

Article

RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN IRAN: FROM CONFRONTATION TO INTERACTION

Ali Akbar Alikhani

Abstract: Religion, nationality, and nationalism are enduring themes in human societies, with Iran, boasting one of the most ancient civilizations, serving as a prime example of their convergence during the 19th century. Presently, the intricate interplay among these factors in Iran has led to a nuanced phenomenon. This article aims to understand contemporary Iranian nationalism and its relationship with religion, focusing on current dynamics while exploring historical trajectories. It seeks to elucidate the components and dynamics of the religion-nationalism relationship in Iran. The article begins by presenting theoretical discourse on religion and nationalism, defining their concepts and components. It then analyzes the contemporary association between religion and nationalism in Iran, ranging from extensive interaction to notable conflict. This analysis covers three mainstream and nine substream categories, including the clash between Islam and nationalism, the synergy between Islam and nationalism, and the antagonism between nationalism and Islam. Additionally, it investigates the progression of this relationship over a century, identifying five distinct periods and six semi-models. In conclusion, the article asserts that while Iranian nationalism has been influenced by global trends, it exhibits distinctive disparities from Western and Arab paradigms.

Keywords: Islam, Iran, Nationalism, Nationality, Archaism

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion and nationality stand as formidable forces within human societies, capable of inspiring immense dedication, even to the point of sacrificing lives. Religion, with its intricate nature, sparks numerous debates, often leading to divergent interpretations and conflicting readings, even among adherents of the same faith. Similarly, nationalism emerges as a socio-political phenomenon fraught with contention, closely linked to power dynamics and the aspirations of influential groups. The intertwining of religion and nationalism further complicates matters. Iran, boasting millennia-old roots in both religion and nationality, provides a unique backdrop. Over recent centuries, the introduction of nationalism into Iranian politics and society has led to fluctuating dynamics between

ALI AKBAR ALIKHANI is an Associate Professor in the Department of West Asian and African Studies at the University of Tehran.

religion and nationalism, often marked by significant roles and enduring tensions. Alongside these dynamics, Iranian culture adds its own layer of intricacies. This article aims to delve into the understanding of Iranian nationalism and its relationship with religion in contemporary Iran. It seeks to explore the nuances of Iranian nationalism, contrasting it with conventional perceptions of nationalism and examining its intersections with Islam. The central inquiry revolves around identifying the components of religion and nationalism in present-day Iran and elucidating their interplay. To address this inquiry, we commence with a conceptual exploration of religion and nationalism, clarifying their respective elements and characteristics. Subsequently, we delineate the multifaceted relationship between religion and nationalism across a spectrum, spanning three mainstream and nine substream categories within contemporary Iran. Concluding with a practical approach, we examine the historical trajectory of the relationship between religion and nationalism within Iranian politics and society over the past century, highlighting its evolution to the present day.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholarly works have addressed the intricate relationship between religion and nationalism, often integrating them within broader discourses. Within this framework, some researchers have classified religious nationalism as a distinct subtype of nationalism. For instance, Ali Ansari categorizes the diverse nationalist currents in modern Iran into four main groups: secular nationalists, religious nationalists, leftist factions, and monarchist nationalists (Ansari 2012: 2). Meanwhile, Mohammad Ali Akbari examines the discourse surrounding “Iranism” during the Qajar and Pahlavi eras, identifying three primary strands: religious Iranism (as reflected in the writings of Yousuf Khan Mostashar al-Dowleh and Mirza Abdul’Rahim Talibof Tabrizi), ethnic Iranism (as reflected in the works of Jalal al-Din Mirza), and secular and archaistic Iranism (as reflected in the works of Mirza Fatali Akhundov and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani) (Akbari 2004: 73-61). Hamid Ahmadi delineates the evolution of the Iranian nationalist movement, initially conceived as a unified entity in the late 20th century, which later diversified into various ideological currents such as state nationalism, liberal popular nationalism, radical nationalism, and Islamic nationalism (Ahmadi, 1388: 148). Similarly, Mohammad Malekzadeh identifies two prominent trends in Iranian nationalism: royalist nationalism and “The National Front of Iran” (Malekzadeh 2008: 79). Reza Zia-Ebrahimi further classifies nationalism in Iran into four distinct categories: archaistic or decontextualized nationalism (archaistic and Western-centric), constitutional revolution nationalism (1906), Mohammad Mosaddegh nationalism (1882-1967), and the movement for nationalizing oil and Islamic Republic nationalism (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 4). Azadeh Kian and Gilles Riaux offer a binary categorization of nationalism in Iran, distinguishing between Western-oriented nationalist and Islamic-oriented nationalist currents (Kian & Riaux 2009: 19).

Ahmad Ashraf distinguishes between nineteenth-century Iranian national identity and historical Iranian identity, acknowledging the latter's influence on the former's formation. He delineates "historical Iranian identity" from "Iranian national identity." Ashraf views Iranian identity as a social construct evolving through historical events and interpretations, while he regards narratives of nationalism as a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, influenced by European ideas aiming to counter backwardness (Ashraf 2020). Sousan Siavoshi examines the discourse of liberal nationalism in Iran, with her focus on the nationalist front from its inception to later periods. She considers each phase of the nationalist front as a facet of liberal nationalism and offers predictions regarding its future trajectory (Siavoshi 2009). Amir Masoud Shahramnia delves into comprehensive discussions regarding the interaction and conflict between Islam and nationalism, alongside related concepts and trends within Iran (Shahramnia 2012: 9). Additionally, Hossein Kachoian has contributed extensively to the discourse on Iranian identity through various publications, including the book "Our Identity" (Kachoian 2012).

