Unity within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran

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Abstract: *The article provides a critical assessment of the more recent literature that relies on theoretical frameworks such as post modernism and globalization to deal with national identity, ethnicity and cultural mobility. Explaining sensitive and complicated issues such as identity requires the extensive use of the native historical, cultural and sociological sources related to the Iranian experience in the past rather than extracting generalizations based on a general and a-historical application of general social science theories. Three factors throughout Iranian history have played significant roles in creating a sense of national identity or Iranian-ness among all groups in Iranian society. These factors are the legacy of ancient Iran's political heritage, the central role of the Persian language in conveying the political, cultural and religious legacy to all Iranian religious and linguistic groups, and the important role of religion in the revival of Iran's cultural heritage, its independence, and unification.*

Introduction

Like many other Asian and Middle Eastern societies, Iranian society for the last several centuries has been comprised of different religious, linguistic, and tribal groups. However, unlike other countries, Iran has been able to maintain its unity and identity and to preserve its continuous socio-political and cultural life as a political entity. The main objective of this article is to explain the constitutive factors of national unity and identity in Iranian society. It discusses the important question related to the factors that have helped to bring together different tribal and non-tribal, Persian and non-Persian speaking groups, and to create a sense of belonging to the same political and cultural entity, namely Iran. My basic argument is that despite all the socio-political and cultural diversity in religious and linguistic terms, social formations such as tribalism, and ethnicity, all of which could have been potential destructive and disintegrative forces for Iranian society, there have been fundamental integrative forces that have helped Iran to continue as a political entity and maintain its socio-political and cultural dynamism. This has enabled Iranian society to survive several historical and devastating foreign invasions and to overcome various socio-political internal and external crises. The article provides a critical assessment of the more recent literature that relies on theoretical frameworks such as post modernism and globalization to deal with national identity, ethnicity and cultural mobility.

This article claims that theoretical frameworks that emerge out of socio-political and economic and cultural contexts different from those of Iran could produce ahistorical outcomes if applied uncritically to Iran's contemporary and past experience. What we need is a methodology and epistemology based on the historical sociology of Iran to be able to explain issues such as identity, nation building, nationalism, or ethnicity. This methodological-epistemological approach should consider the importance of time and space in the application of existing theoretical and conceptual models currently popular in Western social sciences. Explaining sensitive and complicated issues such as identity requires the extensive use of the native historical, cultural and sociological sources related to the Iranian experience in the past rather than extracting generalizations based on a general and a-historical application of general social science theories. As some recent general applications of these models have shown, (Vaziri, 1993)[2] they tend to disregard the tradition of historical sociology in social research (Sckockpol, 1995).

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[2] See, for instance, Mustafa Vaziri, Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity (New York: Paragon House, 1993). The author's simplistic application of Benedict Anderson's model to Iran encourages him to conclude that the civilization, political, and cultural legacy of Iran is reducible and attributable to the construction of an Iranian identity and image of political continuity by nineteenth century European Orientalism. For a more recent work, see Brenda Shafer, Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity (MIT Press, 2002), which reflects the political and strategic

Although some literature in the last decade has touched on the issues of identity, nationalism and nation-building in Iran in a way that reflect the application of a historical sociology tradition and thus presents more realistic analyses of Iranian society(Ashraf,2004&Kashani sabet,200), few studies have concentrated on explaining the causes behind the dynamics of national unity and political continuity in Iran in the past and the fact that different religious and linguistic groups, especially non-Persians, have contributed to these dynamics and even have promoted the factors that are the foundations of Iranian national unity and identity.

With respect to conceptualization, I am not going to engage here the conceptual controversies over jargon and the adaptability of concepts such as nationalism and ethnicity to the Iranian case.(Ahmadi,1995) However, regarding the relevance of "nation," suffice it to say that some leading theorists of nationalism, the state, and ethnicity have stressed the existence of the nation, although not nationalism, in the older historical civilizations such as Iran before the rise of nationalism as a modern ideology.(Smith,1986) What is more relevant here is the concept of "national identity," which is more complicated than that of nation or nationalism. The concepts of identity in general and national identity in particular have been studied from different perspectives. Globalization theorists stress the irrelevancy of nationality and national identity and argue for the rise of ethnic identities in the age of a globalized world.(Castels,2000) To them, the nature and functions of the globalization process encourage the replacement of national identity by ethnic ones. (Ahmadi, 2002:13-17) The post-modern and deconstructive approach emphasizes the importance of differences rather than identity to emancipate marginalized forces and hear the silent voices of modern societies. (Featherstone, 1995) In a different critical approach, the feminist school discloses the instrumental use and construction of national identity discourse by male dominated states and political elites. (Noghaddam, 1994) The constructivist model of Anderson (Nderson, 1983), in contrast to the primordialsit approach of theorists such as Van Den Berghe (Berghe, 1990), considers phenomena such as identity and nationalism as social constructs. While all these approaches to identity have their own merits and have presented realistic accounts of some modernized societies, they are not appropriate theoretical constructs for the main subject of this paper, i.e., to explain the factors behind the long continuity of Iran as a political, territorial and cultural entity.

To argue how Iranians have manifested a sense of Iranian-ness and unity despite having other sub-identities based on local languages, religions, and/or tribal formations, it is necessary to define national identity. According to Anthony Smith:

National identity Involves some sense of political community, however tenuous one. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutional and a single code of rights and duties of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong (Smith, 1991:9).

