Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. История
Zhurnal Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Istoriya

Гісторыя
History

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Аглядны артыкул

Пераасэнсаванне Ірана: як «іранскасць» стала «персідскасцю»

Mohammed Haedapour [1] *

Bentley University

* Corresponding Author: Mohammed Haedapour, mhaedapour@bentley.edu

Анатацыя. Ідэя інтэлектуальнага «вынаходніцтва Ірана» — гэта выразная метафара, укарэненая ў арыенталісцкай археалогіі і гістарыяграфіі, якія сфармаваліся ад сярэдзіны XIX стагоддзя да канца XX стагоддзя. Гэты навуковы праект у значнай меры абапіраўся на міфалогію пра «арыйскую расу», сцверджанні пра перамяшчэнне (міграцыю) арыяў у Індыйскі субкантынент, а таксама на звязанае з гэтым прадстаўленне персідскай этнічнай супольнасці як адзінага аўтара ўслаўленай нацыянальнай спадчыны Ірана. Такая еўрацэнтрычная нарацыя паспрыяла фармаванню «персідскасці» як этнарасавай іерархіі — параўнальнай з тым, як «беласць» функцыянавала як прывілеяваная норма ў Еўропе і ЗША. У гэтым артыкуле я аналізую эпістэмічныя падмуркі, якія падтрымліваюць іранскі нацыяналізм, і, што асабліва важна, прасочваю, як арыенталісцкія інтэрпрэтацыі іранскага мінулага і надалей уплываюць на погляды і практыкі сучасных персідскіх інтэлектуалаў і эліт. Я сцвярджаю, што ператварэнне «персідскасці» ў прывілеяваную ідэнтычнасць нармалізавала пэўныя спосабы бачыць, разважаць, гаварыць і ведаць як адметна «персідскія», падаючы іх як самавідавочныя і ўніверсальныя. Гэтая рацыялінгвістычная канструкцыя ўзнаўляе габітус, які прапускае неперсідскія гісторыі і калектыўныя памяці праз персідска-цэнтрычную прызму — такую, што няяўна ставіць іх на другасную пазіцыю і разглядае як унутрана менш вартасныя.

Ключавыя словы: арыенталізм, нацыяналізм, іранскасць, персідскасць, габітус, персіянізаваны свет, унутраны Іншы

Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. История
Zhurnal Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Istoriya

Гісторыя
History

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Review Article

Reimagining Iran: How "Iranianness" Became "Persianness"

Mohammed Haedapour [1] *

Bentley University

* Corresponding Author: Mohammed Haedapour, mhaedapour@bentley.edu

Abstract. The idea of an intellectual "invention of Iran" is a striking metaphor rooted in Orientalist archaeology and historical writing that developed from the mid-nineteenth century through the late twentieth. This scholarly project drew heavily on Aryan racial mythology, claims about Aryan movement into the Indian subcontinent, and the related framing of the Persian ethnie as the exclusive creator of Iran's celebrated national heritage. Such a Eurocentric storyline helped produce "Persianness" as an ethnoracial hierarchy, comparable to how Whiteness has operated as a privileged norm in Europe and the United States. In this article, I investigate the knowledge claims that underpin Iranian nationalism and, crucially, trace how Orientalist readings of Iran's past continue to shape the perspectives and practices of present-day Persian intellectuals and elites. I contend that the making of Persianness into a favored identity has normalized particular ways of seeing, reasoning, speaking, and knowing as distinctly "Persian," presenting them as self-evident and universal. This raciolinguistic construction reproduces a habitus that filters non-Persian histories and collective memories through a Persian-centered frame, one that implicitly positions them as secondary and inherently inferior.

Keywords: Orientalism, nationalism, Iranianness, Persianness, habitus, Persianate world, internal other

Academic editor: Hayley Williams

Received: October 12, 2025 **Revised** November 30, 2025 **Accepted:** December 10, 2025 **Published:** December 21, 2025

Introduction

It is fair to say that, since Amini's killing, the terms Iran and Iranian have circulated among Persian speakers with an intensity rarely seen before. Hardly a day passes without elite voices and dominant media platforms repeating narratives of Iran's ancient splendour and exceptionalism. Iran is presented as a nation with a three-thousand-year lineage, reinforced by claims that Cyrus the Great authored the earliest human-rights declaration in recorded history. Alongside this heightened invocation of Iran, collective pronouns such as "we" and "our" are repeatedly mobilised to assert ownership over Persian culture, language, nationhood, and pride. The symbolism surrounding this discourse is also striking. The Pahlavi-era flag now appears with remarkable frequency at rallies and demonstrations inside Iran and across the diaspora, from Tehran to Toronto and Los Angeles. These displays are often accompanied by ritualised

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

performances of verbal patriotism and affirmative declarations of national belonging, articulated in the name of "we Iranians." Yet, at the same time, the non-Persian cultures within Iran, including Kurds, Arabs, and Baluch, whose communities have endured decades of structural oppression along national, ethnoreligious, and linguistic lines, are routinely marginalised or erased by both the state and dominant elites. What is often framed as a moment of unified national struggle has, in practice, exposed the deep and longstanding fractures embedded in how "the nation" is defined, especially from the standpoint of non-Persians.

The idiom of "we Iranians" leans heavily on the notion of Iran as the homeland of the Aryans. These Aryans are imagined as an ancient race and are widely cast as the historical origin of Persian language and culture, and thus as the foundation of Iranian identity (see Litvak, 2017; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). Although social-scientific scholarship has discredited race as an analytical category, Aryanist thinking has not disappeared. As Rasmus Christian Elling (2013, 22) observes, the belief that most, or even all, Iranians belong to a supposed "Aryan race," and are therefore racially distinct from Semitic populations and Turks, still circulates among some scholars. Revisionist historians have repeatedly shown that modern Iranian nationalist thought rests on three core propositions (see Asgharzadeh, 2007; Matin-Asgari, 2018; Vaziri, 1993; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). First, it defines Iran as an Aryan land and draws a raciolinguistic boundary between "Aryans" and "Semites" within the nationalist imagination. Second, it is characterised by an intense fixation on pre-Islamic Iran, cast as a golden era that supposedly expresses the authentic essence of Iranianness. Zia-Ebrahimi (2016, 2) calls this "dislocative" nationalism. This pre-Islamic myth functions as the organising centre of contemporary nationalism, portraying Iran as a once-vast imperial civilisation stretching from Khwarazm to Anatolia and Iraq, with Persepolis and Cyrus elevated as icons of grandeur. Third, Persian nationalism has historically been shaped by a pronounced antagonism toward Arabs and Islam. Early nationalist writers such as Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–1896) often treated Islam as an Arab faith inherently at odds with Iranian values, while presenting Arabic as an inferior language that "damaged" Persian following the Muslim conquest.

Among these three pillars, Aryanism is the most foundational because it binds together biology, language, and territory. In this framework, Aryan denotes not only a linguistic family but also a distinct people imagined to inhabit a distinct homeland (Sharifi, 2013, 82). Aryanism became especially influential in the nineteenth century within colonial ethnological classification systems, and it even entered bureaucratic practice, for instance through the 1901 Census of India. In Iran, a particularly explicit deployment of this language appeared at Reza Shah's 1926 coronation, when Prime Minister Foroughi celebrated the alleged purity of the dynasty's bloodline and described the monarch as "pure-bred" (pakzad) and of "Iranian race" (Irani-nejad) (cited in Matin-Asgari, 2020, 200). Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi further amplified this logic by adopting the title Aryamehr ("Light of the Aryans"), a label without historical precedent. In 1973, he asserted that Iran should not be understood as Middle Eastern, but as an Asian Aryan power whose mentality and philosophy aligned closely with European governments, especially France (cited in Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 446). He even described Iran's placement in the Middle East as a mere "geographical accident" (cited in Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, 446).

