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The Rivalry Between Secular and Religious Nationalisms: On the Split in Iranian National Identity

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Introduction

This chapter is an exercise in interpreting Iran's modern history through the lens of nationalism. It demonstrates how the rivalry of secular and religious nationalisms have driven two revolutionary movements in the country, one in the early, the other in the late twentieth century. It is informed by lived experiences related by countless ordinary Iranians, as well as a range of writings and speeches by academics, journalists and political protagonists.

The rival claims to modern Iranian nationalism have drawn on two major cultural wellsprings (Lotfi 2004). While the secular nationalism of the 1905–1911 constitutional revolution dreamed of a glorious ancient pre-Islamic past, the religious nationalism of the 1978–1979 Islamic revolution was rooted in the magnificence of the Islamic heritage, and particularly its devotion to Shiite faith and culture. Whether in secular or

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religious guise, these nationalist ideologies were used by revolutionary leaders to legitimize post-revolutionary regimes.

The narratives peddled by these two forms of nationalism displayed what Clifford Geertz (1973: 225–310) referred to as the political resilience of ‘primordial bonds’. In Anthony Smith’s interpretation, these nationalisms fed on a collective history to shape a collective identity (Smith 2009: 26). Both offered triumphal narratives of national history that challenged the political status quo with a moral focus on creating a sense of collective belonging, security, dignity and authenticity. No matter how inaccurate, flawed or inventive these narratives were, they built upon selective political understandings of aspects of an ethnic or religious past (Smith 1996: 371–388).

I have used the term ‘secular nationalism’ to refer to the outcome of centuries of painful experimentation and innovation within the Christian tradition in Europe and the United States, a process whereby religion informed the separation of church and state and influenced in the evolution of modern national identities. The term ‘religious nationalism’, on the other hand, is used here to denote the political appropriation of religion in the postcolonial era in order to inspire a sense of native belonging in opposition to secular nationalism, seen as a vestige of earlier Western hegemony. Following Mark Juergensmeyer (1993: 1–2, 31), I view religious nationalism as the rival ideology of a political order which purports to provide national life with an underlying meaning.

I use the epithet ‘Islamist’ here to signify Muslim political activists who advocate the use of state power to enforce public and political conformity with Islamic principles. I also use the term ‘populism’ to denote political appeals to an aggrieved public consisting of exaggerated but unrealizable promises made in a bid to capture or retain political power.

The rest of this chapter consists of seven sections. Following the introductory remarks, I provide an account of secular nationalism as the main driver of the 1905 constitutional revolution. The third section demonstrates how secular nationalism was placed at the service of a modern state-building project under the Pahlavi monarchy but failed to create a modern nation characterized by grassroots loyalty to that state. The following three sections offer an account of the rise and consolidation of

religious nationalism in Iran in opposition to secular nationalism. The last section offers a discussion of the limitations of the incumbent religious nationalism in Iran.

Early Modern Iranian Nationalism and the Constitutional Revolution

The imagination of a modern nation emerged in Iranian social and political circles as a result of the encounter with modern imperial powers in the early nineteenth century under the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925). Iran's humiliating defeats in the Russo-Persian wars of 1804–1813 and 1826–1828, which led to the loss of vast and fertile Iranian territories in the Caucasus to Imperial Russia, led to the first attempts at military and political reform from within the Qajar royal court. The memory of these defeats, however, weighed heavily on the conscience of Iranian nationalists for generations to come.

Nationalist sentiments were set in motion in the writings of Iranian literati in the second half of the nineteenth century. These sentiments were characterized by a sense of resentment about national decline and a desire for a return to the glories of a bygone era of grandeur. Early modern Iranian nationalism was inspired by a strong sense of history rooted in collective memory (Akhavi 1997: 198–199). It linked the vivid imagination of a distinct and continuous ancient culture to national destiny through heroes and legends that were attributed the ability to stimulate a reversal of national decline. The founder of the ancient Achaemenian Empire, Cyrus the Great, was venerated as a hero who produced the first charter of human rights, liberated the Jews from the Babylonian captivity and laid the foundations of a world empire. Identification with the glories of the ancient Empire shaped a grand image of Iran that was in sharp contrast with its miserable present. The discoveries and writings of contemporary European orientalist, historians and archaeologists had sharpened the interest in ancient sources.

The sense of an ancient Iranian homeland was rooted primarily in a diverse population settled in a vast integrated territory that was believed

to have been the cradle of human civilization and the seat of the first world empire (Kapusinski 1988: 39). A homeland characterized by community and culture, Iran owed its continuity to the Persian language, which had bequeathed to Iranians of various ethnicities, religions and languages a rich corpus of epic, romantic and mystical poetry and prose (Katouzian 2000: 77, 327–328). In the writings of the literati, this sense of attachment to territory and culture was permeated by the ideals of the French Revolution and the primal sense of European romantic nationalism. The literati lamented Iran's diminished status vis-à-vis European powers. They contrasted the present deplorable condition of Iran with its glorious past on the one hand and with the developed nations of the present-day West on the other. Their writings stirred up national consciousness and provoked vigorous ideological debates, which set in motion a new trend of political thinking that anticipated secular nationalism and constitutionalism (Abdolmohammadi 2015). The concept of an Iranian nation was characterized by a romantic appeal, perhaps best described by Ernest Renan as a 'spiritual principle' (Renan 2018). To exploit Johann Gottfried Herder, Iranian romantic nationalists had been seeking for the nation's originality and authenticity from time immemorial (Herder 2016: 469–487). The romantic nationalists believed that reawakening Iran's 'primordial soul' would compel the modern Iranian nation to overcome its present weaknesses. However, the pride the early nationalist elite felt in the ancient empire of the sixth century BC was greatly diminished by the memory of the seventh-century Arab conquest. The nationalist literati blamed Iran's stagnation on religious obscurantism and political absolutism.

