

THE IDEA OF IRAN: NATIONALISM, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL
CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG DIASPORA IRANIANS

by

Darius Salimi
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Committee:

Cathryn Hyles Rinke Director

Dick A. ...

C. ...

Jean R. Trencher Department Chairperson

Jamie S. ... Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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Darius Salimi
Bachelor of Arts
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Director: Cortney Hughes-Rinker, Professor
Department of Sociology & Anthropology

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Dedication

To my Aunt Lori. You were and are my inspiration to make the most of myself.

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Abstract

THE IDEA OF IRAN: NATIONALISM, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG DIASPORA IRANIANS

Darius Salimi, M.A.

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Dr. Cortney Hughes-Rinker

As a primary objective of this research, I will analyze the formulation and function of national consciousness among Iranians of the diaspora in practice. I aim to achieve this by examining the character, function and role of Iranian national consciousness historically and in the present. The *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic, has played a large role in the transmission of both dynastic history and Zoroastrian myth, as have archaeological discoveries dating to pre-Islamic times in more recent years. I find that in seeking to associate themselves with the glories of Achaemenid Ancient Persia, modern Iranians surprisingly and perhaps unknowingly inhabit the same ritual space as their Sasanian ancient Persian predecessors who sought to do the same. I examine how conceptions of “Iran” and “non-Iran” in texts dating to the Sasanian dynasty lend affect the formation of a national consciousness that stretches from the third century AD to the present, transmitted via the inheritance of the *Shahnameh*, and form part of the basis of modern Iranian nationalism among the diaspora. In order to examine the effects of both

on the national consciousness and personal identity on individuals in the Iranian diaspora, I also developed a survey questionnaire, the results of which serve as one of the central points of investigation in this thesis. In light of a highly culturally diverse and increasingly important Middle East, in this thesis, I will illuminate the origins of nationality, identity and conceptions of nationhood in idiosyncratic Iran, a nation surrounded by others near in the most literal sense, but surprisingly distant in cultural mindsets and historical experiences.

Iran has been oft-understood, discussed, dissected and generally-known, albeit mostly through the scope of Greek-speaking antagonists, the de facto forebears of future Western imperial powers. This study provides insight into Iranian identity and into the currents of nationalism that have shaped and continue to shape the Iranian collective memory and self-reflective cultural view, which distinguish Iran from its neighbors and portrays it as a highly idiosyncratic nation that must be understood and dealt with on its own terms.

Chapter 1: Importance of the Iranian Case

Iran is a nation often construed as problematic and misunderstood by North Americans; for the last 70 years, Iran has played a major role in the foreign policy of the United States – formerly a pro-American bulwark countering the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, and more recently the theocratic bane of American diplomacy. For approximately 140 years prior to that, Iran was one of the foremost prizes fought over by Great Britain and Russia in the Great Game. One-hundred and fifty years of foreign domination culminated in the 1952 coup of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a politician whose National Front party helped to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (which would later be re-christened “British Petroleum”, or “BP”). Mossadegh’s coup would be subverted by the British and the Americans, who restored the authoritarian Shah to power and deposed “the Old Man of Persia”, as TIME magazine referred to the Prime Minister in early 1952 (Editorial 1952).

The deposition of a popular leader who threw off the yoke of foreign influence over Iran’s single most profitable natural resource would prove to be the beginning of a tumultuous period in American – Iranian relations that had begun with the Treasurer General of Persia, a Washingtonian by the name of W. Morgan Shuster, and his advocacy for the cessation of Russian & British meddling in Iranian affairs (Shuster 1913; Keddie 2006). In merely half a century, this relationship would be turned on its head with the

United States surpassing Russia and perhaps even Britain as the most resented foreign meddler in Iranian political affairs. As a crucial cog in American foreign policy, Iran has transitioned from being a staunch Cold War ally to being a modern-day thorn, holding great attention in Washington in either era.

I suggest that the best way to understand Iran and Iranians is to learn how they have viewed themselves, historically. Long before the Shah left for Egypt, the Mullahs, as the Shi'ite Muslim clergy are referred to, took power and the embassy was stormed during and in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. That "Islamic" revolution was actually fostered by various discontents, as Iranians had struggled to maintain their autonomy under the scepter of countless foreign powers. This history of subjugation by others and the inversion of roles of conqueror and conquered have had a profound impact on the development of Iranian national consciousness, manifested in literature such as the *Shahnameh*, the 10th-century mytho-historical epic with much more ancient roots, as well as in the minds of Iranians themselves.

Over two-and-a-half millennia, the ancient land of Persia has been both conquered and conqueror numerous times. The 4th-century BC Macedonian conquerors of the Alexander the Great came, saw, conquered and then disappeared, and Iran was resurrected as a sovereign nation under Parthian and Sasanian dynasties. In the 7th century AD, the Arabs came, brought Islam with them, and received an influx of a more ancient Iranian high culture and thought that enabled them to spread their religion and foster it over half the globe, enabling Iran to survive by virtue of the usefulness of many

skilled Iranian viziers and scientists to the Caliphs. Again, as an Islamic Iran flourished, Central Asian peoples such as the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols came and devastated Iran, compelling submission by piling pyramids high with the skulls of their victims, quelling revolts by massacring inhabitants and destroying local *kariz* or *qanats* (underground irrigation systems) in arid regions, leaving survivors to starve, and grazing their horses on local crops where the conquerors arrived at harvest time. The cities of Hamadan and Nishapur were destroyed and their inhabitants massacred, according to 13th-century historians al-Din and Kirakos (Lambton 1988). Although later Mongol and Timurid rule brought about considerable patronage of the arts, the initial depredations of the Mongols were so extreme that by some estimates, the population of Iran was not to recover to its pre-Mongol number until the twentieth century (Lambton 1988). But again, it was Iran that ultimately prevailed as these peoples subsequently spread the Persian culture and language to places as far as China and the Eastern Mediterranean. Mir Mahmud Ghilzai, a Pashto ruler, sacked and raided Iran in the eighteenth century, and the nation would rise again under the banner of Nader Shah of the Afsharid dynasty, only to be subject to the depredations of the British and the Russians years later.

Despite the repeated defeats and other forms of subjugation suffered at the hands of foreigners, Iran has managed to ultimately retain the majority of its ethno-territorial core, culture, language, identity and for the most part, independence for over 2,500 years while managing to “Persianize” the offending invaders in almost every instance. Given that resisting foreign domination through a pronounced identity, culture and history has been the triumphant theme throughout Iranian history, it is important to understand *how*

and *why* this has occurred, as well as understanding the processes that have allowed this to occur. (Daryaee 2008). As outlined above, different rulers have come and gone, only to leave imbued with a bit of Iran. Alexander famously burned Persepolis, but soon began adopting Persian dress and customs (notably *proskynesis*, an elaborate Achaemenid court ritual that involved prostration before and kissing the feet of the king) to the dismay of his soldiers and sought to style himself as the rightful heir to the Achaemenid throne (Briant 1985). Arabic was imposed as the language of nobility, learning and administration by Muslim invaders, only to have New Persian emerge as the national language, preserved in the speech of common folk and the epic of Ferdowsi, the 10th-century poet of the mytho-historical *Shahnameh* epic which draws upon pre-Islamic Iranian history and Zoroastrian myth; not to mention the immeasurable artistic and administrative contributions of Persians to the new, Islamic empire. (Morony 1986) The Mongols came as brutal conquerors, and left as Persophiles who spread Iranian literature, architecture, cuisine and culture to the Indian subcontinent and much of Central Asia in later conquests (Eaton 2004). In each instance, Persian cultural traits – patronage of the arts and sciences, an orally-transmitted folk history, and the quotidian usage of the Persian language ultimately transcended brute military force to re-emerge and create a more permanent Persianate legacy for both conqueror and conquered, as well as for many lands far from the Iranian heartland. By understanding how Iranians create and maintain identity and national consciousness, in what has come to be described in the last two centuries as “nationalism” through various mediums will allow the reader of this thesis to better understand Iranians in Iran and in the diaspora, their history, their cultural

mindsets, and their styles of communication and self-understanding. In surveying a sample of diaspora Iranians about the *Shahnameh*, ancient Iran and their identities, as well as tracing the possible historical origin of an Iranian national consciousness, I will demonstrate the effects of these two parallel and roughly chronologically successive forms of national consciousness on the identity of these individuals.

Rethinking Iran

Iran is an important nation to study because of the impact it has on world affairs today, as well as the innumerable contributions of Persian individuals in fields as diverse as astronomy, mathematics, geography, literature, government, architecture and music. However, endless diplomatic deliberations and journalistic questions about the enrichment of uranium, the treatment of political prisoners and the status of women and minorities have led to Iran's distinction as a troubled hotspot by politicians and members of the media. Many problems that have arisen, while ideological in nature, have been exacerbated needlessly by a lack of understanding of Iran and Iranians, most notably in the West. It is my intention to aid in rethinking how to understand Iran.

The dominant paradigm in the study of the Middle East is to understand Arabs and Islam. This could likely be for several reasons, including the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent American wars against Iraq and against al-Qaeda, an Islamist terrorist group in Afghanistan and Pakistan with reach throughout the Middle East and North Africa. (Deeb and Winegar 2013) Thus, with most of the attention turned for most of the last decade towards understanding the radical forms of political Islam that

led to the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans and countless others before and since, a ground war against one of Iran's Arab neighbors, and endless conflict between Israel and Arab Palestinians, Iran has largely been lost in the shuffle. (McGlinchey 2011) Famously, the June 2009 election protest movement suffered from a sudden lack of media attention in the West at a crucial moment. Indeed, the death of Michael Jackson and the resultant shift in the news cycle away from the Iranian election protests, and the subsequent outages and slowdowns on websites used to organize the protest movement, such as Twitter (Sahar Haghghat personal communication, April 15, 2011). With largely lawless and war-torn neighbors such as Iraq, Afghanistan and a somewhat stable Pakistan dredging much of the attention of media outlets over the last decade, Iran, one of the nations largest in geographic size, population, and arguably the most strategically-located and resource-rich in the whole region, has not received commensurate media coverage primarily in terms of quality, but also quantity. For this reason, understanding Iran on its own terms is problematic for some, although not all. The heterogeneity of the Middle East (as we conceive of that part of the world today) culturally, linguistically, historically and ethnically is often swept beneath the all-encompassing breadth of Islam or the term "Islamic" or "Muslim" nations. In reality, "Islamic nations" stretch from Indonesia in the Pacific to the Swahili Coast and the North and West African Atlantic (Bates and Rassam 2001). Without the seemingly equalizing or unifying façade of Islam, Iran's neighbors are themselves vastly different from Iran: Pakistan largely falls into the South Asian cultural sphere, Iraq is a lowland polity largely forged from the bits and pieces of former Turkish, Arab and Iranian kingdoms, to name only its most recent proprietors, and the

populations of the Caucasus have been irrevocably altered by a recent seventy-year history under the fist of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan shares some cultural similarities with Iran, the western portion having been cleaved off the Persian heartland three centuries ago, but also is itself extremely heterogeneous and exhibits many layers of cultural strata from Iranian, Indic and Turkic or Central Asian spheres. Thus, the association of Iran in the popular imagination as primarily a “Middle Eastern” or “Islamic” nation, to be dealt with and understood in the same way one may be asked to understand Somalia, Afghanistan, Lebanon or Iraq is inherently problematic.

The most efficient way to begin to comprehend Iran as understood by Iranians is by understanding their history and sense of collective “memory”, in the present and historically. Several monarchs of the Sasanian dynasty (224 – 651 A.D., the final pre-Islamic dynasty of Iran) had been known to appropriate even more ancient titles and traditions to glorify their distant predecessors and to ostensibly cement some kind of loyalty to their own dynasty by playing to nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, much as the Pahlavis did in the twentieth century. What then, is an “authentic tradition”, as Eric Hobsbawm (1992) defines it? If an ancient tradition is invented and merely copied by a later successor, is it still “invented” or is it now “authentic”? If borderline-chauvinistic nationalist mythmaking has an ancient precedent, then is it authenticated by virtue of its status as historical fact? It appears that Iranian nationalist ideology and mythscapes far predate the geneses of most European nations. For this reason, I suggest it imperative to study Iranian national consciousness with an eye to the distant past as a benchmark for understanding what appears to be ancient, Sasanian state-level tradition of the promotion

of a national consciousness merely augmented by the advent of Western archaeology, anthropology and nationalist mythmaking.

How and Why? Questions that Form the Basis of this Thesis

My research explores the origins and function of Iranian nationalism and Iranian national consciousness. I have examined how Iranians manifest a varied form of national consciousness as influenced by divergent strands of historical memory: modern historical and archaeological scholarship and the more antiquated, sometimes orally-transmitted tradition of recounting Iran's history via the *Shahnameh*, or Persian "Book of Kings". I have solicited for and received 25 responses to a survey questionnaire that I developed regarding both strands and each individual's personal identity.

Thesis questions:

This thesis addresses the following questions:

1.) How has the *Shahnameh* or Iranian national epic has played a role in the transmission of history of Iran amongst Iranians themselves? I look to illuminate how this process has occurred in modern Iran and how the work itself was conceived with the aim of seeking to understand the function the author intended it to serve. The *Shahnameh* has played an integral role in the transmission of Iranian (particularly pre-Islamic) history and national consciousness since its completion in the 11th century A.D. Native toponyms ("Throne of Jamshid") as well as personal and family names in Iran are frequently chosen from the *Shahnameh* and reflect the document's importance as a long-tenured wellspring of

Iranian identity and the transmission and preservation of pre-Islamic folklore and Zoroastrian cosmology by its author, born into a family of the *dehqan* class.

