

Iran: An Old Civilization and a New Nation State

by

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This is the first part of a two-part article.

Part I, "The Iranian Tradition of Statehood," discusses the ramifications for present-day Iran of political relations in association with the political organization of space in the ancient world.

Part II, "Iran's Geopolitical Regions in the 21st Century," will be published in a future issue of *FOCUS on Geography*.

Part I. The Iranian Tradition of Statehood

Introduction: An Ancient State and Its Many Neighbors

Iran has functioned for at least 5000 years as a civilization and as fertile ground for the emergence of the world's first state in the modern sense of the word. The administration of Iran has historically been plagued with difficulties of exerting authority outside the main areas of population and, therefore, in fixing its national frontiers.

The word Iran means "the land of the Aryans." Politically, Iran is a country situated in southwest Asia in the part of the globe generally known as the Middle East. With a land area of 1,648,195 square kilometers, Iran is bounded by no less than 15 countries and autonomous regions, making it the country with the largest number of neighbors. Most of them at one time or another in history have been part of the famous Persian Empire (a term used by many Western historians), which disintegrated during and as a result of the Anglo-Russian "Great Game" of

geopolitics that started in late 18th century and ended in World Wars I and II in the 20th century.

During World War II, the country was occupied by Anglo-Russian forces on the unsubstantiated allegation that Iran had joined with Nazi Germany; in fact, Tehran had officially declared its impartiality in the war and adequately defended that impartiality. The Allies had to invade and occupy Iran in order to turn it into a land bridge for logistic supply between Britain and the Soviet Union, and they termed it the "bridge of victory" at the end of the war. This article examines the political geography of Iran's position from ancient to modern times using ancient ideas to illuminate Iran's present-day complex position on the global stage.

Brief Geographical Background

Iran is a country in the Middle East, which is bounded by the Caspian Sea and the republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to the

north; by Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east; by Turkey and Iraq to the west; and by the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman (including the countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates [U.A.E.]), and the northwest corner of the Indian Ocean to the south (see map on pages 18-19). With such a large number of neighbors, Iran has had to derive a set of highly complicated border arrangements, resulting in substantial impacts to relations with all these entities.

Iran is a vast and diverse country, with only a tenth of its area under settled forms of economic use. The rest is desert, steppe, and high mountains. Until the early 20th century, the country was comprised of a set of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups unified under a federal-style system of government and sharing a common literature, social ethos and culture, and a distinct civilization. Apart from the central province, the largest single provincial region by population size is Azerbaijan, where there is a



The author, Professor Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, on a television discussion program.



Kaaledj, the author's birth place, a village on the mountain tops of the Elborz Range (Nour), Mazandaran

concentration of Azeri speakers of the Perso-Turkic group of languages. Other coherent areas with a regional consciousness include Kurdistan in the west, the Arab zone of the Khuzistan lowlands in the southwest, the Turkmen steppe of the northeast, and the Baluch area of the southeast (1).

Geographically, the term "Iran" covers an area much greater than the state of Iran. It includes the entire Iranian plateau, a highland region located between the Himalayas on the east and Anatolia on the west. Culturally, the term includes all peoples speaking Iranian languages, a subdivision of the Indo-European family of languages: those who speak Persian, Dari (Afghani), Dari (Tajik), Kurdish, Luri, Mazandarani, Khorasani, Guilak, Baluchi, and Azeri Turkish (a Turkish local dialect of Azerbaijan that is more Persian in words and characters than the Mongolian and/or Anatolian Turkish).

Iran as a nation today is composed of several ethnic groups, including the Kurds, Baluchis, Mazandarani, Guilaks, Azerbaijanis, Khorasani, and Persians, all of whom are from the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European

ethnicity. There are two exceptions. The first is a few Arabic-speaking tribes of Mesopotamian origin (Mesopotamia was part of the Persian federative system for over 2,000 years), who form a small minority in the province of Khuzestan and defend their Arab identity within their Iranian nationality (as they did in the face of the Iraqi invasion of Iran during Saddam Hussein's rule). The second is a small number of Turkmen tribes who live in the Gorgan plain of Golestan Province, who also fiercely defend their identity as being part of Iran.

The Iranian Tradition of Statehood

There are unmistakable indications in the historical record that Iran was the first civilization to fashion the concept of "state," here used to mean a set of governing institutions with sovereignty over a defined territory. Although there is little doubt that the modern concepts of state and territory were developed in modern Europe, it is hard to overlook the fact that they are rooted in periods older than their 15th-century emergence in Europe.

There are indications that ancient civilizations were familiar with the notion of the state in connection with territorial and boundary characteristics, similar to modern states. References in ancient Persian literature discuss states, territories, and boundaries in a strikingly modern way, which probably influenced ancient Greek and Roman governance. A combination of traits from the ancient Greek, Roman, and Persian civilizations is said to have been a major source of contributions to what culturally constitutes the West in our time. Considering the extent to which Greek and Roman civilizations interacted with that of ancient Persia, little doubt remains about the validity of French geographer Jean Gottmann's assertion in his letter to this writer (1987) that:

Iran must have belonged to the 'Western' part of mankind, and I suspect that this was what Alexander the Great of Macedonia, a pupil of Aristotle, therefore, in the great Western philosophical tradition, found in

Iran and that attracted him so much that he wanted to establish a harmonious, multi-national cooperation between the Iranians and Greeks within the large empire he was building. (2)

Verification can be found in historical events as when, upon conquering Persia in 333 CE, the Greek leader, Alexander the Great, claimed in Persepolis that he was a true successor to the Iranian leader, Achaemenid Darius III. The significance of this declaration is provided by Ferdowsi, the famous 11th-century Persian poet, in *Shahnameh, Book of the Kings* (3). Having conquered Iran, Alexander wrote to the nobles of the country apologizing for having done away with their king, Darius III. In Ferdowsi's poetic retelling, Alexander assured them "if Dara is no more, I am here and Iran will remain the same as it has always been since its beginning" (4). He kept the existing political organization of space, modified later by his successors. Alexander also proclaimed justice to be the goal of his mission in Iran.