This dislocative pattern (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 7) separates Iran from its material and social realities, repositioning it in an imagined past and an imagined racial genealogy. Central to this narrative is the sacralisation of Persian as a transhistorical, transregional lingua franca (Kia, 2020, 20), portrayed as continuous across dynastic breaks and political upheavals (see Amanat, 2017; Dabashi, 2007; Marashi, 2008). In this view, Iranian identity is expected to express itself above all through Persian, not merely as a medium of communication but as the primary vehicle of a Persian worldview and cultural order (Yarshater, 1993, 141). The belief that Persian possesses transhistorical agency, meaning that it "makes" Iran's history, has become deeply entrenched among both intellectual and political actors. One example appeared in June 2017 when Shafiei Kadkani, a prominent poet and professor of Persian literature, disparaged non-

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Persian languages as inherently incapable of generating literary or scientific output. In defending Persian, he employed crude rhetoric and warned that celebrating non-Persian mother tongues would destroy "national culture," leaving descendants to mock that inheritance as nothing more than "a few local songs" (see Parsi-Anjoman Website, 2018).

This ideology of superiority has a long genealogy, visible even in Reza Shah's decree on renaming the country from Persia to Iran. The decree framed Iran as the cradle of the Aryan race and argued that adopting the name Iran was especially fitting at a time when powerful states were making claims about Aryan heritage. Those claims were presented as evidence of the "greatness" of old Persia's race and civilisation (cited in Ansari, 2012, 102). In theorising Iranianness as Persianness, I draw inspiration from Barış Ünlü's (2016, 2) formulation of the "Turkishness contract," which he defines as a patterned yet largely unacknowledged relation between ethnic position and particular ways of sensing and knowing, alongside cultivated forms of not sensing and not knowing. Following Ünlü (2016; 2023), I conceptualise Persianness as a raciolinguistic way of inhabiting the world that operates across everyday interaction as well as institutional and structural domains. Over roughly a century, coordinated efforts by the state and elites have worked to normalise Persianness as the "default" identity imposed upon non-Persians in Iran. In doing so, they have produced a Bourdieusian habitus, that is, a set of cognitive "schemata" shaping perception, judgement, and practice (Bourdieu, 2002, 27). Persian identity, in this sense, exceeds a simple feeling of belonging. It becomes an elevated mode of being, comparable to the structuring privilege of Whiteness in Western contexts.

The article proceeds as follows. I first outline how Persianness was historically produced within late-nineteenth-century Eurocentric and Orientalist frameworks. I then examine how Iranian nationalists fashioned an Internal Orient by suppressing or erasing Iran's ethnoreligious and linguistic plurality. The third section turns to the concept of the "Persianate World," showing how nationalist historians and elites use it to extend the geo-cultural reach of Persianness beyond Iran and to imagine a Persian-centred nationalist project at the scale of Asia. Finally, I argue that much contemporary scholarship on Iran remains deeply Aryanist in its underlying assumptions and thereby reinforces state practices of erasure and denial directed at the histories and memories of non-Persian nations (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2022).

The Raciolinguistic Archaeology of Persianness

The raciolinguistic "archaeology" of Persianness can be traced to nationalist historians whose intellectual horizons were shaped by Aryanist ideas during the late Qajar and Pahlavi periods. Whereas the earliest nationalist cohort drew directly from European Orientalist scholarship, a later cohort that rose to prominence under the Pahlavis relied primarily on the writings produced by the first generation. A key example is Abol-Hussein Zarrinkoub. In Do Qarn Sokout (Two Centuries of Silence), he advanced a racialised civilisational account that elevates Iranians above Arabs, who are cast as ignorant and underdeveloped (see Alizadeh, 2021, 26). Zarrinkoub (1957, 93) portrayed Arabs in highly dehumanising language, describing them as starving and unclothed figures from harsh deserts, and characterising Arabic as an impoverished language, even drier than the desert sands. After the Pahlavi state adopted and formalised this raciolinguistic framing, it spread through the writings of state-aligned historians and intellectuals who were tasked with producing a unified, official narrative of the past. This group included Hassan Pirnia (1871–1935), Abbas Eghbal Ashtiynai (1896–1956), and Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946). Pirnia's commissioned school textbook, History of Ancient Iran (1928), contained a section titled "Races, the White-Skinned Race, the Indo-European People." The chapter explicitly relied on what it called "race science," understood as the classification of races and the bodily forms and traits attributed to them. Pirnia's template was widely imitated and later became a reference point for early Pahlavi-era schoolbooks as well as dominant historiographical accounts (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 157).

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

In the nineteenth century, the state's shifting territorial domain was often described as Mamalek-e Mahruseye Iran, meaning the "protected territories" (Matin-Asgari, 2018; 2020). As Vaziri (1993, 68) notes, between the seventh and fifteenth centuries the Iranian plateau did not fall under a single, coherent political authority or one continuous dynasty. Western travel writings also reflect this fragmentation. When the Venetian traveller Marco Polo crossed the region in the late thirteenth century, he referred to it as Persia and did not use the term Iran. His descriptions suggest that the territory contained eight separate kingdoms, each governed and named differently. The indeterminacy is even clearer in the field of poetry and literature, which nationalists later reinterpreted and repurposed to craft a consolidated "Iranian" identity. Iran, as a modern state and an official identity category, crystallised in the early twentieth century, especially after Reza Khan's 1921 coup and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. Yet the genealogy of Iranian nationalism precedes this moment and extends back to late Qajar debates. As a dynastic order, the Qajar state lacked both a centralised institutional apparatus and a unified conception of citizenship (see Khazeni, 2009; Matin-Asgari, 2020). Even into the eighteenth century, there was no single national history in the contemporary sense. Instead, multiple historical traditions coexisted across the plateau. These included works on the kings of Ajam that mixed myth with history, Islamic narratives covering the region's past, and broader universal histories (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016).

This multiplicity is captured in Mojtaba Minovi's Tarikh va Farhang (History and Culture). In the opening pages, under a heading concerned with assembling materials for writing "Iran's history," Minovi (1946, 14–15) raises foundational methodological questions. He asks what "Iran" refers to, where its territorial boundaries should be drawn, and whether it is coherent to place the domains of the Achaemenids, Parthians, Sassanids, Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Mongols, Safavids, and Qajars under one label when these polities were not identical. He also queries which rulers and dynasties should be included in the narrative, and how chronological sequence should be organised across territories whose borders and centres repeatedly shifted. Minovi notes that there were periods when numerous monarchs and rebels ruled simultaneously in different regions now grouped under the name Iran. He then emphasises that the historical account expected "today," following the monarch's directive, must be written as part of world history and aligned with a new imperial agenda.

Notably, references to the "Aryan race" are largely missing from early nineteenth-century texts. The concept appears more clearly in the writings of Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–1896), who imported it from Orientalist literature (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2014, 1048). Likewise, framing the coming of Islam primarily as an "Arab invasion" is more strongly associated with the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the works of Akhundzadeh and Kermani. To explain why such narratives gained traction, revisionist historians point to Iran's destabilising encounter with Western power in the first half of the nineteenth century (see, for example, Asgharzadeh, 2007; Matin-Asgari, 2018; Sohrabi, 2011; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). This period included direct European political and military interventions, though Russian military and political pressure was particularly decisive for later developments (Ansari, 2016; Matthee & Andreeva, 2018; Richard, 2019).

