Islam and Nationalism in Contemporary Iranian Society and Politics

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Abstract

The importance of national identity and national feelings in contemporary Iranian politics has been much neglected by the students of Iranian studies, particularly outside Iran. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the dominance of Islamically-oriented policies in its foreign policy seem to have encouraged many to believe that Islam and Iran in the contemporary context are two mutually exclusive factors. However, recent internal developments such as the presidential election, on the one hand, and the firm position of Iranians inside and outside the country toward regional political and international cultural challenges vis-à-vis their national heritage on the other indicate that Iranians consider both the religious and national dimensions of their identity as important, and they consider the relation between religion and nationality as mutually inclusive, as opposed to an exclusive one. This article, focusing on the issue of Islam and nationalism and their relationships, tries to highlight this important factor in order to arrive at a better understanding of the political dynamics of Iranian society and politics. It argues that contrary to the situation in the Arab world, these two elements are both constitutive factors of the Iranian identity. Following a rather brief theoretical discussion of the relations between the two in Islamic and Middle Eastern perspectives, the author will try to explain the political reasons behind the rise of the Islam-nationalism controversy in contemporary Iranian politics and emphasizes that such a dichotomous discourse has an elite rather than popular basis. The concluding section of the article concentrates on the importance of the national factor in the Iranian society by focusing on the two recent presidential elections in Iran as well as on several external political and cultural challenges to Iranian national heritage toward which Iranians took a coherent stance inside and outside of Iran.

Keywords: Islam, Nationalism, Iranian Identity, Contemporary Iran

Introduction

The relation between Islam and nationalism has become one of the most controversial issues in the contemporary Islamic world in the wake of the breakdown of the last Muslim Caliphate, i.e., the Ottoman Empire, in 1918. This controversy started particularly when Mustapha Kemal Pasha, the leader of modern Turkey, replaced the Islamic Caliphate with a secular republican system in 1924. While some Muslim scholars such as Rashid Riza of Syria attacked the idea of nationalism *vis-à-vis*.Islam, other non-Arab Muslim thinkers such as Iqbal (Esposito, 1983) and Mawdudi of India promoted - albeit implicitly - the idea of Islamic nationalism in order to justify the creation of a Muslim nation-state comprising the Muslim population of India, namely Pakistan in 1947.

As in other parts of the Muslim world, the relation between Islam and nationalism has also been one of the main ideological and political issues of Iranian politics and Iranian political thought in the twentieth century. However, unlike other parts of the

Islamic world, particularly the Middle East, in Iran the issue emerged much later in the mid-1960s and more vividly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The controversy between these apparently two mutually exclusive streaks of thought has also been fiercely debated in other parts of the Islamic world, especially in the Arab countries, Turkey and the Indian Sub-Continent. The main reason for this factor lies in the fact that the ideas of nationhood and state have been relatively alien to the newly established countries as long as they were part of the Islamic Ottoman Caliphate until its disintegration. As imbedded in the Ottoman *Millet System* (Karpat, 1968; Lewis, 1996), the core factor of identity for its different composing groups was religious rather than national.

Compared to other Middle Eastern peoples, Iranians had been much more accustomed to the ideas of nation and state given their specific cultural and political life and their historical experience as a distinct independent society outside the realm of the Abbasid and Ottoman Caliphate Empires. In other words, while being part of the Muslim world in general and sharing the Islamic faith, unlike other parts of the Islamic caliphate, religion did not prevent Iranians from remaining loyal to and taking pride in their

national identity. In this specific historical case, Islam and nationalism have not been mutually exclusive phenomena. Rather, Islam, particularly in its Shi'ite branch - which possesses deep roots in the Iranian society since the early centuries of the Islamic era - somehow adopted a nationalistic theme and reinforced the sense of belonging to a distinct cultural and political realm. This explains why Islam in Iran eschewed definition exclusively in terms of the dominant Arab Islamic identity.