Eminent researcher Nayer Nouri quotes fellow expert Glover on the nature of ancient Persian civilization:

The Persians (Iranians) set new ideas before mankind, ideas for the world's good government with utmost of unity and cohesion combined with the largest possible freedom for the development of race and individual within the larger organization. (5)

Other writers, ancient and modern, confirm that the "state" was central to Iran's governance from early times. Greek historians/geographers Herodotus and Xenophon (5th century BCE) confirm that Iran's Achaemenid Dynasty (559-330 BCE) founded a federal state, a vast commonwealth of autonomous nations. This federation's founder, Cyrus (*Kurosh*) the Great (559-529 BCE), together with his successors, substantially expanded their new commonwealth, dividing it into many

satrapies (up to forty). Each was governed by a local *Satrap*, a *Khashthrapavan* or vassal king. This was a commonwealth of global proportions, including the lands of Trans-Oxania, Sind, and Trans-Caucasus, which stretch from today's Romania east across the Middle East and North Africa.

It was also a political system of universal aspirations ruled by a *Shahanshah* (king of kings), hence referred to as the *Shahanshahi* system. The king of kings in this system was not a lawgiver but the defender of laws and religions for all in the federation (6). Glover notes the Achaemenids' "good government" and Cyrus's proclamation in Babylonia (7) stated that all were "equal in his realm." Ethnic and cultural groups enjoyed a measure of independence in the practice of their language, religion, and economies. To uphold their independence and to respect their religions, the king of kings did not lay claim to any specific religion.

Consequently, the peoples of ancient Iran's conquered territories were free to keep their religions, laws, and traditions. Upon conquering Babylonia in 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great found thousands of Jews in captivity there. He freed them and sent them back to their place of worship. His respect for the captive Jews' religious freedom guaranteed their good will towards the Iranians. He became their prophet, and they became voluntary citizens of the Persian federation. Cyrus commissioned the building of their temple, and their reaction was to assess his work as fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, where it says:

I am the lord...that saith of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and shall perform my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built: and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid. (8)

Many have tried hard to detect a "dark side" to this early example of a federative state and good government.

The best that certain political interests of our time – such as the former Baath Party in Iraq – could come up with was to equate Cyrus with a warmongering king supporting Zionists (the Jews in captivity in Babylonia). Those of this political viewpoint blame Cyrus for waging wars on several nations, implying that the vast commonwealth of the Achaemenid state came about solely through force and that Arabs were among Cyrus's victims.

These criticisms are based on blatant anachronisms and misrepresentations. Babylonia was not an Arab state but an Acadian civilization. Arabs only reached Mesopotamia much later, first appearing in the southern Iraq city of Al-Hirah by the 5th century CE according to Arab historian/geographers Masudi (9) and Maqdasi (10). These sources relate that Arab settlement of southern Mesopotamia increased after the advent of Islam in the early 7th century CE. Finally, of course, the captive Jews in ancient Babylonia have nothing to do with Zionism, a 20th-century phenomenon.

Moreover, war is an inherent part of mankind's political behavior. Even in this age of modernity when war is detested as an act of immorality, there are moralists who defend the so-called "just war." Babylonia was an Acadian civilization ruled by a tyrant, and, therefore, Cyrus's war easily qualifies it as such both in the Old and New Testaments as well as in the holy Koran.

On the other hand, our knowledge of ancient Persia and its role in the ancient world is largely shrouded in obscurity, and our information, all too scanty, is derived from foreign sources (11) that were at war with Iran most of the time.

Justice as a Cornerstone of the Iranian State System

Considering that justice was a cornerstone of ancient Iranian political philosophy, it is reasonable to argue that Iranian spatial arrangements have contributed to the evolution of the

concept of democracy in the West. Some claim that when Cyrus the Great founded the federative state of many nations in what was to become known in the West as the Persian Empire (12), he did not invent tolerance, righteousness, and happiness for the people but was following a deep-rooted, age-old tradition of how an ideal king should behave. He may have inherited the tradition of good government – based on justice, toleration of others and respect for varying religious beliefs from the 7th-century BCE Medes, whose king Deioces (Diachus) first gathered all Iranians into a single empire (13). Nevertheless, Cyrus's decree of freedom and equality in 539 BCE is the earliest documented evidence that justice was basic to good government in the ancient Persian tradition of statehood.

This tradition was observed by many who succeeded Cyrus in Iran throughout its pre-Islamic history. According to the stales found at Naghsh-e Rostam in western Iran, Darius I (Dariush), known as Darius the Great (521-486 BCE), organized thirty satrapies, each under an autonomous king assisted by a Satrap representing the central authority of the king of kings. He appointed commanders of the army and secretaries of political affairs. He fixed the tributes of each satrapy, designating tribute-collectors and traveling inspectors, called the “eyes and ears” of the great king, to watch over the Satraps and army commanders. He introduced currencies of gold *darics* and silver *siglus*, thus facilitating trade exchange in the federation (14). Darius built the 2,700 kilometer-long Royal Road from Susa, northwest of the Persian Gulf, to Sardis on the Aegean Sea, with branches to Persepolis and other political and commercial centers (15). He ordered that the map of this road and civilized countries along it be engraved on a plate of bronze (16), perhaps the first detailed geographic map in history. He established a postal service with relays of men and horses at

short intervals and caused a canal to be dug in Egypt to link the Red Sea to the Nile (17).

