

# BOOK REVIEW

## The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran

Ali M. Ansari, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 327 p.

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Iran continues to occupy a special place in the hotly debated world agenda. Nuclear crisis, the future of the reform movement and elections, in addition with Iran's role in the ongoing Syrian civil war has dominated global news. Turkey, as a neighboring country, is no exception to this fierce foreign interest in Iranian affairs yet it cannot be claimed that this interest stems from a solely academic point of view. Iran occupies a unique role within global political discourse, and especially so for Turkey. Iranian politics capture the attention of both Turkish academics and the Turkish public, but original works in Turkish on Iranian politics are scarce. Curious parties are essentially forced to rely on English literature to learn more about Iran. As can be seen in the popular debates of "Will Turkey be Iran?" which emerged after the National Security Council decisions on 28 February 1997, Iran has been brought to the attention of the Turkish masses by means of popular political movements. The naming of the newest Istanbul Bridge as the Yavuz Sultan Selim (Selim I) Bridge, in honor of the Ottoman sultan famous for his wars with Safavid Iran, and the alleged Iranian involvement in the recent Gezi Park protests are two particularly popular subjects that have brought Iran back into the attention of Turkish readers.<sup>1</sup> Within this context, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* has special significance for Turkish readers as well as for international readers, since it makes a profound contribution to our understanding of contemporary Iran and the history of Iranian modernization<sup>2</sup>

1 For a good example of this line of thought see Abdullah Bozkurt, "Iran Plays Subversive Role in Turkey" *Today's Zaman*, 21 June 2013.

2 In fact, relations with Iran have always been double-sided. On one hand, Iran has been seen as a close ally of Turkey since the Seljuq period. The famous cooperation between Seljuq vizier Nizam ul-Mulk and sultan Malik-Shah is the quintessential example of such alliance. On the other hand, Iran is often seen as a political conspirator, most usually within Turkish borders. Inspection of the famous work of Mahmud al-Kashgari, *Diwānu l-Lu* at al-Turk, can show us the dichotomy within these relations. Mahmud quoted two consecutive sayings: No Turk without a Persian, No head without a helmet (*Tatsız Türk bolmaz Bassiz bork bolmaz*)- Be aware of Persian, dig up the thorn-bush (*Tarıg közre tikenig tüpre*).

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Professor Ali M. Ansari of University of St Andrews, in *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, analyzes the idea of Iranian nationalism through the modern period. Contrary to popular readings of Iranian history, which place primary emphasis on religion, Ansari stresses the role of nationalism. Indeed, this point is presented in the very first sentence of the book. According to Ansari, nationalism is the determining ideology of modern Iran, which united Iranians across all political fractions. He goes on to assert that four main intellectual groups can be distinguished in modern Iran, three of which are derivatives of the nationalist line of thought. These groups comprise the secular nationalists, religious nationalists, dynastic nationalists, and the left. Any understanding of the history of modern Iran should thus analyze the role of nationalist ideas. Starting from the early twentieth century, Ansari strives to expose how nationalism was born and thrived within the context provided by modern state-building on the one hand and collective historical memory on the other. In Iran, cultural history is often intensely political, and Ansari depicts the ways in which politics evolved through the use of history. He shows us how the ruling elite claimed legitimacy through the creation of myths and historical symbols. By doing so, he allows us to comprehend the role of nationalism as background ideology, operating throughout the course of the modern history of Iran.

Ansari starts his book with a very lucid theoretical discussion on nationalistic ideology. His emphasis is heavily placed on the ideological relations between the western world and Iran in the post-1789 era . More specifically, he provides a contextual framework for the impact of western thought on the development of Iranian nationalism. Contrary to common explanations of Iranian nationalism that juxtapose it against European thought, Ansari shows the reader the ways in which Iranian nationalism forged its own path in a process of bargaining with the European line of thought. This was not an antagonistic relation; it was rather defined by vocabulary born of a European context. Ansari argues that European concepts such as constitutionalism, law, and rights were taken from Europe but were nonetheless interpreted within the limits of the Iranian political agenda. His conceptualization of the Enlightenment, the topic of his first chapter, can also be considered as a valuable contribution to the literature. In this schema, the Enlightenment, as an international and cosmopolitan process, paves the way for a more robust mutual interaction between European and Iranian social structures. He first starts by briefly discussing the ways in which Persia has

been perceived and imagined in the West. He then proceeds to an analysis of these common myths, such as the Aryan myth, which is considered as another symbol of European interaction with Iranian culture (p. 13). He proposes that Iran, or more specifically the ability of “Iranian identity” to integrate itself within a European frame of reference, is unique among non-western countries due these specific points. He also highlights the cosmopolitan nature of the Enlightenment by describing the early interest of European enlightened thinkers in Manichaeism as an alternative line of thought in contrast to mainstream Christianity.

