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Contesting Nationalist Constructions of Iranian Identity

Mehrzad Boroujerdi

The Revolution of 1979 brought cultural concerns to the forefront of deliberations among scholars of Iranian studies. Significantly, these deliberations have produced a chasm between proponents of two contesting views of Iranian national identity. Protagonists of the politically triumphant view have offered Shi'i Islam as the main pillar of Iranians' collective identity. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Iranian secularists countered the Islamists' revisionist emphasis on religion with a conception of identity grounded in Iranians' ethno-linguistic heritage. Because I have addressed the fallacies of the first claim in an earlier work,[1] in this essay I shall examine how nationalist Iranian intellectual and political elites likewise have fallen victim to an ahistorical definition of authentic "Iranian identity." These intellectuals have anchored their conception of identity on the matrices of language, selective historiography, and a Persian-centered nationalism that ignores ethnic minorities.

Secular intellectuals have relied on a romantic conception of nationhood that considers language as the hallmark of the community and the source of national identity. As such, they have identified the preservation of the Persian language, Iran's "lingua franca," as the elixir that will guarantee the survival of Iranian identity. Exploring the politics of identity can assess the accuracy of their prognosis. In the age of modernity, it would seem that their strategy does not respond adequately to the array of challenges confronting the Iranian polity. As an antidote, I submit that scholars of Iranian studies consider a new research

1. See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

Mehrzad Boroujerdi is assistant professor of political science at Syracuse University. *He wishes to thank Jonathan Bach, Katalin Fabian, Abdee Kalantari, Ali Mirsepassi, Mohamad Razavi, Mitchell Rose, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, and Haleh Vaziri for their critical comments on earlier drafts of this article.*

agenda whereby the problematic of national identity is addressed through a more theoretically critical lens. My tentative suggestions for a set of first steps are: (1) that scholars of Iranian studies refrain from treating history as mere heritage; (2) that they contribute their share to helping transform Iranians' foci of identity and loyalty from one based on language and ethnicity to one based on "nation-ness;" and (3) that they deal with the legitimate demands and plight of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran by studying their genealogy, customs, and beliefs.

In discussing the "national identity" of Iranians, this article draws on the insights of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson as well as post-modernist theorists. Hobsbawm and Anderson argue that nation is neither natural nor eternal; that national identity is an assortment of "invented traditions;" that nationalism is nothing more than a cultural artifact that is invented by collective imagination; and that nationality is more rooted in subjective beliefs than objective realities.[2] Meanwhile, the post-modernists render problematic the traditional model of history as the "study of the past as it was." They argue that the basic assumptions historians make about the past are more often than not ideological constructions; that historians are bounded within their own cultural identities; that the nature of history is discontinuous; and that historical "knowledge" is a form of discourse.[3] Moreover, they claim that subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society. In other words, national identity and consciousness neither is inbred biologically nor transcendent but rather manufactured. As people who most systematically "reproduce" the past, historians uniquely are qualified to "rescue history from the nation"[4] or to supply the latter with its "expensive addictions." As Hobsbawm explains: "Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market. Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation *is* the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it."[5]

2. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1989); and *idem.*, *Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, 1992).

3. For a good example of postmodern historiography, see Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

4. What I mean by rescuing history from the nation is the emergence of historiographies that do not necessarily operate within the narrow confines of nationalism as their guiding ideology. I borrow this phrase from Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

5. E. J. Hobsbawm, "Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today," *Anthropology Today*, vol. 8, no. 1 (February 1992): 3.

Although this writer is neither a historian nor a linguist, to the extent that history and language bear the imprint of power, which is the central problematic of political science—my own discipline—I shall address some of the issues they raise.

On Historiography

Ryszard Kapuscinski describes ancient civilizations such as Iran:

> Societies with a historical mentality are directed toward the past. All their energies, their feelings, their passions are dedicated to greater times already gone by. They live in the realm of legends and founding lineages. Historical societies are unable to speak about the future because their future doesn't arouse in them the same passion as their history. They are like an old war veteran. All he wants to talk about is reliving the war which carries such a deep emotion he has never been able to forget it.[6]

