Nationalism in Iran

BY RICHARD W. GOTTAM

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgment vii
Introduction 1

1. The Background 12
2. Cohesive Base for Nationalism 23
3. Social Base for Nationalism 33
4. Nationalism and the Tribes 51
5. Kurdish Nationalism in Iran 65
6. Nationalism and the Non-Moslem Minorities 75
7. Nationalism and Local Particularism 91
8. Separatist Movements 102
9. Azerbaijan: Province or Nation? 118
10. Religio-Nationalism and Pan-Islam 134
11. Early Imperialism: The Genesis of Nationalist Mythology 158
12. Imperialism and Nationalism: Confrontation 181
13. Modern Imperialism: The Revival of Nationalist Mythology 206
14. Liberal Nationalism: Birth and Eclipse 243
15. Liberal Nationalism: Brief Triumph 259
16. “Positive” Nationalism and Royal Dictatorship 286
17. Liberal Nationalism: The Future 312
18. Fifteen Years Later 320
Index 365
the two-sword concept of church and state is unknown. When such an overwhelming majority of the Iranian people adhere to one church, membership in another and often bitterly hostile church, makes identification with the majority difficult.

The Zoroastrians as a group did not figure prominently in the early nationalist movement, although a few individuals among them did. Many Zoroastrians were merchants and as such should have felt the same repugnance toward the old regime and attraction toward the new as were felt by the Moslem merchants. However, most of the Zoroastrians lived in Yazd and Kerman, cities in the south and southeast of Iran which were somewhat isolated from the national movement. A report by the British consul in Kerman in 1911 claimed that the Zoroastrian merchants in the area hoped for British intervention. This claim is not as damning as might first appear, for the Yazd and Kerman area had suffered more extensively than had other Iranian sections from tribal raiding due to a relaxation of central control. The Zoroastrian merchants might well have been choosing between evils.

In 1907 a Zoroastrian merchant in Yazd was murdered by a Moslem. Few Zoroastrians expected to see the murderer punished, since Zoroastrians, as infidels, were often considered fair game. When the liberal Moslem leader in Tehran, Sayyed Mohammad Behbehani, sent a telegram urging local priests not to oppose punishing the murderer, the Zoroastrian community was surprised and immensely pleased. This act was symbolic of the improvement in the Zoroastrian position that the advent of nationalism would bring. It was not just the liberalism of the early nationalists which resulted in this improvement. The Zoroastrian position improved even faster under the reign of Reza Shah, and no one has accused Reza Shah’s nationalism of being diluted with liberalism. The really basic reason for the improvement lies in the inherent secularism of nationalism. As loyalty to the nation of Iran grew in intensity, the feeling of being distinct from Zoroastrians, who were in every respect Iranian, declined precipitately. In fact, a not insignificant group of ostensibly Moslem Iranian nationalists began to glorify the Zoroastrian religion as a genuine Iranian

**Note:** The text continues with further details on the integration of the Zoroastrians into Iranian society and the role of the Bahai religion in shaping Iranian nationalism. It also discusses the treatment of religious minorities and the impact of Reza Shah’s rule on the perception of national identity.

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27 State Papers 1912, Persia No. 4, p. 131.
28 State Papers 1909, Persia No. 1, p. 19.
Shiite, and this accounts for the present hatred of the Bahais. The Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians can be forgiven because their faiths preceded the coming of Mohammad, but the Bahai religion is a Moslem heresy and as such cannot be tolerated.

When reactionary religious leader Sheikh Fazlollah needed an epithet for the constitutionalists, he called them “infidels and Bahais.” The phrase indicates why Bahais prefer to remain incognito. Besides being regarded as heretics, they are accused of consistently serving foreign interests. The most frequent charge against them is that they are servants of the British, but they are often linked with the Russians as well. They are given no representation in the Majlis and can hold no public office. The Bahais are in constant danger of persecution, and as late as 1955 a vicious campaign was waged against them. The dome of their handsome temple in Tehran was replaced by a tin roof, and the building was converted into the headquarters of the military governor of Tehran. The Shah had used reactionary religious leaders in overturning Dr. Mossadeq, and now he was compelled to permit their attack on the helpless Bahais. Official sanction was given to the campaign when the Shah’s own chief-of-staff swung the first pick against the Bahai temple dome. Iran received very bad international publicity as a result of this outrage. The Shah is now strong enough to resist the demands of the clergy and a recurrence of this attack is unlikely. It is significant that no such attack occurred during the emotionally nationalistic Mossadeq period.

