1

Introduction

Pervasiveness of 'Nationalism'

Nationalism is the determining ideology of modern Iran. Yet despite, or perhaps because of its pervasiveness in popular and political culture, and the ease with which it is evoked and resorted to by successive governments to secure political support and cement legitimacy, it remains ill-defined and vigorously contested. The emotional depth professed by its staunchest adherents betrays an analytical immaturity which some observers consider disingenuous.[1] Yet whether the product of cynical manipulation, or a consequence of sincere adherence, there can be little doubt that 'nationalism' in all its manifestations has been the ideological reference point to which all competing ideologies have ultimately had to adhere, and within which most have been subsumed. Nothing exemplifies this process better than the ideological transformation of an Islamic Revolution which aspired to universality but within a decade had defined itself as an *Iranian* Islamic Revolution to distinguish itself from other movements emerging around the world, and to emphasise a pre-eminence and exclusivity most commonly associated with nationalist ideologies. It soon became apparent that the adjective 'Iranian' was not intended as a geographic distinction, but implied barely disguised allusions to superiority on the basis not only of apparent priority but cultural sophistication.

This tendency towards elitism and a jealous guarding of a distinctive and particular culture would be familiar to theorists of nationalism, but it also reflects an internal process in the development of

[1] See in this respect the comments by H Taqizadeh on the emergence of the 'professional patriot' – *vatan-chi* – in *Kaveh,* 17 July 1920, p. 3.

nationalism. Nationalism in Iran can be viewed through two complementary processes. On one level, nationalism as an ideology and a means for securing legitimacy is contested by various factions and ideological groupings who seek to appropriate it to their own particular ends.[2] For the purposes of clarity, four groups can be distinguished in modern Iran: *secular nationalists*, *religious nationalists*, *the left*, and the *dynastic nationalists*. These are by no means exclusive or rigid, but provide a grid against which the fluidity of ideological tendencies can be analysed.[3] These ideological groupings provide narratives of historical descent which tend to emphasise their own role over the others in an unfolding grand narrative or 'myth' of progress and emancipation.[4] This process of emancipation has been, in the modern era at least, largely defined against the West, although, as will be seen in this book, its roots go considerably deeper.

On another level the debate on ideology revolves around the form of its articulation. By and large, and in contradiction to the theoretical aspirations of the ideologues themselves, 'nationalism' has been the preserve of the elites, who although eager to recruit the masses to their respective causes have always jealously protected their rights to define the precise parameters of the particular nationalism they espouse. This dialectical relationship between what may be termed the 'lateral' and 'demotic' tendencies in nationalism has arguably only recently tilted in favour of the latter, with the consequences of universal education, literacy, and the (electronic) mass media beginning to impact the way in which knowledge is produced and consumed.[5] This last development has had and continues to have the most profound effect on the way in which nationalism has been interpreted, understood, and applied within Iran.

[2] J B Thompson, *Ideology & Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1990 p. 71. See also A Matin-Asgari, *Marxism, Historiography and Historical Consciousness in Modern Iran*, in T Atabaki (ed.) *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, London, I B Tauris, p. 201.

[3] P Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. & trans. J Thompson), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 245–46. On the definition of 'secular' see N Keddie Secularism and the State: Towards Clarity and Global comparison, *New Left Review*, Vol **226**, 1997, pp. 21–40

[4] G Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, London, Hurst 2000, pp. 90–98.

[5] On these concepts, see A D Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, London, Blackwell, 1988, pp. 79–89. Smith argues that 'lateral' ethnie have proved more flexible in the absorption and appropriation of others; on the importance of the mass media on ideological development see Thompson, *Ideology & Modern Culture*, pp. 163–216; also B Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso 1983, p. 224.

The Logic of the West

One difficulty in analysing any ideological process is to know where to enter the debate.[6] Because any ideational process is fluid and, to paraphrase Mannheim, 'is in the process of becoming', the moment of entry becomes an attempt to fix a dynamic, and in effect to create an artificial, though analytically necessary, point of reference from which an argument may proceed.[7] Given the dominance of Western thought on the development of Iranian nationalism, it seems relevant to start with the impact of the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[8] This is not to suggest that Iranian nationalism – defined here as the political mobilisation of a particular identity – was defined *against* Europe. Rather it is argued that the dominant narratives (along with the conceptual vocabulary) have been defined *by* a European intellectual tradition. This approach has a number of distinct advantages. In the first place it allows us to frame the argument within the broader context of developments in European nationalisms both on practical and intellectual levels and look in particular at the way in which Iranian intellectuals responded, reacted and interpreted trends established by their European counterparts. Often these interpretations were simplifications of debates taking place in Europe although these simplifications were in many cases supported and promoted by Western diplomats keen to emphasise the rational and scientific nature of European (Western) progress. As such, the perception matters more than the real complexity of the debate which evolved, and one of the more interesting developments lies in the way in which a broadening Iranian intellectual base, increasingly confident in itself, began to engage and interpret the knowledge base produced by Europe. Such an approach allows us to trace the development of both the concept and its application.[9]

