 1999

essential vein of nationalism running through the revolution together with the sanctification of the Iranian nation during the war is enough to remind us that, in the words of Ali Ansari once more, the “nation had never really gone away”.⁸² Given this fact, and keeping in mind what was discussed above – the misplaced idea that nationalism only ‘returned’ with the advent of pragmatism and moderation – one could argue that nationalism underwent a *re-interpretation* in the Second Republic. The religiously-infused nationalism of the revolution and war years which fuelled the universalistic impulse of the Islamic Republic now became more inward looking, for if other nations refused to follow the Iranian example, then ‘Islam in one country’ would have to suffice.⁸³ As tautological as it sounds, therefore, the ‘nationalism of internationalism’ became in this era ‘nationalism in one country’.

Arguing for this ‘reconstruction of nationalism’, however, demands more than a simple accounting of the Islamic Republic’s prudent pursuit of the national interest. As we saw above, the ‘ideological-universalist/pragmatic-nationalist’ thesis presumes that national interest is synonymous with nationalism, an assumption that is rather bald if no account is taken of the internal discourse about nationalism. For this we must examine the ‘nationalism of reconstruction’, and in particular the actions, rhetoric and motivations of the man who lead the national effort, President Rafsanjani.

While Khamenei deserves as much credit as Rafsanjani for the post-1989 re-direction of the Islamic Republic, by taking on Khomeini’s mantle he was obliged to openly maintain a rhetorical link with his mentor’s revolutionary canon. Upon assuming office he announced to the nation that it was revolutionary business as usual: “the Islamic revolution is limited neither to ethnicity, nationality nor

⁸² A. Ansari, ‘Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran’, in B. Shaffer (ed) *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2006, p. 252

⁸³ R. Ramazani, ‘Reflections of Iran’s Foreign Policy: Defining the “National Interests”’, in J. Esposito and R. Ramazani (eds.), *Iran at the Crossroads*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p.217; This sentiment is backed up by Ansari who notes: “Put another way, if the emphasis had been on the religious aspects of nationalism, Rafsanjani now sought to redress the imbalance by appealing to overly national sentiment and justifying policy on the grounds of national interest.” See Ansari, 2006, p.251

borders”.⁸⁴ For Rafsanjani, however, reconstruction implied that charity begins at home – ‘the light bulb which is necessary in the house is forbidden in the mosque’ as Iranians say – and he chose to focus national energies on rebuilding the country by openly appealing to patriotism. The president, to put it another way, now began to purvey a kind of *developmental* nationalism.⁸⁵

Rafsanjani endeavoured to impress Iranians by presenting himself as a man of action who could rise above factionalism and put the country’s interests ahead of short-term political gain. Like that other great modernizer of modern Iranian history, Reza Shah, Rafsanjani cultivated an image as a no-nonsense, single-minded devotee of rapid national development committed to dragging Iran out of its sloth and despair. Rafsanjani’s own military epithet, the ‘General of Reconstruction’, certainly hinted at this historical parallel despite the antipathy clerics traditionally bore towards the first Pahlavi Shah. With General-like dash and determination, Rafsanjani took to crisscrossing Iran with the media in tow, inaugurating flagship reconstruction projects such as dams, ports and free trade zones.⁸⁶ He paid due homage to Khomeini by stressing “for the building of the country we shall not stray from the path and ideals of Imam Khomeini”, but in reality Rafsanjani’s speeches deviated significantly from the revolutionary rhetoric of the previous decade.⁸⁷ Glorification of the revolution or the war effort was replaced with decidedly more practical and hardheaded injunctions to build a “prosperous, free and self-sufficient” ‘country’ (*keshvar*), a revealing semantic choice since the term is devoid of any religious connotation and refers specifically to the country of Iran.⁸⁸ At certain junctures Rafsanjani reverted to the more emotive nationalistic rhetoric of the revolution and

⁸⁴ ‘Rahbar: *Engelab-e Islami mahdud be qomiyat, melliyat va marz nist*’, Keyhan, Doshanbe 5th Tir 1368 (June 26th 1989 No. 13645, p. 1

⁸⁵ ‘*Cheraghi ke be khane ravast be masjid haram ast*’. On ‘developmentalism’ see A. Gheissari and V. Nasr, Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 105-126

⁸⁶ A browse through the major dailies in this era will reveal this phenomenon. For the opening of the free trade zones, see for example ‘*Dovomin bandar- e azad- e tejariye- sana’ati-ye Iran dar jazire-ye Qeshm aghaz be kar kard*’, Keyhan, Shanbe 22nd Farvardin (April 11th 1990), No. 13870, p. 1

⁸⁷ See ‘*Rais jomhur: mikhammad jame’e-ye nemune-ye Islami va keshvari abad, azad va khod kafa besazim*’, Keyhan, Shanbe 11th Shahrivar 1368 (September 2nd 1989), No. 13699, pp. 1, 3

⁸⁸ ‘*Rais jomhur: mikhammad jame’e-ye nemune-ye Islami va keshvari abad, azad va khod kafa besazim*’, Keyhan, Shanbe 11th Shahrivar 1368 (September 2nd 1989), No. 13699, pp. 1, 3

the war years, reminding Iranians that the “Iranian nation will never give up in the face of America”, but such slogans were decidedly in the minority compared with the ubiquitous enjoinders to focus inward on the task of reconstructing the nation.⁸⁹

A day after he was sworn into office Rafsanjani lauded the “united participation of the people in the presidential election and referendum that was a clear, instructive and revealing event”.⁹⁰ He went on to declare:

We need to embark on planning. In addition to the ten year plan we already have, which will culminate in the remarkable development of our essential industry and infrastructure, we need short term plans in order to take the pressure off the shoulders of the oppressed and deprived.⁹¹

In the coming weeks newspapers gave extensive coverage to Rafsanjani’s new cabinet lineup which promised a renewed national effort to rebuild Iran. *Keyhan* dutifully announced: “The future plans and actions of the ministers are based on the economic, agricultural, industrial, cultural and social activities within the framework of the five year plan for the country”.⁹² Thereafter Rafsanjani set about maintaining a sense of national urgency towards reconstruction. “We must set aside all doubts”, Rafsanjani announced, “and begin the serious work of reconstruction”.⁹³ Even recently demobilized troops returning home from the war, he suggested, should be sent to the war-ravaged provinces to speed up the rebuilding effort.⁹⁴ To lift weary spirits among the population, Rafsanjani reminded Iranians that they did not suffer a “scarcity in the domains of culture, politics or idealism”; Iran’s problems derived from a temporary dearth in prosperity which derived from the “various conditions

⁸⁹ ‘*Rais jomhur: mellat-e Iran ahl-e kutah amadan dar barabar amrika nist*’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 10th Ordibehesht 1369 (May 5th 1990), No. 13894, p.1

⁹⁰ ‘*Ezharat- e rais jomhur dar bare-ye behbud-e eqtesad va afzayesh-e tolid-e dakheli*’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 14th Mordad 1368 (5th August 1989), No. 13677, p. 1

⁹¹ ‘*Ezharat- e rais jomhur dar bare-ye behbud-e eqtesad va afzayesh-e tolid-e dakheli*’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 14th Mordad 1368 (5th August 1989), No. 13677, p. 1

⁹² ‘*Tarhha-ye kabine-ye jadid baraye gostaresh-e fa’aliatha-ye eqtesadi, farhangi va ejtemayi-ye keshvar*’, *Keyhan*, Doshanbe 30th Mordad 1368 (21st August 1989), No. 13689, p.1

⁹³ ‘*Ra’is jomhur dastur-e tasri’ dar bazsazi-ye manateq-e jangzade ra sader kard*’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 18th Azar 1368 (9th December 1989), No. 13780, p. 1

⁹⁴ ‘*Ra’is jomhur dastur-e tasri’ dar bazsazi-ye manateq-e jangzade ra sader kard*’, *Keyhan*, Shanbe 18th Azar 1368 (9th December 1989), No. 13780, p. 1

following the revolution and the war”, a situation which could be rapidly remedied.⁹⁵ Nor was he placing total responsibility on the people, for Rafsanjani also declared that “we must make reforms within the administration of the country so it can execute the five year plan”.⁹⁶ All sectors of the national economy, furthermore, were expected to pull their weight. Given Iran’s dependence on oil, Rafsanjani sought to boost the output of other sectors of the economy such as agriculture: “Agriculture is the most fundamental economic activity in the country, and Iran, in addition to reaching self-sufficiency, can export surplus agricultural goods to other countries”.⁹⁷ So great was the imperative to re-direct national energies towards reconstruction that Rafsanjani even implied it was more important than some of the key tenets of the revolution: “What will save the country is to produce essential goods inside Iran and to provide them to the people at a reasonable price”.⁹⁸

In essence, then, Rafsanjani was endeavouring to link the nationalistic themes of the revolution to his own development crusade. Later in his first term, for example, on the thirteenth anniversary of the revolution, Rafsanjani announced that “We are satisfied with our cultural independence. What we are after now is economic, scientific, technical and technological independence which are not achieved through struggle or political efforts of the people, but through national means and steady efforts”. He cautioned Iranians, nevertheless, that the US and other “arrogant” powers were still trying to undermine the revolution. “However”, he implored, “experience has shown that the resoluteness and will of our nation outmaneuver them (arrogant powers) and this can set a good example for all the oppressed nations”.⁹⁹ Rafsanjani’s brother and director of Iran’s official radio and television, Mohammad Hashemi, underscored this thinking when he gushed that the President’s

⁹⁵ ‘Gozaresh-e ra’is jomhur be mardom dar bare-ye amalkard-e doulat va siyasatha-ye eqtesadi-ye ayande’, Keyhan, Chaharshanbe 16th Esfand 1368 (7th March 1990), No. 13853, p.1

⁹⁶ ‘Ra’is jomhur: nezam ejrai-ye keshvar niaz be eslah-e jedi darad’, Keyhan, Chaharshanbe 18th Bahman 1368 (7th February 1990), No. 13831, p.1

⁹⁷ ‘Takid-e ra’is jomhur bar zarurat-e touse’e-ye keshavarzi-ye sana’ati dar keshvar’, Keyhan, Seshanbe 26th Dey 1368 (16th January 1990), No. 13813, p.1

⁹⁸ ‘Siyasatha-ye doulat baraye afzayesh-e tolid va ronaq-e eqtesadi ye keshvar e’alam shod’, Keyhan, Yekshanbe 13th Esfand 1368 (3rd March 1990), No. 13850, p. 1

⁹⁹ Untitled extract, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1295, 4 February 1992

“ideal is to bring Iran to the highest level of its economic, industrial and cultural potential”.¹⁰⁰

Besides exhorting Iranians to assume their national duty and rebuild the country, Rafsanjani also appealed to their pre-Islamic cultural sensibilities. Because of the Shah’s promotion of pre-Islamic Persian culture, the revolutionaries naturally sought to expunge such cultural expressions in the aftermath of the revolution in their quest to banish remnants of the old regime. By the dawn of the revolution’s second decade, however, with the end of the war and the impossibility of a counter-revolution, the Islamic Republic felt secure enough to relax its campaign of Islamicizing Iranian society. With the culture wars now a distant memory, the time had come to once again ‘return to the self’ and embrace those pre-Islamic elements of the Iranian national identity that were once anathema. Just as the Shah tried to inspire Iranians through the majesty of pre-Islamic Iran, so Rafsanjani endeavoured to stoke national pride by recourse to Iran’s illustrious past. In April 1991, therefore, he became the first revolutionary leader to visit Persepolis where he called on Iranians to “reinforce their national dignity”, a reminder to Iranians at home and abroad that reconstruction sought to leave behind the dogmatic Islamicization of the revolutionary years.¹⁰¹ Rehabilitating the purely Iranian aspects of Iran’s national identity also entailed lauding the great Persian poets whose literary canon was prized by most of the population. Rafsanjani tried to endear himself to intellectuals by addressing government-sponsored conferences on Persian poetry.¹⁰² Rafsanjani backed up such policies by stressing in press interviews the compatibility of Iran’s

¹⁰⁰ E. Sciolino, ‘Rafsanjani sketches vision of a moderate, modern Iran’, The New York Times, April 19 1992, p. A1

¹⁰¹ Hunter, 1992, p. 94; Ansari, 2006, p. 252 fn. 32; Interestingly Lindsay Allen claims it was Khamenei who first visited Persepolis, during his presidential term the 1980s. She quotes Khamenei as saying:

“I my visit...I witnessed two distinct attributes lying side by side. First, the art, elegance, and the superb ability that has created...monuments which, after the lapse of tens of centuries, still remain a marvel to mankind. On the other hand, next to it lies exploitation and brute force...an individually created crule greatness...’one has become the ruler of many’. This is the dark and bitter history of the exploited... We must recognize these monuments as a valuable treasury in which we can see history and humanity, Iran and the Iranians, together with their legacy. We must preserve them”.

Quoted in L. Allen, The Persian Empire: A History, London, The British Museum Press, 2005, p. 184

¹⁰² Discussions with Dr S.M Torabi

national and religious identities which in his opinion had re-converged in the revolution to make the Islamic Republic the first among equals in the *ummat*:

Our culture, in addition to its national aspect which, due to the length of the presence of Islam in this country is itself completely imbued with Islam, is an Islamic and religious culture. . . Our people do not see national issues as being separate from Islamic issues. They regard them as being exactly the same; especially now when we have become the mother country of Islam.¹⁰³

Literary appreciation was part of a wider government effort to lift at least some of the suffocating restrictions on the culture and arts. The ban on the buying and selling of musical instruments was lifted, which paved the way for the promotion of classical Persian music. Film directors enjoyed a modest relaxation of both censorship laws and restrictions on participating in international film festivals, although a true flowering of homegrown cinema would have to wait until the Khatami era in the late 1990s.¹⁰⁴ Iran remained a tightly controlled society under Rafsanjani, but allowing the arts to flower, the President hoped, might breathe life into the reconstruction effort too.¹⁰⁵

What were the underlying motivations behind Rafsanjani's appeals to national sentiment? Certainly there was a connection between nationalist rhetoric and the reconstruction effort. In an interview a decade later, Rafsanjani explained his thinking during the reconstruction era by pointing out that "the reality was and is that most of Iran's wealthy and best minds have gone abroad; a country should not let this happen". "If we could maintain a logical relationship with the several million ex-patriot Iranians", Rafsanjani went on, "we could bring billions of dollars of their money into our economy".¹⁰⁶ Rafsanjani well knew that the Iranian diaspora was unlikely to be lured home by revolutionary Islamic rhetoric which denied Iran's

¹⁰³ 'President Rafsanjani's interview to mark Islamic Republic Day', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1654, 3 April 1993

¹⁰⁴ It was Khatami himself, as the Minister for Islamic Guidance under Rafsanjani, who oversaw cultural life in the Islamic Republic, and who led this drive to relax restrictions on the arts. See Brumberg p. 187. For a discussion of the 'new wave' of Iranian cinema under Rafsanjani see H. R. Sadr, Iranian Cinema: A Political History, London, IB Taurus, 2006, pp. 211-269

¹⁰⁵ For the relaxation of cultural restrictions see Hunter, 1992, pp. 92-97

¹⁰⁶ Rahmani, p. 211

rich national heritage. The cynic might also argue that reconstruction simply allowed Rafsanjani to line his own pocket, but it would be uncharitable to deny the president's genuine nationalist inclinations. In addition to the 'Reza Shah' persona noted above, Rafsanjani's own writings displayed an appreciation for the great nationalist modernizers and reformers of the past, a partiality which subtly underlaid his own combination of Islamist politics and nationalism in the era of reconstruction. His most serious piece of scholarship, for example, was a 1967 biography of Amir Kabir, the great Qajar-era Prime Minister, while in his memoirs Rafsanjani also wrote that he was "intrigued" by Mossadegh and the oil nationalization movement about which most other clerics maintained a studious silence.¹⁰⁷ S. Mohammad Hossein Adeli, Iran's Central Bank Director in Rafsanjani's first term summed up the worldview of the President and his technocratic supporters in this way: "There remain so many obstacles to growth here at so many levels. Islamic militants are doing everything they can to prevent this place from opening up. But Rafsanjani's people are different. They do think first of Iranian interests, not Islamic interests and that, at least, is a start".¹⁰⁸

It is also important to locate his patriotic entreaties in the context of the intense factional in-fighting that became a hallmark of the reconstruction years. While the conservatives on the Islamist right initially welcomed Rafsanjani's economic liberalization, the Islamist left in the Majles saw such reforms as a betrayal of the revolution and its principles of socio-economic justice.¹⁰⁹ Postwar reconstruction, they figured, would benefit not the *mostaza'fin* but the conservatives and their bazaari allies who would make ill-gotten gains through hoarding and land speculation. Some political actors felt that the transition to an industrial economy, subject to the vagaries of global markets, would only make Iran dependent on the capitalist West in as it was before the revolution. The prominent Islamist leftist

¹⁰⁷ E. Sciolino, 'Rafsanjani sketched vision of a modern, modern Iran', The New York Times, April 19 1992, p. A1. On Rafsanjani's attitude to these historical figures see Milani, 1994, p. 226 and Moslem, p. 129

¹⁰⁸ J. Miller, 'Iran tries to decentralize economy, causing widespread pain', The New York Times, April 9 1991, p. A10

¹⁰⁹ Moslem, p. 165

politician and former Interior Minister, for example, Ali Akbar Mohtashami, castigated the President for his “open-door policy and free-market system” which he declared was a ruinous path taken by those who “either want to obliterate the revolutionary process or to make it fade away”.¹¹⁰

Nor did Rafsanjani’s foreign policy escape the criticism of the Islamist left. Iran’s decision to remain neutral during the first Gulf War provoked the ire of the notorious revolutionary hangman, Sadeq Khalkhali, who demanded that Iran declare a jihad against the US that was attacking a fellow Moslem country.¹¹¹ Rafsanjani’s riposte, as we have seen, was to emphasize over and over his commitment to the future of the Iranian nation. The Islamist left may have howled at Rafsanjani’s plans to de-nationalize various state enterprises, but the President remained insistent that economic liberalization would strengthen the nation, not betray it. Despite facing this barrage of criticism that he was riding roughshod over sacred revolutionary shibboleths and selling out the country, the snide implication in his rhetoric was that the Islamist left had brought the country close to collapse, a mess only a truly dedicated patriot could fix. In a paradoxical way, while ‘nationalist’ remained a pejorative moniker in the cockpit of politics, but it was precisely the sobriquet Rafsanjani sought to plant in the minds of the wider population, albeit in deed rather than word.

The Wrath of the Right

The shrill criticism of the Islamist left only made the conservatives of the Islamist right more determined to expel them from the centres of power, and without Khomeini to intercede on their behalf, the left was powerless to prevent the impending conservative purge. In the 1990 Assembly of Experts election and the 1992 Majles elections, the Guardian Council imposed tough new candidature rules designed to disqualify Islamist leftist candidates. Prominent revolutionaries such as

¹¹⁰ E. Sciolino, ‘Rafsanjani sketches vision of a moderate, modern Iran’, *The New York Times*, April 19 1992, p. A1

¹¹¹ Brumberg, pp. 174-175

Khalkhali were sensationally disqualified for ‘improper’ Islamic qualifications, prompting one Islamist leftist MP to lament “[t]he corrupt ulama supporting the capitalist leeches and the tyrant feudal lords, who on the one hand break the back of God’s prophet and on the other hand claim to support God’s religion and *velayat-e faqih*, are shamelessly trying to get control of key trenches of the system, especially the Assembly of Experts”.¹¹²

The demise of the Islamist left, however, did not result in the abeyance of factional warfare. No sooner had the Islamist leftists exited the political scene than the conservative-dominated 1992 Majles began attacking the President’s economic policies.¹¹³ Despite economic indicators from the first five year plan showing significant growth in GDP, industrial activity, employment and government revenue collection, the conservative deputies criticized the President’s allegedly incompetent macroeconomic policy. In particular the Majles focused on the plight of the *mostaza’fin* as inflation soared to fifty percent. One deputy chided the Minister, and indirectly the President himself, by imploring: “I beg the Government to find a way out of this inflationary situation [otherwise] in a future not so distant, the Iranian revolution will be taken over by complacent capitalists and comfort seekers with no love for the Lord”.¹¹⁴ However this new-found concern for the *mostaza’fin*, hitherto the *cause celebre* of the Islamist left, concealed a selfish agenda. While the Islamist right had succeeded in eliminating the adherents of a command economy, it remained deeply suspicious of the ultimate implications of Rafsanjani’s economic reforms. Despite initially supporting Rafsanjani’s ascent to the presidency and warming to his economic reforms which promised a greater role for the private sector, the conservatives nurtured a lingering suspicion over what exactly Rafsanjani’s policy of *laissez-faire* entailed. As we saw, Rafsanjani’s ultimate vision was of a modern industrial economy, integrated into the global economy, and

¹¹² Quoted in Moslem, pp. 157-158. For an overview of the conservative purge see also Brumberg, pp. 174-190; For a detailed discussion of the 1992 Majles elections see F. Sarabi, ‘The Post-Khomeini Era in Iran: The Elections of the Fourth Islamic Majlis’, *Middle East Journal*, 48 (1), Winter 1994, pp.89-107

¹¹³ Moslem, pp. 186-187

¹¹⁴ ‘Reform-minded Finance Minister is rejected by Iranian parliament’, *The New York Times*, August 17 1993, p. A.10

guided by an institutionalized, autonomous and powerful central government. To the Islamist right and their bazaar allies, such a scenario seemed eerily reminiscent of the Pahlavi era, when an overweening state dedicated to the principles of modern capitalist development impinged heavily upon the traditional bazaar economy. Such a future was to be opposed at all costs.¹¹⁵

Rafsanjani and his technocrats dismissed the crocodile tears of the conservatives and promptly blamed the bazaaris for the raging inflation. The bazaaris, Rafsanjani claimed, had taken advantage of economic liberalization to line their own pockets in an orgy of unfettered importing. According to the president, “traders and entrepreneurs did not behave in an honorable way”, a charge repeated in the pro-Rafsanjani press which castigated the bazaaris for making colossal profits all the while ignoring the need for a “strong independent national economy” and refusing to yield to “supervision and inspection by the government”.¹¹⁶ A clearly frustrated Rafsanjani pointed out to the Assembly of Experts that “[t]rivial economic problems and high prices or a drop in the prices of some products should not dissuade us from the path we have chosen”.¹¹⁷