3. CONCEPTUAL EXAMINATION OF RELIGION

Religion stands as one of humanity's oldest concepts, deeply ingrained in our existence. Some Muslim intellectuals argue that the innate quest for seeking God is intrinsic to human nature, suggesting that the origins of religious inclination align with the development of human societies. However, the advent of divine prophets marked a pivotal moment, solidifying religion into a tangible form, integrating beliefs and rituals into human life. Belief, being internal and intangible, contrasts with rituals, which serve as visible expressions of belief, allowing for observation and assessment.

Several fundamental principles regarding religion can be outlined as follows:

The first principle asserts that prophets of divine religions are divinely commissioned by God.

The second principle articulates that the mission and duty of divine religions encompass inviting people to seek God, promoting ethical conduct, respecting others' rights, avoiding injustice and oppression, cultivating purity of thought, moral behavior, and advocating for virtues while rejecting vices.

The third principle emphasizes that prophets pursued no personal or group gains from religion, focusing solely on humanity's salvation from ignorance, superstition, idolatry, and the propagation of monotheism.

The fourth principle posits that the teachings, beliefs, and objectives of divine religions and prophets throughout history logically cannot contradict each other, as they all emanate from the same divine source, despite inevitable differences among them.

The fifth principle underscores that religion is a divine revelation not owned by any individual or group, intended for the benefit of all humanity. Even prophets and

bearers of religion acknowledge their human identity, emphasizing equality among all individuals as recipients of divine guidance.

In an ideal conceptualization of divine religion put forth:

“Religion encompasses a collection of divine teachings urging all individuals to refrain from oppression, violence, idolatry, falsehood, and other unethical conduct, while promoting devotion to God, honesty, moral conduct, justice, compassion towards others, and various human virtues, all aimed at the well-being of humanity in both this life and the hereafter.”

The most recent divine religion was revealed about fourteen centuries ago, with the histories of other divine religions extending back thousands of years. Understandably, over these periods, numerous individuals have offered interpretations of religion, with their understandings and interpretations varying in accuracy and validity. At times, these interpretations—whether intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly—have become entwined with the interests of individuals and groups, diverging from the third principle. In pursuit of these interests, certain groups, under the guise of religion and relying on principles such as expediency, the eradication of corruption, adherence to religious rituals, and the like, have engaged in actions deemed unethical, such as oppression, violence, and rights violations, contravening the second principle. Consequently, due to these interpretations, readings, and subsequent outcomes, religions have not only come into conflict with each other, but individuals within the same religious framework have also splintered into factions, each considering themselves righteous and others misguided, with many condoning the shedding of others’ blood and resorting to violence, destruction, and looting, in opposition to the fourth principle. All these actions were undertaken either by individuals or by those who claimed authority as custodians and responsible guardians of religion, asserting their obligation to safeguard God’s religion, in defiance of the fifth principle. Presently, with no prophet or bearer of divine message to articulate the true meaning and purpose, it signifies humanity’s divergence from the first principle.

Considering the precarious nature of the aforementioned five principles, I provide a specific definition of religion in today’s world:

“Religion comprises a set of divine teachings interpreted by multiple custodians, often with conflicting views, who interpret them based on their personalities, beliefs, and contemporary context. Each group, according to its interpretation, advocates for individuals to refrain from oppression, violence, superstitions, falsehoods, and other immoral acts, while promoting devotion to God, honesty, integrity, justice, compassion towards others, and other human virtues. Each group considers itself as the sole adherent of the true religion.”

However, this definition is broad, and more nuanced definitions can be offered for each religion and its various sects. Nevertheless, based on this definition, we witness the practical clash of religions, more accurately termed as the “Islamic sectarian strife in the Middle East.” Each individual, group, and nation presents a set of beliefs, divine

teachings, along with a distinct interpretation, intertwined with politics and contemporary issues, labeling it as Islam. Everyone is expected to adhere to it, while anything else is deemed outside of Islam, subject to rejection, expulsion, or even destruction. Examples include ISIS, Al-Qaeda, extremist Salafis, Taliban, and others. The topic of nationalism is not exempt from this rule. When discussing the relationship between Islam and nationalism, it refers to the everyday Islam of the people and authorities who have sometimes deviated from the five well-known principles about religion. Islam is a universal religion that does not recognize race, language, skin color, nationality, geographical borders, and similar factors. Therefore, “nationality” and “nationalism” are not issues or concerns of Islam but rather societal norms that do not inherently relate to Islam until they contradict religious teachings. Theoretical opposition from religion does not exist in this regard. Whether Islam can function in the realm of nationalism, become one of its components, or be exploited by some, similar to its utilization in other political and social arenas, aligns with the concrete definition we have of religion.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

Nationalism encompasses a complex array of interconnected concepts, each with its own nuances, which collectively form a systematic framework. These concepts serve as the foundational elements of nationalism, yet they are insufficient on their own. Let’s delve into this network of concepts briefly.

Homeland: The bond between an individual and their homeland is fundamental, constituting an integral part of their identity. The sense of belonging to one’s homeland is deeply ingrained and ranks closely after familial ties. Patriotism and affection for one’s homeland are not only natural but also commendable. Sometimes, patriotism may be misconstrued as chauvinism, although it’s improbable for someone to deify their homeland. Instead, the term often reflects profound attachment to one’s homeland. The physical and geographical dimensions of a homeland hold greater significance than its symbolic meanings, and each conceptual or meaningful aspect can be explored and presented alongside its physical and geographical attributes.

Ethnicity: Ethnic identity is rooted in ancestry and lineage, marked by a strong sense of kinship. The emotional and symbolic dimensions of ethnicity outweigh its purely physical aspects. Within a shared homeland, diverse ethnicities can coexist, and while some ethnic groups may be at odds, they often share a deep-seated attachment to their common homeland.

State: A state is defined as a distinct geographical territory governed by a central authority. According to this definition, Iran has been recognized as a state since ancient times, though certain regions have been subject to territorial changes over different historical periods. However, the modern concept of borders and associated regulations can be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia. Additionally, the national flag serves as a potent symbol of the state’s identity and unity.