In matters of state politics, while the Athenians were busy with their particular version of citizenship-oriented democracy, Iran's Achaemenids were forging a state system based on independence for cultural groups or nationalities. It was a federative system in which peoples of varying cultural backgrounds were given the right to govern their affairs autonomously, with respect for their religious and cultural identities. It seems safe to say that equality and justice were important to governance in this federative system of statehood. The administration of justice reached its zenith nearly a millennium later in the Sassanid period during the rule of Anushirvan the Just (531-579 CE), discussed in greater detail below. It is plausible to assume that these early Persian traditions of political philosophy have contributed to the development of modern concepts of democracy in the West. Some suggest (18) that the concept of empire is perhaps a Roman adoption of the Persian *Shahanshahi* system; and thus it is plausible too that the Romans based their idea of a senate on the ancient Persian *Mehestan*, the House of the Elders.

Evolution of State and Boundary from the Parthians to the Sassanids

The Parthians, who succeeded the Macedonians in Iran between 247 BCE and 224 CE, created two kinds of autonomies in the federation: internal satrapies and peripheral dependent states, with 18 of the latter enjoying greater autonomy (19).

Around the dawn of the Christian era, the concepts of state and territory assumed greater sophistication as the notion of frontier or boundary became more important in Iran. This was primarily the result of greater centralization of power in the face of new threats from powerful adversaries, such as the Roman Empire to the west

and the Turans to the east. The political organization of space in the Sassanid federation (224-651 CE) was marked by the development of such concepts as internal and external frontier-keeping states, buffer states, and boundary pillars. There are even hints in ancient literature of a well-defined river boundary between Iran and Turan in Central Asia (20).

Sassanid Use of Territory and Boundary

A look at the works of Persian literature relevant to Iran's ancient political geography, such as the poet Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, reveals that the Sassanids helped develop the concept of territory within the framework of defined boundaries. The founding Sassanid, Ardashir I, revived the Achaemenids' political organization of the state, dividing it into 20 autonomous countries. He initiated a government-style cabinet, assigning ministers of state including Bozorgmehr the physician-philosopher, and revived the ancient notion of the “four corners of the realm,” (the Iranian federation), with four separate armies. He also created an advisory board of the nobles by dividing the political structure into seven classes. The ministers, the priesthood, supreme judges, and four generals commanded the four armies (21).

Most celebrated of the Sassanid kings was Khosro I, Anushirvan the Just (531–579 CE), whose administration of justice has widely been praised by Arabs and early Islamic historian-geographers (22). This wise ruler gave practical meaning to the Achaemenid concept of the four corners of the realm by placing the 20 countries of the Persian federation in four major *Kusts* or *Pazgous*. Each was ruled by a viceroy or regent called *Pazgousban* or *Padusban*, and an *espahbad*, or general, commanded the army of each *Pazgous*. In his epic *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi describes the four *Pazgous* as follows:

Khorasan included the territories of Qom and Isfahan; Azarabadegan or Azerbaijan included the territory of Armanestan (Armenia) and Ardebil; Pars included Persia, in southern Iran, Ahvaz, and Khazar (most likely Khuzestan); and Iraq included the territory of Iraq and the Roman territories of Syria and Anatolia (23).

Development of the concept of territory in the Sassanid era went hand in hand with the evolution of the concept of boundary. Governors (*Padusbans*) were appointed for the vassal states, and mayors (*Shahrighs*) were appointed for the cities; frontier zones were delineated to the west of the federation and boundary lines to its east.

Buffers and Boundaries to the East and West

In the west, the Sassanids developed two kinds of frontier-protection states: the internal frontier states within their four *Kusts* and the external frontier states, the most famous of which was *Hirah* or *Manazerah* in Mesopotamia (24), on the northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf at the meeting place of the Iranian and Roman Empires. This vassal kingdom was created in the 5th century by the Sassanids on the river Tigris not far from their capital Ctesiphon. This frontier state was funded and protected by the Iranians, effectively forming a buffer state for Iran, defusing pressures emanating from the Romans (25). In a similar move, the Romans created the vassal kingdom of *Ghassan* in the region now known as Syria (26).

By virtue of its struggle against Arab rule, Iran played the role of a cultural barrier throughout the Islamic era, guaranteeing its cultural survival in subsequent periods. Islam found its way to Iran after 630 CE, supplanting Zoroastrianism as the main religion, but Arab culture was kept at bay. The precise location of the line of this cultural barrier can be defined as the

western periphery of the Iranian Plateau in Mesopotamia, which played the same role in the pre-Islamic era between the Persian and Roman Empires.

Desert ecologist Mitrani's theory of the "Middle Zone," in his usage applied to Central Europe (27), can be used here to help explain the status and geographical position of Iran within its regional setting. This geographical situation has prevented other cultures from overwhelming the Iranian Plateau throughout history.

On their eastern flank, the Sassanids faced the Turans, who, like the Romans to the west, engaged in numerous wars with the Iranians. In contrast to the imprecise buffer zone established with the Romans, the Iranians on at least one occasion created precise boundaries with the Turans. This difference – buffer zone versus precise border – must have been the result of differing pressure exerted on the federation by these powers to their east and west. Rivalries with the Romans to the west were geopolitical, evolving into a situation similar to the Anglo-Russian "Great Game" of the 19th century in Central Asia. Rivalries with the Turans to the east were intensely strategic, culminating in many wars, and requiring the demarcation of boundary lines to separate the two.