To what extent Iranian Bahais adhere to nationalism is, of course, impossible to determine. T. Cuyler Young writes that the universalist principles of Bahaism run counter to the demands of national particularism. However, members of the Iranian Bahai community insist that Bahais are the most devoted of Iraman Bahai believers. They claim that since an Iranian was chosen to be the Bahaollah, the manifestation of God on earth, the Bahais believe that the Iranian nation has a glory above all others. Probably there is truth in both opinions. It is unlikely that the Bahais, Iranian as they are in language, culture, and history, could be immune to the force of nationalism. But their intense persecution,

35 State Papers 1909, Persia No. 7, p. 47.
traitorous will require time to overcome, but after a few years under a liberal nationalist government this atavistic or totally mythical belief should fade away.

One institutional change that could help accelerate the integration of Zoroastrians and Assyrians would be to eliminate their separate representation in the Majlis and to permit them to vote for the district candidates. If deputies from Yazd, Kerman, and Tehran, for example, had to compete for the Zoroastrian vote and campaign contributions, they would be much more likely to pay attention to the wishes of the Zoroastrian community than they do now. Of course, such a reform would be meaningless at present, when elections are rigged by the Shah, but if free elections are held in the future this institutional change could be of great value.
act was given banner headlines in Iran. The occupation was clumsy and there were a few casualties, but the operation was brief and the price in terms of loss of life low. The act appears to have been popular.

Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf was at the hegemonic level. The Arab leaders in the Union of Arab Emirates were very friendly with Iran in spite of the seizure of the islands, and militarily Iran was overwhelmingly predominant. Iran exercised a solitary "Concert of Europe" role, guarding the region against any revolutionary change. With the construction of a naval base at Shah Bahar, Iran would become a major naval power in the Indian Ocean as well. In South Asia and the Arab world Iran was already a major influence both economically and politically. And as a major power in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Iran played an important world role. In fifteen years this was nothing less than a revolutionary change in power position. Yet there was no parallel growth in pride of the Iranian people.

Utilitarian Strategy: The Bedrock of Control

Following the overthrow of Dr. Mossadeq in 1953, the successor regime, first under General Zahedi and then under the Shah, had no choice but to turn to the Iranian landowning class as its primary base of societal support. The middle class had been much too enamored of Dr. Mossadeq, and despite efforts to please the most conservative religious leaders, such as the persecution of Bahais, by and large the most prominent religious leaders remained hostile to the regime. Some years would be required to purge unreliable elements from the security forces, and not until 1960 was the Shah willing to risk his survival on the premise that the security forces would maintain control even if there were a shift away from the upper-class base of support.

From the fall of 1960 until January 1963 the Shah made a major effort to liberalize his administration. He permitted some degree of electoral freedom and equal amounts of freedom for the press, speech, and assembly. But the consequences were not encouraging for the longevity of his regime, and at the end of that two-and-a-half-year period his political survival was in serious question. What he had more or less wittingly tested was the willingness of the most politically attentive, largely middle-class sector of the Iranian public to be reconciled to a post-Mossadeq regime in which the Shah's personal role was a significant one. The results suggested irreconcilability, and in January and July of 1963 the Shah survived the forcible suppression of the Mossadeqist opposition and then the religious opposition.

Following the advice of Prime Minister Ali Amini's protégé and minister of agriculture, Hassan Arsenjani, the Shah moved in the direction of mooring his regime in the peasantry and labor. Land reform and progressive labor legislation were the vehicles, and without question this strategy did produce a broad base of support for the Shah. But there was a serious flaw in this strategic reasoning. The peasantry and, to a lesser extent, labor were not easily mobilizable in support of the regime. Indeed, prior to land reform, the landowners' support for the Shah had brought with it the largely uncomprehending support of the Iranian peasantry. Now there was some positive enthusiasm from the peasantry, but probably the most important effect of land reform on stability was the removal of the peasantry from the ranks of potential opposition. Peasant riots against the regime could be dangerous, but peasant support offered little strength in case of a political crisis.

