Introduction

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The study of Iranian nationalism has undergone significant changes during the past decade. As older paradigms of culture and society have given way to new critical and theoretical insights, a new generation of scholars of modern Iran has begun the task of questioning the received historiographical tradition long defining the history of modern Iran. Marked primarily by a shift away from perspectives that reified its object of knowledge, shared its self-same assumptions, and had traditionally written from within the ideological parameters of nationalism, the newer approach to the history of Iranian nationalism has instead sought to engage theoretical, conceptual, and comparative perspectives derived from the wider fields of nationalism studies, social history, literary theory, and postcolonial studies. The result is a nascent approach within the field of Iranian studies that has already shed new light on the making of modern Iranian nationhood. This volume brings together scholars broadly engaged in this new scholarship. The goal is to undertake innovative research, study previously understudied subjects, chart new areas of analysis, do comparative studies, and collectively *rethink* the historiography of Iranian nationalism and modernity.

Orientalism, Modernity, and Historiography

Part 1 of this volume begins this process of *rethinking* with a series of articles that critically engage and collectively problematize the conventional analytical vocabulary employed in the historiography of Iranian nationalism. Looking broadly at the encounter with European systems of thought—be they the European orientalist tradition, the European philosophical tradition, or the tradition of European social science itself—these papers question the often

unspoken and undertheorized appropriations that have traditionally been employed from these systems of thought in thinking about Iranian history and society.

Afshin Marashi's article begins by questioning the "universalist" claims of European social science, as that tradition has been used to think about Iran's history of nationalism and modernity. Observing that much of what can now be called the "classical social-science tradition" of nationalism studies has been theorized from empirical cases drawn narrowly from the experience of the polyglot Austro-Hungarian polity of Central Europe, the nationalizing monarchies of nineteenth-century imperial states, a highly idealized understanding of the Habermasian "public sphere" of the eighteenth century, or a subaltern and postcolonial studies tradition that emphasizes the centrality of the *colonial presence* in the nation-building process, Marashi observes that, while these traditions of social science must be positively and productively engaged, Iran's historical experience does not conceptually conform to any of these classical paradigms. The challenge that Marashi poses, and which all of the contributors to this volume likewise pose, is the challenge of how to engage with the great tradition of the European social and human sciences without falling victim to the distortions and elisions that an uncritical engagement with that tradition might produce.

As Ali Anooshahr's, Afshin Matin-Asgari's, and Wendy DeSouza's articles suggest, the tradition of Iranian historiography is rife with examples of perilous and uncritical appropriations from European systems of thought. As Anooshahr describes, the political and ideological context of early twentieth-century European fascism came to shape understandings of Safavid historiography in surprising and still largely unacknowledged ways. Matin-Asgari finds a parallel process at work within Persian-language historiography produced by Iranian expatriate scholars in Berlin during and after the First World War who were profoundly shaped by currents of thought circulating within the German intellectual tradition. DeSouza sees a similar process at work in the cultural and national reconceptualization of Persian mystical poetry that grew out of the dialogic interaction between the European orientalist tradition and the tradition of Iranian nationalist historiography. As Anooshahr, Matin-Asgari, and DeSouza argue, definitions of culture, nation, and modernity, which were peculiar and specific to the context of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European cultural, literary, and philosophical traditions, came to define a broader European historiographic understanding of Iran, as well as an Iranian intellectual tradition's understanding of itself.

Imagining Iran: Land, Ethnicity, and Place

The articles that comprise Part 2 of this volume continue these themes by focusing broadly on evolving notions of Iranian belonging, as those notions took shape as a result of the rapid crystallization of the *nation-form* over the course of Iran's modern history. In particular, categories such as land, ethnicity, and place became increasingly charged and contested categories as Iran's history entered the age of the international system of nation-states. This new international system embroiled Iran not only within the familiar forms of political and economic—and broadly understood “imperial”—power, but also in new definitions of selfhood and belonging. The rigidly territorialized understandings of the modern nation-state demanded by the rapidly crystallizing international state system of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries came to also demand increasingly formalized, legalized, and reified *imaginings* for Iranian selfhood.

