Introduction: Love and Politics

The nation is a love story. At least this is how governments would like to have it because love for the nation is necessary to rule. To that end, governments have several 'romantic' devices to persuade. All governments use a range of national narratives imbued with emotional vigour and tantalising myths. At the time of writing, right-wing politicians are winning elections with the help of highly populist, almost hysterical themes such as 'making America great again', the winning campaign slogan of Donald Trump in the United States. These are the siren songs of (psycho-)nationalism. They are engineered to be persuasive enough to assail and conquer the cognition of the populace. Whether in Asia, Africa, America or Europe, one is continuously enticed to believe in the beauty of the nation. For example, in Britain the word 'Britannia' started as the Roman designation of the British Isles before it metamorphosed into a heroine of the seas in Elizabethan England and the emblem of the naval prowess of the British Empire two centuries later. Today, the idea and symbolism of Britannia has lost some of its meaning. Embattled as a national icon, much in the same way as the idea of Britain itself, the ideational stamina of Britannia has been affected by the historic vote to exit the European Union in June 2016 in the name of national sovereignty, which has led Welsh and Scottish nationalists to question the idea of the United Kingdom once again because they adhere to their own romanticised national myths. The point is that in the familial language of (psycho-)nationalism, in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, the nation is routinely represented almost like an irresistible muse, a siren song with distinctly emotional undertones. 'God bless America' – the target of such phrases is our state of mind and emotional habitat. My term 'psycho-nationalism' derives from such

psychological dynamics. Government, the media, social networking sites, even popular culture in the form of soap operas and music have emerged as the primary carriers of the symbols of this emotive discourse. The target of these subtle forms of political manipulation is our mind and our emotions.

At the same time, the state hovers over a complex system in which psycho-nationalist narratives are moulded and implemented. Hence it claims the *Gewaltmonopol*, defined by German sociologist Max Weber as the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. So if 'romantic' persuasion is not enough, if the siren song of the nation fails to entice, the nation-state can be enforced through violence, brute if necessary. You can be 'beaten' into submission. There are important differences in the ways in which state violence is implemented against assertive dissenters, but governments routinely crush opposition in the name of the nation. This systematic power is exercised through the machinery of laws, norms and regulations. If these strategies are not enough to deter a revolt, the state uses violence through its security forces, police, the military, etc. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben remains firmly within the Eurocentric universe, but his focus on the 'state of exception' is a good conceptual tool for understanding this violence of state sovereignty.[1] The state allows itself to suppress. Thus, our lives are determined by this nation-state, whether we like it or not. From provisions for housing, university fees and food to war and peace, the nation-state continues to be a major factor in the lives of its citizens all over the world. In many ways the nation-state is more consequential in our lives than our parents. It 'stalks' us all the way to our living rooms, regulating everything from TV programmes to schooling issues. If this regulatory power, which always also includes surveillance, is not checked properly by civil society it threatens to turn into a form of arbitrary tyranny.

[1] See further Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Therefore, this book takes seriously the power of the nation-state and modes of resistance to it. I will attempt to dislocate some of the debates on nationalism by investigating several 'sites' where 'psycho-nationalist' dynamics appear. I will keep a close eye on 'new', avant-garde disciplines such as global thought, global history and comparative philosophies, and my evidence is primarily discussed with reference to Iran. Admittedly, Iran is a convenient case study. In his influential book about nationalism, the late Eric Hobsbawm, Professor at Birkbeck and long-standing member of the British communist party, identified Iran as a 'relatively permanent political' unit alongside China, Korea, Vietnam and Egypt.[2] According to him, these countries 'had they been in Europe, would have been recognized as "historic nations"'. Hobsbawm mentioned Iran within the context of European imperialisms and movements that espoused nationalism as an anti-colonial strategy. According to him, the Iranian nation-state, as opposed to other 'entities' in the region that were a direct product of the Sykes-Pikot agreement, did not emerge out of imperial conquest. Rather, the idea of Iran pre-existed the short colonial interlude that created much of the so-called 'Middle East'.[3]