Iran's engagement with Europe did not begin in the nineteenth century. During the seventeenth-century Safavid era, merchants, adventurers, and missionaries travelled to Isfahan, the imperial centre. However, this interaction diminished and then re-intensified through the two Russo–Iranian wars. Iran's defeats led to the loss of extensive territories to Russia, codified in the Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). These humiliations provoked sustained elite reflection and critique, often described as the Iranian modernist movement. By the late nineteenth century, a smaller and more marginal intellectual current emerged that diverged from modernists such as Mulkam Khan (1834–1908), who launched the Persian-language newspaper Qanun ("Law") in 1890 (see Algar, 1973), and Mustashar od-Dowlah (1871), author of Yek Kalameh ("One Word," meaning "Law"). While the mainstream modernists focused on narrowing the gap with Russian and European power through legal and institutional reform,

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

this marginal strand increasingly articulated a raciolinguistic programme. It sought to "undo" historical transformations by purging elements it associated with Arabs, Mongols, and other groups, and by recoding these legacies as corruptions that needed removal.

Iran and the Orientalist Experiment

By tying Persian (Farsi) literary production to the idea of a continuous national tradition, European Orientalists offered early Iranian nationalists what Vaziri (1993, 131) calls a crucial "dynastic connection." This linkage enabled nationalists to assemble a selective, exclusionary, and historically anachronistic story of the past. Drawing on figures such as Edward Browne, Arthur de Gobineau, Ernest Renan, Edward Gibbon, Montesquieu, and Joseph Markwart, early Iranian nationalists came to "discover," particularly between 1850 and 1906, an imagined narrative of former grandeur followed by decline, with the turning point attributed to Islam's arrival. Much Orientalist scholarship in this period was infused with strong anti-Arab sentiment. Its entrenched Islamophobic assumptions encouraged the view that Iran's pre-Islamic past must have been a time of exceptional refinement and achievement.

Montesquieu's writings illustrate this dynamic. Although he praised Zoroastrianism, his knowledge of it was limited. He had not read the Avesta, the Zoroastrian sacred text, whose French translation by Anquetil-Duperron only became available from the late eighteenth century. Moreover, when that translation circulated, many European admirers of Zoroastrianism reacted negatively because it disrupted their idealised expectations of the religion (see Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). Montesquieu's representation of Iran in Persian Letters (1721) was therefore not grounded in rigorous source material. It relied largely on cultural clichés and orientalist assumptions reflective of his own context. Persian Letters is best understood as a satirical literary narrative about the observations of two fictional Persian aristocrats, Usbek and Rica, who spend several years in France during the era of Louis XIV and the Regency.

A comparable pattern appears in Edward Gibbon's interpretation of European history. In The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776–1789), Gibbon romanticised the ancient world before Christianity, casting Roman and Greek antiquity as an apex of intellectual and artistic accomplishment. Kermani extended this template to Iran by presuming a parallel trajectory. He reasoned that, if Europe possessed a glorious pre-Christian era, Iran must likewise have had a pre-Islamic golden age (Siavoshi, 2014, 256). Gobineau, in turn, adapted Gibbon's romantic historical imagination into a biologised account of civilisational change. He explained Persia's defeat by the Macedonians through a story of "racial mixing," claiming that Persians had declined by intermingling with allegedly inferior Semitic peoples. In his widely circulated Essay on the Inequality of Human Races, Gobineau (1855[1967]) divided humanity into three races and ranked them hierarchically. He placed "white" at the top and portrayed its "Aryan" branch as the original source of civilisation. He depicted "black" as physically powerful but intellectually deficient, and "yellow" as ordinary and static. These ideas were mobilised to legitimise colonial domination, slavery, and aristocratic rule, and they later fed racist and nationalist movements in Europe and the United States, including Nazism and White supremacist ideologies.

Gobineau's engagement with Iran was not merely theoretical. He travelled there as a diplomat in 1855–1858 and again in 1862–1863, and he frequently portrayed Iranians as an example of degeneration caused by racial intermixture. Such claims proved attractive to Iranian nationalists. Hussein Kazemzadeh-Iranshahr promoted themes of Iranian superiority and "pure blood," Mahmoud Afshar (1925, 5) urged the protection and revival of Persian language and culture as the main "pillar of national unity," and Ali Shariati (1982, 42) sharpened distinctions between "Aryan" and "Semitic" categories.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

An especially explicit expression of anti-Arab racism appears in Ernest Renan's writings (1882[2018]). Renan linked religion to race and advanced a racialised typology of religions. For him, Islam and Judaism were "Semitic," a classification he grounded in the study of Semitic languages. At the same time, he separated the Babi religion from the "Islamic world" and treated it as "Aryan." Renan's influence on Iranian nationalist thinking can be summarised as the consolidation of anti-Semitic reasoning that also translated into hostility toward Islam. When Islam's arrival was framed as an "Arab invasion" that supposedly contaminated an Aryan population through miscegenation, Akhundzadeh and Kermani presented Iran's weaknesses as consequences of foreign and Islamic legacies. Their proposed remedy was to demonise, minimise, and ultimately erase those legacies, including those associated with Islam as well as other groups such as Mongols and Turks. Language became a major battleground because Persian contains extensive Arabic-derived vocabulary. "Purifying" Persian was thus recast as a project of cultural eugenics. The underlying premise was that removing Arabic elements would enable Iran to recover an imagined pre-Islamic greatness.

During the same period, Orientalist philology generated new claims about connections between European and Eastern languages. Sir William Jones (1786[2013]) argued for an affinity between European languages and Sanskrit in his work on the origins and development of Indo-European languages. His arguments influenced German scholars who further tightened the link between language and race. Within this framework, Persian was categorised as part of the Indo-European family. Joseph Markwart (1922), a German linguist, was especially influential in advancing a racialised philology of language. In his essay "Iranshahr," he described himself with the term Andarzbod, which he presented as equivalent to a "professor" in the Sasanian period. He also mapped an imagined Iranshahr stretching from Kharazm to Diyarbakir. In his account, this was a zone in which Persian functioned as the state language or as the language of commerce, while local vernaculars were reclassified as dialects within a broader Iranian linguistic field.

Finally, Edward Browne's account of the Constitutional movement became central to nationalist historiography. His depiction of constitutionalism as the revival of an ancient Iranian "nationhood" has been widely treated as a dominant "master narrative" within Iranian nationalist discourse (see Matin-Asgari, 2018). Browne also emphasised Islam's compatibility with nationalism and highlighted the role of Shi'a clerical leadership in the movement in ways that critics view as overstated. While Browne (1959) later expressed sympathy toward Islam and Arabs in The Literary History of Persia, his earlier writings (1893) included crude racialised stereotypes. He referred to Arabs using derogatory imagery and characterised Azerbaijani Turks as sullen and intellectually slow (quoted in Alizadeh, 2021, 33). Browne traced Persian literary history back to the Median and Achaemenid empires and argued that Persian "culture and civilisation" originated with the Aryans. He maintained that Muslim Arab empires borrowed administrative and bureaucratic practices from Persian elites, particularly those associated with the Sasanian state. He further claimed that the Abbasid administrative system rested on Persian "wisdom." In addition, Browne attempted to construct ethical, intellectual, and dynastic ties between Shi'ism and "Persians." One key claim was that Persians favoured the Alids and Shi'ism because the third Shi'a Imam, Husayn ibn Ali, married a daughter of the last Sasanian king (Alizadeh, 2021, 34). This line of argument parallels claims also advanced by Kazemzadeh-Iranshahr.

