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**Revising Iranian Nationalist Historiography and Shaping a New
Intellectual Field**

Iran Milliyetçi Tarihyazımının Gözeden Geçirilmesi ve Yeni
Entelektüel Alanın Oluşumu

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Iran Milliyetçi Tarihyazımının Gözden Geçirilmesi ve Yeni Entelektüel Alanın Oluşumu

Öz

Tarihyazımı geçmişteki olaylarla ilgili anlatılarımız ve yorumlarımızdır. Olaylara olan bakışımız zamanla değiştiği gibi geçmişle ilgili düşüncelerimiz de değişebilir. Dolayısıyla, geçmişle ilgili anlatılarımızı ve yorumlarımızı sürekli gözden geçirip güncellemeliyiz. Oysa, tarihi gözden geçirmek salt bilimsel bir uğraş değildir; tersine toplumsal kimliğin ve siyasi düzenin oluşumunda ve sürdürülmesindeki öneminden dolayı tarihin gözden geçirilmesi oturmuş düzenin sert tepkilerine neden olabilir. Bu çalışmada İran'ın milliyetçi/ulusal tarihyazımının revizyonist araştırmacılarca eleştirilen yönleri incelenmiştir. Bu amaçla, ilk aşamada 'tarihyazımında revizyonizm' bir kavram olarak açıklanmış ve ardından, revizyonizmin resmî ulusal tarihlerin paradigmalarına yönelik oluşturabileceği zorluklar ele alınmıştır. Sonraki aşamada ise Aryanist Oryantalizm, geç Kaçar dönemindeki sosyopolitik değişimler ve Pehlevi Krallığının kuruluşu gibi gelişmeler etkisinde oluşan İran milliyetçi tarihyazımının başlıca dayanakları tartışılmıştır. Ayrıca, İran ulusal tarihinin revizyonist araştırmacılarca eleştirilen en önemli yönleri de irdelenmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre, ülke içindeki İslamcı ve ülke dışındaki seküler araştırmacıların bir bölümü arasında kurulan ağlar sonucu iki revizyonist grup oluşmuştur. Söz konusu grup-İçi ağlar yeni bir entelektüel alanın oluşumunu olumlu etkileyebilir, ancak bir yandan gruplar-arası ve öte yandan revizyonistler ile milliyetçi tarihyazımının savunucuları arasında düşünsel tartışmaların gerçekleşmemesi bunun karşısında engel oluşturmaktadır. Bu eksikliklere karşın, revizyonistlerin çalışmaları Aryan miti, 'eski' İran milleti, milli kimliği ve toprakları anlayışını ve ulusal tarihin kapsama-dışlama siyasetlerini eleştirerek ulusal tarihyazımını sarsmayı başarmıştır. Ulusal tarihyazımına yönelik bu eleştiriler kendiliğinden paradigma değişimiyle sonuçlanmayabilir. Bunun temelindeki nedenler, Kuhn'in de vurguladığı gibi, paradigma değişiminin salt yanlışlama yöntemiyle gerçekleşmemesi ve oturmuş düzenin temellerini oluşturan baskın paradigmanın eleştirilere karşı direnç göstermesidir. Oysa, İran örneğinde görüldüğü gibi ulusal tarihyazımının eleştirisi onun kollayıcısı olan ulus-devletin de karşılaştığı zorlukları göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Revizyonizm, Milliyetçi Tarihyazımı, Aryan Miti, Süreklilik, Özgünlük, İran.



Revising Iranian Nationalist Historiography and Shaping a New Intellectual Field

Abstract

Historiography is our narratives and interpretations about the past. As our views toward events change our beliefs about the past also transform over time. Hence, we need to regularly update and revise our narratives and interpretations about the past. Yet, revising history is not merely a scholarly occupation; rather it may cause severe reactions of the established system due to its vital role in the formation and continuity of social identities and political orders. This study analyses the main aspects of Iranian nationalist historiography criticized by revisionist scholars. To this end, in the first step, I discuss the concept of revisionism in historiography and its challenges to the established paradigms of official national histories. Then, I describe the main pillars of the nationalist historiography of Iran shaped under the influence of Aryanism and orientalism in the West, socio-political developments during the late Qajar era, and the foundation of the Pahlavi monarchy. Furthermore, I examine the main aspects of the nationalist historiography criticized or revised by revisionist scholars of Iran. The results of this study attest to the formation of networks among two groups of scholars: (a) those with Islamist tendencies inside of Iran and (b) secular scholars outside of Iran. While these networks and intra-group factions appear promising, a lack of serious inter-group debates among these scholars or between revisionists and proponents of the nationalist historiography produces the main obstacles to the formation of an intellectual field. Nevertheless, revisionist scholarly work has challenged nationalist historiography through criticizing or revising the Aryan myth, the claims as to the immortality/antiquity of the nation, national identity, the territory of Iran, and its time, space, inclusion, and exclusion policies. These critiques may fail to result in a shift in the national historiography in the short run. Paradigms resist anomalies and, as Kuhn also underlines, the sheer falsification mechanism hardly can lead to a shift in a dominant paradigm supported by a political regime. Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that criticism may attest to the arrival of new forces that defy nation-states as the patrons of the official national historiographies.