The second part of the book makes further valuable contributions to the field with the author’s novel periodization of modern Iranian history. Borrowing from Gramsci’s conceptualization of historical blocs, Ansari divides Iranian history into three historical blocs: an Iranian Enlightenment, The Age of Extremes, and the Age of contestation. Clearly, this Gramscian conceptual framework enables him to focus on ideas of domination and recognize the pervasive fuzzy character of temporal borders, leading to their amalgamation when needed.

Ansari frames the “Iranian Enlightenment” between the early 20th century and the first part of the 1960s. Accordingly, this period is crucially important in terms of state building and also in terms of the production of a nationalist ideology. Not only were concepts such as rule of law, rights of citizens, and mass education first being articulated in these years, but the very roots of basic Iranian popular identity-building, in the modern sense, lie within this period. Discussing the intellectual debates most clearly in regard to the famous myths of the *Shahnameh*, Ansari shows the relations between political developments and the utilization of these myths. The mythical war between *Kaveh* and *Zehhak* was construed in order to build a strong national identity in the face of a foreign tyrant.<sup>3</sup> According to Ansari, Iranian intellectuals create and utilize the collective memory emanating from the *Shahnameh* so as to build a nationalist ideology (p.51-65). This nationalist ideology employs myths and narratives and successfully socializes them into the greater cultural fabric. Ansari then goes on to describe how this socialization resulted in

3 The tale of *Kaveh* and *Zahhak* is one of the most popular myths in Iranian-and Kurdish-historical memory. It is about a rebellion of a blacksmith (*Kaveh*) against a cruel ruler (*Zahhak*).

the transformation of “lateral” to “demotic” nationalism through the course of 20th century Iran. In this section of the book, his most valuable contribution lies in showing the ways in which these myths and narratives are pursued and reconstructed through the history of Iran in the 20th century, particularly in relation to the political power structure of the country. By undermining the standard periodization that clearly differentiates between the constitutional period and that of Reza Shah, Ansari demonstrates that the dictatorship of Reza Shah, to a large extent, stemmed from the intellectual framework of the Constitutional Revolution. Ansari shows the ways in which the weakness of the state of Qajar paved the way for an “enlightened nationalism”, which then turned into an “enlightened despotism”. In other words, Ansari indicates how the intellectual fathers of Iranian nationalism hailed Reza Shah as the awaited savior of the nation. They positioned him as the most probable candidate “to secure political framework for the pursuit of reforms and cultivation of a reinvigorated nation state” (p. 66). Ansari clearly demonstrates here how these political developments were made possible by employing, producing, and reproducing collective historical memory.

The second part of the book, “Age of extremes”, focuses on the period from the wake of the “White Revolution of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to until the death of Khomeini. According to Ansari, what characterizes this period is the waning of constitutionalism and the rise of a new sort of governance. The years following Reza Shah’s departure continued to witness a particular understanding of “nation” and a ruler based on constitutionalism.. Only after Muhammad Reza consolidated his power did a new form of relation between the ruler and the nation emerged. The line of thought supporting the constitutional monarchy of Reza Shah was transformed into support for a sacral monarchy. This new type of monarchy had a different relationship with the divine. Mohammad Reza himself did not feel constrained by constitutional concepts such as the rule of law. Without a constitutional limitation, according to Ansari, Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule was a different form of ruling, with a different relation to the divine. Shah emerged as a mediator between the divine and the nation. That said, Ansari claims that Mohammad Reza Shah’s way of ruling and his relations with both the nation and the divine were very similar to those of his successor, Ayatollah Khomeini: “both conceptualized the ruler as the guardian and protector of the nation with a divine mandate and access to esoteric knowledge” (p. 195). In this context, Khomeini emerged as the

better candidate to rule since, as man of religion, his relations with the divine had more credentials. Indeed, the authority that Khomeini finally claimed was far greater than that of any previous monarch of Iran had ever claimed. Khomeini went as far as to claim: “[*velayat*] the most important of Divine commandments and has priority over all derivative Divine commandments... [it is] one of the primary commandments of Islam and has priority over all derivative commandments, even over prayer, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca” (p. 215).