The Birth of the Internal Other

By the late nineteenth century, racialised cultural theories began to circulate in Qajar Iran, largely through the writings of Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani. Both authors promoted harsh, demeaning, and often alarming claims about various groups, including Arabs, Jews, Turks, Mongols, and even African Americans and Native Americans.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Akhundzadeh was a Turkish-speaking subject of the Tsar who spent most of his life in the Caucasus, a region recently incorporated into the Russian Empire. He worked for the Russians as an official translator and travelled to Iran only twice. His most influential work is Maktoubat-e Kamal od-Dowleh (Letters from Kamal-od-Dowleh to Jalal-od-Dowleh; 1865[2016]). The text is structured as an imagined dialogue between Kamal, an Indian figure who represents Akhundzadeh's viewpoint, and Jalal, an Iranian character who stands in for his intended audience. In this narrative, Kamal mourns the destruction of an idealised Iran that supposedly existed before the arrival of Muslim Arabs. He assigns blame to Arabs through explicitly racist language, describing them as crude invaders and presenting Islam as the rupture that ended Iran's former "paradise" (Akhundzadeh, 1865[2016], 21). Akhundzadeh depicts pre-Islamic Persia as a prosperous and well-governed realm that ruled extensive territories from Khwarazm to Anatolia and Iraq. He portrays this imagined order as socially refined and ecologically pleasant, populated by a "pure" Iranian race under just monarchs, with satisfied subjects, productive agriculture, and women who were respected rather than enslaved by Arabs.

Influenced strongly by Renan's ideas (Marashi, 2008, 69), Akhundzadeh's work consistently relies on two moves. The first is the construction of Arabs as an existential enemy. The second is the dismissal of Iran's plural cultural landscapes both before and after Islam. He frames Iranian identity as simultaneously linguistic, racial, and spiritual, describing it as a distinct essence. Fascinated by the Ottoman modernisation programme known as the Tanzimat, he proposed reforming the Persian alphabet, which encountered opposition, particularly from Mirza Malkum Khan (1834–1908). Akhundzadeh repeatedly turns to nostalgia to intensify his critique, asking what became of the wealth and glory Iran supposedly possessed in the era of legendary and imperial rulers such as Jamshid, Gushtasp, Anushirvan, and Khusraw. He elevates pre-Islamic Persia into an idealised golden age in which dignity and freedom prevailed, benevolent kings prevented poverty, and even public healthcare was available to all.

Kermani transformed Akhundzadeh's romantic narrative into an explicitly Aryanist framework. He appears to be the first to introduce the expression "Aryan race" into this nationalist discourse. In his earliest usage he writes "Ariana" in Persian as a transliteration of the French term "Aryan," and he even supplies the French word in parentheses, signalling the concept's foreign intellectual origin. In Seh Maktoub (Three Letters), Kermani (2005, 122) continues Akhundzadeh's tone and style while describing the Persian kings and presenting an aristocratic portrait of Iranian society. He claims that women received specialised treatment in dedicated facilities staffed by women, while men were cared for separately. He contrasts this image with scenes of violation and humiliation attributed to Arabs, portraying noble Persian women as victims of "savage" aggressors. This trope of endangered women in ancient Iran later fed into Pahlavi-era narratives supporting unveiling policies. Kermani (2005, 123) offers Shahrbanoo, described as the king's daughter, as an example and alleges that she was taken to a mosque and sold. He uses this story to call on Iranians to revolt against the dishonour he claims Arabs inflicted upon them (Kermani, 2005, 124–125).

In Sad Khatabeh (One Hundred Lectures, although it contains 42 speeches), Kermani (1927[2006], 2) insists that key features of modern Europe had already existed in Iran millennia earlier. He argues, for example, that Western clothing associated with "civilisation" was present in Iran in the earliest eras. He even claims that artillery comparable to that produced by Parisian industrial schools existed in excellent condition at the court of the Kianids, a mythical dynasty. He treats the Persian language as proof of ancient Iranian civilisation and presents its eloquence as evidence of national superiority. At the same time, large sections of the book are devoted to anti-Arab polemics. In lecture 28 ("The Behaviour of Iranians and Arabs"), he cites "Farang" philosophers to justify alleged racial and cultural differences between Iranians and "Tazis," a derogatory label used by some nationalists for Arabs. He describes Arabs using extreme and degrading stereotypes, portraying them as morally and physically debased and attributing to them repulsive dietary practices (Kermani, 2006, 176).

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Akhundzadeh and Kermani gained renewed visibility in the early twentieth century with the rise of the Berlin Circle in Germany (see Marashi, 2008, 89). The German Social Democratic Party invited Hassan Taqizadeh to Berlin to support German war aims against Russian and British imperial power. This created a new moment in the formation of Iranian nationalism. Taqizadeh and associated elites published Kaveh between 1916 and 1922. The magazine's title, taken from a heroic figure in Iranian legend, and the cover image depicting his rebellion, signal how its editors imagined national identity. During its first period (1916–1919), the magazine largely served German ideological interests, while also running material on Iran's ancient culture. Taqizadeh published essays with titles such as "Nowruz Jamshidi," "Kaveh and the Kaviani Flag," and "Nowruz and the Iranian Calendar," as well as writings on the Shahnameh and ancient Iranian poetry. These texts sought to energise the "Iranian race" and revive nationalist enthusiasm. In "Nowruz Jamshidi," Taqizadeh described Iran as one of the most valuable possessions of the "Aryan" national race. In its second period (1919–1922), Kaveh turned more directly toward theorising Iranian nationalism, drawing heavily on Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and Persian literary traditions. Its aim was to cultivate a national spirit and present the Iranian nation as a distinct cultural and linguistic community rooted in Persian language and a defined Iranian ethos. Like Akhundzadeh and Kermani, Taqizadeh effectively conflated Iranian history with Persian history. Although he criticised foreign intervention, he neglected contemporaneous anti-imperial resistance movements such as the Jangal struggle (1915–1921) led by Mirza Kuchik Khan in the north against Russia and Rais-Ali Delvari's resistance (1915) against British forces in the south. This omission further reveals the Persian-centred definition of nationhood promoted in Kaveh, which offered no meaningful recognition of non-Persian peoples and cultures.

If Akhundzadeh and Kermani grounded Iranianness in explicitly anti-Semitic and anti-Arab positions, Kaveh combined archaism and a revivalist ethos with a call for the unqualified adoption of a "Western cultural model" as the sole route to recovering Iran's imagined past (Matin-Asgari, 2018; 2020). After Reza Khan's rise in 1921, some Kaveh figures, including Taqizadeh, returned to Iran and took positions in government. Others launched Iranshahr, edited by Hossein Kazemzadeh. His attachment to the concept of "Iranshahr," associated with the Sasanian period (224–651 CE), was so strong that he adopted Iranshahr as his surname. The magazine called for a return to an authentic Iranian self and later influenced "nativist" intellectuals such as Jalal Al Ahmad, Sayyed Fakhr-al-Din Shadman, Ali Shariati, and Ehsan Naraqi (Gheissari, 1998, 83–108). Iranshahr elevated Persian as the unquestionable foundation of Iranian identity and the primary carrier of the Iranian self. Unlike Akhundzadeh and Kermani, who rejected religion, Iranshahr integrated religion, especially Shi'ism, into nationalism. It argued that an "Aryan spirit" and the "Semitic spirit" of Islam could coexist in a complementary relationship. The magazine also assigned women a specific nationalist function. It framed them as mothers of the nation responsible for nurturing and educating the Iranian race. Kazemzadeh claimed that the marriage of Shahrbanoo, described as the daughter of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king, to Imam Hossein, the third Shi'a Imam and grandson of the Prophet, initiated a sacred national mission. This story was used to present Shi'ism and Aryanism as spiritually intertwined, producing a distinctive Iranian identity that fused the two. Iranshahr ran numerous articles on women and patriotic duty. In an essay on marrying an Iranian versus a Farangi (European), Kazemzadeh warned against "contaminating" Aryan blood through marriage with Europeans and urged Iranian women to preserve the national bloodline. In Tajalliyat-e Ruhe Irani, Kazemzadeh (1924b, 74–75) defines Iranianness as the totality of pride, dignity, sanctity, honour, and life, and he states that anyone who has Aryan blood and treats Iran as homeland should be called Iranian regardless of whether they are Kurdish or Baluch, Zoroastrian or Armenian.