Keywords: Historical Revisionism, Nationalist Historiography, Aryan Myth, Continuity, Authenticity, Iran.



Introduction

The occurrence of intellectual lock-in and path dependency in the natural and social sciences reveal that to a degree all scholars are influenced by the institutional conditions, epistemological costs, and the 'spirit of the time', and in this regard, historians are no exception (Yalçıntaş, 2013). As time passes some truisms may be contradicted by new evidence or arguments. At this point, uncertainty around principles increases and change is often inevitable. Consequently, historians may begin to doubt prior consensuses reached for explaining why and how some events took place in the past. These developments may require revising accepted narratives to suit new facts, methods, and theoretical frameworks. The history of historiography reveals that most of the 'truths' contributing to our perception of the past change over time. Accordingly, pioneering studies by curious researchers lead to discoveries that clarify historical events. By raising views contrary to the mainstream, these revisionist scholars challenge the established aspects, epistemology, and arguments of the traditional orthodoxies of history (Krasner, 2019; Foner, 2002; McPherson, 2003). As Tucker maintains, historiography is our narratives, interpretations, and beliefs about the past that transform over time. Therefore, he concludes that in a sense all historians are 'revisionists.' He sees historiography as a 'progressive and innovative discipline composed of various dynamic research programs precisely because it is capable of revising itself, constantly improving itself, expanding knowledge and becoming relevant in new historical contexts' (Tucker, 2008). McPherson who considers revision as the lifeblood of historical scholarship asserts that 'history is a continuing dialogue between the present and the past'. He challenges the existence of a 'single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning'. McPherson defines revisionism as the unending adventure of historians to decipher the past, believing that it 'makes history vital and meaningful' so that without revisionist historians, we would be confined by stereotypes (McPherson, 2003: 5-6).

Revisionists challenge official explanations and reassess supposedly sacred assumptions (Schlesinger, 1986: 165). Petrović considers the revision of national history to be not merely a scholarly attempt to interpret the past, rather it defies 'something bigger, the "official" truth, a paradigm sanctioned by political authorities, guarded by legal decisions and maintained by the majority of allegedly opportunistic academics' (Petrović, 1989; Kopecek, 2008). Time and space are two main prerogatives of 'national history' for naturalizing the nation and the nation-state, representing them as legitimate, natural, and immemorial political organizations possessing natural historical territories separating them from 'others' (Hill et al., 2002). Therefore, nationalist historiography contributes to the formation of collective and historical memories; they are political uses of the past, strategies for remembrance, or tools of memory loss forging a shared collective



commemoration subsidized by the dominant groups in society (Lavabre, 2009; Hartog and Revel, 2001; Wang, 2008). In undermining the founding pillars of the official ideologies and interests of favored groups, historical revisionism may generate hostility from ruling factions, privileged oppositions, and ordinary people (Breuilly, 2007). Challenging the official truths intertwined with political power may result in severe reactions because revision can cause a crisis and shift in paradigm.

Kuhn, the historian of science, defines scientific paradigms as ‘universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners’ (Kuhn, 1996). He highlights that in contrast to the sciences in which there tends to be a single reigning paradigm - apart from in times of paradigm shift - the social sciences are characterized by a ‘tradition of claims, counterclaims, and debates over fundamentals’ (Kuhn, 1972). Notwithstanding, there are ‘dominant paradigm(s)’ shaping the values or mentalities of scholars, insiders, ideological adherents, and other citizens. A shift occurs when revisionist ideas replace dominant paradigms. In contrast to Popper, who considered falsifiability the primary force of scientific change, Kuhn states that invariably dominant paradigms can survive in the face of anomalies (Popper, 1959). Nevertheless, some accumulated or significant anomalies may throw them into crisis (Kuhn, 1996). As Markwick argues this process eventually evolves into an intellectual battle between the supporters and proponents of the new and dominant paradigms, creating a ‘paradigm shift’. The new-born paradigm may bring to the discipline a different system of definitions, conceptions, and terminology (Markwick, 2001: 3-31). Apart from, Kuhn’s significant contributions to our understanding about the underlying reasons of paradigm resilience and shift, Foucault’s ideas on the connection between power and discourse is useful to figure out why some discourse resist changes. For instance, in his archaeological works, he explores ‘the “rules of formation” and “regimes of truth” by which scientific knowledge progresses and through which human beings understand themselves.’ Foucault in his genealogical works examines power and knowledge that ‘create the conditions for power to have particular truth effects’ (Välikangas and Seck, 2011).

Likewise, this study analyses the revisionism of the official nationalist historiography of Iran over the last three decades. To this end, I adopted a discourse analysis method to survey the scholarly works of the revisionists and post-nationalist scholars because their texts were produced in the wake of political, cultural, and social developments, and shaped by different domestic and global forces. These domestic forces include the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, leading to revisions of Pahlavi national history, and the ever-growing reaction of marginalized sectors of society to official nationalist historiography. The global forces emerged out of



epistemological developments and intellectual movements across the world like postmodernism, deconstructionism, deconstructivism, poststructuralism, environmentalism, post-positivism, new waves of feminism, and new social movements. These not only facilitated the emergence of new generations of post-nationalist and revisionist scholars but also caused some of the proponents of the *status quo* to amend the national history in the hope of increasing its chance of survival.