The adaptation of Iranian identity to Islamic values and beliefs found its clear reflection in the field of history in the works of historians such as Tabari, Mas'udi, Dinvari, and Gardizi, and in the field of Iranian cultural heritage particularly in the works of such great poets as Rudaki, Firdowsi, Ghatran Tabrizi, and many others. Praising both the Islamic values and ancient Iranian historical and mythological kings and heroes has been a common tenet of Persian literature in both poetry and prose. As some recent field studies have shown (Anjavi Shirazi, 1975), the rather strong tendency for identifying Islamic and Iranian constitutive elements of identity as mutually inclusive still enjoys a powerful base in contemporary Iran. In addition to historians and poets, some leading ethnically Iranian Muslim jurisprudents and Ulama

have also played a role in reviving and reinforcing the national awakening and pride in Iranian national heritage - most notably in the field of the Persian language. This has been achieved through linking the Iranian ancient heritage and the Persian language to the Islamic faith. The fatwa (religious decree) of Imam Abu Hanifa (one of the four major Sunnite Imams on jurisprudence) on the acceptability of using Farsi - Persian - in praying, especially the recitation of Arabic verses in Persian, was a turning point in using Persian for writing and poetry (Abu Zohre, 1960). Moreover, Persian was given a religious legitimacy by likening it to the Islamic faith; an example of which could be seen in the status imparted to Persian as the second holy language of the Heavens according to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (Saket, 2005). Much earlier, the linkage between Shi'ism and Iran had already found a kinship basis in the popular tale of the marriage of Shahrbanu, the daughter of Yazdgerd III, the last shah of the Sassanid Iran, and Imam Hussein the third Shi'i Imam – through which the later Shi'i Imams received an Iranian lineage (Boyce, 1967).

As argued briefly, Islam and nationalism have lived together during the course of Iranian history. It is interesting to note that up to the mid-twentieth century, it was almost impossible to find a distinctive

text written from an Islamic point of view, by an Iranian writer, historian, poet or religious scholar, in which a stance had been taken against Iranian national heritage. This was true even during the periods of preponderance of traditional Iranian nationalism as was the case during the Shaubbia movement (second to fourth centuries of the Islamic history) and also during the Constitutional Revolution in the early years of the 20th century (Enayat, 1982).

The rise of the modern nationalism in Iran

As far as the questions of identity and territoriality are concerned, the rise of the Safavid state at the beginning of the sixteenth century was a turning point for Iran. After several centuries of local dynastic rule over different parts of the Iranian plateau, a state with a distinct identity claim over the historical Iran took control of the land. After becoming embroiled in a long conflict with a rival state, the Ottoman Empire, which tended to repudiate Iran's identity and territorial integrity, the Safavid state revived Iranian identity and national pride by mobilizing the people for the defense of the country - this time, as is well-known, under the banner of Shi'ism. The historical experience of the Safavid state and its succeeding dynasties (Afshar, Zand and Qajar) reinforced cultural and historical

identity and territoriality for the Iranians, and paved the way for the rise of modern nationalism.

In so far as the question of national awakening is concerned, Iran has been one of the exceptional cases in the developing world, particularly in the Middle East, where a traditional sense of nationalism had been in existence long before the introduction of the modern notion of nationalism, particularly in its Western guise, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Two interrelated factors have accompanied and reinforced the rise of this modern nationalist trend.

1- The first factor concerns the decline of the power structure of the Iranian state in the late eighteenth century before the rise of the Qajar dynasty. At this historical juncture, Iran became a buffer state in the strategic "Great Game" over Asia in which the most powerful core states of the World Capitalist System (Wallerstein, 1974), i.e. Britain, France and Russia, were involved in a fierce competition and conflict over India. The weakness of the Iranian state, which was at least in part the result of the fall of the Safavids in 1722, encouraged the emerging power of Tsarist Russia to invade the Iranian territories of Caucasus in 1802, which led in its consequence to the tragic wars of 1802-12 and 1826-

28. Iran suffered defeat in both wars and lost all its territories in the Caucasus as the result of the two treaties of Golestan (1812) and Turkmanchai (1828). These humiliating events deeply shocked the Iranian society and its political elite.

The loss of Herat and the eastern part of Afghanistan in 1856 proved equally shocking. At the conclusion of the Paris Treaty of 1857, which was imposed on Iran in the aftermath of the British invasion of the southwestern coast of Iran in 1856, Iran was compelled to withdraw its claim over Afghanistan. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Iran was under dual political and economic pressure by Russia and Britain, and had to concede numerous economic concessions to both.