Across the early 1990s the executive moved quickly to reassert its control over the economy and prevent the bazaar from derailing the reconstruction effort. Tariffs and customs duties were increased to raise revenue and discourage the importation binge that was driving a growing trade deficit. Utility charges were raised to provide more revenue for the government to direct into reconstruction, and in order to exercise greater control over private capital, the government dispensed with onerous banking regulations which had until that time discouraged banks from investing in various reconstruction projects. Rafsanjani backed up these measures with a rhetorical offensive designed to emphasize the signal importance of a strong central state to Iran’s future. Drawing inspiration from Khomeini’s previous fatwa on the centrality

¹¹⁵ Moslem, pp. 187-194

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Moslem, pp. 189-190

¹¹⁷ ‘Rafsanjani receives Assembly of Experts: economic problems discussed’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1319, 3 March 1992

of the state, Rafsanjani boldly declared in landmark April 1992 speech that states “have been an indispensable endeavour in Islamic societies and human societies in general”.¹¹⁸ “The existence of government and administration”, the president explained, “and the enterprise of managing societies is an imperative and holy principle”.¹¹⁹ Elsewhere Rafsanjani sought to gain a consensus by emphasizing that until reconstruction had been achieved, “we cannot say that the revolution has arrived at complete victory”.¹²⁰

Such urgings did not receive a positive hearing in the fourth Majles (1992-1996). The conservative Majles deputies remained aghast at such modernist economic policy, and shot back with the familiar refrain that Rafsanjani’s model of development was breaking the backs of the poorer segments of society. They scolded Rafsanjani for the alleged corruption that had permeated his government, and for the manner in which he promoted “indolent and callous technocrats” to run economic affairs over those with ‘true’ revolutionary credentials.¹²¹ Indicating the growing split between Rafsanjani and the Islamist right, Khamenei issued a stark warning in 1993 to the technocrats. He reiterated that revolutionary Islamic principles remained paramount and could not be compromised:

Those who are experts in financial and economic matters speak nowadays of planning to reach the level of such and such a [developed] country. Each expert has his own opinion of how to reach that goal. Even if our economy and infrastructure were built to reach the level of the developed countries, even when we build up Iran to reach the level of any of the rich countries, it would have no value without justice in Iran. The message of Islam is the establishment of justice. The Islamic uprising in Iran was in pursuit of justice...It would be far better for us to have less and observe justice, instead of possessing plenty while ignoring justice.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Moslem, p. 193

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Moslem, p. 193

¹²⁰ ‘Iran: Rafsanjani addresses students on progress of revolution and world affairs’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No 1314, 26 February 1991

¹²¹ Quoted in Moslem.,p.196. Interestingly in a subsequent interview Rafsanjani insisted that “corruption in my government was much less than previous governments, and my reaction to instances of corruption was stricter than others”! See Rahmani, p. 191

¹²² ‘Khamene’i on the importance of justice in society’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1582, 9 January 1993

Despite these conservative attacks, Rafsanjani's astute leadership skills still commanded enough respect across the political spectrum and amongst the electorate to be reelected in 1993. His second term, however, was marked by further skirmishing with opponents from across the political spectrum. In 1993 the Majles inflicted humiliation upon Rafsanjani by refusing to re-endorse his choice for Finance Minister, Mohsen Nurbakhsh, a stoush which was viewed as a stern rebuff to the President's continuing economic reforms.¹²³ Mohtashami maintained his public opposition to Rafsanjani by excoriating the President for winning a sham election, while Ayatollah Meshkini criticized the government for doing nothing about "hellish" high inflation.¹²⁴ Rafsanjani shot back that Iran's reconstruction and development was "unprecedented throughout history".¹²⁵ He also sought to raise expectations for the second five-year plan:

I see a very bright future. In the future we shall have no foreign exchange problems, no problems with food, primary goods, medicine or infrastructural matters. We have dealt with all these problems in the first plan. People simply do not know the amount of investment in the past four years which is yet to bring a return. Long distance railways will open. Huge dams will bear fruit. Great factories, refineries, petrochemical, consumer, and steel industries as well as mines will bear fruit. These will bear fruit in the second plan and will bring about a very bright period.¹²⁶

The Islamist right also went after Rafsanjani in the socio-cultural sphere.¹²⁷ In 1992, following outspoken criticism from conservative clerics in Qom's seminaries, Rafsanjani was compelled to replace Khatami as Minister of Culture with the austere Ali Larijani who began to roll back the tentative liberalization of cultural affairs.¹²⁸

¹²³ Moslem, p. 203

¹²⁴ 'Former Interior Minister Mohtashami says election is not a "real competition"', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1714, 14 June 1993; 'Ayatollah Meshkini on Clinton-Rushdie meeting; calls for curbs on inflation', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1864, 6 December 1993

¹²⁵ 'Rafsanjani discusses economic achievements, relations with West, Gulf relations', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1697, 25 May 1993

¹²⁶ 'Rafsanjani sees a "Very Bright Future"', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1720, 21 June 1993

¹²⁷ Moslem, p. 213-224

¹²⁸ 'In shift, Teheran reins in the arts', The New York Times, June 22 1992, p. A5. Rafsanjani later cryptically recalled that "When he [Khatami] assumed his role, some people opposed him. He came to me and said "I feel they have plotted against me and I cannot stay". I told him "if you stay I'll

Whereas Rafsanjani had wanted to loosen cultural restrictions as a means of allowing more varied expressions of national culture, Larijani and his conservative backers viewed any retreat from the strict application of Islamic mores as a capitulation to the insidious influence of Western culture. In a puritan effort to protect the Islamic nature of the regime and society, the conservatives banned popular music classes, re-imposed cinema and press censorship, established Islamic cultural centres to combat foreign cultural influences, re-mobilised the *basesej* to enforce Islamic morals in wider society. In another indirect criticism of Rafsanjani and his allies the Supreme Leader weighed in by warning of the danger of the “Western cultural onslaught” in which foreign influences were corrupting the minds of Iran’s younger generation. Pointing out that there are three kinds of independence – political, economic and cultural – Khamenei noted that the “fight for cultural independence is the most difficult” and that therefore “a culture war becomes an absolute necessity”.¹²⁹

By the mid-1990s Rafsanjani’s position was becoming increasingly precarious. Having colluded in the Islamist left’s downfall, there was no counter-balancing political force to fall back in the face of attacks by the Islamist right. In 1994, after hinting that Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie could be reversed, Rafsanjani was publicly slapped down by Khamenei, who thereafter proceeded to dismiss the President’s brother from his post as head of Iranian radio and television. In the Majles the second five year plan which aimed to cut subsidies, end currency controls and continue privatization of state-owned industries was pruned back by conservative deputies. Amongst society there was mounting concern at the social strains imposed by economic liberalization. The perennial curse of inflation, together with higher unemployment caused by the privatization of state-owned enterprises, provoked rioting in urban centres across Iran. The crisis of inflation unleashed by the economic reforms became particularly acute in 1994 when the

support you, but only in those areas I want to believe in, and in those areas I don’t believe in, I will not support you”. Khatami then replied “I cannot stay””. Rahmani, 225

¹²⁹ ‘Khamene’i on the three kinds of independence’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1682, 7 May 1992

prices of some foodstuffs rocketed up 4,000 per cent provoking considerable anger and unrest on Iran's streets, with protesters exclaiming "Free market economics must be corrected/The system must help the poor".¹³⁰ Despite the dawning realization that the goals of the five year plan were too ambitious, Rafsanjani lashed out at the US for undermining his cherished reforms. In February 1995, on the anniversary of the revolution, Rafsanjani declared to a 150,000-strong crowd that it was in fact the hostility of the Great Satan which had caused the hardships of the preceding years.¹³¹ A month later in a rare interview with the American media he railed against Washington's 16 year campaign to weaken the Islamic Republic through "lies" and "bullying" and expressed exasperation at President Clinton's decision to cancel a lucrative oil investment agreement. "We invited an American firm and entered into a deal for \$1 billion" he pointed out, and that "[t]his was a message to the United States, which was not correctly understood....We had a lot of difficulty in this country by inviting an American company to come here with such a project because of public opinion".¹³² This same public opinion, though, was less concerned with the US and more animated by the failings of the Islamic Republic's faltering reconstruction effort which had tarnished its leading exponent. In an almost forlorn postscript to the Rafsanjani era, one newspaper editorial noted: "All great men in Iranian history have faced opposition from those who put their own interests before those of the country".¹³³

Conclusion: Rafsanjani the nationalist?

In the end Rafsanjani's own political dexterity became his undoing. A former supporter of wartime fundamentalism and the ruinous continuation of the war with Saddam Hussein even after Iraqi troops had been expelled from Iranian soil,

¹³⁰ On the Rushdie fatwa spat and the inflation protests see C. Hedges, 'Islamic Hardliners said to gain ground in Iran' The New York Times, August 3 1994, p. A.3 and 'Inflation fuels discontent against Iran's Government', The New York Times, November 20 1994, p. A.18. On the urban riots see also Behdad, 1995, pp. 120-123

¹³¹ 'Iranian President blames West for hardships', The New York Times, February 12 1995, p. I.14

¹³² E. Sciolino, 'Iranian Leader says U.S. move on oil deal wrecked chances to improve ties', The New York Times, May 16 1995, A.6

¹³³ Quoted in Moslem, p.229

Rafsanjani's commitment to national development never fully dispelled the notion in Iranian minds that reconstruction was merely an exercise in expediency designed to save an increasingly unpopular regime. When faced with conservative pressure, as Gheissari and Nasr note, he proved willing to compromise on pragmatism rather than insisting on persevering with the course of genuine economic liberalization that Iran desperately needed.¹³⁴ Subsidies, for example, remained in place, and a weak taxation regime endured, both of which ensured the continuing parlous state of the country's finances. Even Rafsanjani's vaunted effort to improve relations with the outside world betrayed a less than steadfast commitment to open engagement, for he was surely complicit in the decision to eliminate political opponents abroad, notably in the 1992 assassination of Kurdish leaders in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, an outrage that soured the European-Iran relationship for years to come. In 1996, furthermore, in response to the Mykonos affair and other alleged acts of Iranian terrorism, the US imposed stringent economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic which may not have crippled the Iranian economy but certainly prevented it from prospering.¹³⁵

It was in the eyes of Iranians that Rafsanjani's standing suffered its most precipitous decline. His alliance of convenience with the anti-democratic and conservative Islamist right, the heavy-handed suppression of dissent which resulted in the deaths of a number of prominent journalists and intellectuals, and the rumours of his own fabulous personal wealth all significantly weakened Rafsanjani's assiduously cultivated nationalist credentials.¹³⁶ A true Iranian nationalist, most Iranians figured, would have respected the will of the Iranian people. When in 1990, to take but one example, the 'Society for the Defense of Liberty and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation' petitioned Rafsanjani to broaden political freedoms, he had the group suppressed, an action which hardly endeared the President to Iranians as a

¹³⁴ Gheissari and Nasr, 2006, pp. 111-112

¹³⁵ On sanctions and the Iranian economy see J. Amuzegar, 'Iran's Economy And The US Sanctions', *Middle East Journal*, 51 (2), Spring 1997, pp. 185-199. On the role of the US see A. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*, London, Hurst and Co., 2006, pp. 143-146

¹³⁶ Ansari, 2006a, p. 256

benevolent patriot.¹³⁷ As apathy and cynicism – even occasional nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary era – simmered in the population, the stage was set for a leader who might once again encourage Iranians to feel proud about themselves and their nation.¹³⁸ Rafsanjani set about formally establishing his own modern rightist faction. Meanwhile his former Minister of Culture, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, whom the President had cynically jettisoned in 1992 following conservative pressure, was mulling over the idea of running in the upcoming 1997 presidential elections.¹³⁹ The conservatives thought they would sweep the polls. Instead, Khatami would rock the establishment with the one of the most sensational political comebacks in the history of the Islamic Republic.

¹³⁷ Gheissari and Nasr, 2006, p. 112

¹³⁸ On the passive resistance of the Iranian population see A. Banuazizi, 'Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance', Middle East Report, No. 191 'Iran's Revolutionary Impasse', November-December 1994, pp. 2-8

¹³⁹ On Rafsanjani's break with the Right see M. Wells, 'Thermidor in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of Muhammad Khatami', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 26 (1), 1999, p. 35

Nationalism and Reformism

The Rise of Reformism

By the time the Rafsanjani era drew to a close, prospects for democratic reform in the Islamic Republic appeared to be dim. As discussed in the previous chapter, during the mid-1990s the conservative right had entrenched its power at the heart of the political system by first sidelining the Islamist Left and thereafter emasculating Rafsanjani and the centrists. Without compunction, the right used the security services to intimidate troublesome political opponents and potential critics in wider society. In addition to the alleged acts of assassination perpetrated by Iranian death squads in Europe, at home a number of writers perished in suspicious circumstances. Goaded by conservative clerics in the Guardian Council, the club-wielding agents of the security services broke up opposition political meetings, accosted women for wearing 'improper' Islamic dress, and attacked bookstores and publishers that dared to disseminate anti-establishment views.¹

In spite of these anti-democratic developments, there were important forces at work in Iranian politics and society that would usher in a surprisingly buoyant reform movement in the late 1990s. Firstly, in the realm of factional politics, the veneer of the conservative Right's supremacy betrayed the ongoing inner political wrangling that at certain junctures could spark meaningful and sharply competitive political competition. While political parties remained officially outlawed in the Islamic Republic, the nature of Iranian politics in which competing factions fielded candidates in local and national elections created a *de facto* political party system of particular fluidity and vigour.² As the political stakes rose in response to the Right's attempts to monopolize power, this politicking became increasingly overt as factions sought to cement alliances and gain wider support amongst the electorate by purveying their campaign platforms in the media. Those factions most aggrieved at the Right's antics – Rafsanjani's centrists and the Islamist left – sought to ingratiate themselves with ordinary Iranians by calling for greater political liberalization and

¹ S. Bakhsh, 'Iran's Remarkable Election', *Journal of Democracy*, 9 (1), 1998, pp. 110-112

² Bakhsh, 1998, pp. 110-112

the easing of strict Islamic socio-cultural ordinances. This loose coalition of centrists and rehabilitated Islamist leftists remained loyal to the revolution and the institution of the *velayat-e faqih*, but they chose to garner popular support by promoting themselves as the voices of reason, pluralism and moderation.³ In a roundabout way, therefore, factionalism ended up promoting political pluralism, which in itself became a key plank of the reformist juggernaut.

Secondly, this growing movement for pluralism was influenced by a new generation of religious intellectuals who began to question the religious justifications used by the conservative right to maintain their grip on power. At the same time as ostracized clerical heavyweights such as Ayatollah Montazeri waded into the debate about clerical authority in the Islamic Republic by openly criticizing the theory of *velayat-e-faqih* and calling for some measure of oversight and accountability to the people, a number of dissenting younger clerics published treatises critical of Khomeini's theory of state. Mohammad Mujtahid-Shabistari, for example, claimed that while the constitution of 1979 was a fine example of rational law-making, it had been undermined by the post-revolution triumph of Khomeini's jurisprudential Islam which instituted an 'official reading' of religion justifying a totalitarian theocracy. This reading, Mujtahid-Shabistari argued, lacked validity for there was no eternally correct interpretation of the Quran and the *hadiths*, meaning the absolute theocratic authority of the Islamic Republic constituted a nonsense. In light of the fact that only a small minority of Moslem thinkers actually believed the Quran and the *hadiths* clearly spelt out a form of earthly government, Mujtahid-Shabistari doubted whether the state could at all be based upon religious jurisprudence. Another of Montazeri's students, Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar, extended this argument by offering a detailed critique of Khomeini's idea of clerical government, pointing out that Khomeini's view was only one of a number of Shi'ite theories of government and was not necessarily the most jurisprudentially correct one.⁴

³ The coalescing reformist coalition included Rafsanjani's centrist 'Servants of Construction' (*Kargozaran-e Sazendegi*) and the various Islamic Leftist organizations, among them the Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebhe-ye Mosharakat-e Iran-e Islami*), the Militant Clerics' Association (*Majma-e Ruhaniyun-e Mobarez*), the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization (*Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Islami*), the student-led Office for Consolidating Unity (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*) and the pro-labour Workers' House (*Khaneh-ye Kargar*). See M. Gasiorowski, 'The Power Struggle in Iran', *Middle East Policy*, 7 (4), October 2000, pp. 24-26

⁴ On the religious intellectuals see S. Arjomand, 'The Reform Movement and the debate on modernity and tradition in contemporary Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34,

The greatest exponent of this Shi'ite 'reformation' in the early 1990s was the famous intellectual Abdoul Karim Soroush who published a number of tracts criticizing the clerical monopoly of religious interpretation and political power, which he believed was corroding the fabric of state-society relations in Iran.⁵ Soroush argued there was no single, timeless interpretation of Islam since all interpretations were made by human beings and were, therefore, fallible and historically contingent. If there was more than one reading of Islam, Soroush went on, it followed that there must be more than one road to salvation. Pursuing this line of logic, Soroush pointed out that if there were indeed numerous roads to salvation, then the religious and political positions of the ruling Ayatollahs and their dogmatic, self-justifying ideological interpretation of Islam collapsed. An acceptance of religious pluralism, in other words, carried with it requirement of political pluralism. Soroush was in essence arguing that Islam was too rich and diverse to be reduced to a mere ruling ideology; if war was too important to be left to the generals, Islam was far too important to be left to the mullahs. Most of all Soroush elevated the importance of *ijtihad*, for only through reason and independent judgment could Iranians interpret the rich legacy of Islam and update its tenets for the contemporary age, and in doing so avoid the pitfalls of imitating old interpretations that brought political and societal stagnation.⁶

These calls for greater pluralism within the political system corresponded to similar sentiments simmering in Iranian society, particularly the country's large but frustrated middle class. While students and the intelligentsia were the most immediate consumers of the writings and lectures of the religious intellectuals, there were a number of constituencies clamouring in their own ways for real change in the Islamic Republic's political edifice. Artists and intellectuals, chafing under the strict censorship laws of the mid-1990s and aghast at the apparent complicity of the security services in the aforementioned deaths of several writers, eagerly awaited a more open political system and particularly a more relaxed policing of the socio-

2002, pp. 719-731 and M. Alinejad, 'Coming to Terms with Modernity: Iranian intellectuals and the emerging public sphere', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 13 (1), 2002, pp. 33-41

⁵ Arjomand refers to this movement as a "Shi'i reformation". Arjoman, 2002, p. 721

⁶ On Soroush's thought see A. K. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*, translated and edited by M. Sadri and A. Sadri, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, in particular pp. 122-155

cultural sphere.⁷ Women, increasingly prominent in the economy and entering higher education in ever greater numbers as a result of the Islamic Republic's efforts to increase literacy, were also pressing for their voices to be heard.⁸ Most of all it was Iran's burgeoning cohort of post-revolution youths that was especially susceptible to calls for greater political freedoms and accountability.⁹ Desperate for better employment prospects, tired of Islamic cultural restrictions, and anxious for better relations with the West that would allow them to more easily travel and study abroad, young Iranians represented a ripe constituency for a leader who might present a more uplifting vision of the future. The signal importance of the youth vote in the 1997 presidential election demonstrated the extent to which reformism owed as much to social and demographic changes as it did to new intellectual trends.

What ultimately aided and abetted the rise of reformism in the Islamic Republic was the familiarity and enthusiasm with which Iranian society had embraced the ethos of democracy. Reformism brought to the fore the desire of ordinary Iranians for a genuine democratic government but also reflected deeper currents in the Iranian body politic. As Gheissari and Nasr noted, while the Islamic Republic by the 1990s had shown itself to be far from a truly democratic state, the long tradition of democratic thought and struggle stretching back to the Constitutional Revolution meant modern Iranians implicitly understood the rudiments of voting and electioneering.¹⁰ The popular franchise and elections were, of course, an integral part of the Islamic Republic's political landscape since the revolution, but with a population becoming "increasingly educated in the spirit and practice of electoral politics", the potential existed for the 1997 election to go beyond being another exercise in the factional power struggles and more towards becoming an expression of the popular political will.¹¹

⁷ On the plight of Iran's artists and intelligentsia in this period see S. Siavoshi, 'Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 29 (4), November 1997, pp. 509-530

⁸ On women see A. Kian, 'Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 24 (1), May 1997, pp. 75-96 and A. Akbar Mahdi, 'The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century Long Struggle', *The Muslim World*, 94, October 2004, pp. 427-448

⁹ See Gasiorowski, 2000, p. 23

¹⁰ Gheissari and Nasr, 2006, p. vi

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128. See also A. Gheissari and V. Nasr, 'Iran's Democracy Debate', *Middle East Policy*, 21 (2), Summer 2004, pp. 94-106

The 2nd of Khordad

Few inside and outside of Iran predicted the reformist triumph of the 1997 presidential election. Two months out from polling day many observers were picking the establishment candidate, the dour Speaker of the Majles *Hojjat al-Islam* Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, to become the next President. Nateq-Nouri had already secured the quiet backing of the Supreme Leader and the conservative establishment which controlled the all-important state media. Within Tehran's diplomatic community many were betting on a Nateq-Nouri victory, and the Russians had even treated him to a presidential-style red carpet visit to Moscow six weeks out from Election Day.¹² In the build-up to election day, another *Hojjat al-Islam*, the soft-spoken and quietly intelligent Yazdi cleric Seyed Mohammad Khatami, made a courtesy visit to the Supreme Leader's office in the leafy suburb of Jamaran in North Tehran to discuss his running for the presidency. In an audience with Khamenei, Khatami outlined his bold reformist platform, after which the Supreme Leader, perhaps unexpectedly, affirmed his approval for the presidential hopeful to run for office. The Supreme Leader did not at all believe Khatami had a chance of winning, but some semblance of competition and diversity amongst the candidates, he reasoned, would bolster voter turnout and give legitimacy to the Islamic Republican system.