For positive support, the security forces were essential. Here the regime was clearly successful. Members of the security forces, many of them of lower- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, were able to improve their social status and that of their extended families. Furthermore, the material and other rewards granted the military were impressive. Not only were salaries large and housing and automobiles frequently available, but many of the military were given the heady experience of a training course in the United States. As time passed, gratitude for a rise in status was frequently offset by annoyance over a failure to be promoted or some such careerist grievance. But still the security forces by and large were attracted to the regime and gave it their support. Satisfaction on the basis of
diversity, competing ambitions, and the suspicion generated by years in underground competition. The artless quality of the government response, far from exploiting inevitable suspicions, served to unify.

The climactic event occurred in August 1978 when the Rex Theater in Abadan caught on fire, apparently the result of arson. Over four hundred persons were burned. The doors of the theater had been locked, presumably as a precaution against terrorist attacks, and were not opened quickly; the supposedly ultramodern fire-fighting equipment in the city arrived late and dealt ineffectually with the catastrophe. The government charges that those responsible were fanatical Moslems opposed to the Shah's modernization efforts were accepted without question only by the American press. In Iran the government's description of the Rex tragedy was accepted by very few. This was not surprising since the initial government account was incompatible with the physical location of the theater, and the early arrests were of young high-school teachers rather than of fanatical Moslems opposed to the showing of films. A revised and very different story gained little credibility. The victims' friends and relatives indicated who they thought responsible by rioting against the government. An account that gained wide acceptance was that several Islamic activists being pursued by SAVAK took refuge in the theater; when SAVAK reported this to the Shah, he personally ordered the burning of the theater. That this account would be accepted by so many, especially given the factual uncertainty of the case, is indicative of the extent of deterioration in the Shah's popular position.

Karim Sanjabi, leader of the National Front, compared the Rex to the Reichstag fire. But the results were opposite. Instead of being able to use the episode to consolidate power, the Shah moved dramatically to appease the opposition. He removed as premier Jamshid Amuzegar, a talented technocrat who had served the Shah well for many years as oil minister. Amuzegar's replacement was in many ways his opposite. Jafar Sherif-Emami, a senator and politician with a long survival record that testified to his ability to sense change in the political climate,
religious opposition bemused, angry, and possibly a little embarrassed. Ayatollah Khomeini in a statement made explicit his promises that in the Islamic republic he advocated there would be religious tolerance.

Yet the Shah coupled his efforts to appease the opposition with harsh acts of repression. Most serious of these occurred on September 8, 1978, a few hours after martial law was declared. A large crowd was fired on and many people were killed. The government issued the figure of seventy-eight but opposition spokesmen in Iran claim they can prove that at least forty-five hundred were killed and reports of seventeen thousand deaths were being circulated. Only three days earlier, a million demonstrators in Tehran had given troops, police, and SAVAK officers flowers and had expressed feelings of brotherhood.

After two months, in November 1978, the Shah gave up his efforts to reach and accommodate the opposition. He appointed General Gholam Reza Azhari premier of a new military government. Schools and universities were closed, the press was suspended (and then refused to publish), gatherings of more than three people in Tehran were prohibited, efforts to break strikes of oil workers and government employees were made, opposition leaders were arrested, and parliament was recessed. The Shah promised that these measures would be temporary, but confrontations with the opposition were, as these lines were written, easy to forecast.

By far the most interesting development of 1977 and 1978 in Iran was the growth in popularity of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. When the riots of June 1963 occurred in Tehran the name of Khomeini had little currency among Iran’s Nationalists. But the breadth of Khomeini’s appeal among lower-middle-class and working-class Iranians quickly became apparent. The ease with which the Shah had suppressed the secular National Front stood in sharp contrast to the nearly fatal rioting by Khomeini’s followers. In the years that followed, there was a close working relationship between the Freedom Front, led by Mehdi Bazergan, and Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters. As such the Khomeini movement was