To have a clear definition of national identity in this manner, William Bloom emphasizes that "national identity describes that condition in which the mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols-- have internalized the symbols of the nation--so that they may act as one psychological group when there is a threat to, or the possibility of enhancement of, these symbols of national identity".(Bloom,1990:52) Richard Handler defines national identity in reference to three aspects of human experience: "first, to individual human persons: second, to collectivities or groups of human beings that are imagined to be individuated somewhat as human persons are imagined to be discrete one from another; and third, to the relationship between the two--in particular, to the ways in which human beings are imagined to assimilate elements of collective identities into their unique personal identities."(Levinson & Ember, 1996:28) To have such a collective identity, each community needs some fundamental features on the basis of which national identity is built. These features include: (1) historical territories, or homeland; (2) common historic myths and memories; (3) common mass public culture; (4) common legal rights and duties for all members; and (5) common economy with territorial mobility for members. While the Iranian context implies some shortcomings regarding the application of the concept of "legal rights of the community" because of its long standing tradition of authoritarian rule, it has had the other most common features of national identity and fits the definition. The existence of these basic features, in fact, has facilitated the historical continuity of Iran from the past to the present.

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preoccupations of contemporary states such as Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan and relies on the claims, materials, and sources produced mainly by Pan-Turkist circles in Baku rather than empirical research of Iranian Azerbaijan's socio-political and cultural orientations.

Although the definitional clarification of national identity as a concept is necessary for our study of the Iranian experience, the location of "national" in the multifaceted nature of identity and identity politics should not be ignored. Social scientists have presented different classifications of identity. One such classification draws upon the concepts of core identity (or cultural identity) and role identity (or social identities). Studying the question of identity in a plural society, A. Britain makes a distinction between core identity and role identities.[1] The former is an essential identity that will be defended strongly defended, while the latter is the character that an individual derives for himself as an occupant of a particular social position. A similar view is held by Fitzgerald,(1974) who makes a useful distinction in terms of a more or less "fixed identity," which involves a fairly exact equation of self with group and is the source of cultural identification; and a more "relative identity," which is less rigid and more situation- ally specific, implying a close congruence of the individual with his role. The former might be called cultural identity, the latter social identity. According to this categorization, a person can have as many social identities as he/she likes, but only one cultural identity. (Lian, 1982:44-45)

Drawing upon Britain and Fitzgerald, it can be argued that, although there have been many role or social identities based on religious, linguistic and tribal attachments in Iran, there have been core national or cultural identities around which all Iranians have been united. The important fact is that the existence of different social identities has not been in conflict with the core national identity. It was this fact that convinced Richard Cottam, in discussing the question of nationalism and tribes in Iran of 50 years ago, that "loyalty to the nation can exist along with a multitude of other loyalties and that to a tribe can be one of them."(Cottam, 1979:64) The history of Iran, especially during the last two centuries, has proved this crucial fact. However, less attention has been paid to the fact that in Iranian history, the core national and social identities, i.e., loyalty to religious, ethnic, tribal or political ties, have been co-existed in harmony rather than conflict.

National Identity Dynamic in Iran

It has been the core national identity that has manifested itself during historical conjunctures in the form of mass mobilization of all different religious and linguistic groups for a national cause, either defending Iran as a whole vis-à-vis external threats, or promoting the condition of the nation through internal political upheavals. To borrow from William Bloom, I call this condition of mass mobilization the national identity dynamic, "the potential for action which resides in a mass which share the same national identification."(Bloom, 1990:53-79) Referring to this kind of mobilization, one author calls it 'the regular pattern of multiethnic participation in major Iranian National events and causes' when

The various linguistic, religious or other groups that make up the Iranian nation-state have contributed significantly to promotion of common goals and aspirations. Whenever there has been a consensus on ultimate goals, the ethnic groups have taken joint action to bring about the collective good. (Kazemi, 1988:214). The first manifestation of such 'national identity dynamic' in Islamic Iran was the cross national resistance of Iranians to Arab dominance. Different national revolts broke out throughout Iran during the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates in the seventh and eighth centuries. The main centers of these national revolts were Khorasan in the eastern part of Iran, Azerbaijan in the northwest, and in Sistan (now called Sistan and Baluchistan) in the southeast. Abu Muslim Khorasani, whom some Arabs considered to be a Kurd,(Mordechai,1991:28 & Daniel1979:101-2) could lead many Iranians from all over Iran, in a coalition that defeated the Umayyads and brought to power the Abbasids, the followers of Ali the first Shi'i Imam.(Daniel,1979:70) Other Iranians like Beh'afarid (d.c.749), Al-Moqann'a (d. 778), and Babak Khuramdin were leaders of insurrections in the northeast (Khorasan)(Daniel,1979) and northwest (Azerbaijan) of Iran. The insurrection of Iranians in Sistan by Ya'qub Lays Saffari (or Ya'qub the Coppersmith) led to the establishment of the "Saffarids" (870-879), the first independent Iranian dynasty after the mid-seventh century Arab conquest.