In Ma'aref dar Osmani (Education in the Ottoman Realm), Kazemzadeh (1924a, 133) openly admires late Ottoman policies, particularly those associated with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) founded in 1889. He praises a political trajectory that culminated in the ethnic cleansing of non-Turkish minorities such as Armenians, Kurds, and Greeks in 1917. In the linguistic realm, he proposed an Association of Terminology, also described as an

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Association for Editing Persian Language and Vocabulary, intended to remove Arabic influence from Persian. This programme later materialised in the creation of the Farhangestan Zaban-e Farsi (Academy of Persian Language and Literature) under Reza Shah in 1935. Iranshahr also organised writing competitions centred on ancient themes and figures, including the Ruins of Mada'in, which imagined Cyrus the Great as a troubled spirit observing Iran's turmoil and plunder. Another Berlin-based publication, Nameyeh Farangestan, edited by Mushfiq Kazemi, released its first issue on 11 May 1924. It ran for about a year and closely mirrored Kazemzadeh's nationalist orientation. Writing in Germany's racialised intellectual climate, Kazemi argued that Iran could achieve unity only through the rise of an "enlightened dictator" comparable to Mussolini, who publicly affirmed parliament while coercively manufacturing parliamentary majorities when needed. Iran, he claimed, required the same type of ruler (cited in Matin-Asgari, 2018, 76).

The Berlin Circle shaped both contemporaries and later generations of Iranian elites and historians. Mahmoud Afshar, editor of Ayandeh, treated the revival of national spirit as essential to national cohesion and developed what became known as "Pan-Iranism." In the journal's first issue, he explained his understanding of unity in "Our Ideal: Our National Unity," arguing that unity required both political independence and territorial integrity. He insisted that the expansion and normalisation of Persian across the country was central to this project. Anyone who cares about Iran's history, Persian language and literature, and Shi'a religion, he wrote, must recognise that if national unity collapses everything else will collapse with it. Therefore Persian must become prevalent throughout Iran and gradually replace other languages, a goal to be achieved through widespread primary schooling, compulsory public and free education, and sufficient state resources (Afshar, 1925, 5–6). Afshar also advised Pahlavi policymakers to consider forced migration as a tool of unification. This included relocating Persian-speaking populations into non-Persian regions and vice versa, and encouraging intermarriage and daily interaction between groups. He emphasised Persian-language instruction in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Baluchistan, where he treated linguistic plurality as a threat to unity. He further recommended measures beyond schooling, including the renaming of non-Persian places with Persian toponyms as part of a broader programme of producing "complete" Iranianness.

Persianism and the Claim of Cosmopolitanism

With Reza Shah's ascent, what Ansari (2012, 65) describes as the "myth of the saviour" took concrete political form. Nationalism increasingly became the organising logic of the state (Gheissari, 1998; Sharifi, 2013), articulated through the sacralised slogan "One Nation, One Language, One Country." As Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (2011, 96) argues, the consolidation of modern Iranian national identity from the early twentieth century onward has been deeply and inseparably tied to the Persian language. Although Reza Shah did not openly discuss non-Persian peoples in his public addresses, the state's position on identity was expressed through coercive campaigns targeting communities such as the Lurs, Arabs, Kurds, Qashqai, Bakhtiari, and others (see Cronin, 2003). Across the Pahlavi period, hostility that had long centred on Arabs gradually expanded to encompass other non-Persian identities. Persianism and Shi'ism, often treated as the core axioms of nationalist ideology, thus became the main supports of a Persian psycho-nationalist habitus (see Adib-Moghaddam, 2017).

A key turning point arrived in the 1930s with the rise of "nativism," framed as a recovery of origins through Persianism and Shi'ism. This tendency was shaped by Jalal Al-e-Ahmad's formulation of Gharbzadegi ("Westoxication"), a term first introduced by Ahmad Fardid (see Boroujerdi, 1996). Yet even as it criticised the West, the nativist turn largely preserved the inherited common sense of Iranian identity. It continued to assume the Persianisation of Iran's diverse peoples as a national imperative and treated Shi'ism as a defining marker of belonging.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Taghi Arani (1903–1940), a Marxist nationalist, illustrates the persistence of Persianist reasoning within a modernist and left-nationalist register. In 1924 he published two essays on Persian. One appeared in Iranshahr in February and the other in Nameye Farangestan in August. Both advanced a racialised account of language and identity. Arani described Persian as the central instrument of national integration and claimed that it carried Iranian culture, embodied the "pure" substance of national heritage, and functioned as a medium suited for scientific and rational thought (see Mirsepassi, 2021, 107). In his Nameye Farangestan article, he attacked Pan-Turkists and asserted that Azerbaijani Turks viewed Turkishness as shameful, while presenting Azerbaijan as vital to Iran and portraying the province as the "head" of the nation (Arani, 1924, 251).

Within mainstream Iranian studies, Arani is often celebrated for his labour politics and his commitment to social justice (see Matin-Asgari, 2018). Ali Mirsepassi (2021) further praises him as a radical cosmopolitan who attempted to imagine a just Iranian nation that could overcome internal and external barriers and stand alongside modern states. Mirsepassi highlights Arani's effort to show Persian as a language capable of meeting modern demands, particularly scientific development (Mirsepassi, 2021, 136). He also argues that Arani's framework offers tools for revisiting the native versus foreign opposition that underpinned both traditionalist and Orientalist thought (Mirsepassi, 2021, 135). However, the cosmopolitan idiom surrounding Arani remains limited by its Persian-centred premises. Arani's ethical and mystical references did not lead him to confront ethnolinguistic oppression inside Iran. For Mirsepassi, Persian remains the core axis of Iraniyat (Iranianness) (see Litvak, 2017, 10) and the means through which Iran can absorb modern knowledge and achieve prosperity (Mirsepassi, 2021, 161). This position leaves little room to acknowledge that the vision of a "cosmopolitan Iran," even when articulated through civic virtue and modern thought, continues to privilege Persian and Shi'a norms while marginalising identities that do not fit that mould (Mirsepassi, 2021, 10).

Arani's Persianist and anti-Turkish stance was not exceptional. Ahmad Kasravi, himself a Turkish (Azeri)-speaking intellectual, commended Arani and claimed that they pursued "the same goals" (Matin-Asgari, 2018, 107). Yet Kasravi's hostility toward non-Persian cultures, and his advocacy of linguistic and cultural purification, have rarely been confronted in Iranian intellectual debates. Scholars including Afshin Matin-Asgari (2018), Tavakoli-Targhi (2015), and Mehrzad Boroujerdi (1998) present Kasravi as a major theorist of counter-modernity and as a bridge between pro-Western currents and critiques of modernity. His positions on non-Persian languages and histories are evident in works such as Five-hundred-year History of Khuzestan (1933) and Eighteen-year History of Azerbaijan (1938). The Berlin Circle strongly shaped his thinking, particularly on purification in religion and language.

Kasravi reclassified the Turkic population of Azerbaijan as "Azari" and argued that they descended from the Aryan race. He claimed that foreign domination had compelled them to abandon their supposed native tongue and adopt Turkish, which he treated as alien. Because Azerbaijan held a symbolic place in nationalist narratives, he insisted that Azeris should not speak a language he considered non-native. In fact, his programme went further by advocating the removal of non-Persian languages from Iran altogether. He explicitly wrote that he wished for the elimination of Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, and even "semi-languages" such as Kurdish and Shushtari, so that all Iranians would speak only Persian (Kasravi, 1944, 1).