Contemporary Iranian historians tend to fit the profile of Kapuscinski's old war veterans.[7] As products of a historical society that is left with only vestiges of its former majesty, they turn toward the past in the hope of escaping the chaotic age of modernity, with its irreverence, doubt, and fragmentation.[8] In the course of revisiting the past, they reduce history to the study of heritage. One of the deleterious consequences of the discourse of "heritage-ism" is the fetishization of the past. As Peter Gran aptly explains "a focus on heritage frees one from the flux of history, but at a price: one's heritage, in contrast to one's history, is ultimately unexaminable."[9] Meanwhile, concentrating on one's past triumphs also creates a strong case of lethargy. As such, "heritage-ism" breeds cultural rigidity by insisting on the artificial preservation of order, tradition, continuity, homogeneity, and identity. As a result, "historical" narrative in light of "heritage-ism" tends to neglect anomalies, inconsistencies, transmutations, and

6. Ryszard Kapuscinski, "One World, Two Civilizations," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 39.

7. Such "historians" as Mohammad-Ebrahim Bastani Parizi (1925-), Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani (1896-1956), Ghasem Qani (1893-1952), Mohammad Qazvini (1877-1949), Gholamreza Rashid Yasami (1896-1951), Zabihollah Safa (1911-), and Habib Yaghma'i (1901-1984) in particular seem to fit this profile.

8. According to Mangol Bayat-Philipp: "The different expressions of Iranian national consciousness today, be they secular or religious, reveal a similar tendency to conceive the present as insubstantial and imperfect in comparison with the past." See her "A Phoenix Too Frequent: The Concept of Historical Continuity in Modern Iranian Thought," *Asian and African Studies*, no. 12 (1978): 203.

9. Peter Gran, "Studies of Anglo-American Political Economy: Democracy, Orientalism, and the Left," in *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses*, edited by Hisham Sharabi (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 234.

ruptures.[10] In short, the discourse of "heritage-ism" makes the study of history ancillary and trivial.

In the case of Iran, the didactic character of the discourse of "heritage-ism" performed the task of molding national consciousness. In the early 1960s, Gavin Hambly recognized this tendency among Iranian intellectuals:

> Almost invariably, the intellectual takes great pride in early Iranian civilization—although he may not know very much about it. It is enough for him to remember the conquests of Cyrus the Great or Darius I, and the glories of Persepolis; detailed knowledge of Achæmenid Iran would be deemed unnecessary. In looking back at the past he tends to see his history as a series of great epochs cut short by a cruel whim of destiny: the Achæmenid Empire overthrown by Alexander; the Sassanid Empire swept aside by the Arabs; the Persianized Caliphate destroyed by Central Asian invaders of whom the Mongols were the dreadful climax; the Safavi State reduced to impotence by obscurantism and lethargy; and finally the last tableau, nineteenth century Iran as pawn and buffer between the Russian and British Empires.[11]

Besides bemoaning the "whim of destiny," Iranian nationalist intellectuals and lay people have developed an appetite for "conspiracy theories" in understanding their history and particularly their collective traumas.[12] As a mechanism for historical denial, the myths, idioms, and rhetoric of conspiracy theories have left their indelible mark on the Iranian psyche. In fact, Daryush Ashuri, one of Iran's contemporary social thinkers, longs for a "vigilant historian who instead of lamenting the ambitions and cruelties of colonialism can observe and compose the history of the final decay and demise of an Asian culture [Iran] with the sharp-eye of a social psychologist and the artistic astuteness of a novelist."[13]

10. According to Bayat-Philipp, "A Phoenix," p. 203: "history is mobilized by most protagonists of Iranian nationalism for a definite national goal—to guarantee a sense of continuity."

11. Gavin Hambly, "Attitudes and Aspirations of the Contemporary Iranian Intellectual," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, vol. 50, no. 2 (April 1964): 137-38.

12. For an analysis of conspiracy theories in Iran, see Ahmad Ashraf, "Conspiracy Theories," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, vol. VI, fascicle 2 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1992), pp. 138-47. For a broader, and more theoretical, discussion of conspiracy theories see Charles Pigden, "Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1995): 3-34.