Even within the Khatami camp there was scarce thought to actually beating Nateq-Nouri but despite the daunting challenges ahead, the unassuming Yazdi cleric quietly went about his preparations for the coming campaign. Khatami received a welcome boost on March 18 1997 when Rafsanajani's faction (now known as the 'Servants of Reconstruction') announced it would support the presidential hopeful, declaring Khatami to be the "kind of person who can create national harmony".¹³ The Servants of Reconstruction swiftly reactivated its 1996 Majles election apparatus to organize an understated but shrewd national campaign of speeches,

¹² G. Abdo and J. Lyons, *Answering only to God – Faith and Freedom in Twenty-First-Century Iran*, New York: Henry Holt and Company., 2003, pp. 56-62

¹³ 'Servants of Reconstruction member explains backing for candidate Khatami', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2875, 24 March 1997

posters, newspaper supplements and other outreach activities on Khatami's behalf, a development which immeasurably benefited his nascent campaign.¹⁴

On May 7 1997 the Guardian Council announced that out of 234 potential candidates, only four had been approved to run in the presidential election set for sixteen days thenceforth: conservative frontrunner Nateq-Nouri; Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri, a former Minister of Intelligence; Reza Zavarei, a lay jurist on the Guardian Council and deputy head of judiciary; and finally Khatami. In the wake of the Council's announcement, Khamenei weighed in by unsubtly urging Iranians to vote for the conservative Nateq-Nouri. "The people will only vote for the candidate who they are certain" Khamenei reminded his listeners, "will stand against the USA and excesses of aggressive, demanding and bullying states".¹⁵ Rafsanjani, by contrast, sensing perhaps the changes in the political winds but fearful that the conservatives would go all out to steal the election, cautioned that all officials involved in the upcoming election "are duty-bound to be honest and impartial".¹⁶ The outgoing President warned, furthermore, that the "personal views of the people and their votes should be respected and no-one has the right to use national or government facilities for or against any candidate".¹⁷

By the time of the Guardian Council's announcement, the Khatami campaign had been slowly building momentum. In the previous weeks Khatami, armed with the organizational muscle of the Rafsanjani camp, had toured the provinces, creating a buzz amongst the electorate. While local government officials openly snubbed and even tried to undermine his campaign, Khatami effortlessly mingled with locals and oozed charm wherever he went. His poise, elegance and down-to-earth nature endeared him to millions of voters who responded positively to his uplifting message of tolerance, freedom of expression and human dignity. In his first official campaign address, for example, on May 13, Khatami declared that "the government

¹⁴ Bakhsh, 1998, p. 118

¹⁵ 'Khamene'i: Iran will not elect a president who is "soft" on the West', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2914, 9 May 1997

¹⁶ 'Rafsanjani asks officials to maintain impartiality during election', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2914, 9 May 1997

¹⁷ 'Rafsanjani asks officials to maintain impartiality during election', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2914, 9 May 1997

belongs to the people and is the servant of the people, not their master".¹⁸ Amongst various constituencies such language struck a chord. The middle classes warmed to his talk of creating a "civil society" to articulate grievances against a heavy-handed, conservative-dominated state.¹⁹ Women swooned over his intelligent good looks and impeccable grooming. Similar goodwill to the presidential hopeful emanated from Iran's minorities who remembered Khatami's respect for local traditions while he was Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the early 1990s.²⁰ Most of all it was in the young, post-revolutionary generation that Khatami found his most enthusiastic support. By 1995 half of Iran's population had been born after revolution, and the long years of revolutionary upheaval, war time austerity and social restrictions were breeding disenchantment with a revolutionary government that was increasingly disconnected from this new generation and unable to stave off a chronic decline in living standards.²¹ The Islamic Republic's success in expanding the tertiary education system ironically worked against the conservative camp, for these younger and better-educated Iranians were more inclined to listen to a positive message of reform than anti-Western demagoguery. When Khatami vowed to "consolidate society on the basis of the constitution and institutionalize law in our society" it proved a winning maxim in the minds of the frustrated youth.²²

In the event Rafsanjani's fears of conservative skullduggery during polling day were unfounded. On May 23 1997, the second of *Khordad* in the Iranian calendar, Khatami scored a resounding landslide victory. An incredible 88% of the electorate participated, far surpassing the 52.5% turnout rate of the previous presidential election in 1993. In a sharp rebuke to the conservative establishment, Khatami won an astonishing 70% of the vote, almost three times that of his conservative rival, Nateq-Nouri.²³ Even in South Tehran, a traditional bastion of conservative values, Khatami trounced all other contenders. Khatami's campaign managers agreed with the Interior Ministry, which supervised the election, to 'give' two million Khatami

¹⁸ 'Presidential candidate Khatami on law and order, economy, foreign policy', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2917, 13 May 1997

¹⁹ 'Presidential candidate Khatami on law and order, economy, foreign policy', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2917, 13 May 1997

²⁰ Abdo and Lyons, pp. 61-70

²¹ Brumberg, p. 189

²² 'Presidential candidate Khatami on law and order, economy, foreign policy', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2917, 13 May 1997

²³ S. Akbarzadeh, 'Where is the Islamic republic of Iran heading?', Australian Journal of International Affairs, 59 (1), 2005, p. 29

votes to the Nateq-Nouri camp's tally as a face-saving measure to soothe conservative outrage at this overwhelming defeat.²⁴ It was a move which scarcely assuaged the anger and embarrassments amongst Guardian Council members one of whom recalled that the approval of Khatami's candidature was the greatest mistake in the council's history.²⁵ The chastened Supreme Leader, meanwhile, grudgingly lauded the election result as a "historical epic" and evidence of a nation "brimming with faith".²⁶

The Khatami Message

It is hard to overstate the electrifying effect of Khatami's election campaign rhetoric upon Iranian society in 1997. In a country where dire warnings of 'enemy plots', howls of 'Death to America', and polemics on the 'dangers of liberalism' had dominated political discourse, Khatami's talk of 'democracy', 'women's status', 'civil society', the 'rule of law' and 'dialogue among civilizations' signaled something radically new in Iranian politics.²⁷ Indeed Khatami's quest contained a supra-historical dimension. As Homa Katouzian writes, Iran's modern history has been bedeviled by a familiar cycle of arbitrary rule interspersed with bouts of chaos which only encouraged Iranians to seek solace in alternative authoritarian rulers could reestablish order and stability. In addition to retarding Iran's political development, this succession of coups, wars, and revolutions also sponsored a conspiratorial view of politics in which a large proportion of Iranians implicitly accepted the notion that foreign powers were forever plotting to control and manipulate Iran.²⁸ Armed with a mandate for change from a self-evident majority of

²⁴ Abdo and Lyons, p. 76

²⁵ Abdo and Lyons, p. 60

²⁶ 'Khamene'i congratulates Khatami, praises "tremendous" turnout', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 2928, 26 May 1997

²⁷ Gheissari and Nasr, 2004, p. 98. By way of example see Nateq-Nouri's speech of May 1 1996 in which the then Speaker of the Majles warned "if liberalism prevails, Islamic laws cannot be implemented and humiliation and dependence would return", Tehran Times, May 1st 1996, XVIII (25), p. 2

²⁸ Homa Katouzian writes: "[A] characteristic feature of Iranian history is the cycle of arbitrary rule, public rebellion and disorder, followed by arbitrary rule. Since the state monopolized all rights it inevitably monopolized all obligations as well. Contrariwise, since society had no rights it did not feel any obligations towards the state. In fact, when it was (rightly or wrongly) thought that the state was about to fall, the public reaction was such that it either helped bring it about when it might otherwise have been averted, or shortened the pace of its death agony.." See H. Katouzian, 'Problems of Political Development in Iran: Democracy, Dictatorship or Arbitrary Government', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 22 (1/2) 1995, p. 10

voters - which could scarcely be explained away as yet another foreign conspiracy - Khatami's reformist program aimed to break this negative cycle and render meaningful democratic gains to the Iranian people.

At the heart of Khatami's message was a call to reconcile freedom and religion by making Islam a democratic and pluralistic force.²⁹ He sought to effect this transformation in Iranian politics by focusing on two goals: popular participation in government and the rule of law. For Khatami there was a particular urgency to establish the former. Conscious of the Islamic Republic's waning legitimacy as it neared its second decade, and cognizant of the writings of the religious intellectuals, Khatami believed that an overbearing religious government would only tarnish the faith in the eyes of the people and compel them to cast out the clerics or perhaps even turn away from Islam altogether. But, being a clergyman himself, and a supporter of Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution, he was never likely to subscribe to Soroush's epiphany which called for clerics to surrender the reins of worldly power. Khatami implicitly believed in the necessity of the *velayat-e-faqih* to provide Islamic oversight across Iranian politics and society.³⁰ The recent election result, however, highlighted the pent-up demand for a more accountable and representative form of government. In a speech to Tehran university students in 1998 he noted that throughout history, the powerful desire for freedom had carried all before it. Anything that stood in the way of this impulse would inevitably lose: "If religion opposes freedom, religion loses. If justice opposes freedom, justice loses. If development opposes freedom, development loses....People's ideal has always been and will always remain freedom".³¹ To satiate this democratic yearning amongst Iranians, Khatami continually stressed that he would re-establish the rule of the people or *mardom-salari*. While ultimate sovereignty belonged to God, Khatami pointed out, God had given "jurisdiction" to the people which entitled them

²⁹ For useful overviews of Khatami's political philosophy see also S. A Arjomand, 'Civil Society and the Rule of Law in the Constitutional Politics of Iran Under Khatami', *Social Research*, 67 (2), Summer 2000, pp. 283-301; B. Baktiari, 'Dilemmas of Reform and Democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran' in R. Hefner (ed.) *Remaking Muslim Politics: pluralism, contestation, democratization*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 112-132; G. Mehran, 'Khatami, Political Reform and Education in Iran', *Comparative Education*, 39 (3), August 2003, pp. 311-329

³⁰ "The idea of the *velayat-e faqih*", Khatami declared, "...is the basis of our political and civil system". See 'Presidential candidate Khatami on law and order, economy, foreign policy', *BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East*, No. 2917, 13 May 1997

³¹ Quoted in Mehran, p. 314

to “vote, question and evaluate based on their own judgment”.³² In speech after speech he announced that Islam in fact enjoined the people to take “charge of their destiny”.³³ “Power”, Khatami outlined in his most attractive epithet, “belongs to the people”.³⁴ In his memorable inaugural address to the Majles on August 4 1997 Khatami elaborated on his ideas for the rule of the people which drew its pluralistic inspiration from religion: “[p]rotecting the freedom of individuals and the rights of the nation, which constitute a fundamental obligation of the President upon taking the oath, is an imperative emanating from the exalted worth and dignity of the human person enshrined in our Divine religion.”³⁵

For Khatami, however, the desire for freedom and the rule of the people should not derive from presidential decree: it had to come from within. The problem, Khatami noted, was that the Iranian spirit had been debased by centuries of despotism which encouraged a public culture of “flattery, bombast, pretension and hypocrisy” in order to remain immune from the capriciousness of tyrannical regimes.³⁶ The absence of freedom of expression meant those who seized power usually perpetuated the same repressions they had been subjected to in opposition, and so the vicious cycle continued. This tradition of despotism, in Khatami’s analysis, was second nature to Iranians, and the only way to move beyond this was to re-learn the values of freedom, justice, reason, human rights, respect, tolerance, honour and critical thinking. Iranians, Khatami believed, could determine their own destiny if only they developed a civil society and a free press where these ideas could be vigorously debated and in so doing hold the government accountable to its democratic promises. In essence Khatami was imploring Iranians to understand that his duty to protect the nation’s rights and freedoms demanded the help of the people:

Fulfillment of this responsibility can only be attained through wider popular awareness of [the people’s] own rights, provision of the necessary conditions for the realization of constitutionally guaranteed liberties, strengthening and

³² S.M. Khatami, *Touse’e-ye siyasi, touse’e-ye eqtesadi va amniyyat*, Tehran, Tarh-e No. 1379, pp. 39-45

³³ Khatami, 1379, p. 39

³⁴ Khatami, 1379, pp. 44-45

³⁵ ‘Covenant with the Nation – Inaugural Speech by President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami at the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majles) August 4, 1997’ in M. Khatami, *Hope and Challenge: The Iranian President Speaks*, New York, Institute of Global Studies (Binghamton University, State University of New York, 1997, pp. 81-82

³⁶ M. La’li (ed.), *Khatami az che miguyad?*, Tehran, Daftar Farhangi Ekhlas, Azadi ye Andishe, 1999, p. 324

expanding the institutions of civil society, promoting ethics, strengthening the culture of dialogue, discourse, appraisal and critique, and preventing any violation of integrity, dignity and constitutional rights and freedoms of individuals....In a society well acquainted with its own rights and ruled by law, rights and legal constraints of all citizens are recognized and given due attention. In such a society, the state and the people, inter-linked with corresponding rights and obligations, find their respective proper meaning and place.³⁷

Before the conservative counterattack came, a burgeoning reformist press debated what exactly 'civil society' meant, as did a growing number of intellectuals who relished a rare moment in Iranian history when the state did not intrude so egregiously into intellectual discourse. Echoing the new President's sentiments, many writers explored the idea of civil society as a society where "the rule of law prevails, where personal freedoms are respected and a democratic polity exists".³⁸

Khatami may have been an unassuming and modest politician but he cleverly wrapped his rhetoric in the robes of stock revolutionary phrases and paeans of devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini. Soon after taking office, Khatami undertook a pilgrimage to Khomeini's mausoleum at *Haram-e Mottahar* in the dusty southern reaches of Tehran where he snookered the conservatives by announcing "the Imam's path and thought will serve as the light clarifying our path".³⁹ Such shrewd rhetorical gymnastics were deployed in pursuit of his second key objective, that of strengthening the rule of law. He sought to box in potential opponents and firmly root his own reformist agenda by declaring that the constitution enjoined the President to uphold the rule of law which he knew was essential for protecting the rule of the people against conservative attempts to undermine it. Again, in his inaugural speech, Khatami pointed out that the recent extraordinary election result had demonstrated the trust placed by the people in the government, which in turn entailed a duty of care and responsibility to uphold the rule of the law as set out in the constitution:

The Constitution, the covenant of our Islamic and national solidarity, the actual embodiment of popular allegiance to the Islamic Revolution and the great ideals of the late Imam Khomeini, and the document paid for with the blood of our noble martyrs including Rajaie and Bahonar, serves as the fundamental

³⁷ Khatami, 1997, pp 81-82

³⁸ M. Kamrava, 'The Civil Society Discourse in Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28 (2), 2001, p. 173

³⁹ *Tehran Times*, 27th May 1997, p. 1

reference for the powers and responsibilities of the government and the rights and duties of the citizens. Therefore, to serve the people, it is incumbent upon the Executive and is likewise the mandate and mission of the President of the Islamic Republic, to endeavor towards institutionalizing the rule of law, and the Constitution, first and foremost.⁴⁰

Khatami also singled out the judiciary, long a weapon of the conservatives to purge rival factions, to uphold the rule of law: “I expect the honorable Judiciary to assist the Executive branch in the management of a safe, secure and just society based on the rule of law”.⁴¹ This emphasis on the rule of law was no campaign gimmick. Four months later, at the first joint session of cabinet and Majles deputies Khatami warned that the “[M]ajlis, the government and everybody must cooperate to move towards law-abidance”, and to back up his rhetoric he established the ‘Committee for Ensuring and Supervising the Implementation of the Constitution’.⁴²

In endeavouring to satisfy the yearning of millions of ordinary Iranians for greater freedom, as well as mollify the conservatives for whom reform meant relinquishing control over the state, Khatami was trying to pull off a delicate balancing act. As we noted above, the 1997 election was a massive *cri de coeur* by millions of Iranians for genuine popular sovereignty. However this required more than reforming the political system to create a more authentic Islamic democracy: it was essentially a call for fundamental changes of the system itself namely curtailing the powers of the Supreme Leader and decisively separating religion from politics. Khatami was thus in a bind. He was a product of the system, and was therefore inclined to seek incremental reform, but had been swept into power by millions of voters who wanted more rapid democratization.⁴³ Khatami, though, initially viewed his election mandate as a way to strengthen Iran’s political system, not tear it asunder, and in the euphoria of those first twelve months the new President and his supporters ignored this contradiction by lauding the 1997 election as an unprecedented and epic milestone, the “national event of 2 *Khordad*” (May 23).⁴⁴ Khatami himself described his landslide victory in similar language, boasting that “the epic participation of the

⁴⁰ Khatami, 1997, p. 72

⁴¹ Khatami, 1997, p. 76

⁴² ‘President Khatami addresses Majlis-cabinet meeting on cooperation’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 3081, 20 November 1997; ‘President Khatami announces establishment of new constitution supervision body’, BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 3091, 2 December 1997

⁴³ Gheissari and Nasr, 2004, pp. 97-99

⁴⁴ Arjomand, 2000, p. 284

noble and discerning people of Iran in this round of elections encourages me to claim that the entire nation has joined hands in unison".⁴⁵ For a brief moment in time Khatami had shown how Islam and democracy could go together. But there was a more profound implication in this exuberant talk of a 'national epic' - Khatami's vision of a free, tolerant and inclusive society challenged Iranians to reinterpret not only the meaning of democracy, but of Iranian nationalism.

Civic Nationalism: "Iran for all Iranians"

In his 1945 classic *The Idea of Nationalism*, Hans Kohn famously typologized nationalism into Western and Eastern variants.⁴⁶ Nationalism, Kohn argued, first arose, in the West (England, the US, France, Holland and Switzerland) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the rising middle classes sought to throw off the yoke of absolutism and instead build new nations dedicated to the Enlightenment principles of reason, progress and popular sovereignty. In this Western conception of nationalism, which found its most eloquent expression during the French Revolution, the nation was defined as a community of equal citizens, endowed with certain political rights and freedoms, and united in a patriotic attachment to a national government that vested sovereignty in the people. This 'civic' conception of nationalism was blind to race, colour, creed or ethnicity; rather, it drew its sustenance from the collective will of individual citizens to voluntarily belong to the nation.

In the more backward East (Central and Eastern Europe, Asia), by contrast, where the political boundaries of the old empires were rarely congruent with the patchwork quilt of different ethnic homelands, nationalism arose as a movement for political and cultural autonomy in opposition to the strictures of imperial boundaries. In Kohn's estimation, the retarded state of political and social development dictated that nationalist feelings and demands were articulated not in the rarified Enlightenment language of individual liberty and rational cosmopolitanism, but in terms of culture and ethnicity. Whereas western 'civic nationalism' emphasized shared rights as the foundation of national unity, eastern 'ethnic nationalism' sought

⁴⁵ Khatami, 1997, p. 74

⁴⁶ Kohn, 1945, pp. 329-330

to foster belief in a timeless and idealised nation as conveyed in nationalistic myths and legends. An individual, so this conception went, belonged to a nation by virtue of inherent cultural traits possessed since birth. Membership of a nation, in other words, was acquired through blood, not political will. Kohn argued that this inclination to seek solace in the bastions of idealized culture and historical memory was in large part due to the lack of self assurance of Eastern peoples in the face of overwhelming Western European political, economic and military power. Moreover this “inferiority complex was often compensated by overemphasis and overconfidence” which “lent itself more easily to the embroideries of imagination and the excitations of emotion”.⁴⁷ Writing after the bloody years of the Second World War and in the shadow of Nazism, the implication of Kohn’s typology was that ethnic nationalists’ concern for cultural purity and an idealized, timeless nation had a tendency to lapse into the dark forces of militarism and autocracy.

