

Article

IRANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN COURSE OF HISTORY

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Abstract: The primary objective of this article is to delve into the development of Iranian national identity over the course of history. It aims to explore the emergence of Iran as a distinct political and cultural entity, pinpointing the period when it gained significance as a political entity with defined borders and a unique heritage. Furthermore, the article investigates the contentious debate surrounding whether Iran's status as a continuous entity with territorial and historical coherence is attributable to modern nationalist ideologies. It questions whether the emphasis on Iran's pre-Islamic history and identity is a contemporary fabrication, propagated by 20th-century Iranian intellectuals as a form of archaeophile political discourse. In addition, the article examines an alternative perspective that posits the existence of Iranian national identity long before the modern era, highlighting historical, cultural, and territorial continuity. Ultimately, the article seeks to determine whether Iranian national identity, nationality, and the concept of the Iranian nation should be regarded as ancient and intrinsic phenomena or as socially constructed organizational frameworks.

Keywords: National Identity, Iranian Identity, Historical Sociology, Nationality

1. INTRODUCTION

In what era did the existing notion of Iranian identity, encompassing a distinct territory, history, culture, and political heritage, emerge? Advocates of political ideologies such as ethnicism, alongside writers influenced by new paradigms in nationalism studies or postmodernist thought, often suggest modern origins for Iranian identity. Was it, as they argue, crafted by archaeophile intellectuals, European Orientalists, or the modern Iranian state of the twentieth century, with no vestiges of its existence discernible in antiquity? Alternatively, could the conception of Iranian identity as a political entity, boasting a rich historical, cultural, and civilizational legacy, find its genesis in epochs preceding our contemporary era?

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An imperative avenue for addressing these inquiries and scrutinizing the validity or fallacy of the proposed responses by the aforementioned approaches lies in delving into ancient texts, historical evidence, and documents of Iran. Essentially, understanding how historians and scholars, both Iranian and non-Iranian, have conceptualized Iran as a territorial entity emerges solely through meticulous examination of classical historical text and Iranian literary works, which serve as reflections of the historical and civilizational manifestations of Iranian society. Consequently, dismissing a national identity image of Iran in past eras and the contemporary epoch cannot be asserted solely based on modern social science theories and general assertions extrapolated from European historical cases.

It is evident that the political-ideological inclinations of the first faction, which place greater emphasis on ethnic chauvinism, and the epistemological and methodological frameworks of the second faction, influenced by the postmodern paradigm, which prioritize fragmentation over unity and exhibit a penchant for disparate elements rather than a cohesive identity, contribute to the formulation of such assertions regarding Iran.

Another factor at play is a lack of awareness of the evidence and a reluctance to engage with historical, literary, and cultural texts to ascertain the validity or falsehood of these claims. It does not appear that the primary impetus behind the change in the international designation from Persia to Iran during the reign of Reza Shah was the prevailing European ideas of the time. Not only is there insufficient compelling evidence or rationale to support this assertion, but it is crucial to note that Iranians themselves never used the term "Persia." Instead, this appellation originates from the designation given to Iran by classical writers of ancient Greece during the Achaemenid era [as *Persís*], which subsequently persisted in other European languages. Indeed, historical texts, literary works, and inscriptions from antiquity consistently refer to the country as "Iran." Therefore, the name change, as delineated in the circular issued by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1935 AD, can be construed as an affirmation of the historical appellation of this country as embraced by Iranians, rather than driven by racial motivations.

As a matter of fact, the name "Iran" has been applied to the current territory of Iranians since ancient times. The appellation "Iran" has been ascribed to the geographical expanse of the Iranian people since antiquity. Certain European and American Iranologists contend that from at least the Parthian period onward, the term "Iran" became prevalent in reference to this territory, acquiring identity connotations for Iranians particularly during the Sassanid era (Gnoli 1989). Moreover, the name "Iran" finds mention in the ancient sacred texts of Iran, notably the Avesta (Farahvashi 1995). This same name consistently recurs in all historical works of the Islamic era and is frequently encountered in both prose and poetic compositions. Notably, Ferdowsi recurrently employs the terms "Iran" and "Iran-zamin" (the land of Iran) in his references to the Iranian territory, a practice echoed by numerous poets preceding and succeeding him. For instance, the term "Iran" appears more than 1,700 times in the

works of Nizami Ganjavi, reflecting not only the poet's perception of Iran in his era but also conveying a sense of patriotism:

The whole world is the body, and Iran is the heart,
No one should be ashamed of this analogy.
Since Iran is the heart of the earth,
The heart is certainly better than the body.

Additionally, the name "Iran" persists in the verses of other poets as a delineated territory. For instance, in Anwari's renowned poem "Nameh-ye Ahl-e Khorasan" (Letter to the People of Khorasan), the term "Iran" and the phrase "the country of Iran" (Keshvar-e Iran) are recurrently employed. From the Safavid era onward, this appellation continued to be utilized, sometimes accompanied by the phrase "Mamalek-e Mahruseh-ye Iran" (the protected lands of Persia).

The name "Iran" also appears in the poems of many later poets as a specific territory. For instance, in Anwari's famous poem "Nameh-ye Ahl-e Khorasan" (Letter to the People of Khorasan), the word "Iran" and the phrase "the country of Iran" are repeatedly used. From the Safavid era onwards, this same name was used, and the phrase "Mamalek-e Mahruseh-ye Iran" (the protected territories of Iran) was sometimes employed (Sabet Kashani 1997).