The articles in this section explore the multifarious ways in which imaginings of Iran were transformed as a result of these processes. Mana Kia and Brian Mann consider the problem of territorialization in two very different, and yet profoundly interconnected, contexts. Kia explores the geocultural meanings of “Iran” in the early modern period through a careful reading of an eighteenth-century compendium of Persian poets. Significantly, as Kia argues, in this prenatal age, the sense of belonging, and the meanings associated with notions of land, geography, and “place,” followed strikingly different trajectories than those dictated by the later rigidly territorialized global mapping of nation-states. Brian Mann's contribution, by contrast, looks at the notion of Iranian belonging and placehood through a critical analysis of ethnicity and regionalism in the Khuzistani “secessionist” movement of the mid-twentieth century, a period in Iranian history when notions of ethnicity, territory, and land had already become formally *nationalized* but, as Mann suggests, still contested. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Camron Michael Amin look at the question of an evolving Iranian understanding of selfhood and place through the surprising lens of U.S.-Iran relations. While the history of U.S.-Iran relations is usually told from the vantage point of international relations and imperial *high politics*, Kashani-Sabet and Amin's approach is to look at this encounter through the prism of cultural history. What they each discover—though looking at very different sources—is how profoundly formative the experience of “the other” has been as a constituent element in the formation of Iranian selfhood. As all the articles in this section suggest, the transformations engendered by the modern international system produced more than just political consequences for Iran's modern history; rather, these

transformations came to shape Iranian nationalism and modernity in ways that are only now beginning to be understood.

Religion, Nationalism, and Contested Visions of Modernity

The chapters in this section explore five broad themes or methods. First is an exploration of the complex and nuanced relationship between religion and nationalism. Second includes the ways in which ancient civilizations and pre-modern cultures were appropriated for the purpose of constructing modern nationalisms. Third includes the study of diverse arrays of competing and contested nationalisms in Iran that defy simple categorizations like “civic nationalism” or “ethnic nationalism,” and which continue to evolve to the present day. The fourth theme includes the dynamics of “East vs. West” or “indigenous/authentic vs. foreign” ideals, including alternative visions of modernity, that underpin these nationalist projects. The fifth, which is more of a method than a theme, is to study Iranian nationalism either in a comparative fashion or to broadly contextualize it beyond Iran.

These papers demonstrate that religion has played an integral role in the development of nationalisms in Iran, Egypt, Israel, and the broader Middle East. These studies challenge the idea that Iranian nationalists up until the late Pahlavi period universally downplayed Islamic history and stressed Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage, and that this was followed by a reverse trend after the revolution. Instead, Vejdani, Aghaie, Hammad, and Siavoshi argue for nationalists who embraced both Iran’s Islamic and pre-Islamic heritages, and did not always label Islam as “Arab” and a source of Iran’s decline. In some cases, this was done by stressing the Iranization of Islam, through a focus on Shi‘ism, or on non-ethnic Islam, or even by stressing how Iranians played a prominent role in the development of Islam. In other cases, it was done by Islamizing Iran to construct a religious nationalism in which Islamic values were treated as the core constitutive elements of the nation. In the former case, Iranian culture transformed or absorbed Islam, while in the latter Iran’s core nature was transformed and subsumed by Islamic concepts and ideals. Either way, the two became inseparable, and were combined in the narratives of the Iranian nation. Within this context, Atabaki and Siavoshi also show how ethnicity proved to be problematic in government discourses about the nation following the Islamic revolution. These studies also demonstrate that the patterns of religious nationalism are not restricted to Iran. Rather, similar patterns can be seen in Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and many Arab countries, as is shown by Ram, Aghaie, and Hammad. Aghaie goes further, arguing for

a generalized theory of religious nationalism that puts religion at the center of some nationalisms, and which can be usefully applied beyond Iran to other nationalisms in the Muslim Middle East, as well as to cases of religious nationalisms in other parts of the world.