Strong nationalist sentiments set the stage for the 1905 constitutional revolution. The incompetence of the Qajar kings and the influence of imperial powers on the royal court had become a significant source of humiliation for many in Iranian society. The early twentieth-century nationalist leaders sought to check the power of the king and limit foreign influence. They called for constitutional recognition of the status of the inhabitants of Iran as 'citizens' of the nation, not as 'subjects' of the king (Keddie & Richard 1981).

The constitutionalist view of the ideal Iran was a 'progressive' one, characterized by national sovereignty, the rule of law and parliamentary

democracy. It envisioned a strong state that would place Iran on the path to catching up with its European peers. Western political ideas and institutions, and modern scientific and technological advances, played a decisive role in inspiring a modern revolutionary consciousness in Iran at the dawn of the twentieth century (Browne 2007; Wilber 1955: 81; Avery 1965: 106–139; Binder 1963; Sykes 1963: 395–397). The introduction of Western education by mission schools and the founding of a polytechnic institute and a school of political science in the nineteenth century had been particularly important in spreading modern scientific and political ideas (Ashraf 2007). Also significant was the introduction of printing presses and the increasing numbers of the Iranian elite who visited Europe on diplomatic missions and for education or business.

Although modern secular nationalism emerged as the most coherent political ideology in the constitutional revolution, popular religious beliefs made it imperative for secular intellectuals to find political allies among the Shiite clergy and traditional merchants of the bazaar. Demonstrations and political pressure led by this alliance forced the frail Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah to ratify the draft of a constitution and the convention of a national parliament in August 1906. The death of the Shah in January 1907 sparked in its turn a violent offensive against the constitution led by a coalition between royal despotism and religious zealotry, which was supported by Russia. However, a groundswell of an armed uprising in July 1909 re-established the constitution.

Ironically, the victory of constitutionalism split the constitutionalists into two opposing factions. In the parliamentary upheaval of 1910, the secular minority was effectively denounced as heretics, and many were forced into exile (Abrahamian 1979). Subsequently, the constitution was amended to include religious checks on legislation to ensure compliance with the Sharia.

The conflict weakened the constitutional government to the point that Iran's national sovereignty all but disappeared during the Great War (1914–1918). By 1920, the constitutional government had lost virtually all power outside the capital, with Russian and British forces exercising control over most of the Iranian provinces in the north and south through native proxies. The inability of the central government to maintain Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the crippling political discord in

the government, prompted almost all the main political and religious protagonists in the capital to concede the political rise of a military strongman. The 1921 coup by the commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade was mainly welcomed. Brigadier General Reza Khan promptly occupied Tehran and took command of all military forces. Like Napoleon, Reza Khan emerged as a strong ruler from the ashes of a revolution that had been incapacitated by its own internal squabbles. By abolishing an old-style despotism, the constitutional revolution had given rise to a modernist autocracy.

The Rise and Fall of Imperial Nationalism

Reza Shah rose from humble beginnings. He was born in a provincial village to a mother who had emigrated from Georgia as a child after the loss of Iranian territories in the Caucasus to Russia (Afkhani 2009: 4). He lost his father at an early age and joined the Russian-trained Persian Cossack Brigade in his teens. In 1918, he became the first Iranian commander of the Cossack Brigade (Nahai 2000: 180–181).

In 1921, having taken control of the capital as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Reza Khan set off to crush the insurgencies throughout the country. His triumphant return to Tehran in 1923 prompted the last Qajar king, Ahmad Shah, into permanent self-exile in Europe. In 1925, the Constituent Assembly deposed the Qajar dynasty officially and appointed Reza Khan the Shah and the founder of the new Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). Reza Shah ruled Iran with an iron fist, but he effectively implemented many of the aspirations of the constitutional revolution. His policies were guided by to the vision of recreating Iran as a modern territorial state.

Reza Shah founded such modern institutions as a standing army, a state bureaucracy, a modern education system and a modern judiciary. His reign saw the emergence of an educated urban middle class and the introduction of a national market, modern banking and modern industry (Bharier 1971: 171–172). His infrastructural development projects included the construction of roads, bridges and, more importantly, a trans-Iranian railway. He also founded the first Iranian university and

promoted new technologies of telephone and radio transmission. He made national conscription mandatory and enforced a standardized version of Persian as the state language. However, the Shah was intolerant of political, ethnic and religious dissent, muzzling the press and turning parliament into a rubber stamp. He went on to antagonize the clergy by introducing a European-style national dress code for men and, more crucially, by issuing a decree forcing Muslim women to unveil (Chehabi 1993: 209–229).

Reza Shah's nationalism engendered a modern state, which in its turn fostered nationalism. His secular brand of nationalism celebrated ancient Persia in official historiography, styles of architecture, the pomp and ceremony of coronation and archaeological excavations. He even adopted Pahlavi (the term that designated the ancient Persian language) as his family name. However, his modern state could not inspire a passionate national consciousness. His invocation of ancient traditions was instrumental, pursued only to the extent that it suited the state's purposes. To use Ernest Gellner's characterization of modern nationalism, Reza Shah's efforts were directed at drawing on traditions to crystallize Persian 'high culture' in the context of a modern social organization (Gellner 1983: 43–55).