2.) How has national consciousness manifested itself after Iranian contact with European-style nationalism based in 19th and early-20th century nationalistic movements and archaeology? As the works of Hobsbawm (1990, 1992), Anderson (1982), Smith (1986, 1991, 2001) and others tend to have a heavy focus on modern European-style nationalism, with its roots in the Romanticist movements of the 19th century, I will examine what roles this form of nationalism and orientalist attitudes have played in the development of Iranian national consciousness as we know it today.

3.) In what ways has Iranian national consciousness manifested itself institutionally and popularly in the present-day (particularly post-1979 to early 2010's) and recent past? This portion of the thesis focuses on the time period beginning from the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the mid-20th century onwards amongst Iranians in Iran as well as the diaspora. I have supplemented my data with IRB-approved original surveys of members of the Iranian diaspora regarding national consciousness and the role of *Shahnameh* as well as modern scholarship and academic instruction in creating the individual's understanding of Iran as a cohesive & "imagined" (in the Andersonian sense) ethno-cultural unit.

I analyze the sources of Iranian national consciousness, as well as exploring the ways in which it manifests itself, primarily in literature, but also in practice. These two approaches will be applied to each period to give the reader a more lucid idea of the

evolution and contiguity of Iranian national consciousness and identity through several eras spanning approximately 1,500 years. I argue that the centralized Iranian nation-state can be seen as existing since at least the Sasanian era (224-651 A.D.) Thus, a mono-cultural Iranian national consciousness may be compared in terms of historical depth to other nationalisms with long histories of linguistic and cultural domination and exclusionism over less-dominant local cultures by a dominant centralized nation-state promoting a single historical/dynastic narrative, culture and language. Such a phenomenon may be observed with regards to France vis-à-vis the Occitans and Bretons; China vis-à-vis the Uighurs and Tibetans; Turkey vis-à-vis the Pontians and Kurds and the many other regional minorities that exist in these nation-states with long-tenured conceptions of national consciousness.

A Frame of Reference

This project lies at the intersection of various disciplines: anthropology, history, cultural studies and archaeology. I use relevant academic literature and analytical techniques from all of these fields as well. I will deepen the understanding of Iranian cultural psychology and historical memory by contributing to the scholarship on identity and nationalism at the present and filling an empirical gap in that literature through this research on Iran. It will be beneficial for all who wish to engage with Iran in one form or another to better understand the cosmology of the Iranian sociopolitical world.

I utilize a variety of primary sources and secondary historical accounts dating from antiquity to the pre-Pahlavi era in Iran, in addition to a swath of modern literature

on Nationalism, Orientalism and collective memory. I have put to use much of the modern scholarship on ethnicity and national consciousness, notably works by Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, Eric Hobsbawm, David Miller and Maurice Halbwachs. By doing so, I have given the reader an adequate amount of context as to the currents in the study of nationalism and nationalist movements. Achaemenid and Sasanian-era texts and inscriptions also serve to buttress arguments made to the reader about the genesis of Iranian national consciousness and are used comparatively and to provide historical context.

Anthropology & History

The anthropological literature on Iran is highly diverse. Roxanne Varzi's *Warring Souls* (2006) is an extraordinary insight into the peculiar culture of parole and institution, a sort of elaborate dance between the private transcripts of middle-class Iranian's lives (to borrow a concept from James Scott, 1992) and the public or official transcript of the Iranian state. Vignettes from the lives of middle-class Tehranis give a glimpse into the stifling conditions under which many frustrated Iranian youth live.

Kaveh Baya (2005) surveys the landscape of ethnonationalist politics in the Islamic Republic. Baya claims, "...the regime's Islamic universalism dealt a heavy blow to the bulwarks of identity – particularly Iranian nationalism – in the process encouraging ethnic identity" (2005:44). The crux of his argument is that pan-Islamic sentiments have managed to damage the stability of a multi-national Iranian state. Discontented Kurds, Azerbaijanis and other ethnic groups no longer feel a sense of national identification with

Iran, and come to question the supremacy of the Persian language as encouraged by the Pahlavis. Like Varzi, Baya gives us a glimpse of the re-formation of the structure of Iranian society wrought by the Islamic revolution. While Varzi deals primarily at the individual level, Baya describes an “ethnic resurgence” in Iran that encompasses whole geographic regions. Both authors provide valuable insights into complementary levels of the Iranian state and society. Baya’s work emphasizes the results of a switch from “Iran Time” to “Islam Time” wrought by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath that Haggai Ram (2000) describes. The revolution was a unique event in that it has allowed anthropologists, historians and others interested in issues of nationalism and identity to study the effect of a rapid state-level ideological change on the formation of national and personal identity and consciousness.

I look to interpret the causes of and effects on modern Iranian national consciousness and identity as affected by such efforts. Kamyar Abdi (2001) and Tallinn Grigor (2004) each trace the nationalist heritage movements of Pahlavi Iran. Primarily works of recent history, Grigor and Abdi both lay bare the construction of state-sponsored nationalism and “mythmaking” (2004). Grigor traces the development of the Society for National Heritage, while Abdi tells of Hassan Pirnia and Mohammad Ali Foroughi, nationalist Government ministers who wrote and translated books on the history of ancient Iran. Such texts laid the foundation for a twentieth-century Iranian nationalism that had a substantial impact on Iranian identity down to the present day. Mehrdad Kia (1998) also gives an excellent synopsis of the rise of European-style nationalism in Iran through the lens of several important 19th-century figures, Jalal-od-

Din Mirza, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh, and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani with regards to the campaign for elimination of Arabic words from the Persian language. With notable European romantic and archaeological influences, many of the scholars, high-ranking government officials and other intelligentsia actively promoted a secular Iranian identity until 1979. Such individuals helped to create and promote an almost jingoistic form of Iranian national consciousness that is largely based on identification with pre-Islamic Iran and persists today.

I will integrate Varzi's conceptions and study of *zaher* (the external world of the public acquaintances) and *baten* (the internal world of one's self and close family and confidants where true feelings can be expressed), James Scott's private and dominant transcripts and historical data and evidence from Baya, Abdi, Grigor and others, Anthony D. Smith, Ram & Bell's ideas of national consciousness, mythscapes and ideological shift ("Iran time" to "Islam time") to give the reader a fuller conception of the advent and function of nationalism in modern Iran – an identity movement at both the state and individual levels. My research will place Iranian ethno-national consciousness within the context of historical events, trends and currents spanning several centuries and examine the particular circumstances, both cultural and historical that gave rise to such formulations of identity.

Nationalism and Post-Colonial Studies

I have employed a wide variety of literature available on nationalism and post-colonial studies to give a broader conception of the phenomenon of nationalism as a

whole to the reader. David Miller's (1997) *On Nationality* tackles the subject from a thought-provoking angle. Noting a hint of Orientalism in the studies of "Eastern" nationalism, Miller says:

For John Plamenatz, Western nationalism was the nationalism of peoples with strong cultural identities capable of comparing on equal terms with those of existing nation-states (for instance the Germans and Italians in the nineteenth century), whereas Eastern nationalism was the nationalism of peoples whose native culture is relatively primitive and who must create a new identity for themselves if they are to compete in the modern world (for instance the Slavs). (1997:8-9)

With regard to the notion of "imagined communities", David Miller's perspective on Benedict Anderson (1983) is:

What holds nations together are beliefs, as I have already emphasized, but these beliefs cannot be transmitted except through cultural artefacts which are available to everyone who belongs – books, newspapers, pamphlets, and more recently the electronic media. This is the basis of Benedict Anderson's claim that nations are 'imagined communities', by which he means that they are not wholly spurious inventions, but that they depend for their existence on collective acts of imagining which find their expression through such media. (1997:32)

Miller is thus claiming that what Anderson means is not that national-scale communities are then "spurious" or fabricated, but that they require a certain technological level of advancement to establish a common identity somewhere in the ether between peoples who otherwise would never have known each other. Thus, "imagined communities" have helped to form webs of interconnected cultural practices and identities between disparate parts of Iran and with the aid of mass media in the modern-day Iranian diaspora as well.

Anthony D. Smith (1991) comes at things from an interesting angle. Smith alleges that there are in fact, nations with ethnic origins in the distant past, noting Sasanian Iran as a distinct example. While the other theorists, primarily Hobsbawm (1991) and

Anderson (1983), have less regard for history, Smith notes that various “*ethnies*” exist which include a common myth of descent, territory and culture. Smith feels that ethnic groups, while not at the level of modern nation-states, form the core of many nations today, contrasting the theories of Hobsbawm, Anderson and others with more historical depth. An *ethnie* appears to be at the core of Iranian national consciousness, something I have elaborated on in the later sections of this thesis.

Post-colonial theorists such as Spivak (1988), Said (1979) and Hall (1996) have contributed several unique and fundamental ideas to the field which have applications here. Seizing primarily on ideas of dislocation, colonialism and repression, such scholars have contributed to the understanding of identity by questioning the very basis of the nation itself. Hall’s ideas about “imaginative rediscovery” (1996:393) and identities as “discontinuities” (1996:394) mark his unique viewpoint of cultural identity as a sort of positioning in relation to time or history. These views draw on Said’s “othering” while augmenting it and also drawing on another prominent Caribbean scholar, Frantz Fanon. Fanon and Hall both argue that European colonial powers have had the power to impose a sort of “othering” on the colonized. This allows them to see themselves from an etic perspective while wishing to see oneself from a more a European point of view, as in Senghor’s *Présence européenne, Présence africaine and Présence américaine*. (Fanon 1952) These ideas hold special significance for the Iranian diaspora, but also for contemporary Iranians in Iran in the age of ever-accelerating “time-space compression”. (Harvey 1991) Hall’s theory works especially well in the Western hemisphere, recognizing the convergence of multiple “positionings” resulting from the transnational

economic, political and social connections of the past five centuries that have helped to shape the Americas. As with Appadurai (1990) and his notion of “-scapes”, post-colonial and post-modern scholars and other theorists have acknowledged the increasingly global nature of society in our era.

I argue that such “disjunctures” have deeply affected the conception of Iranian national consciousness in the past 20 years as well. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iranians after the 1979 revolution, and the many Iranians who travel back and forth between family in Western nations and Iran itself are a prime example of transnationalism and disjuncture on a global scale that inevitably leads to the augmentation of mythscapes, and the introduction of mediascapes into the Iranian national consciousness. Art, in the form of literature or handiwork has been a significant conduit for transmitting a form of consciousness about one’s own ethnicity or class as in Marx. Media and the education system today contribute to these mythscapes of ethnogenesis and national history and mediascapes that assist in the mass transmission of these ideas - paradigms of ethnicity in the modern era.

Iranian Identity & National Consciousness

Eric Hobsbawm, a historian and prominent commentator on nationalism, posits a notion of “invented traditions”. Hobsbawm asserts that some traditions are invented while others are “authentic”. Benedict Anderson’s classic text *Imagined Communities* (1982) introduces the concept of “imagining” a community via print capitalism - Anderson believes that the first nation-states were formed around “print languages” that enabled

communication between distant individuals who would have otherwise never had any idea that the other existed, nor been able to communicate with each other effectively by way of a common language. These two concepts have profoundly influenced the view of scholars on nationalism as well as those studying identity. (Bell 2003, Ram 2000)

Anderson's (1982) definition of imagined communities as "inherently limited & sovereign" and Hobsbawm's (1991) idea that many traditions that are thought to imply "continuity with the past" are actually "constructed", each bring contentious arguments to the fore, whose ramifications I will explore in the context of Iran. Anderson's thesis has been misinterpreted by some while Hobsbawm's is simply arbitrary and unreliable - all traditions are ultimately invented. Bell (2003) calls for a reassessment of Smith's "primordialist" notions of the nation and "mythscape", and Ram (2000) also takes a skeptical stance, both more in line with Hobsbawm's school of thought.

How one can determine the authenticity of one over the other is an idea that I will probe with reference to identity formation among Iranians in the present day.

"Primordialism" is used to refer to the ideas of theorists such as Smith who emphasize the ethnic "base" of many nation-states. While Bell makes valid points with regards to "myth consciousness", it is apparent that with regards to nations such as Iran that have a long history of native and ergo "popular" (as in "of the people" in most instances, relative to the hostility with which foreign imperialists have generally been viewed in Iran much the same as in most nations), highly-centralized dynasties or governments administering a large, culturally contiguous area. These dynasties also frequently have employed policies promoting the ethnoreligious, social, and linguistic superiority and

native heritage of one particular group for thousands of years; Smith's thesis of certain "ethnies" forming a more lasting base for a native nationalism rings true. Iraq and Pakistan in particular, two of Iran's largest neighbors are particularly useful examples of more recent nationalisms of the type that Bell seems to be concerned with keeping in check: highly balkanized regions that have been created in modern form as "secondary states" (Balandier 1974) with little in the way of shared history or culture and by the hands of European colonial powers (particularly Britain). Therefore, one cannot speak of "Iraqi nationalism" or "Pakistani identity" in the same sense that one speaks of "Iranian nationalism" or "Iranian national consciousness", as Iraq and Pakistan are twentieth-century conceptions. While there is certainly much to suggest the emergence of extremely politically and culturally advanced societies in the regions these nations are centered on, and in fact even the very first sites to be understood as "historic" (Šumer in Iraq): Uruk, Nineveh, Babylon, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, nations cannot be understood in solely a regional or historical context; they must be understood in terms of political history and organization as well. Contiguity of a particular, dominant national-ethnic identity over an extended period of time separates ethno-historical nations from the Iraqi and Pakistani states in this category.