The same cross-national mobilization occurred during the occupation of Iran by the Ottomans and the Russians after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722.(Foran, 1958:75-80) Nadir Quli Afshar, later Nadir Shah of Iran, the chief of a small group of tribal fighters mobilized other Iranian tribal and non-tribal groups, such as Qajars, Baluchis, Afghans, Bakhtiaris, Kurds, Azeris, and many Persian-speaking armed groups, to defeat both the Ottomans and Russians. Also in 1856, when British naval forces invaded southern Iran at Bushihr to make Iran withdraw from Herat in the eastern part of present-day Afghanistan (Barbara, 1971) (but then part of Iran), many non-Persian Iranian tribes, especially the Qashqai Turks, participated in the war against the British. (Fasai, 1972:319-335) Other examples of national identity dynamic have been the participation of all Iranians in the struggles against despotic rulers in the center. In the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905 and its aftermath,

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1. A. Britain, Meaning and Situations (Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 149-159.

non-Persian speaking Iranians like Azeris, and Armenians played leading roles.(Kasravi,1978) In 1951-53, most tribal groups demonstrated their support of Mohammad Mossadeq's nationalization of oil, the production and sale of which was controlled by the British, and his struggle against the shah.[1] In the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all Iranians, including tribal and non-tribal groups and non-Persian speaking regions such as Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, (Bruienssen, 1986:26&Ghasemlu, 1980:17) and Baluchistan (FBI, 1979:32) played active roles. The last manifestation of this dynamic of Iranian national identity and unity occurred during the late 1990s. Hoping to have a democratic and responsible government based on people's sovereignty in the domestic arena and Iranian national interests in the international milieu, almost all Iranians through ought the country participated in elections brought Muhammad Khatami and the reformist bloc to power. The main religious and linguistic minorities and tribal and non-tribal groups have participated not only to defend Iran whenever it was threatened by external enemies, but also they have been among the most ardent Iranian nationalists praising the glory of ancient Iran during the pre-Islamic empires of the Achaemenids (640-330 B.CC) and Sassanians (224-637 CE). Most of the famous early Iranian nationalists, namely Talib Zadeh (Talibov), Fath Ali Akhondzadeh (Akhondov), Rasul Zadeh, Hasan Taqi Zadeh, and Ahmad Kasravi, were from Azerbaijan. Talibov (1834-1913), one of the first elaborators of Iranian nationalism in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, lamented the disintegration of Iran in the nineteenth century and the way important parts of the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan were separated from Iran by imperial Russia and Britain.(Adamyyat,1984:79-93) While he lived long periods of his life in the Caucasus, he never lost his love for Iran nor his interests in its fate.(Afshar,1984:214-221)

Akhondzadeh was an admirer of ancient Iran and regarded the Arab conquest as a disaster.(Farman farmayan, 1968:141) His ideas were imitated by Iranians such as Mirza Agha Khan Kirmani,(Kedourie and Haim,- :64-93) who also promoted Iranian nationalism mainly in its pre-Islamic color. Muhammad Rasul Zadeh, like Talebov and Akhondov, viewed Iranian nationalism's ideal form to be pre-Islamic Iran. In his writings, published in Persian journals in the Caucasus and later in Soviet Azerbaijan, he tried to encourage Azeris not to forget their Iranian background. (Adameyyat, 1984:17-18)

Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1945), perhaps the most important promoter of Iranian national unity and identity, was preoccupied with proving the Iranian origins of Azerbaijani history and culture. According to Ervand Abrahamian, Kasravi was "the only intellectual who ever tried to tackle the problem of national integration in Iran.(Abrahamian,1980:101) Educated Iranians respected him for his nationalism, but outside of Iran, Kasravi acquired enemies, primarily because he challenged Pan-Turkist propaganda against Iranian Azerbaijan. In his famous work on Azerbaijan's language, he argued that the present Turkish language was brought into Azerbaijan in the eleventh century during the rule of the Seljuqs; before that, he claimed, Azerbaijan's language was Azeri, a local dialect of Persian. (Kasravi, 1976) This argument provoked pan-Turkist circles in the Middle East, particularly in Baku where he was considered as a traitor to the Turkish cause, to launch "a widespread campaign of insult and discredit" (Hunter,1993:25) against him.

In addition to Azeris, (Farzanfar, 1992)[2] other non-Persian speaking Iranians have supported Iranian nationalism. Many Kurdish politicians, like Karim Sanjabi and Daryush Foroohar, the leaders of National Front of Iran and The Party of the Iranian Nation[3] followed Mussadiq's nationalist ideas. (Cottam, 199-, 74) Some contemporary Iranian intellectuals, such as Muhammad Ghazi, are originally Kurd. Cottam pointed out that many Iranian Kurdish intellectuals chose Iranian over Kurdish nationalism because the attraction of Iranian history and culture remains strong for the Kurds. (ibid, 68) Muhammad Ghazi, for example, in the introduction to his Persian translation of Vassili Nikitine's book on the Kurds, rejected the author's idea of creating an independent Kurdistan comprising Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish and Syrian Kurdish territories, because he believed those territories, as a united Kurdistan, should become a province of Iran, as they had been during the Achaemenid (564-330 B.C E) and Sassanian (224-637 CE) empires. (Nikithine, 1987:15)

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1. Among other non-Persians, Azeri Turks, Kurds, and Qashqais had significant role. In fact, Mossadiq's National Front has been and is led after his death by Dr. Karim Saab an Iranian Kurd. One of his followers, Daryush Furoohar established "The Party of Iranian Nation" one of the most radical national movements during the Shah. Sanjabi and Furoohar became foreign minister and the minister of interior after the revolution of 1979.