2. IRAN AND IRANIAN IDENTITY IN ANCIENT HISTORICAL SOURCES

Methodologically, empirical-historical hypotheses cannot be confirmed or refuted solely through theoretical and discursive arguments; rather, judgments must be based on historical, social, political, and economic realities and evidence. The assertion that Iran's historical identity as a nation with an ancient political heritage is a construct of foreign or domestic intellectuals can only be substantiated or rebutted by consulting historical texts, evidence, and documents. Fortunately, given the wealth of historical literature concerning Iran and its environs, a method akin to historical sociology can be employed to either reject or prove such claims.

A cursory examination of existing historical texts pertaining to Islam and Iran reveals that classical post-Islamic works, whether authored by Arabs or Iranians, distinctly depict narratives concerning the history of Iranians and Iran, as well as an identifiable Iranian identity.

This image of Iran is reflected in the historical and literary works produced by both Iranians and non-Iranians since the earliest Islamic centuries. Over the past two centuries, many European Orientalists and Iranian writers have drawn upon these classical texts from the early Islamic period to elucidate, analyze, and interpret Iran's historical trajectory from ancient times onward. For instance, the eminent European Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke, author of one of the seminal works on the Sassanids, acknowledges that the bulk of his research was derived from the writings of Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, the compiler of the multi-volume "History of the Prophets and Kings" (known as *Tarikh Tabari*). Tabari compiled his work in the 9th

century CE, drawing from the writings of other scholars such as Ibn al-Kalbi, Ibn al-Muqaffa', Abu 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn al-Muthanna, Haytham ibn 'Oday, and the accounts of Sayf ibn 'Umar al-Tamimi regarding pre-Islamic Iranian history and the conflicts between Iran and the Arabs, among others. The sections pertaining to Iranian history from Tabari's opus were later translated into Persian during the Samanid era by Abu 'Ali Bal'ami, known as *Tarikh-e Bal'ami* (1958, 1963).

It is pertinent to acknowledge that works related to ancient Iranian history have been authored by a diverse array of individuals, including Iranian, Arab, and European scholars. Many of these writers, such as the Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, either lived during the ancient era concurrent with the Achaemenid period and bore witness to events firsthand, or drew from contemporary written and oral sources. Among the most significant classical European authors on ancient Iranian history are:

Herodotus, renowned for his seminal work which provides invaluable information into the Medes and Persians. According to Iranologists, Herodotus derived his information from official Iranian sources, including official reports and eyewitness accounts of participants in the wars between Iran and Greece from the era of Darius the Great onward. In his *Histories*, Herodotus (1983) offers a comprehensive narrative of Iran and its neighboring territories, rendering it one of the oldest authoritative international sources on ancient Iran.

Xenophon (2001), who after Herodotus provided the oldest source on the on ancient Iranian history, especially concerning the conquests and military campaigns of the Iranians, notably those of Cyrus. His writings on Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenids, afford more detailed insights into ancient Iran than any other author. Additionally, his work *Anabasis* provides a meticulous depiction of the expansive territories of the Achaemenid realm, along with the geographical features and inhabitants thereof (Household 1994).

Strabo, the prominent Greek geographer, offers one of the earliest extant reports on Iran, elucidating its geographical features, peoples, culture, and societal structures.

Isidore of Charax, an ancient geographer and traveler, provides precise descriptions, particularly of caravan routes from Syria through Iran to Central Asia. Living during the Arsacid era, he delineated the geographical, social, and cultural characteristics of Iranian lands in his writings.

Ptolemy, a prominent Greek geographer, contributed significant descriptions of the geographical, historical, and cultural aspects of antiquity, which were subsequently utilized by Iranian and Arab writers in their own historical and geographical treatises.

Ctesias, physician to Artaxerxes II, drew upon official records and royal archives of the Achaemenid court in his historical works. His seven-volume history of ancient Iranians from Cyrus to the demise of Xerxes, along with a continuation of ancient Iranian history up to 398 BCE in ten volumes, remains a valuable source. Though many of his other writings have been lost, references to them by subsequent Greek historians such as Photius provide insights into his broader oeuvre.

In addition to the contributions of Greek and Roman historians, significant portions of ancient Iranian history, spanning both mythological and historical epochs, were chronicled by Iranian authors of antiquity. Notably, during the Sassanid era, works such as the *Khudāynāmag* (Book of Kings) were composed. Primarily written in Pahlavi, these texts were translated into Arabic by Iranians and occasionally by Arabic speakers proficient in Pahlavi, and subsequently served as vital source material for Iranian and Arab historians. Poets and literary figures from both Iranian and Arab backgrounds later incorporated elements of these texts into their poetry. Indeed, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, as well as preceding incomplete works like those of Abu'l-Mu'ayyad Balkhi and the unknown writer of *Abu Mansuri Shahnameh*, drew heavily from these *Khudāynāmags* and their translations.

Ibn al-Muqaffa' (Ruzbih ibn Dādūyah), an Iranian Pahlavi scholar of the 8th century CE, played a pivotal role in translating significant ancient Iranian historical texts into Arabic. Many subsequent Arab and Iranian writers drew upon his translations, which included works such as the *Khudāynāmag* and *Āyīn-Nāmag* from Pahlavi into Arabic. These texts, which encompassed the lives of pre-Islamic Iranians from mythical epochs to the Sassanid era, were widely known and utilized by Muslims.