In Shahryaran-e Gomnam (The Unknown Kings), Kasravi (1927[2006]) attempted to recover the memory of obscure rulers and heroes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who allegedly rose from different parts of Iran to free Iranians from "Tazyan" rule. Echoing Akhundzadeh and Kermani, he portrayed Arabs using degrading stereotypes and depicted Arabia as a barren land whose inhabitants survive on reptiles and insects (Kasravi, 1927[2006], 141). What distinguishes Kasravi from some contemporaries is his calculated use of history to legitimise state coercion and military intervention in places such as Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Khuzestan, which he framed as centres of anti-national sentiment. His writings exemplify a politicised historiography that aims to delegitimise Kurdish and Arab nationalist histories in favour of a state-centred nationalist narrative. In Eighteen-year History of Azerbaijan

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

(1938), he demonises Smail Agha Simko, a Kurdish nationalist who resisted Reza Shah and sought Kurdish autonomy until the Iranian government ambushed and killed him in 1930. Kasravi characterises Simko as a criminal traitor who threatened national unity and security. In Five-hundred-year History of Khuzestan (1933), he similarly attacks Arab nationalist claims by portraying Sheikh Khazal as violent, deceitful, and rebellious, and by framing him as a conspirator against the nation.

Aryanist nationalism did not remain confined to the secular state tradition. Elements of it also entered the Islamic Republic's religious discourse. Racialised assumptions similar to those found in Akhundzadeh and Kermani appear in the writings of Ali Shariati (1933–1977), often treated as a leading ideologue of Islamic thought. Shariati presents Shi'a Islam as the product of an "Aryan" intellect. Iranian scholarship frequently celebrates him for reworking Shi'ism through engagement with Marxist ideas (Matin-Asgari, 2018, 209), for a form of postcolonial cosmopolitanism (Saffari, 2017, 165), and for framing Shi'ism as a modern revolutionary ideology (Mirsepassi, 2011, 124). Yet Shariati also argues, in a manner consistent with earlier nationalist texts, that an Iranian spirit has endured successive disruptions by Greeks, Arabs, and Turks over three millennia. In his account, this spirit, imagined as endowed with Aryan aptitude, found cultural and spiritual compatibility with Shi'ism. Shariati identifies two major "invasions" of Iranian identity. The first is Yonani-zadegi ("Hellenised struck-ness"), which he claims was eventually absorbed by Iran's robust national culture (Shariati, 1982, 220). The second is Arabzadegi ("Arab-struck-ness"), associated with the Arab conquest (Shariati, 1982, 225). His presentation of Shi'ism also reflects the influence of Orientalist thinkers such as Henri Corbin, George Jordac, and Louis Massignon. Massignon's imprint is visible, for instance, in Shariati's works on Hallaj and Salman.

Severing Islam from its geo-cultural context, Shariati (1982, 392) asserts that Arabs were unable to grasp the profound message of the Qur'an delivered by the Prophet, even though the revelation was in Arabic. He describes Arabs with overt contempt, portraying them as primitive and intellectually limited. Elsewhere he projects psychological and racial attributes onto Arabs and Semitic peoples more broadly. He claims that Aryans or Indians often feel unsafe around Semites and imagines Semites as prone to sudden violent attack, invoking predatory animal imagery (Shariati, 1982, 378). He extends the Arab versus Aryan distinction to cognition and imagination, depicting Arabs as mentally constrained. Citing the Orientalist George Gibb Nicholson, Shariati (1982, 376) asserts that Semites perceive only the individual tree whereas Aryans can see both the tree and the forest.

Persianate Studies as Linguistic Imperialism

In recent years, parts of Iranian studies have revived the language of a "cosmopolitan Iran" by pointing to what they describe as linguistic and cultural continuities in Islamic-era literary and historiographical sources (see Amanat & Ashraf, 2019). Building on Marshall Hodgson's (1974) concept of the "Persianate World," they argue that Persian historically functioned as a wide-reaching lingua franca across an extensive zone, stretching from Bengal and the Indian subcontinent through the Iranian plateau and into broader Eurasian spaces.

The term "Persianate World" is a broad modern label that casts Persian as a transcultural vehicle connecting multiple literary and intellectual traditions. In Hodgson's formulation, the "Persianate" imaginary refers primarily to the use of Persian, especially as a written medium, that expanded after the Islamic conquest and persisted for over fourteen centuries. This tradition is often described as having been produced through interaction between Iranian dynasties and literati under Islamic imperial formations, to the point that Turkic dynasties such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, and Mongols are said to have supported the spread of Persian. Acknowledging the Orientalist genealogy of the idea, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi portrays Persian as an "intercommunal," "interconfessional," and "interethnic" language of a "pre-modern cosmopolitan world," and he describes the concept as an attempt to move beyond the rigid

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

partitions of area studies. In this framing, Persian is presented as the shared medium of courtly and intellectual life across regions and empires, from Ottoman and Mughal settings to Central Asia, and even as leaving traces that can still be detected in unexpected places (cited in Marashi, 2014).

However, while Hodgson's initial use of "Persianate" was anchored largely in literary history, many contemporary Persian scholarly deployments of the concept operate more as a political project. They construct an imagined empire of language by translating multi-directional cultural exchange into a story that is predominantly Persian-driven. A central move here is the effort to remove ethnicity from Persianness while keeping Persian language as the organising principle. For example, Mana Kia (2014, 90, emphasis added) claims she uses "Persians" to mean those who share "a particular language of learning." She argues that Persian enabled people in different places to imagine community and origin even in the pre-modern period. On her account, "Persians," meaning Persian-knowers, in Iran, Turan, and Hindustan shared a common understanding of geography that shaped belonging and communal formation (Kia, 2014, 90). Elsewhere, even while acknowledging the epistemic difficulty of writing the histories and memories of societies associated with this "ecumene," Kia and Marashi (2016) describe the Persianate world as a long-duration inter-Asian cultural universe that eventually yielded multiple modern states and societies across a vast region. Their list extends from Iran and India to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, Kurdistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Xinjiang.

This packaging of a heterogeneous cultural geography into a single "Persianate World," however, carries limited analytic payoff. Instead, it echoes an older nationalist impulse that defines identity through language and through a selective reading of the past. The nostalgia embedded in this impulse is visible in Hamid Dabashi's (2016, 146) claim that Iran should be imagined beyond its present borders through an "imperial pedigree" remapped into a transnational sphere that includes diverse peoples "beyond colonial domination." In The World of Persian Literary Humanism, Dabashi (2012, viii) presents Persian as a transhistorical medium of "literary humanism" whose epicentre is located in Iran. In effect, the Persianate world is retranslated into an "Iran world." Despite its postcolonial self-description, this project tends to legitimise Persianism by reducing a multi-national Iran to Persian culture and by seeking to secure parity with "World Literature" through emblematic works such as the Shahnameh. In that sense, Dabashi's approach reproduces the nationalist intellectual trajectory associated with Akhundzadeh, Kermani, and Kazemzadeh, maintaining a Eurocentric architecture of thought while giving it a Persian gloss.

Even scholars sympathetic to the Persianate concept challenge Dabashi's Iran-centred teleology. Nile Green (2019, 6) argues that Dabashi's survey begins and ends in modern Iran, thereby narrating the Persianate as a nationalist destiny. Green suggests that world historians have long struggled with precisely this tendency, namely the pull of nation-based frameworks that Hodgson's "Persianate" was meant to surpass. Yet Green's critique also risks reproducing an essentialism of its own by treating "the Persianate" as an enduring civilisational quality that defines a vast range of political and cultural formations across Asia. He calls for analytical work that separates Persian from assumed civilisational attachment to Islam and from primordial linkage to Iran. He notes that Persian circulated among diverse religious publics and served different cultural centres depending on time and place, including Timurid Herat for Ottomans, Timurid Samarqand for Mughals, frontier diplomacy for the Qing, and Mughal relations for the British. He further argues that for centuries many seekers of Persian learning looked to places such as Balkh, Bukhara, and Delhi rather than to Iranian geographies (Green, 2019, 7).