2- The second cause for the emergence of modern Iranian nationalism can be attributed to the deep national awakening of the Iranian elite and society emanating from their new knowledge of Iranian ancient history and civilization. The excavations of archeologists such as Madame Dieulafoy, Conte du Morgan, Sir Henry Rawlinson, Herzfeld, in the early decades of the 20th century shed light on the unknown aspects of ancient Iranian civilization. The Persian translation of the works of the Greek historians such as Herodotus and others

during the same period further expanded and deepened this new historical awakening among Iranians by helping to glorify the history of the Achamenid and Parthian dynasties of ancient Persia. This sense of a modern national awakening spread from the initial elite-intellectual circles and confines to the public through the works of poets, writers and screen writers such as Adib al Mamlek Farahani, akhondzadeh, Eshghi, Bahar, Aref Qazvini, Farrokhi Yazdi, Pour Davoud, Zabih Behruz, Sadiq Hedyat, and others. Between 1921 and 1941, Iranian nationalism, with pronounced emphasis on the history and civilization of ancient Persia, became the formal ideology of the modern Iranian state during the reign of the first Pahlavi King – Reza Shah.

Religious Activism in Contemporary Iran

Despite the fact that Shi'ism had left its pronounced presence and impact on the Iranian society since the second century of the Islamic history, the Shi'ite Ulama did not enjoy a strong socio-political clout until the rise of the Safavid state. Their influence began to come to the forefront after the Twelver School was formally proclaimed as Iran's state religion in 1501 by the founder of the dynasty, Shah Esmail. Later on during the sixteenth and the first half of the

seventeenth century groups of the Shi'ite Ulama immigrated from Jabal Amil, then part of the Greater Shaam, current Lebanon, to Iran, and helped strengthen the position and power of the Twelver School jurisprudence (Hourani, 1986). While during the Safavid state the Ulama were in general terms loyal and subservient to the Safavid kings, their influence gradually increased during the Qajar dynasty. In fact, as their fatwa proclaiming jihad against Russia in 1826 indicated, they had risen to a point of imposing their will on the king of the time – Fathali Shah.

The influence of the Shi'ite Ulama increased substantially towards the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century in the course of events and developments which culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906. However, the rise of the modern state, after 1921, marked the beginning of a period of secular modernism in which the traditional role of the Shi'ite Ulama began to decline in education, judicial, and even economic realms. The traditional institutions in which the Ulama – the Shi'ite clergy in general - had a strong influence were replaced with modern ones mostly controlled by the secular, modern elite. The general anti-clerical policies of the Pahlavi state, including imposition of severe restrictive measures on traditional

religious circles and Shi'ite seminaries and the forced removal of women's hijab (*chador*) in the latter years of 1930s brought about the state- religion confrontation. However, this implicit conflict did not amount to overt social and political repercussions during the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941).

It was only after the fall of the Reza Shah in late August 1941 and the beginning of an open and somehow unstable era during the 1941-1953 period that politically active religious forces emerged on the national scene, enunciated anti-state policies and discourses, and began to play a political role in the country. Political organizations such as the Fedaiyan-e Islam of Navvab Safavi and religious figures such as Ayatollah Kashani were the most prominent examples. However, such leading Shi'ite Mujtahids as the Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi and others following the traditional quiescent line preferred to stay out of active politics. The activism of the Fedaiyan-e Islam and Ayatollah Kashani should not, however, be interpreted as a purely religious current totally devoid of the nationalist element, much less antithetical to Iranian nationalism. In fact, the very embodiment of Iranian nationalism at the time; the movement for nationalization of the oil industry, spearheaded by a well-established nationalist figure as Prime Minister

Muhammad Mussadiq (1951-53), enjoyed the active and in cases tacit support of a wide range of religious circles and even some of the grand Ayatollahs (Ali Rahnema, 2006). Despite the fact that the modern state under Reza Shah had all but alienated the religious circles and forces from the state and its fast-expanding apparatus, this in itself did not represent a confrontation between Iranian nationalism and Islam per se. The two constitutive elements of the Iranian identity were still consistent.

More recent developments of the Iranian society during the past decades, both in Iran and outside, tend to give a higher profile to the element of consistency between Islam and nationalism The inconsistency, or conflict, so to speak, is in any event quite recent; it practically belongs to the post-1953 (Mussadiq) era. Needless to say, the inconsistency between the two constitutive elements should be analyzed within their specific contemporary context, and simply should not be extended to previous eras of the country's Islamic history. In the author's considered view, it is the lack of proper historical knowledge that has lead even some of the Iranian writers and analysts (Davari, 1986) to reach an erroneous conclusion on the historically conflictual relations between them. Such a lack of specific historical awareness may, however, prove

problematic in the study of the relation between Islam and nationalism; the relation, it has to be underlined, should not be analyzed in theoretical or ideological terms, rather, as a historical phenomenon, which requires proper consideration of the historical relations between the two in a specific society.