Nation: The concept of “nation” or “nationality” is relatively new. In Islamic texts and the works of Muslim philosophers, “nation” and “umma” have different meanings. In its modern sense, a nation refers to a group of people living under the governance of a state, sharing a collective identity within a specific territorial domain, and having at least one official language. The diversity of ethnicities, languages, and customs within a nation does not contradict the concept of nationhood or nationality.

Nationality: Nationality denotes an individual’s membership in a nation and state. It can be categorized into primary, secondary, and mixed types. Primary nationality refers to an individual’s first citizenship acquired at birth, while secondary nationality denotes dual citizenship granted to individuals. Mixed nationality includes individuals whose parents have different nationalities, resulting in dual citizenship from birth.

Language: A unified language is one of the most significant components of nationalism. In Iran, the Persian language holds considerable importance with roots dating back thousands of years. One of the primary cultural sources contributing to the shared language in Iran is the *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi. Alongside the national language, different ethnic groups may have their own languages without undermining national unity or linguistic solidarity.

Religion: Common religion and faith constitute another component of the Iranian people. Before Islam, Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion in Iran, followed by Islam. Despite religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Christians, and religious groups like Sunni Muslims coexisting in Iran, this religious diversity does not undermine Iranian nationalism. These religions have peacefully coexisted for over a thousand years, identifying themselves as Iranians. In cases of religious diversity within a nation, other components of nationality can compensate for it.

Archaism: Typically, archaism is not a component of nationalism worldwide, but in Iran, nationalism is intertwined with archaism. These two concepts differ but are independent yet related phenomena. The author divides archaism into two types: “ideological archaism” and “civilizational archaism.” Civilizational archaism pertains to a nation’s inclination towards past glories, myths, and honorable symbols, which is often cherished by Iranians since ancient times. Presently, civilizational archaism is considered one of the elements of Iranian national identity. However, “ideological archaism” or “modern archaism” is a new phenomenon emerging in 19th-century Europe. The ideological archaism movement in Iran seeks its intellectual and philosophical foundations within Iran, revolving around doctrines such as Aryanism, the Persian language, Iranian myths, Iranian traditions, customary practices, ethnocentrism, and ideological nationalism. This movement, influenced by Enlightenment-era intellectual foundations and subsequent European centuries, did not fully reconcile with Islamic teachings to the extent that it sometimes portrayed Islam as an adversary of freedom, branding it as a dictatorial religion. (Zia-Ebrahimi 2013: 190; Mirsaleem 2004: 628; Saeed 1991: 277; Cottam 1992: 7, 65).

Within the network of nationalist concepts, four concepts are essential elements and components of ideological nationalism, while four others serve as its pillars. The

essential elements of ideological nationalism are homeland, state, nation, and nationality, whereas its pillars include language, religion, ethnicity, and archaism.

Nationalism has experienced various facets and fluctuations in recent centuries, initially in Europe (Hobsbawm 2020; Russell 2014) and then in the Arab world (Darvishpour 1993; Enayat 2005; Tayebi 1981), which is beyond the scope of our discussion. I divide nationalism into two types and provide the definitions of each as follows:

Ideological Nationalism: This is the same nationalism known as “nationalism,” which has been a strong socio-political movement in Europe and later in the Arab world, and has been somewhat weakly articulated at times in Iran. When nationalism is mentioned, it generally refers to this type, which has ideological tendencies across a spectrum of intensity and weakness but always emphasizes the elements and components of nationalism. Nationalism, as an ideology, is of the “hard” type, seeking to pursue certain beliefs and, consequently, certain decisions and actions at any cost. It measures other ethical, human, religious, etc., criteria according to its own dictates. This type of nationalism does not shy away from committing unethical acts, including violence, bloodshed, and the displacement of other humans, labeled as “others,” and perhaps some genocides have also occurred within this framework. Researchers generally agree that “ideological nationalism” or nationalism entered Iran from Europe in the late 19th century (Kian and Riaux 2009: 190; Ghaissari 2003: 31; Adamiyat 1970: 114; Ahmadi 2008: 144; Malekzadeh 2008: 78). It is not compatible with the profound and genuine Iranian culture and the divine, humane, and supra-ethnic perspective of Islam. In conclusion, if we were to provide a definition of Iranian ideological nationalism or nationalism, it would be as follows:

Ideological Nationalism: Ideological nationalism is an intellectual, political, social, and cultural movement that aims to create national unity and cohesion for the revitalization, development, and return to the ancient ideals and values of Iran, relying on concepts such as Iranian nationality, Aryan race, Persian language, Iranian culture, and ancient Iranian civilization. This movement considers Islam and Arabs as the causes of backwardness and problems in Iran, advocating for the sole solution to problems and progress through a return to ancient Iranian ideologies, values, glory, and greatness.

Civil nationalism: Nationalism, as the inclination and attachment of any nation to its glorious and prestigious past, scientific and cultural achievements, and its own myths, is not only common but desirable. This type of nationalism, which we call “civil nationalism,” can be considered “soft” nationalism that does not entail contradictions or conflicts with other religions and beliefs, and does not require disregarding ethics or human values because of it. This type of nationalism is identity-forming and unifying, and it can bring about motivation and social cohesion, mobilizing people towards helping each other or progressing and developing collectively as a state, while avoiding the negative consequences of ideological nationalism. Nationalism, as an inclination, exists with varying degrees of intensity and weakness among Iranians, as it has been

familiar to Iranians throughout history with concepts of nation, nationality, and their national achievements (Ahmadi 2002: 31-12; Adamiyat 1970: 114; Ahmadi 2008: 86, 144).