Most of the Shah's efforts to be progressive were completed or conceived as long as he benefited from the contributions of the country's best and brightest minds, who had been forged in the ferment of the constitutional movement. In later years, however, his mistreatment and alienation of competent intellectuals, managers and technocrats encouraged sycophancy and corruption. Moreover, his fascination with the idea of Iran as an Aryan nation and his leaning towards Nazi Germany provided an excuse for the Allies to occupy Iran in 1941, which led to his forced abdication and exile.

The ousting of Reza Shah and the collapse of his army in the face of allied invasion was particularly humiliating. It was interpreted by critics of his heavy-handed rule as the failure of his modern state to produce a nation whose 'soul' this state would represent. Indeed, scenes of public jubilation upon his downfall were proof of Reza Shah's failure to build an enthusiastic and passionate nation willing to defend his modern state. He was succeeded by his eldest son, the Swiss-educated 22-year-old

Mohammad-Reza. The new Shah lacked his father's charisma and authority. The first decade of his reign saw the easing of censorship and a desire to revive parliamentary constitutionalism. An avalanche of newspapers and other printed materials expressed a stunning range of political points of view. This period of chaotic political openness led to the rise of a new brand of nationalism.

In 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddegh emerged as the champion of the movement to nationalize Iran's oil industry, representing a popular demand to take back control of Iran's oil reserves and revenues from the British (Takeyh 2019). Rather than appealing to ancient glories, Mossaddegh's patriotic rhetoric stressed national solidarity in the face of contemporary threats posed to national interests by British imperialism (Shahi 2009). His fiery speeches and his effective use of print media and the new medium of radio were crucial in mobilizing popular support for the nationalization movement.

Mossaddegh's confrontation with the British and his commitment to constitutionalism attracted the support of the liberal and socialist parties. Mossaddegh's opposition to despotism and colonialism also gained him popularity among the bazaar merchants and urban poor. Even the militant Shiite Islamists led by the influential Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani supported his cause. However, Mossaddegh's rising popularity and power and his liberal attitude towards communist agitation strained his alliance with the Islamists. The British, in their turn, sounded alarms with the Eisenhower administration about the rise of communism in Iran. Eventually, in August 1953, in a plot masterminded by the British and American secret services, and supported by the clergy, the royal army moved to overthrow Mossaddegh (Abrahamian 1993).

With Mossaddegh overthrown, the Shah consolidated his power with the army's support and resumed his father's autocratic style of modernization. In the early 1960s he introduced a progressive package of reforms at the behest of the Kennedy administration. By redistributing arable land from large landowners to smaller agricultural workers, he effectively abolished the old feudal system. He also introduced industrial relations reforms in the interest of workers, expanded tertiary education and crucially extended the right to vote to women.

The Shah's reforms were opposed by Shiite Islamists, now led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. By 1960, the 58-year-old Ayatollah was acclaimed as a prominent scholar in the seminary of Qom, the main intellectual centre of Shiite scholarship in Iran. However, he owed his wider popularity to his outspoken denunciations of Western influences under the Pahlavi monarchy, which he considered to be inimical to Islamic values. His Islamist opposition to the Shah's modernization policies was impregnated with assertive nationalist overtones.

In a speech in June 1963, which sparked a bloody riot in Tehran, Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the Shah's reforms as a sign of 'surrender to American pressure'. In October 1964, he denounced a bill to give legal immunity to American military advisors in Iran as 'capitulation' to the United States. In his criticism, which led to his exile, Khomeini denounced the bill as a 'smear' on 'Iran's grandeur' and as trampling upon its 'national honour'.

With religious opposition stifled, the Shah pressed on with his modernization policies. The avalanche of petrodollars in the early 1970s enabled extravagant spending on development projects, which entailed astonishing economic growth. More contentiously, he made expensive arms deals with the United States to create a world-class air force, leading to the conspicuous presence of American military advisors in Iran. Impervious to the potential renewal of religious opposition, the Shah actively espoused a secular nationalist ideology overlaid by pre-Islamic symbolism. He adopted the title of Arya-Mehr (the Sun of Aryans) and forged an imperial pedigree for his modern state. He went on to hold a lavish celebration of the 2500 years of the Persian monarchy and to change the Islamic Hijri calendar to an imperial calendar.

However, the fall in oil prices in the late 1970s caused an economic shock. The setback meant that the economic expectations raised following a period of rapid economic growth could not be met. The Shah's opponents exploited the economic setback to ridicule his ambition to turn Iran into 'the Japan of the Middle East'. His close military ties with the United States were used to accuse him of turning Iran into an American protectorate.

As would become clear, the Shah's momentous reforms did not inspire enthusiastic support for his imperial-style nationalism. The overthrow of Mossaddegh in 1953 and the perception that he was an American puppet had profoundly tarnished the Shah's political record in the public mind. Much to his disappointment, incipient nationalist sentiments inspired by religion provoked strong public resentment at the status quo. These sentiments were harnessed by the exiled Khomeini to inspire another religious uprising, which would bring down the monarchy in February 1979.

The Islamic revolution came as a shock to the Shah. While overestimating the popularity of his reforms, he had underestimated the deep roots of Shiism in defining national identity in Iran. The Shah's western-style modernization had never been the negotiated outcome of a mature political contest. It had thus failed to create a social class that would be prepared to guard it with passion.

The rapid pace of Western-style modernization in the 1970s provoked grassroots fears of the loss of Islamic identity. Shiite Islamists exploited these fears to trigger a religious revival. They shrewdly sensed the lack of public enthusiasm for top-down secular modernization and instead stirred up deeply felt religious emotions that generated nationalist passions in support of an Islamic revolution. Had the Shah tolerated a loyal secular opposition critical of the royal autocracy, but supportive of the main trend of progress, an ideological buffer could have taken shape to confront the totalitarian momentum of a religious nationalist zeal.

