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Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, eds., *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, University of Texas Press, 2014, 380 pp., \$55.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780292757493.

In this anthology, the editors bring together a series of fifteen papers on the topic of Iranian nationalism. The papers are organized into three uneven parts, the first two parts are comprised of four chapters each while the last part is made up of seven chapters. The papers range widely in scope with respect to the general themes of the book. The editors state that the book as a whole aims to move beyond traditional approaches to the study of Iranian nationalism by turning to a newer approach that undertakes innovative research, charts new areas of analysis, engages in comparative studies, and “*rethink[s]* the historiography of Iranian nationalism and modernity” (ix, emphasis added). In doing so, the book addresses often overlooked aspects of Iranian nationalism, from sexual deviance in Persian mysticism to avant-garde and kitsch aesthetics as found in the arts produced under the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic. As such, the book’s collective treatment of nationalism belongs to what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi calls a tropological approach, where “the focus of inquiry shifts from a *schizochronic* historiography attending to the belated delivery of ‘a gift of the West’ to the Rest to a decolonized and postnational historiography that explores the contingent and the novel deployment of territory, language, ethnicity, religion and culture in the making of a serially continuous and homogeneous polity endowed with competing identities and characteristics.”¹ In this sense then, the book promises to be a welcome addition to a burgeoning field where orthodoxy in Iranian nationalism, developed from the European Enlightenment, is challenged.² In what follows I will provide a critical overview of the book’s composition by giving a brief description of each chapter.

In Part I of the book, entitled “Orientalism, Modernity, and Historiography,” the first chapter is penned by Afshin Marashi on “Paradigms of Iranian Nationalism: History, Theory, and Historiography.” Marashi surveys four well-known approaches to the question of nation-building and nationalism as it applies to Iran. He begins by explicating the historical-sociological approach that envisions the nation-state as a by-product of a large-

¹ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “From Patriotism to Matriotism: A Tropological Study of Iranian Nationalism, 1870-1909,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34 (2002), 217.

² See for instance Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); also see the entry for “Iranian Identity” in *Encyclopædia Iranica* <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity>>.

scale transition to modernity, arguing that this approach at best can only tell us about part of the history of the development of nationalism in Iran (5-6). Next, Marashi considers the culturalist approach to the history of nationalism that takes the nation as a highly flexible symbolic system that can be made and remade to signify cultural meaning and symbolic association (10). Comparing the monarchical nationalization in Europe with the Qajar monarchy in Iran, he asks, “What kind of historical evolution can we expect in a polity that acquires a modern cultural understanding of *national monarchy*, but which has yet to actualize the conceptual presence of a *national state*” (12-13)? The third approach to the question of nationalism, oddly enough, is attributed to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas³ and his idea of the public sphere that is taken as a historical prelude to “the nation.” Given the late development of this idea in Iran, Marashi argues, it cannot be useful in telling the story of nationalism in Iran (14). In his final account, Marashi considers a postcolonial approach to the idea of nation-building to show that while Iran is distinct from the European West, it is also significantly different from the colonial East. He takes Ranajit Guha’s analysis of the conventional historiography of India—which emphasizes the Indian nationalist elites’ ability to advocate on behalf of the masses—as a basis for a comparative analysis to show that there are important dissimilarities between the two countries so as to render this approach unfitting. Marashi’s survey of the main approaches to historiography of nationalism is certainly illuminating. Its insight would have been bolstered by citing and incorporating a few works on Iranian nationalism conducted from these four general approaches that exemplify the failures that he points out. This lack makes the claim that Iran is different enough from Europe and the East to require a new historiography of nationalism, an uncontroversial claim that needs no argumentation.

The second chapter entitled, “Franz Babinger and the Legacy of the ‘German Counter-Revolution’ in Early Modern Iranian Historiography,” is a contribution by Ali Anooshahr. He juxtaposes German historians of the Ottoman Empire, who briefly treated the emergence of the Safavids, with the British Orientalists’ orthodox account of the same event in order to reveal the source of a different historiography that, *pace* E. G. Brown’s economic-materialist analysis, focuses on the spirituality and male-centered creed of the Safavids. To this end, Anooshahr discusses the work of the German Orientalist Franz Babinger, whose work emphasized the idea of *Männerbund*, or male organization, as well as the idea of historical Aryan *volk*. After explicating the development of these ideas, Anooshahr argues that Babinger’s conceptualization of “blood and spirit” was then projected into the language of post-WWI counter-revolution in modern Iran and thereby added a new dimension to early modern Iranian historiography. However, so long as Anooshahr’s main argument depends on the influence of Babinger, this connection remains tangential at best, as the proposed impact is too contingent to bear the full weight of his claim.