One of the central tenets of this study is that nationalism as understood in Iran has largely been driven by and defined against a normative frame of reference established by European intellectual and political culture. In

[6] The difficulties of the 'hermeneutic circle'.
[7] K Mannheim, *Ideology & Utopia*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, p. 135.
[8] On another level, the vocabulary of modern knowledge is so dominated by the Western perspective that it is difficult to avoid engaging with this, hence Near & Middle East.
[9] Iranian nationalists will tend to frame their myth of emancipation and awakening according to their ideological preferences. These can be quite fluid and are historically varied. Most nationalists look to the nineteenth century for the period of national awakening but there are those who have argued for the Abbasid Revolution, reflecting perhaps the continuing influence of Zarrinkub's *Two Centuries of Silence*.

other words, Iranian nationalists sought to remake their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. That is, the grand narrative of progress, and the role of the 'nation' in articulating that progress, has been defined by Europe. Many of the myths which have permeated nationalist ideologies – decadence, decline, progress, feudalism, despotism, race, and the role of religion – have been appropriated from an idealised European model of development.[10] Moreover, in the Iranian case, not only aspects of the *metanarrative*, but the *grand narrative*, have been appropriated from Europe.[11] This logic of the West has been pervasive not only in the way in which states have reacted to the challenges posed by European powers, but more crucially in the way that intellectuals of whatever political hue have been vehicles of ideological dissemination. This is not to articulate an 'orientalist' argument about the intellectual colonisation of native elites, but to state the reality that whether integrated or opposed, most intellectuals related in some manner or form to the ideas which emanated from Europe.[12] Nothing exemplifies this better than the influence of Marxist thought in Iran, or indeed the reaction of religious intellectuals to the challenges posed by the West. As a succession of Iranian intellectuals have argued, to greater or less effect, it is only by engaging with these ideas and building an indigenous knowledge base that the terms of reference can be gradually changed. It is this process which has gathered momentum in recent years and which is beginning to change our understanding of Iranian nationalism and the narratives it has engendered.

Nationalism, Myth, and History

Nationalism as generally understood today erupted into Europe during the French Revolution of 1789.[13] Many of the parameters of nationalist

[10] On the prominence of 'progress' and 'decadence' in historical narratives see P Nora, quoted in S Berger & C Lorenz (eds.), *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, Basingstoke, Palgrave 2008, p. 18.

[11] For a discussion and definition of 'myth' see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London, Paladin, 1973, pp. 118–155. In this sense all narratives, and by extension narrative history, incorporates mythologies. Ideologies and political myths are the means by which narratives, grand narratives, and metanarratives are constructed. For a fascinating discussion of the means and methods of narrative displacement see Kidd C, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c. 1830*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 101–215.

[12] One of the most acute statements regarding this negative aspects of this process was made by Sartre in his Preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,* New York, Grove Press, 2004, p. xliii.

[13] A D Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, London, Routledge 1998, p. 17.

ideology which we recognise today were shaped and ultimately defined by the French revolutionaries and their heirs and interpreters, including secularism, standardisation, unification, centralisation, and of course conscription: the ability to recruit vast numbers of soldier-citizens on the basis of patriotism and 'national' allegiance alone. The causes and consequences of the French Revolution have spawned an extensive literature which has effectively challenged the dominant grand narrative of popular emancipation and progress through a national awakening. Historians have undermined the originality of the French Revolution and pointed to precursors both in Britain and North America, while the consequences of the Revolution, and the empire it generated, complicate the basic narrative.[14] One of the earliest and most influential commentators of the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville, drew attention to the anomalies in the popular understanding of the Revolution, highlighting the important fact that there was nothing particularly 'national' about the universalist aspirations of the 'Great Revolution' in France. Indeed the revolution in France was initially made French by opponents who sought to contain it, and as de Tocqueville astutely observed, the ambitions of the Revolutionaries were truly *religious* in scope.[15]