Certainly, Iran serves as a good example for the way the idea of a nation-state is created and sustained. But Hobsbawm and other European scholars of nationalism refer to the country only in passing, without much emphasis on the way Iran has been thought of and manufactured as a nation-state. In the absence of a critical review of the way Iran has been imagined, the country is wrongly assumed to be quintessentially Islamic, Shia, Persian or other. Therefore, what is needed, is an appreciation of the country that escapes the platitudes of 'identity'. If Iran has been invented as a 'historic nation' as Hobsbawm argues, then this history speaks to nationalism studies throughout the world. Yet the lack of emphasis on the country is also apparent

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2012, p. 137.
[3] See further Pinar Bilgin, 'Whose "Middle East"? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security', *International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2004, pp. 25–41.

in Hobsbawm's second pre-eminent publication in the field, *The Invention of Tradition*, which he edited with Terence Ranger, a passionate anti-colonial activist and Afrikanist who was deported from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) by the white-minority government in 1963 because of his support of the African nationalist movement. Their study, with its emphasis on the role of the 'formalisation' and 'ritualisation' of traditions in the making of national myths, is required reading in most courses covering nationalisms today.[4] So if Iran is a relatively permanent political entity as Hobsbawm suggests, studying the traditions, norms and institutions of the country is a 'hard case' with which to gauge some of the mechanisms at work in the making of contemporary nation-states, even as they emerged in Europe and North America. In turn, this is important to assess how states control and manipulate their citizens. Hence, to understand psycho-nationalism, is to understand our daily lives and how the state impinges on everything that we do.

While I am certainly not claiming to present a comprehensive historical analysis (which has been provided by others), it is the task of this book to understand conceptually how the idea of Iran is created, in order to understand the mechanisms and effects of psycho-nationalist discourse.[5] At the same time, I am also paying attention to forms of resistance to those inventions which are engineered primarily by the state and its underbelly. The locus of psycho-nationalism, I claim, is the state; the language of resistance to it is spoken by actors within society. In this way, for instance, I discuss Ayatollah Khomeini, the late leader of the Iranian revolution, alongside Dariush Eghbali, the iconic Iranian pop singer who resides in exile in Los Angeles.

[4] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 4.

[5] For rather more historical approaches see among others Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, and Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation 1804–1946*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

A second, rather more recent impetus for the idea that nations are invented came from Benedict Anderson. Comparable to Hobsbawm, Anderson only mentions Iran in passing when he discusses the impact of print-capitalism on the making of 'national' languages. He mentions how 'conscious' manipulations by the nationalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century disturbed the relative unity of the 'Turkic speaking peoples' in Iran (Turkey, Iraq and the USSR). Turkish was appropriated as a European language through compulsory romanisation by Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk) in order to signify a 'Turkish' national consciousness 'at the expense of any wider Islamic identification'.[6] Language as a marker of a cloistered identity functioned in the same way in the USSR. The Russian communists first enforced 'an anti-Islamic, anti-Persian compulsory Romanisation' which was followed under Stalin in the 1930s by a 'Russifying compulsory Cyrillisation'.[7] Indeed, Russia looms large in the imagination of Iranian nationalists because of the treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828), according to which Iran lost all of its Caucasian territories, including contemporary Dagestan, eastern Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, to the Russian empire. As one prominent professor at the University of Tehran put it: 'These humiliating events deeply shocked Iranian society and its political elite'.[8] Moreover, the Soviet Union plotted the occupation of northern Iran in 1946, one of the first crises diffused by the United Nation Security Council. Ultimately, Russian, British and US imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth century facilitated the articulation of a 'postcolonial nationalism' in Iranian society that was opposed to foreign domination of the country. As we will see, after the revolution of 1979, the Iranian state readily stoked up and played to such sentiments.

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 2016, pp. 45–6.
[7] Ibid., p. 46.
[8] Hamid Ahmadi, 'Islam and Nationalism in Contemporary Iranian Society and Politics', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2010, p. 201.