In Chapter 3, “The Berlin Circle: Iranian Nationalism Meets German Countermodernity,” Afshin Matin-Asgari argues that in modern Iran, from the time of the Pahlavis to the time of the Islamic Republic, the idea of Iranian nationalism was borne out of the encounter with interwar German intellectual trends. In particular, German romantic writers like Herder and Goethe, with their idea of historical nationhood that found its origin

³ Habermas is not known as a theorist of nationalism or as someone who has written specifically about nationalism. His development of the idea of public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1962) was meant as an ideology critique that grounded the idea of national citizenship that, while in practice, was exclusionary, remained open and utopian. Instead he has written extensively on political community and political association under the rubric of a constitutional patriotism that surpasses nationalism.

in the case of Germany (the Aryan race), along with both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer's radical critiques of the modern West, were major influences on a group of young Iranian intellectuals led by Hasan Taqizadeh called the Berlin Circle. Through its organs, the Persian-language periodicals *Kaveh* (1916-1922) and later *Iranshabr* (1922-1927), the intellectuals in the Berlin Circle exerted a great deal of influence on the formation of modern Iranian nationalism. Matin-Asgari's thesis concerning the influence of *Kaveh* on Iranian nationalism deserves further development, as do the ideas of Taqizadeh and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, who wrote the vast majority of *Kaveh's* content and forcefully advocated the need for unconditional Westernization.

Wendy DeSouza, in Chapter 4, "The Love that Dare Not Be Translated: Erasures of Premodern Sexuality in Modern Persian Mysticism," considers the discourse surrounding the Orient's supposed exoticism in European literature in order to show how at base the debate over Persian mysticism was truly an attempt to define modern sexuality (68). For European Orientalists Persian poetry depicted the East as a place of sexual excess. Persian mysticism increasingly became associated with sexual deviance thanks to the understanding of premodern Sufi poetry as overtly sexual, even with homosexual overtones. Examples of such works commonly interpreted in this manner are *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan, 1,001 Nights (Hezar-o yek Shab)*, and the *Divan of Hafiz*—especially as seen by European intellectuals such as Goethe, Montesquieu, Hugo, and Voltaire. Needless to say that such a view blatantly contradicted the moral and religious sensibilities of modern Iranian intellectuals who understood the tie between culture and nationalism in a more traditional sense. DeSouza does well to point this tension out.

While the common thread that runs through the four chapters comprising Part I is the juxtaposition of Iranian nationalism and European influences, the next four chapters in Part II, entitled "Imagining Iran: Land, Ethnicity, and Place," are united in their portrayal of different aspects of early modern Iranian identity.

Mana Kia, in Chapter 5, "Imagining Iran before Nationalism: Geocultural Meanings of Land in Azar's *Atashkadeh*," wants to point to a premodern alternative to nationalism as that which provides one's sense of identity and belonging. She selects a text by an author known as Azar entitled *Atashkadeh* in order to reveal a geocultural sense of land (90). *Atashkadeh* belongs to that literary genre called *tazkereh*, a commemorative compendium of poets. According to Kia, *tazkereh* authors transcend actual acquaintances, political loyalties, and ethnic commonalities to create an identity based on poetic sensibilities as found in the geocultural Persianate landscapes (90-93). As such, *Atashkadeh* maps poets and places them "onto a regionally partitioned Persianate that reflects both the accumulated dual narrative of Perso-Islamic histories and the specificities of Azar's own time and location" (94). This map includes Iran, Turan (central Asia), and Hindustan. Kia argues that it is only within this shared Persianate geocultural context that Iran as a land could be distinguished as defying the exclusivities of nationalism (105). Overcoming the exclusionary trait of nationalism is a commendable aim, and so long as Kia's idea approaches this goal then the piece is a worthy contribution to the debate.