2. Taqi Arani (1902-1940), Iranian Marxist whose colleagues founded the Tudeh Party after his death in prison, was another Azeri Turk who strongly rejected local Azeri nationalism, stressed on Iranian nationalism, believed in the Persian heritage of Iran, and considered Azerbaijan an integral part of Iran. See further Ramesh Farzanfar, "Ethnic Groups and the State: Azaris, Kurds and Baluch of Iran," ph. d. dissertation (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1992), 243; and Ervand Abrahamian, "Communism and Communalism in Iran: The Tudah and the Firgah-i Dimukrat," International Journal of Middle East Studies, 1, 4 (October 1970): 291-316.

3. Both parties still exist and belong to the nationalist opposition against the Islamic Republic.

Foundations of Iranian National Identity and Unity

The participation of different religious and linguistic groups in national movements and the contribution of non-Persian speaking Iranians to the cause of Iranian nationalism indicate that, contrary to some students of ethnicity and conflict, in Iran there has been unity within diversity based on the foundation of Iranian national identity. This case raises an important question: What factors have contributed a sense of Iranian-ness to these diverse groups? Most scholars of Iran cite several basic common factors that constitute Iranian national identity. For example, W.S. Enders presents three basic factors: 1) the abstract non-Muslim and non-Turco-Mongol principle of monarchy, which accepts the ruler being of any ethnic origins (provided that he meets the second two criteria) or dynasty; 2) a state culture with Persian as the literary and administrative language; and 3) a state religion which in Iran since the sixteenth century has been Shi'i Islam. (Ender, 1979:63) John Limbert sees Iranian identity in a similar way: Through centuries of political and social upheaval, four basic historical patterns have endured to preserve the Iranians' sense of national identity: 1- charismatic leadership, 2- a deep religious impulse, 3-concern with justice, and 4-acceptance of foreign ways adapted to Iranian tastes. The survival of these four historical traditions preserved the foundation of national identity through periods when strong outside forces made Iranians change the form of their nation's political and social life. (Limbert, 1987:45-52)

The three basic common elements in these two views, also reflected in other studies, have laid the foundations for a sense of unity and a national identity among different Iranian groups. These elements include: the Iranian political heritage, i.e. the institution of the state, its political history, mythology and land; the existence of a rich cultural heritage mainly manifested in Persian language and literature; and the omnipresent influence of religion. A more detailed discussion will clarify the complex phenomenon of national unity in Iranian context.

Iranian political heritage
The institutions of state and monarchy, Iran's political history, mythology and the land (the concept of *Iran zamin*) have played a very important role in maintaining Iranian independence and bringing together its different religious, linguistic, tribal and non-tribal groups under one political entity. References to these legacies have formed important parts of the Iran's long history, and have helped to create a historical consciousness in which all Iranians have the same sense of pride. As Richard Cottam pointed, There is much that divides the Iranian people, including linguistic differences and social incompatibilities; but the people's awareness of and tremendous pride in Iran's great history serve as strong cohesive forces to help counter the many divisive factors ... a description of its present humble position in the society of nations must be balanced by an account of its past imperial greatness under the Achemenid, Sassanid, and Safavid dynasties and under Nadir Shah ... not only are all of the various Persian-speaking provinces able to identify themselves with this single history, but Turkish-speaking Azerbaijan can think of itself as "one of the most important cradles of Iranian civilization"(Arani,1924:247-248)... even the separatist-minded Kurds consider themselves as descendants of people who historically have always been closely tied to the Iranians. (Cottam, 1979; 26-27)

The important fact is that the Iranian state and the monarchy have not been dominated by only one specific ethnic or local group. The state and monarchy were not ethnically based institutions, and the rulers could be of any ethnic origins or from any dynasty provided that they promoted Iran's culture, territorial integrity, and formal religion. (Wimbush, 1979:63) Thus from the arrival of Islam, the Iranian state and the monarchy have been in the hands of Arabs, Sistanis (Saffarids, who came from the region where Baluchis now are settled) Turks (Ghaznavids and Seljuks), Turcoman (Afshars), Lurs (Zand), Mongols (Il-khanids, and Taymurids), and Azeris (for several centuries, from Safavids to Qajars). Of these, only the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) was ethnically Persian.[1] However, all these rulers contributed to the promotion of Iran's culture, territorial integrity and its formal religion. All rulers of these dynasties considered themselves as the shah, *padishah* , or *shahanshah* (king of kings),[2] of Iran and all its peoples, regardless of their race, religion or local language. The prominent Islamic intellectual Ali Shariati viewed the principle of monarchy (*shahanshahi*) as a unifying force in the pre-Islamic era too. (Shariati, 1988; 316)

Given its long pre-Islamic experience, the existence of the state has been an important aspect of Iranian nationalism and the symbol of its independence in the Islamic era. Iran never has been a stateless society, and writers like Harit Krishna point out that the first centralized state in the world was founded in Achaemenid Iran during the

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1. Even Pahlavis were not pure Persians. The mother of Reza Shah was from Caucasus and so was one of his wives. None of the three wives of Muhammad Reza Shah were Persians: Fooziyeh was an Arab form Egypt, Sorraya was a Bakhtiyari and Farah Diba, the former Empress of Iran was originally an Azeri from Tabriz.