I have started with Hobsbawm and Anderson in order to ease the reader into the topic. There are at least four themes in the available literature on nationalism which their work touches upon, including studies about Iran. First, nationalism is largely treated as an elite project driven by the state and its underbelly. This emphasis on 'nationalism from above' is apparent in recent research by historians of contemporary Iran, whose contribution to the field traces ideational and institutional conceptions of the country.[9] Others have given particular attention to the blind spots of Iran's contemporary nationalist projects.[10] This scholarship covers a lot of ground in terms of both the role of the state in nationalist discourse and the impact of western modernity on the state-building process in Iran. And yet, the battlefield of nationalism is by far wider. Horizontally, the idea of Iran is a global phenomenon and has to be engaged with as such. Vertically, the idea of Iran has been inscribed into the very consciousness and body of Iranians. The psycho-nationalism of successive states ruling the Iranian terrain is cognitively intrusive and physically demanding. There is a physiognomy of Iran that has taken its psychosomatic toll on the way Iran is imagined both within the country and elsewhere. As an invented mental space, psycho-nationalism in Iran represents a locus for identity, which is not merely cultural, civilisational or national. It is exactly personal because the 'modern' Iranian state has assaulted the cognition of its people on a deep psychological level. 'Cultural schizophrenia', in the words of the contemporary Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan, is a symptom of centuries-old psycho-nationalist dynamics which have affected the way Iranians perceive themselves and others.[11]

[9] See Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Iran* and Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*.

[10] See among others Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 and Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

[11] See Dariush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.

These coercive psycho-nationalist strategies by the state have been resisted in Iranian poetry, philosophy and popular culture. When the world-renowned diva of Iranian popular music Googoosh, who left Iran in 2000 after 20 years of artistic silence, called her comeback album 'Zoroaster', she was appropriating this ancient Iranian religion in protest against the Islamicised national narrative of the Islamic Republic. At least for Googoosh, the imagery of Zoroastrianism became a vehicle of protest much in the same way political interpretations of Islam became a carrier of resistance to the dictatorship of the Shah in the 1970s. This is not because she is a Zoroastrian 'fundamentalist'. Neither were the revolutionaries in 1979 particularly and coherently 'Islamic'. Such imageries and symbols of the past are used to call for an idea of Iran that safeguards diversity and multiculturalism. Before the revolution and after, there have been several revolts in the name of an inclusive and culturally tolerant idea of Iran and this power-resistance dialectic between the state and society has left an indelible imprint on the way Iran is perceived. In this way, Iran has become one of the most contested topics of contemporary global history. This is one of the reasons why Iranians that I have interviewed for this study – even second and third generation citizens in Europe and North America – find the country 'inescapable', 'mesmerising' and central to their personal identity.[12]

The primary material that I have gathered for this book through years of fieldwork in Iran and outside of the country shows the inherently global imagination that many Iranians hold. Many Iranians imagine the country in cosmopolitan and multicultural terms: Iran as the quintessential melting pot of world history, if you like.[13] Many others think the country as monolithic, either primarily 'Persian', 'Islamic' or 'Shia', or even French as the Shah once wrote

[12] Interviews with participants living in: Hamburg, 13 April 2016, Washington, DC, 26 June 2016, London, 16 August 2016. All respondents preferred to be anonymous.
[13] Ibid.

in *Life Magazine*.[14] This is why I approach the topic as an exercise in global thought and comparative philosophies. Iran as a subject matter stands at the crossroads of disciplines and theories. A pluralistic approach to the country ensures a pluralistic appreciation of its meanings. I have invented the 'fields of study' of 'Global Thought' and 'Comparative Philosophies' as a part of my academic title at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Much like an engineer of a mini state with one inhabitant (myself), I am now giving meaning to an invented outfit. Titles and corresponding 'identities' start with imagined ideas, even if they are entirely new as is my title. Nation-states follow a similar pattern. They are imagined and continuously filled with meaning. Therefore, I am presenting this study as a 'psycho-ethnography' of the way nation-states are imagined. Hence, this is not a project limited to Iran. It is research that contributes to a global understanding of nation-states and the psycho-nationalist politics that they pursue.