For our purposes, the influence of the French Revolution was not immediate but indirect. As Nikki Keddie observes, the immediate reaction among statesmen in the Ottoman Empire and Iran was not positive.[16] The revolution was not only 'Godless', but in executing their king the French had chosen anarchy over order and were in consequence a force for instability. The real significance of the French Revolution was to come much later, with the foundation of the Napoleonic Empire, a development and a personality with which Middle Eastern statesmen could empathise and admire. With Napoleon, Middle Eastern statesmen, frustrated with the inadequacies of their own leaders, discovered a model ruler to emulate.[17]

[14] See for example, Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 235.

[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution,* Manchester, Fontana, 1966, p. 41.

[16] N Keddie, *The French Revolution and the Middle East,* in *Iran and the World* Macmillan, London 1995, p. 239.

[17] See A Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*: *Nasir al Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896,* London, I B Tauris 1997, p. 130, on Nasir al Din Shah's admiration for Napoleon, an admiration which would continue with both Reza Shah and his son. An alternative role model that was to gain in prominence as the condition of Iran declined was Peter the Great. See M Ekhtiar, An Encounter with the Russian Czar: The Image of Peter the Great in Early Qajar Historical Writings, *Iranian Studies*, Vol 29(1/2), 1996, pp. 57–70. Peter the Great was a particular favourite among enlightenment thinkers in

With French established as the language of diplomacy and the medium of ideological dissemination, it was to be French ideas that were first to penetrate intellectual life in the Orient.[18] The avowed secularism of the revolution, and the distinct advantage that the French had not been, and were not, perceived as a political threat in Iran, also facilitated the process of appropriation. Of course, the process of appropriation took time and coincided with other intellectual developments which were transforming an industrialising Europe in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, in intellectual terms, and in stark contrast with the romanticism which characterised the revolutionary era and its immediate aftermath, the impact of the French Revolution and the nationalism it promoted was carried to the East on a wave of scientific rationality and positivism. The confidence with which Europe expanded abroad was mirrored in an intellectual confidence which produced a narrative of progress shorn of many of the complications of the debate which surrounded it within European intellectual circles. Radical positivism and scientific rationality characterised the intellectual endeavour of Europe and explained its success.[19] These *modern* myths of progress were encapsulated and socialised through a new grand narrative of progress unleashed through the eventual, and inevitable, realisation of the 'nation'. It was given voice by the development of a new discipline of history, shorn of the traditional mythologies of the past, rigorously analytical and scientifically precise. This was most obviously identified with the German tradition of historiography established by Leopold von Ranke. Ranke reacted against the romanticism of his age, and was especially spurred onto action after reading the novels of Sir Walter Scott. As he uncompromisingly put it, "I found by comparison that the truth was more interesting and beautiful than romance. I turned away from it and resolved to avoid all invention and imagination in my works and stick to facts."[20]

Ranke of course was not quite the dour radical empiricist that his subsequent renown would depict, conceding earlier in his career that myths had some merit in providing an insight into the 'view of a people

large part because of Voltaire's sympathetic biography; see J G A Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, Vol 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 76. Peter is 'Great' because he is a legislator, unlike Charles XII of Sweden.

[18] N Keddie, *The French Revolution*, p. 233.

[19] As Hayden White notes, even challenges to the enlightenment 'optimism' remained themselves intrinsically optimistic in outlook; see Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins 1973, p. 47.

[20] Quoted in J Mali, *Mythistory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2003, p. 96.

of itself',[21] but posterity has credited him, not without justification, with having founded a *discipline* of history, regulated by method and distinct from mythology. Quite how incomplete this break would be was apparent to many writers and historians throughout the nineteenth century, not least Marx, whose opening salvo in his *18th Brumaire* warned of the dangers of mythologising the present. Indeed if some writers saw merits and hidden truths in analysing the myths of antiquity, they were almost unanimous in their criticism of what was increasingly termed 'political mythology'. As Joseph Mali notes, "after 1848 mythology had become a political, not just a historical problem."[22] Indeed it was clear to the more astute in academe that the rationalisation and professionalisation of society, far from eradicating the tendency to mythology, was paradoxically providing new outlets for its expression. Max Weber presciently observed in a lecture at the University of Munich in 1918:

> The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human life … it is not accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situation, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic pneuma, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together. If we attempt to force and to 'invent' a monumental style in art, such miserable monstrosities are produced as the many monuments of the last twenty years. If one tries intellectually to construe new religions without a new and genuine prophecy, then, in an inner sense, something similar will result but with still worse effects. And an academic prophecy, finally, will create only fanatical sects but never genuine community.[23]

That the march of reason and modernity could in fact engender a new fertile environment for myths and their political exploitation became increasingly prominent in the nationalistic fervour which galvanised European society in the run up to the Great War. Marxist intellectuals were among

[21] Quoted in J Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 97; see also A Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 1997, pp. 225–26. For the juxtaposition of 'scientific history' and 'memory' see S Berger & C Lorenz (eds.), *The Contested Nation*, pp. 14–17

[22] J Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 88. See also the comment of David Strauss, quoted **in *Mythistory***, p. 93, "The boundary line between the mythical and the historical … will ever remain fluctuating and unsusceptible of precise attainment."

[23] M Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, Routledge 1970, p. 155; Weber continues: "many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another."

the harshest critics of nationalist ideology and its ethnic-racial stereotypes, but the Great War, far from diminishing national allegiances, reinforced and polarised them. Indeed the post-war settlement not only multiplied the number of new nations in Europe, but institutionalised and legitimised them through a League of Nations. The ultimate expression of the trend towards biological determinism – scientific nationalism heavily clothed in myth[24] – was to be found in Nazi Germany, where nationalism was to be defined within a racial stereotype of the Aryan myth. With the destruction wrought by the Second World War, intellectuals who had hitherto sympathised with its utility condemned it outright as the scourge of the age.[25]

History, Myth, and Nationalism

The complex dialectical relationship between myth and history, and the vigorous debates which engaged European academics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not extend beyond Europe's intellectual frontiers. As far as Iranians were concerned, Europe was supremely and 'rationally' self-confident; there were no doubts. Yet the European rediscovery of Iran, or 'Persia' as they called the country, provides a good example of the way in which *myth* and *history* were integrated and manipulated for political gain. In its most serious manifestation, the ultimate legacy of this encounter would be a new grand narrative of Iranian history culminating in the Aryan Myth.[26]

The theory and ideology of nationalism, and the discipline of history have arguably enjoyed a symbiotic relationship.[27] Never was this

[24] M Bloch in 1934 noted, "I am terrified of every scientific nationalism." Quoted in J Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 133. 'Scientism' is of course recognised as one of the means of engendering myth. See Hayden White, *Metahistory*, p. 20. See also in this regard T W Adorno & M Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, Verso 1997, p. 258, first published in 1944.

[25] The most obvious and influential example of this was E Cassirer who before the war had shown an ambivalence towards the usefulness or otherwise of myth. In 1946 he published *The Myth of the State*, Yale University Press. Henry Tudor commented that "[t]he theorist who, more than any other, has drawn attention to the use of myths in contemporary politics is Ernest Cassirer. Indeed, as a study of political myths, his *The Myth of the State* has yet to be superseded," in *Political Myth*, London, Praeger, p. 31. Joseph Mali's discussion of Cassirer's awkward appreciation of the role of myth is illuminating; see Mythistory, pp. 187–90. The deconstruction of 'nationalism' as an (extremist) ideology also began in earnest after 1945. 'Myth' has of course returned with a vengeance through the medium of mass communications; see Thompson, *Ideology & Modern Culture*.

[26] Another lasting legacy would be the literary myth produced by Morier's *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*.

[27] See the discussion by A D Smith, ch. 1, Nationalism and the Historians, in *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 29–55. Also

relationship tighter than during the late nineteenth century and its determined search for national origins and roots. The debate, as has been suggested earlier, was complex and variegated, with criticism of the ways in which 'national histories' were vulnerable to mythologising and in essence proved rich breeding grounds for the promulgation of new (political) myths. These fears would come to fruition during the Fascist dictatorships of the inter-war years, and the reaction against the racist Aryan ideology of the Nazis was, unsurprisingly, uncompromising. The consequences of this intellectual quarantine were that the roots of the ideology were marginalised and ignored. Yet the development of the Aryan myth and the search for common European (white) roots was an intellectual inquiry which was intimately connected to the European rediscovery of Iran and was to have consequences for that country which far outlived its utility within European intellectual circles.