Nationalist ideologues played a significant role in invoking and inventing traditions to shape and diffuse a nationalist ideology (Anderson 1991), but the sacrifices needed to promote that ideology were inconceivable without a consecrated cause (Connor 1994). In the secular nationalism of the Pahlavi monarchy the banishment of religion from the political sphere was considered essential to Iran's modernization. Religious nationalism, on the other hand, came to represent the return of religion to public and political life. Shiite Islam demonstrated the capacity to engender grassroots national consciousness within a modern society.

Religious Nationalism Inspiring an Islamic Revolution

The vast majority of the Iranian population identified themselves as Muslims. Of these, an overwhelming majority identified themselves with Twelver Shiism as the true interpretation of Islam. The religious revival of the 1970s aroused a religious sense of nationalism. With deep roots in the cultural self-understanding of Shiite believers, this religious nationalism rivalled the state's secular nationalism. A sense of being oppressed, a perception that oppression must be opposed to the point of embracing martyrdom and a deeply held hope for the emergence of a Saviour had shaped this cultural self-understanding. These notions had been kept alive for centuries in everyday life by grassroots religious networks, familiar religious symbols and regular religious rituals.

The Shiite sense of being oppressed (*mazlumiyya*) was rooted in the belief that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and his 11 descendants, through the lineage of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, enjoyed a divine right to the political and spiritual leadership of the Muslim community, but that their right to succession had been violently usurped by tyrannical Sunni caliphs. The notion of martyrdom (*shahada*) for a sacred cause was inspired by the legend of the Shiite hero, Hussein ibn Ali, who challenged Umayyad Caliph Yazid, but was slain along with his small band of followers at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. As for the expectation of the coming of a Shiite Messiah (*intezar-e faraj*), this was rooted in the faith in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad ibn Hassan, in 874 and the expectation of his return as the promised Mahdi (the Guided One), an eschatological redeemer who would rid the world of evil and institute an era of peace and justice.

A modern Shiite version of nationalism was indebted to the success of the Safavid dynasty to turn Iran into a bastion of Shiism some five centuries earlier. By proclaiming Twelver Shiism as state religion, the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) had played a foundational role in making Shiism a rival ideology of nationalism in modern Iran (Savory 2007).

In 1501, after the Ottomans had outlawed Shiism in their domains, the Safavid founder Ismael declared independence and laid the

foundations of a powerful Shiite Empire in Iran. The adoption of Shiism as the state religion was meant to distinguish Safavid Iran from the arch-rival Ottoman state, whose Sultans were associated with mainstream Sunni Islam. Rivalry with the Ottomans prompted the Safavids to create a more cohesive Iranian identity based on the claim that Shiism represented the more genuine version of Islam. The severe policy of mass conversion to Shiism in Iran, where most of the population was still Sunni, was integral to achieving ideological conformity and building mass loyalty to a Shiite state.

The Safavids' thorough and often brutal conversion campaign permanently transformed Iran's religious landscape, providing the impetus for Iran's cultural unification and a sense of Iranian exceptionalism. While marginalizing or repressing other religious and cultural persuasions, the Safavids offered state patronage for the development of Shiite shrines and recruited Shiite scholars to disseminate the Twelver doctrine. In time, Shiite theologians acquired social and political influence by providing religious legitimacy for the Safavid Shahs. In exchange, the Shahs provided the clergy with economic and ideological power (Keddie 1969). They were given control over religious taxes and endowments, and served as judges and educators.

The Shiite clergy consolidated their influence further under the Qajar dynasty. Indeed, the Qajar Shahs actively engaged the clergy in a process of reciprocal legitimacy, and even allowed their involvement in political decision-making. Their reliance on religious taxes and endowments secured the clergy financial independence from the state and laid the foundations of an enduring political alliance with wealthy donors among the merchants of the bazaar. Shiite nationalism proper, which was developed in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s by intellectuals like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ali Shariati, built on the self-perception of Iranians as having defended Shiism against a sea of surrounding Sunni neighbours for nearly five centuries.

In the 1960s Al-e-Ahmad, an author, activist and public intellectual, put forward the notion that Shiite Islam was fundamental to Iranian identity. His 1962 essay, *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication), offered a cultural critique of Westernization in Iran that characterized 'enchantment by the West' as a 'contagious disease' that would alienate Iranians from their

native culture (Al-e-Ahmad 1981). In 1963, he visited Israel and, in his account of the visit, reflected positively on the fusion of the religious and the secular in Israel, speculating that it could be a potential model for Iran (Al-e-Ahmad 2017). His pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 was a captivating journey for the sceptic Al-e-Ahmad (Al-e-Ahmad 1985). It would make the former communist sympathetic to the need for a religious transformation of Iranian politics, with the Shiite clergy viewed as the guardians of native traditions against Western imperialism (Al-e-Ahmad 1980).

In the early 1970s, Ali Shariati, a French-educated Iranian sociologist and public intellectual, emerged as the champion of a liberationist reading of Shiism (Rahnema 1998: 35). Influenced by the anti-colonialist thinking of the Algerian National Liberation Front during his time in France in the early 1960s, he had translated an anthology of Frantz Fanon into Persian. Unlike Fanon, however, he believed that religion was essential in the struggle for national liberation. Shariati came to define Iranian nationality in terms of Shiite culture. He viewed Shiism as the glue of Iran's social cohesion and as the nexus of the nation's past, present and future (Shariati 1971, 1972). His religiosity was akin to the Catholic Liberation Theology of Latin America. Like Al-e-Ahmad, Shariati criticized fascination with the West and the resulting cultural alienation. Instead, he called for a 'return to self'. He was also critical of Shiite orthodoxy's passive interpretation of Shiite eschatology. Instead, he urged his audience not merely to await the return of the Mahdi, but to work actively to hasten his return by fighting for social justice.