In this sense, Turkey and Armenia may very well be the neighboring states with the most similarities to Iran in matters of political history, identity and mythscapes. As other states which similarly feature longer, shared histories of linguistic, cultural and military domination by native monocultural governments, they have subsequently rendered the creation of "ethnies" at their core that have dominated other co-territorial

indigenous groups. Further afield, Chinese, French, Japanese and Russian nation-states also embody, approximately, the same space as Iran in terms of correspondent national mythmaking and long-running and historic state-sponsored monocultural promotion that derives national myth from a singular dominant “ethnie”. I examine how Iranian mythscapes have been created over time by a transmission of history cultural values through art forms and media, much as they are paralleled in the Greek *Iliad*, the French *Chanson de Roland* and various other forms of early national myth-making and ethno-national consciousness.

Methodology

In order to better understand the rise of Iranian nationalism, I have used anthropological research methods and many primary historical sources, as one must in the anthropology of the historically-rich Middle East. Textual analysis of primary and secondary sources will feature prominently in this thesis as my main method of research and analysis. I have also used grounded theory to identify and formulate codes and concepts that could be transmuted into larger theories and hypotheses that can be explored, tested and posited in the body of my research. Index/code analysis has also been employed as a method for dealing with large swaths of text from my questionnaire responses and for processing themes and idea fragments into larger theories and concepts that I will examine using grounded theory techniques, as mentioned. Using these techniques, I looked for terms such as “pride”, “identity”, “myself”, “country”, “ancestors”, “empire” and “history” and relative phrases and words.

I also employed an electronic survey questionnaire, approved by George Mason University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The questionnaire asked of respondents who identify as "Iranian" living outside of Iran to answer several questions about demographics (age range, sex, place of birth) and also about how they conceive of Iran historically, based on personal knowledge of scholarship and the *Shahnameh*. All responses were confidential and consisted of 25 completed questionnaires. I have primarily used qualitative analytical methods to render my results.

Historical Sources

Primary sources include historical texts dating from the Sasanian period (224-651 A.D.) to the 20th century. In these texts, I will be searching for evidence of traditions, events and edicts that profess earlier forms of Iranian national consciousness and mythscape. I have employed many secondary sources; primarily anthropological and history-based texts concerning nationalism and identity in general and specifically concerning Iran including Herodotus and other historians and theorists. I have sought to interpret and analyze these texts in a critical manner, accounting for place and voice, inferring the author's positionality and possible biases. I have also utilized several articles from the scholarly *Encyclopaedia Iranica* as a tertiary source throughout. These are used primarily for providing factual reference for the reader and to lay the foundation for the historical background of certain sections.

I synthesize large amounts of ethnographic data, primary source texts and analytical scholarly texts to formulate a more complete understanding the role of

nationalism in Iranian national consciousness historically and presently in terms of ethnic and national identification with the dominant and mono-cultural narrative espoused by those strongly affiliated with the nation-state, usually social elites. After consuming a sizable amount of topical literature, I have used plotting and ideational techniques to formulate thesis statements and link together common themes and ideas. Using indexing techniques, I identified gaps in the present literature regarding the topic and here I attempt to answer the questions inductively ascertained from the deficiencies of my sources. The *Shahnameh* itself will be referenced extensively, as will scholarly books and articles pertaining to the document.

Anthropological Questionnaire

Of the 25 respondents, 15 were male and ten were female. Twenty-two respondents in total were born in Iran, although as we shall see this reflects a wide variety of educational background and a wide chronological range of emigration from Iran. Twenty-four respondents replied that their country of current residence was the United States, with the lone outlier living in Sydney, Australia. Only seven respondents entered their religion as “Muslim” or “Islam”, with none of those specifying any particular sect. Two respondents chose not to respond to the question about religion at all. These data indicate the complexity and diversity of religious beliefs among Iranians, especially those of the diaspora.

Religious Beliefs	Male	Female	Total
Muslim	2	5	7
“None”	5	0	5
Agnostic	2	3	5
No response/“N/A”	4	0	4
Baha’i	2	0	2
Christian	0	1	1
Atheist	0	1	1
Total	15	10	25

Table 1: Religious Beliefs, by gender.

Fifteen of the 25, or 60% of respondents either responded as “None”, Agnostic, Atheist or no response, confirming the widely recounted secularism and strained relationships with religion that many Iranians, notably those in the diaspora, have. The three individuals who entered no response may convey a lack of comfort in any information about personal beliefs, a reluctance to admit a minority belief, or simply atheism or a lack of participation in organized religious activity. One other individual in that category entered N/A, suggestive of agnostic beliefs or atheism. Somewhat surprisingly, only about a quarter of respondents (28%) identified themselves as Muslim, given that Iran itself is an overwhelmingly Muslim nation, according to official estimates.

<i>Age:</i>	<i>Have you read or had some level of exposure to the Shahnameh?</i>
<i>Gender:</i>	<i>How does the Shahnameh figure into your life? Please describe your relationship to it:</i>
<i>Place of Birth:</i>	<i>Do stories from the Shahnameh factor into your identity as an Iranian individual? If yes, how so?</i>
<i>Country of current residence:</i>	<i>What do you know of ancient Iran?</i>
<i>Religion (if any):</i>	<i>Do you feel any sort of "connection" to ancient Iran? Why or why not?</i>
<i>If you emigrated from Iran, please briefly describe how and at what age:</i>	<i>How have Iranian history & archaeology shaped your identity, if at all?</i>
<i>Where were you educated, for the most part?</i>	<i>How would you describe your Iranian identity? What do you feel is important or makes you Iranian?</i>
<i>If you were born or raised primarily outside of Iran, please briefly describe your connection to Iran:</i>	

Table 2: Questionnaire.

The median age of the respondents was 53, and the average was 49 years old. As I will discuss, this means that many respondents grew up mostly under the rule of the Shah, and chose to leave for various reasons in the years and decades after that regime collapsed. A small but significant portion of the respondents is second-generation, meaning that they either emigrated from Iran as young children or were born abroad.

Organization of the Thesis

I will begin with a discussion of themes in Iranian identity and national consciousness to give a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the data, especially given the relatively small sample size. Next, I will examine the Sasanians' memory of the Achaemenid dynasty, and how this aligns with Anthony D. Smith's definition of an *ethnie*. I will conclude with a discussion of the controversy surrounding the Cyrus

cylinder, a famed symbol of modern Iranian patriotism and national consciousness and with a discussion of other themes gleaned from questionnaire responses. It is my intention to help create an academic underpinning for the proliferation of Iranian Studies in the United States as more Americans seek to understand a nation frequently seen as at odds with their own and as part of an erroneously fetishized as a homogenous “other”.

Chapter 2: History and Ethnicity in the Land of the Noble

Roots: Identity, History and What Makes an ‘Iranian’?

Time and place are important factors in the description of any phenomenon. History and geography are significant analogues of these components in ethnographic discourse. When we are able to delineate Iran and Iranians or other ethnic identity groups, we do so primarily by association with a particular series of events (history) occurring to a particular group of people, (an ethnic group) largely in a particular place, a geography.

As a geographical conception, Iran has existed for at least 2,500 years, dating to the founding of the Achaemenid Empire in the mid-6th century B.C. Unifying Iranian and non-Iranian peoples from the Oxus to the Danube to the Nile, a culturally, ethnically and linguistically Iranian people, calling themselves “Persians” and “Aryans” were the first to rule in its entirety what would later be termed the “Iranian Plateau”, an area consisting primarily of what is today most of Iran and Afghanistan and parts of western Pakistan. Iranian peoples are spread over the distance of this region, having gradually infiltrated the region from Central Asia possibly beginning around 1,000 B.C. The Achaemenids, titled thusly by posterity because of the royal claim of descent from an ancestor known as “Achaemenes” in Greek, themselves were Persians, and describe themselves as “king(s) of Persia”, or the “*Pârsa*” of the Achaemenids, a region of south-central Iran (modern *Fars*) from which the dynasty originated.

While accorded the distinction of being the originators of the first truly Iranian polity as we have known it historically, the earliest mention of an area as Iran is the “Airyanōm Vaējō / Ērān-wēž” or “land/place of the Aryans” of the Young Avesta, the holy book of Zoroastrianism. (Daryae n.d.) According to the text, this area is close to the Oxus river of what is today Turkmenistan. It is important to note that the Young Avesta was composed (or rather transmitted) by individuals from the Eastern Iranian world in their own language in the first half of the first millennium B.C., as opposed to the Persian ancestors of the westerly Achaemenids. However, Zoroastrian elements were a clear part of the royal inscriptions, decrees and cosmology of the Achaemenids and the origins of the beliefs of the Persian kings and their Avestan-speaking kin to the east are thought to spring from a shared origin as semi-nomadic Iranian peoples of the Central Asian steppe in the preceding millennia. Zoroaster (or “Zarathustra”), the eponymous prophet of the religion, has been theorized to have potentially lived as early as 1750 B.C. and as late as the early Achaemenid period (Olmstead 1948). Linguistic analyses of the Gathas, hymns written by Zoroaster have shown that the language used dates to between 1700 and 1500 B.C., meaning that in all likelihood, Zoroastrian teachings had long since been passed down to the ancestors of the Achaemenids as well as the Avestan-speaking peoples. (Boyce 1979)

Daryae (n.d.) claims that the notion of “Ērān-Šahr” or Iran as distinct from the non-Iranian realm which consisted of lands and peoples entirely foreign to the Persian core (known to the Sasanians as *aneran*, or “non-Iranian”), was a development of the Sasanian Empire (224-651 A.D.).

If these historical developments are the point of reference for the geographical outlook of the (*Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*), then we can make certain assumptions. One is that during the late Sāsānian period a conceptual worldview had developed which was based on the imperialistic policies beginning with Kawād I to the time of Husraw II. This is the time when the Sāsānian Empire reached its furthest limits and exerted its influence beyond the traditional borders of the Sāsānian Empire. Consequently, the concept of Ērān-šahr in our text was an imperialistic notion of what Ērān-šahr was territorially. (N.d.: 6)

According to Daryae'e's reading of the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, an important middle Persian document concerning Sasanian administrative geography, Iran being thought of as an ethno-political territory was only a development of late antiquity, putting into question the conception of pre-Sasanian Iran by its rulers and inhabitants as an ethnically and culturally coherent state-level unit.

Therefore, early Iran can potentially be defined in several ways: (1) the earliest abode of the self-identifying Aryan ancestors of the Persians and other later Iranian peoples who dispersed across a wide stretch of land, (2) the land of the Iranian plateau as inhabited by linguistically Iranian peoples after approximately 1,000 B.C.; or (3) the lands laid out in the *t-ī Ērān-šahr* and the inscriptions of the Zoroastrian clergyman Kartir at Naqsh-e-Rostam in Fars province (which corresponds to the ancient land or “*dahyu*” of Persia claimed by Achaemenid kings). In the interest of examining the earliest conception of the Iranian nation and national consciousness in the light of modern Iranian affinity for the “glories” of pre-Islamic Iran, I will examine and analyze what can presumably be said to be the early formation of Iran as an idea with a cultural, linguistic and ethnic basis.

National Consciousness, Nationalism and Nation: the Formulation of a Collective Identity?

In defining individuals, places and things as “Iranian”, we must necessarily place them in synthetic or rather, “unnatural” categories: as Barth famously wrote, “ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves” (1969). Self-ascription is fluid and peculiar to the social sciences. There is nothing inherently “Iranian” about the peaks of the Alborz range any more than there is of the very blood of the nineteenth-century Qajar reformer Amir Kabir. Dealing then in abstractions as many scholars do, we must define “national consciousness” and other terms derived of culture that serve to designate and delineate on the basis of language, community and ethnic origin.

We may be able to describe Sasanian political and cultural policies as the first iteration of Iranian nationalism in the pre-modern and non-Western sense, as well as national consciousness. Although we think of the large-scale sentiments of national determination – movements for the establishment of an independent state based around a dominant ethnic group and its homeland -as nationalism today, it is apparent that the earliest discernible form of nationalism as state policy in Iran arose from a national consciousness and sense of collective history that resulted at least partially from foreign cultural and political hegemony.