In addition to the *Khudāynāmag* and *Āyīn-Nāmag*, Ibn al-Muqaffa' also translated other seminal works such as the *Book of Mazdak* and the *Book of the Crown* (*Kitāb al-Tāj*) detailing the life of Anushirvan, the Sassanid king of Iran (Mashkoor 1998). These translations found resonance among figures like al-Tabari and other later Iranian-Islamic historians. However, Ibn al-Muqaffa' was not the sole translator of these *Āyīn-Nāmags* and *Khudāynāmags* into Arabic or New Persian (Dari); numerous others undertook this task, including al-Baladhuri, an Iranian historian of the 9th century CE based in Baghdad. Al-Baladhuri translated the history of the Sassanid era, particularly the reign of Ardashir, from Pahlavi into Arabic and versified it (See. Baladhuri 1987). Ibn Moskūyah, another Iranian writer, rendered these works into prose in his book *Tajārib al-Umam* (Ibn Moskuyah 1986, 2:69-136).

It's noteworthy that there wasn't a singular *Khudāynāmag* or *Āyīn-Nāmag* on ancient Iranian history; records from the early Islamic centuries indicate the existence of numerous books with these titles in Pahlavi, which later served as sources for historians of the Islamic era. Hamzeh al-Isfahani, a prominent Iranian historian of the 10th century CE, detailed in his book *Sinī Mulūk al-Arḍ wa'l-Anbiyā'* that Bahram, the mobad (priest) of Shapur in the province of Fars, compiled over 20 copies of the *Khudāynāmags* in the early Islamic era. Another historian of the time, Musa ibn 'Isa al-Kasrawi, compared these *Khudāynāmags* (Isfahani 1987). Several noteworthy translations of the *Khudāynāmags* into Arabic include:

Sīr al-Mulūk al-Furs, translated by Muhammad ibn al-Jahm, a poet during the Abbasid era of al-Ma'mun.

Tārīkh al-Mulūk al-Furs, another translation from the era of al-Ma'mun, apparently by his treasurer.

Sīr al-Mulūk al-Furs, translated by Zadawayh ibn Shahwayh al-Isfahani.

Sīr al-Mulūk al-Furs, translated by Muhammad ibn Bahram al-Isfahani.

Tārīkh Mulūk Banī Sāsān, translated and edited by Bahram ibn Mardanshah, the mobad of the province of Shapur in Fars.

Tārīkh al-Sāsānīyīn, translated by Musa ibn 'Isa al-Kasrawi (See. Mashkoor 1998).

Apart from the Khudāynāmags, which served as official histories of Iran, other works on the general history of Iran were also documented. For instance, al-Mas'udi mentioned in his book *al-Tanbīh wa'l-Ishrāf* that in 915 CE, he came across a comprehensive volume in Istakhr, Fars, detailing Iranian sciences, scholars, and the history of Iranian kings. According to al-Mas'udi, this book contained unique information not found in other works such as the *Khudāynāmag* and *Āyīn-Nāmag*. As reported by al-Mas'udi, the images of 17 Sassanid kings (15 men and 2 women) were depicted in this book. This book was translated from Pahlavi into Arabic based on a copy found in the royal treasury in Iran in 113 731 CE (Tafazzoli 1997, 276-277). Hamzeh al-Isfahani is believed to have utilized this book in his compositions (227).

In addition to these overarching histories, other works on specific historical periods were translated from Pahlavi into Arabic and New Persian (Dari), including the *Kārnāmāg ī Ardashīr ī Pābāgān* (The records of Ardashir, son of Pabag), *Zādspram*, Pahlavi narratives, *Andarz-Nāmags* (Books of Advice), *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, and *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*. Many of these books were translated into Arabic by Iranians or Arabic speakers familiar with the Pahlavi language within the first one or two centuries of Islam (269).

Iranian scholars also wrote and translated classical works on ancient Iranian history into Persian in the early centuries. Numerous books on the history of pre-Islamic Iran by Iranian authors were composed in Arabic, including those by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (*Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk*), al-Baladhuri (*Futūḥ al-Buldān*), Ibn Moskūyah (*Tajārib al-Umam*), al-Dinawari (*al-Akhhbār al-Ṭiwāl*), Hamzeh al-Isfahani (*Sinī Mulūk al-Arḍ wa'l-Anbiyā'*), al-Mas'udi (*Murūj al-Dhahab* and *al-Tanbīh wa'l-Ishrāf*), al-Gardizi (*Zayn al-Akhhbār*), Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (*Taḥqīq mā li'l-Hind* and *Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah*), and Abu Sulayman Banakati (*Rawdat uli al-albab*).

The reports on ancient Iranian history extended beyond the early Islamic centuries, resulting in the creation of significant works focusing on both general Islamic and Iranian history. These works, produced from the eleventh century CE onwards, played a pivotal role in preserving and elucidating ancient Iranian history. Notable among these are:

“*Mujmal al-Tawarikh wa al-Qisas*” (Compendium of Histories and Stories) from the 12th century CE. “*Tarikh-e Rawzat al-Safa*” (The History of the Garden of Purity) by Mirkhwand, composed in seven volumes. “*Zubdat al-Tawarikh*” (The Essence of Histories) by Hafiz Abru in the 15th century CE. “*Tarikh-e Gozidah*” (The Selected

History) by Hamdullah Mustawfi in the 14th century CE. “Nuzhat al-Qulub” (The Delight of Hearts), also by Hamdullah Mustawfi, on the detailed geography of Iran; “Fars Namah” (The Book of Fars) by Ibn Balkhi in the 12th century CE; “Jami’ al-Tawarikh” (The Compendium of Histories) by Khwaja Rashid al-Din Fadlullah composed in 14th century CE; “Habib al-Siyar” (The Beloved of careers) by Khwaja Ghiyath al-Din Khwandamir in the 16th century CE; “Al-Mu’jam fi Athar Muluk al-’Ajam” (The Encyclopedia of the Traces of the Persian Kings) by Sharaf al-Din Qazwini in the 13th century CE; “Rawzat al-Safa-ye Nasiri” (The Nasiri Garden of Purity) by Rida Qoli Khan Hedayat, composed in the 19th century CE; and “Nasikh al-Tawarikh” (The Abrogator of Histories) in more than ten volumes by Muvarrikh al-Dawlah Sepehr, a historian of the Qajar period in the 19th century CE.