The syncretic collective identity that the religious nationalist ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s tried to define for Iranians by combining Islamic and Iranian elements was not always consonant. While a few tended to prioritize the Iranian element, other, more zealous ideologues elevated Islam as the core content of contemporary Iranian national identity. One could debate whether intellectuals like Al-e-Ahmad and Shariati were religious nationalist ideologues, or secular thinkers who used religious idioms to appeal to the religious masses. Nevertheless, in the 1970s their radical readings of Shiism and their critiques of hegemonic Westernization armed educated young people from religious backgrounds with a religious ideology of national liberation.

By the late 1970s, politicized Shiism had crystalized into a uniquely religious nationalist ideology that promoted Shiite culture as essential to national liberation. Depicting the anti-monarchical movement as a religiously inspired national liberation movement was instrumental not only in challenging the legitimacy of the incumbent regime, but also in bringing secular dissidents under religious control.

While the influence of the clergy over the more conservative classes was crucial, the Islamic revolution might not have achieved victory in the name of the nation if it had not managed to attract the support of the modern educated middle classes. The Islamists' recruitment of middle-class intellectuals, managers, technocrats, industrial workers and most crucially women—precisely those social groups that had benefited most from the modernization policies of the Pahlavi monarchy—enabled them to broaden the appeal of their agitation against Pahlavi modernization. The modern middle class sought political participation, but the Shah had blocked all avenues to independent political activity. This impasse channelled all political activism into religious networks that had grass-roots links.

The recruitment of the urban poor and uprooted provincial and rural migrants was also crucial to the victory of the revolution. The economic downturn in the late 1970s had turned the lives of these marginal populations into a daily struggle for survival. They packed religious congregations in lower-class neighbourhoods to hear radical clergy criticize the monarchy's corruption and tyranny. They lacked sophisticated political consciousness, but their savvy 'street politics' and their traditional upbringing made them qualified to serve as the foot soldiers of the Islamic revolution (Bayat 1998).

The radical interpretation of *intezar-e faraj* provided the 1979 revolution with the aura of an eschatological movement that created an expectation of the imminent return of the Saviour. To cite Eric Voegelin, the Islamic revolutionary zealots set about 'immanentizing the eschaton' (Voegelin 1952). By compelling the faithful to rise up against the ruling tyrant in order to hasten the return of the Mahdi, the activist interpretation of the Shiite concept of *intezar* provoked a major disruption in the quietist Shiite orthodoxy.

Shiite nationalism therefore held out a promise to each and every walk of life. It inspired the faithful with a spirited hope for imminent redemption, attracted the support of the modern middle class with the promise of political freedom and mobilized the urban poor with the prospect of more prosperous lives. With religious networks serving as platforms to recruit from all walks of life, Shiite nationalism emerged as the most natural language through which Iranians could enter the sphere of public politics.

The portrayal of the insurrection against the incumbent regime as both a religious and a national duty gradually shaped an alternative sense of the nation inspired by political religion. Emerging as the undisputed leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini did not claim to be the Mahdi, but he accepted the title of the Mahdi's viceroy. Khomeini branded the Shah as *taghut*, which in Islamic theology connoted tyrants who rebel against God. He used the term to denote the Shah as a tyrant in league with arrogant imperialist powers. The exit of the disappointed Shah from the country and the disintegration of his advanced and expensive armed forces in the face of hostile mass demonstrations were interpreted as proof of the feebleness of imperial nationalist claims of Aryan racial origins versus the power of the religious spirit of the nation.

Shiite Nationalism in State Power

For decades, Iranian Islamists had sought to wrest the 'Muslim nation of Iran' out of the control of secular rulers in order to wind back westernizing assimilation and reinstate Islamic values (Friedland 2002: 381–425). The 1979 revolution provided Shiite Islamist zealots with an opportunity to make their dreams come true. It catapulted them to the leadership of the first openly religious state in a modern, rich and resourceful country with a vast territory and large geopolitical significance. Shiite nationalism figured powerfully not only in the revolutionary revitalization of the nation, but also as the recipe for thwarting secular efforts to strip the Iranian state of its religious content. Khomeini's notion of the 'Muslim nation of Iran' served as a rallying cry for the project of founding an Islamic state. It promised to bridge the divergence of culture and polity

by combating the ‘corrupting’ and ‘degenerative’ influences of Western modernity.

A conception of Shiite Islam as the core of Iranian national identity was implicit in the revolution’s political ideology thanks to the religious nationalist ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s. Khomeini skilfully incorporated what he found useful in the ideas of these ideologues to fashion his own religious version of nationalist ideology. Building a Shiite state and confronting Western modernity were two essential elements of Khomeini’s Shiite nationalism. Echoing Al-e Ahmad, he warned against the penetration of ‘poisonous’ Western culture into Muslim nations, and he set out to build an Islamic state that would instil Shiism as the centrepiece of Iranian national identity.

Critics, mostly from the ranks of secular nationalist activists, leftist intellectuals and even some social scientists, dismiss the idea of Khomeini as a nationalist leader due particularly to his open denunciation of nationalism as contradictory to Islam following the seizure of political power. Indeed, Khomeini dismissed nationalism and instead appealed to the worldwide community of Muslims (*umma*). But a closer scrutiny suggests that he did this to highlight the global aspirations of political Islam. Khomeini’s initial animus towards nationalism was, in truth, a political strategy to retain power in the face of the challenges posed by rival secular nationalisms from both left and right. Once these rival ideologies had been crushed, the Ayatollah would emerge as a champion of Shiite nationalism.