PSYCHO-NATIONALISM EXPLAINED

Even the most ardent 'globalist' who believes in the de-territorialisation of space, must be surprised that the nation continues to be presented, partially successfully, as a source of identity. When I was a student at the universities of Hamburg, America (Washington, DC) and Cambridge everyone spoke of the 'global village'. Conversely, studies into nationalism were outdated and largely confined to the postcolonial 'Third World'. There are nuances of course: national sentiments in North Korea are very different from those in Germany. The Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un propagates an aggressive nationalism. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel refrains from speaking about a 'German nation'. But it is rather surprising that even very intelligent people continue to defend national pride beyond innocent expressions of national affinity. This is largely

[14] Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, 'A Future to Outshine Ancient Glories', *Life*, 31 May 1963.

because until very recently, nations were thought to be primordial and self-evident. In Europe and elsewhere, the nation was produced as a people with a common 'race', history, culture, set of habits and in particular with a shared language. In the course of the last four centuries, and in Europe certainly since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the allegiance that used to tie communities to smaller polities such as city-states even within larger imperial entities, gradually came to be integrated into a tightly defined and formally delineated territory. In Iran this process was equally complicated. The position of the country at the crossroads of ancient human history forced successive leaders of the Iranian terrain to integrate and centralise a notion of Iran that would legitimise the ruler – a rather arduous task trying to unify the *satraps* and *ostans* that were ruled by the Cyruses, Xerxes, Dariuses, Alexanders and Gengis Khans of this world. And what to do with the loose ethno-geography of a place like that? The problem is exactly that the idea of Iran and its political management has an ancient genealogy. The point that I am making is that high politics in the region, including the politics of the nation, precede European modernity. It is just that the western archives haven't adequately captured this Iranian presence in global history.[15]

It is not then that the nation-state that came into existence through this process is a distinctly 'modern' phenomenon as Anderson, Gellner, Hobsbawm and Kedourie famously argue.[16] There were 'nationalised' entities in antiquity. Certainly, Sassanid Iran (224–651) had its own sense of the nation, with its own religious narrative (Zoroastrianism), symbolic capitol (Ctesiphon), official language (middle Persian) and Persian-centric ethno-ideology. But the absence of modern forms of communication such as the printing press, as Anderson argues, the 'techno-politics' of mass communication

[15] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'A (Short) History of the Clash of Civilisations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2006, pp. 217–34.

[16] Their writings are part and parcel of the many compilations in nationalism studies. See among others John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

today and in particular recourse to ideological systems of psycho-controlling and monopolising the national narrative for the state made it that much more difficult to keep the nation together without the exercise of brute force and military dominance. In other words: modernity equipped the state with rather more sophisticated psycho-nationalist devices. In terms of dissemination and impact, mass producing pamphlets about the 'divine' rulership of the current Iranian leader Ali Khamenei in the seminaries of Qom, as well as his Twitter account with over 235,000 followers, is very different to propagating a divinely ordained universal order dominated by the king of kings, as Cyrus II proclaimed in the so-called 'Cyrus cylinder' in the sixth century BC. The psycho-nationalist *intention* is comparable, both strategies are meant to solicit submission to the ruler, but the ability of the ruling elites to get their message across is, of course, fundamentally different:[17] the Cyrus cylinder has been parked in the British Museum across from my office at SOAS on Russell Square, the Twitter account of Khamenei transcends spatial restriction.

We can agree that contemporary psycho-nationalism is distinctly invasive. Michel Foucault has termed such mature forms of political mind control 'bio-political'.[18] According to Foucault, bio-power is intimate; it targets our bodies. Despite his fascination for Iran during the revolutionary years of 1978–9, Foucault's empirical material remained Eurocentric. If he had studied the Iranian case beyond his journalistic articles for *Corriere della Serra* in Italy, Foucault would have discovered how state power in Iran failed to 'discipline' and subdue resistance.[19] Bio-power in Iran, which has been implemented through ideological education and measures to optimise the penetrability of the population through psychological

[17] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'What Is Radicalism? Power and Resistance in Iran', *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2012, pp. 271–90.

[18] See among other works Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

[19] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, Chapter 4.