However, it may be acceptable to agree with Bagher Momeni's opinion that during recent centuries, religion and faith have been the most important pillars of Iranian identity and cohesion (Momeni 1992: 89). The emergence of civil nationalism in Iran should be attributed to ideological nationalism, which has been moderated and rationalized. Because "ideological nationalism" or nationalism in general has brought about a certain level of self-awareness regarding nationality and nationalism. In conclusion, if we were to provide a definition of Iranian civil nationalism, it would be as follows:

"Civil nationalism is an expression of a set of thoughts, attitudes, and widespread national inclinations towards Iranian nationality, Persian language and literature, Iranian Islamic culture and civilization, and the ancient glories of Iran. It considers these elements as a source for national unity and cohesion, self-sacrifice for the homeland, and the growth and advancement of the state."

5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISLAM AND NATIONALISM IN IRAN

In my opinion, ideological nationalism, as it emerged in Europe and even the Arab world with its political and social consequences, has never fully manifested in Iran and has largely remained theoretical. This is because ideological nationalism in the world has often led to organized extremism, insults, marginalization of others' social rights, and sometimes violence, while it has not resulted in such actions in Iran. There are multiple reasons why ideological nationalism couldn't emerge practically in Iran. Iranian nationalism, in practice, has mainly focused on glorifying Iranian achievements, emphasizing the importance and grandeur of Iranian culture and civilization, commemorating a few Iranian scientists and luminaries, and celebrating their works and holding occasional celebrations of two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old events. Therefore, nationalism in Iran has mostly been civil nationalism. Nevertheless, if viewed optimistically, Iranians have had many shortcomings in this regard, including the fact that many Iranian scientists and their works are still relatively unknown, and over the past century and even recent decades, many historical artifacts have been destroyed or lost, and valuable ancient Iranian traditions have faded away.

Nevertheless, researchers have provided various categorizations of nationalism in Iran, as much as they could, and mentioning them briefly in the research background. In my opinion, in today's Iran, we are faced with three mainstream and nine substream perspectives on the relationship between Islam and nationalism, in both ideological and civil senses. The three mainstream perspectives are as follows:

The first stream involves the confrontation between Islam and nationalism.

The second stream entails the interaction between Islam and nationalism.

The third stream depicts the conflict between nationalism and Islam.

These categorizations and all definitions are of an ideal nature and may practically be a combination of them. I will now elaborate on each of them.

5.1. CONFRONTATION OF ISLAMISM WITH NATIONALISM

The stream of confrontation between Islam and nationalism includes certain religious spectra, including clerics and their followers, who reject Iranian nationalism, do not honor the ancient glories of Iran, and do not appreciate Iranian traditions such as Nowruz, Sizdah Bedar, Chaharshanbe Suri, Shab-e Chelleh, etc., or even condemn them, emphasizing instead Islamic teachings, rituals, and festivals. In the stream of Islam and nationalism confrontation, three substreams are positioned on a spectrum, with the most radical being anti-nationalism, followed by milder substreams. The three substreams are as follows:

Anti-Nationalism Islamism: This substream aims to “destroy nationalism in favor of religion,” rejecting and denouncing the glories and myths of ancient Iran, and portraying them as exaggerated or worthless. On the other hand, their goal is to draw people’s attention to Islam and prioritize it.

Anti-Nationalism Islamism: This substream, with a minority and marginalization approach to the glories, works to “diminish nationalism in favor of religion” without rejecting or destroying these glories and artifacts.

Non-Nationalism Islamism: This substream focuses on “strengthening religion against nationalism” in Iran to sideline nationalism naturally, without diminishing or marginalizing the glories, artifacts, and myths of ancient Iran.

5.2. INTERACTION OF ISLAMISM AND NATIONALISM:

The interaction between Islamism and nationalism can be considered the strongest and most populous discourse in Iran, perhaps not comparable to two other streams. This discourse considers nationalism as an inclination and not only does not see any contradiction between nationalism and Islam but also reconciles them, resolving potential contradictions within the framework of popular customs and returning them to the private lives of individuals and groups, avoiding conflicts. The overlap of national and religious ceremonies and rituals is one example of this, where societal norms, according to the interests and tastes of individuals and groups, intelligently and unconsciously integrate them into the private sphere of people’s lives and manage them.

If we classify the interaction between nationalism and Islamism with tolerance, it will have three substreams:

Convergence of Islam and Nationalism: This substream reinforces both Islam and nationalism through their mutual reinforcement, considering them compatible. It views Islamic religion as a continuation of Zoroastrianism and Islamic civilization as a continuation of ancient Iranian civilization. This stream relies on multiple scientific works to demonstrate that thoughts, policies, philosophies, mysticism, beliefs,

customs, and so on, from ancient Iran continued after the emergence of Islam and were present in Islamic Iran. According to this belief, ancient Iranian customs and traditions are either harmonious with Islam or not contradictory to it.

Coexistence of Islam and Nationalism: This substream believes in the coexistence of Islam and nationalism, considering each desirable in its own right, without seeing any conflict between them. Some intellectuals in this stream believe that many political and social theories and ideas from ancient Iran are applicable today and can effectively address some issues and theoretical needs of Iranian society without conflicting with Islam.

Divergence of Islam and Nationalism: This substream believes that Islamism and nationalism have their own specific space, requirements, and beliefs, and should be left to function independently. They avoid conflicts or fusion between Islam and nationalism. Supporters of this substream do not see any problem with the concurrent existence of Islamic principles and, if necessary or possible, the application of theories, ideologies, and models from ancient Iran, but there is a kind of differentiation between them.

5.3. CONFLICT BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND ISLAMISM

The stream that confronts nationalism with Islam can be considered as ideological nationalism, or simply Iranian ideological nationalism. This stream views the religion of Islam and the Arabic language as contradictory to Iranian nationalism, national symbols, and the grandeur of ancient Iranian civilization, and sees them as destructive to this civilization and its heritage and ancient customs. The stream that confronts nationalism with Islam, which is largely secular, non-Islamic, and sometimes anti-Islamic, can be divided into three substreams:

Non-Islamic Nationalism: This substream focuses on strengthening nationalism against Islam to separate Islam itself from the process of Iranian nationalism, but does not openly oppose Islamic teachings and rituals.