This study categorized 31 Farsi, 67 English, and 6 Turkish research papers as a part of its revisionist historiography list.¹ This total 104 examined studies meet at least one of these two criteria: (a) they directly challenge the nationalist historiography of Iran, or (b) they provide arguments at odds with the main underlying pillars of nationalist historiography including its time, space, exclusion, and inclusion policies or its deterministic race-based methodology. In the following section, I will explain the key features and constituents of nationalist historiography in Iran. Then, I will introduce the emergence of historical revisionism in Iran and investigate if it contributed to the formation of a new 'intellectual field' in the area of Iranian studies. In the concluding section, I will categorise the foremost orthodox aspects revised by revisionists.

1. Nationalist Historiography in Iran

The disastrous wars of the early nineteenth century between the Qajar state and Russia and the subsequent loss of vast parts of the empire caused the first inklings of doubt over the root of both the 'backwardness' and glaring power gap between the Qajar Empire and the West. This anguished situation was accompanied by the prevalence of the Aryan myth in Europe. In the second half of the nineteenth century, orientalist Aryanists like Gobineau published books about the so-called pre-Islamic Aryan civilization of 'Persia', while Indian Parsi/Zoroastrian missionaries made contact with Qajar Iranian elites like prince Jalal al-Din Mirza, Kermani, and Akhuzadeh, who later became the pioneers of amateur racist history writing in Iran (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011).

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Qajar Iran witnessed severe political changes. In 1906, a system of constitutional monarchy was established, but after a period of turbulence, civil wars, and foreign interventions, the Majlis was closed in 1911. Many activists were killed, exiled, or fled the country prior to WWI, during which Qajar Iran territory was occupied by the Allied and Central Powers. This course of events birthed a new generation of activists refusing democratic models and

¹ In this study I use Farsi, Fars, and Iran instead of Persian, Persians and Persia because ordinary people as well as scholars use these terms to introduce the country's official language, ethnicity and country.



idealizing an authoritarian, racist, and centralist regime. Alongside the rivalry between Britain and the Soviets, their propaganda efforts heralded the foundation of the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran. Many activists who legitimized Reza Khan's rise to power later transformed into the ideologues of the Pahlavi regime, founding a new national identity based upon official historiography (Alizadeh, 2020). Consequently, from 1925 to 1979, the Pahlavis became the main patrons of nationalist historiography, establishing new institutes for its development and propagation (Marashi, 2008; Vejdani, 2015; Abdi, 2001).

Many scholars have recognized the policies of nationalist historiography which contributed to creating the modern nationalist Iranian identity (e.g., see (Matin-Asgari, 2012)). The time policy of nationalist historiography serves to depict over 2,500 years past for the Iranian 'nation' and 'nation-state', alongside an archaic foundation for Iranian identity. Moreover, it has a dual space policy: the first representing Iran as a nation-state with a territory accepted by international law, and the second claiming that lands once dominated by the most powerful 'Iranian kings' with the largest territories were actually lost Iranian lands. Nationalist historiography vaguely defines the nation's insiders and outsiders; in the process of characterizing 'Iranianness', it centralizes the Farsi language and Fars ethnicity and assumes Zoroastrianism to be the original national religion of Iran (Ringer, 2012: 267-277; Ringer, 2009: 549-560). However, depending on circumstances, nationalist historiography also tries to Persianize or Iranianize Islam, the Shia sect of Islam, and the Greek, Arab, Mongol, and Turkic dynasties, or describe them as evil, wild, or inferior (Vejdani, 2015; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011; 2014; 2016). Indigenizing Islam or non-Persian dynasties with an assumed *aniranian* (non-Iranian) origin functioned as a balm for national humiliation, bringing them under a nationalist meta-narrative, and proving the Iranian's distinguished place in the history of civilizations and Islam. The nationalist historiography also claims a continuity of superior Iranian elements – e.g., Iranian kingdoms, the national spirit, the Iranian psyche, vazirs, poets, scholars, movements, wisdom, symbols, motifs, and art – across the pages of its history (Ram, 2000; Ahmadi, 2019).

This nationalist historiography overlooks what it considers to be Iran's pre-Aryan history and civilization, with some scholars, like Pirniya, determining its pre-Aryan inhabitants to be ugly and inferior (Pirniya, 1929:12-17). Furthermore, a nostalgia for a golden age of ancient 'pre-Islamic Iran' is another important feature of its nationalist historiography (Ram, 2000: 70). According to Chehabi the imagined pre-Islamic past which 'as European scholars had discovered, shared a common ancestry with European culture' served to bridge the huge gap between the Islamic reality and the desired European model (Chehabi, 1993: 223). It also arbitrarily exploited legendary histories like the *Shahnameh* as historical sources when required because, as



Lefkowitz maintains, in the study of the ancient era, when lacking sufficient documents historians can always utilize myths to fill the gaps in their narratives (Lefkowitz, 2009: 353-361). Mainstream historians generally sought a scapegoat to 'be blamed for the fall from heaven', holding Arabs, Islam, Mongols, and Turks responsible for Iran's perceived backwardness (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011: 379). For instance, Ashtiyani believes that it was the barbaric 'yellow skinned' Arsacids (Ashkanids), Mongols, and Turks that caused Iran to lose its status in the civilized world (Ashtiyani, 1926: 17-18). The arbitrary and biased use of traditional and modern positivist methods alongside a problematic methodology and the abuse of history for political ends prevailed among the nationalist historians of Iran. The problem with this biased historical writing does not stem from the ideological tendencies of nationalist historians because revisionists may also possess ideological tendencies or at least belong to a social group; rather, it is related to the use and abuse of history for nationalist and often racist objectives.