Persia in the Western Imagination

For centuries, European literary culture had been familiar with 'Persia' through the medium of classical and Biblical texts. With the advent of printing and the development of the book, this familiarity grew exponentially and was complimented by the expansion of trade routes east in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[28] Indeed by the turn of the seventeenth century Europeans had begun establishing trade and diplomatic missions in Iran, and there are intriguing indications that Iranian merchants likewise established trading houses in European capitals.[29] These travellers and merchants came to Iran rich in cultural preconceptions and ideas about the Persians they would find. Among the myths they would bring with them was that of 'decadence', and underlying many of their otherwise sympathetic and interesting observations was the belief that although the Persians might be materially wealthy, this wealth was destructive to their social and political well-being. Such ideas were also married to a belief that the Persians of the day were clearly not the

Berger & Lorenz, *Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, p. 1. see also, S Meskoob, Nationalism, Centralisation of Power and Culture in the Twilight of the Qajars and the Dawn of the Pahlavis, *Iran-Nameh*, Vol 12 (3), Summer 1994, p. 482.

[28] On the question of literary dissemination, see M T Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, London, Blackwell, 1979, p. 21. See also N Wheale, *Writing & Society: Literacy, Print and Politics in Britain 1590–1660*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 6.

[29] See *Diary of Samuel Pepys – Complete*, London, George Bell & Sons 1893 (iBook edition), p. 3175, entry dated 10 January 1667/1668. See also John Evelyn, *Diary*, London, Everyman Library, 2006, dated 18 October 1666, p. 454, which notes the adoption of the 'Persian mode' of dress at court.

'noble Persians' described by Herodotus, but had clearly been ethnically/racially diluted by repeated invasions. Ideas of decadence were particularly favoured by Protestant writers who sought to use their Persians as a tableau against which they could criticise the social and religious malaise of Catholicism, although they were not alone in applying this method, as seen by Montesquieu and his imitators.[30] Of particular interest in this regard was the notion of 'despotism'; a term which had classical roots, but was initially applied by early modern intellectuals against the absolute monarchs of Europe (by and large Catholic) before being subsequently reapplied with a vengeance to the Orient.[31]

Nonetheless by the time Montesquieu's Persian Letters had entered into literary circulation, the collapse and the apparent dismemberment of the Safavid state in Iran appeared to lend credence to European fears of the dangers of decadence. That European knowledge of Iran, even in the early eighteenth century, was keen is reflected in the detailed cartographical changes which were made in light of the political upheaval following the Afghan uprising in 1722, and the temporary Russian annexation of Caspian Sea territories. Indeed one of the earliest European academic theses was written on the 'Current Revolutions in Persia' and defended at the University of Uppsala in 1725; this occurring three years after the collapse of the Safavid State shows an intellectual diligence few contemporaries could achieve.[32] For much of the eighteenth century Iran

[30] See in this regard Sir Anthony Sherley, *His Relation of His Travels into Persia*, London, Nathaniell Butter & Joseph Bagset, 1613; Sir John Chardin, *Travels in Persia* (ed. Sir Percy Sykes), London, The Argonaut Press, 1927. Chardin's travels were originally published in 1686 and subsequently reprinted. This Huguenot account, although rich in detail, carries within it a distinct message. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, which were themselves deeply anticlerical – see in this regard, M Mosher's review of 'Radical Enlightenment', *Political Theory*, Vol 32 (3), June 2004, p. 429 – spawned a number of imitators. See for example the English equivalent, the second edition of which was published in 1735 (author's collection). Earlier enlightenment writers used Persia as a positive tableau with which to contrast the ills of their own societies, in large part because 'Persia' qualified as a 'civilised' nation. Enlightenment thinkers, drawing on the classics, tended to categorise people as 'barbarian' or 'civilised', with a third category, 'savage', added in the later eighteenth century. These were processes rather than fixed states, aspirational and fluid. The 'Persians' were arguably regarded as having succumbed to 'over-civilisation', a product of decadence that had resulted in barbarism. This latter category was quite distinct and different from savagery in the enlightenment imagination. See in this respect F Furet, *Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History Daedalus*, Vol 105 (3), 1976, pp. 213–14.

[31] For the modern genealogy of this idea, see P Springborg, *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince*, Cambridge, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992.

[32] See map by Homann dated to approximately 1730. The thesis was submitted by one Isaac Isaacson, who according to the supporting documentation had never actually visited Iran. Copies of both are owned by the author.