The emphasis in the preceding lines on the importance of the historical consistency between Islam and nationalism in Iran does not intend to deny the existence of tension and conflict, even active confrontation, between the proponents of these two identity trends. In fact, the latter part of the twentieth century Iran has witnessed a quite palpable discursive contestation between them. This contestation reached its denouement with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Contrary to the arguments of some students of Iranian politics (Bigdeloo, 2001), the roots of the new controversy did not go back to the rise of the modern wave of national awakening in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when a group of Iranian intellectuals such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhonzadeh, Jalal al Din Mirza Ghajar and Mirza Agha Khan Kirmani promoted a modern idea of Iranian nationalism with strong romantic pre-Islamic and anti-Arab tenets.

The works of these early nationalist thinkers and

even some later promoters of Iranian nationalism such as Sadiq Hedayat, Ibrahim Pourdavood, and Zabih Behrooz did not provoke an Islamic anti-nationalist response *per se*. Perhaps a major reason for this lack of negative reaction was the fact that the ideas and works of these nationalist thinkers, with a the marginal exception of Akhondzadeh, were not anchored in the rejection of Islam as a religion. Rather, they generally tended to blame the Arabs, to be precise, the two-centuries-long rule of the Arab Caliphates - for the misfortunes of Iran. Such a streak of thinking could not be considered a totally alien trend in the Iranian history once the historical experience of the *Shaubbia* movement in the early Islamic period were to be taken into consideration, and more importantly, the fact that the influence of Shi'ism as an identity factor in Iran had from the very outset carried an implicit anti-Arab; that is, anti-caliphate, flavor. From the viewpoint of Iranian Shi'ites during the past centuries, it can hardly be neglected as a historical fact that most of Shi'ite Imams had been persecuted, tormented and ultimately killed – martyred - by "oppressive, usurper" Arab Caliphates. For this, many Shi'ite Ulama of the time did not necessarily consider the anti-Arab orientation of Iranian romantic nationalism a peculiarly anti-Islamic phenomenon per se.

The rise of what could be called a palpable trend of Islamist anti-nationalist discourse of the post World War II Iran has in fact three inter-related causes. 1) The influence of the Middle Eastern and Arabic, and to a lesser extent, the Indian-Pakistani Islamist discourse, which were anchored in the total rejection of the ideas of nationalism and nation-state as purely Western alternatives for genuinely Islamic concepts – e.g., the Islamic Ummah; 2) The gradual decline of the Ulama's status and power as a result of the rise of the modern state in Iran since 1921; and 3) Using either nationalism or Islam as legitimizing instruments for the state after the 1960s.

The Islamist discourse of the early twentieth century which emerged as a reaction to the abolition of the caliphate system by the Young Turks in 1924 has in fact had a marked influence on the Islamic world as a whole. The formation of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al Muslimun) in 1928 by Hassan al Banna in Egypt, with the express objective of establishing an Islamic state, gave the new ideological trend a strong momentum, and gradually spread to other Arab and Muslim lands during the 1940s (Mitchell, 1969). It was virtually the first time that a modern political organization sought to establish an Islamic state as the best alternative to the existing

secular political systems. As a clear by-product of this new ideological – Islamist – trend, in 1941 the Jama'at Islami was founded in India (present day Pakistan) by Abul Ala' Mawdudi, who theorized the establishment of an Islamic State for the Muslim population of India (Adams, 1983). Both groups laid the foundations of a religious fundamentalist discourse which carried and embodied strong anti-nationalist orientations. Some theorists of the Muslim Brotherhood such as Sayyid Qutb promoted a line of radical anti-nationalist Islamism that legitimized the use of force against the nationalist regimes of the Arab world (Dekmejian, 1995). He was later arrested and executed in Egypt for complicity in the assassination attempt against Jamal Abdel Nasser.

Iran, similar to other Muslim countries, albeit to a lesser extent, also came under the influence of this Islamist current when in 1944 a group of young Islamists under the leadership of Navvab Safavi established the first Iranian fundamentalist radical group - namely the Fadaiyan Islam. Safavi had close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and made a trip to Egypt and Palestine in the early fifties. His group published the first theoretical Islamist work on the necessity of an Islamic state in Iran (Fadaiyan Islam, 1987). Later on during the oil nationalization

period, the group developed strong anti-Mussadiq positions and actively militated against him and the National Front, the first broad coalition of Iranian nationalists. Besides Safavi, Ayatollah Kashani, who also had close contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist Palestinian and Egyptian leaders, and who had initially cooperated with Mussadiq up to a certain point in time (Summer 1952), gradually took distance from him and the nationalist platform and practically joined the opponents of Mussadiq and his policies. The conflict between Mussadiq and Kashani-Fadaiyan Islam did in fact set the stage for the political confrontation between Islamism and Iranian nationalism that unfolded further in the years and decades to follow. Later translations of Muslim Brotherhood pamphlets and books, particularly the works of Qutb and Mawdudi, further reinforced this conflict and gave it a distinct discursive and ideological feature.