2. The Emergence of Historical Revisionism in Iran

Prior to the 1990s, there were a handful of examples critiquing Iranian nationalist historiography. For example, Islamist figures like Motahhari and Shariati criticized disdain for the Islamic era and the glorification of pre-Islamic 'Iranian' or 'Aryan' dynasties. Shariati, an early advocate of Islamic political and social ideology, urges Iranians to abandon Western and pre-Islamic traditions and return to their 'true Shiite self'. He states that Iranians know nothing of the Sasanians, the Achaemenids, and even earlier civilizations, and do not find their roots in this 'distant past' (Shariati, 1978: 67; Abdi, 2001: 67). In addition to these Islamic reactions, the first significant revisionist books have been published since the late 1980s. Matin-Asgari argues that Vaziri's pioneering 1993 study, *Iran as an Imagined Nation*, was one of the first revisionist books to be largely overlooked or considered unwelcome by nationalist scholars (Matin-Asgari, 2012: 176; Vaziri, 1993).

The results of the study indicate that of the examined 31 academic revisionist pieces of research published in Iran, approximately 40 percent reveal the Islamist tendencies of the writers. Such writers reject the Aryanist framing of the orientalist and Pahlavi nationalist historians, presenting their own national history highlighting the role of Islamic culture in the historical 'continuity' of the nation and the 'distinguished' role of Iran in Islamic civilization. Instead, codes extracted from research published in English attest to the effect of new global approaches to history, like discussing the imagined nature of historical phenomena and communities, the rejection of positivist approaches, relativism, and feminism. About 35 per cent of this English-language research was published in compilation or conference books, suggesting the formation of academic and intellectual networks within this group of revisionist authors. Furthermore, most of these studies revise race-based approaches to the history of Iran, but the absence of the voices of marginalized groups - like non-Fars ethnics - in their



accounts imply at least some attempt to mend nationalist historiography to increase its chance of survival in the new academic sphere. The existence of networks between revisionist Iranian scholars and their non-Iranian counterparts in the West and revisionist researchers with Islamist inclinations in Iran heralds the first steps toward the formation of what Bourdieu term an 'intellectual field' (Bourdieu, 1969). However, the lack of serious scholarly debate forms the greatest obstacle to its realization. For instance, the findings of this study show that the examined Farsi research rarely cites, discusses, or challenges the examined English research, and vice versa. The existence, combination, and opposition of multiple forces can contribute to this process, nurturing the embryonic paradigm in Iranian historiography that has emerged since the 1990s. As the 'intellectual field' concept suggests, amongst these revisionist scholars there are hierarchical relations and uneven cultural, social, economic, and symbolic distributions of capital. The Islamist scholars organized around certain research centers like the Institution for Iranian Historical Studies and have access to these centers' archives and media. However, some of the scholars working in Europe and the USA have themselves organized around high-ranking journals, universities, and research centers, and possess access to main opposition media. These possibilities enhance their cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital, enabling contact with a broader audience and institutes to propagate their ideas. Moreover, the discussed points recall Manhhien's ideas on the sociology of knowledge production. To him knowledge "is clearly rooted in and carried by the desire for power and recognition of particular social groups who want to make their interpretation of the world the universal one". Accordingly, he believes that intellectuals serve as the agents to formulate and "carry" the task of elaborating interpretations for their groups of origin or affiliation (Goldman, 1994).

3. Revised Aspects of Nationalist Historiography in Iran

The studies examined in this paper revise various aspects of the nationalist historiography of Iran that emerged in the Qajar era and became established during the Pahlavi monarchy. The main points criticized or revised by these studies can be categorized into five groups:

3.1. The Space Policy of Nationalist Historiography

Hill et al. (2002) state that national historiographies set forth claims about what can be defined as a nation-state's legitimate 'natural' territory and how it can operate. This 'space policy' serves to both 'naturalize' the present territory of the nation-state and legitimize its claims as to its historical borders. Kashani-Sabet (2000) demonstrates that the present territory of Iran and the quality of its related consciousness resulted out of the foreign interventions, territory losses, and regional uprisings that had been