"The Khuzistani Arab Movement, 1941-1946: A Case of Nationalism?" is the title of Chapter 6 by Brian Mann, who investigates the revolt of Arab tribes in Khuzistan during 1941-1946 in order to make a case for Arab nationalism in Iran—which, in the author's eyes, is "conspicuously absent from the historiography of Iran's 'decentralization' era" (113). But in doing so Mann seems to reveal an ambivalence in determining the reasons for the failure of the rebellion: on the one hand, he correctly identifies that for the Arabs the problem was that their tribal structure was retarding the emergence of a defined Khuzistani Arab

nationalism—i.e., the bond of the tribe hindered a transition to an effectual ethnonationalist movement (127). On the other hand, he ascribes the decline of the movement to the disappearance of the Khaz'als, a lack of economic resources, and the government co-opting many prominent Arab elites (133).

In the following chapter, “‘The Portals of Persepolis’: The Role of Nationalism in Early U.S.-Iranian Relations,” Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet goes back to early records of American and Iranian relations as found in news media, travel books, diplomatic reports, and missionaries’ accounts, to trace the history of the tenuous relations between Iran and the United States. Unlike similar analyses, the author aims to consider this history with an eye on the clash of nationalisms (139). Kashani-Sabet suggests that such an analysis could reveal that Iran and the U.S. were mutually interested in forming strong ties and that Iranians wanted an enhanced American presence in the region (145). It is, however, hard to see how the chapter’s eclectic gathering of historical notes, while enlightening, could result in sufficient support for her thesis.

In Chapter 8, “An Iranian in New York: Abbas Mas’udi’s Description of the Non-Iranian on the Eve of the Cold War,” Camron Michael Amin contributes to the historiography of U.S.-Iranian relations by examining a travelogue written by Abbas Mas’udi, an Iranian diplomat, in 1945. From Mas’udi’s notes Amin attempts to extrapolate a picture of how Iranians viewed themselves vis-à-vis America. Mas’udi reported that America had certain hesitations about engaging the wider world, marking this hesitation as “an undeniable feature of its modern national character” (171). Amin believes that there is a significant implication for Iranian nationalism here: “for Iran’s national character to be modern is to be open to contemporary influences...” (Ibid.). This argument seems rather too quick and too thin seeing as the premise of America’s national character is not sufficiently connected to Iranian national character to make the claim of the conclusion evident.

Part III of the book is the largest of the three parts. It consists of seven chapters brought together under the general title, “Religion, Nationalism, and Contested Visions of Modernity.” In these chapters “nationalism is treated as a set of contested visions of what the nation should be” (xiii).

Chapter 9, “Islamic-Iranian Nationalism and Its Implications for the Study of Political Islam and Religious Nationalism,” by Kamran Scot Aghaie, claims that there is an organic tie between nationalism and religion, which generally has been ignored in the literature on nationalism (181). Aghaie aims “to contribute to a resolution of this methodological problem by making a case for ‘religious nationalism’” (182). Along this line, he moves on to present Iran as a case in point of such religious nationalism. He cites many prominent political and cultural figures of the current Iranian regime who argue for an Iranian nationalism that is marked by Islam, concluding that their nationalism is therefore religious nationalism. Here, the evidence, namely proclamations of the officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran on what constitutes Iranian identity, is too self-fulfilling to support the thesis of religious nationalism. In other words, in citing the officials of the Islamic Government Scot Aghaie is begging the question.

In Chapter 10, “The Place of Islam in Interwar Iranian Nationalist Historiography,” Farzin Vejdani considers, as its title suggests, the role of Islam in Iranian historiography. To demonstrate the place of Islam, he studies Iranian historiography during the interwar period with the goal of showing that neither Islamic culture in general nor Shi’ism in particular were in decline. He makes his case by looking at education curricula, particularly textbooks. He concludes by stating that, “Contrary to prevailing wisdom, the interwar Iranian state did not overwhelmingly focus on pre-Islamic Iranian history at the expense of the history of Iran

after the rise of Islam in its official curriculum” (214). This is a rather straightforward thesis that his empirical research seems to bear.

Touraj Atabaki, in the eleventh chapter entitled, “Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity and the Construction of New Histories in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” advances the intriguing thesis that unlike Europe, where modernization was associated with individual rights, critical reasoning, and liberalism, in Iran the reverse happened. This is attributed to the fact that in Iran “modernization was embraced by an intelligentsia, who identified their own interests with those of the state” (220). This approach was crystallized in Reza Shah’s authoritarian modernization, where individual rights took a back seat to the rights of the unitary national culture (222). According to Atabaki, recent local historiography, such as Muhammad Taqi Zahtabi’s *The Ancient History of Iranian Turks*, works to provide support for Iranian political culture. Atabaki’s discussion of Zahtabi’s work and its influence should prove fascinating to students of Iranian history.