Not only did the Sassanids revive the Achaemanid organization of the state and territory, they also fashioned the term *Iranshahr* (the country of Iran), arguably the first time that a state or a nation had assumed an identity and/or a name independent of its ruling dynasties (28).

Poet Ferdowsi provides glimpses of Iran's political geography in his verses. Describing a debate between the Persian king Bahram Gour (Bahram I, 421-438 CE) and a Roman emissary on their differing styles of diplomacy and statesmanship, Ferdowsi informs the reader that, victorious in his campaign against eastern Turks, Bahram Gour had boundary pillars built, between Iran and its Turkish adversaries. Deciding that the River Oxus (*Jeyhun*)

would form the boundary between the two sides, Bahram

constructed pillars of stone and chalk (plaster); thereby ensuring that no one from Iran or Turk or others would pass beyond unless permitted by the Shah who has also made Jeyhun (River Oxus) a median in the way. (29)

Thus, it is Ferdowsi who asserted a thousand years ago that boundary pillars were erected six hundred years earlier and that Iranians, Eastern Turks, and third party nationals were prohibited from going beyond them unless permitted by the king himself. The king also defined the River Oxus as part of the boundary between the two political entities. This is a good example of the creation of a boundary line in ancient Persia, corresponding to the modern understanding of the concept. Similarly, the permission from the king for passing beyond the boundary might be considered as an early form of a passport, in today's terms.

Territories and Boundaries to the South

There are indications that the Parthians (250 BC - 224 CE) made substantial progress in seafaring, but there is no evidence to suggest how they or the more ancient Achaemenids treated the issue of territoriality and boundary in coastal areas along the Persian Gulf. The Sassanids, by contrast, organized the southern Gulf into two states or satrapies after they gained control of this area during the 4th century CE. To the west, they created the kingdom of Hagar, embracing ancient Aaval, covering an area that today includes Bahrain, Qatar, and the Hasa and Qatif provinces of Saudi Arabia. To the east they created the vassal kingdom of Masun, encompassing an area that in our time includes Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

The original population of these

areas was Iranian long before Arabs found their way to the coastal south. Arab immigration began in the 2nd century CE. When the *Kawadh* (*Qobads*) ruled Masun in the 6th century CE, they were faced with a rising tide of immigrant Arabs. The Iranian rulers treated the newcomers as citizens (*Shahrvandan* in Persian, *Ahlalbilad* in Arabic), giving them some autonomy under their own tribal leadership (30). Thus, the ancient Iranian federation was still at work a thousand years after its creation and in a distant, vassal kingdom. However, the Sassanid era was coming to an end as the Arab influx became a flood fueled by Islam. The Arabs captured the Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon in the 630s, and the empire collapsed by 650.

Summing Up: Impact of the Iranian Tradition of Statehood on the West

There is no doubt that the Athenians initially developed the concept of democracy, specifically direct democracy, in which citizens do not elect representatives to vote on their behalf but vote in their own right. However, this practice applied only to the social strata of the Athenian city-state, which became a democracy in 500 BCE. A nationwide application of democracy had to wait until Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 331 BCE and adopted the Persian way of organizing the political space – as a quasi-federal state divided into discrete territories. The Achaemenids no doubt developed the original concept of state, but the idea of a vertically organized state with distinct and clearly demarcated boundaries matured under the Sassanids and began to influence Western civilizations.

When assessing the influence of ancient Iran on the concepts of state and boundary in medieval Europe, Biblical references abound on the topic of Iranian statehood and its tradition of respect for the rights of varying peoples (*Isaiah 44; Esther 1:1; Ezra 1:1; and others*). According to these

testimonies, the state organization created by the Achaemenid kings was based on culture groups and not territorial conquest. By developing their own version of a federative state based on the notion of justice for all, the Iranians created a commonwealth of semi-independent nations (or a federation of autonomous states) and arguably laid the foundation for the idea of state democracy or democratic state.

This political structure of statehood was taking shape in Iran simultaneously with the advent of the Greek version of citizenship-centered democracy. In 539 BCE, Iran's first Achaemenid leader, Cyrus the Great, issued the charter in Babylonia (discussed above, the text is in the British Museum) declaring equality and justice for individuals, as well as freedom for religious-cultural entities in the realm. These notions formed the political fabric of the Iranian-Persian state; Cyrus' successor, Darius the Great, also referred to justice in the states he bequeathed to posterity. This suggests that, while the Athenians were concerned about the rights of individuals in society, the Iranian-Persians were anxious to promote the rights of communities within their state system.

Few other sources discuss the extent to which these ancient Iranian-Persian traditions influenced the evolution of the Western concepts of state, boundary and democracy. Examples include Durant (31) and the philosopher Nietzsche, who may have formed his view of the civilized Western man based on his readings of the ancient Persian philosophy of life (32). Nondemocratic traditions were also passed on to the West: the scholar Ghirshman (Iran, 1962) states that, "under Alexander, 'monarchy by divine right' of the Iranians became an institution of Hellenism and later was taken up by many European states" (33).

The scholar Levy suggests that the connection between the ancient Iranian-Persian tradition and the West

had some intermediate steps. Specifically, he points to the Arab Caliphate, which succeeded the Iranian Sassanid federation across the Middle East in the Islamic era. Levy identifies the Caliphate as an intermediate culture through which the Iranian-Persian tradition of statehood influenced the modern Western world. Quoting early Arab and Islamic records, he states that,

the Fakhri, an early- fourteenth century manual of politics and history, relates how the caliph, Umar, when at his wits end to know how to distribute the spoils of war which were pouring in, sought the advice of a Persian who had once been employed in a government office (of the Sassanid time). His suggestion was that a divan, a register or bureau, should be instituted for controlling income and this became the germ out of which grew the government machine that served the caliphate some hundreds of years. (34)

Of the influence of the Persian legacy of state and statesmanship on the Arab Caliphate, an early Islamic historical account quotes Caliph Umar as saying:

Verily have I learnt justice from Kesra (Khosro, Anushirvan the Just). (35)

In his writings on the tradition of sacred kingship in Iran based on reliable Roman sources, Filippani-Ronconi, states that:

if we want to look into the successful diffusion in the Western world of certain institutions connected with kingship, in either the religious or the lay domain, we must go back to the Roman Empire, which was the first Western state to absorb a great deal of such outside influence, especially in its political and administrative institutions

regarding the status of the Emperor. (36).