Defining a "Persianate World," despite the concept's intellectual appeal, primarily through the Persian language produces serious methodological and epistemological problems. Shahab Ahmed warns that categories such as "Perso-Turkic" or "Persianate World" often operate prescriptively and normatively. They privilege particular linguistic and ethnic elements and obscure the polyglot, multicultural texture of the worlds they attempt to describe (Ahmed, 2015,

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

84). Ahmed therefore cautions against using "Persianate" as the master descriptor because it selectively magnifies Persian and implies that Persianness is the defining feature of a shared Islamic paradigm (Ahmed, 2015, 84).

Many Iranian historians and scholars, intentionally or not, have been drawn toward a totalising language that resembles earlier nationalist habits. This is visible in efforts to claim and stabilise "the Persianate World" for contemporary nationalist ends. In this vein, the term is increasingly extended to labels such as "Persianate selves" (Kia, 2020), "Persianate modernity" (Jabbari, 2023), and "Persianate Sufism" (Amir Arjomand, 2020). Such expansions often flatten the complexities of Asia's historical cultural-linguistic space and make Persian appear far more uniformly dominant than historical evidence supports. For instance, Kia (2020, 15) argues that Persian served as "the language of Islamic universalism" for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Yet this claim overlooks evidence that Persian was not consistently the transregional language across the entire space now labelled "Persianate," nor was it the language of all dynasties treated as "Iranian" (Green, 2019, 13). Relatedly, "Iran" in its nationalist meaning does not appear as a political category in medieval literature and only became a state identity in the early twentieth century.

The Persianate label also collapses many dynastic formations across roughly fifteen centuries into a single story, even though these dynasties did not succeed each other in a simple linear sequence, nor did they uniformly share political and cultural priorities. Some regimes, such as the Samanids, invested more heavily in Persian promotion than earlier powers like the Tahirids or Saffarids. Yet variation of this kind does not establish that Persian was "the language of all Iranians" or that it formed a coherent Persianate zone. Assef Ashraf (2019, 1), himself a scholar of Persianate studies, notes a basic inconsistency. If Persian language is the defining trait, it is striking that there was no Persian equivalent term for "Persianate," and the people living across this zone did not self-describe through such a category. Ashraf suggests they may have had only a faint sense of shared cultural space.

Green (2019, 38) offers examples that appear to support a shared chronicle-writing practice, though the implications remain contested. He notes that Kurds and Afghans, despite possessing their own languages such as Kurmanji and Pashto, sometimes adopted the Persian courtly chronicle genre (tarikh) to write early histories. One example is the Sharaf-nama of Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi (d. 1599), a Kurdish author positioned within Ottoman and Safavid patronage networks. Yet this kind of evidence can also be read as indicating the pressures of imperial literary conventions rather than a naturalised Persian civilisational unity.

A further issue is how Persianate scholarship often treats non-Persian languages in Iran as merely "vernacular," "local," or subordinate dialects, while simultaneously portraying Persian as the region's unquestioned lingua franca. This rhetorical downgrading helps bolster claims of cultural parity with major civilisational languages in Asia, particularly those associated with India and China (see Eaton, 2019). It also encourages a selective map of "peer" civilisations that prioritises a few powerful "big brothers," while giving limited attention to other influential languages such as Urdu, which are acknowledged only intermittently.

Ethnographically, the space conflated under the Persianate label has always been populated by diverse ethnolinguistic communities in both pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. The presence of Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Lurs, Baluch, and many others demonstrates the multilingual and multicultural composition of Iran and its neighbouring regions. Kurdish literary history, in particular, provides a strong test case for Persianate claims. Written Kurdish texts are documented from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including classical figures such as Ali Termakhi (1591–1653), Mullah Jaziri (1570–1640), and Faqih Tayran (1590–1660). A landmark work from this period is Mem and Zin by Ahmad Khani (1650–1707), written down in 1692, which narrates the tragedy of two Kurdish lovers while also expressing resistance to Ottoman and Safavid power. Kurdish oral traditions extend further back. The Yazidi religion preserves sacred hymns known as Qowl, and the Yarasan tradition has a related genre called Kelam. Both are composed in poetic forms governed by Kurdish prosodic rules (Kreyenbroek, 2015). In addition, large encyclopedic projects such as Kordica by Ako Jalilian and Farhang Zarki Mukiyriani by Selah Payanyani (an encyclopedia of

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Kurdish oral history) document the depth and breadth of Kurdish cultural production. At present, eight volumes of Kordica and twenty-one volumes of Farhang Zarki Mukiyriani have been published. Fifteen volumes focus on Kurdish alphabet and language, while six cover topics such as women's clothing, women's oral histories, foodways, children's literature, and music and poetry. Yet these Kurdish and other non-Persian archives remain largely unfamiliar within Persianate scholarship, and therefore are frequently neglected in accounts of the so-called Persianate World.

Conclusions

This article has argued that what is often celebrated as "cosmopolitan Iran" is frequently produced through a language-centred narrative that reproduces, rather than transcends, Persianist nationalism. By elevating Persian as the primary medium of inter-Asian connectivity, contemporary invocations of the "Persianate World" risk transforming a descriptive label into a political imaginary that converts uneven, multi-directional cultural exchanges into a Persian-dominated story of civilisation. Such a move mirrors older nationalist habits that tie identity to language and then treat that language as a natural, transhistorical carrier of collective essence. The result is a renewed hierarchy of belonging in which Persianness becomes the implicit norm for interpreting the past, while non-Persian histories are downgraded to local "vernaculars," marginal archives, or secondary traditions.

The conclusion is not that Persian lacked historical reach, nor that Persian literary networks were insignificant. Rather, the problem lies in methodological overreach and epistemic foreclosure. Treating "Persianate" as the master category privileges one linguistic element and obscures the polyglot and multi-confessional textures of the spaces now folded into this term. It also risks retroactively projecting a modern nationalist geography, including the category of "Iran," onto medieval and early modern worlds that did not self-describe through such boundaries. A more rigorous approach requires denaturalising Persian's presumed civilisational ties and refusing to equate imperial literary convention with cultural ownership. Re-centering multilingual archives, including Kurdish, Arabic, Turkic, Baluchi, and other traditions, is therefore essential, not as an additive gesture, but as a necessary correction to the analytic frame. Only then can "cosmopolitanism" become more than a rhetorical claim and instead function as a critical method for writing histories without reproducing internal others.

References

Afshar, M. (1925). Our ideal: Iran's national unity. *Ayandeh, 1*, 5–8.

Ahmed, S. (2015). *What is Islam? The importance of being Islamic*. Princeton University Press.

Akhundzadeh, F. A. (2016). *Maktoubat-e Kamal al-Dowla and its attachments* (A. A. Haghdar, Ed.; 1st ed.). Bashgah-e Adabiat. (Original work published 1865)

Algar, H. (1973). *Mīrzā Malkum Khān: A study in the history of Iranian modernism*. University of California Press.

Alizadeh, N. (2021). Imagined Iran after the arrival of Islam in Aryanist Orientalist, nationalist, and Islamist historiography. *Journal of History School, 50*, 25–53.

Amanat, A. (2017). *Iran: A modern history*. Yale University Press.

Amanat, A., & Ashraf, A. (2019). *The Persianate world: Rethinking a shared sphere*. Brill.

Amir Arjomand, S. (2020). The emergence and development of Persianate Sufism: Khorasan, ninth to twelfth centuries. *Journal of Persianate Studies, 13*(1), 1–35.

Ansari, A. (2012). *The politics of nationalism in modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press.

Ansari, A. (2016). *Iran's constitutional revolution of 1906 and narratives of the enlightenment*. Gingko Library.

Ansari, A. (2019). *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and revolution*. Routledge.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Arani, T. (1924). Azerbaijan yek mas'aley-e hayati va mamati baray-e Iran [Azerbaijan: An existential question for Iran]. *Farangestan, 5*, 247–254.

