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Between Iran and Persia Islam and Nationalism in Iran's Resurgence as a Regional Power

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A COUPLE of years ago, King Abdullah II of Jordan alluded to the “threat” of a “Shi’a crescent” stretching from Iran to Iraq, the Arab littoral states in the Persian Gulf region and to Lebanon. According to this view, local Arab Shi’as, such as Lebanon’s Hizbullah, are merely satellites in the orbit of Tehran and are thus “potential fifth columns”. However, according to a recent *Foreign Affairs* article by Professor Vali Nasr of the US Naval Postgraduate School, a more differentiated approach would be advisable. A glance on Iran’s past might reveal that “Shi’a identity” and “Iranian nationalism” were always inter-related. In spite of this, what is usually termed “Iranian national feeling” by some appears to have always been the more dominant factor in Iran’s identity and foreign policy. To understand this phenomenon we have to consider the concept of “Iran” as it manifested itself in history and at present.

“Greater Iran”, Past and Present

When discussing Iranian nationalism in the context of contemporary Iranian foreign policy, it is crucial to be aware that the historical “Lands of Iran” - or rather more appropriately “Greater Iran” - were always known in the Persian language as *Īrānshahr* or *Īrānzamīn*. These terms signified a quasi-imperial concept as they included not only “Iran proper”, but also the Caucasus, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Central Asia, and large parts of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. The concept of *Īrānshahr* can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period when Iran was ruling over those areas as one of the first world powers in human history. The capital of *Īrānshahr* was, at times, situated in what is now Iraq.

Iran’s bygone Pahlavi dynasty created what can be considered a mythical cult surrounding the establishment of the Iranian monarchy some 2,500 years ago. It is important to understand that those features of Iran’s past grandeur are still present in the minds of even ordinary Iranians today. This will help us to comprehend Iran’s current insistence of being treated as an equal in its dealings with the United States, for instance.

Thus, “Iranian nationalism” is not necessarily identical with “Persian ethnicity”, but is more encompassing. It is based on the Persian language and civilization – whether Islamic or pre-Islamic. During most of the Islamic period, the Iranian lands were ruled by ethnic Turkic dynasties, a pattern that prevailed until about 80 years ago when the Pahlavis, who were ethnic Persians, came to power.

“Iran” or “Persia”?

Another determining factor for Iranian nationalism is the Persian language, *fārsī*, a word ultimately derived from Fārs province, the “Persis” of the ancient Greeks, or “Persia proper”. Many Iranian exiles, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, still refer to their country in English as “Persia”. It is remarkable that there does not exist an equivalent for such a term in Persian, as the country was always known as “Īrān”. To avoid confusion and to emphasize the link to the glories of the past, the country adopted in 1935 the name “Iran”.

Persian is only *one* member of the large family of Iranian languages - Kurdish featuring most prominently among them. Being an Indo-European language and closely related in its grammatical structure and even vocabulary to most European languages, Persian is also spoken outside Iran: in Afghanistan it is known as *darī*, one of the two official national languages; in Tajikistan it is the single national language, known as Tajik. Afghanistan’s national language, Pashto, is also an Iranian language.

More importantly, in the Middle Ages, the Persian language and culture were highly influential in converting the people “east of Baghdad” to Islam, mainly through Sufism or Islamic mysticism. Urdu and Ottoman-Turkish literature, for instance, would be unthinkable without it. Civilizations such as those of Mughal India or Ottoman Turkey are thus considered highly “Persianate societies”, that is, they may not necessarily be ethnically Persian or Iranian, but their linguistic, material, and artistic cultural activities derive from the Persian language and culture. The output of Persian literature in Muslim India (where Persian had been the official language until the end of the Mughals in the wake of British colonialism), for instance, exceeded that of Iran by far in number. Persian can thus well be considered the second language of Islam – after Arabic.

Nationalism or xenophobia?

Iran “converted” to Shi’a Islam only in 1501, the year when the Shi’a Safavid dynasty came to power. The year 1501 marked a watershed as Iran was until then one of the centres of Sunni scholarship. The Safavids, who had been most probably of Turkic descent, called themselves “Shahs of Iran”, in conscious remembrance of the pre-Islamic *Īrānshahr*. One of the results of the “conversion” to Shi’ism, was a certain *Wagenburg* mentality, as Iran saw itself surrounded by potentially hostile Sunni states, among them the Ottoman Empire and Mughal India.

The current situation faced by Iran appears to offer to Shi’as a way out of their century-long isolation. But it has also had an impact on Iran: at least until the 1980-88 war with Iraq, Iran might have perceived itself as the “centre of the universe”, according to one scholar. Already in the 11th-century, the Persian poet Ferdowsi, in the *Shāhnāma* – Iran’s national epic – developed the concept of “Iran” and “Turan” (symbolizing the potentially “threatening” Turkic, non-Iranian outside world). In the early modern period, there emerged the antagonism of Shi’a Safavid Iran to its Sunni neighbours. From the early 1800s onwards, there was Iran’s quasi-colonial experience with Czarist Russia and Britain (the latter replaced by the United States after World War II). This mind-setting seems to reveal a certain paranoia or what can be termed “inherent Iranian worries”. Transferring those “worries” of a country of about 70 million people -- a potential future nuclear power -- to our own times would mean addressing Iran’s security concerns.

Perspectives

In Iran's ethnic structure, little more than 50% are Persians. Its nationalism is thus not "ethnic" but rather "conceptual", or one could even say, "imperial". In terms of the Shi'a factor, and contrary to what is usually stated in the media, the 1980-88 war with Iraq was not a Sunni-Shi'a showdown, as Saddam Hussein's armies consisted mostly of Shi'as. This might serve as an eye-opener with regard to the validity of the "Shi'a crescent theory". To pursue its long-term political strategy of hegemony over the Persian Gulf region, and subsequently perhaps even over the rest of the Middle East, Tehran addresses supposedly Shi'a issues in its dealing with international Shi'a communities – through the promotion of the "Iranian model", in spite of the quietist and politically rather non-assertive character of Twelver Shi'ism in history. In the Sunni world, Iran appears as the champion of "common Islamic issues", such as the Palestine question.

Incidences where local Shi'a communities had been used by Tehran to achieve political goals are however not uncommon, such as the Shi'as in Iraq and Lebanon. In Afghanistan, many Shi'as had been killed by the Taliban in the city of Mazar-e Sharif. Still, Iran and the Arabs, as well as other non-Iranian Shi'ias, seem to be aware that they might need each other to achieve short-term political goals.

It appears that Iranian nationalism and national interest will be the driving forces behind the country's foreign policy in time to come. This nationalism would not be "racially motivated" as it would include the ethnic non-Persian "Persianate" Shi'as of Iran, such as the Azeri Turks who make about a quarter of the population. This direction of Iranian foreign policy is perhaps easier to address than a "religiously driven" apocalyptic millenarianism, as it would allow for diplomatic, pragmatic solutions to current issues. Paradoxically, the Islamic republic would thus be firmly rooted in traditional Iranian foreign policy.

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