2. Shahanshah means the King of Kings, and only those rulers who ruled all Iranian territories were Shahanshah.

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reign of Cyrus the Great. (Deb, 1932:333-365) This ancient historical experience was continued, as an important element of the Iranian nation, into the Islamic era. As one contemporary theorist of state and nationalism points out:

The Iranian state is 2500 years old, second in antiquity only to the Chinese... In Iranian history, there was a great civilization, but it is the state that is the dominant feature. Though the life of the state was interrupted, first by Alexander, then by Arabs, the idea of the state--the Persian historical mythology--survived, and played its part in the emergence of the modern nation. (Watson, 199-:143-144)

In the context of the Middle East, Iran maintained its state institution up to the present time, and in this regard has a special position. Bernard Lewis points out that "before the First World War there were in effect only two-or, we might say, two-and-a-half-states in the Middle East. The two were the surviving monarchies of Turkey and Iran... the half is Egypt". (Lewis, 1980:15-17)   The institution of state and the principle of monarchy were considered the same up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Different Iranian tribal groups that were in fact autonomous socio-political organizations have had continuous relations with Iranian states, especially with the person of the shah, who considered them subjects of Iran. The existence of a strong state with a monarch at the centre facilitated the unity of different tribal groups. Whenever the state became weak, strong tribes mobilized to conquer the institution of the state and establish a new dynasty. In fact, the conflict of tribes with the state, especially up to the twentieth century, did not mean a trend for separation from Iran and creation of another state, but rather the goal was to defeat the existing ruler and replace him with a strong tribal leader as the new shah of Iran. In this way, tribal leaders competed, sometime successfully, against the existing state rulers, and this pattern, according to Lois Beck, was prevalent from A.D. 1000 until after the rise of the Qajars in the 1779. (Beck, 1980:214)

What made these tribal leaders compete for control of the state was the strong influence of Iranian culture and its pre-Islamic political legacy. In fact, the whole content of Firdowsi's epic *Shahnameh* is the history of Iranian states and monarchs, from semi-mythical ancient times to the tenth century. The enduring popularity of the *Shahnameh* throughout Iran and beyond is its evocation of the glorious days of Iran as a strong empire ruled by ideal, just monarchs.   The institution of monarchy, according to the religious traditions of pre-Islamic Iran, was considered to be a sacred and a divine one. As Fillipani-Roncini points out, Kingship and priesthood are thus considered to be the two fundamental poles of human society, and this tradition has been firmly maintained throughout the millennial history of Iran, notwithstanding the radical conversion of almost all Iranians from one religion to a quite different one, namely from Mazdaism to Islam. (Ronconi, 1978:55-56)

This tradition of sacred kingship was justified in Islamic Iran, by Sunni and particularly since the Safavi era by Shi'i ulema. The king was considered as "the shadow of the God" (*zill al-Allah*). In contrast with the prevalent attitudes of those post-revolutionary students of Iran and Islam who insist there was continuous conflict between Shi'i ulema and the state, historical evidence shows that the former, with few exceptions, have been , especially after Shi'ism became the state religion during the Safavid dynasty, the legitimizing forces behind the Shahs(Sheikholeslami,1986:227-256) Even during the early days of Reza Shah's rule, in the mid-1920s, when he wanted to declare Iran a republic as Kemal Ataturk had done in Turkey, it was the Shi'i ulema who rejected the idea and recommended instead that he become the new shah of Iran. (Bahar, 1977). The idea of the sacredness of kingship in both ancient and Islamic Iran as well as the historical continuation of the state as an institution had effects on the Iranian public. The tribal elites who wanted to become chiefs were aware of the attitudes toward monarchy and thus were looking to the shah to recognize them as the chief or Ilkhan of their tribe. Those tribal chiefs who defeated rivals and ruled large parts of Iran were considered to be shahs, a title bestowed on them by Muslim ulema in special ceremonies. While the presence of ulema signalled the legitimizing role of Islam, the new shah himself and the political elites expected the kingship to be exercised in the tradition of the great ancient Iranian kings.

Mas'udi, the Islamic historian of the tenth century, described how Mardavij, founder of the Ziarid dynasty (928-1042), after conquering most of northern and central Iran, was dubbed shah with a golden crown encrusted with jewels previously worn by the kings of old Iran, and he selected for himself the name of Khosrow Anoshirvan (Sassanian king, 531-588), who was called "the just." (Meynard, 1861:27) He stressed, "I shall restore the empire of Al-Ajam (as Arabs used to call Iran) and destroy the empire of the Arabs." (Wilbert, 1975:40) Shah Ismael (1500-1524), founder of the Safavi dynasty who came from Azerbaijan, also invoked the ancient tradition of kingship at the ceremony in Tabriz where he was crowned <u>Shahanshah</u> of Iran:

Today I came down to the earth: I am lord and king! Known as true that I am Haydar's son! [Haydar was the name of his father and a name for Imam Ali.]

I am Fereydoon, I am Khosrow, I am Jamshid [all Iranian kings before Islam], I am Rustam, son of Zal [Iranian mythic hero]. (Roconi, 1978:79-80)

Similarly, Ann Lambton described the ceremony at which the ulema, amirs, officials, and notables declared Nadir Afshar (a Sunni Turcoman from Khorasan) as the shah of Iran. When Nadir said that according to Iranian tradition he was not the son of a king, the ulema replied that" kingship is in hands of God and He gives the kingdom to whoever He wills and takes it from whoever He wills."(Lembton, 1977:113). The important point about the effective role of the ancient Iranian tradition of kingship and the historical support given to this institution by religion is that the existence of a shah in Iran was a factor of common allegiance of Iranians, especially tribal chiefs. According to Cottam, all important tribes--the Kurds, the Qashqa'is, the Lurs, the Bakhtiyaris, the Khamseh, the Shahsevan, the Baluch, and the Turkomen--recognized the suzerainty of the shah and his prerogative to name the tribal leadership.(cottam,1979:52) The institution of state-monarchy, thus, has been an important element for uniting different Iranian religious and linguistic groups. In fact, all tribal forces in Iran were aware of the necessity for a state, led by a shah, around whom there could be a sense of unity. (Foran, 1993:84) The ideal of power for Iranian tribal chiefs was not the establishment of power restricted to their territory but acquiring enough power to conquer the center and become the shah of Iran, the only way to have the allegiance of all other tribes and non-tribal Iranians. In this way, when a conqueror was able to found a dynasty, others supported him as the new shah. (Tapper, 71)[1]