13. Daryush Ashuri, "Jan-e Parishan-e Iran," *Fasl-i Kitab*, nos. 10-11 (1370-71 [1991-92]): 16-17.

Ashuri is not alone in his longing for sophisticated historiography.[14] This gap in Iranian studies has inspired me to pose the following four questions. (1) What accounts for Iranian historians' penchant to blame others for their cultural, political, and socioeconomic woes? (2) What excuses do Iranians have for the poverty of their historiography?[15] (3) Why do many Iranian historians stand sentinel over the glorified past? (4) What explains the paucity of history books that address such questions as: when and why did scientific thinking decline in Persia?; why, despite their geographical proximity to and interaction with ancient Greece, were Iranians not aroused by their neighbors' philosophical contemplations?; and what accounts for Iran's scientific poverty compared with the other three great civilizations of Asia—China, India, and Japan?

There is a positive correlation between Iranians' preoccupation with identity and their captivation by the memory of a resplendent past.[16] Seeking out the comfort of the golden age of bliss, the cloister of a mythically-contrived history, and the abyss of ideological musings, many historians as well as lay people have taken refuge in the belief that Iran enjoys the blessing of God, the angel of history, and prodigious heroes and sages. Few recognize that the conceptual capital inherited from the ancestors is depleted, if not already overdrawn. Arguably, the fascination with language—for example, the beauty of Persian poetry—is a key factor that has prevented Iranian historians and intellectuals from abandoning their mythopoetic world-view.

On Language

Language plays the pivotal role within the discourse of Iranian cultural heritage. Many of Iran's cultural historians and literary critics start with the premise that the Iranian nation is defined primarily by the Persian language. For these scholars, language is the manifestation of a nation's thoughts, experiences, and ambitions. Ehsan Yarshater has written the most eloquent statement of this view:

14. Abbas Amanat writes: "Save for a very small group of professional historians, therefore, the serious study and writing of history in the modern sense is still in its infancy." See Amanat, "The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Nostalgia, Illusion, or Historical Awareness?" *Iranian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1989): 17.

15. Indeed, many of those who write "histories" in Iran come from other disciplines, mostly literature. Consequently, their chronicles or literary histories may be engaging, but their scholarship is far from impeccable. For a powerful indictment of historiography as a pastime or aesthetic pursuit in Iran, see Fereydoun Adamiyat, "Problems in Iranian Historiography," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1971): 132-56.

16. For two theoretical discussions of the relationship between memory and history see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Patrick H. Hutton, *History As An Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

> A more promising defense against the sense of anonymity that accompanies a submerged identity is a restorative and sustaining element that Persia has cherished and preserved against all odds: the shared experience of a rich and rewarding past. It finds its expression primarily through the Persian language, not simply as a medium of comprehension but also as the chief carrier of the Persian world view and Persian culture. The Persian language ... is a reservoir of Iranian thought, sentiment, and values, and a repository of its literary arts. It is only by loving, learning, teaching, and above all enriching this language that the Persian identity may continue to survive.[17]

In an axiomatic manner, some suggest that the safeguarding of the Persian language is the most effective weapon that Iranians have to thwart the encroachment of Western civilization.[18] Others, such as Zabih Bihruz (1890-1971) have gone further, conceptualizing language as the reflection of the Iranian nation's racial and mental structure.[19] Alas, far from being an isolated aberration, the racial underpinning of Bihruz's nationalism has resonated in Iranian literature.[20] Appropriating the Teutonic tradition of early advocates of nationalism—Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)—members of the first Iranian Academy (*Farhangestan*) and their intellectual heirs insisted that the Persian language had forged and defined the collective life of the Iranian nation. Thus, Persian had to be purified of foreign words.[21]

In my view, however, Shahrukh Meskub (b. 1925), a contemporary cultural historian and translator, offers the most sophisticated view of the relationship

17. Ehsan Yarshater, "Persian Identity in Historical Perspective," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 26, nos. 1-2 (1993): 141-42.

18. For example see my discussion of Fakhr al-Din Shadman in *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, pp. 54-63.

19. See the following two works of Zabih Bihruz: *Zaban-e Iran, Farsi ya Arabi?* (Tehran: Mihr, 1313 [1934-35]); and *Khat va Farhang*, second edition (Tehran: Furuhar, 1363 [1984-85]).