Examples of the influence of the Persian tradition of statehood on the Western civilization are provided:

The heritage handed down by Iran to the West and still living in its ideological conceptions and cultural institutions is manifold. If its patterns are sometimes difficult to recognize and trace back to their origin, that is due to the fact that this legacy has been received through intermediate cultures and westernized models... The leading elements of what we could call the 'vertical organization' of the state are part of this age-old heritage. They were handed over to the modern world through the late Roman imperial structure and its medieval renaissance: through the institutions of chivalry and knighthood that, obscurely transmitted to European society in a Celtic-Germanic garb, were later Christianized... (36).

Summing Up: Impact of the Iranian Tradition of Statehood on Iran in the Post-Islamic Era

What happened to these concepts in Iran and in its neighbors following the arrival of Islam? The Arab Caliphate of Baghdad (Abbasid Caliphate, 750 to 1258 AD) mimicked the Sassanid organization of territories almost in its entirety (37). They too created frontier states, one of which, the Khozeimeh Amirdom of Qaenat (in eastern Iran), lasted until the 1930s (38).

In the post-Sassanid era, as Islam spread into Iran, the embrace of Shia Islam over Sunni was essentially a desire to revive the country's cultural and national identity. The ancient Persian concept of justice gained new currency, transmuted into one of the five basic principles of Shia Islam. In the following centuries, the expansion of Shia in Iran merged with other notions of identity in the face of the Arab Caliphate, paving the way for the

eventual revival of the concepts of Iranian territoriality and statehood.

Eventually Iranian identity and empire revived under the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722). Originating in northern Iran, the Safavids reestablished a unified Iran, although it was transmuted in many ways by acceptance of Shia Islam as the official religion. What they revived in terms of territorial organization of space was a vague adaptation of the Arab Empire's interpretation of the Sassanid system, not the original version. This suggests that, during the centuries dominated by the Arabs and Sunni Islam, Iran departed from its own ancient traditions of state and boundary. This was a powerful handicap that has manifested itself during the 20th century in the face of the conceptual and physical onslaught of modern European ideas about nationality and statehood.

Emergence of the Nation-state in the 20th Century

The Pahlavi Dynasty came into power in Iran in February 1921 out of a *coup d'etat* against the Qajar Dynasty. The founder of this new Dynasty gained a short breathing space, 16 years of strong central control of the country, during which the idea of a modern nation-state was imposed on Iran. This experience enabled the government to tie its formerly federated and varied provinces firmly to the central government.

Beginning in 1921, Reza Khan Pahlavi put down regional revolts by the tribes of the Khamseh and others before beginning the process of reducing rebellion elsewhere in the west (39). He took advantage of the Russian withdrawal from Iranian soil in September of that year to put down the Russian-backed revolt of Kuchak Khan in the northern province of Gilan, marking the clear beginning of the centralization process. In the following year, Reza Khan attacked rebel forces in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan and settled the northeast province of Khorasan.

This process continued in 1923 in the south, where the main tribes, the Bakhtiari and Qashqai, were put down and Sheikh Khazal, the regional ruler of the Arab tribes of Khuzestan, was ousted.

Reza Khan was able to seize the government and legitimized his position and simultaneously consolidated his (and the central government's) power through military means. In 1925, he sealed the unity of the nation (40) by deposing the last of the Qajar Dynasty, Ahmad Shah, crowning himself as "Reza Shah" Pahlavi, head of the House of Pahlavi.

The new king's carefully constructed state and national frontiers were far from strong. The illusion of centralization worked only for the innermost provinces. Iran's abilities to confront challenges from the outside world were limited in spite of its modern defense force. The new state was successful in its first legal battles with the British over control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the south, and it made some gains in a 1933 oil agreement (41).

As World War II commenced, Iran declared its neutrality, but this was jeopardized by political affairs in neighboring Iraq and growing British suspicions concerning the activities of German agents in Iran. The invasion of the USSR by German forces in June 1941 added to Iran's difficulties: with its sensitive geographical location on the one hand and the Anglo-Soviet alliance on the other, the country was exposed to simultaneous pressures from the north and the south.

Increasingly perceived by the Allies as a strategic supply corridor for transferring war material to aid Russia's defense (42), Iran's oil also was seen as a key commodity, to be denied the Axis powers (43). In 1941, an allegedly pro-German revolt by the Iraqi Prime Minister, Rashid Ali al-Guilani, resulted in British and Russian occupation of Iran on the 25th of August, bringing the Middle East directly into the Second World War. Reza Shah was deposed and sent into exile by a joint

Anglo-Soviet decision.

The Challenge of the Autonomous Republics in the 1940s

The overthrow of Reza Shah put the country's internal structure and international borders into question. The Anglo-Soviet alliance opposed the accession of Reza Shah's son, the second Pahlavi, to the throne. The Soviet Union's occupation in the north included their pursuit of additional territory, achieved by seizing parts of northern provinces.