These works, authored from 11th century CE onwards, encompassed ancient Iranian history alongside Islamic history and the narratives of the Israelite prophets. They remained influential until the late Qajar period, providing readers with traditional accounts of Iranian mythological and historical epochs. Educated Iranians of these periods were well-versed in this history, often transmitting it to the wider populace, who were also well-acquainted with the mythological aspects of Iranian history through Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. The prevalence of such prose and poetic works ensured that literate Iranian elites developed a distinct sense of Iranian identity, rooted in the history and legends of Iran, setting them apart from others (Mashkoor 1998, 29).

The exploration of pre-Islamic Iranian history was not confined to Iranian authors writing in Arabic or Persian. Many Arab writers of the early Islamic centuries also dedicated significant portions of their works to Iranian history (al-’Ajam) and the Iranian royal dynasties (29). Ibn al-Nadim, in his masterpiece “*al-Fihrist*,” introduced renowned Iranian, Arab, and other authors and their works, shedding light on the cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge during that era (Ibn Nadim 1973). Al-Tha’alibi (Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Isma’il al-Tha’alibi), an Arab writer and historian of the 11th century CE, dedicated one of his major works to Iranian history. His book, “*Ghurar Akhbar Muluk al-Furs wa Siyarih*” (The Principal Accounts of the Persian Kings and Their Biographies), offers a comprehensive narrative of Iranian history from its mythological origins to the end of the Sasanian era (Tha’alibi 1989). Similarly, al-Moqaddasi, another early Islamic Arab writer, included sections on ancient Iranian history, particularly the life and teachings of Mani, in his significant work “*Kitab al-Bad’ wa al-Tarikh*” (The Book of the Beginning and History) (Moqaddasi 1970).

Abu ‘Ubayda Ma’mar ibn al-Muthanna, a 9th century writer and historian, featured important accounts of ancient Iran in his works, later utilized by prominent Iranian historian al-Tabari. Other writers, like al-Mas’udi in his “*Muruj al-Dhahab*” and “*Tanbih wa al-Ishraf*,” also drew from Abu ‘Ubayda’s writings (Mashkoor 1998, 52). It is believed by some, such as Ibn al-Nadim, that the renowned book “*Fadha’il al-Furs*” (On the Virtues of the Persians) was authored by him (52). Among other classical Arab writers discussing ancient Iranian history, al-Haytham ibn ‘Oday, a 8th century historian, included crucial information about Iran and the interactions between

Iranians and Arabs, later utilized by al-Tabari (53). Sayf ibn 'Umar al-Fahimi, another Arab writer and historian of the 8th century, produced writings, known as "Riwayat Sayf" (The Accounts of Sayf), referenced by al-Tabari over thirty times (53). In addition, Ibn Kalbi, an Arab historian of the early Islamic centuries (eighth century CE), authored a significant book about the Arsacids (Muluk al-Tawa'if), extensively relied upon by al-Tabari, especially for its section on Alexander and his invasion of Iran (55).

3. APPROACHES TO IRANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CLASSICAL WORKS

While European classical works, notably those by historians like Herodotus, Xenophon, Ctesias, Plutarch, and others, focus on specific details such as the lives of Cyrus and Darius or accounts of wars involving Iranians, classical Iranian and Arab writings, including pre-Islamic Pahlavi texts like the Khudāynāmags and early Islamic works on Iranian history, take a more holistic approach. Rather than concentrating solely on individual monarchs or dynasties, these texts present Iranian history and identity as a coherent entity across time and space. This perspective reflects the historical worldview and philosophy of history held by the authors and researchers. Before the Islamic era, Iranians presented a coherent, general history from the beginning of creation until their time, establishing a collective identity which was both temporal—Kayumars as the first human on earth—and spatial—emphasizing the Iranian lands or Ērān-Wēž. These works, particularly post-Islamic ones, express the historical identity and political legacy of Iranians in various forms. Although historical writings related to Iran demonstrate limited diversity in their approaches to historiography and the narration of Iranian myths, they generally present a unified account of Iranian historical identity from mythological times to the authors' contemporary era. However, Islamic historiography brought about a change in the portrayal of Iranian historical identity. Two distinct approaches to writing Iranian history emerged:

1. Presenting Iranian history within the Islamic framework of history and introducing it as a part of the overall human history.
2. Separating Iranian history from Islamic history and presenting it as a distinct section titled "History of the Persians" (Tarikh Muluk al-'Ajam or Tarikh Muluk al-Furs).