20. For example, the novels and poems of such literary figures as Mehdi Akhavan-e Sales, Sadeq Chubak, Sadeq Hedayat, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, and Nader Naderpour are riven with Persian chauvinism and marred by ethnic slurs against the Arabs. See Joya Blondel Saad, *The Image of Arabs in Modern Persian Literature* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

21. The earlier advocates of this purification project were such intellectuals as Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadah (1812-1878), and Mirza Malkam Khan (1833-1908). For a discussion of the failure of this project, see Mohammad Ali Jazayery: "Western Influence in Contemporary Persian: A General View," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1966): 79-96; and *idem.*, "Observations on Loanwords as an Index to Cultural Borrowing," pp. 80-96, in *Studies in Language, Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages and Late*, edited by E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald A. Hill (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1969).

between language and national identity. In *Iranian Nationality and Persian Language*, he contends that Iranians are different from other Muslims due to their history and language. Devoting much of his book to language, he asserts: "We maintained one nationality or, perhaps better put, our national identity, our Iranianness, through the blessing of language, by means of the vitality of Persian as a refuge."[22] Meskub considers the *Shahnameh*, the epic masterpiece of the eleventh-century Persian poet Firdusi, the very cornerstone of his own thinking and sense of personal identity. He explains: "The *Shahnameh* ... is the ideal of Iranian nationality, and later becomes the most important cultural factor in preserving Iranian nationality."[23]

Meskub's assertions and inferences are problematic for a number of reasons. First, his view of language—epitomized in such phrases as "refuge for the soul" and "substance of thought"—is more romantic than factual. Vernacular languages and poetry play a central role in forming the collective life of ethnic groups and nationalisms. Certainly, the introduction of the printing press, mass communication, and the modern educational system has enhanced the role of language in shaping national identities. Nevertheless, to regard language as the embodiment of a nation's collective spirit may be taxing the concept. Scholars of Iranian studies should realize that while language antedates and constructs subjectivity, it is never a tabula rasa. Anthropological and theoretical linguists and philosophers, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jürgen Habermas, have emphasized this point.[24]

Furthermore, while overemphasizing the role of language, Meskub underestimates the function of imagination. Aside from a cursory treatment, Meskub does not analyze Persia's cultural ambiance or the collective aspirations of the people who first inspired Firdusi and then embraced his epic. Rather, Meskub merely observes how beautifully Firdusi expressed Persians' aspirations without also examining why the sentiments and collective imagination of Firdusi's compatriots were ready to embrace his epic. Yet, Firdusi's invention of a mythical genealogy and identity did not take place in a vacuum. In 1968, literary scholar Mujtaba Minuvi warned his counterparts not to engage in hyperbole when evaluating the contributions of Firdusi or other poets: "What I mean by exaggeration is when some claim that Firdusi is the founder of Iran's independence, or others contend that what freed Iranians from the yoke of Arabs

22. Shahrokh Meskub, *Iranian Nationality and the Persian Language*, translated by Michael C. Hillmann (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1992), p. 31.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

24. For example, Foucault writes: "I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 216.

and guaranteed the independence of this country was the Persian language. Others even go as far as to say that the official Persian language is the symbol of our nationality and unity."[25]

Yet another issue disregarded by Meskub is the degree to which the "hegemony" of Persian language was made possible by an ardent state-sponsored campaign promoting a rather morbid nationalism. It should be kept in mind that during the first half of the twentieth century when Iran underwent the transition from being an antiquated empire to a modern secular state, perhaps no more than 50 percent of Iranians actually spoke Persian. Moreover, close to 80 percent of Persian-speakers themselves were illiterate as far as reading and writing Persian was concerned. In other words, even though Persian became the language of the political and literary elite, it never replaced the local languages, which maintained their own grammar and speech forms. Needless to say, the campaign to define "Persian" as the pillar of Iranian nationalism alienated Azeri Turks, Kurds, and other ethnic minorities in Iran.[26]

The centrality that Meskub accords to language becomes even less relevant in the late twentieth century. Besides language, such previously critical factors as race, religion, and common history no longer by themselves can be considered the principal determinants of national identity. Among other factors, the territorial expansion of empires and the non-racial messages of major religions has diminished the prominence of race as a unifying feature for most nations. The birth of modern nation-states during the seventeenth century secularized collective identity and undermined the unifying role of religion. Years of shared history do not make people into one nation, as the examples of the ancient Persian and Roman as well as the modern Ottoman, Austrian, and British empires show.