At the end of the War, Iran faced the first challenge to its territorial integrity. In December 1946, an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan was declared in Tabriz under Ja'far Pishevari. This *coup* against the central government in Tehran was backed by the presence of the armed forces of the USSR. It was feared that this might foreshadow the total loss of Azerbaijan to them. Similar concerns applied to the Kurdish People's Republic, set up in Mahabad in the west of Iran in the same way and at the same time. Many in the West viewed the two new autonomous republics as designed to move Soviet frontiers southwards in accordance with the will of Peter the Great and according to the objectives of the USSR as laid out in the Four Power Secret Pact of November 1940 between the Soviet Union, Germany, Japan, and Italy (44).

The eventual survival of Iran's 1941 frontier in the northwest was due to several combined factors: pro-Iranian Azeri resilience, Iranian political adroitness, and Western pressure on the USSR (45). In January 1946, the Soviet government refused to withdraw its armed forces from Iran, stating that its troops would remain in place until the originally agreed upon deadline of March 2nd. The Iranian government protested to the United Nations Security Council against these Soviet prevarications. However, help from the UN was feeble and slow in coming. It was left to Iran's Prime Minister Qavam as-Saltaneh to fight the battle alone. He offered the USSR an oil

agreement for exploration in the five occupied northern provinces—Asterabad, Azerbaijan, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Khorasan—provided that Soviet forces were withdrawn and subject to ratification of the concession by the Majlis (parliament) when it was reconvened. The matter was complicated by a British military landing near Basra and the start of a major tribal rebellion in the south of Iran supported by the British (46).

In December of that year, the United States decided to support Qavam as-Saltaneh against the Soviet Union's attempt to rig the elections in Azerbaijan. This ensured that Iranian government troops were able to enter Azerbaijan to supervise elections for the Majlis on December 7th. The eventual Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the Pishevari republic re-established Iranian sovereignty in the northwest, and permitted a return to the prewar boundaries with the USSR in that region. The Mahabad republic met the same fate at the same time.

From 1951-1953, Prime Minister Mossadeq's government, elected into office in accordance with the laws of the Iranian constitution like those preceding it, succeeded in nationalizing the Anglo-Persian oil industry. However, this was a success on paper only, as the subsequent oil agreement with the Anglo-American Consortium held back actual nationalization until the early 1970s. Then, with OPEC support, Iran regained independent control over its oil industry, from production to exports as well as pricing.

Mossadeq was deposed in 1953 by a combination of internal, U.S., and British interests. From then until he was deposed in 1979, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ruled Iran with an iron fist with the help of SAVAK, his notorious intelligence and security service.

The 1979 Revolution and the Restatement of Territorial Integrity

The strength of the modern nation-state in Iran was seriously challenged

during the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s, tested by both the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War (1979-1988). None of the peripheral provinces broke away from the Iranian state during the period of unrest in 1979-80 or during the Iraqi invasions of 1980. This was in part a function of the internal cultural cohesion of the country and in part a result of prompt action by the central government to put down secessionist movements in their infancy. Also, the development of Iran as a nation-state with a comparatively sophisticated economy between 1946 and 1978 brought about considerable rural-urban migration and trans-province movements to new work places. Together with a growth in national consciousness, these changes largely eroded traditional tribal and ethnic lines of separation.

Today, the only remaining challenge to Iran's territorial cohesion from its ethnic and linguistic minorities is in Kurdistan, tribal parts of Khuzistan, and more recently in parts of Azerbaijan. In the case of Iranian Kurdistan, the creation of an internationally sponsored Kurdish state in Iraq would be disruptive to the present balance. The majority of Iranian Kurds see themselves ethnically as Kurds but also as citizens sharing Iranian heritage and values with the rest of the Iranian populace. Since the start of the conflict in Iraq, the governments of Iran, Turkey, and Syria pledged to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity. The United States, France, and the United Kingdom have reassured the United Nations Security Council that Kurdistan will not be hived off as a separate state. The prospects for an autonomous Kurdish nation seem therefore to be very small on current evidence (47).

The Islamic Revolution and Recovery since 1979

Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution gave the illusion of opportunity for ethnic groups to break away from central



Professor Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh (with hat in his hand) at number 10 Downing Street, London, with R.H. Tony Benn (former British energy secretary) and Professor Abbas Edalat of London Imperial College and others delivering a petition to Prime Minister Tony Blair against war on Iran.

government and to seek regional autonomy. During the unrest of 1979 and 1980, marginal areas of the country were at times difficult to reach by the central government, which was unable to send its representatives, gather taxes, or guarantee security in parts of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Luristan, Fars, Khuzistan, and districts on the Persian Gulf. The most prolonged and widespread insurrection occurred in Kurdistan, with isolated armed clashes between the Iranian security forces and Kurdish dissidents.

Small-scale opposition, such as that by the Turkmen minority, was crushed early during 1979, though this was more a political movement of the left-wing Fedayin-e Khalq than an ethnic uprising. Arab separatist organizations in the oilfield province of Khuzestan were set up by and supported with arms from Iraq. Under these conditions of uncertainty in provincial areas, the British Foreign Office's off-the-record view was that "The question of territorial fission

within Iran merits serious consideration" (48). Such judgments were not uncommon in Western Europe, Japan, and North America, indicating widespread concern about the territorial unity of Iran during the period from February 1979 to September 1980.

This unstable position was temporary, and the subsequent Iraqi invasion of Iran and outbreak of war quickly united all Iranians (including all ethnicities and opposition groups) in defense of their country's territorial integrity. This proof of the essential territorial stability of Iran bolsters the expert opinion of Professor McLachlan, a highly respected Iranologist, who asserts, "Under conditions of normality, Iran's border regions and ethnic minorities do not pose problems to internal security" (49). The new revolutionary authorities were quick to suppress pockets of lawlessness in the border regions with the help of the majority once the initial impact of Iraqi invasions on Iranian soil had been

stopped. With the exception of persistent, isolated unrest in Kurdistan, Iran returned to its state of national cohesion by 1981.