Khomeini’s vision of Iran as a Shiite nation was explicitly articulated in his ambition to turn Iran into the hub of a global revival of Islam. He envisioned Shiite nationalism as a means to turn Iran into Islamic *umm al-qura*’ (mother of all cities) in a clear challenge to Iran’s Wahhabi arch-rival Saudi Arabia. In his brand of nationalism, the Iranian nation appeared as a chosen people with a strong commitment to ‘sacred history’ and ‘divine duty’ (Litvak 2020). Khomeini’s religious nationalism was rooted in the notion that Iran was uniquely qualified as a nation to pave the way for the emergence of the Mahdi and to serve as the pivot for his ‘virtuous rule’. Since ‘the rule of the virtuous’ was in the process of being established in Iran, Iran had become the ‘redeemer nation’ (Ramazani 1989: 202–217).

Secular nationalists failed to grasp the significance of religious nationalism as a driving force of the 1979 revolution and a pillar of the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state. This failure stemmed from their devotion to the idea that religion was bound to decline as a political force. As Michael Walzer has shown in the cases of India, Israel and Algeria, in Iran too secular nationalist leaders were overly invested in the idea that the 'scientific outlook' was destined to relegate religion to 'the dustbin of history' (Walzer 2015: 25). They thus neglected the political force of religion, which had remained alive in the everyday lives of the people. They failed to come to grips with the paradox of religious nationalism as a modern political force opposed to Western modernity.

To draw an analogy with Perry Anderson's analysis of secular nationalism in India, the Iranian secular nationalists were outflanked by a rival nationalism that appealed directly to the religious passions of the general public (Anderson 2012: 27). By contrast, the secular nationalists could not candidly acknowledge the latent religiosity of nationalist passions, nor could they openly distance themselves from the religious beliefs that had a passionate grip on the nation they meant to liberate. While they persisted in their denial that there was a religious core to nationalist passions, Ayatollah Khomeini had no inhibition in placing this religious core front and centre of his nationalist message. His Shiite nationalism had a deep emotional thrust based on community and belonging. It was supported by myths and legends from an age-old passionate religious culture that invoked exaggerated accounts of how Shiite heroes shaped historical events.

The social potency and mass appeal of Khomeini's religious nationalism resided in a unique combination of religious tradition with populist egalitarian slogans. On his triumphant return to Iran from exile, the Ayatollah promised national dignity and economic prosperity, but more importantly, an ideal state of spiritual enlightenment. His pledge to awaken Shiite believers to their 'celestial identity' and 'blissful destiny' appealed to an aggrieved public who felt betrayed by secular elites. It inflamed the public fears of a loss of religious identity under a secular regime and promised that the Islamic regime would alleviate these fears.

Khomeini's religious nationalism had the ability to obtain broad public support for an Islamic state as the agent of the nation's awakening to

its 'authentic' identity. Emphatic public recognition was obtained in a referendum in March 1979, which endorsed the establishment of Iran's Islamic Republic. The Ayatollah offered the Islamic Republic as the site for Iran's social reconstruction, moral regeneration and collective salvation.

As Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini entrusted the Islamic Republic with the divine mission of reviving the Islamic codes of practice in order to weed out the 'heathen system of monarchy' from 'the sacred Iranian territory'. The presumed divinity of this mission justified the reinstatement of norms of public piety and the enactment of a harsh religious penal code, including public flogging, hanging and stoning. It also legitimized the obliteration of political opponents of the Islamic state, leading to countless arrests, imprisonments and executions. Even the secular political activists and intellectuals who had supported the Islamic revolution were pushed aside by the protagonists of a religious revival. The Islamist elite had no qualms about using the force of the modern state against former allies who were now seen as enemies of the state.

Khomeini's theory of the state identified the Shiite clerics trained in Shiite jurisprudence as the custodians of the emerging Islamic Republic. His novel interpretation of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of experts in jurisprudence), developed in the early 1970s during his exile in Iraq, nurtured the political authority of a qualified Shiite *faqih* as the supreme power in the land (Khomeini 2004). This blueprint for clerical rule was enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, which was ratified in a second referendum in December 1979.

Nevertheless, Khomeini was pragmatic enough to recognize the indispensability of modern state apparatuses to his project of building a Shiite nation. Sami Zubaida has pointed out that Khomeini's political ideology was only thinkable within the horizon of the modern state (Zubaida 1993). The Ayatollah therefore consecrated the purge and incorporation of the modern state institutions inherited from the fallen monarchy, while creating new Islamic political institutions. He also recognized the need for a degree of secularization of the sacred. His notion of *masliha* (expediency) effectively authorized bypassing the *Sharia* when the vital interests of the Islamic state were at stake. Identifying cases of *masliha* was

entrusted to a new institution, the Expediency Discernment Council, whose members were appointed by the Leader himself.

Khomeini's brand of religious nationalism was defiant of a world order that he had no part in building. Its consolidation rested on a distinct hostility to the United States and Israel. This hostility was driven by intense anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist agitation. The United States was branded 'the Great Satan' and Israel a 'cancerous tumour'. Khomeini brazenly defended the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran by his supporters and openly called for annihilation of the state of Israel. He also called for the revolution to be exported to the Muslim majority states and fostered militant Islamic groups throughout the region.