perceived as challenges to the integrity of the country during the nineteenth and first half of twentieth centuries. Her emphasis on the role of different external and internal forces in shaping Iranian borders and their fluctuations challenge efforts to naturalize the territory of contemporary Iran as a nation-state. The most perplexing part of the space policy relates to the naturalizing of Iran's territory prior to the Safavid Empire or determining its borders. A nationalist stereotype claims that all of the lands captured by the Achaemenids or Sasanids in their thirst for power embody Iran and continued to be so even after Alexander, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Mongols conquered them. Some of the orientalist use the word 'Persia' to represent a geographic and sometimes political entity with vague borders, but when Iranians attempt to translate the word as 'Iran' its meaning becomes a puzzle. Investigating the evolution of the 'idea of Iran' rather than Iran, Gnoli (1989) provides some alternative suggestions: firstly, it was a religious and political name; secondly, its history - in the form of *Eran Shahr* - goes back to the third century; it was a name coined by the Sasanids for political and religious purposes. Therefore, Gnoli's study implies that '*Iranshahr*' and the later '*Iran*' were not natural phenomena, but instead were invented by Sasanian 'propaganda' for its imperial ends. Consequently, Gnoli discards about eight centuries of pre-Sasanian history - and more importantly the Achaemenid empire - which are situated at the heart of the nationalist historiography project (Matin-Asgari, 2012: 180-181). In the same way, Zia-Ebrahimi (2011: 461) states that *Eran Shahr* was the 'official appellation of the Sasanian empire' invented to meet their political objectives.

Exploring the historical texts Vaziri (1993: 66-81) determines that the word Iran mentioned within historical texts does not refer to a country, till orientalist charged the word with a political connotation for racial and colonial purposes. Discussing the evolution of terms like Iran, *keshvar* (country), *dowlat* (government), and *Mellat* (nation) during the late nineteenth century, Tavakoli-Targhi (1994) concludes that these terms underwent 'rearticulating', becoming absorbed with new meanings more in line with modern necessities: 'The '*Iranzamin*' of ancient texts is not a country with the same borders as today's Iran. Modern Iran came into being when nation-states appeared in the aftermath of European supremacy and the collapse of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Gurkani-Indian empires.'

The Shahnameh is one of the sources that nationalist historians present to suggest the continuity of Iran as a country. Davis asserts that there is a consensus among scholars that the legendary Iran of the *Shahnameh* was located in the north-east of contemporary Iran, while important eras like the Fars - the seat of two pre-Islamic dynasties - are not mentioned in this part. He maintains that the borders of this legendary Iran are unclear and while the capital of its main enemy, Turan, is mentioned in the poems, Ferdowsi does not name the capital of the legendary Iran. Davis shows that in the *Shahnameh* the geographical places mentioned after the arrival of



Alexander are limited to the south-east of today's Iran, and are in parts devoted to the Sasanians, with Mesopotamia functioning as the main part of an empire retaining ambiguous eastern borders (Davis, 2012: 38-39). Furthermore, Manafzadeh argues that the poems of the *Shahnameh* reveal that parts of today's Iran – for instance, Mazandaran and Zabol- were not part of the legendary Iran described within.²

3.2. Time Policy: Iran as an Ancient Nation

As previously discussed, it is widely accepted that nations and national identities are modern phenomena that co-emerged with the rise of the nation-state in late seventeenth-century Europe. In Iran, elites only became acquainted with these concepts on the eve of the twentieth century (Katouzian, 1995: 15-19). Despite this fact, the proponents of Iranian nationalist historiography believe that Iranians are an exception in world history in the sense that Iranian national identity stretches back over thousands of years. For instance, using mythical sources Yarshater tries to show that for millennia 'Iranians' have sustained 'a deep sense of national identity' (Yarshater, 1983: 411). As Hill et al. maintain such claims imply that nationalist history writing is not a purely academic or intellectual effort, instead reflecting the nationalistic climate of the age. For this reason, historiography at such a 'political and intellectual turning point served mainly to create a past for a new thing called the nation-state, to make this new thing old'. They conclude that this national historiography aims to 'naturalize the "nation" as a form of community and thereby naturalizes the nation-state as a political organization'. In so doing, national historiography intends to depict the nation and the nation-state as realities existent since time immemorial (Hill et al., 2002). For example, Matini, an Iranian nationalist scholar, states that 'in ancient Iran, Iranism (*Irangarayi*) went beyond mere national awareness and turned into the worshipping of Iran and a belief as to its superiority'. Accordingly, he concludes that the roots of Iranian nationalism likely emerged in the seventh century B.C.E., and in this respect, Iran is exceptional in world history (Matini, 1992). Likewise, Khaleqi-Motlaq, another Iranian nationalist scholar, maintains that his fellow ideologues who believe in Iranian superiority and the inferiority of Arabs and Turks are inheritors of an ancient Iranian nationalism (Khaleqi-Motlaq, 1994). Matin-Asgari discusses and challenges the nationalistic accounts of Yarshater, Matini, and Khaleqi-Motlaq who insist that the national and imperial conception of Iran and Iranian identity are the same phenomena. He also casts doubt on the theories considering 'all of Iran's

² Alireza Manafzadeh discusses the meaning of Iran and its historical territory in different conferences. For instance, see <https://bit.ly/34p8BFn> and <https://bit.ly/34scg5f>.



inhabitants at all times and without exception' to be Iranian (Matin-Asgari, 2012).