These approaches to Iranian historical identity are evident in all historical works post-Islam. Many Islamic histories, rooted in the Quran, commence with the creation of Adam, the father of humankind, and extend to the advent of Prophet Muhammad and early Islamic developments. Iranian history is aligned with Islamic history—but from a holistic perspective—and finds a specific and distinct place in the narration of human historical developments. For example, Kayumars is equated with Adam, and various mythical and historical Iranian figures are portrayed as descendants of

prophets like Noah. Sam, the father of Zal and the grandfather of Rustam, is depicted as one of Noah's sons (see. Dinawari 2002). This integrative approach considers Iranian history as an integral part of human history. In another instance, Tabari underscores that the reign of Kavus, the son of Manuchehr, coincided with the reign of Prophet Solomon, and Kavus asked Solomon to give him control over the demons (Bal'ami 1958, 47-51). Other historical works following this approach include *Akhbar al-Tiwāl* (by Dinawari), *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh* (by Hafiz Abru), *Mujmal al-Tawārīkh wa al-Qisas*, *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh*, *Mujmal Fusihī*, *Tarikh-e Guzidah* (by Hamdallah Mustawfi), among others.

The second approach examines Iranian history separately, juxtaposed with the histories of other nations. However, even in this approach, there's a dedicated section addressing the historical identity of Iranians and linking Iranian history with Islamic narratives. It typically begin with Islamic history, tracing from the creation of Adam to Prophet Muhammad, before delving into Iranian history separately as the history of the "Ajam" or the "Furs" (Persians). For instance, Hamza al-Isfahani delineates Iranian history into four periods: the Pishdadian, Kayanian, Arsacids, and Sasanians (Isfahani 1987, 30-61). He then examines the histories of other civilizations like the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Israelites, and Arabs in separate sections (63-164). Among the prominent works adopted this approach are *Zayn al-Akhbār* by Gardizi, *Murūj al-Dhahab* by Mas'udi, *Fārsnāmah* by Ibn Balkhi, *Tārīkh-e Sīstān*, *Tārīkh-e Tabarī* by al-Tabari, *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm* by al-Muqaddasī, *Majma' al-Ansāb* by Shabānkārah'ī, *Tārīkh-e Ghāzānī* by Rashid al-Din Fadlullah, *Rawḍat al-Ṣafā* by Khwandamir, *Rawḍat al-Ṣafā-ye Naṣirī* by Reza-Qoli Khan Hedayat, and *Nāsikh al-Tawārīkh* by Muvarrikh al-Dawlah Sepehr.

Apart from these two historiographical approaches, the discourse on Iranian history, or the narrative of Iran's historical evolution, differs among historians in two ways. This duality may have roots in pre-Islamic Pahlavi texts and later influenced Iranian and Arab historians. Consequently, two distinct approaches to presenting Iranian history emerge. One approach involves a broad discussion based on historical sequence, while the other involves categorizing and periodizing Iranian history from its inception. At times, as evident in numerous texts, notably Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, these approaches are intertwined in depicting Iran's historical evolution. A prominent feature across classical works, both pre and post-Islam, concerning Iranian history is the clear categorization of its historical development. These works typically delineate Iranian royal dynasties into four fundamental classifications, spanning from the mythical to the historical era:

1. The Pishdadian (Pre-Aryan) period.
2. The Kayanian (Aryan) period.
3. The Ashkanian (Arsacid, Parthian) period, also known as the *Muluk al-Tawa'if* (Kings of the Provinces) era.
4. The Sasanian era.

While the first two periods, particularly the former, lean towards the mythical, the latter two are marked by historical realities. Both Iranian and Arab historians, have provided detailed accounts of the Arsacid and Sassanid dynasties, along with their political and social advancements. For instance, Hamza al-Isfahani, a 9th-century Iranian historian, explicitly outlines these four periods in his work. After providing a general discussion on categorizing Iranian history into the four periods, he delves into detailed accounts of Iranian kings' reigns, meticulously examining the political and social landscape of each era (30-61). This indicates the prevalence of the same categorization in preceding works, particularly since Musa ibn 'Isa al-Kasrawi (Khusrawi) directly translated his book from Pahlavi into Arabic, titling it "Tarikh Padshahan-e Iran" (History of the Kings of Iran).

This fourfold classification is evident in other works as well. One such significant piece is Gardizi's "Zayn al-Akhhbār" or "Tarikh-e Gardizi." He divides Iran's history, historical identity, and political legacy into five distinct categories and discussed them:

1. The Pishdadian, from Kayumars, Tahmurath, Zahhak, Fereydun, to Manuchehr.
2. The Kayanian, during the reigns of Kayqubad, Kavus, Kaikhosr, Kay Sohrab, Kay Ghoshtasp, Bahman, Humai, and Darab.
3. The Muluk al-Tawa'if (Petty kings or Kings of the Provinces) or the Arsacids, during the periods of Alexander, Ashk, Shapur, Goudarz, Narsi, Hurmuz, Parviz ibn Nowzar, ... and Ardalan.
4. The Sasanian kings, from Ardashir Babakan to Qubad ibn Firuz.
5. The Akasir or Sassianan Khosrows, covering the period from Khosrow I Anushirvan to Yazdegerd, the last Sasanian king, and the advent of Islam (Gardizi 1984).

Moreover, Ibn Balkhi also adopts this fourfold categorization in his book "Fars Namah" (The Book of Persia). While dedicating shorter discussions to the first three periods, he devotes the major portion to the history of Iran during the Sasanian era. After examining the historical developments of Iran in this period, he briefly discusses the geographical, social, cultural, and legal characteristics of ancient Iran (Ibn Balkhi 1984, 119-173).