Political theorist David Miller (1997) surveys the sometimes uneasy and ill-defined cleavage between the terms “national consciousness” and “nationalism” first by firmly defining the latter vis-à-vis Isaiah Berlin:

Berlin, for instance, contrasts nationalism with ‘mere national consciousness – the sense of belonging to a nation, and then proceeds to pack a great deal of definition into nationalism proper. It involves, he says, four essential beliefs: first, that the characters of human beings are profoundly shaped by the groups to which they belong; second, that such groupings are quasi-organic in nature, such that the ends of their individual members cannot be dissociated from the good of the whole; third, that the ultimate ends that individuals pursue are to be interpreted as the values of one specific national grouping, rather than as having a universal and transcendent status; fourth, that the interests of the nation are to be regarded as supreme, and nothing is to be allowed to obstruct pursuit of these interests. Here nationalism is identified by reference to doctrines that are characteristic of one particularly strong version of it: that species of nineteenth century nationalism whose roots lay in German romanticism, in its organic view of society and its cultural relativism. Clearly, to say of someone in ordinary parlance that he is a nationalist is not to impute to him all (or any) of these beliefs; it may mean no more than he is involved in a campaign for the independence of his nation (1997: 8)

We can infer that “mere national consciousness” has less to do with ideology, the domain of nationalism, and rather consists of an awareness and belonging that exists on a more tangible plane than ideological nationalism does. Awareness of the differences between peoples from distant locales is enough to engender “consciousness” of a group’s individuality. It is possible that the modern phenomenon of nationalism has its roots in the age of exploration, as has been suggested by many scholars. Regular or intermittent contact between peoples within a relatively diverse range of cultural and physiognomic similarity may have been enough to foster a sense of one’s own “national consciousness”; the advent of deep-sea faring ships brought primarily European explorers in contact with

groups virtually isolated from Eurasian contact for all of recorded history. Therefore contacts with peoples of seemingly extraterrestrial difference to European mariners, sailing “under the flag” may have served as an impetus for the development of nationalist sentiments. Vast differences in appearance, culture and demeanor have led to a more distinct sense of national or ethnic distinctness and superiority. These differences were used for centuries afterward to justify colonialism and other forms of subjugation.

Nationalism would seem to require a certain amount of collective historical memory – i.e., nation-states with histories shaped by “common glories in the past and...a common will in the present” as Renan (1882) supposed. Collective memory, an idea with roots in the writings of Karl Marx, was well articulated by French sociologist and student of Emile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, as “events that were rendered to an individual by other members of society” (1992). Indeed, individuals have a large impact on the way collective memories are imparted (Funkenstein 1989). Memories of events never witnessed by those who now share them are passed from generation to generation – this is one of the fundamental components of collective memory.

Modern Iranian Nationalism and its Origins in Language-Based Nationalism

A controversial movement to replace Arabic-derived words in Persian occurred in nineteenth-century Iran. Spearheaded by Qajar prince Jalal od-Din Mirza, and other nationalist intellectuals, Mirza composed the *Name-ye-Khosrawan*, a *Shahnameh*-style epic that replaced Arabic vocabulary with allegedly forgotten Persian words that Mirza borrowed from the *Dasatir*, a Persian-language book composed in India by a man named

Azar Keyvan who lived during the reign of the Persianate Mughal dynasty. Keyvan claimed to have used pre-Islamic Persian words in place of Arabic ones, and Mirza borrowed these. Only later was it revealed that Keyvan had simply made up the supposedly “forgotten” Persian words, and thus Mirza and his efforts were mocked by other intellectuals not in favor of removing Arabic or European loanwords from Persian (Kia 1998).

Such currents in the politics of language have cemented the *Shahnameh*'s role as a centerpiece of identity among many Iranians. As a vessel for preserving and promoting the use of Persian words over Arabic words, Zoroastrian myths and pre-Islamic history, the *Shahnameh* is a document that provides a strong link to pre-Islamic Iran, much as modern archaeology has for Iranians who identify strongly with the pre-Islamic past in recent years.

An undercurrent of xenophobia and anti-Arab sentiment is typified by some Iranians professing strong nationalist beliefs. Mirza and Akhundzadeh corresponded regarding such beliefs, with Mirza writing in a letter to Akhundzadeh that he had written *Name-ye-Khosrawan* because: “I have used the language of our ancestors which like everything else has been violated and plundered by the Arabs”. Akhundzadeh in reply wrote “Your highness is freeing our language from the domination of the Arabic tongue. I am also trying to free our nation from Arabic script. What if a third person appeared and freed our nation from the yoke of the base customs of these Arabs who brought an end to

our thousand-year-old monarchy of justice and renown, and destroyed our motherland which is the paradise of the earth” (Kia 1998).

Ferdowsi and Oral Legends: A Genealogy of Iranian National Consciousness

Iran has a long tradition of orally-transmitted literature and storytelling, usually performed by a *naqqali* (Mahamedi 1982, Talebi 2009). The most famous and typically Iranian story is that of the *Shahnameh* or “Book of Kings”, the tenth-century partly-mythologized national epic that has played a large role in the creation and maintenance of Iranian identity and national consciousness for the past thousand years. Scholars believe that its roots go back even further, to several documents originating in pre-Islamic Iran, an even more tantalizing prospect for the ancient role of Iranian literary tradition as the crux of Iranian identity. Composed in the 10th-century A.D. by Hakim Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi Tusi, the *Shahnameh* is an epic of tremendous proportions in both scope and size, consisting of approximately 100,00 lines, 990 chapters and a partly mythical historiography covering the creation of the world, Alexander and Sasanian monarchs.

Born around 940 A.D., Ferdowsi, as he is commonly known in our day, was born into a family whose *dehqan* (landed petty nobles) class membership required that they help to keep the history of Iran, a tradition dating back at least to the Sasanian era and the reign of Khosrow I (Taffazoli 1994). Ferdowsi abstained from using any words he deemed to be of Arabic origin in the *Shahnameh*, stating forthrightly that “the Persian language is revived by this work”. This was a remarkably bold statement on his behalf, as Arabic had replaced Persian as the language of the ruling elite of Iran; it also was the

language of science at the time, with many treatises written by medieval Persian scholars in a tongue unfamiliar to the unlearned multitude of their nation.

Ferdowsi's work, as large as it may now loom in the canon of Persian ethnic literature, was not unprecedented. Beginning with the Achaemenid era, Zoroastrianism was also eventually codified as the state religion of the Sasanian Empire. Apart from the religious centralization of the state, Khosrow I (531-579 A.D.) sought to consolidate his power by establishing a cult of national heritage that would diminish the feudal divisiveness that permeated Persian society, accentuated by the rise of the *dehqans* as petty lords. Khosrow initiated an "antiquarian renaissance" of sorts during which the "Book of Lords" was most likely composed, and Achaemenid-era titles and heroic stories and lineages were revived as part of an effort to create a strong, centralized state around a heroic past and culture (Smith 1986).

The "Book of Lords" was a forerunner of the *Shahnameh*, composed by *dehqans* at the behest of Khosrow which gives the history of a mythical Persian dynasty, also detailed in Ferdowsi's work. Composed from the remnants of oral literature passed down to sixth-century *dehqans*, the Book of Lords represents one of the first great attempts at forging a formal and collective Persian ethnic history. This followed a tradition of Zoroastrian literature, which had only been transcribed from much more ancient Persian and pre-Persian Central Asian oral tradition during the Sasanian period as well.

The fact that oral tradition was dominant among Iranian peoples until Late Antiquity has possibly contributed to the general lack of understanding of their history

and societies by others, as compared to their southern European contemporaries. Much of what we know about Cyrus, the first leader of the ancient Persian Empire comes from the *Cyropaedia*, written by the Greek historian Xenophon alongside the accounts contained in Herodotus and the Old Testament. In the Western historical tradition of antiquity, Iranic peoples are viewed through the prism of Greek and Roman adversaries and their writings and had been perceived entirely so until excavations began in Iran in the early twentieth century.

Apart from cursory ethnographic descriptions by Greek-speaking writers, some economic documents and royal decrees, we know very little about how ancient Iranians viewed themselves and their world. It is not likely that anything in the vein of a modern national consciousness was present among the peoples of the Iranian Plateau 2,500 years ago. However, a two-hundred year reign over a variety of far-flung peoples would have certainly imbued at least the ruling Persian elite with some sense of ethnic distinctness. As I have discussed, there was certainly the precursor of a national consciousness present and actively maintained during the Sasanian period. Greek cultural influence began to permeate Iranian society with the conquest of Alexander in 330 B.C., and continued through the reign of his Seleucid successors and their Parthian usurpers, who ruled most of Iran as a highly de-centralized state. The Sasanians claimed descent from an ostensibly mythical Achaemenid ancestor named “Sasan”. This was emblematic of the dynasty’s efforts at creating a centralized, unified and distinctly Persian kingdom as a response to the introduction of the Greek language and culture to native Iranian peoples.

Certainly then, at least among petty nobles such as the Sasanian clan during the reign of the Parthians, nationalistic sentiments may have been stoked by Greek cultural ascendancy on the plateau. Gellner defines nationalism as “a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” and nationalistic sentiment as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle [of nationalism], or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment” (1983:1). It would seem that a protracted history of conquest of and by foreign peoples would have led to the consummation of Gellner’s criteria by the post-Achaemenid era, imaginably triggering the beginning of a pursuit of indigenous rule and ethno-political legitimacy

Sasanian Memory of the Achaemenids as the First Documented Iteration of Iranian

National Consciousness

As Daryaee (1995) notes, Latin historians Ammianus Marcellinus and Herodian both noted the Sasanian predilection for claiming formerly Achaemenid territories as rightful re-conquests: “Herodian stated that Ardashir had claimed Asia by ancestral right, claiming that since his ancestors from Cyrus to Darius III had ruled these regions, they must now be reunited under his rule” (Daryaee 1995) This evinces an early form of “national consciousness” which may more accurately termed “national awareness”, in which (alleged) descent from a prior dynasty is used as justification for military conquest. As I will show, the Sasanians used the Achaemenids frequently for many causes including justification of imperialist policies as well as to lay claim to the cultural

heritage left by the previous native dynasty and create a sense collective memory based on Achaemenid glories.

Sasanian inscriptions at sites like Naqsh-e-Rostam and Persepolis also reveal an awareness of the Achaemenids, if not an outright desire to associate with them as descendants. Daryaee notes a Sasanian inscription on a doorpost at Persepolis:

He [i.e., the official] caused great rejoicing, and ordered rites performed for the gods. He gave blessings to his father and ancestors. Then he offered blessings to Shapur the king of kings, to his own soul, and also to him who built this structure. May God remember (them?) (Daryaee 1995).

Persepolis, by that time in ruins for nearly 600 years, would then appear to have been a sacred place where some religious & political rites of power were still performed with acknowledgement to the Achaemenid builders of the site. A central point of Daryaee's thesis is that the mythical Kayanid or Kayanian dynasty of the ancient pre-Achaemenid holy book, the Avesta is conflated sometimes by the Sasanians with the Achaemenids. The Kayanids are also conflated with the Achaemenids in the part-history, part-myth of the *Shahnameh* – an important point for later recall. The Sasanians attempted to create what Daryaee calls a religio-political entity named “Iran” in the third century during the reign of Ardashir I, the first monarch of the dynasty.

While the reasons for such a policy may not be clear – it is apparent, as we have seen in the patronage of the “Book of Lords” by Khosrow I, that the Sasanians were probably the earliest originators of what we can discern from the archaeological and

historical record of a sort of Iranian national consciousness. They promoted a form of historical memory with its roots in the Avesta and the grandeur of Achaemenid ruins. It should also be noted however, that the Parthian kings used Achaemenid titulature (namely, the epithet “King of Kings”), denoting a continuity of memory of the Achaemenids long before Sasanian rule (Daryaee 1995).

Matthew Canepa (2010) in his excellent analysis explains the evidence for a Sasanian conception of the past as a lineal and heavily related to an Achaemenid dynasty revered by the Sasanians, according to archaeological and artistic methods:

What is remarkable about the Sasanian dynasty’s additions to [Naqsh-e-Rostam] is not simply their monumentality but the extent to which they sensitively, seamlessly, and unrelentingly incorporated the Achaemenid material into their larger vision. Here, the first two great kings of the dynasty adapted and expanded pre-imperial Sasanian practices such as incising their identities visually or epigraphically directly into Achaemenid features and using them as a stage for ritual practice. This engagement went far beyond a superficial interest in the Achaemenid remains: the intense building activity and rituals performed at the site created a coherent experience of a single cultural, dynastic and historical whole. Furthermore, parallels between the visual, discursive and ritual expressions of the two dynasties are so startlingly close that it is much more likely that some sort of causative, if not lineal relationship, lay behind the pronounced similarities than to posit that they were random, as has been repeatedly implied. (2010:575)

Ritual similarities followed the artistic similarities of the site as well. The *Ka’ba-ye Zardosht* or “Cube of Zoroaster”, a building of unknown function at Naqsh-e-Rostam dating to the Achaemenid era, also contains a trilingual inscription by Shapur I in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek, proclaiming his allegiance to Ahura Mazda (the god of the Zoroastrians), his royal lineage and lands he has conquered and rules:

I, the Mazda worshipping lord Shapur, king of kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose lineage is from the Gods, son of the Mazda worshipping divinity Ardashir, king of kings of Iran, whose lineage is from the Gods, grandson of king Papak, am ruler of Iranshahr, [I hold ?] the lands:

Persis, Parthia, Khuzistan, Mesene, Assyria, Adiabene, Arabia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Segan [Makhelonia = Mingrelia], Arran [Albania] Balasakan, up to the Caucasus mountains and the Gates of Albania, and all of the mountain chain of Pareshwar, Media, Gurgan, Merv, Herat and all of Aparshahr) Kerman, Seistan, Turan, Makuran, Paradene, Hindustan [= Sind], the Kushanshahr up to Peshawar, and up to Kashgar, Sogdiana and to the mountains of Tashkent, and on the other side of the sea, Oman. And we have given to a village district the name Peroz-Shapur and we made Hormizd-Ardashsir by name Shapur. And these many lands, and rulers and governors, all have become tributary and subject to us.



