

## The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran

This sophisticated and challenging book by the distinguished historian Ali M. Ansari explores the idea of nationalism in the creation of modern Iran. It does so by considering the broader developments in national ideologies that took place following the emergence of the European Enlightenment and showing how these ideas were adopted by a non-European state. Ansari charts a course through twentieth-century Iran, analyzing the growth of nationalistic ideas and their impact on the state and demonstrating the connections between historiographical and political developments. In so doing, he shows how Iran's different regimes manipulated ideologies of nationalism and collective historical memory to suit their own ends. Firmly relocating Reza Shah within the context of the Constitutional Revolution, Ansari argues that Reza Pahlavi's identification with a monarchy by divine right bore a greater resemblance to, and facilitated, the religious nationalism that catapulted Ayatollah Khomeini to power on the back of a populist and highly personalized mythology. Drawing on hitherto untapped sources, the book concludes that it was the revolutionary developments and changes that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century that paved the way for later radicalization. As the first book-length study of Iranian nationalism in nearly five decades, it will find an eager readership among scholars of the Middle East and those students more generally interested in questions of nationalism and ideology.

Ali M. Ansari is a Professor of Iranian History at the University of St Andrews. His many publications include *Iran under Ahmadinejad* (2008); *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (second edition, 2006); and *Modern Iran since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (2003).

*Dedicated to the memory of my father*  
*Mohammad Ali Massoud Ansari (1915–1979)*

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For it is only when it is threatened with destruction from without or from within that a society is compelled to return to the very roots of its identity; to that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it.

Ricoeur, *Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds* in *A Ricoeur Reader*, 1991, M J Valdes (ed), University of Toronto Press, p. 484

I quite understand, my good friend, the contempt you bestow upon the nursery tales with which the Hajee and I have been entertaining each other; but, believe me, he who desires to be well acquainted with a people will not reject their popular stories or local superstitions. Depend upon it, that man is far too advanced into an artificial state of society who is a stranger to the effects which tales and stories like these have upon the feelings of a nation; and his opinion of its character are never likely to be more erroneous than when, in the pride of reason, he despises such means of forming his judgement.

John Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, Longman 1827, pp. 190–1

# The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran

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## Preface

A central feature of this study is to assess the complex relationship between ‘history’ and ‘myth’, and how they had fed into and helped define the idea of Iran and Iranian nationalism during the course of more than a century. Partly to reflect the complexity of the conceptual relationship I have avoided fixing analytic definitions which may serve to effectively prejudge the argument, but also give the impression of clarity which in practice rarely existed. At the same time, it will be of undoubted benefit to the reader if some frame of reference is outlined as well as some of the more important sources for the ideas and approach applied in the text. Readers who are interested are encouraged to peruse both the bibliography and the footnotes which detail my intellectual influences, but for immediate purposes, the ‘metanarrative’ of this text is informed by the works of Gramsci, Ricoeur, and John B Thompson for the operation of culture, ideas, and ideology; on Anderson and Smith, for my understanding of nationalism; and on Pocock and Israel for the development of the European Enlightenment.

With respect to terminology, the study of ideas and ideology enjoys a characteristically rich vocabulary reflecting perhaps the richness of the debate and the important nuances which exist. In this text I have drawn on a variety of terms partly to reflect this nuance but also to relieve the reader of the tedium of reiteration. The application of the term ‘myth’ is drawn from a number of writers including Barthes, and is used as he defines it, in the sense of a ‘story’, or alternatively a ‘narrative’. Political myths and grand narratives are used in the sense conveyed by the Persian term *ostureh*, historical myths shaped to serve political ends and to help feed world-views and cultural outlooks. In Persian, *afsaneh* is used to

denote a myth that is wholly false. Such a distinction does not exist in the English language, and I have avoided trying to create one, for example between myth and legend, in order in part to stress the conceptual continuity and essential ambiguity that exists. Some myths are palpably not *real* but contain *truths* of social value. Others are neither real nor of social value. I have tried to let the examples in the text speak for themselves. In addition I have used the term ‘metanarrative’, drawn of course from Hayden-White, to describe those mythologies and narratives that have become so effectively socialised that they have become part of the collective ‘common sense’. Two other terms also make an appearance according to context: discourse (as made popular by Foucault) and ‘persuasion’, as most recently introduced by Bentley. Both are applied in relation to ideologies.