The above points do not, however, imply that the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran did not play a critically important role as well. These papers demonstrate how ancient symbols and narratives were appropriated in the construction of the modern national narrative. Further, Ram and Hammad show how this pattern correlated in interesting ways with the dynamics within Egyptian nationalism and Zionism. In particular, in the Egyptian and Iranian cases, nationalists “remembered” pre-Islamic civilization, culture, and religion (i.e., Pharaonic and Zoroastrian) selectively, to push modern qualities back in time to the early history of the nation they envisioned, while at the same time claiming an ancient, indigenous origin for many traits of their modern nation. Vejdani shows that during the Pahlavi period Iran’s Islamic heritage was not systematically excluded or downplayed in favor of its pre-Islamic heritage, and Aghaie shows that Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage was not rejected or downplayed by Islamists in favor of a universalist, or antinationalist, Islamism. Atabaki further shows how efforts were made to include Turks/Azeris as prominent players in Iran’s pre-Islamic and Islamic history. Similar patterns can also be seen in an analogous form in Israeli Jewish nationalism or Zionism, as is demonstrated by Ram’s article comparing Zionism and Islamism.

In all of the chapters in this section, nationalism is treated as a set of contested visions of what the nation should be. For example, Grigor shows how artistic representations of the nation have evolved from avant-garde in the Pahlavi period, followed by a kitsch style after the revolution, which was in turn challenged by the reemergence of a new avant-garde style. Siavoshi explores the competing and contested visions of the Iranian nation by comparing the discourses of the Islamic regime, the reformist opposition, and monarchists. Aghaie explores the domestic religious nationalist discourses within Iran. Atabaki shows how ethnic identity markers such as Turk/Azeri and regional histories related to alternative narratives of the nation. And Ram explores similar issues in relation to Israeli nationalism and its relationship to Iran.

These papers also demonstrate how the positioning of the nation’s civilizational and moral context or affinity is both arbitrary and important. Thus, the nation was coded or defined as either Western or Eastern, and in either case the pattern was to define the nation as an indigenous phenomenon, and to exclude or rationalize foreign or alien elements and qualities that either were part of the nation, or which influenced it. In the case of Iran, the debate

tended to center around how to negotiate the apparent foreignness of Islam. In the case of Egypt and Iran, efforts were made to find a local, non-Western basis for nationalism, while in the case of Zionism, the approach was to define Israel as being solidly part of the Western or Judeo-Christian civilizational sphere, and distinctly not associated with the Islamic Middle Eastern “other.”

These studies also demonstrate that there were broadly similar patterns of evolution among these different nationalisms, rather than each case being unique. Hammad’s paper shows how Iranian and Egyptian nationalists directly influenced one another and worked to define a “local” and “authentic” nationalism, and Ram’s paper shows how Zionism and Khomeinism share many important qualities, despite their mutual antagonism and condemnation. He also shows how Israeli views of Iran are inextricably connected to the complexities of domestic ethnic and religious politics and to diverse and evolving conceptions of the Jewish state, and how the same is true of Iran and its views of Israel.

Collectively, the themes outlined in this book by no means exhaust the possible range or trajectories for rethinking Iranian nationalism and modernity. Indeed, if the chapters in this volume can be said to revolve around the broad themes of Iran’s modern intellectual encounter with European thought, its new imaginings of territory and place, and the contested nature of debates surrounding the notion of Iran’s national “heritage,” then the chapters in this volume can in fact be said to merely initiate a selective process of conceptual rethinking. While themes of ethnicity, regionalism, and gender, for example, make their appearance in this volume, the larger questions that these and other themes pose can certainly lead to yet further trajectories of *rethinking*, and it is hoped, more concentrated reflections on these issues. What this volume does hope to accomplish, however, is therefore not an exhaustive exercise of problematizing the historiography of Iranian nationalism and modernity, but rather an initial exercise of collectively juxtaposing innovative, experimental, and alternative perspectives that it is hoped will in turn lead to new perspectives and possibilities in thinking about Iran’s modern history.

Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity