

Article

“God’s Favored Nation”: The New Religious Nationalism in Iran

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Abstract: A new religious nationalism has evolved in the Islamic Republic of Iran as a means to reconcile the contestation between the Persian ethnic (*Iraniyat*) and the Islamic (*Islamiyat*) elements, which has marked Iranian nationalism since its inception. The new synthesis identifies Shi’ism with Iran and associates Sunni Islam with Arab tribalism. It commends Iran’s pre-Islamic cultural attributes and highlights its contribution to Islam. Concurrently, it presents Shi’ism as key factor in the endurance of Iranian nationalism and the preservation of Iran’s independence. It culminates with the claim that the Iranians are “God’s favorite nation,” destined to lead the Muslim world.

Keywords: Iran; nationalism; Islam; Shi’ism; Persia

A major contested issue in Iranian nationalism has been the relative importance among three repertoires of symbols and ideas, which shape modern Iranian identity, namely the Persian ethnic-linguistic (*Iraniyat*), the territorial and the religious Islamic (*Islamiyat*) one. Various elite groups under the Qajars (1796–1925), the Pahlavis (1925–1979) and the Islamic Republic (1979–) highlighted the importance of each element as a means to enhance their legitimacy and power. While radical advocates of *Iraniyat* depicted Islam as alien to “true” Iranian identity, proponents of *Islamiyat* always accepted the existence of a primordial Iranian nation as a given, but had refrained from giving it any ideological and political value. All three discourses are closely linked with particular political systems that Iran has experienced in the past or experiences currently.¹ However, attempts by each political camp to focus exclusively on one element and exclude the other have failed, and often resulted in a popular backlash favoring the suppressed element.

Scholars have discussed the promotion in the Islamic Republic of Iran of nationalism that reconciles between *Iraniyat* and *Islamiyat*, but have not discussed some of its more important aspects in depth.² The purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyze these elements of the religious–nationalist formula that seemingly goes against entrenched Islamic principles, but in fact reflects the dynamism of religion. The article is based on a broad array of sources ranging from Iranian academic studies, through articles in websites dedicated to the propagation of religions and ending with newspapers articles aimed at the general public. In other words, the sources do not represent the views of a narrow group of intellectuals, but the discourse of the mainstream religious-political establishment.

The relations between nationalism and religion have ranged from sharp dichotomies to complete fusion in the form of religious nationalism.³ According to Anthony Smith, who follows the Durkheimian model, nationalism is a religion both in a substantive sense, in so far as it entails a quest for a kind of this-worldly collective salvation, and in a functional sense, in so far as it involves a “system of beliefs and practices that distinguishes the sacred from the profane and unites its adherents in a single moral

¹ (Kashani-Sabet 2002; Holliday 2007, p. 28).

² (Aghaie 2014; Ahmadi 2010; Hourcade 2017; Holliday 2011; Saleh and Worrall 2015).

³ For analyses of religious nationalisms, see (Spohn 2003; Rieffer 2003; Brubaker 2012; Smith 2000.)

community of the faithful.” Nations are defined through their sacred properties such as the notion of being a chosen people, group attachment to the sacred territory, collective memories of the nation’s spiritual heights in the “golden age,” and the cults of the “glorious dead.”⁴ As will be discussed below, most of these attributes apply to the contemporary Iranian case.

Joceline Cesari analyses the link between religion and nationalism as one manifestation of the politicization of religion in the modern period. She maintains that religion in nationhood “can be used as the foundation of identity for the majority group as well as for minorities.” Moreover, what is specific to Muslim countries is the combination of the nationalization of religion with cultural homogenization, which occurred when a particular denomination of Islam, Shi’ism in the Islamic Republic, has been absorbed into the state apparatus and granted a monopoly over society and public space. Equally important, contrary to the concept of Iraniyat, it serves as a unifying factor between the Persian-speaking majority and most ethnic minorities in promoting a more homogeneous Iranian identity. At the same time, such nationalism clearly excludes religious minorities, or the non-Shi’is in the Iranian case. Muslim nationalism thus becomes the collective identity innate to each individual, and submission to the new political system extends from this individualism. Muslim nationalism is not simply state use of Islam for political control. Rather, it is a trait of the psyche of citizens under the new political order.⁵

Barbara-Ann Rieffer’s definition of religious national movements applies in many ways to the Islamic Republic. In this case, the religious–nationalist idea adopts religious language and modes of religious communication, builds on the religious identity of a community, cloaks itself in religion and relies on the assistance of religious leaders and institutions to promote its cause. Furthermore, when a religious national movement is politically successful, often the religious beliefs will be institutionalized in laws or procedures governing the region. Religious nationalism tends to occur in a number of instances. It often occurs when the population of a territory is religiously homogeneous. In addition, when a religious group is situated in a territory that is surrounded by a different religious denomination, Shi’is surrounded by Sunni countries in the Iranian case, the perceived or actual threat from their neighbors can foster religious nationalism and can aid in mobilizing a group along religious national lines.⁶ Religious nationalism is not a new phenomenon, and it can be traced to the late 16th and early 17th centuries, when English and later British nationalism were dependent upon Protestantism, and reappeared in broad array of cases, from the partition of India and Pakistan to the Israeli Right in the middle of the 20th century. In Iran, too, the link between Persian ethnicity and Shi’ism goes back at least to the policies of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722). However, the present-day Iranian case contains modern nationalist elements as well.

Unlike other models of religious nationalism, e.g., the Jewish or Palestinian-Islamist, the Iranian one did not attribute religious sanctity to the territory of Iran, although the existence of two highly sacred Shi’i sites in Iran, Mashhad and Qom, which also serve as sites of pilgrimage serves as a supportive element. Rather it refers to “a nationalism that constructs the nation, its culture and its citizenry through Islamist symbols and concepts as the core constitutive elements.”⁷

The new discourse nationalizes Islam by closely linking Shi’ism with Iran and by associating Sunni Islam with Arab tribalism and chauvinism. It highlighted Iranian endorsement of Islam as reflecting the unique cultural qualities of the ancient Iranians and glorifies Iranian contribution to Islam. Its proponents present Islamic nationalism as the true authentic national ideology, since only thanks to Shi’ism could Iranian nationalism fully achieve true self-fulfillment and self-realization, thereby making Shi’ism a major marker of Iranian identity. The ultimate manifestation of this religious

⁴ (Smith 2001, p. 144; Smith 2003).

⁵ (Cesari 2018, pp. 13, 15; Cesari 2017, p. 31).

⁶ (Rieffer 2003, p. 225).

⁷ (Aghaie 2014, p. 182).

nationalism is the depiction of the Iranian nation as the “nation loved by God,” a euphemism for the “chosen people,” which is destined to lead the world of Islam.

1. Forging the Religious–Nationalist Synthesis

The new religious nationalism, in addition to its homogenizing force mentioned above, appeared as a response to the weakening of the religious ardor in Iranian society and the continued appeal of nationalism among all social strata, including the ruling clergy.⁸ While Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei inclined to elevate the Islamic aspect of the new nationalism, presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hasan Rouhani sought a more balanced approach.⁹ Former president Mahmoud Ahamadinezhad (2005–2013) promoted his own brand of religious nationalism that was rejected by the clerical establishment.¹⁰

Advocates of religious nationalism contended that the dichotomy between *Iraniyat* and *Islamiyat* was the product of Western-inspired modernity and was carried out by Western-oriented intellectuals.¹¹ In particular, it was the Pahlavi regime which promoted exclusive *Iraniyat* and downgraded Islam.¹² “The enemy,” supports radical *Iraniyat* in order to fight against the great gains in constructing the great Islamic civilization in Iran, the official Porseman website concluded. Contrary to the false *Iraniyat–Islamiyat* dichotomy, they argue the religious and national elements have been inseparable components of Iranian identity throughout history. Moreover, the close link to religion was a cardinal factor in ensuring the persistence of Iranian identity throughout history.¹³

Borrowing from the early 20th century nationalist and modernist terminology, the official Porseman website explains that Iranian national identity which has always stood on the principles of “honor/dignity (*ghayrat*), manliness (*mardanegi*), courage and self-sacrifice,” had never been distinct from its religious identity as all of these elements are authentic religious Islamic principles. The Iranians fused the powerful values of Iranian identity with the pure values of Islam thereby creating true religious national identity that is free of the false elements of ancient Iran and of the fanatic Arabism of the pre-Islamic era. The core and essence of Iranian identity is its Islamic identity that gives its meaning and significance.¹⁴

Contrary to the imposed construction of secular nationalism, Islamic nationalism was portrayed as one element within a broader indigenous modernization process that has been free of any influence of Western modernity. In addition, Islamic nationalism contained two crucial foundations: the material (state building and economic modernization) and the spiritual-moral Islamic element. The fusion of these two elements enabled Iran to withstand Western-dominated globalization, which eradicated local identities elsewhere.¹⁵

2. Nationalizing Shiism

A crucial element of the religious-national narrative sought to identify Shi‘i Islam as an integral and inseparable constituent of Iranian identity and history. The religious nationalist bond explains why Iranians converted from Zoroastrianism to Islam voluntarily, quicker, more thoroughly, and with greater passion and devotion than any other nation. A major point at stake in this context was approach towards Iran’s 7th century Arab-Muslim conquest. Was it a national humiliation, according to a nationalistic Iranian vantage point or Islamic liberation, which ended an oppressive Jahili system

⁸ (Shahi and Saleh 2015; Golkar 2018).

⁹ For Khamenei’s position, see (Holliday 2011, pp. 75–98). For Khatami’s views, see (Holliday 2010). For Rouhani’s views, see his, (Rouhani 2006).

¹⁰ (Fozi 2016; Ansari 2012, pp. 278–79).

¹¹ (Kamili Ardekani 2005; ILNA 2018; Khoorna 2019).

¹² (Shahramniya 2013, p. 203; Farjad 2006).

¹³ (Wikifeqh n.d.; RasaNews 2010; Moftakheri 2013, p. 96; Guruh ‘ulum Ijtimha’i Idara kul shahr Tehran 2012; IRNA 2017).

¹⁴ (Paygah-e Basirat 2009; Wikifeqh n.d.). For an analysis of these codes in modern intellectual discourse, see (Balslev 2017).

¹⁵ See for example, (Qazvini 2013, pp. 5–6; Taqavi 2007; Kamili Ardekani 2005; Imamjom azadeh Seyed Javad va-nadia Morad 2013).

and culture? A corollary issue was the charge by secularists, both in the past and under the Islamic Republic, that Islam had been an essentially Arab religion and was, therefore, alien to Iranian culture and history.¹⁶ The solution that the religious–nationalist narrative promoted distinguished between the corrupt oppressive Sassanid political and social system, as befitting a pre-Islamic Jahili regime, and the Iranian people, whose character and qualities were inherently and overwhelmingly positive.

The major argument is that the Iranians adopted Islam thanks to their pure nature, and the root cause for their attraction to the spiritually and morally superior as well as more egalitarian Islamic laws was their “morality and justice-centered spirit” and their “quest for freedom.”¹⁷ Hojjat al-Islam ‘Ali Yunesi, former Minister of Intelligence and special advisor to President Rouhani, went further and attributed Iran’s endorsement of Islam, and of Shi’ism in particular, to the fact that the “Iranian nation” had never worshipped fire (the Zoroastrian cult) or idols, but had been believers in one God (*yektaparast*) and inclined towards spirituality.¹⁸ Others pointed to the similarity of various values and ideas in Islam and pre-Islamic Persian culture, such as between Persian mourning ceremonies and the ‘Ashura commemorations, in explaining Iran’s rapid and deep Islamization.¹⁹ Among the major reasons for the Iranian conduct was the “innate characteristics” of their culture and disposition, that is the special “Iranian texture” and their “lively and vibrant” nature. The rationalist element in their culture enabled the Iranians to fully understand and grasp the rationalist and justice-centered essence of the Qu’ran, which stood in complete contradiction to the oppression and injustice of ancient Sassanian culture. Thus, they were able to enjoy the best of the two cultures, to discard the worst aspects of pre-Islamic Iranian culture and avoid those of the Umayyad-Abbasid Islam, particularly its Jahili-Arab aspects.²⁰

At the same time, in an effort to show the compatibility of Islam with authentic Iranian culture, Khamenei sought to popularize the Islamic headscarf by nationalizing it. He contended that prior to Islam only upper-class women in Iran adorned the Chador (a full-body-length cloak that covers the head, too), and that Islam democratized it by obliging all women to wear it. The Chador, he concluded, is “our national symbol and national garb,” before it became an Islamic hijab (headscarf), and it belongs to our people.²¹

Various writers backdated the conversion to Islam prior to the Arab conquest by claiming that the many Iranians who had resided in the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam already during the Prophet’s lifetime. In order to prove their point, they highlight Salman al-Farisi’s early conversion and loyalty to the Prophet as a manifestation of a broad Iranian endorsement of Islam. Others claim that since Sassanid Iran had controlled parts of Yemen during the Prophet’s lifetime then the conversion of Iranians there in responses to ‘Ali’s call applies to Iran as a whole.²²

Moreover, the unique qualities of the Iranian nation explain why it endorsed Shi’ism, that is “pure Muhammadan Islam” and the inseparable bond between Shi’ism and Iranianism. Most Iranian writers acknowledge that Shi’ism became the majority religion in Iran only under Safavid rule (1501–1722), but they insist that it had been much more prevalent early on contrary to the standard claim by Sunni chroniclers and Westernized historians. Moreover, even during the time when the Iranians were Sunnis, their Islam was spiritual and mystical, as opposed to Wahhabi Islam.²³

According to this self-congratulatory narrative, the Iranians, “being a smart people” with a history of civilization and culture found the true meaning and spirit of Islam in the Prophet’s family,

¹⁶ For such charges by early Iranian nationalists, see (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, pp. 50–51, 56–57).

¹⁷ (Tebyan 2010; Guruh ‘ulum Ijtimha’i Idara kul shahr Tehran 2012; Porseman.com 2016; Montazeri Moqadam 2019; Wikifeqh n.d.).

¹⁸ (Dana 2017); See similar assertions in (Hamshari 2012; Parsine 2012; Khoorna 2019).

¹⁹ (Bayat 1999).

²⁰ (Aftab News 2006c; Paygah-e Basirat 2009; Fars News 2013; Rasekhoon 2015; Nouruzi 2005; Lakza’i 2017; Moftakheri 2013, pp. 99, 105).

²¹ All statements cited in (Ganji 2018; Mashreq News 2011).

²² “Islam Iranian”.

²³ (Shia News 2014; Rasekhoon 2015; Lakza’i 2017); ISNA, 8 Mar 2015 cited in (Memri.org 2015).

and therefore rallied behind it early on. They were attracted to Imam 'Ali's style of just government, because he treated the Iranian converts to Islam as fully equal to the Arabs, in contrast to the discriminatory measures of his three predecessors, who believed in Arab racial superiority. Moreover, 'Ali and the Shi'i Imams opposed the manner in which Iran was conquered under the caliphs 'Umar and his successor 'Uthman, which was motivated by lust for domination and booty, and had the imprint of Jahili tribal bigotry. They wanted to prevent bloodshed and disseminate true Islam through peaceful propagation, and consequently appealed more to the Iranians.²⁴

This early and deep devotion to the Prophet's family distinguished the Iranians from the Arabs and the Turks. The Arabs endorsed Islam by name only, as they retained numerous Jahili practices and deviations and carried out all sorts inhuman activities in the name of Islam. By contrast, the Iranians were the only people who differentiated between "true Islam," meaning Shi'ism, that is a universal tolerant religion that emphasized God's unity, social justice and love of the Prophet's family, and the barbaric (*jahili*) thinking of pre-Islamic Arabism, which characterized Umayyad Islam.²⁵

While 'Umar (the ultimate evil ruler in Shi'i tradition) disparaged and mistreated the Iranians, Imam 'Ali and other Imams spoke Persian occasionally as an indication of the respect they had for Iranians and their culture. In particular, they praised the piety and conduct of the people of Qom and Khorasan (Mashhad), the two holy cities for the Shi'a in Iran.²⁶ Later on, since the Umayyads and Abbasids treated the Iranians as "second rate" Muslims, they were repudiated by the Iranians and had no impact on "Iranian national identity and national essence." By contrast, the Shi'i Imams became the "refuge of the oppressed," and their relations with the Iranians had been truly "Islamic and humane," and they "quenched" the Iranians' thirst for justice and equality. Moreover, once the Iranians accepted Islam, they looked for the best source to address intellectual and doctrinal challenges and found it in the Imams. In other words, unlike the crude Arabized Sunni Islam, the Iranians saw Shi'ism as the more advanced branch of Islam which corresponded to their thirst for the truth. It was this fusion between Iranian traits and the nature of Shi'ism, which laid the ground for the consolidation of Shi'ism in Iran, and from then on the Iranians supported every Shi'i dynasty that ruled that part of the world.²⁷

Thanks to their unique traits and unlike other peoples, the Iranians retained their own language and culture while equipping themselves with the weapons of Islam. Moreover, Iranians played a key role in various anti-Umayyad revolts, particularly that of Abu Muslim (that brought the Abbasids to power in 750), which broke out in support of the Prophet's family but also for the preservation of Iran.²⁸ Associating Sunni Islam with Arab tribalism, Hojjat al-Islam Khosro-panah lamented that what became known as Islam (meaning here Sunni Islam) was taken over by Caliphal Islam, and the spirit of Islam became a victim of the Arabized Caliphate, so much so that the term *Islamiyat* was associated with tribalism and Arab chauvinism.²⁹

These statements go further than the efforts by Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari prior the 1979 Revolution to reconcile *Iraniyat* and *Islamiyat*. Motahhari merely acknowledged the validity of pre-Islamic Persian identity or nationhood, but did not endow it with any moral and spiritual value. Conversely, the new narrative recognizes and stresses positive aspects in pre-Islamic Iranian culture. Such a view stands in sharp contrast with the prevalent position among Arab Islamists that regards the pre-Islamic period as the epitome of barbarity and ignorance, and demonstrates the power of *Iraniyat* even among Islamists. For the Arabs, the emergence of Islam marks their transformation into a proto-national collective and their elevation from disparate tribes to a great empire and civilization.

²⁴ (Fars News 2013); "Islam Iranian."

²⁵ (Lakza'i 2017; Aftab News 2006c, Shia News 2014a).

²⁶ (Anonymous 2007, Wikifeqh, n.d.a); "Islam Iranian."

²⁷ (Montazeri Moqadam 2019; Fars News 2013).

²⁸ (Khoorna 2019).

²⁹ (Paygah-e Basirat 2009).

For Iranians, pre-Islamic elements play a more important role in their culture and the glory of the pre-Islamic past is too great to be ignored.

The legitimization of pre-Islamic Iran peaked with President Ahmadinezhad's glorification of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, which aroused a heated debate inside Iran and received considerable attention by scholars outside it.³⁰ Yet, whereas Ahmadinezhad's activities aimed at defying the clerical establishment, the discourse discussed here enjoys clerical backing. Moreover, it portrayed Shi'i Islam as fully intertwined with and even as a marker of Iran. In conclusion, the new narrative maintained that Iranian culture made possible the rejection of the distorted Jahili Umayyad Islam and the endorsement of pure Shi'i Islam. The latter in its turn deeply influenced Iranian culture, much more than it influenced the Arabs who retained many of the Jahili practices.³¹

3. Islamizing Iranianism: The Celebration of Nouruz

A prime example of the religious–nationalist synthesis and the Islamization of Iranian culture is the concerted effort to link the popular national holiday of Nouruz, the first day of spring, with Shi'ism. The linkage was made most probably in order to justify the regime's acceptance of Nouruz not as a concession to popular un-Islamic culture, but as a matter of choice. It also aimed at conservative elements which resented the retention of a pagan holiday. Regime's spokesmen argued that the Prophet had never rejected local pre-Islamic traditions, if they had contained positive aspects. Similarly, Islam has always respected rational traditions that were compatible with human nature in the religions that had preceded it. In the case of Nouruz, though it has Zoroastrian origins, it is in fact a universal holiday celebrating nature and is, therefore, relevant to humanity as a whole and had roots in all divine religions. They praised Nouruz as a holiday that unites the family, the bastion of the Islamic community, and commended its contribution to national harmony and cohesion, which were always fully compatible with the correct Islamic worldview. They also took care to note that acceptance of Nouruz, did not mean condoning the popular holiday *Chaharshanbeh Soori*, which had overt pagan elements and was celebrated right before it as an act anti-government defiance.³²

Another approach sought to Islamize Nouruz and to endow it with a special Shi'i coloring both in order to legitimize it religiously but probably also in order to demonstrate Shi'ism's unique links to Iranian culture, similarly to the past Safavid practice. Proponents of this line cited traditions attributed to the sixth Shi'i Imam Ja'far al-Sadeq (d. 757) who described Nouruz as the day in which Allah signed a pact with humanity when Noah's ark reached a safe haven once the floods began to subside. More important, on Nouruz the angel Jibril (Gabriel) revealed himself to the Prophet, and years later it was the day when the Prophet ordered 'Ali to break the idols in the Ka'ba. It also coincided with the day of Ghadir Khum, when the Prophet designated 'Ali as his rightful successor. Therefore, on Nouruz the Zoroastrians used to give presents to 'Ali when he was Caliph, which he regarded as *jizya* (pol tax), thereby symbolizing the allegiance of the Persians, even the non-Muslims to 'Ali and the superiority of Islam over pre-Islamic Iran. Finally, and crowning its importance, Nouruz will be the day when the Mahdi will appear to redeem the Shia and humanity. Thanks to these attributes, Imam Ja'far regarded Nouruz as a religious holiday, recommending that the believers perform special ritual ablutions (*ghasl*) and four units (*rakat*) of prayer. Significantly, these writers underlined their resort to early Shi'i authorities, such as Muhammad bin Hasan Tusi (d. 460/1067) and Mohammad Baqer Majlisi (d. 1699) thereby refuting any potential charge of inventing a religious-national narrative for a current political purposes.³³

³⁰ See above note 9.

³¹ (Ramazan Nargesi 2008; Arabnezhad Zarandi 2017; Nouruzi 2005; Anonymous Wikifeqh n.d.).

³² (Mohammadi Ishtihardi 2017; Abna 2013; Tebyan 2015; Mehr News 2017; Shia News 2018).

³³ Hojjat al-Islam (Baqizadeh Pelami 2006; Mu'asasa-i tahqiqati hazrat vali 'asr 2012; Abna 2013; Tebyan 2017; Fazel Lankarani, Mohammad Javad n.d.; Mohammadi Ishtihardi 2017).

4. Iran's Leading Role in Islam

Alongside the elaboration of the blessings brought to Iran by embracing Shi'ism, two other parallel themes highlighted the special status and role of the Iranians in Islam. The first underscored the elevated status that God, the Prophet and the Shi'i Imams allotted to the Iranians as the future saviors of Islam, while the second emphasized the Iranians' exceptional contribution to Islamic culture and civilization.³⁴ Both themes reflected, sometimes explicitly, a sense of superiority and condescension vis à vis the Arabs of the early Islamic period, not just for turning against Imam 'Ali but as a people.

The Iranian writers could not ignore the facts that the Prophet was an Arab, that the Qur'an, God's eternal word, was given in Arabic and that the first Muslims had been Arabs. Therefore, they turned the Qur'an's language as a means to criticize if not mock the Arabs, and glorify the Iranians. According to *Kayhan* (which is affiliated with the Supreme Leader's office), the Arabs prior to the Prophet had been a "cruel and uncultured people" who lacked any awareness of written theology and laws, a people who had never seen a true prophet, and had been devoid of divine and heavenly faith and belief. The Qu'ran made it very clear that Arab mentality (*Ruhiyye*) was such, that had religion and the principles of Islam come down in any other language, the Arabs would not have accepted Islam. By contrast, Imam Ja'far al-Sadeq praised the Iranians for embracing Islam thanks to their supra-nationalist attributes.³⁵ In other words, the Iranians owing to their sophisticated culture and mentality could recognize the superiority of Islam and embraced it even though it came down in a language other than their own, whereas the less cultured Arabs could not.

Contrary to the Arabs, the Qu'ran and the Prophet recognized the Iranians as a "God-fearing people, courageous and firm in their belief and possessing God-given intelligence and aptitude," and praised their character traits as those of "the Party of God" (*Hizballah*). A major quality of the Iranians from the very beginning was their "*valayat*" (spiritual allegiance) to 'Ali and their readiness to give their lives and heart to him, a clear reference to most Arabs who had betrayed 'Ali. For these reasons, God regarded the Iranians as a victorious and proud nation. The Prophet also appreciated them as possessing a highly developed culture and civilizations, and occasionally conversed in Persian. Thus, while he praised Quraysh as the cream of the Arabs, he described the Persians as the cream of the non-Arab peoples.³⁶ To prove their point regarding the difference between Arabs and Iranians, the religious-nationalist advocates highlight the Qu'ranic passages, which admonished the Arabs for their conduct, particularly the fear that they would revert back to Jahili beliefs and practices following the Prophet's death. Most important was God's warning that "if you turn away, He will replace you with another people; then they will not be the likes of you." (Surat Muhammad:38, and al-Ma'ida:54-55, 67).³⁷ They cite traditions, accepted by both Sunni and Shi'i exegeses, that Prophet pointed to the Iranian as the people whom God would choose to replace the sinful Arabs.³⁸ The Iranian role is clarified by statements by the Prophet and subsequently the Shi'i Imams that should knowledge (*ilm*) be placed in the stars, a man from the land of Fars would bring it back.³⁹ In other words, the Iranians are the true guardians of Islam. Citing the Qu'ranic passages mentioned above *Kayhan* concluded that "it is here that the role of the Iranians and of the great nation of Iran becomes obvious, and it would transform the Prophet's anxieties to relief and delight."⁴⁰

The qualities of the Iranians are also manifested in their remarkable and exceptional contribution to Islam and Islamic civilization bringing it to the apex of its development.⁴¹ According to the official

³⁴ (Wikimedia Commons 2014; Velayati 2018; 'Arabnezhad Zarandi 2017).

³⁵ (Falakhzadeh 2010; Parsine 2012).

³⁶ (Tabnak 2012; Aftab News 2006d; Anonymous 2007); "Islam Iranian."

³⁷ (Abtahi 2004, p. 15; Aftab News 2006a; Shafi'i Mazanderani 2005).

³⁸ (Anonymous 2007; Qudsonline 2013; Shafi'i Mazanderani 2005; Falakhzadeh 2010; Purjavadi 2014).

³⁹ Various writers cite different versions of the same tradition, which replace the word knowledge (*ilm*) with faith (*iman*), or Islam, see (Ma'aref and Mir-Hoseyni 2011; Anonymous 2007; Tebyan 2010; Qudsonline 2013; Islamquest 2007; Falakhzadeh 2010).

⁴⁰ (Falakhzadeh 2010).

⁴¹ See for example, (Moftakheri 2013, pp. 108-9; Javan News 2011); "Aya ahamiyat dadan beh 'id nowruz bid'at nist?"

narrative, the Iranians dedicated their energy to Islam more than any other nation and demonstrated greater sincerity and devoutness to Islam than any other nation. Not only did they play a significant role in spreading and propagating Islam from its inception, but they were those who had composed most of the important works in Islamic culture. Even most of the Sunni religious texts as well as Arabic grammar books were written by Iranians.⁴² The Iranians adopted Islam, but they gave it a unique Iranian character, Moftakheri stated, while Hojrat al-Islam Mustafa Mohami, the Supreme Leader's representative in Sistan and Baluchistan, concluded that Iran has been the cradle of Islamic civilization.⁴³ Or in Yunesi's words, "everything that comes into Iran improves. When Islam reached Iran, it shed Arabism, racism, and nationalism, and Iran eventually received pure Islam."⁴⁴ This statement was not much different from the official Pahlavi narrative which claimed that the Arab conquerors had been deeply influenced by the more developed Iranian civilization, reflecting the strong hold of nationalist myths on all political trends.⁴⁵

Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, Ahmadinezhad's controversial chief of staff, expanded the idea of "Iranian exceptionalism" within Islam when he stated that "the land of Iran has always been the place where faith has appeared." However, he was not alone. According to Purjavadi, Iran has always been the land of the philosophers, the scholars and the mystics. The music of theosophy (*Irfan*) and rationalism was always heard in Iran reflecting unbreakable bond between love for Iran and faith. The Iranians, and by clear implications not the Arabs or other Muslims, were those who fully embraced the love of God with its deep spiritual and mystical dimensions. The Persian language by its special qualities is the language of the true love of God. The continuity between various Sassanid and Islamic practices is a sign of the inherent Iranian quest for justice that had existed even in pre-Islamic times rather than a symptom of the survival of Jahili practices as was the case with the Arabs. Indeed, unlike the Arabs, the Iranians thanks to "their ingenuity," did not confine Islam to a nationalistic framework, but gave priority to its global universal dimensions.⁴⁶

The conclusion that various writers deduce is obvious, the Iranians are the "nation loved by God" (*mellat-e mahbub-e khoda*), that is the "chosen people" of Islam. Nasrollah Purjavadi of Tehran University, for his part, interprets the Qur'anic passage "Allah will bring forth [in place of them] a people He will love and who will love Him" (Maida 54) as referring to the Iranians. The metaphysical religion of the Iranians is the religion of love, and through their mystical proclivities and love of the Prophet family the Iranians are the people who most truly and deeply love God, and therefore He in return loves them, he concluded.⁴⁷ Abdol-Ali Ali-Asgari, head of IRIB, Iran's Broadcasting Authority, went even further when he spoke of two "chosen" nations to which the Qu'ran and the Prophet referred, the Jews who had lost this status following their transgressions, and "the countrymen of Salman," the Persian. In other words, he added, the nation that would come and shoulder the heavy burden of truth and progress in this world are the Iranians.⁴⁸

As Anthony Smith has shown, the claim to be a chosen people is a common feature among many national movements. Nationalism confers on the members of the nation a sense of their own inward superiority vis à vis outsiders, in a manner analogous to religious myths of ethnic election. The idea of "chosen people," which dates to antiquity, has survived well into the modern era where, coupled with nationalist ideology, has transformed into contemporary concepts of national destiny and national mission. The myth of ethnic election is a powerful mechanism of social integration. It offers a sense of group superiority and promises collective and thus individual salvation. A nation is chosen on the condition that it observes certain moral, ritual, and legal codes, and only for as long as it continues

⁴² "Khidmat-e Iranyan beh Islam"; ([Aftab News 2006b](#); [IslamQuest 2014](#); [Khoorna 2019](#); [Lakza'i 2017](#)).

⁴³ ([Moftakheri 2013](#), p. 109; [Fars News 2018](#)).

⁴⁴ ([Moftakheri 2013](#), p. 93; [Memri.org 2015](#)).

⁴⁵ ([Shakibi 2013](#), p. 119).

⁴⁶ ([Purjavadi 2014](#); [Moftakheri 2013](#), p. 93; [Rasekhoon 2015](#)).

⁴⁷ ([Purjavadi 2014](#)).

⁴⁸ ([Memri.org 2019](#)).

to do so. The privilege of election is accorded only to those who are sanctified, whose lifestyle is an expression of sacred values.⁴⁹ In the Iranian case, being chosen is the outcome of the endorsement of the correct interpretation of Islam—that is of Shi'ism—and by their spirituality in practicing Islam.

Often, the notions of being chosen emerged among subordinated ethnic minorities as a means to ensure long-term survival in the midst of hardships. Such an element can be found in the traditional Shi'i self-perception as the elite (*khassa*) of the Islamic world compared to the Sunni plebs (*amma*). The modern case of Persian/Iranian ethnic pride is different. While the Shi'is are a minority in the Muslim world, and Iran is facing a larger Arab world, the claim comes from a position of strength projecting the self-image of the Islamic Republic as a regional power. The sense of missionary ethnic election in Smith's words, that links this Shi'i belief and Iranian identity can be found in Safavid elevation of the Iranians over other peoples.⁵⁰ Moreover, as Smith has observed, the idea of being a chosen people entails the motif of a religious and national destiny and mission, which at present serves Iran's claim for Islamic leadership.

The adoption of these motifs marks a change from the early period after the 1979 Revolution when the Iranian authorities showed a certain deference to the Arabs, when they elevated the status of Arabic in the Islamic Republic, and declared Arabic the "Holy language of Islam", compulsory in primary and secondary education.⁵¹ The promotion of the Iranians as the Islamic chosen people might have been a response to the traditional Islamic-Sunni approach, which highlights the central role of the Arabic language of the Prophet and of him being sent to the Arabs as an indicator of the important and implicitly senior status of the Arabs within Islam. Moreover, Salafi Islam, which served as a conduit to the emergence of Arab nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century, denounced Shi'ism as a distortion of true Islam and repudiated Persian influence on early Islam as responsible for its deviation from the true Islam of the righteous forefathers (*al-salaf al-salih*). The fusion of Persian ethnicity with Shi'ism as the foundation of the Iranian claim refutes the Salafi claim on both accounts.

Still, the Iranian claim of being the chosen people of Islam is not necessarily shared by Arab or Azerbaijani Shi'i communities. All Shi'is agree that they are the elite of Islam vis à vis the Sunnis and they share the same criticism of the early Arab Muslims who had abandoned Imam Ali and his descendants. Most Arab Shi'i political movements accept Iran's political leadership, but that does not mean that they accepted the ascendancy of the Iranian nation over the Arabs. Rivalry between Arab and Iranian clerics was rife in the Shi'i Shrine Cities of Iraq in the early 20th century.⁵² In the latter half of the century, the Shi'is of Iraq made great efforts to prove their Arab authenticity facing charges by Sunnis of being agents of Iran. Hence, they could not have welcomed the idea of Iranians being the "chosen people" of Islam at the expense of the Arabs.

Overall, the idea of a chosen people, in Anthony Smith's words, establishes clear borderlines between Us and Them, segregating "the chosen community from a profane and alien world. In the present-day Iranian case it serves a dual purpose. One, which may cater to popular feelings, elevates the Iranians above Sunni Arabs. The other, which serves the regime's ideological agenda, contrasts the Iranians and the West. Thus, it also serves as an engine of collective mobilization. At a time when the religious ardor of the population may be weakening national pride suffused with religious content may serve as a more powerful mobilizing force behind the regime, both against the West and against radical jihadi-Salafi Sunni organizations.⁵³

⁴⁹ (Smith 1999a, particularly p. 337; Smith 1999b, p. 130).

⁵⁰ (Nasr et al. 1989, pp. 19, 40).

⁵¹ (Paul 1999, pp. 209–10).

⁵² (Nakash 1994).

⁵³ (Smith 1999a, pp. 336–39).

5. Islam in the Service of Iranian Nationalism

A complementary motif to the emphasis on Iran's special status in Islam has been in the effort to highlight Islam's service to the Iranian nation throughout history, thereby transforming Islam to a means and the nation into the goal. In its turn, this effort points the need to bolster the weakening of religious enthusiasm by highlighting its service to nationalism. As there is no national identity without the formation of collective memory and history, the Islamic Republic exerted extensive effort to construct a meta-narrative of a unified Iranian history from the antiquity to the present,⁵⁴ in which Islam has been the key to national independence in the past as well.

According to this narrative, as Islam came to Iran it put an end to the religious and ideological splits in Iran and brought about unity, in particular it created unity and harmony among all ethnic groups. In addition, Islam played a key role in the revival of local culture under the various foreign dynasties that ruled the country. Moreover, Khamenei insisted that thanks to Islam Iran as a state and civilization reached unprecedented achievements in all scientific and cultural fields, and it succeeded in transforming the various dynasties and foreign conquerors that ruled it into Iranians.⁵⁵ More importantly, the introduction of Shi'ism as religion of state by the Safavids, played a key role in the formation of Iranian identity and the restoration of Iran as a unified country. Thus, the consolidation of Shi'ism in Iran ensured its independence and the full realization of its great potential.⁵⁶

In discussing the modern period, the new narrative presents the "oppressed Iranian nation," as fighting to maintain its political independence and religious identity against predatory Western colonialism. According to this narrative, Iran was the first target of British imperialism due to its geo-strategic position, but equally so because it was the bastion of true Islam, which was the most effective bulwark against imperialism. In this narrative various monarchs, particularly the secularist Pahlavis are portrayed as either voluntary or objective servants of Western imperialism, while the clergy are always presented not only as the true representatives of the people, but as the most genuine fighters to preserve Iran's independence and territorial integrity. While the clergy of course serve Islam first and foremost, they are also the flagbearers of true nationalism.

According to this narrative, the Islamic Revolution marks the peak of Iranian history. It was a patriotic and national movement in addition to being Islamic, since it expressed deep and widespread desire for full independence and the elimination of foreign domination. The Revolution has "saved Iran" from the political and economic enslavement by the West and enabled Iran to regain its true independence for the first time in 200 years.⁵⁷ Similarly, in his speech on the 40th anniversary of the Revolution, President Rouhani highlighted the Revolution's goal "to protect Iran." He contrasted the significant loss of territory that Iran endured under the Qajars with the victory over the 1981 Iraqi invasion, and declared "Today's mindset is an Islamic Iran and the youth of today will stand against the whole world according to their religious and national beliefs." He also pointed to Iran's impressive technological progress since 1979.⁵⁸ Indeed, an important element of this narrative is the stress on Iran's great achievements in a wide variety of scientific and technological fields since 1979, and their attribution to the Islamic Revolution.⁵⁹

No wonder, then, that imperialist enmity towards Iran increased following the Revolution, primarily due to the very essence of Islamic Iran as a vanguard in the struggle against exploitation, domination and humiliation of many nations by the great powers. Hence, ever since the Revolution, the enemies never ceased their machinations against the territory, identity, culture and interests of the "Iranian nation." The strategy of global arrogance against the "Iranian nation" includes economic and

⁵⁴ See, (Chehabi 2009).

⁵⁵ (Guruh 'ulum Ijtima'i Idara kul shahr Tehran 2012; Taghrib.com 2019; Khamenei 2011).

⁵⁶ (Reza'i 2016, p. 5).

⁵⁷ (Shahramniya 2013, pp. 197–217; Khamenei 2018).

⁵⁸ (Al-Monitor Staff 2019).

⁵⁹ See for example, (2019; Tehran Times 2019).

psychological warfare designed to weaken the nation's will power, and undermine its belief in the leadership, as well as to foil Iran's scientific progress, particularly the development of peaceful nuclear energy.⁶⁰ In addition to transforming the nuclear issue into the focus of national pride and a means of popular mobilization, this narrative also seeks to create complete identity between Iran's clerical leadership and national greatness. Undermining the clergy will therefore certainly weaken the nation.

6. Religious Nationalism and National Destiny

The depiction of the 1979 Revolution as the high point of Iranian history and nationalism, and the claim for being God's favored nation, converge into the claim for Iran's religious and national destiny to lead the Muslim world. As Anthony Smith observed, both religious myths and nationalist ideals, particularly the claim of ethnic election as a chosen people, enjoin a collective task or mission on a given population. Both require the designated communities to fulfill a special destiny.⁶¹ In the Iranian case, a dual mission and destiny emerge, leadership of the Muslim world and, subsequently, playing a key role in support of the future Mahdi when he will reappear and redeem humanity. The Iranian claim for leadership rests on its religious position as the only country that adheres to the correct and pure form of Islam, and on its qualities as a state and as a historical-cultural entity. This claim is implied in the Iranian constitution, which depicts the Supreme Leader as "*Vali amr al-Muslimin*" (Guardian of the Muslims) or in the official English translation "Supreme Leader of Muslims").

Khamenei was cautious and presented Iran only as a symbol of a successful Islamic system and as a model for other countries to follow voluntarily.⁶² Other officials were more forthright. In a speech given in 1995, Rouhani then head of the Center for Strategic Studies of the Expediency Council, stated that "The eminent leader of the Revolution, his eminence Ayatollah Khamenei, may his shadow extend, is the leader of the world of Islam today. This has nothing to do with whether we say so or not."⁶³ Twenty years later, General Qassem Suleimani, then commander of the Quds forces, boasted that thanks to the Islamic Revolution, "no country but Iran can currently claim leadership of the Islamic world." Iran has transformed from an isolated state under the Shah to the leadership role, because, unlike all other Muslim states, it "exclusively possesses two important attributes: supporting Islamic fighters and groups, and defending Muslims and Islam from attacks on them. These are the two important attributes that cement Iran's leadership in the world."⁶⁴

These ideas received doctrinal backing in the writings of Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and of the intellectual Mohammad Javad Larijani, who argued that a "state in which an Islamic system fully dominates, has a special status," and its leader should lead the entire Islamic nation. If such a state is ruled by Velayat-e Faqih, then his ordinances obligate every Muslim and all Muslims should swear allegiance to him." Larijani added that the election of the Supreme Leader of Iran must be made with the understanding that he is the leader of the entire Muslim nation.⁶⁵

Yunesi developed this idea to a future vision of Iran's grandeur. Speaking at a conference on history and nationalism in Iran, he highlighted "greater Iran," whose culture, civilization, religion and spirit stretched from the Chinese border in the east to the Persian Gulf in the West. Since its inception, Iran has had a "global dimension" as "it was born an empire," he stated. He assured his listeners (particularly outside Iran) that Iran does not want "to take over the world again," but that it should play a leading role in its sphere of influence in order to protect its interest. "We need to know what our status is and must arrive at historic self-awareness—that is, thinking globally but acting

⁶⁰ (Rasekhoon 2009; 2016).

⁶¹ (Smith 1999a, p. 337).

⁶² Khamenei speech in Paveh on 18 October 2011 Cited in (Aghaie 2014, pp. 188–89).

⁶³ (Radio Iran 1995).

⁶⁴ (Memri.org 2014).

⁶⁵ (Mesbah Yazdi 1996; Larijani 1996).

as Iranians. “We must try to once again spread the banner of Islamic-Iranian unity and peace in the region,” he concluded.⁶⁶

Iranian historical mission will culminate in their central role in aiding the Mahdi once he reappears sometime in the future to redeem humanity and his Shi'i followers. Shi'i apocalyptic literature elaborates on the future battles that the Mahdi will wage against the enemies of the Prophet's family. Significantly, these early traditions specified that he “will deal with the Arabs and Quraysh only by the sword.” His main supporters will be the non-Arabs, most of them Iranians.⁶⁷ The Mahdi for his part, expressed great interest in Iran as the bastion of support for the Shi'i cause.⁶⁸

Thus, the historical circle is closed. Unlike the Arabs, the Iranians had supported 'Ali and the Prophet's at the dawn of Islam and unlike the Arabs they will be the saviors of Islam at the end of history.

7. Conclusions

The religious nationalist synthesis emerged in Iran in response to the decline of religious ardor particularly among the youth, and the continued appeal of nationalism even among the clergy. Its main features have been the Islamization of Iranian nationalism when it insisted that the Iranians have embraced Islam, particularly Shi'ism, as it appealed strongly to their innate spirituality and aspiration of justice, thereby transforming Shi'ism into an integral and even the central component of Iranian identity. The religious nationalist bond explains why Iranians converted from Zoroastrianism to Islam voluntarily, quicker, more thoroughly, and with greater passion and devotion than any other nation. While this narrative identified Shi'ism the pure Muhammadan Islam with Iran, it branded Sunni Islam as a distorted Islam which preserved pre-Islamic Jahili fanatic and tribal Arab traits. When applied to the modern period, this narrative portrays the clergy as the flagbearers of true nationalism and as the nation's authentic leaders. The attribution of religious Shi'i meaning to the national holiday of Nouruz is another prominent manifestation of this effort.

The other important feature has been the nationalization of Islam, which conveyed the message that only thanks to Shi'ism could the Iranian nation preserve its independence and realize its potential and goals. The complimentary element was the emphasis on the exceptional contribution of Iranians to Islam, which brought Islamic civilization to its apex. While Iran elevated Islam, the 1979 Islamic Revolution is thus portrayed as the high point of Iranian nationalism.

Rogers Brubaker noted that particular religious traditions have shaped particular forms of nationalism.⁶⁹ In the Iranian case, the Shi'i motif of the righteous community fighting for justice against oppression had a major impact on Iranian self-perception of “the oppressed people and nation” through long periods of their history. Just as Islam delivered the Iranians from Sassanid oppression in antiquity, so did the Islamic Revolution salvage modern Iranians from the Pahlavi and American tyranny. In this regard, the Iranian Revolution is portrayed as the convergence and culmination of the religious and national struggles for salvation and as the peak of Shi'i and Iranian historical development until the advent of the Mahdi.

The new religious nationalism, like some Arab countries, serves as a homogenizing force to overcome ethnic cleavages. If, in Arab countries, a specific legal school serves as a national marker, in Iran it has been Shi'ism. It was also used as a force of popular and national mobilization against external enemies: colonial Algeria and the Palestinian struggle against Israel to cite two examples, and defiance against the West in the Iranian case. However, in some of the Arab cases, Jordanian and Palestinian, for example, religion served to reinforce a fledgling national consciousness. By contrast, in the Iranian

⁶⁶ (Memri.org 2015).

⁶⁷ Cited in (Nasr et al. 1989, pp. 19, 40; Majlisi 1983, p. 307; Shafi'i Mazanderani 2005; Al-Kurani 2006, pp. 31, 100; Naqi-pur 2015; Markaz Takhassosi Mahdaviyat 2011).

⁶⁸ (Wikifeqh n.d.).

⁶⁹ (Brubaker 2012, p. 6).

cases, nationalism already had powerful foundations, and religious nationalism developed as a means to mitigate its more radical secular Iranian aspects.

In a certain historical twist, the religious–nationalist narrative sought initially to mobilize nationalism in the service of Islam, but paradoxically turned Islam into an instrument in the service of Iranian nationalism.

At the same time, this nationalism contains two unusual or unexpected features for an Islamic system. The first is the recognition given to positive aspects in pre-Islamic Persian culture, which stands in sharp contrast to the position of Sunni-Arab Islamists movements which regard the Jahili period as an absolute anathema. The other feature is the undisguised sense of superiority vis à vis Arabs, both regarding the formative period of early Islam, but also to the utopian future, when the Iranians will play a key role in the victory of the awaited Mahdi, who will punish those Arabs who had betrayed the Prophet's family. The complementary elements of Islamized nationalism and nationalized Islam integrate together with the claim for Iran's natural and destined leadership of the Muslim world.

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