Anti-Islamism Nationalism: In addition to strengthening nationalism against Islam, this substream also seeks to diminish Islam in favor of nationalism and tries to portray Islam as less important while emphasizing the importance of nationalism. This substream mildly attempts to sideline Islamic symbols, rituals, and teachings in favor of nationalism.

Anti-Islamism Nationalism: This substream seeks, as much as possible, to undermine and destroy Islam in favor of nationalism, portraying Islam as the cause of Iran's decline and backwardness. It puts pressure on the values and importance of the ideas, heroes, myths, and traditions of ancient Iran, considering them sufficient for modern functions. This stream, if possible, aims to eliminate Islamic rituals and symbols from Iranian society.

6. EVOLUTION OF RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN IRAN

In practice, religion and nationalism in Iran have experienced many ups and downs over the past two hundred years. Generally, the process of formation and practical course of this movement can be divided into five periods - or with tolerance, into six patterns - as follows:

6.1. QAJAR PERIOD: FORMATION AND INITIATION

From the mid-Qajar period, the intellectual and social foundations of the nationalist ideological movement began with the writings and works of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, followed by Jalal al-Din Mirza and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani. The intellectuals of this period, who played an important role in formulating nationalist ideology, transformed with the acceptance of Western progressive models into symbols of the nationalist movement and the modern middle class. The most important nationalist thinker of this period and indeed of its entirety was Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1191-1256). Akhundov is considered the first to apply elements of Iranian nationalism in his thoughts and works in a new political sense and to some extent theorize it. Iranian nationalism, considering its inclinations and the background of its pioneers, from the outset, connected with Western ideas of progress, renewal, and civilization, while also being tied to Iranian archaism. In this period, nationalism emphasized the necessity of progress and development on one hand, and the return of Iran's dignity and glory on the other. However, these intellectuals opposed what they considered superstitions entrenched in Islam and among the masses, seeing it as a cause of retrogression.

6.2. CONSTITUTIONAL PERIOD; STRENGTHENING NATIONALISM

During the Constitutional Period, the inclination towards religion and faith as the main components of Iranian identity prevailed. However, the notion of nationalism, whether secular or Islamic, was influenced by the activities and nationalist tendencies of the constitutionalists and was strengthened, becoming one of the fundamental pillars of the constitutional movement. After the Constitutional Revolution, it continued as a strong political force. (Malekzadeh 2008: 78; Alizadeh & Tarafdari 2009: 166). During the Constitutional Movement, some concepts of nationalist thought and movement practically entered the political and cultural arenas of Iran. Some of the leaders and revolutionaries of the Constitutional Revolution emphasized nationalism and its prevalence in various matters and the importance of renewal and homeland in their speeches, talks, and writings. (Tarafdari 2010: 222).

The practical application of these concepts and politicians' attention to nationalist components led the pioneers of this movement to engage more motivatedly and strive for the development of their perspectives. The establishment of the constitutional system and the realization of some elements of nationalism played a significant role in the development of nationalist historiographical schools and the introduction of ancient Iranian epochs as the basis of Iranian national identity. It provided an

opportune moment for intellectuals and political figures to articulate their archaistic views on Iranian history under this new structure (Alizadeh & Tarafdari 2009: 166-167). Furthermore, they introduced the Constitutional Revolution as a “national” and “patriotic” movement (Tarafdari 2010: 222), depicting historical events with a nationalist approach, and presenting ancient Iran as the true basis of Iranians’ authentic identity (Alizadeh & Tarafdari 2009: 168).

Nationalism during the Constitutional period can be seen as a synthesis of secularism, modernism, Western nationalism, and the ancient history of Iran and Iranians (Kazemi 1996: 125-120). Islam also had a presence among various sectors, ranging from subtle to prominent. Non-religious intellectual spectrums focused on secular nationalism, while religious groups and some clerics considered a blend of nationalism with Islam.

6.3. THE FIRST PAHLAVI ERA; CONSOLIDATION OF SECULAR NATIONALISM

The period of the First Pahlavi era can be considered a phase of consolidating the non-religious nationalist movement to the extent that it became the official discourse of the monarchy (Katouzian 2008: 432; Soleimani & Azarmi 2016: 207). Many believe that one of the reasons for the attention of the Pahlavi monarchy and Reza Shah to the nationalist movement was to gain political legitimacy (Soleimani & Azarmi 2016: 211).

The government of Reza Shah embraced nationalist and archaistic historiography (Tarafdari 2010: 223) and promoted secular nationalist beliefs and principles alongside modernization efforts (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 4). In my opinion, another reason for Reza Shah’s embrace of nationalism was the political and social conditions of the time, characterized by tribalism, unruly autonomous governance, tribal systems, claims of independence, and autonomy in some regions of Iran, among other similar factors. In the face of such political and social upheaval, strengthening Iranian nationalism was a measure that could guarantee national unity and territorial integrity, suppress opponents of independence, and potentially separatist movements. This approach proved to be highly successful and effective.

6.4. THE SECOND PAHLAVI ERA; CIVIL NATIONALISM

The trajectory of nationalism continued during the Second Pahlavi era, especially after the 1953 Iranian coup d’état, and reached its peak with the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of Shiraz, introducing the Pahlavi dynasty as the successor to the ancient culture and civilization of Iran (5). During this period, historiography focused on nationalism and archaism persisted.