Just as this simplistic East/West typology has long been discredited in academia, Khatami and his reformist allies set out to demonstrate that ‘civic nationalism’ could flourish in the modern-day Islamic Republic.⁴⁸ Whereas the Pahlavis had based their conceptions of Iranian nationalism on a chauvinistic glorification of Persianism, Khatami and his reformist allies re-conceptualized Iranian nationalism as a ‘civic nationalism’ in which Iranians constituted a nation not only by virtue of the fact they were a community of citizens who hold inviolable political rights, but more importantly because they *choose* to exercise these rights in order to belong to the Iranian nation.⁴⁹ Reformists therefore upheld popular participation as a touchstone of Iranian nationalism which corresponded with Khatami’s emphasis on popular sovereignty, the rule of law, constitutional rights and freedom. One eminent reformist intellectual confirmed this notion by defining Iranian civic nationalism as a kind of “democratic patriotism” in which all Iran’s ethnicities – not just the Persian Shia core – were considered members of the nation, bound to it through the possession of democratic rights and an empowered feeling of national pride

⁴⁷ Kohn, pp. 330-331

⁴⁸ Kohn’s typology which posits two kinds of nationalism – one based on territory and political will, and the other based on ethnic and cultural identities – has been criticized for being overly prescriptive. In reality many nations have developed out of an overlap of these two paths to nationhood. For an overview and critique of Kohn’s theory see Lawrence, pp. 121-122

⁴⁹ Interview with Political Science Professor, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, June 6 2006

(*mihan-dusti*).⁵⁰ *Mardom-salari*, therefore, was not simply a political slogan; it represented a national idea, the antithesis of Pahlavi romantic nationalism, which Khatami sought to inspire in the minds of his compatriots. This idea of civic nationalism as a pluralist and inclusive paradigm was encapsulated by the favourite reformist catch-cry “Iran for all Iranians” which peppered the speeches and campaign advertisements of the reformist camp.⁵¹

To implant civic nationalism in the collective consciousness of the electorate, Khatami celebrated the diversity of the Iranian nation and took great pains to emphasize that his message of freedom, justice, tolerance and popular participation applied to all of Iran’s religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities. “All minorities and religious groups”, Khatami pointed out, “can happily live under the umbrella of the Islamic Republic and within the great and wise nation of Iran”.⁵² He went on to say that “our principle in the Islamic Republic is that we do not favour individuals based on religion or ethnicity, and if there are such instances of discrimination deriving from historical or cultural roots we should fight against it”.⁵³ Taking this logic one step further, Khatami linked the fate of all Iran’s ethnic groups to the strength of the nation. In a stirring nationalistic 1998 speech he declared:

[O]ur Sunnis, Shi’ites, Baluchis, Kurds, Turkomans, and Lurs can be proud only if Iran is strong and proud. If this Iran collapses or becomes weak, each piece of it will be hunted by the enemies who do not care for Islam, the Persian, the Turk, the Baluchi, the Kurd or other groups – all the enemies seek is their own benefit. We should be strong and wise. Our wisdom depends on our unity.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Interview with Reformist intellectual, Tehran, June 3 2006

⁵¹ The term ‘Iran for All Iranians’ was frequently used by Khatami and Reformist political coalitions such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front especially in Majles and Presidential elections. See for example the campaign advertisement in *Iran News* VI (1513) February 15th 2000, p.1

⁵² La’li, p. 116

⁵³ La’li, p. 116 Khatami was perhaps less than honest in this regard as official discrimination and persecution against Iran’s Bahai community continued. Firuz Kazemzadeh noted: “The Islamic Republic of Iran proclaims Shi’i Islam as its state religion, and recognizes only Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism as other true religions. The three minority faiths are legitimized by the Constitution and accorded certain legal and political rights. The Baha’is, however, Iran’s largest non-Muslim religious minority, are not mentioned in the Constitution and have the status of unprotected infidels. Since the onset of the Islamic revolution in the fall of 1978, more than 200 Baha’is, mostly leaders of the community, have been put to death. Baha’i institutions have been disbanded, community properties confiscated, holy places demolished, and cemeteries desecrated. Baha’is have no civil rights. They cannot hold government jobs, enforce legal contracts, practice law, collect pensions, attend institutions of higher learning, and openly practice their faith....The election of Hojjat ol-Eslam Mohammad Khatami to the presidency and the subsequent relaxation of the clerical dictatorship have not radically altered the situation of the Baha’is in Iran..” See F. Kazemzadeh, ‘The Baha’is in Iran: Twenty Years of Repression’, *Social Research*, 67 (2), Summer 2000, pp. 537-556

⁵⁴ Quoted in Mehran, pp. 319-320

This determination amongst reformists to fashion a strong and united Iran through the prism of civic nationalism and constitutionalism hinted at a palpable historical parallel. While the reform movement's immediate precursor was the intellectual reformation of the 1990s, reformists themselves traced their roots back to the Oil Nationalisation movement of the early 1950s when the nationalist hero and democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh rallied Iranians of all stripes in the fight against British imperialism.⁵⁵ In doing so the reformists aimed to latch on to the hallowed memory of Mossadegh that was undergoing somewhat of a renaissance in the 1990s amongst many Iranians. As we argued in chapter three, many figures and groups across Iran's political spectrum had attempted to latch on to Mossadegh's legacy even if they were not entirely enamoured of certain tenets of liberal nationalism. The subtlety of Khomeini's approach in appropriating this mantle without openly lauding the fallen Prime Minister, however, betrayed the reservations among the clerics about the Mossadegh's insistence on constitutionalism which they considered a secular attempt to subvert Islam. Such a reticent stance towards Mossadegh's legacy persisted amongst many in the Islamic Republic's ruling class but in the popular mind the Prime Minister enjoyed iconic status and immense respect for his indefatigable fight against imperialism and his commitment to constitutionalism, a legacy rendered even more sacrosanct in the Iranian mind given the Prime Minister's ultimately tragic fate. It was fitting, therefore, that during the heady years of the late 1990s reformist politicians paid homage to the memory of Mossadegh by making regular pilgrimages to Mossadegh's villa west of Tehran. In 1999, for example, Mossadegh's grandson led the anniversary commemorations and called on the government to restore the late Prime Minister's villa as a mark of respect for his service to the nation. The Supreme Leader pointedly chose to ignore the event and instead, with his withered hand, awkwardly attempted to plant a sapling in ceremony elsewhere marking 'Environment Day'.⁵⁶ For the reformists, however, the symbolic link with the memory of Mossadegh was important in demonstrating to the wider population that

⁵⁵ A. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*, London, Hurst and Co., 2006, pp. 160-163

⁵⁶ *Salaam*, 15 Esfand 1377 (March 6th 1999), No. 2252, pp. 1, 10

Iran was ‘for all Iranians’ as much in the 1950s as at the dawn of the new millennium.⁵⁷

The Three Cultures

Insofar as Khatami’s re-conceptualization of Iranian nationalism was based upon the notion that all members of the nation deserved freedom and dignity, it also centred on the no-less-important and perennially vexing question of reconciling the constituent parts of Iranian national identity. As we have stressed in previous chapters, at the popular level - in contrast to the often one-dimensional politicization of identity at the government level - there had long existed a comfortable ambiguity linking all the elements that comprise an ‘Iranian’ national identity. A 2003 survey of Iranian national identity undertaken by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Khatami’s old ministry) merely confirmed the multitudinous nature of who exactly is an ‘Iranian’ and offered an insight into demotic conceptions of nationalism. A sample of Iranians from all of Iran’s major ethnic groups was asked to what extent they felt proud to be ‘Iranian’. An overwhelming 89.5% said they were ‘very proud’ to be Iranian, indicating that even in the *Islamic Republic national feeling* was a vital touchstone of individual and collective identity.⁵⁸ Such a burgeoning patriotic feeling was on full display only months after Khatami’s election when, in December 1997, the Iranian national football team scored a famous victory over Australia. Newspapers reported wild scenes of national rejoicing on the streets, and even in the staid spiritual capital of Qom Iranians “expressed their joy by crying out ‘Iran’, ‘Iran’ in the streets while vehicles drove with high lights on and sounding their horns”.⁵⁹

Of the reformists, it was again Soroush who eloquently captured the importance of building an inclusive Iranian national identity. In an important essay entitled *The Three Cultures* Soroush noted that:

⁵⁷ W. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?: the structure of power in the Islamic Republic*, Washington DC, Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 2000, pp. 182-183

⁵⁸ *Yafteha-ye-Peymayesh dar 28 Markaz-e-Ostan-e-Keshvar: Arzeshha va Negareshha-ye-Iranian, Mouje dovvom, Virayesh e Avval* (*The Results of a Survey in 28 Provincial Capitals of Iran: Values and Attitudes of Iranians, Second Wave, 1st ed.*), Tehran, Office of National Planning of the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance, 2003, p.295

⁵⁹ *Tehran Times*, XIX (200), December 1st 1997, p. 2

The three cultures that form our common heritage are of national, religious, and Western origins. While steeped in an ancient national culture, we are also immersed in our religious culture, and we are at the same time awash in successive waves coming from the Western shores.⁶⁰

The problem, Soroush declared, was that various traditionalists, modernizers and reformers had sought the solution to Iran's modern ills through "the hegemony of one of these cultures over the other two".⁶¹ The inexorable advance of Western power had caused some to advocate a return to Iran's 'pure' pre-Islamic culture. Others had called for a complete adoption of Western ways so as to combat the West on its own terms, and still others had demanded a dogmatic adherence to the traditional Islam.⁶² Where among the three cultures, Soroush asked, does Iranian identity lie? It was a question that had long dominated modern Iranian intellectual thought. Jalal al-Ahmad, who had popularized the term *Gharbzadegi* in his 1963 book, and the great lay Islamic intellectual of the 1970s Ali Shariati, both spoke of 'returning to thyself'. However grand that may have sounded at the time, Soroush claimed the 'idea of return' had engendered much confusion: did it mean a return to an Arcadian utopia, a license for extremist nationalism or a *carte blanche* to turn one's back completely on all foreign cultures?.⁶³

For Soroush an even bigger hurdle was "the baneful equation of identity with rigidity".⁶⁴ Too many Iranians, he argued, had disdained learning from the 'other' and sought refuge in a distant past. "Returning to one's authentic self", Soroush wrote, "can not be accomplished by reposing in one's ancestral tomb".⁶⁵ He pointed out that Iranians do not have a fixed 'self', and that in fact identities are constantly evolving across time and space. Indeed, to shut oneself off from this constantly evolving cultural milieu was paradoxically harmful: "One who has squandered half of a life languishing in isolation and iniquity must not use the pretext of persisting in one's identity to continue a slovenly and secluded life. One must seek purification in exchange with others".⁶⁶ As soon as Iranians understood that all that has

⁶⁰ Soroush, p. 156

⁶¹ Soroush, p. 156

⁶² Soroush, pp. 158-162

⁶³ Soroush, p. 162

⁶⁴ Soroush, p. 163

⁶⁵ Soroush, pp. 163-164

⁶⁶ Soroush, p. 163

flourished outside Iran was not alien or threatening, and dispelled the “misconception that each culture is an indivisible monolith, accepting one part of which equals accepting the whole”, the “gates of insight and blessing will be opened, and the mind shall embark on the path of critical selection”.⁶⁷ With a critical eye, so thought Soroush, that carefully selected the benefits of the West, and expunged obsolete thinking within Iran, the Iranian ‘self’ could become stronger. It was not so much a ‘return to the self’ as a ‘reconstruction of the self’:

In this manner, a new self will be born who will clean and ventilate the house in broad daylight, instead of shutting its door and boarding its windows to protect it from robbers.... We do not have a “fixed” ethnic or religious “self”, these identities are fluid and expansive. With vigilant eyes, brave hearts, and able hands the multiple selves can be merged.⁶⁸

Soroush thus argued that there was no single culture in which the totality of Iranian identity resided. All of the ‘three cultures’ had an essential role in moulding this identity:

No part of our culture (religious, national, or Western) can be defended in absolute terms. There are elements in all three from which we have to repent, and all three are in need of renewal and borrowing. On this score they are all the same; none is so complete as to eclipse the others. Thus those who sought to weaken, put to sleep, or kill a part of our mixed cultural heritage in order to make other parts more salient have not served our people well. They were reactionary nationalists, radical Westernizers, or unschooled defenders of Islam.⁶⁹

Hailing from the same intellectual tradition, as well as being long-time acquaintances, it followed that Khatami’s views on national identity would accord with Soroush’s thinking.⁷⁰ Khatami’s civic nationalism was concerned not only with ensuring all members of the nation had equal rights, but that all elements of the national identity were assigned their due weight. Khatami condemned the Pahlavis who, in exaggerating the legacy of pre-Islamic Iran, sought to downplay Islam, but he also took issue with those revolutionary zealots who wanted to deny the

⁶⁷ Soroush, p. 163

⁶⁸ Soroush, p. 164

⁶⁹ Soroush, p. 167

⁷⁰ On the personal relationship between Khatami and Soroush see R. Fisk, ‘Iran’s leader urged to stand up for human rights’, *The Independent*, December 8th 1997, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/irans-leader-urged-to-stand-up-for-human-rights-1287610.html>, accessed 6/04/2009. This friendship, however, would later come under strain as Soroush became increasingly critical of Khatami’s inability to stand up to the conservatives. In 2003 Soroush published an open letter to his old friend blaming the President for inaction in the face of conservative suppression. See ‘Iran’s leader offers to quit’, *CNN.com*, July 12th 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/07/12/iran.khatami/index.html>, accessed 6/04.2009

achievements of the pre-Islamic Persian civilization. Instead, in a country where 99% of the population belonged to the Islamic faith, Khatami stressed the inseparability of being Iranian and being Moslem. Islam and Iran had for centuries nourished each other across a range of human endeavour such as art, religion, language, architecture and literature and for Khatami, a humanist scholar himself, this cross-fertilization was impossible to overlook. "Islam provided the Iranian nation, inherently talented to create civilizations" Khatami proudly declared, "an opportunity to bloom, and the Iranian nation in turn provided Islam with a suitable forum for progress".⁷¹ In other words, as much as Khatami spoke of the diversity of the Iranian nation and the necessity of developing a conception of civic nationalism to empower all Iranians whatever their ethnicity or creed, he could not help but elevate the Iranian-Islamic infusion which he considered the nation's unifying cultural force. At certain junctures Khatami appeared to give contrasting analyses of what exactly constituted the defining characteristic of Iranian nationalism. During a speech in the remote province of Sistan and Baluchistan he announced that "Islamic culture constitutes the most important pillar of our cultural identity".⁷² A few months later, by contrast, he described the Persian language as the "symbol of unity" and the "historical identity" of the Iranian people.⁷³ But what seemed contradictory to the outsider was merely evidence of an inextricable connection in the mind of Khatami. In his famous 1998 CNN interview Khatami stressed the link between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran by noting:

You are cognizant of the great heritage of the Iranian nation with its glorious civilization and culture. Iran's glorious civilization was concurrent with the Greek city states and the Roman Empire. After the advent of Islam, the Iranians ardently embraced it. The blend of Iranian talents and the sublime Islamic teachings was a miracle. Without intending to deny the share of other nations in the formation of the Islamic civilization, I believe the great Iranian civilization had a major role in developing and promoting the Islamic system.⁷⁴

In another interview Khatami steered a path between the two pillars of Iranian identity by emphatically declaring that "[w]e are proud to be Iranians, and our Iranian identity is not separate from our Islamic identity". He elaborated during a television interview broadcast to the Iranian diaspora:

⁷¹ *Tehran Times*, XX (198), December 3rd 1998, p. 2

⁷² *Tehran Times*, XX (15), April 22nd 1998, p. 1

⁷³ *Iran News*, VII (1758), January 6th 2001, pp. 1, 15

⁷⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>. Accessed 29/07/2008

In one sentence let me say that our identity is Islamic Iranian. We are proud of being Iranian. Of course, there have been many efforts, and this negative trend may still exist, to try to separate Iranian-ness from Islamic-ness. On the other hand, there may be an attempt to say that being Islamic is contradictory to being Iranian; in other words, in order to prove our Islamic identity, we have to negate our Iranian identity. And therefore, if we want to say we are Iranian, we have to stop being Islamic. Both these trends are deviant.⁷⁵

Engaging with 'Iranian-ness' (*Iraniyyat* in Persian) entailed the reassessment and rehabilitation of Iran's pre-Islamic historical and cultural legacy, especially with regard to the country's abundant antiquities. The Pahlavis' symbolic appropriation of the pre-Islamic Achaemenid dynasty, as we examined above, together with Khomeini's stinging denunciation of the institution of monarchy naturally compelled the revolutionaries to adopt an antagonistic stance in relation to Iran's pre-Islamic glories. In the drive to create an Islamic nation after the revolution, the Islamic Republic equated Iran's pre-Islamic heritage with the deposed monarchy. It was hardly a propitious time, therefore, to glorify the nation's pre-Islamic archaeological heritage which the revolutionaries considered symbols of monarchical oppression rather than sources of national pride. Considering some revolutionaries viewed archaeology as a 'pseudoscience' devoted to lauding the despotic ancient kings, it was perhaps unsurprising that archaeology as a discipline went into a state of decline in the initial years following the revolution. Iran's sole archaeology department at Tehran University, like other academic departments across the country, was closed during the cultural revolution while curricula were Islamized. In the hysteria of the revolution foreign archaeologists, long viewed in many quarters as spies, were denied access to the country which in turn contributed to the dearth of archeological digs across Iran.⁷⁶

That said, there was no concerted program to erase Iran's archaeological jewels. The Pahlavi era Archaeological Service and the Office for Protection and Preservation of Historical Remains limped on, deprived of resources but clinging to the fact that Khomeini himself specifically ordered archaeological treasures not to be vandalized or destroyed.⁷⁷ One could argue, therefore, that the decline of archaeology was less a matter of ideological hatred towards Iran's past and more a

⁷⁵ Khatami on issue of Iranian identity, importance of links with Iranians abroad', BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 3105, 18 December 1997

⁷⁶ Abdi, p. 70

⁷⁷ Abdi, p. 70

natural recognition of other pressing priorities: it would be churlish to castigate the Islamic Republic for not lavishing large amounts of money on archaeology while mounting a desperate defense against the Iraqi invaders. One prominent contemporary Iranian archaeologist recalled of that time:

Archaeology most definitely continued after 1979. It must be said that immediately after the revolution most projects stopped. Foreign archaeologists returned home amidst the chaos, and when the war began the government was totally focused on defending the country. However, some projects continued even during the war, for example in Ecbatana. Persepolis was of course a sensitive site and work there essentially stopped, but archaeological work continued in other sites across Iran.⁷⁸

By 1985 the Islamic Republic had established the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO) as an umbrella agency to coordinate the nationwide registration and preservation of archaeological remains. Five years later the government launched a crackdown on the illegal trade in antiquities by posting guards at important archaeological sites, arresting hundreds of illegal diggers and dealers, and confiscating thousands of stolen artifacts that might have made it on to the global antiquities market. By this juncture archaeological activities across Iran had increased significantly. Throughout the 1990s the ICHO presided over a number of large-scale national excavation and survey projects, some of which were joint projects with American and German universities. The ICHO also sponsored symposia and periodicals to further archaeological research in the Islamic Republic.⁷⁹

Such developments confirmed that the official attitude to the nation's pre-Islamic past was progressively mellowing. With the siege mentality of the Islamic Republic's early years now fading in the collective memory, but also a growing realization amongst the ruling elite that public support for a strictly Islamic polity was dwindling, the space opened for a more inclusive interpretation of nationalism and national identity. Despite the continuing attempts of the conservative Right to maintain an austere version of Islam in the face of a purported Western 'cultural invasion', there was clearly greater scope in the 1990s to re-examine Iran's pre-Islamic history. Rafsanjani, as we saw, was attuned to this development, but so too was Khatami. An accomplished author in his own right, he encouraged a more open

⁷⁸ Interview with Archaeologist, University of Tehran, Tehran, 3 June 2006

⁷⁹ Abdi, pp. 71-72

cultural sphere in which increasing numbers of books on Iran's pre-Islamic history were published, something which is readily apparent to anyone who browses bookshops in Iran today.

With this growing domestic interest in Iran's ancient past, the Khatami government also sought to revive Iran's moribund tourism industry by attracting foreign tourists to the country's pre-Islamic archaeological treasures. "The bitter truth", Iran's then chief tourism official announced in a 2000 press conference, "is that our negative image, created by negative propaganda, has been a fatal poison for our tourism industry since the revolution".⁸⁰ We want to improve this image", he went on, "and President Khatami's open-door and détente policy is the main key to this goal".⁸¹ The Islamic Republic now openly touted itself as a 'cultural tourism' destination boasting a rich historical and religious heritage. Even the more conservative elements of the regime were lining up to cash in on the expected tourism bonanza: the conservative-controlled Foundation for the Deprived and War Disabled, for example, began offering guided tours to Persepolis, although one suspects more out of pecuniary motives than a passionate devotion to Iran's ancient history.⁸² Whatever the case, the old reticence to Iran's ancient past had patently vanished as tourists arriving at Iranian airports in the late 1990s and the early 2000s were greeted with glossy posters of Persepolis and other archaeological icons. Not only was Persepolis resurrected in foreign eyes; Tehran football fans enjoyed a moment to savour when the Piruzi FC, one of Iran's most famous clubs, reverted to its more famous moniker, Persepolis, after a long post-revolution hiatus.⁸³

With increasing numbers of tour parties traveling to Iran's iconic archaeological sites, Khatami resolved to embark on his own 'tour'. His vision of the symbiotic union between Iran's pre-Islamic and Islamic identities – between 'Iranian-ness' and 'Islamic-ness' - was captured in the iconic images of his 2001 visit to Persepolis, the very ruins where Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi held his extravagant 1971

⁸⁰ M. Balali, 'Iran hopes it news moderate image will help tourism', *Reuters News*, September 7th 2000

⁸¹ Balali

⁸² S. Swindells, 'Iran turns to tourism for image lift and income', *Reuters News*, August 21st 1997

⁸³ See Christopher de Bellaigue's talk at the 2005 British Museum's and The Guardian's public forum 'The Unbroken Arc: What Ancient Persia tells us about Modern Iran', available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/subsection/0,,1599560,00.html>, accessed 6 January 2008

commemorations. Khatami, pictured in front of the site's soaring columns wearing his clerical attire, remarked:

Persepolis, like dozens of other important monuments of our history, recalls a grand epoch and the power of Iranians. That's why this great treasure, this precious capital must be conserved, protected and above all restored. The vestiges of the past are in reality the identity of people. It is reactionary to want to return to the past but based on this identity we can prepare for a better life.⁸⁴

Khatami's talk of a 'better life' referred to perhaps his most important message, that of reconciling Iranian identity with Western modernity, the 'third culture as identified by Soroush. While Khomeini was on record as saying that revolutionary Islam did not deign to concern itself with 'the price of watermelons', Khatami understood the importance of economic development, particularly for a new generation of Iranians for whom the deteriorating economy was a pressing concern.⁸⁵ Development, though, inevitably raised the question of to what degree Iran should borrow from the scientific and technological achievements of the West while at the same preserving a unique Iranian identity. Khatami's vision of a new civic nationalism endeavoured to bring together Iran's pre-Islamic and Islamic identities, but it also contained within it the strands of another profoundly important discourse around reconciling Iran with Western modernity. His prescription, however, while inherently connected with his vision of Iranian nationalism, went beyond it. Like his mentor Khomeini, Khatami had a universal message, only this time it was not about 'exporting the revolution', but rather pursuing inter-civilizational dialogue.

Dialogue of Civilizations

Soon after his election victory Khatami began propounding his most famous slogan, that of 'Dialogue among Civilizations'. His starting point was the obvious state of decline of Iran and other Moslem countries.

Our predicament is that the Islamic *ummah*, once a flag-bearer of knowledge, thought, and civilization, has in recent centuries relapsed into weakness and backwardness and worse still, has even failed, due to the consequent painful state of passivity *vis-à-vis* the

⁸⁴ *Iran News*, VII (1768) January 17th 2001, p. 1

⁸⁵ For Khomeini's now infamous quote see. A. Molavi, 'Buying time in Tehran: Iran and the China model', *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (6), November/December 2004, p. 9

ostentatious dominant civilization of the time, to properly utilize the fruits of this civilization....Our era is an era of the preponderance of Western culture and civilization, an understanding of which is imperative.⁸⁶

It was self-evident, Khatami reminded Iranians, that development and modernization of Islamic countries required the utilization of Western science and technology. The question - and Khatami as we have seen was not the first to ask this - then became how to retain one's national identity amidst rapid modernization and its attendant economic and social impacts. The solution Khatami proposed was a grand dialogue among civilizations whereby the nations of the Islamic world could become familiar with and adopt the positive achievements of the West, but remain true to their heritage. Civilizations, Khatami opined, had always interacted, none more so than Iranian and Islamic civilizations that had bestowed upon Iranians such a rich identity. In the modern world, however, the dialogue between the Western and Islamic civilizations had become seriously imbalanced. The West was all-powerful, while the Islamic world was in terminal decline. Despite the technological, economic and military preponderance of the West, Khatami argued that dialogue should still proceed on two assumptions. Firstly, relations between countries must be based upon equality and respect. Khatami deplored the "colonial relationship which has ruled over certain parts of the world in the past two or three centuries", dividing "peoples and nations into first- and second-class citizens".⁸⁷ Secondly, the constituent nations of the Islamic civilization had an obligation to critically and realistically examine their own positions in relation to the West. Khatami implored:

We are adrift in a world dominated by Western culture, politics, economics, and military might, and confront the idea of development which is a tested form of progress in the West. We must decide once and for all where we stand in relation to the West and how Western values are related to development, so that we can attain development without losing our national identity or becoming dissolved in the West.⁸⁸

Khatami acknowledged 'development' was a Western term that carried with it the implication of 'modernization' and 'westernization'. But Western civilization, he argued, was not the only 'ultimate' human civilization. There was an alternative to Western modernity and secular liberalism. Echoing Soroush, he claimed somewhere between complete rejection of Western modernity and uncritical embrace of it, there

⁸⁶ M. Khatami, *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*, Canberra, Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia) The Australian National University, 2000, pp. 14-15

⁸⁷ Khatami, 2000, p. 2

⁸⁸ Khatami, 2000, p. 78

was a middle ground for Moslem countries like Iran to be modern, and all-the-while remain true to their respective national identities. Retaining one's authentic identity was in fact the key element in this equation: "A genuine meaningful discourse can take place only when the parties concerned find themselves in their own genuine true position", Khatami wrote, "otherwise the dialogue is meaningless and certainly void of any good or benefit".⁸⁹

Khatami thus arrived back at his jumping off point. The only way for Iran and other Islamic countries to find their "true position" was to empower all of their citizens through the rule of law and a civil society, where freedom of expression and participation was encouraged, and where national identity was a source of pride and not a discourse of oppression or exclusion. Dialogue within societies, Khatami believed, would lead to dialogue between societies, which would in turn usher in a new age of international goodwill between countries and between civilizations, and the end of the bloodletting that was such a marked feature of the modern, Western-dominated era. For Khatami, freedom, civic nationalism and dialogue among civilizations were thus all inter-connected.

Conclusion

On 30 April 2000, at the height of his popularity and confident that reformism would prove a permanent fixture in Iranian politics, Khatami boasted "[t]he Iranian nation is a reformist nation".⁹⁰ On the other side of the political spectrum, however, conservative forces were earnestly plotting their comeback counting on the fact that whatever the enthusiasm Khatami may have generated for popular sovereignty, the strictures of Islamic government would ultimately contain it. Nevertheless reformism had profoundly altered the discourse of nationalism in the Islamic Republic. Khatami's rhetoric was the catalyst for re-interpreting nationalism in Iran, both as a force for constitutionalism and democracy, as well as an avenue for reconciling the pre-Islamic and Islamic poles of Iranian national identity. Such a reinterpretation arose out of the continuing reflexive interplay between state and society around the issue of nationalism. In the late-1990s, as the Islamic Republic

⁸⁹ Khatami, 2000, p. 17

⁹⁰ 'Khatami says process of reform irrevocable', *Iran News*, VI (1561), 30 April 2000, p. 1

approached its twenty-year mark, changing demographics and political expectations in society prompted new expressions of nationalism, both at the domestic level, but more importantly, at the political level. The discourse of nationalism in Iran consequently evolved, leaving behind the heavily religious nationalism of the war years and Rafsanjani's anemic developmental nationalism, and instead reoriented towards new debates surrounding civic rights, state-society relations, and the question of reconciling the constituent parts of Iran's national identity. This process of evolution, however, remained ongoing. As reformism began to run out steam in Khatami's second term a new strand of conservatism was poised to exploit nationalism for its own political gain.

Nationalism and Islamic Neoconservatism

The Demise of Reform and the Rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Khatami's first term in office brought real hope to millions of Iranians that the political system was on the verge of becoming truly responsive to the voice of the people. To the surprise of the outside world, the years 1997-1999 did witness a fundamental change in the political culture of the Islamic Republic towards greater freedoms, more open debate, and a growing awareness of the centrality of popular sovereignty. Amidst this euphoria, however, conservatives of various stripes were busy plotting to retake the initiative from the incumbent reformist president. The reformist triumph in the local and municipal elections of Spring 1999 represented a grassroots vindication of Khatami's program for implementing the rule of law and popular participation, but that same year also witnessed the beginnings of overt conservative repression. Following the closure of a popular reformist newspaper in 1999, Tehran University students launched violent protests which soon spread to other campuses around Iran. The students openly challenged the regime by calling for dismissal of the Supreme Leader, something which appeared to unnerve Khamenei who vacillated for a number of days before ordering the security forces to suppress the protests.¹ Khatami demurred from publicly supporting the students and thus precipitating an internal showdown within the regime, a development that signified a growing split within the reform movement between a president urging incremental change and a younger generation impatient for more rapid democratization.²

Nevertheless reformism was not yet dead in the water. Reformist candidates won a majority of votes in the 2000 Majles election, and Khatami retained enough goodwill to be re-elected in 2001, but his second term was to be marked by more conservative chicanery and an accompanying disillusionment in the reformist constituency that

¹ Ansari, 2006, p.171

² S.A. Arjomand, 'The Rise and Fall of President Khatami and the Reform Movement in Iran', *Constellations*, 12 (4), 2005, p.509. For an overview of the student protests see D. Hiro, *Iran Today*, London, Politico's Publishing, 2005, pp. 296-314

would undermine many of the gains of the past four years. The conservative backlash, hinted at in the murders of prominent reformist intellectuals by shadowy elements of the regime in the late 1990s, was now marked by blatant suppression of the press, show trials of political and religious dissidents, vetoing of reformist legislation by the conservative-dominated Guardian Council, and finally the culling of reformist candidates from the 2003 Local Council elections and the 2004 Majles election. Between 1997 and 2004, to give but one telling statistic, Khatami endured the indignity of having over a third of the bills he sponsored in the Majles vetoed by the Guardian Council.³

In the face of such conservative politicking, there was little Khatami could do. Looking increasingly frustrated and haggard in his second term, he continued to insist on the application of the 'rule of law' in the belief that change had to come from within the system, not upon the ashes of it. The great reformist dilemma, however, was that this very body of laws also contained within it anti-democratic principles, namely the supremacy of the Supreme Leader's rule and the clerical-controlled judiciary, with which the conservatives were using to arrest the momentum of reformism.⁴ The reluctance to accelerate the pace of reform and engage in open confrontation with the establishment precipitated internal dissension and a loss of morale within the reform movement. There remained a "pervasive culture" of reformism in Iranian society, evident in the mushrooming civil society composed of professional unions, defiant journalists, and NGOs, but in light of the reformist leadership's preference for gradualism, many reformist-inclined Iranians began to lose hope and drift away from politics.⁵ Bereft of institutional power and enduring

³ V. Nasr, 'Iran's Peculiar Election: The Conservative Wave Rolls On', *Journal of Democracy*, 16 (4), October 2005, p. 11

⁴ F. Vahdat, 'Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourse of Mohammad Khatami', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25 (3), 2005, p. 664

⁵ A. Adib-Moghaddam, 'The pluralistic momentum in Iran and the future of the reform movement', *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (4) May 2006, p.668; Shahra Razavi speaks of the growing distrust between the reformist leadership and its constituency because of the former's lack of boldness. See S. Shahra, 'Islamic Politics, human rights and women's claims for equality in Iran', *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (7) October 2006, p.1233

democratic political achievements to sustain popular enthusiasm, Khatami began to lose the battle for Iranian hearts and minds.

It was not only a lack of democratic progress that proved injurious to Khatami's popularity. The lacklustre Iranian economy also did little to inspire confidence in the reformist leadership, and contributed to the growing disconnect between Khatami and certain constituencies particularly the youth and urban poor. For those graduates entering the workforce, and the families grinding out a living in the slums of Tehran and other cities, Khatami's talk of greater democracy seemed to ignore the realities of a chronically depressed labour market and slow overall economic growth.⁶ As Khatami's second term drew to its demoralizing end, a space opened up in the political system for other figures who could entice the disillusioned electorate with promises to address growing economic malaise, corruption and social vice.

Unnoticed by many Western observers, who falsely assumed the permanence of the reformist juggernaut, was the rise of the 'New Right' or 'Islamic neoconservatives' in the Iranian political landscape. The Islamic neoconservative movement derived its vigour from an up-and-coming generation of lay revolutionaries, often of military or intelligence backgrounds, who were intent on preserving pious revolutionary values they felt were under threat from the wave of reformism. The rise of this new trend once more demonstrated the shifting sands of Iranian factional politics: many Iranian neoconservatives were spiritually close to the older conservatives of the Islamist right, yet they shared a concern for the plight of the poorer segments of society in a similar manner to the Islamist left. From the mid-1990s the neoconservatives began to entrench their power, firstly among their traditional power bases in the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence, and later in the Office of the Supreme Leader and the Judiciary. Aided by the Guardian Council which culled reformist candidates from voting lists, the neoconservatives asserted their growing influence by winning a majority in the 2003 Local Council elections, before going on to win an even more

⁶ See J. Amuzegar, 'Khatami's First-Term Presidency: An Outsider's Assessment', *SAIS Review*, XXII (1) Winter-Spring 2002, pp. 10-14 for an overview of Khatami's attempts at economic reform and the various ways in which he came up short.

impressive majority in the 2004 Majles election, on both occasions facilitated by the droves of disillusioned reformist voters who stayed away from the polls. In what Ehteshami and Zweiri call the growing 'militarization of politics', the Revolutionary Guards and Baseej militia became ever more vocal in political affairs, notably in the aforementioned protests of 1999 when the Revolutionary Guards commander, General Safavi, publicly threatened to crush the student protesters. Such threats demonstrated the zeal of the neoconservatives to resist reformist efforts towards democratizing the foundations of the Islamic Republic. As veterans of the Iran-Iraq war in which they fought in the name of Khomeini's concept of government, neoconservative figures such as Safavi were not inclined to stand by watch the political system unravel in the face of reformist agitation. Neoconservatives, however, were not necessarily beholden to the conservative right. While upholding the principle of theocratic government, the neoconservatives were increasingly incensed at the moral and economic corruption of the Rafsanjani years, and were determined to arrest the decline of the revolutionary values, particularly the concern for the *mostaz'afin*. In the Local Council election of 2003 and the Majles election the following year, the neoconservatives plugged the old theme of cultural and moral purity, but what increasingly marked their campaigns was a commitment to economic justice, the implication being that the corrupt clergy had forgotten the needs of the 'oppressed'. Such themes were to be central to the presidential election of 2005.⁷

In May 2005 the Guardian Council approved six candidates for the June 17 presidential election. Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and former head of state television Ali Larijani, represented the neoconservatives. The other four candidates were pragmatic or moderate conservatives to varying degrees: ex-President Hashemi Rafsanjani; Speaker of the Majles, Mehdi Karrubi; former Revolutionary Guards General and then Chief of Police, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf; and former head of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Rezai. Reformists expressed outrage that not a single reformist candidate was approved, whereupon the Supreme Leader intervened

⁷ For an overview of the 'militarization of politics' and the rise of the Islamic neoconservatives see A. Ehteshami and M. Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*, London, IB Taurus, 2007, especially pp.1-46

to sanction the candidacies of Mostafa Moin (a former Minister of Science and Technology) and Mohsen Mehralizadeh (a former Vice-President) to give the impression of a fair race.⁸

Many inside and outside Iran assumed the forthcoming election to be another signature battle between the reformists and the conservatives in the manner of the 1997 presidential race. The reformist candidates, Moin and Mehralizadeh, proceeded under this assumption and served up more of Khatami's rhetoric by promising greater political openness and more cultural freedoms. The lustre of the reform movement, however, had dulled significantly since the halcyon days of 1997. The strong-arm tactics of the conservatives and Khatami's own failings, which we noted above, bred widespread cynicism in the run-up to the 2005 election, exemplified by a number of prominent reformists such as Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi and dissident journalist Akbar Ganji who urged a boycott of the entire affair.⁹ The reformist cause was further undermined by the choice to field two candidates which had the effect of splitting a diminishing constituency.¹⁰

It was this mass of disillusioned, reformist-inclined middle class and young voters that the pragmatic conservatives went after in their quest to fashion a new strategic centre in Iranian politics. The Rafsanjani and Qalibaf campaigns deliberately played down revolutionary Islamic motifs and instead sought to attract support by promising economic growth, strong government and greater engagement with the outside world. Both individuals viewed Khatami's concern for democracy as a distraction from the real task of national development; pragmatism, not democracy, was needed to break the political deadlock in the Islamic Republic. Rafsanjani in particular, following the same tune he played in his previous term as President, consistently made "[v]eiled references to Reza Shah and his combination of nationalism and developmentalism"

⁸ Nasr, 2005, p.14

⁹ C. de Bellaigue, 'New Man in Iran', *The New York Review of Books*, August 11 2005, p.19

¹⁰ Nasr, 2005, p. 15

across the campaign, hoping to captivate the minds of a new generation of Iranians with a more concrete vision of the future than the reformists were offering.¹¹

For much of the campaign, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad barely registered in most people's consciousness. As election day neared, however, interest in the diminutive Tehran mayor and ex-Revolutionary Guard began to stir. Ahmadinejad's campaign gained traction with the assistance of the Guardian Council which urged Iranians to vote for the "most anti-Western candidate", and that of the Supreme Leader whose representative in the Revolutionary Guards urged guardsmen and Baseej militiamen to vote for the candidate who "refrains from extravagant spending" a none-too-subtle swipe at the Rafsanjani and Qaliibaf campaigns.¹² As the Rafsanjani campaign foundered through mismanagement (he rarely traveled outside Tehran) and a certain air of lethargic overconfidence, Ahmadinejad ran a shrewd campaign targeting the lower classes, particularly the urban poor, who were not only desperate for some amelioration of their economic plight, but were also concerned about the increasing moral corruption resulting from the *laissez-faire* social policies of the Khatami years.¹³ Ahmadinejad campaigned on platform of social justice and a fairer distribution of wealth, and constantly presented himself as a true man of the people in stark contrast to the 'fat cat' epithet Rafsanjani was unable to shake.¹⁴ State media made much of Ahmadinejad's austere lifestyle and his humble house in downtown Tehran all of which befitted his status as a war veteran, a background that contrasted with his clerical and reformist opponents who had avoided frontline service during the war years. The implicit message of his campaign was of an outsider who possessed the common touch, and who stood ready to do battle with the corrupt 'economic mafias' that controlled the Iranian economy.¹⁵ While he projected pious Islamic values, he played up his image as a lay person – not a cleric – who was more committed to

¹¹ Nasr, 2005, pp. 15-18

¹² Interview with a Western correspondent, Tehran, 7 May 2006; de Bellaigue, 2005, p. 19

¹³ For succinct overviews of the 2005 election see Ansari, 2006, pp. 225-232 and de Bellaigue, 2005

¹⁴ Ansari, 2006, pp.225-228

¹⁵ Nasr, 2005, pp. 19-20

putting bread on the poor's tables than purveying religious demagoguery.¹⁶ Ahmadinejad thus cleverly subsumed his "hardline ideological position into a populist platform".¹⁷ "People think a return to revolutionary values is only a matter of wearing the headscarf", Ahmadinejad pointed out, but "[t]he country's true problem is employment and housing, not what to wear."¹⁸

On June 17 Iranians went to the polls. Rafsanjani and Karrubi scored 21% and 17.3% of the vote respectively.¹⁹ Ahmadinejad, with the help of block-voting by the *Baseej* and Revolutionary Guards Corps which shepherded conservative voters to ballot stations, turned his growing momentum into a respectable 19.5% of all votes cast.²⁰ Karrubi cried fraud and engaged in a very public spat with the Supreme Leader over the extent of government meddling on Ahmadinejad's behalf.²¹ Given that no candidate had gained the requisite 50% of votes to win outright, the top two candidates, Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, entered a second round vote.

With reformists out of the race, the dynamics of the second round began to change. In particular the fault-line between the pragmatic conservatives and the neoconservatives became much clearer. On the campaign trail the focus on reformist ideals increasingly gave way to a debate around which candidate could best address the socio-economic grievances of the lower classes, a constituency which now comprised a proportionally larger pool of voters in the absence of disillusioned middle and upper class voters. It was a fight Rafsanjani, a pillar of the political system but also widely regarded as an unrepentant kleptocrat, would struggle to win. Despite a grudging endorsement of Rafsanjani by many reformist intellectuals and politicians inside the establishment, many middle class voters began to drift away and it was Ahmadinejad's populist

¹⁶ Religious demagogue he may not have been, but Ahmadinejad's pre-election rhetoric was heavily infused with religious imagery. To a rally in Tehran he promised a government whose "every project, every method, and every administrative mechanism has been extracted from the heart of Islam", quoted in de Bellaigue, 2005, p. 20

¹⁷ Nasr, 2005, p. 20

¹⁸ Quoted in Nasr, 2005, p. 20

¹⁹ Nasr, 2005, p. 18

²⁰ Nasr, 2005, p.18; de Bellaigue, 2005, p. 19; Interview with a Western correspondent, Tehran, 7 May 2006

²¹ de Bellaigue, 2005, p. 19

economic platform which resonated far more with the rump of poor conservative voters. Ahmadinejad shocked many inside and outside Iran with a comfortable victory (61.7% of the second round vote) to become the fifth president of the Islamic Republic, and the first non-cleric to hold such office since 1981.²² Despite the President-elect's focus on domestic issues during the campaign, as he entered office a more pressing issue was flaring up that would come to dominate the first two years of his presidency: the mounting concern in the West over Iran's nuclear energy program. It was a crisis tailor made for a man who delighted in rocking the establishment and whose uncompromising personality relished a showdown with the West.

Iran's Nuclear Energy Program

Although the nuclear issue became a *cause celebre* under the Ahmadinejad presidency, the origins of the country's nuclear program extended back to the 1950s and the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. The first tentative steps were taken in 1957 when Iran and the US signed the 'Agreement for Cooperation Concerning Civil Uses of Atoms', reflecting the Shah's determination to draw closer to Washington at the height of the Cold War. The agreement also paved the way for substantial numbers of Iranians to study nuclear physics and engineering at American universities.²³ By the 1970s these newly-trained nuclear scientists, technicians and engineers began returning to Iran where they staffed burgeoning university physics departments and sought state employment. The Shah obliged by dipping into his bugling coffers to significantly expand his nuclear program which the US was more than willing to support. The Nixon Doctrine mandated that the US could not supply allies with nuclear weapons, but Washington agreed to step up its civilian nuclear cooperation with Iran, on the basis that an economically and technologically progressive Iran was as much a bulwark against communism as a militarily progressive one. In 1974, therefore, the chairman of the United States Atomic Energy Commission traveled to Iran to meet with officials from the newly-established Atomic Energy Organization of

²² Nasr, 2005, p.19

²³ M. Kibaroglu, 'Good for Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power', *The Middle East Journal*, 60 (2) Spring 2006, pp.213-214

Iran (AEOI) where plans were made to build uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities. A state visit by Henry Kissinger the same year laid the groundwork for a \$15 billion agreement signed in 1975 whereby the US agreed to construct eight nuclear reactors in Iran. In return the Shah promised to give back some of the petrodollars his country was extracting from American consumers by investing in a uranium enrichment facility in the US. Initial plans were also laid for the construction of a spent fuel processing facility inside Iran, and this deepening nuclear cooperation was furthered by a deal signed between Iran and the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology for the training of Iranian nuclear engineers.²⁴

Nuclear cooperation proceeded apace under the Carter administration. Between 1977 and 1978 a flurry of important nuclear agreements were signed, beginning with the April 12 1977 US-Iran agreement to exchange nuclear technology and cooperate on nuclear safety. On December 31 1977 Carter visited Tehran amid much fanfare whereupon a further agreement was signed bestowing upon Iran the status of 'most-favoured nation' for spent fuel reprocessing. On July 10 1978 Washington and Tehran signed the 'US-Iran Nuclear Energy Agreement' facilitating nuclear cooperation and regulating the export of equipment and material to Iran. The Europeans, too, were carving out a significant role in Iran's nuclear program. In 1974 Iran had signed a contract with French company Framatome for the construction of two pressurized water reactors, and two years later the German conglomerates Siemens and Kraftwerke began work on six nuclear reactors at Bushehr. As the first rumblings of revolution stirred in 1978, however, work on all nuclear projects ground to a halt.²⁵

The chaos of the revolution and the desire of the clerics to do away with anything associated with the Pahlavi regime saw the Iranian nuclear program fall into disrepair. Whereas the Shah had fuelled rapid modernization with his seemingly limitless oil revenues, the revolutionary government in fact allowed oil exports to fall and, what is

²⁴ Kibaroglu, p.214; see also G. Bahgat, 'Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 39 (3) September 2006, pp.308-312

²⁵ Kiraboglu, pp.214-215

more, did little to stop the flight of nuclear scientists abroad. It was Saddam Hussein's invasion that quickly shook the ayatollahs out of their Luddite complex. Iraq's blitzkrieg demonstrated the power of modern military technology and suggested to some in the new regime that possession of the most powerful known weapon might have prevented Saddam Hussein's aggression. The economic dislocation of the revolution and war also precipitated an energy crisis, which again focused attentions on the suitability of nuclear energy for power generation. With such military and civil nuclear energy thoughts in mind, the revolutionary government hastily revived the AEOI and encouraged the French and German consortia to resume work on their pre-revolution nuclear contracts. Under intense US pressure the European companies shied away from Iranian these entreaties, forcing a radical re-think in the Islamic Republic's nascent nuclear program. While revolutionaries screamed 'Neither East nor West, just the Islamic Republic' on the streets, in the upper echelons of government Iranian leaders realized that in lieu of Western support they would have to reach out to Eastern nations in their search for nuclear technology and expertise.²⁶

In the 1980s the Islamic Republic set about courting alternative sources of nuclear expertise, namely Pakistan, Argentina, Spain, Czechoslovakia, China and the Soviet Union. In 1984 the Esfahan Nuclear Research Centre was opened, replete with fuel fabrication and conversion facilities for uranium enrichment courtesy of Chinese technical assistance. Three years later Iran struck further deals with Pakistan for technical cooperation and Argentina for enriched uranium and scientific training. Despite this initial outreach, by the 1990s work on Iran's reactors remained well behind schedule prompting President Rafsanjani to seek closer links with the Chinese who in 1991 announced a deal to sell Iran a research reactor. The following year Beijing and Tehran announced the signing of another agreement to furnish Iran with a 330 MW (e) reactor, but American protests saw the Chinese pull out of the deal. Iranian exasperation at Washington's continuing obstruction encouraged Tehran to seek the assistance of a resurgent Russia, whom the Iranians encouraged to finish the work started by the Germans at Bushehr. In 1995 Iran and Russia signed a Nuclear

²⁶ Kiraboglu, pp.216-217

Cooperation Accord in which Russia agreed to complete Block No. 1 of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and train Iranian scientists and engineers. Meanwhile in the tertiary education sector the Islamic Republic committed itself to greatly expanding the number of university departments and research centres devoted to nuclear physics.²⁷

Under the Khatami government, Iran's nuclear program was accelerated in the late 1990s, building on the efforts of an alleged network of front companies, government organizations and academic institutions dedicated to acquiring advanced nuclear technology from pariah states such as North Korea and dissident scientists such as A.Q. Khan of Pakistan.²⁸ As Shahram Chubin notes, while Iranian security fears may have been allayed by the progressive weakening of Iraq under Western sanctions, this did not convince Tehran to scale down its nuclear ambitions. Security rationales may have shifted, but the nuclear program acquired a political momentum of its own, a point which Chubin aptly describes:

Iran has invested in its nuclear infrastructure for nearly two decades. The program has been marked by persistence and incrementalism, by determination rather than urgency. As the absence of a crash program would suggest, the motives for investing in a nuclear option stem more from political than security imperatives. While the security rationale has been shifting, the political motive has remained unvarying and fixed. The impulse behind the program has been persistent, even if its aims have been unclear.²⁹

Western nations were quite aware of the Islamic Republic's efforts to resurrect the Shah's nuclear program, although owing to frosty relations and the secretive nature of the Iranian authorities they were unsure exactly how far along Iranian nuclear scientists had come. On August 14 2002 the extent of Iran's secret nuclear progress was sensationally revealed at a Washington press conference held by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the Iranian exile group

²⁷ Kiraboglu, p.217

²⁸ For a discussion of Iran's alleged links with various proliferators see A. Cordesman and K.R. Al-Rodhan, Iranian Nuclear Weapons, The Options if Diplomacy Fails, CSIS Report, April 2006, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060407_irannuoptions.pdf, accessed 8/04/2009

²⁹ S. Chubin, Iran's Nuclear Ambitions, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, p. 11

Mujahedeen-e Khalq. Through various channels the NCRI had come by leaked information from within Iran's nuclear establishment revealing the existence of a top secret uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production facility at Arak, the clandestine nature and technical sophistication of which seemed to indicate an effort to build nuclear weapons. At the 2002 General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) the Head of the AEOI strenuously denied Iran was secretly developing nuclear weapons, and vigorously insisted its enrichment and reprocessing activities were strictly related to its desire to establish a civilian nuclear power network as allowed for under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT).³⁰ Iran thereafter continued to argue that nuclear power was essential in order to diversify its energy sector which was heavily dependent on finite fossil fuels, to say nothing of the fact that Iran, despite being a major oil exporter, did not have the refining capacity to meet domestic demand, and was in the embarrassing position of having to send crude oil off-shore to be refined and re-imported.³¹ The Bush Administration rejected this economic rationale and immediately condemned Iran's actions as a secret nuclear weapons program in contravention of the NPT to which Iran had been a signatory since 1968.³² Policymakers in Washington and other Western capitals held to the view that Tehran's insistence on investing in expensive 'front-end' nuclear technology, and its reluctance to address the perennial problem of wasteful oil and gas consumption, seemed to contradict Iranian claims that energy diversification and energy independence were the rationales for going nuclear.³³

With Iran's nuclear programme now in the international spotlight, the Islamic Republic came under increasing scrutiny of the IAEA. In June 2003 the IAEA

³⁰ See the Iranian statement at <http://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC46/iran.pdf> accessed 10/04/2009. For background see Ansari, 2006, pp.198-201; Saikal, 2006, pp. 193-195; Chubin, pp. 1-10

³¹ Despite being the world's fourth largest oil producer, Iran currently produces only around 57% of its daily petrol consumption. The shortfall is made up by sending crude to overseas refineries and re-importing it. See 'Iran calls halt to petrol imports', *BBC News*, news.bbc.ok/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/5109788

³² The US State Department declared in December 2002 that Iran was "actively working to develop nuclear weapons capability"; quoted in Chubin p. xiv

³³ For an overview of the dubious economic rationale for the Iranian nuclear program see T. Wood et. al., 'The Economics of Energy Independence for Iran', *The Nonproliferation Review*, 14 (1), March 2007, pp.889-112

Director General found that Iran had indeed failed to declare the true extent of its uranium importing and reprocessing activities as required under the NPT.³⁴ To rebuild international trust, the IAEA subsequently called upon Iran to halt all further uranium enrichment, provide unrestricted access to agency inspectors, and sign an Additional Protocol to the NPT by October 31 2003 in which Tehran would submit to more rigorous IAEA inspections.³⁵ On the eve of the October 31st deadline, the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Germany (the EU-3) made a historic visit to Tehran to conclude an agreement in which Iran promised to sign the Additional Protocol, a commitment it eventually honoured on December 18 2003.³⁶ But with the conservatives in a bullish mood after the eclipse of the reformists, particularly in the 2004 Majles election, the Islamic Republic was not about to cave in to Western demands so easily.³⁷ To the chagrin of the IAEA, Tehran refused to ratify the Additional Protocol or cooperate fully with verification inspectors meaning that while the Agency continued to make progress in gaining a “comprehensive understanding of Iran’s nuclear program”, a number of questions remained “outstanding” surrounding the true nature of the Islamic Republic’s nuclear programme.³⁸ In September 2004 the IAEA again called on Iran to ratify the Additional Protocol and to cease all enrichment activities as a confidence-building measure.³⁹ Tehran thumbed its nose at this resolution and proceeded to begin the conversion of raw uranium into gas, a precursor to full uranium enrichment. Nevertheless on November 15 the EU-3 convinced Iran to renew the Additional Protocol and extend its suspension of all enrichment and reprocessing activities in return for trade concessions. It remained, however, a

³⁴ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report by the Director-General, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2003/gov2003-40.pdf>, accessed 10/05/2009

³⁵ Implementation of the NPT safeguards agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution adopted by the Board 12 September 2003, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2003/gov2003-69.pdf>, accessed 10/04/2009

³⁶ Ansari, p.205; ‘Iran Signs Additional Protocol on Nuclear Safeguards’, <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/2003/iranap20031218.html>, accessed 10/05/2009

³⁷ Ansari, p.216

³⁸ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution Adopted by the Board 18 June 2004, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2004/gov2004-49.pdf>, accessed 10/05/2009

³⁹ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution Adopted by the Board 18 September 2004, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2004/gov2004-79.pdf>

voluntary suspension, not a legal obligation, which did nothing to allay suspicions in Washington that the whole affair was simply an exercise in Iranian obfuscation.⁴⁰

In March 2005 Washington made a surprise volte-face by agreeing to support the EU-3 negotiations and offer economic incentives if Tehran would give up its nuclear ambitions. The Bush administration, though, was almost hopeful the Iranians would reject such carrots, and it was not to be disappointed. In Iran, nuclear energy had become such an iconic issue that there was little chance the government would scuttle the entire project after years of pursuing it in the face of Western opposition. For the US and Israel, only a complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear program would suffice. From Tehran's perspective, the nuclear issue was now one of principle, namely that of national pride and sovereignty. In between were the Europeans, trying to extend the suspension regime in order to strike a permanent agreement. But with the Americans not even at the negotiating table to mollify Iranian concerns of an imminent attack, and given ongoing arguments about whether 'suspension' extended to Tehran's limited enrichment research, the negotiations went nowhere. Both sides elected to await the outcome of the presidential elections in Iran.⁴¹

The shock election victory of the hardliner Ahmadinejad boded ill for the nuclear impasse. Having been in office barely two months the new President gave a belligerent address at the United Nation's 60th anniversary summit in New York in which he insisted on Iran's "inalienable right" to possess a civilian nuclear power program. The Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad pointed out to skeptics, did not seek to possess nuclear weapons. He went on to launch a scathing attack on the West's double standards – what he referred to as "nuclear apartheid" – in which NPT member states such as Iran were subjected to onerous Western scrutiny and other nuclear states outside the treaty such as Israel sustained little criticism whatsoever.⁴²

⁴⁰ For an overview of key events in the nuclear crisis see BBC World's [Timeline: US-Iran ties](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/3362443.stm) http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/3362443.stm accessed 13/02/2007 1901 hrs; see also Chubin pp. xiv-xx

⁴¹ Ansari, 2006, pp.221-223

⁴² For the full text of Ahmadinejad's speech see:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050918-irna02.htm>, accessed 23/07/09

The eclipse of the reformists and pragmatic conservatives, together with America's mounting problems in the Iraq, only made the neoconservatives more contemptuous of the West's ability to pressure Iran. Across 2005 Iran ignored two more IAEA resolutions to cease its enrichment activities and ratify the Additional Protocol.⁴³ Ahmadinejad seemed to enjoy taunting the West and even welcomed the prospect of punitive measures such as sanctions. With no compromise or trust-building measures emanating from the Iranian side, on February 4 2006 the IAEA had no choice but to adopt a resolution criticizing Iran's lack of cooperation with the inspection body and vowing to report it to the United Nations Security Council.⁴⁴ Russia and China supported the resolution but only on the grounds that the resolution did not stipulate the threat of military strikes against Iran, and that Iran be given a last-ditch chance to demonstrate compliance before the next IAEA meeting in March. By that time Tehran had still not done enough to demonstrate complete transparency to the IAEA, which finally turned the Iran nuclear file over to the Security Council and beseeching it to "lend weight to the IAEA's efforts".⁴⁵ Ahmadinejad, though, was not to be deterred. On Tuesday 11th April 2006 – two weeks after the Security Council had given Iran a month to cease all uranium enrichment – Ahmadinejad announced at a speech in Mashhad that Iranian scientists had successfully enriched uranium: "Dear Iran has joined the club of nuclear countries.... The nation, under the umbrella of God's grace and through its own efforts, has reached this big achievement. Today is a big day which will be recorded in Iran's history."⁴⁶ The government quickly ordered the following day to be one of national rejoicing. Bells rang out in schools and candy was

⁴³ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution Adopted on 24 September 2005, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2005/gov2005-77.pdf>, accessed 10/04/2009; Implementation of the NPT Safeguards in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution Adopted 11 August 2005, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2005/gov2005-64.pdf>, accessed 10/04/2009

⁴⁴ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution Adopted on 4 February 2004, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2006/gov2006-14.pdf>, accessed 10/04/2009. For a particularly harsh interpretation of Iran's obfuscation, deception, stalling and stonewalling during the tortuous negotiation process see Chubin pp. 63-80

⁴⁵ Report on Iran's Nuclear Programme sent to UN Security Council, <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/2006/bog080306.html>, accessed 10/04/2009

⁴⁶ R. Tait and E. MacAskill, 'Iran Declares: we are in the nuclear club', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 12th April 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1752063,00.html> Accessed Wednesday 12th April 2006

handed out on the streets. It was Ahmadinejad's finest hour. But what was the real story behind the regime's attempts to stir up such nationalist sentiment?

Nuclear Nationalism: Pride and Fear

In contrast to the unbecoming demeanour of Khatami, Ahmadinejad clearly reveled in his new-found celebrity amongst poor Iranians. Grand tours of Iran's outlying provinces in which Ahmadinejad addressed adoring crowds soon became a fixture of his presidency. Despite focusing on domestic issues in his presidential campaign, his post-election speeches invariably centred on the nuclear issue, and state media made a special point of covering his nationalist-infused orations before throngs of flag-waving Iranians. Ahmadinejad's January 2007 Khuzestan roadshow showed the president in nationalist overdrive:

Our enemies have today changed their faces, and in the guise of human rights and opposition to the production of nuclear weapons, want to prevent the development of the Iranian nation. But the whole world knows that the nuclear activities of the Iranian nation are completely peaceful....The Security Council that is supposed to protect peace and world security, and defend the rights of nations has, under American and British pressure, issued an illegal resolution against the nation of Iran.⁴⁷

In the minds of the Tehran leadership this 'nuclear nationalism' operated on two levels. On the one hand Iran's nuclear program was the supreme nationalist vehicle for demonstrating and projecting the illusion of Iranian national power to the region and the wider world. On the other hand, Tehran's anxiousness to join the ranks of the world's nuclear powers concealed age-old insecurities of incessant enemy 'plotting' to subvert and dominate the Iranian nation. Let us examine these in turn before turning to the domestic motivations for manipulating nationalist sentiment in the following section.

While President Bush famously labeled the Islamic Republic as a key member of the 'Axis of Evil', such pejorative language clashed with Iranian self-perception. The

⁴⁷ '*Esteghbal- e kamnazir-e mardom-e khungarm-e Khuzestan*', *Keyhan*, Chaharshanbe 13th Dey 1385, Number 18706, p.2

Islamic Republic, like most of the Iranian populace, viewed Iran not as the outcast, pariah nation of Western imagination, but as an ancient nation entitled by virtue of its location and rich history to play a leading role in the Middle East. As we have seen throughout this thesis, successive Iranian governments, imbued with this sense of pride (and not a little arrogance) at possessing a sense of continuous nationhood, have perpetuated the Iranian quest for global status. Mossadegh's drive to be the global icon of anti-imperialism, Mohammad Reza Shah's vision of a 'Great Civilization' and Khomeini's belief in the Islamic Republic as the standard-bearer of global Islam were all shades of this same underlying superiority complex that drives Iranian nationalism. Small wonder, then, that the neoconservatives of the modern-day Islamic Republic operated with the implicit belief in Iran's "historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region where classic Persian empires have at one time held sway".⁴⁸

This legacy, however, while reviving memories of ancient glory, also served as a reminder of contemporary atrophy. Here the nuclear issue came into the calculations of Ahmadinejad and others within the Iranian elite. Nuclear power has long been marker of national power and prestige as the history of the twentieth century demonstrates, and for Iran its notions of grandeur as a regional superpower were bound up with its desire to join the nuclear club. Shahram Chubin argues that the Iranian leadership had not by that point definitively decided whether to actively develop a nuclear weapon, and instead appeared to prefer getting as close to a weapons capability as possible within the NPT before unified opposition in the international community fully coalesced.⁴⁹ Whatever Iran's ultimate designs may have been, the glee with which Ahmadinejad announced the fuel cycle breakthrough at Mashhad certainly indicated that Iran's leadership considered nuclear power, if not at this stage a nuclear arsenal, to be a barometer of Iran's technological prowess and thus regional and global political standing. Presented as a matter of national pride, therefore, the nuclear program enjoyed unanimous support across the Islamic

⁴⁸ Fuller, p.241

⁴⁹ Chubin, p.60

Republic's heavily factionalized political spectrum. Backing the sentiments of his election rival Ahmadinejad, Rafsanjani went on record as saying: "We want to have enrichment and all other parts of nuclear technology to use this valuable science for the good of our people and the country, and we will do this at any cost".⁵⁰ Even Khatami, who endeavoured to reach out to the West during his tenure as President, spoke of the necessity of achieving an indigenous nuclear capability both in terms of restoring national respect and securing strategic advantage: "We cannot rely on other countries to supply our nuclear fuel as they can stop it anytime due to political pressure".⁵¹ While the various factions disagreed to what extent Iran should pursue uranium enrichment for its own sake in the face of international approbation and possible retaliatory measures, all agreed that the nuclear program as a whole encapsulated Iran's desire for national independence, a sacred revolutionary value that few could argue against. The drive for status and independence as symbolized by an indigenous nuclear energy programme was, therefore, the "nationalist glue" that bound the Islamic Republic leadership together.⁵²

Ahmadinejad and other officials were able to bang the nuclear nationalist drum even louder in his first term not only due to the breakthroughs of Iranian physicists, but also because of Iran's rising strategic stock in the Middle East. Changing regional dynamics after the 2003 Iraq War buttressed the regime's penchant for effusive nationalist self-praise and self-righteousness over the nuclear issue, which in turn perpetuated this illusion of national greatness in the minds of Islamic Republic leaders. Ironically the Islamic Republic had the US to thank for its recent change in fortunes: the swift American decapitation of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes in 2001 and 2003 respectively eliminated two of Iran's bitterest regional enemies. As the coalition forces became evermore bogged down in those two theatres of war, and as the price of oil rose ever higher, many commentators began to hail the

⁵⁰ Quoted in Chubin, 25

⁵¹ Quoted in Bahgat, p.323

⁵² Chubin, p.19

unprecedented 'rise' of Iran to regional power status.⁵³ Iranian power and influence was magnified, moreover, with the subsequent American-wrought reinvention of Iraq as a Shia-dominated state, a critical development in what some scholars - and nervous Sunni Arab leaders - labelled the 'Shia revival'.⁵⁴ While some Sunni leaders spoke of a plot to erect a 'Shia crescent' across the region, the Shia revival was in reality an interlocking and mutually supporting series of resurgent Shia national identities in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon.⁵⁵ As the 'mother country' of Shi'ism, Iran remained a natural source of moral, financial, political and military support for Shia groups dispersed across the Middle East and South Asia. Every time Iraqi Shia groups or Hizbollah beat a path to Tehran's door, Iran's standing and influence in the Shia revival became stronger, a nexus that only strengthened with the arrival of the neoconservatives such as Ahmadinejad who, while spruiking pan-Islamic causes such as Palestine, hailed from the wing of the Islamic Revolution very much committed to sectarian Shi'ite values.⁵⁶ The Shia revival, therefore, was inextricably entwined with the 'rise of Iran', and Ahmadinejad's rambunctious nationalist rhetoric over the nuclear issue reflected both the demise of Iran's regional enemies, and its increasing influence among Shia groups who were themselves demanding a more active role in defining 'their' nationalisms.⁵⁷ In Tehran's worldview a nuclear Iran would not only confirm Iran's new status as a major regional power, but also boost its standing among Shia, which would in turn bolster Iran's international influence even more. The 'new'

⁵³ D. Hirst, 'Iran and Israel will be kings of the Middle East jungle', *The Guardian*, Friday 13th January 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,1685460,00.html>, accessed Wednesday 28th March 2006, 0855 hrs

⁵⁴ V. Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 2006

⁵⁵ Nasr writes: "Shia revival therefore [does not] mean pan-Shiism or a unitary Shia language of power, but anchoring Shia interests in national identities. In time, "Iraqi-ness" and "Bahrain-ness" and even "Lebanese-ness" – given the Shias' favourable numbers there – may come to mean forms of "Shia-ness" just as Iranian nationalism has long been entwined with Shia identity. For the time being, new conceptions of nationalism, divorced from the Sunni-dominated Arab identity of old, are a convenient way of breaking apart the old order. In time they may transcend sectarian identities as well". See Nasr, 2006, pp.233-234; On the Sunni fear of a 'Shia crescent' see D. Hirst, 'Arab leaders watch in fear as Shia emancipation draws near', *The Guardian*, Thursday January 27 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,1399370,00.html>, accessed 24/10/2007 1800 hrs

⁵⁶ Nasr, 2006, p.225. Nasr succinctly describes the unparalleled influence Iran now wields in the Middle East, most of all in Iraq. On this issue see also the International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 38, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, 21 March 2005

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=3328>, accessed 03/11/2007

⁵⁷ Nasr, 2006, p.213

nationalisms of Shia revival and the Iranian neoconservatives thus derived sustenance from each other.

This nuclear nationalism, however, like any expression of Iranian nationalism, also contained within its bluster the seeds of doubt and a feeling of profound insecurity about Iran's regional standing. Just as the last Shah propagated an image of an all-powerful Iran while retaining a private belief that the US and UK would undermine him should he get too big for his imperial boots, Islamic Republic leaders engaged in nationalist hyperbole despite, or indeed because of, a nagging national inferiority complex that centred around Iran's perceived vulnerability to capricious foreign powers. While the zeal to export the revolution had long faded, the Islamic Republic still perceived itself as a revolutionary state, and like other revolutionary regimes it was inclined to be at turns overconfident in its 'mission for humanity' and also extremely insecure, sensing 'enemies of the revolution' in all quarters.⁵⁸ Through recourse to self-congratulatory and confrontational hyperbole, Ahmadinejad and others sought to exorcise the victim mentality that is such a part of Iranian national security perceptions. In the Iranian mind, the country's modern history was a tragic story of foreign aggression and interference, a running sore that became a permanent scar as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. Although many veterans such as Ahmadinejad considered their war service as a badge of honour, the sheer loss of life and the perception of Western and Gulf Arab connivance at prodding Saddam Hussein to attack in the first place, engendered a bitterness that made the war as the "principal conditioner" of Tehran's national security outlook.⁵⁹ The memory of the bloody eight year war merged with deep Iranian fears over the post-9/11 security environment in which the enmity with the US deepened and, what is more, had become much more proximate given the deployment of American military forces around Iran's borders. Taken as a whole, the legacy of the war with Iraq, Iran's cool relations with powerful Arab states, the enmity with Israel, and now the uncomfortably close presence of the US presented a compelling rationale for nuclear deterrence, based around a strategy of

⁵⁸ Chubin, p.14

⁵⁹ Chubin, p.18; see also F. Mokhtari, 'No One Will Scratch My Back: Iranian Security Perceptions in Historical Context', *The Middle East Journal*, 59 (2) Spring 2005, 209-229

nuclear ‘strategic ambiguity’ in which the mere possibility of an offensive nuclear capability would suffice to ward off foes.⁶⁰ Outlining this strategic rationale, and perhaps with an eye to North Korea, which had escaped punitive military action over its nuclear program, the Iranian chief nuclear negotiator and Head of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, declared: “If Iran became atomic Iran, no longer will anyone challenge it, because they would have to pay too high a price”.⁶¹ Ironically, this instinctive need for rhetorical grandiosity as a fig leaf for a gnawing sense of vulnerability had the potential to invite the very consequences it was intended to prevent: as Iran has become more intransigent over its nuclear program, the more Israel and the United States openly hinted at air-strikes against the Islamic Republic.⁶²

The New Mossadegh

The politics of the Iranian nuclear crisis also betrayed an important domestic subtext. For the Islamic Republic in general and Ahmadinejad in particular, the most immediate threat to regime survival derived less from a possible Western airstrike and more from declining domestic political support. Confronted with this threat to the longevity of the political system, the Islamic Republic took to manipulating nationalist sentiment over the nuclear crisis as a means of maintaining political legitimacy. Ahmadinejad was a mouthpiece for such propaganda efforts, but the President himself also exploited nuclear nationalism to conceal his own economic failings and score points against intra-regime opponents. Let us examine these issues in greater detail.

Although many Westerners still assumed that the Islamic Republic was a hotbed of ideological fanaticism, by the early 2000s the collapse of the reform movement had bred what Christopher de Bellaigue called a “sullenly depoliticized” society inside the

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the Iranian rationale for deterrence, see K. Pollack, ‘Bringing Iran to the Bargaining Table’, *Current History*, November 2006, pp.365-366. See also Bahgat.

⁶¹ Quoted in Chubin, p.33

⁶² While conflicting signals came out of Washington across 2006 and 2007, the oft-repeated caveat from American officials was that “all options” remained on the table in the quest to deal with Iran. See for example D. Sanger, ‘On Iran, Bush confronts haunting echoes of Iran’, *The New York Times*, January 28 2007, p. 1.1

Islamic Republic.⁶³ The regime was still able to draw sizeable crowds from its conservative constituency to key anniversaries such as the victory of the revolution or Khomeini's death, but the social foundations of the Islamic Republic were becoming increasingly tenuous. Due in large part to the anti-democratic tactics of the neoconservatives and their conservative counterparts, voter apathy and disillusionment deeply permeated society in Ahmadinejad's Iran, particularly among the country's bulging cohort of young people. The neoconservative political triumph, in other words, rapidly became a pyrrhic victory, marred by disenchantment with and disengagement from the state among the general population.⁶⁴

Aware that the cost of stifling reform and denying democracy entailed a loss of legitimacy, and mindful that appeals to perpetuate the Islamic revolution no longer resonated with Iranians, the Islamic Republic soon identified the nuclear issue as an iconic issue with which to rally nationalistic support around a tired regime. During Ahmadinejad's first term many journalists and scholars peddled the orthodoxy that the majority of Iranians unconditionally supported their country's nuclear programme, although other observers have since questioned the extent to which the citizenry was genuinely behind the state.⁶⁵ One study of youth attitudes found that while Iran's young people agreed in principle with the nuclear programme, such sentiments did not equate to an expression of support for the regime. Pressed on the issue, the study found that Iranian youths would have gladly sacrificed the nuclear program if it meant that the current leaders were no longer in charge.⁶⁶ Perhaps because of this equivocalness which was hidden by doctored opinion polls, the Islamic Republic

⁶³ C. de Bellaigue, 'Iran', *Foreign Policy*, 148 May/June 2005, p.19 (hereafter de Bellaigue, 2005a)

⁶⁴ Ansari, 2006, pp.194-195, 212

⁶⁵ The Times, for example, reported in August 2005 that the nuclear crisis has "galvanized all political factions, classes and public opinion". See R. Navai, 'A divided nation puts differences aside on the nuclear road', *Times Online*, August 11 2005, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article554000.ece. Similarly Gawdat Bahgat wrote that On almost all domestic and foreign policy issues, Iran spoke with more than one voice. Nuclear power, however, is one of the few exceptions. The right to develop nuclear power is a matter of national pride, where the population is largely united behind the regime. See Bahgat, p. 323. Christopher de Bellaigue on the other hand has written that in almost five years of living in Iran he never once heard a spontaneous conversation about the nuclear programme among average Iranians. See de Bellaigue, 2005a, p. 19

⁶⁶ J. Cohen, Iran's Young Opposition: Youth in Post-Revolutionary Iran, *SAIS Review*, vol. XXVI, Summer-Fall, 2006, p. 9

vigorously pursued the propaganda windfall of the nuclear crisis. In the aftermath of the 2004 Majles election, for example, which returned a dubiously high proportion of neoconservative deputies, and as tensions between the West and Iran heated up over the latter's nuclear program, state television began airing long patriotic advertisements, complete with the national anthem as a backing track, explaining to Iranians why they needed nuclear power, and reminding them that the "achievements of our scientists are another step forward in our struggle for independence".⁶⁷ At other times the media dutifully broadcast the unofficial (and therefore enduringly popular) anthem *Ey Iran* last heard during the dark years of the Iran-Iraq War. The memory of the war, moreover, was explicitly played upon by the Islamic Republic via a cleverly-constructed propaganda nexus that linked the nuclear crisis to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Particularly during the annual anniversary of the victory of the revolution, television advertisements broadcast extended segments of revolutionary street protests and men heading off to fight the Iraqi invaders, as if to emphasize the historical and contemporary perfidies against the nation and the revolution. The West, Islamic Republic spin doctors hoped to implant in Iranian minds, was a threat to the nation, not just the regime. At other times short television pieces were broadcast about Iranian history, mythology and scenic beauty, all designed to imbue a strong sense of national identity and patriotic vigour in the face of steadily increasing Western pressure upon Iran.⁶⁸ As Ali Ansari notes:

It became an exercise in vulgar nationalism, a hijacking of an ideology in the interests of power that disguised the supreme irony: a Parliament elected on the basis of contempt for the national will presenting itself as the protector of that nation.⁶⁹

Protecting the integrity of the nation was indeed uppermost in the minds of Iranian leaders at this particular juncture. Not only was public apathy threatening the regime's social base, but national security too had been imperiled by simmering ethnic unrest around Iran's borders which threatened Iran's territorial integrity. This presented an additional imperative for the Iranian state to ramp up nationalist feeling

⁶⁷ F. Harrison, 'Iranians back drive for nuclear power', *BBC News*, 24/5/2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4574931.stm, accessed 28/3/2007 1057 hrs

⁶⁸ Ansari, 2006, pp.194-195

⁶⁹ Ansari, 2006, p.216

over the nuclear issue by purporting to be the defender of the Iranian nation rather than the saviour of its own political skin. Ahmadinejad's nuclear roadshow became a disingenuous way for the regime to paper over ethnic minority complaints – to a large extent the result of regime incompetence and neglect - and instead focus attention on external enemies. Indeed for all the regime's talk of national unity, there remained manifold tensions among minority populations.⁷⁰ In May 2006 thousands of Azeris, who comprised the largest minority in Iran, staged violent protests in reaction to a cartoon published by a state-owned newspaper depicting a cockroach speaking the Azeri dialect.⁷¹ The government moved quickly to shut down the newspaper and offered its staple accusation that foreign plotters were again trying to divide the nation. In a live address to the nation, Ahmadinejad declared “[t]he United States and its allies should know that they will not be able to provoke divisions and differences, through desperate attempts, among the dear Iranian nation”.⁷²

Ethnically-Arab Khuzestan witnessed even more violent unrest following Ahmadinejad's ascent to the presidency.⁷³ Despite Khuzestan being the centre of Iran's oil production, the province ranked among Iran's poorest and least-developed. Simmering resentment at the central government's lack of investment and alleged discriminatory policies exploded into riots in April 2005 after the release of a leaked letter, attributed to former vice-president Mohammad Ali Abahi, which detailed plans to ethnically cleanse the province by expelling Arabs and replacing them with ethnic Persians. In the aftermath of these riots came a spate of bombings and oil line sabotage followed by heavy-handed government repression.⁷⁴ Nor was Iran's most

⁷⁰ See for example the 2007 Persian New Year Message of the Supreme Leader who speaks of “unity and oneness”. *Taakid e rahbar e Iran bar vahdat e melli dar saal e no*, BBC Persian, March 21 2007, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/03/070321_he-si-nowruz-messages.shtml
Accessed 25/10/2007 1230 hrs

⁷¹ M. Collin, ‘Iran Azeris protest over cartoon’, BBC News, May 28 2006
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5024550.stm
Accessed 25/10/07

⁷² Quoted in J. Bradley, ‘Iran's Ethnic Tinderbox’, The Washington Quarterly, 30 (1) Winter 2006-2007, p.182

⁷³ ‘Iran clamps down on Arab protests’, BBC News, July 27 2005
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4721893.stm
Accessed 25/10/07

⁷⁴ Bradley, pp.183-186

intractable separatist problem, the Kurdish issue, peacefully resolved in Ahmadinejad's term. In July 2005 Iranian security forces shot dead a young Kurd, sparking demonstrations in cities across northwestern Iran, and almost a year later an unexplained series of explosions rocked Kermanshah.⁷⁵ The old cross-border dynamics were at play again, with Kurdish gains in Iraq reverberating amongst their brethren in surrounding countries, including Iran, causing yet more border security headaches for the regime in Tehran.⁷⁶

To the east, predominantly-Sunni Baluchistan was also afflicted with increased violence and instability. The province, long a hotbed of violent drug gangs smuggling opium and heroin over the border from Afghanistan, seethed with smouldering ethnic and sectarian tensions. Two separatist groups, the Baluchistan Liberation Front and the Baluchistan Protection Council, claimed to be active in the province, taking advantage of local resentment towards the central government which Baluchis claimed was oppressing their local culture and neglecting the region's economy and infrastructure. A more immediate threat to the central government was a Sunni rebel group based in the province, *Jundallah* (God's Brigade), which waged a low-level insurgency against Iranian security forces. In December 2005 Ahmadinejad's motorcade was attacked by what the Iranian press termed "armed bandits and trouble-makers" along the Zabol-Saravan highway, although other government sources attributed the attack to the *Jundallah*. The audacious nature of the attack on the presidential motorcade forced the government into damage control and the issue was quickly hushed-up, with subsequent reports denying Ahmadinejad was even present and therefore quashing rumours the affair was in fact a serious assassination attempt on the president.⁷⁷ There was no possibility, however, of hushing-up the February 2007 bomb attack in the south-eastern town of Zahedan that killed eleven

⁷⁵ Bradley, p.187

⁷⁶ For a report on the clashes between Kurds and Iranian forces see R. Oppel Jr., 'Kurdish militants' other front: Iran', *International Herald Tribune*, October 22 2007
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/10/22/europe/kurds.php>

Accessed 25/10/07

⁷⁷ Iranian Police Chief denies assassination attempt on Ahmadinejad, *Qatar News Agency*, December 20 2005

Revolutionary Guardsmen died and which the government blamed on *Jundallah*.⁷⁸ Tehran, naturally, also accused the US of supporting these Sunni insurgents, adding grist to the rumour mill that American forces were already conducting covert action inside Iran.⁷⁹ Given these outbreaks of violence around the periphery from 2005-2007, paranoia within the Iranian ruling establishment reached all new heights, spurred on by the official American policy of 'regime change' in Iran and recent activity amongst diaspora opposition groups. A 2006 conference in Washington, for example, brought together representatives from Kurdish, Baluchi, Khuzestani, Turkmen and Azeri opposition groups hoping to form a common front against the regime in Tehran.⁸⁰ Such developments stoked old fears in Iran over 'centre-periphery' relations, a constant concern of the state throughout modern Iranian history as it battled to submerge regional and ethnic loyalties into a centralized nation-state.⁸¹ As we have seen in previous chapters the Islamic Republic, too, has had to grapple with this question, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. The political subtext of Ahmadinejad's nationalistic speeches across Iran, therefore, was an effort to project an image of a strong regime, backed by the people, and in total control of its sovereign territory. There was, in other words, a calculated national security imperative behind the nationalist rhetoric:

The enemies of Iran are trying to divide the Iranian nation. But they should know the people are wise to this trick. They will not fall for it again. Our main task is to develop and build the Iranian nation. No one will stop us.⁸²

Setting aside the state for a moment, one must also consider the way in which Ahmadinejad endeavoured to manipulate the nuclear crisis for his own political benefit. In light of the desperate shortage of popular and charismatic political leaders

⁷⁸ 'Iranian bombing 'kills 11 people'', *BBC News*, Wednesday 14 February 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6359971.stm, accessed Tuesday 27 February 2007

⁷⁹ S. Hersh, 'The Coming Wars', *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/01/24/050124fa_fact Accessed 25/10/07; G. Dinmore, 'US Marines probe tensions among Iran's ethnic minorities', *Financial Times*, Saturday 24 February 2006, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/ed436938-a49d-11da-897c-0000779e2340.html>, accessed Tuesday 27 February 2007

⁸⁰ Bradley, p.181

⁸¹ Atabaki, pp. 23-44

⁸² S. Tisdall, 'Ahmadinejad roadshow seduces an adoring public', *The Guardian*, August 19 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329557086-117700,00.html>, Accessed 20/08/2007

in the post-Khatami Islamic Republic, the nuclear issue afforded Ahmadinejad the opportunity to recapture the aura of Iran's most famous nationalist leader, Dr Mohammad Mossadegh. Indeed, the new President's stinging attack on 'nuclear apartheid' at the United Nations was eerily reminiscent of Mossadegh's own denunciation of Western attempts to deny Iran the right of energy self-sufficiency 54 years previously. The memory of this era is recognized today in a national holiday which commemorates the oil nationalization movement, although the desultory repairs undertaken by the ICHO in 2006 to Mossadegh's anonymous, dilapidated villa west of Tehran symbolized the continuing official ambivalence to the memory of the famous Prime Minister.⁸³

Ahmadinejad, it must be said, exhibited this same distrust of the clerics towards Mossadegh, and even during his election campaign he made scant mention of the oil nationalization hero.⁸⁴ In a country, though, where historical allusion is deeply rooted in the political culture, Ahmadinejad soon adroitly cast himself as the 'new' Mossadegh, the 'saviour' of Iran's sovereign right to develop nuclear energy. It was a calculated political ploy to co-opt the reformists' own attempts to latch on to the hallowed memory of the 1950s National Front/Oil Nationalization movement.⁸⁵ The nuclear issue was a valuable bandwagon for Ahmadinejad to leap upon after his election victory, and at his first post-election news conference Ahmadinejad did not mince his words. While the Iranian Foreign Ministry had reminded Western journalists that "[t]he nuclear issue is a part of a macro policy, and our position will not change with a change of a president", it was clear that this would be Ahmadinejad's pet issue.⁸⁶ "Iran has a right", the President-elect declared, "to achieve scientific developments in all fields". He went on:

⁸³ Interview with Western correspondent, Tehran, May 7 2006

⁸⁴ de Bellaigue, 2005a, p. 20

⁸⁵ Ansari, 2006, p.162. See also Buchta, , p.182

⁸⁶ 'Iran to maintain nuclear policy', *BBC News*, http://news.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/hi/middle_east/4624193.stm
Accessed 28/3/2007

We need the peaceful nuclear technology for energy, medical and agricultural purposes, and our scientific progress. We need it for the development of our country and we shall carry on with it.⁸⁷

It was an argument no self-respecting Iranian, even the most hardened opponent of the Islamic Republic, could refute. Armed with this propaganda tool and confident that his election represented the will of the Iranian people (or so he told journalists), Ahmadinejad remained in permanent campaign mode, remorselessly flogging the nuclear issue to his core constituency. Ahmadinejad was determined that he, and not the Khatami-era reformists, would be the true heir of the Oil Nationalization movement. The new President may have cast himself as a feisty, anti-establishment figure like Mossadegh but there the political similarity ended for whereas Khatami and the reformists had sought to recapture the democratic spirit of the Mossadegh years, neoconservatives like Ahmadinejad emphasized that they were the guardians of national security and honour, not civic political rights.

In time the 'New Mossadegh' saw himself as superior to that of old. By April 2006 when, as we saw above, Iranian scientists had completed the nuclear fuel cycle, Ahmadinejad was confidently announcing that "[n]uclear matters are one hundred times more valuable for the Iranian nation than the nationalization of the oil industry".⁸⁸ The historical allusion bug afflicted others too. Friday prayer leaders around Iran eagerly spruiked the nuclear issue to their flocks. In Dezful, a town scarred by the Iran-Iraq War, Seyyed Hasan Taqavi told worshippers that "[t]oday, the nuclear industry is as important as the nationalization of oil several decades ago and no-one can prevent Iran's independence and dignity".⁸⁹

Yet for all his nationalist strutting, and in spite of the efforts of regime spin doctors, Ahmadinejad was not immune from criticism over his economic failings and

⁸⁷ 'Iran to maintain nuclear policy', BBC News, http://news.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/hi/middle_east/4624193.stm

Accessed 28/3/2007

⁸⁸ *Masa'ale-ye hasteyi sad barabar melli shodan-e san'at-e naft baraye mellat- e Iran arzesh darad*, *Etelle'at*, Seshanbe 5th Ordibehesht 1385, number 2361, p.1

⁸⁹ 'Senior clerics criticize reporting of Iran's case to Security Council', BBC Monitoring News Alert, Saturday 11th March 2006

confrontational foreign policy. Murmurs of discontent from the street and factional sniping only made the President more inclined to put up a patriotic smokescreen in the midst of the nuclear crisis to gloss over mistakes and cow political rivals. Ahmadinejad, after all, was elected promising to “put the oil money on everyone’s dinner table”, but in reality he was not able to effect major macroeconomic change.⁹⁰ This was in part due to the deep structural problems of the oil-dependent, state-dominated economy which remained chronically inefficient and corrupt, beset with crippling US sanctions, and obliged to expend billions of dollars annually in subsidies to the poor.⁹¹ Ahmadinejad’s own erratic economic management, however, was by any measure startlingly incompetent. His denunciation of the stock market during the election buildup sufficed to scare away domestic investors whose precious capital was sorely needed to kickstart privatization of the moribund state-controlled sectors of the economy and therefore raise productivity.⁹² On his provincial tours he announced spur-of-the-moment spending plans which committed the government to unaffordable development projects. In 2007 he abruptly increased the minimum wage before sheepishly scaling it back when unemployment jumped dramatically. The new President also purged the Management and Planning Organization of experienced technocrats and replaced them with his cronies from the Revolutionary Guards.⁹³ In order to fulfill his election promises of helping the lower classes, Ahmadinejad convinced the Majles to provide funds for a massive increase in public expenditure especially on subsidies, cheap loans and grants for the poor, and further development projects. The luxury of high oil prices bred a hubris which took little account of the fact that the injection of such amounts into the economy only exacerbated inflation and therefore inflicted greater economic pain upon those urban poor whom Ahmadinejad had vowed to help.⁹⁴ By 2007 inflation in Iran was estimated to be over

⁹⁰ Quoted in ‘The big squeeze’, *The Economist*, July 21 2007, 384 (8538), p.11

⁹¹ For an overview of the manifest economic problems facing the Islamic Republic see P. Alizadeh (ed.), *The Economy of Iran: The Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, London, IB Taurus, 2000

⁹² For a concise overview of the Ahmadinejad government’s failed economic policies see J. Amuzegar, ‘The Ahmadinejad Era: Preparing for the Apocalypse’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 60 (2), Spring/Summer 2007, pp. 35-53

⁹³ ‘The big squeeze’, *The Economist*, July 21 2007, 384 (8538), p.11

⁹⁴ Interview with Tehran-based Political Analyst, Tehran, June 11 2006

25 percent, with the rate of unemployment not far behind this extraordinary figure.⁹⁵ In a richly symbolic move the central bank caved in to inflationary pressures by issuing a new 50,000 rial ‘atomic’ banknote in early 2007 embossed on one side with electrons orbiting an atom upon a map of Iran. An accompanying quote from the Prophet Mohammad minted on the new notes read “Men from the Land of Persia will attain scientific knowledge even if it is as far as the Pleiades”⁹⁶. The irony of course was that this new note, which was supposed to glorify Iran’s nuclear achievements instead highlighted the raging inflation afflicting the economy. When quizzed about the contradictions in his economic policy which had caused such high inflation in the first place, Ahmadinejad replied “I pray to God that I will never know about economics”, and dismissed high inflation as a “rumour”.⁹⁷

By late-2006/early-2007 Ahmadinejad’s brazen and flippant responses to economic exigencies was causing public outcry over his mishandling of the economy, a development accompanied by a mounting chorus of press criticism of the President. In the Majles, 150 MPs signed a joint letter blaming Ahmadinejad for the raging inflation and unemployment, in a move that could only have occurred with the consent of the Supreme Leader himself, and which seemed to indicate that the mentor and protégé were moving apart.⁹⁸ Even the conservative newspapers got in on the act; *Jomhuri Islami*, usually an ally of Ahmadinejad’s, articulated what had been on many lips for some time by attacking the President’s hijacking of the nuclear crisis in order to conceal his economic policy failings:

Turning the nuclear issue into a propaganda slogan gives the impression that you, to cover up flaws in the government, are exaggerating its importance. If people get the impression that the government is exaggerating the nuclear case to divert attention from their demands, you will cause this national issue to lose public support.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ ‘The big squeeze’, *The Economist*, July 21 2007, 384 (8538), p.11

⁹⁶ ‘Iran defiant with atomic banknote’, *BBC News*, news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6441777, accessed 10/04/2009

⁹⁷ Ibid; R. Tait, ‘Shoppers see red and President feels the heat over tomatoes’, *The Guardian*, January 28 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,2000346,00.html>, accessed Sunday 28/01/2007

⁹⁸ R. Tait, ‘President’s future in doubt as MPs rebel and economic crisis grows’, *The Guardian*, January 16 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329686581-117700,00.html>, Accessed 17/01/2007

⁹⁹ R. Tait, ‘President’s future in doubt as MPs rebel and economic crisis grows’, *The Guardian*, January 16 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329686581-117700,00.html>, Accessed 17/01/2007

Given this relentless criticism and the intensely factional nature of Iranian politics, the President continued to seize on the nuclear issue in order to steal a march on political rivals. Ahmadinejad's election campaign had, after all, made a point of distinguishing the austere, patriotic young Tehran mayor from the senior clerics such as Rafsanjani whose infamous corruption earned him the decidedly unpatriotic epithet *vatan-forush* (lit. 'country-seller', i.e. traitor), and once in office the nuclear crisis allowed the 'New Mossadegh' to overshadow rivals across the political spectrum. This desire to monopolize the defense of Iran's nuclear program became a signal feature of neoconservatives such as Ahmadinejad who boasted a pronounced group mentality that viewed 'outsiders', even within the same political system, as hostile.¹⁰⁰ The zeal with which the new President purged the bureaucracy of Khatami loyalists and replaced them with his own tight-knit coterie of allies inflamed intra-regime antagonism, which in turn reinforced the siege mentality among Ahmadinejad and his cabal. The President's incessant playing of the nationalist card could not, however, drown out the cries of cronyism that over time transformed into outright criticism of the Ahmadinejad and his handling of the entire nuclear crisis. Press criticism of Ahmadinejad's confrontational posture was especially intense, with the fundamentalist newspaper *Resalat* chiming in by declaring that "[n]either weakness nor inexperience and unnecessary rhetorical aggression is acceptable in our foreign policy".¹⁰¹ Such criticism was ample ammunition for Ahmadinejad's political rivals, notably Rafsanjani, whose savvy political skills ensured he did not leave the political stage for long despite the presidential election debacle. While pro-Ahmadinejad candidates fared poorly in the December 2006 Local Council election, a resurgent Rafsanjani camp performed very well, and began to step up its criticism of Ahmadinejad's uncompromising stance on the nuclear crisis which it claimed had left Iran

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No. 21, *Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad's Tumultuous Presidency*, February 6 2007 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4647&l=1>, p. 6, accessed 8/09/2007

¹⁰¹ R. Tait and I. Black, 'Ahmadinejad under fire in Iran for hardline nuclear stance', *The Guardian*, February 27 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329728283-111322,00.html>, Accessed 27/02/2007

internationally isolated and vulnerable to possible military strikes.¹⁰² In yet another irony, the President's desire to overshadow political rivals by engaging in confrontation with the West over the nuclear issue had instead enhanced the pragmatists and reformists he was trying to undermine.