Revising Iran's nationalist history is intricately linked with debates about the shaping of and the features of nation-states and national identity. The examined studies reveal that scholars and authors with Islamist or anti-colonialist inclinations reject secular and archaic narratives of the Iranian nation and national identity as rendered by orientalists and secular Iranian nationalists, however, they assume a collective awareness of a sort of traditional national identity before the Qajar era. For instance, although Kachuyan links contemporary identity problems to the country's confrontation with the West and Russia, he also subscribes to a theory of a previous kind of shared religious identity among Iranians (Kachuyan, 2005). Believing in orientalists' and imperialist western countries' role in propagating racism in Muslim countries, Shahbazi rejects the existence of a racial kinship among Iranians and Europeans. Nevertheless, he ventures an assumed link between the name 'Iran' and the Sanskrit word 'Ariya' as evidence of the effect of Iran on the Indian subcontinent culture and the antiquity of the Iranian nation (Shahbazi, 1980). Other scholars adopting new epistemological methods have attempted to deconstruct the nationalist narratives claiming the existence in Iran of a shared ancient national history. For instance, recalling the 'subjective antiquity' paradox discussed by Anderson (2010), Boroujerdi (1998: 43-55) identifies the subjective beliefs of nationalist theory, and further, by utilizing 'invented tradition' concept coined by Hobsbawm (2012) suggests how nationalist claims regarding Iranian national identity conflict with the realities of the country. Moreover, Tavakoli-Targhi (1994: 611) argues that even during the Constitutional Revolution era (1906-1911) modern terms like *mellat* (nation) were unknown to Iranian activists. Similarly, Vaziri (1993: 63) maintains that 'the term Iran, as the name of the land, and the notion of Iranian national consciousness are by-products of twentieth-century ideas that have no historical affiliation in the way many nationalist Orientalists try to portray.' Finally, Ram (2010, 89-112) believes that the emphasis on ancient Iran during the Pahlavi era was a tactic to package 'modernizing-cum-westernizing reform as a recovery of the Iranian self rather than an alienation from it'. These many debates reveal that the revision of nationalist historiography calls into question the assumed natural archaic status and organic political manifestation of the Iranian nation, nation-state, and national identity.

3.3. The Aryan Myth

The Aryan race myth is one of the main pillars of Iranian nationalist and Aryanist orientalist historiography. As a racial-biological tool, the myth was originally used and abused by Aryanist orientalists and later by Iranian nationalists to reconstruct an Iranian past according to positivistic deterministic methods. Ram demonstrates that the Aryan myth was one of the more persistent hypotheses introduced into Iranian nationalist discourse



during the Qajar era, becoming one of the main pillars of official Pahlavi ideology, and surviving after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Even during the Islamic Republican era, Aryanist racial explanations can be traced in the works of Islamic scholars and official school textbooks (Ibid., 95-101). Despite its endurance, the results of this study suggest that the Aryan myth has been the most criticized aspect within Iranian nationalist historiography. Examining the philological and semantic evolution of the word *Ariya* from ancient Avesta and Achaemenid inscriptions up into the modern era, Zia-Ebrahimi states that this term was subject to drastic mutation. He discusses the historical anachronism resulting from the confusion between the word '*Ariya*' - an ethnonym used by a fairly restricted group of ancient people spread between northern India to the Iranian plateau - and the word '*Aryan*' - a modern racial category born in nineteenth-century Europe. Accordingly, such a distortion of ancient sources and the resulting malapropism 'stem from the fact that an existing term (*Ariya*) has been used to describe a modern idea (*Aryan*)' and this was subsequently exploited to amalgamate Indians, Iranians, and Europeans into a large racial cluster possessing assumed biological and psychological characteristics, otherwise known as the Aryan race (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011: 461). Likewise, Ansari (2017) argues that the 'European rediscovery of Iran' is an excellent example of the manipulation of myth and history for political ends, creating a new grand narrative of Iranian historiography founded upon the Aryan myth. Besides, Eqtedari (1981) asserts that belief in the ancient immigration of an unknown group (*Aryans*) to Iran conflicts with anthropological, historical, and archaeological discoveries in the Khuzestan province of Iran.

3.4. Paradoxes of Continuity and Authenticity

Showing the historical continuity of the Iranian nation, national identity, monarchy, and territory has been an indispensable part of and mission for Iranian nationalist historiography. More significantly, most revisionists, post-nationalist and Islamist scholars who reject the race-based methods of the orientalists and secular nationalists prefer silence to challenging the national history's assumptions regarding Iran's historical persistence. Vejdani (2015) believes that 'if there was an underlying principle uniting much of early twentieth-century Iranian historiography, it was Iranian historians' need to emphasize continuities over ruptures.' He links continuity claims to presumptions of legitimacy as another important feature of Iranian nationalism. Hence, nationalist historiography aims to naturalize Iran as an authentic nation whose existence is never disrupted or contaminated by any external intervention. To this end, they resort to an 'indigenizing strategy' through which they can present non-Aryan or *aniranian* elements voluntarily dissolving into 'Iranian culture and civilization' through the contributions of wise, superior Iranian bureaucrats, poets, and scholars. The continuity and authenticity myths are central for