External Wars and the Consolidation of Shiite Nationalism

The war with Iraq (1980–1988) made resort to nationalism even more imperative. It was promoted as a 'sacred defence' and as a war of 'Islam against infidels'. Ironically, Iraq's military invasion of Iran under Saddam Hussein was crucial to Khomeini's success in forging national solidarity. By attributing the invasion to US instigation, Khomeini presented Iran as a holy nation in opposition to an infidel tyrant in league with the evil American empire. No wonder the Ayatollah referred to this disastrous war as a 'divine gift'. He characterized the war in terms of the opposition between good and evil.

Ayatollah Khomeini put the newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in charge of mobilizing civilian volunteers in a militia force (*basij*). Myths of the sacred territory created a symbiosis between religion and the homeland. Iran as a Shiite territory was sanctified through the prior presence and activities of the Shiite saints. The battlegrounds of the war became places of reverence and awe, with the burial grounds of those 'martyred' in the war turned into shrines of pilgrimage.

Cyclical religious ceremonies dictated by the event-rich Shiite calendar combined with state-sponsored public events to marshal the nation in support of 'the sacred defence'. The memory of Imam Hussein's

martyrdom became a mainspring of nationalist fervour. Patriotic hymns and public rituals immortalized the Imam's sacrifice of his life for Islam as a model to emulate. In short, the war consolidated the 'collective self' and demarcated the boundary between 'us' and 'them' as part of the process of nationalization of the Shiite faith (Ansari 2009).

Shiite nationalism even inspired quasi-irredentist tendencies, which began with Ayatollah Khomeini's idea of exporting the revolution. Under Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, these tendencies found their geopolitical justification, with territories with substantial Shiite populations beyond Iran's borders deemed to provide Iran with 'strategic depth'. Iran's sponsorship of Lebanese Hezbollah and other affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria constituted an Iran-centred 'Axis of Resistance'. Even the militant Sunni groups enjoyed the support of Iran's Shiite regime in their hostility against the US and Israel.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 effectively handed the Iraqi government to the Shiite allies of the Islamic Republic. The withdrawal of US forces in 2011 created a golden opportunity for the Islamic Republic to turn the shrine cities in southern Iraq into a virtual extension of an Iran-centred Shiite homeland. Cordial relations with Iraqi politicians provided Iran with vital political, military and intelligence leverage. The foreign legion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, known as the Quds Force, armed, trained and funded allied Iraqi militia groups. Investment in the repair and upkeep of Iraq's Shiite shrines and regular mass pilgrimages to Iraqi shrine cities helped expand Iran's influence at the grassroots level.

The Arab Spring and the rise of the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) provided more opportunities for Iran to boost its regional hegemony through allied militias. Iran managed to expand its influence into Syria by propping up the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad against the Sunni-dominated uprising in 2011 and the threat of ISIL in 2013. The strategy of opening up a corridor to connect Iran to the Mediterranean added a new dimension to its transnational ambitions. Regional rivals attributed these transnational activities to Iran's renewed imperial ambitions.

Haggai Ram suggests that Islamic consciousness of Iran as a nation does not constitute the basis for an alternative myth to the national myth,

but only adds Islamic terminology to the same myth (Ram 2009). In this perspective, the Shiite version of political Islam in Iran remains well within the confines of imperial nationalism (Aburaiya 2009: 57–68). The fusion of religious faith and nationalism has generated a social and political power that seeks to flow beyond Iran's international borders (Norbu 1992).

Yet Iran's Islamic regime has cautiously kept Iranian nationalism under religious control. The expansion of Iran's transnational influence and the development of nuclear and missile technology despite the crippling sanctions imposed by the US are fed into public consciousness as reasons to celebrate Shiism as source of national pride. However, references to pre-Islamic Iran as an alternative means of firing up nationalism are held in check. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's failed attempt to revive the discourse of pre-Islamic imperial greatness was a case in point. His populist political platform, which combined messianic fervour with veneration of Iran's ancient grandeur to muster public support outside clerical control, was quashed by a barrage of criticism from the clerical establishment.

The Limitations of Shiite Nationalism

The religious ideology of nationalism enabled the Shiite Islamists to forge a totalizing authority intent on ordering every aspect of public and private life. This distinctively religious nationalist programme fuelled a pernicious pursuit of social uniformity, moral purity and political conformity. It turned into a coercive system of moral and political policing bent on transforming a modern nation with a diverse population into a univocal religious community dominated by sectarian rule.

Beneath the moral façade, however, cronyism, nepotism and other forms of favouritism have become entrenched in the political machinery, opening the way for corrupt rentiers to game the system (Azadi 2020). Access to high political positions and lucrative economic opportunities through clerical patronage has effectively transformed the Islamic Republic into a theocratic oligarchy, and the revolutionary guards into a praetorian guard to protect this oligarchy in exchange for handsome

economic and political rewards. Sectarian righteousness has led to a sense of exclusive entitlement, giving rise to a new upper class with intertwined family relations (Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani 2018).

Despite its claims to be a republic, Iran's Islamic Republic has failed to act like a republic that confers on all its citizens equal rights and that can be held accountable by them. Sectarianism has constrained its capacity to broaden the base of national enfranchisement. While unaccommodating of the notion of equal rights to citizenship, the regime has institutionalized discrimination based on faith, ideology and gender. Religious rationalizations have been used to legislate discrimination against women and the persecution of non-conforming political and faith groups.

The incorporation of the doctrine of *velayat-e motlaq-e faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist) into the revised constitution in 1989 provided a legal basis for the claim of a supreme Shiite jurist to absolute political power without accountability. Ayatollah Khamenei lacked Khomeini's charisma but has been an assiduous administrator. Since 1989, he has exercised the extended powers granted to him by the constitution with enormous efficiency. His office constitutes a form of deep state that effectively determines government policy.