Figure 1: The Naqsh-e-Rostam archaeological site in Fars province, Iran. The “Cube of Zoroaster” is in the foreground. The entrance to an Achaemenid royal tomb is cut into the rock face in the background.

This bears a striking, and undeniable resemblance to the Achaemenid king Darius's inscription at Behistun (Bisotun):

"I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of countries, son of Hystaspes, grandson of Arsames, an Achaemenian.

ays: My father was Hystaspes; Hystaspes' father was Arsames; Arsames' father was Ariaramnes; Ariaramnes' father was Teispes; Teispes' father was Achaemenes.

Darius the King says: For this reason we are called Achaemenians. From long ago we have been noble. From long ago our family had been kings.

Darius the King says: there were 8 of our family who were kings before me; I am the ninth; 9 in succession we have been kings.

Darius the King says: By the favor of Ahuramazda I am King; Ahuramazda bestowed the kingdom upon me.

Darius the King says: These are the countries which came to me; by the favor of Ahuramazda I was king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, (those) who are beside the sea, Sardis, Ionia, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, Maka: in all, 23 provinces.

Darius the King says: These are the countries which came to me; by the favor of Ahuramazda they were my subjects; they bore tribute to me; what was said to them by me either by night or by day, that was done."

There are clear parallels between Shapur's inscription and that of Darius. Shapur invokes the Zoroastrian supreme deity, Mazda (or Ahuramazda) as does Darius. Both kings name lands that they "hold" or have been given, many of the very same Asian lands by similar names. Shapur, in Achaemenid style also records his lineage, confirming his descent from Ardashir and Papak, just as Darius, who was not directly descended from his predecessors Cyrus and Cambyses, recounts his relation to his dynasty's eponymous ancestor, Achaemenes.

Darius and Shapur each proclaim themselves “King of kings”, but it is Shapur who makes reference to “Iranshahr” and his sovereignty over the kings of “Iran and non-Iran” (“*Eran ud aneran*”) whereas Darius declares himself “King of Persia”. This would seem to indicate, at least at the state level, that the Sasanians were the first to put forth a geo-political conception roughly contiguous with modern Iran and known by the same or a similar name. The use of the title “King of kings” by Sasanian rulers, “suggests a continuity rather than a loss of memory of the Achaemenids” (Daryaei 1995).

In Darius’ inscriptions, Ahuramazda is often praised and entreated. However, there is strong debate as to whether this meant that the Achaemenids themselves were Zoroastrian. The Achaemenids have been noted for their lack of religious persecution, which would seem to be at odds with strong personal religious convictions or a state-sponsored doctrine, as was characteristic of many later Sasanian monarchs.

If Iran as a geo-political conception was first denoted by the Sasanians, then we can ascertain that this is the first historical expression of Iran as a coherent state-level entity sufficiently incorporating a form of descent-based historical memory as well as geographic and cultural contiguity among the regions of the Iranian plateau. Further, the Sasanian designation of “*Aneran*” or “non-Iran” to connote lands steadfastly controlled and claimed by the Sasanians, yet distinguished as culturally separate lend credence to the dynasty’s idea of Iran as an ethnic and cultural entity unto itself, as opposed to an imperial conglomeration of territories conquered by a land-holding family with no use for

historical or ethnic self-identification. In this sense, Sasanian Iran may also be considered the first true “nation” to exist on the Iranian plateau.

Ethnies and Political Entities of the Sasanian World

Anthony D. Smith in his *Ethnic Origins of Nations* presents a set of six criteria for ethnic communities that he calls “ethnies” in pre-modern eras, a term which he notes has no direct equivalency in English or Greek. Smith’s hypothesis is based on “...the *sense* of common ethnicity rather than any objective reality”. Any data pertaining to the social and ethnic identification of many of the subjects of the Sasanian Empire: those whose daily lives were lived in essentially *gemeinschaft* communities, where abstractions such as nations, ethnies and memories of the Achaemenids may have very well likely not played a significant role in any aspect of life. I apply Smith’s criteria to modern Iranian conception of Iran as well as historically. The courts of Sasanian kings were populated with viziers, petty lords, Magi, emissaries and other nobility for whom these seemingly modern abstractions such as ethnic affiliation, a myth of common descent or ethnogenesis most probably *would* have been important indicators of identity and affiliation. The dominant culture of these elite individuals in Sasanian Iranian society would comprise an exclusive ethnie with its own descent myths based in the stories of the *Avesta* (and later, the Book of Lords), memories of the Achaemenids, and a territorial link to the historic domination of the Iranian Plateau by those elites and their predecessors.

The first of Smith’s “dimensions of an ethnie”, ***a collective name***, he describes as such: “In general, however, collective names are a sure sign and emblem of ethnic

communities, by which they distinguish themselves and summarize their ‘essence’ to themselves...” (1986:22)

Officially, Iran had been known as “Persia” in the West and to much of the rest of the world, until 1935 when Reza Pahlavi, or Reza Shah formally requested that foreign governments refer to the nation as “Iran”, the indigenous name for the whole of the country. Having discussed the Sasanian use of “Eran” or “Iran” in the pages prior, the reader may now be aware how Smith’s first criterion is applicable to the example at hand. The crystallization of “Iran” as a concept arose quite clearly out of need for the Sasanian Iranian ruling elite to “distinguish themselves” and their subjects by labeling them as “Eran” or “Aneran”, while still designating all as territories of their empire. A curious subplot to this exercise in ethnic designation is that Shapur is implying something about the demographic nature of whole regions, as opposed to merely declaring his dynasty, lineage or ruling faction as “Iranian”, which suggests that these regions most likely had a distinctly “Iranian” cultural flavor to them by Shapur’s time. Thus, we are able to note a pre-existing Persian *ethnie* by the Sasanian era. A traveler would have been able to notice significant cultural differences while travelling through Persis (or *Pars*) as opposed to Syria, both firmly claimed and controlled in Shapur’s day by the Sasanians.

The genesis of the name “Iran” derives from “Ariyanam”, a term used in the Zoroastrian collection of holy texts, the *Avesta*, as designated areas inhabited by Aryans. (Gignoux 1985) Certain portions, of the *Avesta*, such as the “Gathas”, a collections of hymns have been dated to around 1,000 B.C. and certainly predate the Achaemenids and

certainly any conception of political entity governed by culturally Iranian peoples encompassing the entire Iranian Plateau. Thus, we can see that Iranians and proto-Iranian peoples have used such terms for some time to self-designate themselves and their domains.

A *common myth of descent*, as Smith espouses, is the second essential criterion to the formation of an ethnic:

“The fused and elaborated myths provide an overall framework of meaning for the ethnic community, a *mythomoteur*, which ‘makes sense’ of its experiences and defines its ‘essence’. Without a *mythomoteur* a group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action.

Myths of descent usually reveal several components and layers of legend. There are myths of spatial and temporal origins, of migration, of ancestry and filiation, of the golden age, of decline and exile and rebirth. It is only much later that these separate myth-motifs are brought together to form a fully-elaborated mythology of origins and descent. Often, this is the work of nationalist intellectuals in the modern era; but we also find quite elaborate sets of myth-motifs in pre-modern eras, as in the Homeric canon or the Bible or the Iranian Book of Kings. In each, a kernel of ‘historical truth’ is decked out with fantasies and half-truths so as to provide a coherent and pleasing ‘story’ of the ways in which the community was formed and developed...the object of this profusion of myth was not scientific ‘objectivity’, but emotional and aesthetic coherence to undergird social solidarity and social definition.

The *Shahnameh*, as the author himself notes, is a prototypical example of an ethnic *mythomoteur*. Drawing upon Zoroastrian cosmogony, the story of Gayomart, the first man and king of Iran has its roots in much earlier times. Dynasties and kings in the *Shahnameh* sometimes converge with historical ones, such as Dara, who seems to be identifiable with the last Achaemenid monarch, Darius III. The story of Dara and Sikander of Rum, is certainly a partially fictionalized account of Alexander’s conquest of

Achaemenid Persia and his dealings with Darius III, his Persian counterpart. Ferdowsi mentions that Dara sent envoys to Alexander's court to claim tribute upon his ascension to the throne of Rum (or rather Macedon, if we are reading it as a historical account) and Alexander's incursion into northern India as well. Aside from typical poetic hyperbole and other mutations, such as Alexander's identification with Rum ("Rome"), and Ferdowsi's assertion that Alexander died in Kashan, and not Babylon as Diodorus Siculus tells us, one can see that Ferdowsi's account of Darius III and Alexander is roughly accurate historical account of an important period in Iranian history. "Half-truths", such as Ferdowsi's suggestion that Alexander secretly entered Darius' camp disguised as his own envoy, serve as fantasy and generally make for a more compelling story. The same is true of the stories of Rostam & Sohrab, Kay Khosrow, and other *Shahnameh* stories which seem to have less discernible historical precedents, yet serve to function as reinforcement of Iranian cultural values as well as convenient vehicles for the conveyance of a collective history of Iran.

A parallel historical track can be found in modern times: archaeological and historical discoveries at Persepolis, Naqsh-e-Rostam, and other sites as well as the diffusion of Greek-language texts at least partially concerning ancient Iranians, such as Strabo's *Geography*, Herodotus' *Histories* and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, have allowed for a historical/archaeological modern augmentation of the *Shahnameh's* celebration of Iranian cultural values by Iranians today. Few individuals who identify as Iranian would not recognize names such as Cyrus or Darius or have some conception of the extent of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. As Smith says, the object of the profusion of myths is

not necessarily scientific objectivity, but rather to “undergird social solidarity and social definition” (1986: 24). Mehrdad Kia (1998) chronicles the development of modern Iranian nationalism and its appropriation of ancient Iranian history to forge an Iranian identity distanced from Arab Islam. Now, as seventeen centuries prior, national mythmaking has served to function exactly as Anthony Smith suggested --to buttress allegiance and the strength of the nation-state by espousing a collective and partially mythologized history.

A *shared history* is the next criterion. Smith says:

Ethnie are nothing if not historical communities built up on shared memories. A sense of common history unites successive generations, each with its set of experiences which are added to the common stock, and it also defines a population in terms of experienced temporal sequences, which convey to later generations the historicity of their own experiences. In other words, historical sequences provide ‘forms’ for other experiences, channels and moulds for their interpretation.

History and collective memory, then, are important components of the *ethnie* that Smith feels are important to an awareness that re-appropriates history interpretively and otherwise. He continues:

What matters, then, is not the authenticity of the historical record, much less any attempt at ‘objective’ methods of historicizing, but the poetic, didactic and integrative purposes which that record is felt to disclose. ‘History’ in this sense must tell a story, it must please and satisfy as narrative, it must all be of a piece, like the Homeric epics and Ossian. It must also educate. The heroes and heroines whose deeds it unfolds must embody the virtues held precious by the community and conform to its stereotypes...

The *Shahnameh* captures the essence of the above paragraphs perfectly. A mélange of Zoroastrian cosmogonic myths and historical events, some more objectively

and some with a distinctly Persian slant, the epic fulfills the criteria readily. As recited by *Naqqals* across generations, and certainly in the time before Ferdowsi himself, the *Shahnameh*, other shahnamehs (as earlier Persian books of partly mythical history are referred to) and earlier Iranic oral legends served to educate, inculcate and entertain Iranian peoples. Alexander is portrayed at times as either a despicable or honorable figure, but ultimately he is claimed to be the half-brother of Darius III, and is praised for saving the world as builder of a wall on the fringes of civilization to keep Gog and Magog, barbarian peoples referenced in the Hebrew Bible, at bay. Thus, the *Shahnameh* makes sense of Alexander's military conquest of the Persian Empire for its readers, hinting at his Iranophilic tendencies and partially justifying his invasion.

As I have shown in this section, the *Shahnameh* serves as a document that helps to preserve a shared "history". Smith's next criterion also inhabits the same theoretical space: a "*distinctive shared culture.*" Smith explains:

Over and above myths of descent and common memories, *ethnie* are differentiated by one or more elements of 'culture' which both help to bind members together and to separate them from outsiders. This is what Benjamin Azkin termed the 'similarity-dissimilarity' pattern, where members of an *ethnie* are similar and alike in those cultural traits in which they are dissimilar from non-members...Cultural uniqueness is also important for ethnicity. The *ethnie* in question should appear to be, not only distinctive, but incommensurable, either by having a language which is unrelated to other languages, or a religious community entirely to itself, or because among a host of ethnic cultures it stands out by virtue of a cultural characteristic all its own, such as colour or institutions, or because the combination of its otherwise cross-cultural traits is unique. (1986:26)

Iran is a country of considerable ethnic and cultural complexity, however, it has, since Achaemenid times, been dominated by a ruling class primarily engaged in Persian cultural practices. While there have been interludes of foreign domination by Macedonian, Arab, Mongol and Turkic rulers, all have yielded, to varying extents, to the trappings of the culture of Persian nobility and administration. For example, the Timurid and Safavid dynasties were two of the most ardent patrons of Iranian architecture, courtly practices and the Persian language of any native or non-native dynasty to rule Iran.