nationalists because their perceived Aryan-Iranian past only includes fragments at best of the pre-Islamic era, while the majority of the period claimed was ruled by Arabs, Greeks, Turks, and Mongols. Through resorting to these strategies, Pahlavis could naturalize their sovereignty and racial ideology as the heirs of a 2,500-year-old monarchy and 'pure' Iranian heritage. Accordingly, Ram argues that all the textbooks of the pre and post-1979 era serve to create 'a sense of pride' and induce a sense of continuous Iranian nationhood stretching linearly from pre-Islamic antiquity to the present (Ram, 2000: 71-72). In keeping with the grand scheme of Iranianizing foreign rulers, textbooks - like mainstream historiography - assume different sub-policies for different dynasties: they claim that the Seleucids 'submitted to the seductive force (*jazebeh*) of Iran's culture and civilization'; the history of the Arab-Islamic Empires are portrayed as the resistance of the Iranian civilized nations and 'wise elites' - vazirs and scholars - against the 'inferior Arab race'; and approximately nine centuries of Turkic dynasties rule are indigenized through asserting the centrality of Persian language, vazirs, and Shiism that has been represented as an Iranian religion (Ahmadi, 2019; Ram, 2000). A textbook published in the Pahlavi era teaches pupils that all blows to Iran during history have never resulted in a rupture in its history. Thus, the Arab invasion destroyed the Sasanian Empire, devastated its palaces and treasures but could not wipe out its unbeatable spirit. The textbook calls Arabs, Turks, and Mongols as quests who set around Iran's table of culture and dined for a while. Accordingly, there was no reason to be worry because as they came, they had to leave soon without imposing any serious damages on Iran's firm spirit, rich culture, and antique territory (Anvari and Javadi, 1978: 70-84; Ram, 2000: 70-84).

Claims on authenticity cause nationalist historians to discard what they consider to be the pre-Aryan past of the country. Elamite history is one the most important eras overlooked or belittled by Iranian nationalist historiography, so as to portray Cyrus as the founder of the 'nation' and the Achaemenids as the starting point of its history. Abdi, an Iranian archaeologist, believes that radical nationalists exaggerate the role of Cyrus and forge fake documents about him, and warns of the consequences of neglecting two millennia of Elamite history (Abdi, 2013: 44-52). Referring to the limited pages devoted to the alleged non-Aryan past in the nationalist historian Pirnia's *Ancient History of Iran*, Zia-Ebrahimi (2011: 457) reproaches the writer's racist rhetoric in describing non-Aryans - like the Elamites as 'racially and morally inferior' people.

3.5. Inclusion and Exclusion Policies

Aryanist Orientalist and Iranian nationalist historiography share similar inclusion and exclusion policies. Generally, nationalist historiography provides accounts of privileged Fars Shia men, at the expense of non-Fars, Sunni, and women's voice. For instance, Najmabadi deconstructs the nationalist texts and symbols representing the patriarchal mentalities of



nationalist modernists during the Qajar and Pahlavi era. She demonstrates that nationalists endeavor to portray the homeland (*vatan*) as a mother or beloved whose honor must be defended against foreign threats (Najmabadi, 2005). Moreover, Tavakoli-Targhi sees nationalist modernists' supports for the unveiling of women as a tactic to divorce Iran from its Arab-Islamic past (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: 54).

The continuity and authenticity claims of nationalist historians lead them to exclude or indigenize subaltern non-Fars ethnic groups (Boroujerdi, 1998; Saleh, 2013; Elling, 2013; Sarıkaya, 2008). Vejdani argues that nationalist historians perceived Iran's historical demographic diversity as a challenge to their ethnic and dynastical logics, and in the present, as a real or potential threat to the integrity of the country. Therefore, they engaged in writing an integrative history not only to depict the continuity of the nation in the past (time policy) but also to incorporate various local diversities into the grand narrative. Consequently, they could portray local populations as authentic Iranians sharing a common race, customs, language, and history (Vejdani, 2015). In this regard, Arabs and Turks, as 'non-Aryan' citizens of Iran and their role in the country's history, have been a primary source of anxiety for Iranian nationalism. As Ansari (2017) discusses, prior to the establishment of the Pahlavi monarchy, Iranian nationalists revealed an 'ideational' antipathy toward Arabs whose limited population could pose no serious challenge to the country's territorial integrity; however, by the foundation of the Pahlavi monarchy, Turks were considered the real threat by constituting a sizeable population of Iran. For instance, even before the monarchy's establishment, Browne described Azerbaijani Turks as 'dull, sullen, moody, fanatical and violent' subjects of the Qajar state (Browne, 1893). Likewise, Ashtiyani (1926) presented Turks as the 'blood enemies' of Iranians since time immemorial. He claimed that the 'old everlasting conflict' between the 'white civilized' Aryan Fars race and the 'uncivilized' 'plundering' 'yellow-skinned' Turks to be the cause of any downfall within Iranian history.

To cope with this perceived Turkish peril both in the present and in the past, Iranian nationalists developed a strategy to distinguish between an acquired variable superficial identity – e.g., lingual identity - and a deterministic intrinsic fundamental identity – e.g., racial biologic identity. Utilising the *Azeri Language Hypothesis* as the main pillar of this strategy, they borrowed from orientalist literature and developed a justification that the Turks of Iran were and are Iranian by race – an essential/fundamental identity - whose languages changed after invasion by the Turks – a superficial identity that could and should be changed. Thus, Turks were portrayed as 'Turkish-speaking people' with an Iranian essence present in their blood and psyche. Nationalists tried to show that Turks in north-western Iran used to speak the alleged ancient Iranian language 'Azeri' before their 'Turkification' between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries.