Iranian cultural heritage

Iranian cultural heritage, as the main recorder and bearer of the memory of Iran's political heritage, i.e. the existence of the institution of state, the historical continuity, rich mythology, and the centrality of land (Iran *zamin*), has played an important role in giving a sense of being Iranian to different groups with diverse local dialects, languages and religious attachments. This cultural heritage has manifested itself in classical and modern works, both in prose and poetry, in the Persian language. The role of Iranian culture in the creation of a notion of national identity among different sections of Iranian society has been a unique and crucial factor of Iranian history. The Iranian culture, especially the Persian language and its rich literary heritage, enabled Iran to maintain its political independence, and prevented its assimilation, in contrast with other Islamic parts of the Middle East and North Africa, into the Arabic language and culture. But the Arab conquest was not the only foreign invasion from which Iran preserved its independence and cultural heritage. As Mehrdad Mashayekhi has argued, throughout history, Iran has witnessed waves of invasions from the outside. Thanks to the rich cultural heritage, Iranians have survived such devastating experiences and each time have adapted themselves to the new conditions while preserving some aspects of their ancient civilization, most notably the Persian language. (Mashayekhi, 1992:84) Thus, even though foreign conquerors ruled Iran for long periods, it was Iranian culture that ruled them. (Meskoob, 1992:49)

The main element of the cultural revival of Iran, particularly in its Islamic period, was Persian language and its extraordinary potential in literature and poetry. Richard Frye argues that Iranian literature occupies an especially stellar position in the minds and hearts of Iranians and familiarity with great Persian poets, such as Firdowsi, Hafiz, Sa'di, Rumi, and Nezami is not limited to the educated elements, for many Iranians who cannot sign their names can quote at length from this great literature. (Frye, 1953:22) An important point in the verse of many great Persian poest is contempt of factional, racial, religious, and linguistic divisions and heavy emphasis on universal human values. In the poems of Hafiz, Sa'di, and Rumi, among many others, this tendency finds its highest manifestations. (Hafez, 1988:143). Besides conveying universal values that made them popular for many religious and linguistic groups, Iranian literature, especially Persian poetry has played an important role in the revival of Iran as a political entity. In fact, it was the Persian poem with its literary richness and fascination that encouraged the first local Iranian anti-Caliphate dynasties, such as the Saffarids (in Sistan), the Bueeds (in Tabaristan) and the Samanids (in the Greater Khorasan), to support Persian poets and the writing of history in Persian rather than Arabic. Moreover, the revival of Persian literature and of pride in Iranian culture was promoted by the weakening of the Abbasid caliphate. This replacement of Arabic by Persian was not an easy task, given the dominant view of Arabic as the language of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, Muslim ulema legitimized this process. For example Abu Hanifa, an Iranian and founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, issued a *fatva* justifying the reading of some Qur'anic verses in Persian for the residents of Greater Khorasan. (Saket, 2002:122-123&Abu zohre, 1960:240-241) Other ulema in the early Islamic period (and later) quoted a Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) according to which the Prophet Muhammad said that Arabic and Persian are both languages of the residents of heaven. (Safa, 1978:101&Natel khanlari, 1995:16).

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[1]. Richard Tapper, "Introduction" in the Conflict of the State and Tribe in Iran and Afghanistan, P. 71.

With the continuous development of Persian literature, it perhaps was inevitable that it became intertwined with Iranian culture and thus played an important role in relating different religious and linguistic groups to each other and providing them a sense of national identity. Historically, many poets and scholars learned Persian as a second language but became among the most eloquent writers and poets of Persian. In fact, Persian was not only the language of the literature but also of writing history and education in all parts of Iran including Azerbaijan, Kurdistan[1] and Baluchistan. Beside the Persian language, other elements of Iranian culture, like national Iranian festivals and customs, especially the historical Iranian pre-Islamic celebrations are bases of national unity among all parts of Iranian society. The best example of such festivals is Now Ruz (new day), a 13-day observance of the New Year, which for more than 2,000 years begins at the precise moment of the annual spring equinox and has acquired many traditional rituals that are shared by all Iranians. The above discussion about the influence of Persian language and literature in the culture of all parts of Iran is in intended to counter the arguments of those students of ethnicity who contend that the present situation of Persian as the official language of Iran is as an indication of Persian chauvinism. (Beck, 1980:14020&Homayoonpur, 1982:382-94) What these arguments lack is historicity and historical insight. Having the Western theories of ethnicity and tribalism in mind, they focus on present situation and ignore the relationship of 'ethnic groups' with their past and the evolution of Iranian culture. Especially, they do not consider how all Iranian linguistic groups, including Azeri Turks, Kurds, and Baluchis have contributed to the spread and promotion of the Persian language. The lack of historical knowledge leads them to misunderstand or disregard how the Persian language became in the course of history the state and official language, or *lingua franca* of Iran. Moreover, the insistence of some twentieth century Iranian nationalists, whether Azeri, Persian or Kurd, to promote Persian as the formal language of Iran and their cautious attitude toward the use of local language in education, needs to be seen as a reaction to the systematic sate policies in Turkey and the former Soviet Azerbaijan to eradicate the influence of the Persian language, even to the extent of prohibiting the use of Persian for Iranian-owned schools and by Iranian immigrants living there. (Dehnavi, 2004)

The omnipresent role of religion

The essential role of religion in Iran has not been restricted to its Islamic era. Religion has been central in Iranian history and politics for at least two millennia. The Achaemenian kings (fifth and sixth century BCE), for example, associated themselves with the Iranian God Ahura Mazda and with the gods of their numerous subject peoples. The Sassanians (2nd-6th centuries CE) established Zoroastrianism as the state religion, and the Safavids (16th-18th centuries) did the same with Shi'i Islam. However, the role of religion in general and Islam in particular, in the promotion or the weakening of Iranian national identity has become a controversial issue in twentieth century Iranian politics. This controversy over the relation between religion and nationality, or between Islam and Iran has continued and even deepened since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. There have been two extreme views on this subject: an emphasis on the importance of Iranian national identity, particularly in its pre-Islamic notion, excluding any role for Islam; (Big deloo, 2001:43-50) and a stress on Iranian identity in its Islamic context, rejecting the role of ancient Iranian history, culture and traditions in the formation of Iranian identity. (Naqavi, 1986, 2002) To mediate these two extremist views, some intellectuals have embraced a position that emphasizes the role of both factors in the shaping of Iranian national identity. (Shariati, 1984 &naraghi, 1976:171-186) The third view seems more realistic, because there has been a mutual relationship between Iranian culture and the Islamic faith, especially Shi'ism. The controversy over the place of Islam in Iranian identity in the Twentieth century somehow stems from lack of consensus on the nature of Iranians' conversion to Islam. While some argue that Islam was imposed on Iranians by the use of force, others stresses on the voluntary conversion of all Iranians to Islam[2]. While there are some elements of truth in both perspectives, neither reflects the full picture of coming Islam into Iran. If we make a distinction between the emergences of Islam in the neighbouring lands south west of Iran during the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the later invasion of Iran by the Arab Muslim armies during rule of the second Caliph, Omar, in the mid-seventh century, part of the dilemma may be solved. The Iranians in the western border areas probably had become aware of the new religion and, not considering it a hostile phenomenon, were mostly attracted and converted to it. Moreover, the new popular spiritual message was not necessarily unfamiliar to the Iranians of the time, especially in the southwest. (Chatterji, 1972)

The problem arises when we disregard such an important distinction. Attributing and connecting the conversion of all Iranians to Islam to the Arab invasion has, as Ahmad Ashraf points out, distorted historical and social research about the cultural dynamism of Iran as a nation. (Ashraf, 2003:346) This distortion has made the research

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[1] It is interesting that the main sources for the history of the Kurds written by the Kurdish authors,including Sharafnameh, Sayrol Akraad, Hadigheye Naseriyeh, Tuhfeye Nasri, have been written in Persian language.

[2] Fath Ali Akhond Zade of the late ninetheenth century presented the first view and Ayatullah Murteza Mottahari in the mid twentieth century stressed on the second perspective.

on the development and the reasons for the Iranians' conversion to Islam complicated. Later developments in Islam (eight century CE), as the result of which the Umayyids made Islam an instrument of political dominance over conquered lands and followed a discriminatory policy toward non-Arabs, made Iranians to make a distinction between Arabs and Islam. Arab rulers such as Qutaibat ibn Muslim and Yazid ibn Mahlab pursued harsh and brutal policies for the forceful conversion of Zoroastrians to Islam in Khorasan and northern Iran. (Alkhatib, 1977:40) The resentment of Iranian Muslims at being treated as *mawalis* (essentially second-class citizens) (Dorraj, 1990) prompted many of them to participate in the Abbasid uprising that overthrew the Ummayyeds in 750. This revolt, according to one Islamic intellectual, "was for the revival of true Islam which was disregarded by Arabs, and for giving the Islamic state to the family of the Prophet. (Shariati, 1990:51-56)"

A careful study of the socio-political life in Islamic Iran reveals that the Islamic faith and the pre-Islamic Iranian cultural and political heritage have not been in conflict with each other. It is important to understand, on the one hand, how true Muslim believers recognized the importance of the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran and accepted the great contribution of Iran to Islam, and, on the other hand, how most nationalist oriented Iranians were Muslims and recognized the importance of Islam to Iran. It is also considerable how the inseparability of Iran from Islam, or vice versa, has been reflected in Iranian historiography. Despite all the problems emerging as the result of the instrumental use of Islam for political dominance in the Arab Caliphates of Umayid and Abbasid, The Iranians maintained Islam as an inspirational and spiritual part of their identity and played a central role in the rise of the Islamic civilization. It is not surprising that after several decades, Iran provided such important Islamic philosophers as Avicenna and al-Ghazzali, historians such as Tabari, statesman such as Nizam al-Molk the organizer of the Seljuk dynasty, refined "Arab" literati such as Hamadhani, grammarians such as Sibawayh, mathematics such as al-Khawrazmi, and encyclopaedic geniuses such as al-Biruni. (Rocconi, 1978 :69) It was by the help of Islam too that Iranians revived and maintained their pre-Islamic cultural legacy. Even the celebration of Now Ruz was accorded "Islamic" characteristics by such Muslim ulema as Majlesi, the great Shi'i theologian of the Safavi era, when he mentioned that Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, was born during Now Ruz, and the Prophet Muhammad appointed him as his successor on Now Ruz.[1] In this way, Islam gave a new momentum to Iranian identity, and "the tree of Iranian-ness grew on the earth of Persian language and in the climate of Islam." (maskoob, 1992:44) Thus, Islam became part of Iranian cultural heritage, an "Irano-Islamic identity" that served as a force for unification of Iran. This was specially the case after the Safavi dynasty used Shi'i Islam to create the first great central state in Islamic Iran.