Ferdowsi's famous quotation from the *Shahnameh*, "The Persian language is revived by this work", reinforces the notion that has existed since antiquity that the predominant language of the Iranians was a significant point of differentiation between Iranian peoples and their neighbors. Persian and its closely related Iranian tongues (e.g., Kurdish, Tajik, Baluch) are vastly different than the Afro-Asiatic languages to the west, the Ural-Altai Turkic languages of Central Asian peoples and of Asia Minor today. Iranian languages are not the only Indo-European languages of the region, but the languages of Pakistan and the northern and western portions of what is today Afghanistan are of only distant relation. The Persian language has been the dominant language of literature, administration and the ruling classes of Iran for most of the last 2,500 years and intermittently elsewhere throughout Central and South Asia and other parts of the Near East. Having created a canon of texts, expressions and a courtly culture (Achaemenid proskynesis and modern *ta'arof*) that distinguishes Iranian ethnic and cultural domains from those of neighboring indigenous South Asian, Turkic and Arab or Mesopotamian *ethnies*, Persian culture is distinctive and historically rooted.

Smith's penultimate criterion is an *association with a specific territory*:

“*Ethnie* always possess ties to a particular locus or territory, which they call their ‘own’. They may well reside in that territory; or the association with it may just be a potent memory. An *ethnie* need not be in physical possession of ‘its’ territory; what matters is that it has a symbolic geographical centre, a sacred habitat, a ‘homeland’, to which it may symbolically return, even when its members are scattered across the globe and have lost their homeland centuries ago.”

“Territory is relevant to ethnicity, therefore, not because it is actually possessed, nor even for its ‘objective’ characteristics of climate, terrain, and location, though they influence ethnic conceptions, but because of an alleged and felt symbiosis of between a certain piece of earth and ‘its’ community.”

As I have referenced earlier, the conception of Iran as *Eranshahr* or *Eranwez* is a concept that dates back to the Avestan (~1,000 B.C.) *Airyanem Vaejah*. For various reasons, Iranians have made a distinction between Iranian peoples and lands and non-Iranian peoples and lands since antiquity. Smith's description of an *ethnie*'s ties to a territory is particularly pertinent to the larger and more historic diasporas, namely those of the Jews and Armenians. However, the Iranian diaspora has itself grown far and wide in the prior several decades, particularly after the 1979 Islamic revolution, when a cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini took power after the ouster of the king Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and accounts for increasing numbers of individuals of Iranian ancestry in the United States, Canada, Australia and northern Europe. These first and second generation Americans, Swedes and others often express yearning desire for their ancestral homeland.

This is typified by the nostalgic content and quality of diaspora-produced media, notably the prolific output of Los Angeles-based Persian-language television programs

Smith's definition includes both "an alleged and felt symbiosis" and a reference to return (albeit "symbolic"). Many of my survey respondents, all of whom are members of the diaspora mentioned returning to Iran to visit as having an impact on how they view themselves as Iranians. In short, location is an essential dimension of the constitution of an *ethnie*; vast diasporas can be identified and reduced to the outlines of their ancestral homeland on a map. Being in a place where certain activities ("culture") take place, reinforces the link between culture and geography. There has been recent scholarship on the transmission and continuation of culture among the diaspora via the internet (Bernal 2005, Hiller and Franz 2004). However, the primary origin of cultural reinforcement remains the homeland of the diaspora: from there, the vast majority of all typically "Iranian" experiences and memories originate in the minds of those who identify as such.

The final dimension of Smith's definition of an *ethnie* is a *sense of solidarity*:

"To qualify, therefore, as an ethnic community or *ethnie* (as opposed to just an ethnic category), there must also emerge a strong sense of belonging and an active solidarity, which in time of stress and danger can override class, factional or regional divisions within the community. In practice, the sense of active solidarity and co-operation varies considerably, as it does in latterday fully-fledged and recognized nations. But, if we are to speak of a genuine *ethnie*, this sense of solidarity and community must animate at least the educated upper strata, who

can, if need be, communicate it to other strata and regions within the community (Smith 1986:29).”

As shown by the responses to my questionnaire, Iranian patriotism is alive and well. Most Iranians exhibit tremendous levels of pride for their nation and national history, in particular. Solidarity is not necessarily concomitant with strong sentiments of national pride, however. Iran, as we are often reminded within the scope of current politics and diplomacy, is an ethnically diverse country. Azeris, Kurds, Lurs and Baluchis all form considerable ethnic minorities that would seem to undercut the nationalist sentiments of others. Some factions within these ethnic groups have espoused separationist tendencies, many of them with ethnic ties to other groups, thanks to the hyper-patriotism and modernization initiatives of the Pahlavi dynasty. Also, migrations to Tehran and other large, cosmopolitan cities and the continuation of free national public education under the Islamic regime have also helped Iranians in identifying with a dominant Iranian historical narrative and culture that has its origins in the Iranian nationalist writings of Jalal od-Din Mirza and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh. Patriotism, national pride and national solidarity are then indoctrinated into young Iranians of varying ethnic backgrounds in classrooms in Iran and by family members, much as these values are into youngsters in the United Kingdom, United States or elsewhere. A famous anecdote about the Iran-Iraq war tells us that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein thought that Arab populations in southwestern Iran would support his invasion, but the Iraqis were surprised when the Iranian Arabs fought fiercely alongside the Iranian military to repel the Iraqis (Mackey 1998).

Certainly then, we cannot claim that all Iranians purport a sense of solidarity amongst themselves. However, a significant portion do identify with the dominant historical narrative and cultural milieu that includes the Achaemenids, the Safavids, and a variety of culinary, architectural and artistic heritage and certain cultural etiquette and practices that are identified as typically or generically “Iranian” or “Persian”.

The Iranian ethnicity can be said to be primarily constituted of a dominant *ethnie* of historical-nationalist descent which venerates Cyrus, Darius, Nader Shah, Ferdowsi, and depending on political inclinations, possibly also the Pahlavis or Ayatollah Khomeini. Furthermore, Iranians share a common territorial and cultural link, held intact by a common language, historical narrative and epic literature. Now that I have defined the Iranian *ethnie* as roughly corresponding to Anthony Smith’s terms, I examine how Iranians, thusly defined create and maintain a sense of national consciousness in the present, based on their understanding of Iranian history and the *Shahnameh* and how this consciousness maintains a link, sometimes tenuously, with that of the past.

Chapter 3: Myths, Text and the Nation Antique

***Shahnameh* and Ancient Persia: A Source of Nationalist Sentiment – If You’ve Read**

It

"Sleep, man of folly, and may thy slumbers be deep. Thou hast rested upon thy throne while Bijan was hidden in a pit. But thou hast forgotten that a road leadeth from Iran into Turan, and thou didst think in thine evil heart that none would come forth to avenge him. Listen, therefore, unto my voice; for I am Rostam, the son of Zal, the Pehliva, and I have broken down thy doors, and released Bijan from his chains, and I am come to do vengeance upon thee."

When Afrasiyab heard these words he awoke, and cried out in his fear. And he called upon the names of his guards. But no man came forth, because they had been laid low by the hands of Rostam. Then Afrasiyab made his way unto the door, and because it was dark he escaped thence, and he fled before the face of Rostam, and left his house between his hands. Then Rostam took much rich booty of slaves, and horses, and jewels, and when he had done so he sped back unto his army, for he knew that with the day Afrasiyab would come forth with an host to assail him. And it came about as he foresaw, and when the day was risen the watchers cried out that an army marched forth from Turan. Then Rostam set his men in battle order, and he sent Manijeh and the slaves and the booty into Iran, and he placed himself at the head of the host, and Bijan rode beside him. And there was fought a mighty battle, and great was the slaughter, and the bodies of the slain and the broken armour covered the earth. And the banner of Turan sank, and Afrasiyab fled before his enemies.

Then Rostam returned with joy unto Kai Khosrau, and the Shah was glad also. And he came forth to greet his Pehliva, and there rode with him Gew and Gudarz, his warriors. And when Kai Khosrau saw Rostam he embraced him, and said-

"O stay of my soul, and man of valour, thou resemblst the sun, for wheresoever men may look they behold the traces of thy mighty deeds. Happy is Zal who owneth a son such as thou!"

Then he blessed him, and showered rich gifts upon him; and Gew blessed him also, and Gudarz, because he had brought back Bijan into their midst. Then Kai Khosrau gave orders that a great feast be prepared, and the heroes drank until their heads were heavy with wine. But in the morning Rostam came before the Shah in audience, and opened his mouth and said-

"May it please the King to lend his ear unto his slave. I desire to return unto Zal, my father."

And Kai Khosrau listened to the just desires of Rostam, though he would fain have kept him in his courts. Now when Rostam was departed, Kai Khosrau called before him Bijan, and he spake to him of that which was come about, and he poured pity upon the daughter of Afrasiyab when he learned all she had suffered for the sake of Bijan; and he gave him rich gifts, and bade him bear them unto her, and he said-

"Cherish this woman in thy bosom, and suffer not that grief come nigh unto her, neither speak to her cold words, for she hath endured much for thee. And may thy life beside her be happy."

And when the Shah had thus spoken he dismissed Bijan from his presence."

In order to measure the presumed effects of *Shahnameh* and the historical-archaeological inheritance of ancient Persia, I developed a fifteen-question survey for circulation amongst members of the Iranian diaspora residing outside of Iran. All respondents gave their country of current residence as the United States with the exception of a single respondent who lives in Australia. Questions fall into four basic categories – education, immigration, the *Shahnameh* and identity and ancient Persia and identity, in addition to basic demographic queries about age, gender, sex and residency.

I hypothesized that the *Shahnameh* and an awareness of ancient Iran would have a moderate to strong effect on the identity of most Iranian-identifying individuals. The primacy of the stories of the *Shahnameh* in the consciousness of many Iranian and as well as many Central Asian peoples, and the torrent of archaeological findings coming out of Iran since the 19th century, are often re-presented and interwoven with state-sponsored nationalist rhetoric. Given this prospect, I surmised that for many Iranians, and especially those who had received their education in the schools of the Shah, ancient Iran in particular would prove to be a large part of what Frantz Fanon called “national consciousness” (1961), and at the individual level, identity.

I circulated the questionnaire electronically, asking friends, acquaintances and private Iranian cultural or academic organizations to forward it by e-mail to members or their friends and acquaintances who identify as “Iranian”. I examine the data in the following sections and extrapolate themes of intense patriotism and enthusiasm for the

Shahnameh and ancient Iran as well as some unexpected apathy via code/indexing methods.

I asked respondents three questions, in this order, with regards to the *Shahnameh*:

“Have you read or had some level of exposure to the *Shahnameh*?”

“How does the *Shahnameh* figure into your life? Please describe your relationship to it:”

“Do stories from the *Shahnameh* factor into your identity as an Iranian individual? If yes, how so?”

Having used index/code analysis to select and infer narratives from the responses I received to the questionnaire, I now will examine discursively the themes and attitudes survey respondents exhibited regarding the two primary topics they were asked to answer questions about: the *Shahnameh* and ancient Iran.

Nearly every respondent indicated that they had some sort of relationship with the *Shahnameh* or ancient Iran, and responded positively to either or both questions about either source influencing their identity. Affirmative responses to all three questions were overwhelmingly reverential, provided that the respondents had indicated in the first question that they had had significant exposure to the *Shahnameh*. Of those who had, “awe” and “admiration” appropriately describe the tone of their responses because of the universal complaisance and regard for the work, its characters and its author.

“I believe it is a landmark masterpiece that was done to preserve a part of Persian history and literature at a very sensitive time in the old Persia.”

"I consider it a masterpiece and have recounted stories from it to my children. The book is on our book shelf in the family room”

“It shows how being a good person can help one to be successful in his life and how important it is to learn from the past and not to make their mistakes anymore.”

“Shahnameh reflects the essence of being an Iranian, Love for Iran, humanity and being proud of being an Iranian.”

“ancient Iran is the only connection Iranians have to their Persian pre-Islamic identity. I believe this is also part of the reason why the Shahnameh became a popular epic in Iranian literature - it helped Iranians re-connect to an almost forgotten past in an Islamic-dominated period.”

“I believe that my heritage, language, culture, and my identity owe a lot to Ferdousi and his Shahnameh. I have learned a lot from it and I believe every Iranian is forever indebted to it.”

“I am proud of Ferdosi and his intention. He was a revolutionary and a nationalist.”

“To me, Shahnameh is a reminder of the great Persian culture and way of connecting us to it”

The tone of these responses is rife with pride in the work of Ferdowsi. It is clear from the above that the *Shahnameh* is without doubt the national epic of Iran. The beaming superlatives used to describe it and the recognition of the centrality of the text to the “heritage, language, culture” and “identity” as one respondent says, highlight that the epic is venerated by a significant portion of diaspora Iranians.

There were a notable, but smaller number of “negative” responses to this question, meaning individuals did not feel that the *Shahnameh* played a role in their lives. Many of the respondents who indicated a positive response to the question mentioned an association with childhood and schooling, as primary incidences of exposure to the stories or text:

“Brings out in me some of the bed time stories that I can still remember from the time that I was only a youngster.”

“An average level of exposure. Not much more than what we had in school. Later on have been exposed more through Iranian media.”

“Only when I was in elementary and high school , very little.”

“Only what was required during attending school in Iran.”