The Iranian Awakening

What is taking place in Iranian domestic life at the start of the 21st century, two decades after the Islamic Revolution, appears to be a belated realization of the goals set by the country's constitutionalism a century earlier. A constitutional revolution awakened the Iranian elite at the beginning of the 20th century, and the Islamic Revolution, with its tumultuous aftermath, appears to have caused the universal awakening of all Iranians at the start of the 21st (50). That is to say that the postrevolutionary euphoria, which has further slackened the shaky rule of law, as well as the consequences of the eight-year war, together with the biting effects of the economic and strategic siege of Iran by the United States, have all led to the awakening of the people of Iran.

The United States has, in recent decades, implemented a careful plan of strategic encirclement of Iran, adding a strong sense of insecurity to the country's deepening economic hardship. Tehran has viewed this strategic encirclement in the following way. The United States helped Pakistan, directly or otherwise, to create the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to destabilize Iran's eastern flank. Washington extended direct and indirect support to the United Arab Emirates' claims to the Iranian islands of Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa, a direct threat to Iran's territorial integrity in the Persian Gulf (51). The U.S. then armed and encouraged Iraq to light the flame of war on Iran's western flank (52), and supported Israeli-Turkish military cooperation, resulting in Israeli surveillance flights over Iran's western borderlands, thus destabilizing the northwest. The U.S. support for strategic cooperation between Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan

Republic is viewed in Tehran as a serious threat to the three Azerbaijan provinces of Iran.

As seen from Tehran, this strategic, long-term U.S. policy, coupled with the prevention of Caspian Sea oil and gas from being piped through Iran to the outside world and along with the deliberate isolation of Iran in the evolving strategic alignments in the Caucasus, Caspian, and Central Asia, has completed the strategic encirclement of Iran on its northern flank.

A perhaps unanticipated consequence has been to heighten the perception of threat and territorial awareness among Iranians, thus strengthening national unity throughout the country. No other phenomenon in the past two hundred years has worked as effectively as Iraq's invasion of Iran and the UAE territorial claims against Iran to elevate national unity and awareness of territorial integrity among Iranians. This encirclement by outsiders, together with economic and political pressures, has caused a political awakening of the kind needed for the democratization of Iranian society to be ignited. Four main mechanisms working together have brought the country to this point. Each is discussed separately below.

The Mobilization of the Mechanisms of Democratization

Iran's Constitutional Revolution, during which a national constitution was issued in 1906 and amended in 1909 and 1925, was not completely successful mainly because the kind of democracy it promulgated was no more than an imported idea copied from Europe, which could only impress the westernized elite. A rural and traditional society, with over 90% of its population illiterate and unaware of modern world, could not digest this European idea in its original form.

In other words, there was neither the capacity for democracy nor was there any demand for it outside of a small group at the top of Iranian

society. In the four subsequent decades – from 1906 to 1940 – although the elite was struggling for democracy, the country was under foreign occupation, and foreign policies would not promote or allow Iranian citizens to wake up and claim and exercise their own rights to democracy.

The years from 1940 to 1953, though witness to free elections in accordance with highly ambiguous election laws, were not years of democracy in Iran either. This period also began with foreign occupation and the implementation of the policies of foreign powers. Following the end of foreign occupation, clashes occurred among the elite on how to govern the country, harming prospects for democratization: differences in political views translated themselves into personal disputes between Mossadeq and his many political rivals, and personal vengeance among the elite replaced efforts for the implementation of democratic ideas. Thus, for the time being, the locomotive of democratic ideas was completely derailed. The masses, still contending with their rural economy and traditional way of life, lacked the necessary awareness or motivation to move towards improving their lot in a new and improved political system. They were unaware of the significance of voting and unfamiliar with their right to participate in the management of the political affairs of their country.

In 1953, the vacuum resulting from the lack of effective national participation in politics made it possible for a supposedly “democratically oriented” politician like Mossadeq to close down even the Majlis (Parliament), the most important symbol of democracy. What was happening at that time was not the exercise of democracy but a popular movement that later led to the creation of the necessary capacity for democracy. However plausible these efforts were, Iranian society at that time did not have the necessary mechanisms for the realization of democracy. Today the wheels have begun to turn in

that general direction.

The Mechanism of Political Supply and Demand

The comprehensive national awakening in Iran today has motivated demands for democracy throughout society. The elite, along with everyone else in Iran, speaks the same political language with the same purpose. They all demand the kind of reforms that are fundamental and far-reaching, the kind of reforms that could address the problems which prevent or at least delay the implementation of democracy in Iran. The demand for democracy has gained ground in Iran at the grassroots level, and it is causing a growth of democracy from the basic foundations upwards through society. The tree of democracy in Iran now appears to be growing with its roots firmly placed in the culture fed by the values that form the Iranian identity.

The Mechanism of A Clash of Views and the Start of Political Dialogue

When the mechanism of political supply and demand begins to move towards democracy, this sets another mechanism in motion that is essential for a balance of power – the clash of political views, which give birth to the dialogue necessary among the forces shaping political events. A society that awakens to a variety of opinions among political groups and factions experiences conflicting views. Democracy is the result of a balance of power in a society. This balance of power emerges as the result of opposing ideas and opinions among political groups that require the rule of law as their ultimate arbiter.