Some modern scholars argue that the Pishdadian and Kayanian mythical periods in classical works correspond to the Medes and the Achaemenids, so that the Pishdadian period aligns with the Median era, while the Kayanian period corresponds to the Achaemenid period (Bavand n.d.; Khaleqi 1995, 158-170). For instance, some researchers propose that the Avestan "Θraētaona," appearing as Fereydun of the Pishdadian in the Shahnameh, is synonymous with "Fravartīš" or Phraortes, the powerful Median king in Greek accounts of Iranian history. Similarly, the Avestan "Manušciθra" is identified with Manuchehr of the Pishdadian in the Shahnameh, corresponding to "Huvaxštra" or Kyaxārēs in Greek accounts, with both names signifying "of good lineage and good appearance" (Bavand n.d. 70-74).

4. IRANIAN NATIONALITY: A MODERN OR ANCIENT PHENOMENON?

After examining the discourse presented earlier, our attention is now directed towards unraveling the enigma of Iranian national identity. Should we align with prevailing theories of European nationalism, construing it as a distinctly modern construct? Or, in accordance with ethnocentric and postmodern ideologies, should we view it as a product of contemporary intellectuals and the twentieth-century modern state? Does the historical evidence of Iran substantiate these assertions, or do we require an alternative framework to comprehend Iranian identity?

If we delineate identity as “self- recognition grounded in specific tenets and the projection of these foundations to others,” we can discern the historical dimension of Iranians’ perception of self-identity and its portrayal to others, alongside the acknowledgment of Iranians’ identity by non-Iranians, across an extensive temporal expanse. Reflecting on Iranians’ historical identity as depicted in classical Western (Greek and Roman), Islamic (Arabic), and Iranian literary works, we can address the pivotal query: has Iran, as both a geographical and historical entity—comprising territorial and political (state) components—been recognized by Iranians and non-Iranians long preceding the Islamic era? This cognizance, encapsulating the historical identity of Iranians, delineates Iran as a distinct entity replete with its own narrative of history, culture, civilization, and politics, set apart from non-Iranian counterparts. Both Iranians and non-Iranians—be they Greek, Roman, or Arab—were cognizant of such image of Iranian identity and manifested it within their historical compositions.

Consequently, contrary to assertions posited by new ideologies, including ethnic nationalism and proponents of contemporary postmodern political and historical interpretations, Iran, as a continuum of territorial and historical existence, is not a byproduct of nationalist discourses stemming from Iran post the Constitutional Revolution. The consciousness among Iranians regarding their identity and nationality harks back not to the modern epoch but rather to centuries antedating the advent of Islam, at least to the late Parthian era and subsequently the zenith of the Sasanian era. During this epoch, Iranians undertook the codification of historical and mythological national narratives, yielding an intellectual legacy and a *weltanschauung* that later permeated Islamic (both Iranian and Arab) literary spheres. Thus, the assertions made by Iranian intellectuals after the Constitutional Revolution concerning the historical identity and ancient foundations of Iranian history and identity are deeply rooted in this society’s remote past and was not an invention of Western Orientalists. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, certain Western scholars and Orientalists during the 19th and 20th centuries fashioned their works drawing inspiration from classical writings on Iran’s history and historical identity. Notable among them are German and Russian Orientalists Nöldeke (1948) and Barthold, with the former composing his history of the Sasanians under the influence of Tabari’s writings, and the latter crafting his treatise on

the Turks, inspired by the historical compilations of classical Iranian historians, particularly Gardizi's *Zayn al-Akhbar*.

Exploring Iranian identity through historical evidence compels us to provide evidence-based responses to queries from proponents of ethnic ideologies and advocates of postmodern and critical modern nationalism theories, especially regarding their relevance to Iranian national identity. According to these views, nationality and nationhood are modern phenomena that emerged by the aftermath of the French Revolution, the proliferation of the printing press, and the demise of universal empires and religious hegemonies (see. Anderson 1983, 17-25). Indeed, this argument holds merit, supported by various instances in European history and the Middle East, where nationalism emerged among Turks, Arabs, and Kurds after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, a methodological examination of Iran's historical trajectory, particularly from a historical sociology perspective, reveals that the intricacies of identity and nationality in Iran cannot be elucidated by prevailing theories explaining nationality in Europe or in nascent nations globally.

Among social theorists, however, one can allude to Anthony Smith (1971; 1976), a prominent scholar of nationalism and nationality, who recognized the plausibility of the existence of "nations" in pre-modern epochs for certain entities, including Iranians, accentuating the antiquity of the nationhood concept and the sentiment of attachment to specific territories and histories (see also Armstrong 1982). Concerning Iran, his proposition resonates more convincingly than the modernist and structuralist approaches to nationalism advocated by figures such as Hobsbawm and Anderson. The accounts delineated by Iranians preceding and succeeding Islam, alongside those of Greeks and Arabs, regarding Iranian historical identity and their socio-political existence, attest to the recognition of a distinct "nation" within Iran. This encapsulates a collective national idea where people within a defined territory assert their political sovereignty.

While we assert that certain aspects of modern, nationalist sentiments have permeated Iran under the influence of global developments and European nationalist ideologies, we also underscore the existence of a form of national sentiment and consciousness, entrenched within the classical Persian writings, notably evident in the works of Iranian luminaries such as Ferdowsi, Nezami Ganjavi, Khaqani and others.