The second cause for the deteriorating relation between Islam and nationalism in Iran relates to the rise of the modern state in Iran, which led to the gradual disempowerment of Ulama in the spheres of education, judiciary, economy, and politics. Before the rise of the Pahlavi state in 1925, the Shi'ite Ulama had a strong influence in traditional religious schools,

religious courts, endowments, and the parliament (Majlis) in the post-Constittional Revolution period. They lost their former status and influence in these spheres following the consolidation of the Pahlavi rule and in particular as a result of the establishment of the modern educational system and the ministry of justice Moreover, the endowment institution (owqaf) was taken from them during the rule of Reza Shah (Abrahamian, 1982). Furthermore, he was openly inimical to the Ulama's role in politics and compelled them, through various political and legal measures, to withdraw to their traditional educational base in the seminaries (howzas). The same general trend continued later under Mohammad Reza Shah and the last vestiges of the Ulama's power were taken away through the land reforms of the early 1960s in the course of the Shah's so-called "White Revolution". The simmering dispute between the Shah and the Shi'ite clergy finally culminated in the bloody episodes of early June 1963 and the exile to Turkey and subsequently Iraq of Ayatollah Khomeini in November 1964. Since both Pahlavi Kings had predicated their policies on the foundation of a formal nationalist discourse, the disempowered Ulama and a new generation of young Shi'ite clergymen who were under the influence of Middle Eastern Islamism,

gradually developed an anti–nationalist ideological outlook and political platform.

The Iranian Ulama's anti-nationalist outlook as a reaction to their disempowerment by the modern secular state has not been a phenomenon peculiar to Iran only. Other cases of the development and emergence of Islamic anti-nationalist discourse around the Muslim world can also be explained along similar criteria. The case of Rashid Reza of Syria and Mawdudi of Pakistan, who had been amongst the most ardent opponents of the nationalist discourse in the Islamic world can serve as the the best examples. They both supported the idea of Arab and Pakistani nationalism before the rise of the secular states of Egypt, Syria and Pakistan. In fact, Rashid Reza was the leader of the General Syrian Congress of July 1919 in Damascus in which most ardent Arab nationalist trends took part (Enayat, 1982; Ahmadi, 1987). The same was true in the case of Mawdudi as the leader of Jama'at Islami in India who eagerly supported the nationalist idea of a Muslim state during 1940s. It is interesting to note, however, that when both Reza and Mawdudi and their ideas and recommendations were not included in the power structure of the newly established states of Egypt, Syria and Pakistan, they began to take distance from their earlier convictions

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and positions and voiced strong opposition to the creed of secular nationalism.

And finally, the third cause for the unfolding confrontation between Islamism and nationalism in Iran has been due to the fact that these two main factors of Iranian identity turned into the instruments of state legitimacy, first during the latter part of the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, and subsequently, from the very outset of the establishment of the new post-Revolutionary regime - the Islamic Republic. The state has alternately used nationalism or Islam at the expense of the other in order to justify and legitimize its rule. This has propelled the proponents of either trend to position themselves against the existing state legitimating discourse. Given the Pahlavi state's reliance on the nationalist discourse, during the 1960s and 1970s some Islamist thinkers such as Murtadha Mutahhari rejected the idea of Iranian nationalism as employed – in fact, manipulated - by the state and its supporters. By emphasizing the role of Islam as a critical constitutive element of Iranian identity, he tried to reconcile Islam and traditional Iranian nationalism by showing the role of Islam in promoting Iran's position in the Islamic period on the one hand, and on the other the distinguished role Iranians had played in

contributing to the cultural and scientific achievements of the Islamic civilization (Mutahhari, 1970). Ali Shariati, for his own part, took a similar stance regarding the relation between Islam and Iranian nationalism. His aim was to emphasize the importance of both factors for the present Iranian identity. He considered Shi'ism as a synthesis of Iranian and Islamic dimensions of Iranian identity. (Shariati, 1992: 263-298)