Throughout the Islamic era, then, these two elements of Iranian unity, Iranian culture and Islam, have not been considered mutually exclusive or contradictory; rather they have been considered two sides of the same coin. For example, during the rule of Shah Abbas (1587-1628), the solar celebration of Now Ruz and the lunar observance of Ashura (the day Imam Hussein was martyred) coincided. Shah Abbas ordered the mourning for Hussein that day and celebrations for Now Ruz on the next day. A fanatical Muslim,as Ali Sahriati notes, would have disregarded Now Ruz, and a fanatical nationalist would have forgotten Ashura. (Shariati, 1988:72) Firdowsi, the composer of the Iranian national epic, the *Shahnameh*, was a Muslim believer and revived the Iranian ancient, pre-Islamic heritage in such a way that it was compatible with the spirit of Islam. (Pourjavadi, 1978:10) Shahnameh became so popular and cherished for Muslim Iraninas that some Arabs referred to it as "the Qur'an of Ajam." (Shirani, 1990:306). Ferdowsi was neither the first nor last scholar to reconcile Iranian pre-Islamic myths and legends with an Islamic view of history, thereby imparting a religious legitimacy to the former. This process was facilitated by the fact that under Islam the Zoroastrians of Iran were considered as people possessing a holy book, the Avesta., (Zanjani,1985) Consequently, in histories such as *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk* [History of prophets and the kings] (tabari,1985) by Tabari (d. 932) and *Mojmal al-tavarikh val-qesa* [Collection of histories and stories] of unknown authorship (ca. 1126), figures such as Zoroaster and Jamshid (mythic pre-Islamic Iranian shah) are identified with prophets such as Abraham and Soloman(Balaami,1988:47-51& Divari,2002). Such blending of Iranian mythologies with the Islamic heritage (Christenson, 1917:34 also is deeply rooted in Iranian popular culture. For example, Rustam, the mythical national hero of the *Shahnameh*, and Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, have been considered the two strongest and most sincere men in Iranian folklore. Thus, when Rustam with all his power could not defeat the invulnerable Esfandiyar, it was Ali who guided him in how to defeat his rival.[2]

These two elements of nationality and religion have been omnipresent throughout Iran since the advent of Islam, and most Iranian states have considered the importance of both for promoting national unity in Iranian society. Today the influence of these two elements is seen among Iran's main religious and linguistic Iranian groups, such as the Kurds, Azeris and Baluchis, many of whom have pre-Islamic Iranian names, Islamic names, or a blend of

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[1]. See Aeeynha-ye Now Ruzi [Mirrors of Now Ruz],

[2]. Thus, it is not surprising that many Iranians in the past gave the blended name of "Rustam Ali" to their sons to show their love for both Ali as a religious leader and Rustam as a national hero.

both. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the place of religion (mainly Islam) and nationality as the important factors of Iranian identity has become a controversial issue, with some Iranians stressing the role of the ancient Iranian legacy and history at the expense of Islam and others over-emphasizing the role of Islam as the only constitutive factor of Iranian identity. The basic cause of these mutually excluding attitudes has been their instrumental use to legitimize authoritarian political systems, Iran's ancient heritage by the second Pahlavi shah (1941-1979) and the Islamic faith by the Islamic Republic (1979-present). (Bashiriyeh, 2003:271-85)

Conclusion

By laying out the dynamics of the Iranian national identity and delineating elements of unification in Iran, especially in its Islamic era, this article raises a discursive challenge to the arguments of those students of identity, nationalism, ethnicity and tribalism who generalize the twentieth century's experiences of separatist and autonomist movements in Iran, and disregard the long history of socio-political harmony among such groups. I argued that three factors throughout Iranian history have played significant roles in creating a sense of national identity or Iranian-ness among all groups in Iranian society. These factors are the legacy of ancient Iran's political heritage, the central role of the Persian language in conveying the political, cultural and religious legacy to all Iranian religious and linguistic groups, and the important role of religion in the revival of Iran's cultural heritage, its independence, and unification. These three factors, in tandem, played a crucial role in the integration of Iranian society after the arrival of Islam. My argument, however, does not disregard the fact that contemporary Iran has experienced cases of political conflict in which some religious and linguistic groups have been involved. These experiences, which mostly have occurred after the mid-twentieth century, have encouraged students of ethnic conflict and tribal societies to apply the Western theories and approaches to ethnicity and identity to the case of Iran and consider it a conflict laden society, in which different ethnic and tribal groups have been in permanent conflict with the state and with each other. Such argumentation lacks historical insight; not only does it distorts the reality of Iranian society in the past, as discussed in this article, but also brings about inappropriate and insufficient explanations for the more recent cases of ethnic political mobilization in Iran.

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