A 53-year old male who immigrated to the United States at age 16 gave this response to the question about the *Shahnameh* and identity: “I have memorized a few poems and recited them at the right time and right place.” He also mentioned that he had taken a “Shahnameh-khani class, only once” (where the *Shahnameh* is read aloud,

formally). This man's outlook on and pride in the *Shahnameh* exemplifies an individual who clearly embraces the epic as part of his identity. He also described Ferdowsi as "a revolutionary and a nationalist", stating that he was "proud of [Ferdowsi's] intentions". Although he did not elaborate as to what he thought Ferdowsi's purpose in compiling his *Shahnameh* was, we may presume that the respondent believes it to be a nationalistic and patriotic effort on the author's behalf – which, if perceived as being of the tradition of the *dehqans*, it was.

At least some of these patriotic feelings that are aroused come directly from the *Shahnameh* itself. Afrasiab, the antagonist of Iranian hero Rostam, is the king of Turan, a land of Central Asian nomadic peoples thought to be loosely identified as possibly of Turkic origin. The mythical land of Turan in the *Shahnameh* derives its name from Tur, one of the sons of the emperor Fereydun, who is said to have inhabited the Central Asian portion of the original Persian empire which spanned most of the known world according to Ferdowsi. The *Shahnameh* recognizes three large swaths of land that were at one time all a part of the Achaemenid Empire and which were inherited by the sons of Fereydun: Iraj, who inherited Iran; Tur, who inherited the lands to the east and north of Iran; and Saum, who inherited "Rum" (identified with "Rome") and lands west of Iran.

Ferdowsi's intention for composing the *Shahnameh* was to preserve the history and language of Iran. His dictum "*Ajam zenda kardam bedin Pārsi*" or, "I have brought the Persians to life with this Persian language" indicates language-based nationalism (Perry 2005). Surely then, the *Shahnameh* can be said to have been one of the earliest

post-Islamic period pieces of nationalist literature. Scholars have noted the relatively low percentage of Arabic-derived words used in Ferdowsi's work, with figures between from 4-8 percent; however nowhere does the author state that this was his intention, as is commonly believed (Perry 2005).

Clearly, the *Shahnameh* has engendered strong nationalistic feelings in many. These particular responses hint towards a conception of the author as being a purveyor of the traditions of ancient Persia.

Contemporary Perceptions of Ancient Persia

My questionnaire also asked respondents three questions about ancient Iran in succession:

- What do you know of ancient Iran?
- Do you feel any sort of "connection" to ancient Iran? Why or why not?
- How have Iranian history and archaeology shaped your identity, if at all?

Several respondents expressed an antipathy to Arab influence, albeit less forcefully than Mirza and Akhundzadeh.

"Yes, I feel strongly connected to our ancient culture. Despite several outsiders attacks on Iran such as invasion of Iran by nomad Arabs, and Mongolians, Iranian culture has always prevailed and denied most of foreign influence."

“Try to make other culture be aware that we are not terrorists, we did not invite Arab's invading culture into our country. We have more than 10,000 year civilized cultural background, and like to live in harmony with others and not to invade them.”

“How proud Ferdousi was of this country, and how he cherished the Parsi language which we call Farsi these days. Being a pure Iranian and not letting the invasion of Arab culture/ language helped many of us to remain proud of our heritage today and try hard to keep the old Iranian tradition into our today's life. This type of thinking is translated today as racism among some Iranian or other culture who don't mind the intrusion of other culture.”

“In a world where many Western cultures see Islamic countries as violent and backwards, the rich historical tapestry of Iran and its archaeological finds help me to counter-balance these negative perceptions”

Archaeologist Kamyar Abdi (2001) states, most Iranians evince nationalist sentiments. The individuals who entered the above responses into my questionnaire appear to espouse a fair share of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiment in the vein of Mirza and Akhundzadeh. These respondents, along with many others, including the majority of historians and other scholars of Iran place a large emphasis on the cleavage between pre- and post-Islamic Iran. To be clear, the Arab-Islamic invasion of Iran in the seventh century A.D. was a major event in Iranian history - it marked the advent of what would become the dominant religion of the Iranian plateau to this day - Islam - into Iran. The coming of the Arabs would also mark the end of the Sasanian dynasty and Iran

would not again be ruled by an indigenous dynasty for some 300 years until the northwestern Iranian (and by this juncture, Shi'a Muslim) Buyids brought much of western Iran under their control, also hoping to legitimize their power by claiming descent from the Sasanians (Nagel 1990).

With the glories of Persepolis and the Achaemenids forever looming over the Sasanian kings, so would those of the Sasanians over later Iranian aspirants to the throne. Here, we see the effects of a legacy of centuries of autonomous rule as a world power. Surely, the Arab invasion and subsequent three-hundred year rule of Iran engendered resentment among Iranians of the seventh through tenth centuries, as evidenced by the Iranophilic language of Ferdowsi and the cachet afforded the Buyids among their Iranian subjects by their purported Sasanian lineage. However, as Halbwachs has noted in his writings on memory, true "memories" can only exist in the minds of those that participated in such events (Halbwachs 1992). Thus, the collective memories (if they can be referred to as such) of Mira, Akhundzadeh and other modern Iranians are thereby a product of interpreting, rather than remembering, the past through the scope of historical documents, archaeological discoveries and stories.

Only three of 25 respondents unilaterally indicated that they had no interest, felt no "connection" to, or knew very little about ancient Iran. The remainder of respondents had more to say in response to these three questions about ancient Iran than any of the other of the questions, including the questions about the *Shahnameh*. The universal nature of the responses on the topic seems to indicate a more uniform enthusiasm for and

knowledge of ancient Iran than the *Shahnameh*. Several responses demonstrated the ardor most respondents expressed towards ancient Iran:

“Takhte Jamsheed [Persepolis], and other historical sites in Iran, are great reminder of our rich culture and definitely make me proud of our history and ancient culture”

“I am connected to ancient Iran through its rich culture, the language they were speaking, poetry, traditions they have passed to us such as Norooz [Persian New Year’s, the start of the Zodiac calendar, and a Zoroastrian tradition] and other celebrations”

“I have read a few books and would like to read as much as I can about pre islamic iran.”

“Iranian history and archaeology have made me feel a stronger connection to Iran, despite having been born and raised entirely in the United States. Perhaps because I have never been to Iran, when I learn about the history, archaeology, and culture, I feel more Iranian.”

Perceptions of the Cyrus Cylinder as a “charter of human rights” are common to many. Several entries referenced human rights and the legacy of the cylinder directly or obliquely:

“I know that art and cultural was highly developed and in the political area, the influential individuals who built and ruled Iran also played a fundamental role in establishing the foundations of concepts such as democracy and human rights”

“I learned how to be tolerant of others, I also respect freedom of religion for everyone, something that we learned from king Cyrus, respecting human rights..”

“I know a lot about ancient Iran through Shahnameh and I am very proud of ancient Iranian system of government and their belief in freedom of religion and their respect for human right”

“I am impressed by Iranian history for its many successes and failures. Relatively recent archaeological discoveries describing the life of people who constructed ancient palaces reveals humanitarian rules and regulations that were exercised in ancient Iran.”

“there are many examples of progressive work done by Iranians - like the Cyrus cylinder, poetry, the postal network, etc. - that really allow one to connect with the positive contributions Persians have made to world civilization.”

The last response does not explicitly state what the respondent thinks the “progressive work” the Cyrus Cylinder is an example of, but the other responses imply these types of perspectives likely derived from more self-celebratory nationalistic views, which stretch the definition of “human rights” considerably to the point of falsehood.

However, it is apparent from the responses that I received that Cyrus - a remarkable historical figure in his own right - is still primarily associated by many nationalistic diaspora Iranians with human rights and the cylinder. Philip Kohl (1998) has shown us that overstating the purported virtues of past societies and attempting to link them to the present is a common trait of many nationalisms, and unsurprisingly manifests itself as such in the diaspora nationalism of the Iranians.

By and large, most responses simply reflected national pride, and often featured terms like “accomplishments” “glory” “rich history” “success” “culture”, “civilization”, and “military might”

“It has made me proud of my heritage and instilled in me the desire to take my family back to Iran periodically so that they can see first hand the country's amazing historical and archeological sites. There are very few countries in the world that can match Iran's rich history and archaeology.”

“I have read stories from ancient Iran. I have seen their antiques in the museum and I am always very proud of our history.”

“Ancient Iran was a huge empire with glorious culture and civilization that made a lots of influence in other countries. This empire was conquered , ruined and established itself many times in history...”

“Civilization, Art, Kingdom, Freedom, Poetry, Celebration”

“the mighty Persian empire that governed very large piece of the globe.”

Themes reflect a positive overall view of ancient Iran - perhaps as some sort of paradise - are similar to those of other nationalisms and likely derive from similar roots. As Valeria Forte (2011) suggests, Italian interest in the pre-Roman Etruscans of Tuscany climaxed during the nineteenth-century *risorgimento*, or unification of Italy, and heavily emphasized the Italian origins of Rome's predecessors. Many of the attitudes perceived today among some Iranians - particularly as evidenced by those participating in my study - may also wax during periods of political turmoil, as Iran is in now (and largely has been for most of the last century). Not only have many Italians, Iranians and other individuals with nationalist tendencies, scholars among them, exhibited incredible enthusiasm for archaeology associated with ancient societies that used to inhabit their modern homelands, but they have often done so while crafting, consciously or unconsciously, an ancestor state which is the basis for a more perfect modern state based in the same territory and owes nothing to its neighbors. The latter point is discussed at length with regard to Italian nationalism and the Etruscans by Forte, as some influential Italians sought to undermine the notion that Etruscan art was influenced by its Greek contemporaries. It is possible to see the similar nationalist thought between the 18th-century establishment of the Cortona Etruscan Academy in Italy and the 1926 establishment of the Society for National Heritage in Iran, whose stated intention was to "enhance public interest in ancient knowledge and crafts; and to preserve antiquities and handicrafts and their ancient techniques".

Several respondents expressed an antipathy to Arab influence, albeit less forcefully than Mirza and Akhundzadeh.

“Yes, I feel strongly connected to our ancient culture. Despite several outsiders attacks on Iran such as invasion of Iran by nomad Arabs, and Mongolians, Iranian culture has always prevailed and denied most of foreign influence.”

“Try to make other culture be aware that we are not terrorists, we did not invite Arab's invading culture into our country. We have more than 10,000 year civilized cultural background, and like to live in harmony with others and not to invade them.”

“How proud Ferdousi was of this country, and how he cherished the Parsi language which we call Farsi these days. Being a pure Iranian and not letting the invasion of Arab culture/ language helped many of us to remain proud of our heritage today and try hard to keep the old Iranian tradition into our today's life. This type of thinking is translated today as racism among some Iranian or other culture who don't mind the intrusion of other culture.”

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While I have demonstrated that across nations, modern nationalism is accompanied by gross generalizations, zealously patriotic attitudes and a sentimentalized disposition with regards to the nation's distant past, most people with nationalist sentiments do appear to evince such sensibilities out of a genuine and possibly defensive attachment to their homeland. In the case of diaspora Iranians, this defensiveness may have been exacerbated by the dogmatic persecution of certain groups by the current Iranian regime and the currently negative image of Iran and the Islamic Regime in the West. Several of the respondents to the questionnaire indicated as much despite the lack of any questions directly asking about the issue of maintaining an Iranian identity in the diaspora, particularly in the United States, which has had no diplomatic relations with Iran for over 30 years. Anti-Islamic sentiments were often proffered as well, and may also reflect wide political discontent, resulting in some respondents distancing themselves and their culture from the religion as an aspect of Iranian identity:

“In a world where many Western cultures see Islamic countries as violent and backwards, the rich historical tapestry of Iran and its archaeological finds help me to counter-balance these negative perceptions. At one time, I was ashamed to be an Iranian living in America.”

“I try to distance myself from Islam which forced its way to Iran by power of sword and learn how my ancestors used to live. I tell my non Iranian friends about ancient Persia and their battles and beliefs. Also at suitable times I try to inform Iranian friends who we are.”

“I love Iran's ancient culture, but to live this culture is not an easy task especially if you live in another country with different type of expectations and tradition”

“The fact that as an Iranian, I would not let any one to discredit me in any situation”

“We might have had strong empires before Islamic invasion of our land. But what we are now is a mixture of the old Persian culture with the influx of Arab, Mongol/Turkic cultures. All together its the remnant of old and backward culture and will not survive the new era.”

Responses to the questions about the *Shahnameh* contained similar anecdotes about ancient glories, “heritage”, “culture” and “civilization” as questions about ancient Iran, although there was clearly more familiarity and more widespread enthusiasm for ancient Iran (at least as expressed by the responses to those questions) than for the *Shahnameh*. The responses to questions about the poem seemed to have been equally enthusiastic, but more limited as many respondents who mentioned that they had been made to read it or read it of their own volition and demonstrated a greater knowledge of its stories and significance. Most of these respondents had been raised in Iran, where it has often been taught in primary schools and stories are likely to be more accessible to individuals with formal training in the Persian language, given the arcane and difficult language used by Ferdowsi. Of the 16 respondents who indicated that they had read significant portions or all of the *Shahnameh*, all indicated that they were born in and received at least part of their schooling in Iran. Of those, 13 also indicated that the

Shahnameh “factored into” their Iranian identity in some way. Of the nine respondents who had indicated that had either not read, read very little, had only heard about the *Shahnameh* or otherwise expressed very little familiarity with it, only two were born and raised entirely in Iran. The remainder consisted of seven individuals who are classified as second-generation in American immigrations terms – those who were born and raised in the country that their parents immigrated to, or were brought to that country at very young age.