However, despite the efforts of Mutahari and Shariati for a theoretical and political reconciliation between Islam and nationalism during the late sixties and seventies, the gap between the proponents of the two currents widened in the latter years of the Pahlavi era. The advent of the Islamic Revolution did not put an end to this discursive conflict and political confrontation. In fact, the Islam-nationalism dichotomy deepened further during the tumultuous first decade of the Islamic Republic during 1980s. However, a host of political and cultural events and developments, most notably the Iran-Iraq war, showed the importance of nationalistic outlook, orientation and fervor for the defense of the country. Therefore, the hostile views of the state and revolutionary institutions to nationalism gradually changed and gave way to a more moderate position toward Iranian

traditional national heritage.

National Factor in the Recent Political and Cultural Developments

The continued relevance and resilience of Iranian heritage among the public has had an important role in convincing the state and revolutionary circles to come to terms with this fact and phenomenon. The growth and abiding popularity of publications on ancient Persian history, culture and civilization in Iran especially among university students, along with the emergence of a wide range of NGOs in more recent years with a clear nationalist orientation, can explain an important feature of the Iranian society; the society, the general populace, do not consider Islam and Iranian nationalism two mutually exclusive factors. The commemoration at the University of Tehran in recent years of peculiarly Iranian national festivals such as Mehregan, Sede, and Espandarmaz (widely considered as the Iranian version of Valentine Day) by student associations, and in some cases, even by the Islamic associations (*anjoman haaye Islami*), reflect the continuing popular relevance and importance of the national factor as a constitutive element of the Iranian identity.

Moreover, the Iranian public opinion has been

very sensitive to efforts aimed at weakening its national solidarity and unity. An example in point relates to the popular reaction to the political and ideological use of ethnic issues in national politics. In the course of the presidential elections of 2005 and 2009, some candidates resorted to ethnic issues for mobilizing political support and voters in ethnic provinces such as Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Baluchistan, Golestan and Khuzestan. Mehdi Karrubi, Mehr Alizade and Moin were among the pioneers in this respect in the 2005 campaign. However, they received the least votes in these provinces, and the leading candidates such as Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad who did not cater to ethnic factors in their campaign received the highest votes. The same pattern seems to have also occurred in the course of the presidential elections of 2009. Once again, Mehdi Karrubi who used ethnicity as an electoral ploy trailed behind other candidates such as Moussavi and Ahmadinejad. This happened even in ethnically dominated provinces such as Azerbaijan. Another example of popular reaction to the perceived threats to national identity and national territorial and cultural integrity revolved around the question of the Iran-UAE conflict over the three Persian Gulf islands, and also the use of distorted or fictitious names for the

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Persian Gulf. The *National Geography's* use of the fictitious name of "Arabian Gulf" in one of its 2007 issues caused a widespread popular furor among Iranians everywhere, leading to a number of mobilization campaigns both inside and outside Iran, which eventually forced the magazine to apologize. A similar case of popular mobilization and open expression of protest occurred following the release by Hollywood of the animation movie 300, which Iranians found to be presenting a distorted image of ancient Iran and Iranians.

Conclusions

The present essay has explored the relationship between Islam and nationalism as the two constitutive elements of the Iranian identity. Since some contemporary Iranian writers and political activists seem to have taken a mono-dimensional stance regarding one of these factors at the expense of the other, the paper has tried to argue that historical and documentary facts do not support a mutually exclusive approach to Iranian identity. The long historical experience of the Iranian society has shown that both Islam and traditional Iranian nationalism have been inseparable components of the national identity. The article has attempted to shed some light on the reality

of the inseparability of these two streaks through addressing more recent political causes of the conflict and confrontation between Islamist and nationalist factions in Iranian politics, hence highlighting the political roots for this phenomenon and also explaining the importance of the national part of this composite identity in contemporary Iran.

As argued in the paper, the recent discursive and political confrontation between Islam and nationalism in Iran has been mainly due to the import of the ideological discourses of the Arab World into Iran as well as the power struggle between the political factions of the post-World War II Iran rather than a native phenomenon with historical roots. The recent re-emergence of popular interest in preserving and rejuvenating different festivals of ancient Iran on the one hand, and the wave of popular reactions and mobilization protests to political and cultural challenges to Iranian territorial integrity and its cultural heritage on the other hand, seem to further underline the fact that the relation between the national and religious dimensions of the Iranian identity is mutually inclusive rather than exclusive.

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