## Acknowledgements

The writing of this book has been both challenging and rewarding. Challenging inasmuch as I have tried to tackle a number of distinct if inter-related conceptual themes within what I hope has become a coherent, if at times complex, narrative argument; rewarding insofar as it has encouraged me to confront and clarify issues of nationalism and identity which have been very much part of my own intellectual growth ever since I entered university. In a concrete sense, it reflects a long overdue return to my doctoral research during which I sought to understand and explain the concept of political myth as one means of explaining the political development of late Pahlavi Iran. This interest, encouraged and stimulated by my supervisor, Charles Tripp, has never left me, and this text, as far removed from my original thesis as it undoubtedly is, owes much to those preliminary investigations and to the continued patient and generous support of Charles, for which I am immensely grateful.

This text, which builds on my understanding of political myth, moves into broader territory reflecting my own interests in the relationship between history and myth and the nature and construction of nationalism as a product of the Enlightenment. My understanding and interpretation has benefitted immensely from the work of others, as I hope will become apparent from the extensive references and bibliography. A number of people, however, merit special mention for their generous insights, contributions and conversations which, to a greater or lesser extent, have informed my argument. I am particularly grateful to Houchang Chehabi for his meticulous and (very) patient reading of the first draft, and for his invaluable comments and encouragement. Lloyd Ridgeon and Paul Luft have patiently listened, challenged, and occasionally corrected some

of my more wayward assertions, while Touraj Daryaei has been invaluable in helping me to understand the historiography of ancient Iran. Both David Morgan and Toby Dodge have helped to clarify my views, albeit from quite different perspectives. I am also grateful for the support offered by the British Institute of Persian Studies and the Iran Heritage Foundation, who funded a series of workshops and conferences on the theme of history and identity in Iran and allowed me to engage with a wider range of scholars and to benefit from their insights. I am also grateful to the National Archives for permission to cite the many official documents made available so efficiently by the archivists.

In St Andrews I have benefitted enormously from working with some of the finest minds working in the disciplines of history, politics, and international relations. Colleagues working on British and European history have helped me to escape the narrow confines of what some might consider ‘area studies’ and helped to shape my views on the Enlightenment, nationalism, and historiography. I am especially grateful to Michael Bentley, Nick Rengger, Tim Greenwood, Robert Hoyland (now departed to Oxford), and Andrew Peacock for their comments, conversation, and support. I would also like to thank the secretarial and support staff at St Andrews, in particular Lorna and Andy, along with staff in IT and the Library who have put up with regular, if spontaneous, visits with unerring conviviality and patience. Patience is indeed a virtue long cultivated by those who deal with academics on a regular basis, and no acknowledgement would be complete without warm-felt thanks to Marigold Acland and her team at Cambridge University Press. It goes without saying that this manuscript was somewhat late in delivery, although I hope it is the better for it and that I have been able to smooth out at least some of the rough edges which undoubtedly exist. That I was eventually able to finish it at all owes much to my wife Marjon, whose encouragement and support have been unwavering. Without her, the challenges would have been considerably greater and the rewards much diminished.

## A Note on Transliteration and Dates

A simplified form of Persian transliteration has been used throughout, making allowances for pronunciation. I have omitted diacritical marks, but have retained the *ayn* and *ezafe*. Thus *Shah* rather than *Šāh*; and *Shahanshah-e Iran* rather than *Shahanshah Iran*. Names of individuals are rendered in the way they are most commonly known or have been reflected in the sources. Thus ‘Mosaddeq’ throughout as opposed to Musaddiq, and the names *Muhammad* and *Riza* are rendered *Mohammad* and *Reza*, unless the names are quoted from a source, in which case the original transliteration is retained.

With respect to dates, three different calendars are used in the sources, the Lunar Hejri, Solar Hejri, and Imperial calendars. The Solar calendar was revised and institutionalised by parliamentary legislation in 1924. The Imperial calendar was imposed by decree in March 1976 and withdrawn in 1978. All dates are provided with their Christian equivalent.