Another point mentioned by Zia-Ebrahimi is that the Second Pahlavi monarch, following the establishment of similarities between Iran and the West, considered Iranian civilization as part of the ancient Indo-European family, which also included

Western civilization (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 212). This approach could potentially resolve a contradiction, as the nationalist movement had inclinations both towards Iranianism and anti-imperialism, while also possessing intellectual leanings towards Western culture and civilization (Modir Shanechi 1992: 6). Richard Cottam also notes that Iranian nationalists were heavily influenced by Western culture, while the essence of nationalism, which emphasizes national culture, persisted. They sought to maintain their nationalist stance with the help of Western ideas, culture, and even Western states and governments, which were culturally, politically, and economically aligned with the West, to ensure the prosperity and advancement of their own state (Cottam 1991: 7, 65).

6.5. OFFICIAL DISCOURSE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic government, Iranian nationalism took on Islamic characteristics, shedding its secular aspects and moving away from archaism. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war and its eight-year duration both strengthened Iranian nationalism and further integrated it with Islamic beliefs. Islamic nationalism became a unified identity to the extent that Iranianism and Islamism became inseparable, with no clear boundaries between them.

Although enmity towards foreigners has long been considered one of the main components of Iranian identity, before the Islamic Revolution, Arabs and Islam were often perceived as “others” and “foreign elements,” while Europe and the West were viewed with respect and admiration. Since the fall of Mossadegh, this perception gradually changed, and with the emergence of figures like Imam Khomeini, Ali Shariati, and others, a generally anti-Western, anti-imperialist, and Islamic approach emerged. The Iranian Islamic Revolution was the result of a coalition of Islamic supporters and other forces, and Imam Khomeini and many of his followers, such as Morteza Motahhari, emphasized an Islamic-Iranian identity in their positions and actions. They sought to present indigenous values and foundations as popular nationalism instead of the Western-oriented secular and archaistic currents (Motyl 2003: 1006).

Mohammad Bagher Khorramshad believes that during the struggles of revolutionary forces both during the Shah’s era and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic system, particularly during the years of the Iran-Iraq war, prominent examples and symbols of Islamic nationalism were displayed. With the emergence of predominantly religious nationalist discourses and movements, such as the Islamic Nationalist Movement and the nationalism of the Islamic Republic, secular, liberal, and leftist nationalist movements lost their popular base and central position and were marginalized (Khorramshad 2003: 106). Extreme ideas and approaches of secular nationalist movements, including opposition to Islam, extreme Persian chauvinism, and racism based on Aryanism, which led to the denigration of some Iranian ethnic groups such as Arabs, also contributed to the marginalization of this movement. The influence of these extreme ideas has been significant enough to affect the substream of Pan-Iranianism, which to some extent represented the continuation of secular nationalist movements in Iran in the years following the Islamic Revolution. This

substream adopted relatively more balanced positions regarding Islam and a more inclusive approach towards Iranian ethnic groups. Overall, over the decades following the Islamic Revolution, the presence of secular nationalist extremist movements in Iran's intellectual and political sphere has diminished, although it has not been completely eradicated.

6.6. RIVAL STREAMS OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

Alongside the official discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding nationalism, there are currently two rival substreams that pit Islam against nationalism. One of these substreams is anti-nationalism Islamism, and the other is anti-Islam nationalism, which we will explain each in turn.

Anti-Nationalism Islamism: This substream, primarily rooted among some clerics and their followers, considers Islam as the principle and focus. It opposes nationalism and Iranian symbols such as Nowruz, Chaharshanbe Suri, Yalda Night, Sizdah Bedar, as well as the glories and myths of ancient Iran. This movement is not widely popular but remains active.

Nationalism Anti-Islamism: This substream, known as ideological nationalism, has historical roots dating back to the Qajar period and has been active in certain periods, although it has not been widely accepted. It negates Islamism and portrays Islam and Arabs as agents of Iran's backwardness. However, in recent years, it has intensified in response to the anti-nationalism Islamism substream and often opposes the political system of the Islamic Republic. For example, during the unrest of 1388 (2009), slogans were raised such as "Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic" and "My generation is Aryan, religion is separate from politics" to promote their nationalist ideas (Abdolmahdi 2015: 15). Additionally, dozens of people gathered in Pasargadae on the anniversary of Cyrus the Great's birthday to celebrate the day and chant slogans against the Islamic Republic while expressing support for the Pahlavi dynasty (Shahid-Saless 2016). Although this movement is not widely popular, it remains active.

7. IRANIAN NATIONALISM PATTERN

In my perspective, Iranian nationalism, regardless of its form and the ideologies or civilizations that have influenced it, possesses its distinct pattern, characterized by a essence of "civil nationalism." Consequently, it lacks certain primary functions and repercussions observed in European or Arab nationalism. Throughout history, people and intellectuals, disillusioned by the dictatorship and tyranny of monarchs and governors since the early Qajar era, acquainted themselves with modernity and Western societies. However, they did not fully comprehend the political and social systems and institutions of Western societies. Previously, their understanding was merely superficial, primarily focused on escaping oppression and attaining vague notions of justice. However, with time, they embraced a practical and humane model rooted in law, order, tranquility, and rationality. This shift led them to grasp onto any

semblance of stability to alleviate their precarious circumstances. From that era until the present, both religion and nationalism have been instrumentalized as tools to emancipate Iranian society from the quagmire of backwardness and decay, propelling it towards the shores of progress and legality. Each thinker, guided by their expertise, perspective, and concerns, adhered to one of these paradigms. Hence, Iranian nationalism does not stem from notions of prestige, hubris, or exclusion, but rather emerges out of necessity and urgency.