In Chapter 12, “Return of the Avant-garde to the Streets of Tehran,” Talinn Grigor aims to show the endurance of a particular kind of nationalism as envisioned by a group of secular reformists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the association of this model nationalism with a particular (avant-garde) aesthetic (233). She contends that avant-garde architecture remained tied to the secularist and modernist conception of nation in Iran (234). According to her, Pahlavi architecture managed to offer new “ways to map civic space, national time, and secular identity...up to the time of the Revolution in 1978-1979” (235). After the revolution, Grigor argues, the new regime rejected the avant-garde and embraced a populist kitsch aesthetic. With the exile of the avant-garde to the private sphere, there emerged a tension between public kitsch and the private avant-garde. She complements her discussion with pictures of various buildings, mural paintings, and posters, which add to the value of her argument.

Sussan Siavoshi, in Chapter 13, “Construction of Iran’s National Identity: Three Discourses,” lays out Iranian nationalism as found in the Pahlavi regime, the Islamic Republic, and finally as envisioned by the Green Movement. Despite some variations, the monarchist focuses on the pre-Islamic as a source of Iranian nationalism, while the regime of the Islamic Republic emphasizes the Islamic element of such identity. Siavoshi argues that the proponents of the Green Movement manage to escape the exclusionary aspect of both views of nationalism by embracing both pre-Islamic and Islamic elements of Iranian identity. In my estimate, however, when it comes down to it the reason offered for greater inclusivity within the Green Movement’s conceptualization of nationalism is simply the claim that it accepts “both Iranian and Islamic characteristics” of such identity, without acknowledging who this definition excludes, namely, non-Muslims and non-Iranian subjects who claim to belong to this polity.

“Relocating a Common Past and the Making of East-centric Modernity: Islamic and Secular Nationalism(s) in Egypt and Iran,” is the title of Chapter 14 penned by Hanan Hammad. The chapter provides an alternative account of westernization in Egypt and Iran in order to examine how the desire to authenticate modernity influenced the mutual perception of religious and secular intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century in both countries (275). Along these lines Hammad argues that the colonization of ancient Egypt by the Persians afforded the intellectuals of colonized Egypt historical capital to generate nationalist resistance against the British occupation (276). She adds that there is a widespread misperception that Iranian intellectuals throughout the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century looked down upon Arab culture and sought to eliminate Arabo-Islamic legacies, and that their Egyptian counterparts were hostile to Persian

culture. Hammad contends that in reality both religious and secular intellectuals in Egypt and Iran showed rigorous mutual interest (289). *Pace* Hammad, negative and biased feelings still count as “rigorous mutual interest.” In other words, even if we recognize the simple fact that there was mutual interest it does not necessarily follow that all such interests were positive and constructive interests.

In the final chapter, “East is East, and West is West, and Never the Twain Shall Meet? Post-1979 Iran and the Fragile Fiction of Israel as a Euro-American Space,” Haggai Ram argues that there is an analogous relationship between religious Zionism and what he calls Khomeinism that can be revealing with respect to Iranian and Israeli nationalism. He argues that messianism and the interpenetration of the sacred and the profane have been crucial for imagining the modern nation in Israel and Iran, and should be considered a fundamental cause of the respective tensions, contradictions, and exclusionary practices inherent in both societies and political systems (306).

By now it should be apparent that the chapters are too diverse to lend themselves easily to any generalization. Today in increasingly multicultural and pluralist societies ideas such as nation and nationalism are not conducive to accommodation of a peaceful coexistence of a diverse citizenry. Indeed, such ideas are rejected because of their exclusionary and essentialist aspects. Consequently, most theorists working in the area of political philosophy do not view nationalism as a liberating force in today’s world. This reservation aside, it speaks both to the editors’ and contributors’ credit that the anthology manages to treat so many different subjects from multidisciplinary points of view around the unifying theme of Iranian nationalism. Their efforts are laudable and their contribution a welcome addition that enriches the historiography of Iranian nationalism. The book should serve graduate students, researchers, and academics in Iranian history and contemporary Iranian politics well.

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