The Supreme Leader is elected for life by a council whose members are vetted by his own appointees based on their absolute loyalty to *velayat-e faqih*. He has the authority to set the agenda and direction of domestic and foreign policies. He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and controls the judiciary, the police and state radio and television. His office has the final say in matters of national security and can even block legislation by decree. His powers are further extended through his field operatives in all sections of government, with the authority to shape policy as it suits him.

The Islamic Republic seems increasingly at odds with the emancipatory and egalitarian promises of the revolution that established it. Failure to provide good governance has eroded much of the popular appeal of Shiite nationalism. In the late 1990s, a reform movement led by the more moderate Islamists gained victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections. The reformists attempted to ease the corrosive trend of intolerance, discrimination and incompetence from within the ruling system. However, hopes of instituting meaningful reform were dashed in the face

of a conservative pushback. The reformists' gains were wound back with the support of the state's judiciary, intelligence and security apparatuses. Hopes for reform through electoral process were dashed yet again in 2009, when the regime crushed a massive uprising that had erupted against a rigged election.

In recent years, the litany of grievances about economic mismanagement, systemic corruption and political repression has combined with demographic and generational changes to give rise to a more broadly based level of public discontent, which intermittently erupts into open protest. Since late 2017, public expressions of discontent have become more radicalized and widespread. The protests that swept the country in November 2019 following the government's snap decision to triple gasoline prices called openly for regime change (Maloney 2019). The regime's brutal response occasioned the bloodiest anti-regime riots to date.

At the international level too, hostility to Western interests, involvement in transnational proxy wars and the pursuit of a controversial nuclear programme have locked the Islamic Republic into a vicious cycle of defiance and reprisal with the United States (Ghobadzadeh 2015). Hostility to Western interests has made the oil-based economy increasingly vulnerable to international political and economic pressures. The regime plays up US sanctions as the cause of the country's economic decline. In a bid to inspire nation solidarity, the regime characterizes economic pain as the price of resistance against US domination. But an increasingly despondent public blames the regime's misguided policies, which have isolated Iran internationally while enabling a tiny minority of rentiers to amass wealth at the cost of the impoverishment of the vast majority of Iranians.

The failure of the Shiite state to extend equal rights and tangible economic benefits to all citizens of the state is threatening its own stability. An overzealous sectarian interpretation of Shiism has marginalized, repressed or otherwise disadvantaged, most co-habitants of the territorial state. The inability to cater to the social, economic and political demands of a rapidly expanding population of highly educated and ambitious young professionals and intellectuals of diverse religious, ethnic and political persuasions has eroded loyalty to Shiite nationalism and inspired dissent. In the eyes of the general public, the Shiite nationalist narrative

has been reduced to empty rhetoric and unfulfilled promises, while vital national resources are either dedicated to the state's transnational ambitions or embezzled by corrupt politicians.

Descent into sectarianism has led to ideological, social and political conflict, as the marginalized groups put forward competing prescriptions for the nation's future direction. Rival visions of national destiny are once again competing for political influence. Countervailing projects of national revitalization have reignited the frantic search for a dignified national identity for Iran. While still incipient, secular nationalist sentiments could take advantage of the erosion of the legitimacy of religious nationalism to inspire broad-based political action for change. Draconian measures against legitimate dissent are likely to impair further the regime's claim to represent the entire nation (Conversi 2004).

The experience of the Shiite state in Iran is testimony to the fact that there can never be a single version of a nation or of a history based on a sectarian faith, just as there can never be a homogeneous national community with a single destiny. Different classes, confessions and ethnicities may espouse rival narratives of the nation, its history and its destiny. No 'high culture', whatever its history, can thrive in a modern society as a basis for an inclusive nationalism through sectarian prejudice. The stability of the modern nation-state rests on its ability to overcome the nationalist zeal of a core identity group to block the enfranchisement of other members of the nation. To cite Gellner, no modern state can bind the dominant culture to a sectarian reading of religion without risking obsolescence (Gellner 1983: 72–81, 141–142).

The rising popularity of pre-Islamic symbols and rituals among the younger generations is a case in point. In October 2016, the unprecedented congregation of thousands from across the country around Cyrus's tomb near Persepolis to celebrate the day that was believed to mark his triumphant arrival in Babylon turned into protests against the Islamic regime, ending in arrests and the banning of similar events.

A recent reliable survey of religious beliefs in Iran is another testimony to the erosion of the popularity of Shiite nationalism in Iran (Tamimi and Maleki 2020). The survey results indicate a dramatic shift, particularly among the younger generations, towards irreligion, conversion and even atheism. While Iran's official census data identifies 99.5 per cent of the Iranian population as Muslims and 90 per cent as Shiites, the new

survey has found that only 40 per cent of Iranians identify as Muslims and only 32 per cent as Shiites. This is despite 90 per cent describing themselves as hailing from believing or practising Muslim families. Some 68 per cent agree that religious prescriptions should be excluded from legislation and mandatory *hijab* abolished.

The shift in religious attitudes indicates a readiness for a new project of national revitalization that is more inclusive, yet motivating and energizing. A process of social and cultural reform could provide some kind of synthesis based on the selection and reinterpretation of received traditions. With paths to reform blocked, however, no attractive political alternative with the power to unseat the incumbent regime is yet on the horizon. The regime still enjoys the vocal support of radical Islamists. But domestic turbulence, international pressure and the regime's intransigence could activate latent political alternatives with unpredictable consequences.

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