The most significant evidence indicating that Iranian nationalism stemmed from the necessity and urgency to rescue from the existing condition and was not a nationalism in the conventional Western or Arab sense is the lack of reaction from the nationalist movement towards the weakening of Iran's national sovereignty and the loss of Iranian territories in the contemporary period. In various treaties and agreements, such as the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, Turkmenchay in 1828, Paris in 1856, Akhal in 1881, the separation of border cities from Iran with Russia in 1893, the determination of Iran's borders by the Englishman McMahon in 1905, the Treaty of St. Petersburg in 1907, and the separation of lands south of the Persian Gulf according to the regional advisory council's agreement in 1970, a total of approximately 3,613,011 square kilometers of Iran's best lands, abundant with mines, natural resources, and water, were separated from Iran. Undoubtedly, the primary and fundamental concern and goal of Iranian nationalism should have been the return of these territories to Iran. Whether this goal was achievable in practice is another debate, but at least theoretically and in terms of setting goals and strategies, restoring the credibility and national sovereignty that Iran had lost should have been their priority. However, the nationalist movement did not pay attention to this most critical national issue because it was primarily focused on liberating itself from oppressive and totalitarian rulers. The most prominent manifestation of Iranian nationalism was the movement, and later the Pan-Iranist Party led by Mohsen Pezeshkpour and his associates. Emerging in the early years of the second Pahlavi era, this movement considered itself a socio-political, ideological, and cultural nationalist movement (Pan-Iranist Party Education Committee 2017). It could be argued that the secular and ancient-oriented nationalist movement in Iran, which was a form of extreme Persian ethnocentrism, crystallized under the banner of Iranian nationalism and took shape as "Iranianism" (Boroujerdi 2005: 267). The Pan-Iranists introduced their party as a nationalist party and regarded their doctrine as the essence of Iranian nationalism (Pan-Iranist Party Education Committee 2017). However, even this movement was not a strong nationalist force capable of creating a robust and pervasive Iranian nationalism in the country. Although their opposition in the parliament to the separation of Bahrain is commendable, they did not take any practical steps towards it, which is indicative of their lack of significant influence.

8. CONCLUSION

In this article, we've delineated eight key concepts forming a network of ideas central to nationalism, encompassing its various elements and facets. Throughout Iran's history, nationalism has predominantly centered around sentiments of patriotism and social cohesion. When nationalism emerged as an ideology in the 19th century, the pre-existing historical backdrop within Iran's socio-political culture provided fertile ground for the adoption of nationalist sentiments among Iranians. This facilitated an earlier onset of nationalist thought in Iran compared to other Eastern societies, as aptly noted by Fereydoun Adamiyat, who highlighted the tangible presence of several essential elements of nationalism within ancient Iranian culture (Adamiyat 1970: 114-113). However, despite these conducive circumstances, the fruition of ideological nationalism remained relatively limited, primarily emerging towards the latter years of the Qajar era and the reign of Reza Shah. Instead, what proliferated was a form of civil nationalism, rooted in an awareness of the grandeur, civilization, and historical legacy of ancient Iran. The rich tapestry of Iran's historical, cultural, and civilizational heritage provided ample material to underpin nationalism as an ideology. However, Iranian nationalism transcends mere ideology, encompassing a broader spectrum of attitudes, values, beliefs, teachings, and a distinctive cultural and social fabric. These multifaceted elements serve as barriers, impeding the seamless amalgamation of ideological nationalism with the broader Iranian identity and hindering its widespread and practical adoption.

Pezhman Abdolmohammadi, in a report prepared for the Middle East Studies Center at LSE London, notes an increased interest in pre-Islamic historical sites such as Takht-e Jamshid and Pasargadae, as well as the tomb of Ferdowsi. Additionally, he observes a growing trend of using Persian words like "dorood" (greetings) and "sepas" (thanks) instead of "salam" and "moteshakaram," indicating a burgeoning inclination towards secular nationalist thought and sentiment (Abdolmohammadi 2015: 12). The attraction of some young people to Iran's pre-Islamic history and Zoroastrianism, as well as their inclination towards Persian names and symbols like Cyrus the Great, Ferdowsi, Kaveh the Blacksmith, Arash Kamangir, Rostam, Siavash, Babak Khorramdin, and Aryo Barzan, as observed on various websites and blogs, is also evaluated in this context. However, Abdolmohammadi admits that the promotion and resurgence of these symbols are often politically motivated, aimed at opposing the Islamic Republic regime (Abdolmohammadi 2015: 9). It should be noted that such actions and activities, while undertaken by adherents of the secular nationalist movement both within and outside the country, are not widespread among the general populace, social, political, and intellectual activists, and elites. Nonetheless, some of these actions and activities are indeed carried out by the followers of the secular nationalist movement inside and outside the country with the aim of reviving secular nationalist thought and movement. However, they are not pervasive among the general population, social and political activists, intellectuals, and elites.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported.

