Iranians' Identity:

Nationality, Ethnicity, Religion and State

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Nationalism

- **Nationalism** is a sense of identity with the nation
- While many states equal nations in some sense – nation-state--, there are many nations which are not fully sovereign states
- whereas a nation consists of a cultural community, a state is a political entity
- Nations are modern and constructed concept
- Nationalism is a political response to modernization

Hypotheses

1. Iranians' identity is characterized by nationality, religion, ethnicity, and the Persian language.

2. States have been the major players in the socioeconomic structure of Iran from the beginning up to 20th century, therefore, has coercively changed Iranian identity throughout its history.

Hypotheses (cont'd)

5. Various aspects of Iranians' identity have been used to mobilize populace against the state.

6. Iran did not become a nation-state until 20th century.

7. Unlike nation-states in democratic societies, the state in Iran does not fully represent the nation.

8. Religion cannot create a nation because religion is a transnational reality.

Theoretical Justification (TJ)

- A "nation" is an internal solidarity, and national identity is a mental construction of a nation using its cultural traditions.

- The three major components of collective identity are (1) common territory, (2) common language, and (3) community (psychology, morality, collective consciousness, including religion).

- Individual identity forms in one's conception of the "self" (social personality).

- Group identity is a response to: Who are we?

TJ Continued …

- The answer to these questions can be found through relations or interactions with others.

- Individuals and groups find similarities and differences in relation to others.

- The construction of identity arises from difference and similarity, from rejection of or imitation of "others."

- The relationship between "self" and "others" is a means of reifying the nation.

- The "self" is produced by difference and contrast. (J. Cole)

Historical Background: Ancient Iran (Territory = Kingdom)

- Under Cyrus and Darius, many languages and religions (ethnic groups) were tolerated, but the main language was Ancient Farsi, a branch of Avesta, and the dominant religion was Zoroastrianism during Sassanid.

- Iran has been a multi-tribal nation from the beginning, including when the Persians and Medes migrated to the area.

- The first empire was formed when the tribes that migrated to the Iranian plateau integrated with the indigenous people as well as the people of the occupied lands in the region.

Integration of State and Religion Before Islam

- Ancient Iran was under the "divine kingdom."
- The great God has delivered all lands into my hand, said Cyrus.
- By virtue of God's will I am the king, said Darius
- Moghs (clerics) were the dominant power in the Sassanid empire. Integration of religion and the state continued to exist throughout Iran's history.
- According to Firdowsi, king and religion were two parts in one body that ruled the nation. There was no kingdom without religion, and vice versa. He adds: they have been protectors of each other, as if they are under one tent

- نه بی دین بود پادشاهی به جای   نه بی تخت شاهی بود دین به پای
- تو گویی که در زیر یک چادرند   چنین پاسبانان یکد یگرند

The Role of Islam

- Islam produced monotheism, state, and nationality for tribal Arabs—and a divine justification for occupation of other nations, including Iran.

- The Arab invasion produced an identity crisis followed by resistance, submission, and humiliation.

- Iran as an empire could not be recreated as a nation based on religion.

After Islam:
Iranian Identity Through Religion

- Domination by Islam and the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet to the Persian language (New Farsi = Dari) were the keys to integration of ethnic and tribal groups into one nation.

- Ancient Farsi, a branch of Avesta close to Sanskrit, and Middle Farsi, which included Ashkani, Pahlavi, and Sasanian Pahlavi, were replaced by new Farsi (Dari) with the Arabic alphabet.

Integrated Identity of Turks, Arabs, and Iranians (Fars)

- The Iranian plateau was ruled by the Turks, by the Islamic Abbasid empire, by the Mongols, and by the Timurids, all of them non-Persian world empires based outside of Iran but incorporating the plateau into their realms using the Persian language and Islam as the means of unification and independence. (J. Cole)

- Firdowsi writes:

  - نژادی پدید آید اندر میان   زایران و از ترک و از تازیان
  - سخن ها به کردار بازی بود   نه دهقان، نه ترک و نه تازی بود
  - بجویند و دین اندر آرند پیش   زیان کسان از پی سود خویش

Continued …

- Today, many Iranians, including the Turks, consider themselves "Seyyed" (Sir, descendants of prophet Mohammad), and without doubt Arabs, Turks, and Iranians are culturally mixed. At the same time, the ethnic groups have kept their distinctive identities. The problem is that they have not all been integrated into the political system, which is an issue that remains critical and unresolved.

Shii-zation of Iran by Safavid (1501–1722)

- Shah Ismail Safavid declared Shiism as the state religion, uniting all of Iran after centuries of foreign and fragmented rule. It opened a new door for clerics in politics.

- The Safavid kings spread the Twlever Shii religion throughout Iran, which created a new independent kingdom.

- Shiism was successfully employed against the territorial aggression of the Sunni Ottoman Turks.

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- While religion led people to emotionally charged action to defend national territory, it is not easy to determine whether religion or nationality has priority in Iranian identity—each has played a different role in the psychology of the Iranian people.

- Both religion and nationality have been politicized in Iran.

Nationality and Religion

- Elements of nationality and religion such as the Quran and Shahnameh Firdowsi (The Book of Kings), religious rituals, and Norooz, Mosque, and historical tributes, including Persepolis, might be compared to provide understanding of the influence of each on society.

The Modern Concept of Nationality

- Whereas Safavid mobilized Iranians on religion in 16th and 17th centuries, the Qajar Dynasty (1795–1925) ruled on the basis of tribalism, with clerical endorsement.

- In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, secular intellectuals such as Akhoundzadeh, borrowing the modern concept of nationalism from the West, articulated the Iranian national identity by retrieving the ancient civilization and the Persian language.

- Persian-centered nationalism overlooks linguistic ethnic minorities.

Ethnic Identity

- Iran is a multi-ethnic/ -religion/ -language nation.

- Half of the population speaks Persian, and a fourth is Turkic in language and culture and 10% in various dialogues/ languages.

- Other ethnicities include Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baluch 2%, and Turkmen 2%.

- All linguistic minorities except Lurs live in the border regions neighboring their own counter-part ethnic groups. This makes states on both sides of the borders nervous, so they have been using military threat to keep them in.

- Ethnic groups have dual identities, but the centralized state has failed to recognize it.

The Persian-ization of Society by Reza Shah

- The Persianization of Iranian identity by Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah ignored the multi-ethnicity characteristics of Iran.

- Religious identity was underestimated by the state, and Western culture was adopted from the top by state order.

- De-Arabization of the culture and language was undertaken, with conceptualization of identity being grounded on Iranian linguistic heritage.

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- Secular intellectuals such as Zabih Behrooz and Yar Shater relied on an idealistic conception of nationhood that wrongly considered language as the hallmark of the community and the source of national identity that could restore a pure Iranian heritage. (Boroujerdi)

- Ultra Nationalist Iranians hold Islam responsible for Iran's lagging behind the West, and therefore they want to restore Iran's ancient civilization.

Nationalism As an Ideology and a Movement

Nationalism develops in response to three demands:

- To defend the homeland against external threat and domination (e.g., Iran against Britain during nationalization of the oil industry in 1951).

- To use national sentiments for development (e.g., Germany and Japan before and after WWII). Iran has not been able to do this.

- Both Germany and Japan went too far, they ended in national chauvinism and fascism.

Identity Crisis:
Growth of Political Islam

- Identity crisis occurs in a transitional period when people cannot define for themselves who they are because they are moving away from their existing cultural values to newly arrived standards.

- The Westernization of Iran after the oil boom in 1973 vs. traditionalism caused a cultural gap and a divided nation, which eventually led Iranian society into a serious identity crisis.

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- The "traditionalists" steeped in their religious values could not change to enjoy a lifestyle like those who were more affluent, educated, free to travel, and who "dated" and spent time with the opposite sex.

- People who spent their leisure time in restricted religious institutions rather than in theatres and coffee shops, at the beach, and in restaurants, as did the Westernized part of society, developed a hatred for the Shah's regime that symbolized the new culture.

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- In search of an alternative identity (neither East nor West), religious students and religious intellectuals were politically and ideologically inspired by their mentor Ali Shariati who was advocating a "return to Islamic roots".

- These people along with "traditionalists" became the army of the populist revolution in 1979.

Present Iran: Islamization of Society

- After the 1979 revolution, Iranian identity was forcefully shaped into Islamic identity.

- Khomeini declared, "The terms 'democratic' and 'national' are both for the deception of the people."

- The IRI set out to reverse the Persianization and Westernization of Iran, and to that end they changed the name of the National Majlis to the Islamic Majlis, proposed changing the "Persian Gulf" to the "Islamic Gulf," and systematically opposed Western values, which they labeled "cultural imperialism."

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- The IRI used religious emotions to mobilize the people in the war against Iraq to defend <u>not</u> the national land but the land of Islam. War created a new religious discourse in Iran serving the ruling power.

- When the sentiment for the war was over, and after the death of Khomeini, Rafsanjani, then president, employed a pragmatic approach to meet the needs of society; the shift from Islamism toward Iranism became evident.

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- However, the clerics discovered that they could not rule without using Islamic discourse. They tried to mix the religious and the secular, and Iranian society became split into two identities: religious and nationalistic.

- Today, the Ayatollahs have lost the hearts and minds of the people, but they still have a firm grip on the state power.

- At the same time, there is not yet any sign of a serious identity crisis in Iran

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- Khamenei, the supreme leader, has called this year "the year of wahdat Irani, ensejam-e Islami" (Iranian unity and Islamic consolidation). The IRI is showing signs of consolidation, but society is moving away from political Islam to a pragmatic national identity and non-state religion.

- The IRI simply cannot represent all Iranians, particularly the ethnic/linguistic groups.

Conclusions

Nationalism is not yet an ideological force for a movement and social change in Iran. In the age of globalization, nationalism is hard to form, because it works like a double-edged sward.

The Persian language is only one of the bases of national identity.

Identity is dynamic and a historical matter; therefore, it changes as the mental construction of people change.

Ethnic groups in Iran have not achieved their rights yet; therefore, they could develop ethnic nationalism as a political means of change.

Conclusions (cont'd)

In a time of globalization, a common history is not enough to hold a multi-ethnic society together. People have to meet their citizen's rights.

Three significant factors—common territory, common language, and community—exist among ethnic groups as motivations for their mobilization unless their demands are met.

Unmet cultural demands of ethnic groups could develop into political and territorial movements for regional self autonomy or even independent states.

Recommendations

- To preserve Iran as a nation, decentralization of power, democracy, and equal citizenship for all are required. Concerned people need to build civil society as a prerequisite.

- Elites (intellectual, academic, economic, industrial, military) have a particular responsibility in this.

References

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- Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Contesting Nationalist Constructions of Iranian Identity , *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East ,no. 12 (Spring 1998).*

- For detailed knowledge on theory of nations and nationalism see various sources –books and articles-- by: Max Weber, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, and John Hutchinson among others.