Iranian society is presently experiencing this clash of views and opinions among political forces and has begun a far-reaching dialogue. Two main trends have emerged: the traditionalists and the reformists. This extensive discourse, with all its rough and smooth features that lead to sharp exchanges between political factions

from time to time, has turned into a serious process for political development. There is no stopping it now.

As an example, both the student demonstrations in the spring of 1999 on the one hand and the closure of numerous newspapers in the spring of 2000 on the other have deepened the discussion in the years since. Iran has entered a new phase of political development in which Iranians of all walks of life are involved. This process is helping to shape a new political identity that is not necessarily that of the central government. Another positive aspect is the government's efforts, slowly and sometimes reluctantly, to come to terms with these new developments.

Conclusion: The Mechanism of the Transfer of the Will of the People to the State

Another potential mechanism to move Iran in the direction of democracy is "the transfer of the will of the nation to the state for the management of the affairs of territory" (53). This can work only through democratic elections of the kind that reflect the will of the people. Iran's presidential election of May 1997 was, without a doubt, a turning point in the formation of a new political identity in both domestic and foreign policy. Similarly, the 2005 presidential election is a vital landmark event in the progression of the democratic process. In addition to the statistics of participation, unprecedented in Iran and in the Middle East, the manner and motivation for voting and impacts on political reforms in Iranian society were also unprecedented.

Almost all eligible voters, about 31 million people, took part in both the 1997 and 2005 elections. In the 1997 election, the overwhelming majority spoke in one voice and for one purpose: political reform. This unprecedented move has had significant consequences in the decade since, the most important being the waking up of the voters

themselves to the reality of the political power they hold in their hands.

Subsequent elections have shown this to be a true and fundamental change. There is a process at work, albeit in need of much refinement, but it has passed the point of no return. Significantly, these political developments are taking place without direct influence from the highly charged ideological tendencies of the traditional political parties. This process is leading to a quickly evolving demand for political parties that could channel the will of the people and the political force of society into the government and tackle the new demands of Iranian society (54).

In conclusion, an amalgam of these four mechanisms has created a situation in Iran that can confidently be termed the most significant turning point in the country's modern political history and in its emergence on the global scene with a new political identity. Should this development continue in safety, free from the possible harm of military ambitions or foreign influence, it will lead the people

of Iran to bring under control the destiny of their political life. It will lead to the realization of the rule of law as the ultimate arbiter in Iranian society, with important future impacts on the region of West Asia.

Notes and References

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- 2- Professor Jean Gottmann, whose student (this author) was at Oxford University in the late 1970s, authorized this quotation from his letter, in a separate note dated May 19, 1992.
- 3- *Shahnameh, the Book of Kings*, by Abul-Qasem Ferdowsi (d. 1020 AD) is widely praised as the only reliable source in Persian literature that studied the pre-Islamic history of Iran and its association with other political entities of antiquity. Hitherto, little attention has been paid to the way it describes political relations in association



Forthcoming in FOCUS on Geography: Part II - Iran's Geopolitical Regions in the 21st Century by Dr. Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh. Please watch for the follow up article to read about his views on the geo-politics of Iran in the 21st century.

- with the political organization of the space in the ancient world. Popularly known as an epic account of ancient Persian history, especially of the Sassanid period (224–651 CE), the *Shahnameh* provides a remarkable description of the development of the concept of state in ancient Persia. It carefully describes how the idea of a vertically organized state evolved in ancient Iran with clearly demarcated boundaries, which influenced such Western political conceptions as “state,” “territory,” “boundary,” and “democracy.” Ferdowsi's description of the political geography of the ancient world bears remarkable resemblance to the modern concepts of political geography that evolved in post-Westphalia Europe. Did he, who lived a thousand years ago, well before Westphalia treaty of 1648, learn these ideas from modern Europe, or is it that ancient Persia influenced medieval Europe in terms of the evolution of political thoughts and political geography? This is a fascinating question deserving further exploration with the help of reliable analysis of the ancient world by respectable scholars of our time.
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 - 12- Some suggest that the concept of “empire” is perhaps a Roman adoption of the Persian *Shahanshahi* system (Tavakoli, Ahmad, 1372 (1993): *Empratouri, Shahanshah* (Empire, Shahanshahi), *Ayandeh Monthly*, Vol. IXX, No. 7-9, Tehran). Moreover, the Romans may have evolved their idea of “senate” on the basis of ancient Persian *Mehestan* (the House of the Elders), or vice versa.
 - 13- Nayer Nouri, A. H., 1971: *Iran's Contribution to the World Civilization*, Vol. II., Tehran, p. 188.
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 - 15- Mojtahed-Zadeh, Pirouz, 1974: *New Studies on the Royal Road*, translation from Victor W. Von Hagen's article in *The Geographical Magazine* (of June 1974), as appeared in monthly *Daneshmand* (Scientist) of Tehran, Vol. 11, No. 11 (Series No. 131), September: pp. 4-5 & 56-9.
 - 16- A plate of bronze or other metals is called *jam* in Persian. Similarly, a goblet of metal or crystal is *jam*. On the other hand, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* speaks of the legendary Jamshid Shah, founder of Iran, who had a *jam* showing the world. From this concept comes the mystical “crystal ball” in almost all cultures. This author is of the opinion that Jamshid Shah was none other than Darius the Great, who had the bronze disc “*jam*” showing a map of the civilized world. There are other reasons supporting this theory, the discussion of which goes beyond the scope of this article.
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 - 20- Turan is a term used by Ferdowsi (d. AD 1020) in his *Shahnameh*, the greatest work of epic literature in the Persian language, in reference to peoples of Turkic origin in the eastern fringes of old Khorasan. What constitutes Central Asia now was “Greater Khorasan” during most of the past 20 centuries.
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