REFERENCES

- Abdolmohammadi, Pejman (2015). *The Revival of Nationalism and Secularism in Modern Iran*, London: LSE Middle East Centre
- Adamiyat, Fereydoun (1970). *Thoughts of Fatali Akhundov*, Tehran: Kharazmi
- Ahmadi, Hamid (2008). *Foundations of Iranian national identity, the theoretical framework of citizen-centered national identity*, Tehran: Research Institute of Cultural and Social Studies
- Ahmadi, Hamid (2012). Iranian national identity in the scope of history, *Quarterly Journal of National Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1, pp. 12-31
- Ajoudani, Masha Allah (2006). *Iranian Constitution*, Tehran: Akhtran, 8th edition
- Akbari, Mohammad Ali (2004). *Genealogy of the New Iranian Identity of the Qajar and Pahlavi Era of Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications*
- Alikhani, Ali Akbar (2018). *The Hidden Wisdom of Islamic Political Philosophy and Wisdom and the Transition to Practical Politics*, Tehran: Tehran University Press
- Alikhani, Ali Akbar (2021). *A layered method in researching thought*, Tehran: Negah-e Maaser Publishing
- Alizadeh, Mohammad Ali and Tarafdari, Ali Mohammad (2008). Middle Genealogy of National Identity in the Nationalist Historiography of the Qajar and Constitutional Eras, *Information Journal*, Second Volume, Number 7, pp. 161-172
- Ansari, Ali M. (2012). *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Ashraf, Ahmad (2020). *Iranian identity from ancient times to the end of the Pahlavi era*, translated and edited by: Hamid Ahmadi, Tehran: Ney Publishing.
- Boroujerdi, Mehrzad (2004). *Iranian intellectuals and the West of Tehran: Farzan-e Rooz*
- Cottam, Richard (1991). *Nationalism in Iran*, translated by Ahmad Tadayon, Tehran: Kavir
- Darvishpour, Hojatollah (1994). *Examining the phenomenon of nationalism in the Arab world*, Tehran: Organization Publishing of the Islamic Development Organization
- Davari Ardakani, Reza (2020). *Nationalism, Nation and Nationality*, Tehran: Naghd-e Farhang Publication
- Education Committee of the Pan-Iranist Party (2016). *Basic introduction to the school of Pan-Iranism and the Pan-Iranist Party*, available at <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/bb25cac576e8b0158e8e954f1c851d7e.html>
- Enayat, Hamid (1980). *Reviewing of the political thought of West Tehran: Amir Kabir*, second edition.
- Entekhabi, Nader (1994). Nationalism is the cognate of modernism, *Neghah-e Now*, No. 27
- Ghadimi Gheydari, Abbas (2011). Archaistic Nationalist Historiography in Qajar Era, *Iranian Contemporary History Quarterly*, Number 1: 75-92
- Gheysari, Ali (2003). *Iranian intellectuals in the 20th century*, translated by Mohammad Dehghani, Tehran: Hermes
- Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest (2020). *Nations and Nationalism after 1780: Program, Myth, Reality*, translated by Mehdi Saberi, Tehran: Cheshme Publishing.

- Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar (1978), Khosrovan's letter, the story of the kings of Pars from the beginning to the end of the Sassanids, Tehran: Imperial Organization of Social Services
- Kachorian, Hossein (2012). *Our Identity*, Tehran: Ketab-e Farda Publishing
- Katouzian, Mohammad Ali Homayoun (2008), *The conflict between the state and the nation, the theory of history and politics in Iran*, translated by Alireza Tayeb, Tehran: Ney publication
- Kazemi, Seyyed Ali Asghar (1996). *Ethics and Politics*, Tehran: Qomes
- Khorramshad, Mohammad Bagher, Kalantar Mehrjerdi, Alireza and Solati, Hossein (2017). *Discourse of national identity in the current of nationalism before and after the Islamic revolution by adapting the thought of Ahmad Kasravi and Ezzatollah Sahabian*, *Contemporary political essays*, number 1, pp. 28-21
- Kian, Azadeh, and Riaux, Gilles (2009). *Crafting Iranian Nationalism: Intersectionality of Aryanism, Westernism and Islamism*, In Susana Carvalho and François Gemenne (Eds.) *Nations and their Histories; Constructions and Representation*
- Mirsalim, Seyyed Mostafa (2008). *Cultural Currentism after the Islamic Revolution*, Tehran: Center for the Rediscovery of Islam and Iran
- Modir Shanechi, Mohsen (1992). *Iran's political parties*, *Khavaran magazine*, number 136, Malekzadeh Mohammad (2008), *from the rise to the fall, the history of the flow of nationalism*, *Farhang Pouya magazine*, number 81, pp. 76-11.
- Momeni, Bagher (1992). *Religion and government in the era of constitutionalism*, Tehran: Baran
- Monyl, Alexander (2003). *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism, Volume Three, Movements, Characters and Concepts*, translated by Kamran Fani and Nourollah Moradi, Tehran: Specialized Library of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Russell, Bertrand (2012). *from Day and Organization, the Origin and Development of Socialism, Liberalism, Radicalism, Nationalism*, translated by Ali Ramin, Tehran: Farzan-e Rouz, 4th edition
- Saeed, Edward (1991). *Orientalism*, translated by Abdolrahim Gavahi, Tehran: Farhang Ma'arif publishing
- Shahidi, Seyyed Jafar (2016). *Analytical history of Islam from the beginning to the first half of the fourth century*, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications, 9th edition
- Shahid-Saless, Shahir (2016). *The Rise of Nationalist Fervour in Iran*, *The Middle East Eye*. 7 Nov, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/rise-nationalist-fervour-iran>
- Shahramnia, Amir Massoud (2012). *Interaction and confrontation between Islam and nationalism in Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution*, *Strategic Research Quarterly*, second year, number 5, summer 92, pp. 216-198.
- Siavoshi, Sosa (2010). *Liberal Nationalism in Iran*, translated by Ali Mohammad Ghodsi, Tehran: Center for the Recognition of Islam and Iran
- Soleimani, Gholamali and Azarmi, Ali (2016). *Antiquarian nationalism and the crisis in the identity of Iranian man, a rereading of Motahari's response*, *Religious Anthropology*, No. 37, pp. 207-223
- Tarafdari, Ali Mohammad (2019). *Contemporary Iranian Nationalist Historiography and the Foundation of Sacred Historical Illusions*, *Sureh Andisheh*, No. 5051, pp. 219-225
- Tibi, Bassam (1981). *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Enquiry*, translated by Marion Farouk-Sluglett, Peter Sluglett, UK: Palgrave MacMillan
- Zarrinkoub, Abdolhossein (2020). *Early Islam, the story of the beginning of Islam and its spread until the end of the Umayyad state*, Tehran: Amir Kabir 24th edition.

Zia-Ebrahimi, Reza (2013). Self-orientalization and the use and abuse of the discourse of Aryanism in Iran, translated by Ali Mohammad Tarafdari, *Mahnameh Sureh*, No. 82

Zia-Ebrahimi, Reza (2016). *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, New York: Columbia University Press