Moreover, modernity has shifted the ground for the criterion of nationhood as far as language is concerned. The evidence suggests that the salience of language as the primary means for defining a nation is dwindling. Consider the following examples: In Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada, different ethno-linguistic constituencies voice their concerns and settle their disagreements through democratic procedures. The citizenry's multilingual composition, while at times stressful, has proven to be peaceful and enduring. The European continent is moving—however haltingly—toward greater integration despite a multiplicity of languages. Arguably, a Briton, an American, or an Australian would not think that they come from a single nation simply because they speak English. The fact that intellectual elites in Pakistan, India, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are bilingual has not made them less nationalist. The calls by certain

25. Mujtaba Minuvi, "Maqam-e Zaban va Adabiyyat dar Milliyyat," *Rahnama-ye Kitab*, vol. 10, no. 5 (1346 [1968]): 446.

26. See Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellon Research University Press, 1992).

Turkish elites to form a greater Turan composed of all Ural-Altaic speaking people did not succeed, as the newly independent republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus opted for separate statehood. In short, even people who speak the same language may insist—sometimes even through revolutions or civil wars—on maintaining their separate identity.

In the age of modernity, "national identity" no longer should be conceived as something essential, tangible, integrated, settled, and fundamentally unchanging. As the pace, extension, and complexity of modern societies accelerate, personal and collective identities are becoming more self-reflexive, ambulatory, multiple, and fragile. To resort to an ethno-linguistic definition of identity is to misunderstand the multi-dimensional and fundamental nature of the challenges of modernity. Just as ideology is more than a constellation of ideas, similarly, language is more than a constellation of discourses or "army of words." Hence, the frontiers of culture are broader than language. In other words, language does not constitute the entirety of any culture.[27] Language, after all, is a product of social reality, and as such, the internal logic of cultural discourse must be situated within the field of social practices and relationships. Although language shapes culture, "culture also shapes the development of language. Language is not, however, a reflection of culture, and culture does not develop analogously with the structure of language."[28] For example, it would be absurd to claim that just because one has learned to speak Japanese or Portuguese, (s)he has now mastered the corresponding cultures as well. Humans have qualities that are more sophisticated than the ability to talk. These include the ability to communicate non-verbally, to imagine, to analyze, and to feel. A mute person is still able to communicate. More importantly, that person still can be imaginative, emotional, and resolute in his or her goals. In short, language and culture—like everything human—are permeable and malleable.

As a cosmopolitan intellectual, Meskub recognizes these trends well. Consequently, he concedes, "we can no longer analyze the question of Iranian national identity from the perspective of language and history alone, as I have done in the book," adding that "language is the best, but not the only, means for giving shape to a nation or people."[29] Perhaps Meskub has recognized the wisdom of Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa: "Even language, possibly the most genuine of social identifying marks, is nowadays no longer a characteristic that is identifiable with that of the nation, because in nearly every nation different

27. In his classic book *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1921), the anthropological linguist Edward Sapir explains that culture is *what* society thinks and does, and language is *how* people think.

28. Bassam Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 86.

29. Meskub, pp. 17-18, 41.

languages are spoken—even when one of them is the official language—and because with very few exceptions nearly all languages spill over national frontiers and trace out their own geography on the toponymy of the planet."[30] As Steven Pinker points out, most "people can be forgiven for overrating language."[31]

On Nationalism and Nationalities

Just like language and culture, ethnicity also is not always state-bound. Today, many states are multinational, and most nations are polyethnic or polyglot. Yet politicians and their academic mentors often subscribe to a model of the nation as an eternal, homogeneous, and natural entity. By resorting to polemics and patriotic history writing, they preserve conceptions of the nation's historical descent.[32] Meanwhile, the tide of ethnic nationalism, a corollary to the genesis of the nation-state, is rising. In the Middle East, for example, contemporary states are a patchwork of ethnic groups, sects, and other interests. The state is rarely coterminous with the nation. Because state boundaries and institutions reflect the interests of colonial powers, the Middle East and it's peoples have experienced ethnic and other civil unrest, the production of universalist and/or chauvinist ideologies, and crises of identity.

Examination of the "historical" accounts of nation-state formation in Iran demonstrates the theoretical poverty of this genre of work. The reign of the "honor-shame school of historiography"[33] has impeded the production of critical works of scholarship that deliberate on such problems as the conception of "nationhood" in a multi-ethnic polity like Iran. Scholars and political elites conspicuously have ignored the plight of minorities.[34] Ironically, the *historically*

30. Mario Vargas Llosa, "Democracy Today," *Newsletter of the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences*, no. 40 (May-June 1993): 2.

31. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1994), p. 67.

32. Addressing himself to the shallowness of this claim, Vargas Llosa writes: "Every nation is a lie for which time and history have gradually fashioned an appearance of truth—as they did for ancient myths and classical legends. No nation ever arose *naturally*. The coherence and fraternity that a few still display conceal alarming realities beneath fine literary, historical and artistic fictions that underpin their identity. In these nations too those "contradictions and differences"—creeds, races, customs, languages, and not always minority languages—were demolished, for just like Albert Camus's Caligula, the Nation needs to eliminate these things in order to feel secure, safe from the risk of fragmentation." Llosa, "Democracy Today," p. 2.

33. I borrow this concept from Amanat, "The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran," p. 6.

34. Another notorious absence in Iranian historiography is the absence of feminine voices. For a refreshing exception, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The Story of Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History* (forthcoming, Syracuse University Press).

dominant definition of what constitutes a "nation" among Iranians has been an ethno-linguistic one.[35] In contrast to a political definition of nationhood that emphasizes such criteria as freedom, rights, and citizenship,[36] an ethno-linguistic definition stresses race, blood, culture, and language.[37]

As I have noted, language is a particularly recurrent theme deemed as the primordial factor that has held Iranians together. As such, according to nationalist Iranian intellectuals, Persian is and should remain the quintessential lingua franca of Iran as a multi-ethnic polity.[38] Two questions arise from this argument. First, how would the proponents of the ethno-linguistic view of nationhood define "Iranianness" today? Is their definition of "Iranians" limited to those living within the contours of a circumscribed "nation-state" called Iran, or does it also encompass expatriate or linguistic communities living in Afghanistan, Arab countries, Central Asia, India, Pakistan, and the West? In other words, what have been the ethnological effects of the incessant migrations to and from Iran? Secondly, considering that Iranian intellectuals overwhelmingly are not well disposed toward regional dialects and languages, how would they explain the deep historical roots and perseverance of the latter in the annals of Iranian history?[39] I find disturbing that certain Iranian political elites and intellectuals rejoice in the freedom of subjugated nationalities in the former Soviet

35. For a discussion of the ethno-linguistic notions of nationhood in Persian poetry, see Muhamad-Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani, "Talaqqiy-e Qodama as Vatan," *Alefba* (first series, Tehran), no. 2 (1352 [1973-74]).

36. In my view the "Jacobin" model, which was introduced by the French revolution, is a good example of the political definition of nationhood. As Sami Zubaida explains, the Jacobin model embodied such ideas as the "sovereignty of the people as nation, the state as the sum total of its individual and individualized citizens, the institutions of representation, a constitution which enshrines the rights and obligations of citizens and a legal system based upon it before which are all equal." Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 121-22.

37. The Germanic view, articulated by such thinkers as Fichte, Herder, and Hermann Hesse, represents the ethnic definition of nationhood. This view maintains that the love of the fatherland is in the heart and the blood.

38. For an interesting exchange on the role of the Persian language as Iran's lingua franca, see Changiz Pahlavan, "Zaban-e Farsi va Tawse'a Melli," *Iran Nameh*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 507-25; and Najaf Daryabandari, "Zaban-e Farsi, Zaban-e Mushtarak," *Iran Nameh*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 674-78.

39. In answering this question, I believe, one should keep in mind the point Bassam Tibi has raised regarding the persisting gulf between High Arabic and the regional dialects because it seems to apply in the case of Persian as well. "It is important to point out that these dialects do not constitute diverse forms of expression of one and the same language, as is the case in French or German, but are rather virtually separate languages in both vocabulary and grammatical structure, despite their nonwritten form and their restriction to everyday use." Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation*, p. 88.

Union yet denounce the demands of ethnic minorities in Iran as treasonous. Why do they lament the cultural devastation suffered by Central Asia and the Caucasus during the Bolshevik's Russification campaign, but see no comparison with the imposition of Persian language and culture on ethnic minorities in Iran? To interpret the former as an appalling case of cultural arrogance and the latter as the natural dominance of a splendid "lingua franca" is disingenuous.