The period was also marked by the marginalization of the *Shahnameh* as the source of Iranian national identity. The cult of Cyrus the Great was mobilized against the *Shahnameh* myths. As epitomized in the famous 1971 celebration of 2500 years of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great was employed as the quintessential example of an enlightened monarch. In contrast, the age of extremes was the period in which new myths were utilized. These new myths originated in particular from an Islamic vocabulary. Shariati and other intellectuals of ‘the Age of Extremes’ employed the history of Islam so as to define a new understanding of Iranian identity. Moreover, a new language was articulated for resisting the existing rulers. In this context, *Kaveh* has been replaced by *Husein* as the new savior. After the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it became difficult not to claim that this newly Islamic-oriented language did not culminate in further extremities. The Islamic Republic had heavier emphasis on its Islamic heritage, yet still with an acknowledgement of the secular Iranian contributions.

Within the third period, the Age of Contestation, Ansari engages with the post-Khomeini era. This era was a new phase in Iranian nationalism in terms of the relation between the nation and popular ideas. For the first time in the history of modern Iran, with the help of the new media and mass education, Iranians imagined their community for themselves. They contested new forms of identity and debated about what a “nation” entails. Khomeini’s death, according to Ansari, revived areas of contestation such as the nature of the state, constitutionalism, and the role of religion. The ideological sphere, which was suppressed due to Khomeini’s personal charisma and the above-mentioned political relation with the divine, opened avenues for the embracement of new myths and transformation of the old. Additionally, the fall of the Soviet Union and the newly emerging neighbors of Iran further complicated the debate. On the one

hand, Islamic identity continued to dominate the ideological sphere, but on the other hand, common historical heritage with the new neighbors, only one of which was Shiite while others often lacked any interest in religion, began to be emphasized. Competition with the Republic of Turkey for influence in Central Asia resulted in a cultural interpretation of identity in which both Iran and the Turan have a common cultural heritage. Obviously, this common heritage can be seen in the *Shahnameh*. In the following Khatami period, a constitutional understanding of Iranian identity re-emerged. Old concepts of rule of law, rights, and enlightenment were again employed by Khatami, and the reformist line of thought was contested to build an Iranian identity in relation to these concepts. Unfortunately, Khatami failed to fulfill his political promises, paving the way to new populist leader Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad's position within this realm of conflict has leaned towards counter-enlightenment. Ansari argues that Ahmadinejad has built a new multi-sided narrative that offers something for everyone: an amalgamation of anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism merged with Shiite eschatology and national exceptionalism (p. 275). Ahmadinejad's understanding of Iran is a mix of all of these.

*The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* is of equal interest for scholars specializing in the history of Iran and for those who study nationalism in general. Ali Ansari paints a brilliant portrait of the relationships of history, myths, and nationalism. He is successful in introducing new approaches to the conceptualization and periodization of an extensively studied area of nation-building. His contribution is also important for the Turkish reader, who usually encounters Iran in terms of strategy and nuclear issues. The book is of great value to go beyond the biased and sometimes essentialist accounts of Iran that consider the Iranian (Islamic) Revolution as pivotal and often read the nation's history retrospectively. Ansari reminds us of another important factor that lies behind the history of modern Iran: nationalism. However, he explicitly focuses on mainstream nationalism and only considers non-Persian nations in relation with mainstream line of thought. In other words, non-Persian minorities are seen within the framework of the mainstream nationalism. The relationship between politics and history in non-Persian nations, and their own understanding and employing of myths, could have been included in the analyses. Considering the rise of minority nationalism all over the world, it could have been a further contribution to the literature. In addition, although attentive to an

array of primary and secondary sources, some of which are still untapped at this time, Ansari's writing style remains uncluttered. In an effort to appeal to the general reader, the book does not give enough background information on all relevant characteristics and events, however at times this makes it hard for the general reader to understand some important details. Despite these caveats, however, it is an intellectually stimulating work, one of the most detailed and masterful analyses of 20th century Iran.