Conclusion

To conclude we might return to Ahmadinejad's 2007 address in Khuzestan and glimpse the real dynamics at work. His trip to rally support in this province was cancelled at the last minute following concerns about the president's safety in the restive province. Ahmadinejad was not to be deterred however; national security demanded that a wavering province be re-enthused with a stirring nationalist oration. After his address in Ahvaz he went to give a similar speech in Khorramshahr, the Iranian 'Stalingrad' of the Iran-Iraq War, a city he passed through as a young man on the way to the frontlines of that conflict. In Susangerd he descended the stairs of the presidential plane decked out in Arab dress in deference to local culture, something that must have made past self-styled nationalists such as Mohammad Reza Shah turn in their sarcophagi. In his various addresses in and around Khuzestan he endeavoured to salvage any vestiges of the province's wartime patriotic spirit both for his own ailing presidency and for a regime deeply embroiled in the nuclear crisis with the West. No mention was made of the bombings, riots and savage government repression; instead he promised new government projects and investment in the province. As he addressed the crowds, Ahmadinejad had his eye over his shoulder, looking back north to Tehran where his political rivals were busy imagining scenarios of a post-Ahmadinejad Islamic Republic.

In terms of the wider themes of this study, Ahmadinejad's first term demonstrated the continuing evolution of nationalist rhetoric in the Islamic Republic. Gone was the rhetoric of civic nationalism; in its place came nuclear nationalism. This new variant

¹⁰² R. Tait, 'Ahmadinejad in electoral setback', *The Guardian*, December 18 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1974821,00.html>, Accessed 28/03/2007

of nationalist rhetoric emanated from the worldview of the Islamic neoconservatives for whom the imperatives of national security, the rationale of the nuclear programme, and the opportunity to step up confrontation with the West trumped any concern for civic nationalism. Clearly many Iranians supported this stance, and responded enthusiastically to Ahmadinejad's calculated rhetoric which encompassed historical allegories with the oil nationalization movement and motifs of Shi'ite forbearance in the face of injustice and oppression, and now "nuclear apartheid". On the other hand the level of apathy amongst much of the population, particularly during the 2005 election, was a warning to the Islamic neoconservatives and the regime as a whole that popular support for the Islamic Republic appeared to be ebbing. The nuclear crisis, therefore, offered a valuable propaganda tool with which to drum up pro-regime support and maintain regime legitimacy. The reflexive interplay between state and society which had underpinned the discourse of nationalism across modern Iranian history was thus an important background factor during the era of nuclear nationalism.

Conclusion

We began this study with the hypothesis that *nationalism has endured and evolved through the Islamic Revolution and the history of the Islamic Republic as an essential mode of discourse, as an integral element of individual and collective worldviews, and as an important tool of regime political legitimation*. The preceding pages, outlining the absorbing transmutations of Iranian nationalism from 1979 until 2007, have validated this hypothesis.

The trajectory of nationalism throughout and beyond the 1979 revolution was of course heavily influenced by its gestation in the mid-nineteenth century and its evolution across the twentieth century. The rise of modern Iranian nationalism was in turn rooted in the pre-existing historical consciousness of Iran as an ancient and distinct civilization. This legend of Iran, enshrined in the grandeur of Persian language and literature, was passed down through succeeding generations across the Iranian plateau. Iran's distinctive identity became further entrenched with the rise of Shi'ism as the 'national' religion in the sixteenth century. What we have attempted to argue here is that a recognizably modern Iranian nationalism developed in incremental steps during the late-Qajar era as European ideas of cartography, historiography and nationhood gained increasing currency in high Iranian society. The discourse of nationalism in this era built upon these older notions of Iran, as evidenced in the eagerness to rediscover Iran's pre-Islamic greatness, and sometimes evolving in reaction to them, such as the concern to disparage Iran's Islamic past which some felt was a stain on the national honour. These embryonic conceptions of Iranian nationalism and national identity developed concurrently with a growing national self-awareness across society. Burgeoning Iranian nationalism gained impetus from below as ordinary Iranians, increasingly aggrieved at the encroachment of imperialism, but also increasingly interconnected through the medium of print and the telegraph, expressed old fears and new national self-awareness in large-scale protests such as the Tobacco Concession Revolt which became signal events in the history of Iranian nationalism. Yet this infusion of older identities, new cultural interpretations amongst the elite, and outpourings of demotic nationalism in turn created a diverse

discourse of nationalism reflecting varying conceptions of what constituted Iranian national identity and competing visions of how the nation should function as a political community. In the early decades of the twentieth century, therefore, nationalist discourse exhibited elements of other ideologies and identities from Shi'ite Islam and constitutionalism through to secularism and monarchism. Reza Shah is rightly credited for establishing Iran as a modern nation-state, and in doing so firmly implanting the abstract notion of Iran as a nation in the body politic, but he certainly did not hold a monopoly on the interpretation of Iranian nationalism despite all his efforts to do so. The discourse of nationalism remained dispersed across different groups in Iranian society each with their own agendas, outlooks and prejudices.

The contestability of Iranian nationalism continued through the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. The Shah's attempts to monopolise the discourse and symbolism of nationalism as a means of eclipsing the legacy of Mohammad Mossadegh sparked nationalistic counter-discourses from opposition groups which fed on the seething discontent across society over the state's commitment to breakneck modernization and its alliance with the US. Far from becoming the embodiment of the Iranian nation, Mohammad Reza Shah in fact fatally punctured his nationalist credentials and was never able to burnish a sense of legitimacy among the populace.

When the revolution finally exploded into life during 1978/79 it marked the end of Pahlavi nationalism, but not of nationalism itself. While a self-conscious religious mood pervaded the revolution, it was also marked by a spontaneous demotic outpouring of nationalistic feeling which reflected the sentiments of ordinary Iranians and obliged political actors to pander to such emotions by infusing their rhetoric – be it Marxist, Secular, Radical Islamist, Islamic modernist – with nationalist themes and motifs. Nationalism was in many ways a common denominator in a heterogeneous revolutionary coalition although in the end it would be Khomeini who emerged triumphant with a carefully calibrated message that appealed to religious sensibilities and patriotic yearnings for national independence. He may have rejected the epithet of 'nationalist' but his genius for rousing nationalist passion remained unsurpassed.

This is not to conclude definitively that the revolution was more nationalist than religious or vice versa. Endeavouring to ascertain where religious sentiment ended and nationalist spirit began in the minds of the revolutionaries is a fruitless intellectual task. Trying to prove, for example, that Khomeini and his comrades-in-arms cared nothing for Iran and were single-mindedly devoted to establishing a pan-Islamic state is a similarly stark and ultimately pointless categorization. Mehdi Bazargan, for one, the Prime Minister whom Khomeini sidelined during the revolution, sought to characterize the revolution by claiming that whereas he wanted Islam for Iran, the Imam wanted Iran for Islam.¹ We have here instead sought to present a more nuanced position by emphasizing the intricate ways in which religion and nationalism were coiled around each other in the minds and rhetoric of the revolutionaries across the political spectrum.

At the same time, however, we must be careful not to essentialize the phenomenon of nationalism during the revolutionary period and its aftermath. As we have explored in the preceding pages, nationalism in the Islamic Republic was subject to an ongoing process of evolution. This mutability of nationalism after 1979, a key theme of our study, was influenced by a range of factors such as varying styles and personas of leadership, the travails of factionalism, and unexpected historical events such as war. Leading on from the revolution, the discourse of nationalism underwent a significant reorientation in September 1980 when Saddam Hussein tried to extinguish out the revolution by invading Iran. The Islamic Republic responded by mounting a highly effective propaganda campaign to cast the war as a sacred defense of Islam and the homeland, thereby sacralising the revolutionary Iranian nation. In the postwar era, President Rafsanjani endeavoured to maintain the sense of national sacrifice and unity in the service of reconstruction. His ‘developmental nationalism’, with echoes of Reza Shah, stressed Iran’s rebirth, particularly as a Persian Gulf power. It was his presidential successor, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who demonstrated how a change in leadership style and a fresh outlook could herald a major shift in nationalist discourse. Khatami’s brand of civic nationalism – eloquently summed up in the reformist slogan “Iran for all Iranians” –

¹ M. Bazargan, *Enqelab-e Iran dar do harekat*, Tehran, Naraq, 1363/1984

shifted the nationalist paradigm away from revolutionary and wartime nationalism which was suffused with the theme of Iran as a sacred nation and bastion of global revolution, to one in which Iranian nationalism was predicated on the idea that Iran was a community of citizens bound together by common rights and values. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in the 2005 presidential election heralded another manifestation of nationalism. Derisively dismissing the reformist attempt to reconcile the republican and religious aspects of the constitution, Ahmadinejad and his allies endeavoured to reassert the authoritarian tendencies of the Islamic Republic. In lieu of the more cerebral approach of Khatami to the question of state-society relations, the new President seized on Iran's nuclear programme to both stir up nationalist passions and overshadow political rivals by presenting himself as a genuine patriot.

The conjunction of nationalism and religion in the Islamic Republic has been another overarching theme of this study. Despite its determination to supplant the Pahlavi nationalist project, and boasting a self-conscious commitment to pan-Islamism, the Islamic Republic reified and upheld the Iranian nation under the guise of religion. Like other societies throughout history, the merging of religious and nationalist feeling in the Iranian self-perception amplified a sense of national exceptionalism. This inextricable link between religion and nationalism was exemplified in the rhetoric of Khomeini and his peers which boomed out of Tehran in the early years of the revolution. The regular pronouncements on the necessity of exporting the revolution, for example, far from negating nationalism, were in fact an affirmation of a new conception of religious nationalism. Combined with the persistently effusive praise of the Iranian nation, such language highlighted a continuing nationalistic impulse in which Iranian exceptionalism was the base for this universalistic verve. In the crucible of the Iran-Iraq War, this sense of religious nationalism reached its apogee as Iranian leaders implore their citizens to defend the 'divine' nation whose defeat, Iranians were warned, would deal a shattering blow to Islam itself. In the post-war years religion and nationalism remained tightly bound but in different ways. President Khatami's outlook, for example, stressed balance, both between state and society, and between religion and national values. Seeking to transcend the culture wars of the past, Khatami stressed that Iran's pre-Islamic and

Islamic traditions were equally valued pillars of Iranian identity, a point he stressed in actions and words during a famous trip to Persepolis.

The third theme which has underpinned this study is the contestability of nationalism in the Islamic Republic. Before and after 1979 this contestability centred around a reflexive interplay between state and society which framed the discourse on nationalism. This discourse has endured as a kind of dialectic between the state, on one hand, which has attempted to build legitimacy amongst the populace, and society, on the other hand, in which expressions of nationalism have not always accorded with official interpretations. This disconnect propelled the Islamic Republic to fashion new ways of constructing consensus and legitimacy through nationalist rhetoric, imagery and motifs. During the revolution, for example, there was broad agreement around the necessity of expelling the inordinate influence of the United States in Iranian affairs but other aspects of nationalism and national identity became highly contested. In particular the desire of Khomeini and his lieutenants to efface Pahlavi nationalism by reorienting Iran's national identity towards Islam and to erect a theocracy based upon a highly selective interpretation of Islamic history provoked often violent reactions. Such opposition compelled the Islamic Republic, particularly its clerical elite, to position itself as the 'guardian of the nation' with a self-declared duty to root out imperialism, internal traitors and ethnic minorities with separatist intentions all of which were injurious to ideal of national unity Khomeini and others held so dear. While millions of Iranians actively supported the creation of a revolutionary religious nation, others demurred when the autocratic state policies began to undermine its claim to represent the nation. Save for a minority, most Iranians rallied around the state to defend the revolution and their country against the Iraqi invaders. The sacred aura bestowed on the national defense by Khomeini and other leaders was echoed in the experience of soldiers at the frontline drawn from all over Iran and thrown into the sharp end of war. The war, as one aforementioned veteran noted, in a way completed the process of nation-building as hundreds of thousands of Iranians fought together at the front under appalling conditions creating an intense feeling of national camaraderie.

Whatever the material progress achieved in reconstruction and the shrewd fashion in which Rafsanjani reappraised Iran's foreign relations, there was a notable lack of domestic support for his vision of Iran and by the mid to late 1990s the Islamic Republic was faced with a young and increasingly restive population demanding a new interpretation of state-society relations. Into this void stepped the reformists who offered a new perspective on Iranian nationalism and national identity. This new take on nationalism derived from the fertile minds of Khatami, Souroush and other reformist luminaries, but it can also be seen as an attempt by the Islamic Republic to reformulate nationalist discourse to ensure the continued legitimacy and survival of the state. As it was, many elements within the regime soon refused to countenance reformism and began to undermine Khatami's agenda, which paved the way for the rise of the Islamic neoconservatives who seized on nuclear nationalism as a means of engendering popular support.

Despite the calculated manner in which Iranian leaders have fashioned an apparent nationalist consensus over Iran's right to possess a nuclear energy programme, nationalism in the Islamic Republic remains a highly contested discourse both across the country's fractured political landscape and amongst society. Sometimes this contestation reaches comic proportions. In November 2008 for example, a spat erupted over remarks made by Rafsanjani at a seminar in Qom. When the ILNA news agency quoted Rafsanjani as praising Mossadegh's heroic anti-imperialist stand, conservatives were outraged and insisted that the ex-President's comments had been altered. Far from eulogizing Mossadegh, they claimed, Rafsanjani had in fact been talking about the great clerical opponent of Reza Shah, Seyed Modarres.² Such a petty stoush at a time when the Islamic Republic was and still is battling a grave legitimacy deficit symbolized the divide that is opening up between state and society. We noted above how "sullenly depoliticized" the Iranian population has become, particularly its youth cohorts. In a recent study of youth culture in Iran, one prominent academic was quoted as saying "[t]oday's youth are totally indifferent to politics, culture and society. If I pour a gallon

² Ahmad Zeid-Abadi, '*Nezam-e jomhuri-ye Islami va manafe' Iran va Islam*', *BBC Persian*, 15 October 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2008/10/081015_ge_az_mosadegh_hashemi.shtml, accessed 16/10/2009

of petrol on myself and set myself on fire in the classroom, none of my pupils will even turn to look”.³ Another Iranian author described the sense of fatigue amongst the wider population:

[I]n the past century Iranians have been afforded, or have produced, more opportunities to re-create themselves in a bombastic and dualistic fashion, energetically vacillating between extremes of contentious Islamism and secularism, pre-Islamic and Islamic imagination, and avid anti-imperialism and absorption in global trends. The result of these century-long Manichean struggles, some would argue, is tired bodies and souls. Having recently mustered youthful energy, yet again, to attempt the transcendence of these contentious identities, by taking refuge in a constitutionalism that could make cohabitation of these so far conflicting identities not only possible but also mutually reinforcing, many people in Iran seem to have packed their bags after their disappointment with the reform process and are finding solace in their private homes and selves.⁴

Such ambivalence has prompted Iran’s youth to explore new ways of articulating their national identity in a globalizing world. In contradistinction to the Islamic Republic’s pariah status on the world stage and its determination to expel Western cultural imperialism, young Iranians, particularly the urban youth, are increasingly espousing a new vision of national identity rooted at home but also “outward looking and cosmopolitan”.⁵ Through the medium of the internet – Farsi is the third most popular weblog language – and satellite television, young Iranians are not only defying centralized control and opening up “new spaces of dissent”, but are also assimilating foreign trends and influences in a quest to explore “what it means to be an Iranian”.⁶ Laudan Nooshin, for example, has explored how Iranian youths use Westernized musical styles to downplay aspects of national identity propounded by the state and instead project their own interpretations of *Iraniyyat* which often exhibit a fascination with Iran’s pre-Islamic past in lyrics and band names.⁷ This is not to suggest that Iran is becoming

³ K. Basmenji, *Tehran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran*, London Saqi, 2005, p. 10

⁴ F. Farhi, ‘Crafting a National Identity amidst Contentious Politics in Contemporary Iran’, *Iranian Studies*, 38 (1), March 2005, p. 7

⁵ L. Nooshin, ‘The language of rock: Iranian youth, popular music, and national identity’ in M. Semati (ed.) *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with globalization and the Islamic state*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 76-77. See also F. Adelhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 5-6

⁶ B. Rahimi, ‘The Politics of the Internet in Iran’ in M. Semati (ed.) *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with globalization and the Islamic state*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 37-8, 48; Nooshin, pp. 76-77

⁷ Nooshin, pp. 76-77

secularized in a Western fashion; religious government may have been discredited but religious teachings, mores and symbols are still an integral element of public life in Iran.⁸ Rather, it is to suggest that for all the Islamic Republic's efforts to emphasize the Islamic component of Iranian identity, society continues to challenge official interpretations of nationalism.

Nevertheless there will be no pendulum swing back to the Persian chauvinism of the Pahlavis. Many of the studies of Iranian youth focus far too much on web-literate and cynical Tehranis enamoured with Iran's pre-Islamic past, ignoring the millions of young Iranians across the country who, while sharing an antipathy to the ruling clerics, still adhere to a more traditional outlook on life and faith.⁹ Instead, it is in the brief luminescence of reformism, which has entrenched the importance of elections in Iran, that the future of nationalism in the Islamic Republic may lie. As Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr argue, the 2005 election, for all its imperfections, was one of the most "dynamic and innovative" in Iran's history, replete with targeted advertising, focus groups, and image management borrowed from the West as well as intense debates over competing conceptions of foreign policy, government and economic development.¹⁰ Elections in the Islamic Republic may not meet Western standards of propriety but they have become an important arena in which the nature of state-society relations continues to be debated, reinterpreted and tested. This political evolution reflects Iran's increasingly skeptical but sophisticated electorate, the product of a century of evolving political consciousness since the Constitutional Revolution, that has in many ways moved beyond the debilitating cultural wars over the meaning of Iran's national identity to the question of individual and collective rights vis-à-vis the state.¹¹ The legacy of reformism, in other words, has thrown into stark relief a profound question which existed at the dawn of modern Iranian nationalism and which the Islamic Revolution has yet to resolve: how can the state truly represent the nation and its citizens. Khatami's era may have ended in failure but his call

⁸ See Y. A. Abazari et al, 'Secularization in Iranian Society' in M. Semati (ed.) Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with globalization and the Islamic state, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 238-254

⁹ For two recent Tehran-centric accounts of modern Iran see A. Moaveni, Lipstick Jihad: a memoir of growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran, New York, PublicAffairs, 2005 and P. Mahdavi Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009

¹⁰ Gheissari and Nasr, 2006, pp. 148-149

¹¹ Ansari, 2003, pp. 250-253

to create an “Iran for all Iranians” has transcended the deep divisions within the political establishment to become an underlying expectation amongst the electorate which Iran’s leaders can no longer ignore. Of all the permutations of nationalism and national identity in the Islamic Republic, civic nationalism may yet prove the most enduring.

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Interviews

As outlined in the introduction the identities of interviewees have been kept strictly confidential owing to the current political climate in Iran.

Interview with Ayatollah, Qom, 29 April 2006

Interview with Western correspondent, Tehran, 15 May 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Esfahan, 10 June 2006

Interview with Senior Nezhat-e Azad official, 10 May 2006

Interview with Embassy-based Political Analyst, 23 March 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, Tehran, 6 May 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 21 June 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 6 June 2006

Interview with Basij veteran, Tehran, 14 March 2006

Interview with official from Office of Dialogue among Civilizations, Tehran, 29 May 2006

Interview with Philosophy Professor, Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran, 13 February 2006

Interview with Literature Professor, Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran, 14 February 2006

Interview with newspaper editor, Tehran, 22 May 2006

Interview with Tehran-based Political Analyst, Tehran, 11 June 2006

Interview with three Humanities Professors, University of Tehran, Tehran, 21 February 2006

Interview with Tehran-based Western correspondent, Tehran, 16 February 2006

Interview with former Iranian ambassador, Tehran, 6 May 2006

Interview with Archaeologist, University of Tehran, Tehran, 3 June 2006

Interview with cleric, Tarbiyyat Modarres University, Tehran, 31 May 2006

Interview with Tehran-based Western freelance journalist, 12 May 2006

Interview with Reformist intellectual, Tehran, 3 June 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Tehran, Tehran, 19 June 2006

Interview with two Basij veterans, Tehran, 10 April 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Tehran, Tehran, 13 March 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Tehran, Tehran, 28 February 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Tehran, Tehran, 11 June 2006

Interview with Political Science Professor, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, 7 February 2006

Interview with Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Tehran, 6 May 2006

Interview with Tehran-based Western correspondent, Tehran, 7 May 2006

Interview with Social science researcher, Tehran, 19 June 2006