Thus, we can infer that exposure to the formal *Shahnameh*, in Iran acted as a strong indication of incorporation of the mytho-historical document into one’s identity, as was the case for 52% of respondents overall and approximately 81% of respondents who had been born and raised in Iran.

Nineteen of 25 respondents, or 76%, responded positively to either or both of these queries:

- Do you feel any sort of “connection” to ancient Iran? Why or why not?
- How have Iranian history and archaeology shaped your identity, if at all?

Of the six individuals who responded negatively to either of these, four were born and raised in Iran. None of these respondents also indicated that the *Shahnameh* was a component of their identity. This represents an increase of 24% over individuals who responded that the *Shahnameh* was a component of their identity as Iranians. A large majority of individuals surveyed indicated, as hypothesized, that either ancient Iran, the *Shahnameh*, or both factored prominently into their identity as Iranians.

Chapter 4: Nationalism and the Reclamation of a Legacy

The Cyrus Cylinder as a Politicized Symbol of pre-Islamic Benevolence among Iranians

“Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source – the unique source – of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, equality before the law, human rights and cultural freedom...These are European ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption.”

-Arthur M. Schelsinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1998)

“In a world where many Western cultures see Islamic countries as violent and backwards, the rich historical tapestry of Iran and its archaeological finds help me to counter-balance these negative perceptions. At one time, I was ashamed to be an Iranian living in America. But now I view it as an asset. It is easy to group Iran with all of the other countries in the Islamic world. But Iran is indeed different, and there are many examples of progressive work done by Iranians - like the Cyrus cylinder, poetry, the postal network, etc. - that really allow one to connect with the positive contributions Persians have made to world civilization.”

-Male survey questionnaire respondent, age 33, United States citizen.

“I learned how to be tolerant of others, I also respect freedom of religion for everyone, something that we learned from king Cyrus, respecting human rights and ending the slavery. I as many Iranian kept with tradition of Taarof, not to the extreme but to a moderate level.”

-Female survey questionnaire respondent, age 61, born and raised in Iran, residing
in the United States.

As much of my survey data have shown, many Iranians are deeply proud of the accomplishments of historical Persian empires and individuals, particularly those from pre-Islamic eras. Some appear to harbor adamantly pro-Iranian sentiments nearly to the point of unabashed jingoism. In recent decades, an ancient document, the Cyrus Cylinder has served as a beacon of Iranian nationalism and purported pre-Islamic benevolence to many Iranians. The Cyrus Cylinder provides a final example through which to see the durability of Iranian national consciousness

The cylinder, a typical Mesopotamian foundation document, has received an incredible amount of praise from many proud modern-day Iranians some 2,500 years since it was composed as an alleged early declaration of human rights. I argue that while the document does allude to repatriating groups forced to undergo forced migrations and the patronage and rebuilding of religious structures of subject peoples, some scholars and journalists have also assailed it as a symbol of propaganda and Iranian chauvinism. Thus, it has become a rallying point and emblem for many nationalistic Iranians, who like the Sasanians see themselves as the heirs of the Achaemenid legacy. Contested as inauthentic, inconsequential and alternately misunderstood as a “charter of human rights” or simply not accurately understood, my intention here is not to engage in a discussion of the cylinder’s significance archaeologically, but rather to apprise the reader of this bitterly disputed document’s significance as an article emblematic of modern Iranian identity, national consciousness and interpretation of the past.

The cylinder itself is a clay document found in a foundation deposit found during an 1879 excavation at the temple of Marduk at the site of ancient Babylon. A typically Mesopotamian feature of many buildings containing offerings, documents praising royalty and other items intended to never be seen again, foundation records are often intended to confer a blessing on the structure itself and commemorate restorations or other events. The text itself is in the Akkadian language of 6th-century Chaldean Babylon and was actually composed by priests of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, although much of it is written in the first person as Cyrus (Dandamaev 1993). The account given, only partially complete, describes the neglect of Babylon and the cult of Marduk by Nabonidus, the last king of the Chaldean dynasty of the city. Because of Nabonidus' iconoclasm, we are told that Marduk sought out an "upright king", whom the god deemed to be Cyrus, to march on Babylon and seize the city from the "king who did not fear [Marduk]" (Cylinder). Cyrus then gives his genealogy and titles, guarantees the peace of the country, and reveals that he allowed captive peoples to return to their homes and that he received the blessing of Marduk and repaired the great fortification of Babylon, Imgur-Enlil.

This is the essence of what the cylinder itself says. However, in 1968, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran, presented a copy of the cylinder to the United Nations at a conference on human rights and declared the cylinder "the precursor to the modern Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Abtahi 2007). To this day, a copy of the cylinder is kept at the United Nations' headquarters in New York City. This mischaracterization of the document has elevated the object to a level of near-veneration

by many ardently nationalist Iranians and provoked intense debate over the meaning of the document in academic circles and in the media.

The supposition that the cylinder embodies some sort of a charter of human rights (itself a mis-remembrance of Pahlavi's statement that it was a "precursor" to the modern Universal Declaration of Human Rights) most likely arose from lines 30-36 (and here I am referencing the translation by Irving Finkel of the British Museum) and its corroboration with the Old Testament accounts of Cyrus behavior towards the Jews.

The text:

30. brought their weighty tribute into Shuanna, and kissed my feet. From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa,
31. Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Guti - the sanctuaries across the river Tigris - whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated,
32. the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements,
33. and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus – to the fury of the lord of the gods – had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord,
34. I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries,
35. every day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: "Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son,
36. may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant (?) days, and the population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship. I have enabled all the lands to live in peace.

Here, “Cyrus” (or rather, the author) mentions that he “sent back to their places” people of the cities of Ashur and Susa (and other cities), and that he had repaired the “dilapidated” shrines of their gods, “returned [the gods] to their sanctuaries” and that “I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements”. Such policies of permanent relocation were common in the ancient Near East and many populations, including the indigenous populations of Iran experienced such forced migrations at the hands of the Assyrians and others. The story of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, familiar in Judeo-Christendom, has contributed to the conception of Cyrus as an early purveyor of human rights. The book of Ezra from the Hebrew Bible says that Cyrus ordered that the Jews in captivity be returned to Judah, their temple to be rebuilt and their treasures to be restored. This seems a plausible outcome in the aftermath of the conquest of Babylon, if we are to believe the cylinder’s account of his restoration of sanctuaries and repatriation of displaced peoples.

A July 15, 2008 article about the cylinder in the German news magazine, *Der Spiegel* was entitled “*Falling for Ancient Propaganda: UN Treasure Honors Persian Despot*” (Schultz 2008). The inflammatory rhetoric of the article included accounts of the behavior of Reza Pahlavi, the king of Iran (1953-1979) attempting to link himself to an idealized Cyrus, and included quotes from Classics scholar Josef Wiesehofer and others who heaped varying degrees of condemnation on the veneration of the document. Given the prominent stature of Cyrus and the cylinder in the minds of many Iranians, the article provoked many objections from the diasporic community in particular

. As the quote in the introduction to this chapter demonstrates, ideas expressed by historian Arthur Schlesinger and others about the allegedly “liberty”-free regions of the world, which correspond conspicuously with the traditional Orient persist to this day and likely have their roots in equally chauvinistic and jingoistic Western nationalisms. Zealously hyperbolic assertions about personal freedom and human rights abound in the Iranian community, to the point where some individuals falsely believe Achaemenid Empire to have been a wholly charitable and humanitarian enterprise. Similarly, colonialist nineteenth-century attitudes of condescension towards non-Western cultures which portray them as degenerate, barbaric dens of bondage by some scholars and journalists are equally harmful and misrepresentative. Because of the embellishment of claims for nationalistic reasons by both sides, there are bound to emerge tensions between the Iranian diaspora and some in their adopted countries.

As survey respondents quoted above have shown, the Cyrus cylinder factors into the conception of ancient Iran among Iranians as a symbol of “progress” and “freedom”. While such modern abstractions have been subject to hyperbole from Iranian nationalists with respect to the Achaemenids in particular, the dynasty was historically remarkable for its advancements in administration, monumental architecture and a relative tolerance of native beliefs. Philip Kohl discusses such nationalist interpretations of archaeology:

A common nationalist reading of the past is to identify the entities archaeologists define, particularly archaeological cultures, in terms of an ethnic group ancestral to the nationality or aspirant nationality of interest. Such identifications provide the nationality in question with a respectable pedigree extending back into the

remote past, firmly rooted in the national territory; land and people are united. Once made, such identifications then can be extended to interpret progressive changes, cultural developments in the archaeological record, as due to the activities of this ancestral ethnic group (1998:225).

Kohl's description of the nationalist appropriation of the past as purposefully linking it with that nation's present and representing a sort of "progress" is particularly pertinent. In the Iranian case, the present is often framed as a regression from a more enlightened era, represented by such objects as the cylinder and contrasted with the current political and social turmoil of Iran.

The cylinder itself has thus become an exemplar of folk-interpretation of the past in the modern era of archaeology and diasporic nationalisms. Favorably mischaracterized as a "charter of human rights" amongst the Iranian diasporic community, the nature of the content of the piece has been both deliberately and unintentionally transformed into a centerpiece of an Iranian identity that touts its links with the pre-Islamic past. As Kohl (1998) has shown, the nationalist tendencies of many Iranians lend themselves to an interpretation of the past that embellishes the image of pre-Islamic Iran while seeking to align themselves more closely with it. This is perhaps in part a reaction to a strong distaste for the restrictive laws and mores of a heavily Islamic society, as Iran is today and was at the time of Akhundzadeh and others.

The image of pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties and kings as just and heroic provided by the stories of the *Shahnameh*, is likely another cause of these conceptions. These beliefs, themselves emerge from the nationalistic rhetoric of the Sasanians who also wished to align themselves with the Achaemenids much as modern Iranians now do.

A syncretism of the mythohistorical *Shahnameh* stories with modern historical and archaeological studies seems to define the modern Iranian impression of the pre-Islamic past; where Jamshid and Cyrus mingle and are both thought of as fair and righteous rulers of the world in the national consciousness of many Iranians.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Iranians are notoriously proud people. In this thesis, I have sought to chart the intricacies of national consciousness as a component of the identities of diaspora Iranians. In seeking to do so, I found it necessary to give the reader significant exposure to certain aspects of Iranian history that pertain to issues of nationalism and national consciousness. In examining the roots and possible genesis of national consciousness in Iran, I have helped to clarify the role of the *Shahnameh* and related documents and stories dating to the Sasanian era in the transmission of ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian cosmologies and histories. My results also indicate that historical narratives accompanying the nineteenth-century advent of Western and Western-style archaeology in Iran have played a significant role in the formation of Iranian identities as well, perhaps even more so than the *Shahnameh*.

The fact that Iranians form an *ethnie*, as defined by Smith (1986) is an equally important corollary of my findings. Iranians have, dating back to at least the Sasanian period, maintained links with a more ancient Iranic and Zoroastrian heritage, in ways similarly exultant of links with an idealized past. Just as Shapur I celebrated rituals and inscribed in the even more ancient doorposts at Persepolis, modern Iranians - and their rulers - have done the same, as Reza Pahlavi did in 1971 near the archaeological site. A continual endeavor to meld the present with an Achaemenid past highly esteemed as

representing the zenith of Iranian history by nationalists ancient and modern alike places Iranians of two different eras - the Sasanian and our own - in the same ritual space. Both have sought to do so arguably for their own self-interest, as is evident in the case of rulers. In doing so they have helped to achieve a genuine link with the Iran of earlier antiquity in consciously imitating their predecessors and promoting the transmission of indigenous history and myths, thereby creating and fostering a national consciousness that has taken root among Iranians then and now. The Iranians who consumed what was originally a state-sponsored and yet also authentic form of Iranian nationalism are linked forever with their modern-day counterparts by a 10th-century poet from Khorasan, who himself collected and wrote out of a tangible sense of love for the history of Iran.

In studying Iran historically in addition to examining the modern phenomenon of nationalism among diaspora Iranians, I have been able to give depth to the study. Nationalism, as a broad and overarching term describing an abundance of ethnoterritorial movements, is not the thrust of this thesis so much as are the idiosyncratic “nationalisms” of the world – that of diaspora Iranians in particular. As it has been shaped by the passage of time, Iranian nationalism has mutated to serve the needs of its adherents as much as it has maintained curious traits and conformities over the centuries. This is the result of an older, *ethnie*-based nationalism that has been perpetuated across the centuries primarily through the stories of the epic *Shahnameh* and its nationally-conscious mytho-history.

While some displays of nationalist sentiment lay bare the ugly roots of an ethnically-based worldview, it is not my intent to pass judgment on the views of any of

my survey respondents. In completing this research I have come to the conclusion that harboring nationalistic tendencies can be a constructive and necessary component of an individual's identity, particularly for those living as minorities abroad. Hearteningly, some of my questionnaire respondents commented on how their pride in the stories of the *Shahnameh* and the history of ancient Iran allowed them to define themselves as Iranian individuals who have a rightful desire - and what some expressed as a "duty" - to share the unique historical and cultural contributions of Iran to the world, itself a quite noble cause.

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Curriculum Vitae

Darius Salimi received his Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2011. As a student, he co-founded the Iranian Studies Group at George Mason in 2010 to help promote the study of Iran in the humanities and social sciences in Northern Virginia and the Washington, D.C. area.