The insensitivity of Persian-speaking political and intellectual elites to the plight of ethnic minorities is not limited merely to the issue of language. A contemporary authority on the subject of dissent and rebellion remarks: "In Iran, every twentieth-century period of national political instability has spurred rebellions among non-Persian minorities of the periphery."[40] Why is this so? This can not all be a matter of foreign conspiracy and manipulation. Surely, Iranian intellectual and political elites can not dismiss these rebellions as products of foreign conspiracies but must recognize the material basis for the grievances of their minorities. Yet many of Iran's (ultra)nationalists worry that discussing the plight of ethnic minorities may open a Pandora's box, and lead, even if indirectly, to Iran's eventual breakup.

Although Iranian ruling elites have enjoyed some success in creating countrywide economies, establishing political apparatuses, and protecting territorial sovereignty, they often have failed in forging a genuine sense of national cohesiveness among the citizenry. The time has come to acknowledge that many of these minorities—the Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmens—never have been embraced or integrated fully within Iranian society.[41] Because of consistent economic and political discrimination, these minorities merely acquiesce in the rule of Persian-speaking elites but harbor latent or active separatist and irredentist sentiments. Iranian political elites, who so far have treated their minority populations more as subjects than as citizens, have proven time and again to be trigger-happy in their dealings with ethnic minorities. Instead of attempting to win their hearts and minds, the central governments often have subdued them through the threat or use of military force.

In the 1990s, as events around the world demonstrate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold a nation together by resorting constantly to repressive state apparatuses.[42] As modernity continues to produce newer forms of life, values, and identities, it is also demanding a new discourse and style of statecraft. The only long-term guarantee for Iran's territorial sovereignty and national unity

40. Ted Robert Gurr, "Third World Minorities at Risk Since 1945," in *Resolving Third World Conflict: Challenges for a New Era*, edited by Sheryl J. Brown and Kimber M. Schraub (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1992), p. 78.

41. The case of the Azeris is much more complex and beyond the scope of this essay.

42. The lessons of communal and ethnic strife in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Cyprus, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Pakistan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka are instructive.

is to lay the groundwork for the citizenry—as a collectivity and not as bodies of disorganized people—to share a sense of national identity, loyalty to homeland, and historic destiny (economic prosperity, social justice, and political freedom). In order to do this, however, Iranians need to strengthen a civil society that bestows rights and empowers the citizenry legally, politically, economically, and culturally. Only then can Iranians hope that the rights of minorities (both ethnic and religious) in particular, and the rights of the citizenry in general, would be addressed in a responsible and democratic manner. Local, religious, and sectarian particularisms may lose their destructive and non-associational tendencies once newer forms of civic consciousness are created. The way to integrate a multi-ethnic polity like Iran, where minorities constitute between 40 to 50 percent of the population, into a nation is not through inculcating chauvinism or resorting to government by fiat.

Conclusion

I have maintained that the question of "Iranian national identity" has to be problematized in accordance with the axioms and imperatives of the age of modernity. Subsequently, I argued, Iranian secular intellectuals need to reevaluate their conception of nationhood, which presently is so dependent on language. Such a rethinking ought to be part of the larger corrective steps needed to bolster the critical consciousness of Iranian historiography. If Iranian intellectuals in general, and scholars of Iranian studies in particular, are to seek the correct answers to the question of national identity, they must not imprison themselves in the torturous labyrinth of arcane problematics, antediluvian ideas, ruminations of the past, mnemonic conjecturing, and esoteric altercations. They need to realize that aversion to new theoretical approaches, fetishization of the past, pompous bravado about ancestors, conspiratorial and chiliastic views of history, and "cult of patriotism" are futile strategies.[43] Inaugurating the debate on Iranian national identity without these constraints is bound to produce a body of scholarship that is less apologetic, chimerical, perfunctory, fragmented, and verbose.

43. Erich Fromm comments: "Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity. 'Patriotism' is its cult. It should hardly be necessary to say, that by 'patriotism' I mean that attitude which puts the own nation above humanity, above the principles of truth and justice; not the loving interest in one's own nation, which is the concern with the nation's spiritual as much as with its material welfare—never with its power over other nations. Just as love for one individual which excludes the love for others is not love, love for one's country which is not part of one's love for humanity is not love, but idolatrous worship." Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), pp. 58-59.