The socio-political and intellectual currents of the early Islamic epochs, particularly the *Shu'ubiyya* movement—discussed extensively in classical and contemporary literature—attest to the existence of such national sentiments and a kind of awakening of Iranian national identity vis-à-vis non-Iranian entities. Certain leaders of the *Shu'ubiyya* movement, including Ibrahim al-Imami and Bashar ibn Burd, amidst Arab racial and ethnic supremacy and the denigration of Iranians as an inferior people (*mawali*), invoked Iran's historical past and its ascendancy, countering Umayyad Arab ethnic chauvinism with references to the formidable kings and illustrious Iranian kingdom before Islam (Momtahn 1989; Homaei 1984; Eftekharzadeh 1992). Such expressions of sentiment can only be construed as a reflection of the existence of a

traditional sense of nationality and belonging to a particular society with a distinctive historical and political identity.

5. CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this article was to re-evaluate discussions surrounding Iranian identity and Iranian national identity, taking into account new approaches, perspectives, and theories regarding nationalism, identity, and ethnicity. Recent global, regional, and academic-political developments have spurred theoretical inquiries and challenges regarding the nature of Iranian identity and nationality. This has led proponents of ethnocentric and separatist ideologies (such as Pan-Turkism, Pan-Kurdism, and Pan-Arabism), as well as some proponents of modern theories of nationalism, identity, and postmodern approaches, to advance fresh claims concerning the history, nature, and authenticity of Iranian national identity. Despite disparities in their viewpoints, theoretical underpinnings, and objectives, they converge on a few key claims: they contend that Iran, as a cohesive historical, cultural, and civilizational entity with enduring historical continuity, is a product of 20th-century and late 19th-century political discourses. Furthermore, they argue that the modern Iranian state following the Constitutional Revolution, along with Iranian intellectuals influenced by modern European racial discourses and archaeological findings by Orientalists, have contrived and constructed Iranian national identity, advancing the notion of the cultural, historical, civilizational, political, and territorial continuity of a construct called Iran.

In scrutinizing these claims, we employed the “historical sociology” approach and examined the issue of Iranian identity in light of alternative theories pertaining to nationalism, ethnicity, and grounded in historical evidence from Iran. Through an exploration of ancient historical and classical works predating and succeeding Islam (found in the writings of Greek, Roman, Arabic, and Iranian historians, geographers, and scholars), we endeavored to trace Iran’s trajectory as a nation characterized by a distinct territorial, historical, and cultural identity across history. These texts collectively indicate that both Iranians and non-Iranians (Westerners and Arabs) have recognized Iran an entity with distinct civilizational, historical, cultural, and political identity, thereby reflecting a form of national identity and historical consciousness among Iranians. This identity has persisted over time and laid the groundwork for modern Iranian national identity.

These findings counter opposing claims, especially those of ethnic nationalists and postmodern theorists, suggesting that Iranian national identity did not emerge as a fabrication of purported “archaeophile” Iranian intellectuals during the Pahlavi era or Western Orientalists. Rather, these intellectuals and Orientalists grounded their research and discourse not in fabrications, but in the content available in classical historical works. While national identity, including Iranian national identity, can ultimately be viewed as a “social construct” or an “invention of tradition” through the modern theories, it must be acknowledged that this social construct and Iranian

invention of tradition are not products of the modern era. As emphasized by numerous Western and Iranian scholars, their roots can be traced back to at least the early Sasanian period (Ashraf 1994, 16-17). This renders Iranian identity a unique phenomenon in the Middle East region, which does not have its roots in the late 19th or early 20th centuries, but goes back to the ancient periods of Iranian history. The most salient characteristic of this distinct Iranian identity is the territorial, political, cultural, and artistic continuity of Iran, which, despite historical disruptions, has persisted vibrantly from antiquity to the present day.

APPENDIX

In the post-Islamic Revolution era, discussions surrounding identity in Iran revolved around the interplay between Islam and Iranian identity, or Islamism and Iranianism, yet lacked precision in academic exploration (Ahmadi 2000; 1998). Instead of delving into the concept of identity itself, scholarly inquiry often gravitated towards examining the Islamic and national elements of Iranian identity, or endeavors to reconcile them.

Since the 2000s, two significant developments have spurred a renewed examination of Iranian identity. The first is a series of political upheavals on both international and domestic levels. The second is the proliferation of new political ideologies from Europe and the United States has found its way into Iranian discourse. Key transformations in the former category include:

- The collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and several other multi-ethnic states in the 1990s.

- The expansion of globalization and increased access to mass media and information technologies.

- Political shifts within Iran, particularly the widening of the political landscape since 1997 and an emphasis on national interests and rational foreign policy.

- The resurgence of nationalist political ideologies in the Middle East, particularly the renewed activism of Pan-Turkic circles and the establishment of Pan-Turkism as a guiding principle for the expansionist policies and national interests of some regional states.

The main spheres of the dissemination of political ideas that have led to a focus on the discourse of identity and related concepts include:

- The emergence of postmodernism as a critical discourse in Europe and its haphazard application in the analysis of social issues and thought in Iran.

- Attention to certain theoretical aspects of the components of modernization and development, particularly discussions related to the transitional periods to political and economic development in the Third World.

- Theoretical debates on the impacts of globalization on phenomena such as the nation-state and identity (see Ahmadi 2002).

These political and intellectual developments have catalyzed discussions about Iranian identity across various research, academic, and political spheres in Iran. Three distinct categories emerge as primary actors in articulating issues related to Iranian identity. The first two categories, to varying extents, can be viewed as ideological proponents advocating for the dismissal of Iranian identity and nationality as historical and political realities. They are briefly

outlined below, followed by the third category comprising scholars and researchers striving to counter the assertions of the former two through empirical and historically grounded research.

