

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

Exactly twenty years after the first release of *Iran as Imagined Nation* (1993), it gives me great pleasure to revise my book and add an epilogue. The epilogue emphasizes updated conclusions related to core arguments and the central thesis of the book, considering the latest scholarship in the field and engaging in renewed arguments on the historicism of Iranian national identity to the extent that they were not treated in the first edition, and also offers perspectives on the implications of national identity today. The revision of the first edition text involved the shortening of parts of chapter one and honing various points in consecutive chapters. The diacritic marks in transliterating some Arabic and Persian words and names have been made consistent throughout the text, although some commonly known words, such as: 'Dari', 'Farsi' and 'Sasanian' are written without diacritics.

In 1993, the seminal thesis of this short book provided an alternative paradigm: challenging the dominant nationalist historiography which had anachronistically conceptualized and traced Iranian national identity to the remote past. The goal behind writing this book was not to produce a replacement history for Iran or an encyclopedia of Iranian topics to meet the wide-ranging demands of scholars whose scholarship had been rooted in the old methodology. Instead the book was intended to open an investigation into how the indiscriminate and imprecise construction of Iranian national history and the resulting invention of a 'national' identity for the people of antiquity had transpired. Though some critics detracted from what the book offered, only focusing on what it lacked, the book's controversial arguments have triggered a number of deeper studies regarding Iranian national identity since 1993. The critics of the book believe too much emphasis has been put on Orientalism and less credit has been granted to the rise of domestic nationalism for the formation

of national identity. This has been a misreading. Chapter 8 of the book in fact emphasizes how the internal nationalist doctrine boosted and promoted Iranism and Iranian identity. However, the goal of the book has been chiefly to trace and challenge the work of the Orientalists and bring to light the anachronism of their conception of continuous Iranian identity from ancient times.

Since the thesis of the book probes the authenticity of rooting Iranian identity in the remote past, readers might ask how I view this historical challenge in relation to my own personal feelings towards Iran as the country of my birth. To answer this question I must share that I have wonderful memories of growing up in Tehran — my friends, my schooling, hearing sweet anecdotes from my parents, and experiencing a bond with the community where I grew up. I have also always been grateful that Persian has been my mother tongue, giving me access to fantastic world-class Persian literature. At the same time, as a social scientist I am not reluctant to confront new and noteworthy ideas for reflection and investigation even though it may challenge the so-called established history of the country of my birth. Thus this book is not about my personal feelings towards Iran, but rather is an invitation to investigate history in a responsible fashion by using other measuring tools such as anthropology and critical analysis, taking it out of the monopoly of a few who have perpetuated their at times stultifying assumptions about the past.

History by its nature is an inexact discipline that has often been manipulated by the array of feelings, beliefs, and old-fashioned religious dogma transmitted by pre-modern historians. Historians and other social scientists of the last two hundred years reconstructed the past based on their own generational, short-lived ideological orientations without giving consideration to the fluid nature of nation-state and nationalism. Today's academia has accepted the challenge of making the discipline more intellectually rigorous, dynamic, and objective, but of course not without resistance from those whose ideas are being questioned. While controversial, the arguments in this book certainly do not stem from my personal feelings and views, but rather from a deeper intellectual reasoning.

On a different level, academic writings on national identity need eventually to become morally justifiable, non-chauvinistic, and non-anachronistic, avoiding overtly national assertions. The

nationalists' narrow claim of Iran being a unique nation possessing more than its share of importance on the world stage is an improper, intellectually sluggish approach for our time and age, abhorrent to neighboring communities, and distasteful in its lack of subtlety in approaching the question of national identity. It is more desirable for our generation to deem the histories and achievements of other communities of the world just as significant and alluring as our own.

From the perspective of the new global setting, national identities solidify our external differences by emphasizing those who 'belong' to our group and those who are 'the other', but in reality all of humanity, despite national or regional differences, shares the same space on the surface of the planet. Modern transportation and communication networks have helped us transcend our parochial pre-modern perceptions of other cultures, as exotic as they still may seem to us. Many travellers as well as social scientists have been able to learn languages and enjoy what other communities of humanity have to offer.

As a result of this global mobility, means of communication, and higher levels of education and socioeconomic status, people of diverse countries and cultures have been able to connect with other like-minded individuals who share the same occupation or savor the same spiritual and emotional inclinations in life. These encounters have, to a small extent, weakened the blind prejudice of people who exclusively identify themselves in terms of the inhabitants of their own countries, whether they have anything substantive in common with them besides their shared national identity or not. Interpersonal human connection can even supersede national identity. This modern phenomenon opens up another aspect of identity, beyond national identity, and has served to remedy some of the harsh, limited views of nationalism and national identity. The human mind is in many ways flexible and infinite and can adjust to new and self-constructed circumstances, yet it can also be deceived by illusive, finite interpretations of reality. The idea of national identity is only one of such finite historical 'illusions'.

As a final comment, given the recent rise of debates on modern nationalism and the global ramifications of national identity, the appearance of this second edition is timely and I hope it contributes to ongoing dialogue and debate.

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The revision of this book has been possible thanks to my friend Chandra Khaki who converted the pdf version of the entire book into Word. Thanks to Gorgias Press and their recognition of the continued relevance of this book, it will finally appear in an affordable paperback. I am pleased to express my gratitude in writing to those who inspired and helped me to produce this epilogue. Above all, I am indebted to my partner, Allison, whose readings and discussions of various drafts made significant contributions to the quality of the epilogue. The quality was improved and arguments were sharpened with the help of reading and commenting by several colleagues mentioned here. My childhood friend and intellectual mentor, Dr. Asghar Feizi, insistently encouraged me to pursue the second edition of this book, whose content was debated in the hundreds of discussions we pursued in Berkeley between 1989 and 1992. He deserves my deepest appreciation for reading and commenting on the major themes of this book. Needless to say, Professor Michael G. Morony has continued to be the inspiration and a pillar in my research to find a better balance in presenting my arguments. There are no words to express my deep gratitude for his mentorship and encouragement. I am thankful to Professor Afshin Matin-Asgari for his graceful and precise recommendations, as well as for sharing with me some sources, including his own chapter on national identity. My appreciation goes to Dr. Denis Hermann for his sharp suggestions and for sharing a number of sources with me, as well as for our earlier exchanges about the themes of this book. Professor Geoffrey Nash deserves many thanks for taking an interest in this book and sending me his sound recommendations. I am thankful to Professor Parvaneh Pourshariati for sharing with me her ideas and tips of pre-modern Iranian identity.

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