Subsequently, nationalists claimed that by abandoning the language of the blood enemies, the Turks of Iran could and should revert to the Aryan/Iranian essence rooted in their heritage and inner consciousness (for the Azeri language hypothesis see (Kasrawi, 1926; Qazvini, 1926)). Contrary to these ideas, a separate group of scholars not only rejects overlooking 'Turkic' heritage but accepts it as an indispensable part of what nationalists and Aryanist orientalists assume to be Iranian/Persian art, culture, and language. For instance, Perry (2001: 193-200) shows the effect of Turkish on the Persian language; across four volumes of dictionaries; Doerfer (1963-67) details Turkish (three volumes) and Mongolian (one volume) loanwords in Farsi; Ganjei (1986) discusses the impact of the Turkish language on Farsi during the Ilkhanid era; Ganjei (2009) alongside Floor and Javadi (2009) display the role of Turkish in the Safavid court, army, official correspondences, poetry, and society; with additional research analyzing the role of the Turkic languages in the formation of Farsi and the 'Pahlavi' languages (e.g., see (Kızılözen, 2019; .Cavanşir, 2016). Recent developments - like the publication of the Günbet manuscript of the Turkish epic *Dede Korkut*, narrating the epic stories of the Oghuz in Azerbaijan and Iran suggests that a geography and ethnic group can embrace different cultures at the same time (Shahgoli et al., 2019). New research across various fields, from architecture (e.g., see Grigor, 2016; 2018; Kazemivand, 2015) to literature (e.g., see (Rahimi, 2018; Rahimi, 2010)) herald serious challenges in the future to the purist race-based orientalist and nationalist historiography of Iran.

Analyzing the challenge of diversity to Iranian nationalism, Asgharzadeh (2007: 5) concludes that the elites and the Fars ethnic group were not the sole architects of the racist discourse and national history of Iran. Rather, once it became the official ideology of the Pahlavis, different groups - from their allies to opposition groups, scholars, ordinary people, and non-Fars 'Farstoxicated' sections of society - contributed to the development of this discourse in response to the invisible hand of self-interest. Referencing Foucault's notion of the interconnected nature of discourse and power, he demonstrates how an ideology maintaining the privileged status of its insiders 'seeps through the web of all human interactions and social relations down to the very depth of society' to otherize and marginalize its outsiders. 'Farstoxication' echoes the term 'Westtoxication/Occidentosis' coined by Al-e Ahamd (1984), but recalling Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Bates, 1975), significantly emphasizes the voluntary contribution of self-interested non-Fars 'Farstoxicated' people. Asgharzadeh states that representing Aryans in the national history as the country's primary antique owners has likewise triggered comparable reactions from marginalized groups. Accordingly, the result has been an 'absurd' competition over 'who has come earlier than whom, who has come first, who has come second, who has come last, whose language was spoken earlier than the others, and who, as a result, should have mastery over others' (Asgharzadeh, 2007: 199).



Furthermore, Katouzian believes that 'the ahistorical racist and Pan-Persianist theories and practices which swept over and controlled the land' since the foundation of the Pahlavi monarchy threaten the 'consistent and complementary' coexistence of different cultures in the country. He warns that similar reactions from non-Fars Iranians to this ahistorical pan-Persianism, in the form of 'equally ahistorical pan-ethnicisms, the emotional rejection of Persian language and literature, and the denial altogether of the broader Iranian culture and tradition' may undermine the integrity of the country and the 'solidarity of the broader Iranian culture' (Katouzian, 1995: 18).

Conclusion

The Pahlavi's official national historiography served to legitimize the monarchy, naturalize the superiority of the regime's insiders, the inferiority of its outsiders, and induce/internalize a sense of the officially patronized new national identity in Iran. Although this nationalist historiography was patronized, propagated, and instrumentalized by the Pahlavis, it inspired the race-based works of Aryanist orientalists and to a limited degree, the Indian Parsis. This historiography has its time, space, inclusion, and exclusion policies which to a large degree survived following the 1979 Islamic revolution. Since the late 1980s, nationalist historiography faced serious challenges originating from new global epistemological developments and social movements, like postmodernism, multiculturalism, deconstructivism, poststructuralism, new waves of feminism, pluralism, and post-positivism, leveraging new movements among marginalized outsiders within the nationalist historiography such as women and the non-Fars ethnic groups. Subsequently, different groups of scholars began to criticize or revise the main pillars of nationalist historiography either to cause a paradigm shift in the field or maintain parts to survive the emerging global and local conditions. This study investigated (a) the main aspects of the nationalist historiography criticized by revisionist and post-nationalist scholars and historians, and (b) the extent to which these developments may set the basis for shaping an 'intellectual field'. The results of this study demonstrate the complementary works and networks 'within' two groups of scholars: scholars with Islamist tendencies inside Iran, and a group of academicians outside Iran. While these networks and intra-group cooperation appear promising, the lack of serious internal debate among these scholars and between revisionist scholars and proponents of the nationalist historiography is the foremost obstacle to the formation of an 'intellectual field'. Notwithstanding, their scholarly works have posed challenges to the nationalist historiography through criticizing or revising the Aryan myth, claims regarding the immortality and antiquity of the nation, national identity, the territory of Iran, and its inclusion-exclusion policies.



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