First category: These are small activist groups primarily motivated by ethnicism and other ideologies, opposing the concept of Iranian nationality and national identity as a cohesive historical, cultural, civilizational, and territorial continuum. This category exhibits a form of “ethnic chauvinism,” advocating for the primacy of ethnic identities, ethnic nationalisms, and the establishment of new territorial, cultural, and politically homogeneous ethnic structures.

Second category: This consists of certain intellectual circles, predominantly a new generation of Iranian domestic and foreign graduates, captivated by postmodern and critical intellectual approaches. They apply these perspectives in discussions surrounding national identity in Iran. Apart from postmodern debates, their engagement with theories of nationalism and ethnicity in Europe, particularly influenced by the works of Benedict Anderson (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1983), as well as more recent debates on globalization and its impacts on the nation-state and nationalism, draws them to examine issues of identity, nationality, and the state in Iran from these angles. However, their understanding of these theoretical discussions often surpasses their grasp of the complexities of Iran, especially concerning Iranian identity, nationality, and the state. Consequently, their writings tend to be theoretically focused rather than critically applying these theories to the Iranian context.

Despite differing motivations and objectives between the writers in the first two categories--the former seeking to undermine Iran’s political, cultural, and historical order, and the latter driven by scientific motivations to address political and social issues--their writings often converge, leading to erroneous and ahistorical interpretations of complex issues such as national identity, identity crisis, national cohesion, or national unity in Iran. This convergence contributes to a general misunderstanding of Iran’s political, social, and historical-cultural characteristics. The main assertions, wherein occasional convergence occurs between the two categories, can be summarized as the following myths

1. Since Iranian society is composed of ethnic groups with distinct identities, cultures, and social structures, one cannot speak of it as a whole with shared national identity and commonalities (Sadr al-Ashrafi 1998).
2. The conception of Iran as a territorial whole with historical, cultural, civilizational, and even political continuity is the product of the work of nationalist and ancient-oriented intellectuals after the Constitutional Revolution, particularly in service of the objectives and interests of the Pahlavi regime (Hey’at 2002).
3. The emergence of racist ideologies in recent centuries, especially the 20th century, has led Iranian ancient-oriented intellectuals to create the myth of the Aryan race and to invent a political tradition based on the succession of Iranian governments from ancient times to the present, while denigrating other “ethnicities” and “nations”.
4. The same racist theories have led Iranian ancient-oriented intellectuals to engage in “othering” of the “self,” and to create an Iranian chauvinistic nationalism by positing the “Iranian” against the “non-Iranian” - such as Arabs and Turks.
5. Considering the theories related to “nation-building” and its various stages of transition and the resulting crises, Iran has not yet completed the nation-building process and therefore cannot be considered a national society, and one should speak of the existence of “non-national” groups (such as peoples, ethnicities, or nationalities) within it.

6. The absolute monarchy after the Constitutional Revolution, in order to justify its legitimacy and consolidate its ethnic domination and the like, created the fabricated phenomenon of “Iran” by changing the name of this territory from Persia to “Iran,” so that, under the influence of the racist theory of Aryan superiority, the people of this land could be considered of the mentioned race.
7. Essentially, something called “Iran” as a distinct territorial domain with a specific history, culture, and national language did not exist, and all of these were inventions of contemporary Iranian ancient-oriented intellectuals.
8. The modern Iranian state, by pursuing “assimilation” policies in culture and language, imposed the culture and language of a particular ethnic group on other Iranian ethnicities, and through the prevention of teaching local languages and the imposition of the Persian language as the official language, engaged in a form of ethnic and national oppression (Poorpirar 2001; Al-Tai 1999).
9. The very existence of a continuous history for the land known as Iran is a product of the work of proponents of Aryan racist theories in Europe. It was these Orientalists who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, through the fabrication of historical books, the discovery of ancient artifacts, and the invention of seemingly ancient Iranian inscriptions, created the myth of the existence of an ancient history and ancient Iranian heritage. The imposition of the Persian language and national-linguistic oppression are common claims made by ethnic-centric discourses in Iran (though the proponents of this argument have failed to demonstrate in which historical periods local languages were used as educational languages, while the new Persian language has been the literary and administrative language across Iran since the early centuries after Islam, and education and scholarship were generally conducted in this language—accompanied by Arabic as the sacred religious language—which has made Persian a de facto national language for all Iranians regardless of their local languages. See. Meskoob 2000).
10. The modern Iranian state, through its centralist policies largely dictated by foreign powers like Britain, destroyed the local authority of entities that they label as “peoples,” “ethnicities,” and “nationalities” within Iran, and systematically engaged in their massacre, forced migration, and annihilation through the use of the modern military.
11. Given the above points, decentralization in the territorial, administrative, cultural, linguistic, and political realms in contemporary Iran is a necessity, and this is the best way to achieve pluralism, democracy, and civil society (Mohammadzadeh Golkhadani 2001).

The author contends that, notwithstanding certain points within some of the aforementioned myths, the conclusions drawn and the representations made regarding national identity, history, and Iranian culture are unfounded. Furthermore, many of the discussions concerning contemporary Iranian political developments, especially regarding the policies of the modern state and its motivations, lack factual basis and are derived from misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations propagated by the aforementioned actors. These interpretations are often influenced by their political-ideological motivations or stem from an ahistorical generalization of irrelevant theories.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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