Asgharzadeh, A. (2007). *Iran and the challenge of diversity: Islamic fundamentalism, Aryanist racism, and democratic struggles*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ashraf, A. (2019). Introduction: Pathways to the Persianate. In A. Amanat & A. Ashraf (Eds.), *The Persianate world: Rethinking a shared sphere* (pp. 1–xx). Brill.

Boroujerdi, M. (1996). *Iranian intellectuals and the West: The tormented triumph of nativism*. Syracuse University Press.

Boroujerdi, M. (1998). Contesting nationalist constructions of Iranian identity. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 7*(12), 43–55.

Boroujerdi, M. (2020). Rethinking the legacy of intellectual-statesmen in Iran. In R. Jahanbegloo (Ed.), *Mapping the role of intellectuals in Iranian modern and contemporary history* (pp. xx–xx). Rowman & Littlefield.

Bourdieu, P. (2002). Habitus. In J. Hillier & E. Rooksby (Eds.), *Habitus: A sense of place* (pp. xx–xx). Ashgate.

Browne, E. G. (1893). *A year amongst the Persians*. Adam & Charles Black.

Browne, E. G. (1910). *The Persian Revolution of 1905–1909*. Cambridge University Press.

Browne, E. G. (1959). *A literary history of Persia*. Ebnesina.

Cronin, S. (2003). *The making of modern Iran: State and society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*. Routledge.

Dabashi, H. (2007). *Iran: A people interrupted*. The New Press.

Dabashi, H. (2012). *The world of Persian literary humanism*. Harvard University Press.

Dabashi, H. (2015). *Persophilia: Persian culture on the global scene*. Harvard University Press.

Dabashi, H. (2016). *Iran without borders: Towards a critique of the postcolonial nation*. Verso.

Eaton, R. M. (2019). *India in the Persianate age: 1000–1765*. University of California Press.

Elling, R. C. (2013). *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and ethnicity after Khomeini*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gheissari, A. (1998). *Iranian intellectuals in the 20th century*. University of Texas Press.

Gibbon, E. (1776–1789). *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. Strahan & Cadell.

Gobineau, A. (1967). *The inequality of human races* (A. Collins, Trans.). H. Fertig Press. (Original work published 1855)

Green, N. (2019). *The Persianate world: The frontiers of a Eurasian lingua franca*. University of California Press.

Hodgson, M. (1974). *The venture of Islam: Conscience and history in a world civilization*. University of Chicago Press.

Jabbari, A. (2023). *The making of Persianate modernity: Language and literary history between Iran and India*. Cambridge University Press.

Jones, W. (2013). The third anniversary discourse, on the Hindus, delivered 2nd of February, 1786. In Lord Teignmouth (Ed.), *The works of Sir William Jones: With the life of the author* (pp. xx–xx). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1786)

Kasravi, A. (2006). *Shahryaran-e gomnam [Unknown kings]*. Negah Publishing Inc. (Original work published 1927)

Kasravi, A. (1933). *Tārik̲-e pānsad sāla-ye K̲uzestān [Five-hundred-year history of Khuzestan]*. Tehran.

Kasravi, A. (1938). *Tārik̲-e hejdah sāla-ye Āzarbāyjān [Eighteen-year history of Azerbaijan]* (10th ed.). Tehran.

Kasravi, A. (1944). Ma va hamsayegan [Our neighbours and us]. *Parchameh Haftagi, 6*(5), 1–6.

Kazemzadeh, H. (1924a). Ma'aref dar Osmani [Education in the Ottoman realm]. *Iranshahr, 3*, 127–143.

Kazemzadeh, H. (1924b). *Tajalliyat-e ruh-e Irani [The manifestations of Iranian soul]* (2nd ed.). Negah-e Parvin.

Kermani, M. A. K. (2005). *Seh maktoub [Three letters]* (B. Chubineh, Ed.). Nima Verlag.

Kermani, M. A. K. (2006). *Sad khatabeh [One hundred lectures]* (M. J. Mahjoub, Ed.). Sherkat-e Ketab.

Khazeni, A. (2009). *Tribes and empire on the margins of nineteenth-century Iran*. University of Washington Press.

Kia, M. (2014). Imagining Iran before nationalism: Geocultural meanings of land in Azar's *Atashkadeh*. In K. Scot-Aghaei & A. Marashi (Eds.), *Rethinking Iranian nationalism and modernity* (pp. xx–xx). University of Texas Press.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Kia, M. (2020). *Persianate selves: Memories of place and origin before nationalism*. Stanford University Press.

Kia, M., & Marashi, A. (2016). Introduction: After the Persianate. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 36*(3), 379–383.

Kreyenbroek, P. G. (2015). The Yezidi and Yarsan traditions. In M. Stausberg, Y. S.-D. Vevaina, & A. Tessmann (Eds.), *The Wiley–Blackwell companion to Zoroastrianism* (pp. xx–xx). John Wiley & Sons.

Litvak, M. (2017). *Constructing nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*. Routledge.

Marashi, A. (2008). *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, power, and the state*. University of Washington Press.

Marashi, A. (2014, June 19). Iran and India: Two countries separated by a common language. *KGOU*. https://www.kgou.org/world/2014-06-19/iran-and-india-two-countries-separated-by-a-common-language

Markwart, J. (1922). Iranshahr. *Iranshahr, 1*(4), 71–77.

Matin-Asgari, A. (2018). *Both Eastern and Western: An intellectual history of Iranian modernity*. Cambridge University Press.

Matin-Asgari, A. (2020). The making of Iran's illiberal nation-state (1921–1926). In R. Jahanbegloo (Ed.), *Mapping the role of intellectuals in Iranian modern and contemporary history* (pp. xx–xx). Rowman & Littlefield.

Matthee, R., & Andreeva, E. (2018). *Russians in Iran: Diplomacy and power in the Qajar era and beyond*. I.B. Tauris.

Minovi, M. (1946). *Tarikh va farhang [History and culture]*. Kharazmi Publisher.

Mirsepassi, A. (2000). *Intellectual discourse and the politics of modernization: Negotiating modernity in Iran*. Cambridge University Press.

Mirsepassi, A. (2011). *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of hope and despair*. Cambridge University Press.

Mirsepassi, A. (2021). *The discovery of Iran: Taghi Arani, a radical cosmopolitan*. Stanford University Press.

Mohammadpour, A. (2024). Decolonizing voices from Rojhelat: Gender-othering, ethnic erasure, and the politics of intersectionality in Iran. *Critical Sociology, 50*(1), 85–106.

Mohammadpour, A., & Soleimani, K. (2022). Silencing the past: Persian archaeology, race, ethnicity, and language. *Current Anthropology, 63*(2), 185–210.

Montesquieu, C. S. (1721). *The Persian letters of Montesquieu*. G. G. Harrap.

Parsi-Anjoman Website. (2018). The warning of Dr Shafiei Kadkani about the linguistic plans of the enemies. https://parsianjoman.org/?p=6237

Pirnia, H. (1928). *Tārikh-e Irān-e qadim: Az āqāz tā enqerāz-e Sāsāniyān [History of ancient Iran: From the beginning to the fall of the Sasanians]*. Khayyām.

Renan, E. (2018). *What is a nation? And other political writings*. Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1882)

Richard, Y. (2019). *Iran: A social and political history since the Qajars*. Cambridge University Press.

Saffari, S. (2017). *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian political thought*. Cambridge University Press.

Shariati, A. (1982). *BazShenasi hoviate Irani [Recognising Iranian identity]* (Vol. 27). Sepideh Bavaran Press.

Sharifi, M. (2013). *Imagining Iran: The tragedy of subaltern nationalism*. Lexington Books.

Siavoshi, S. (2014). Construction of Iran's national identity: Three discourses. In K. Scot-Aghaei & A. Marashi (Eds.), *Rethinking Iranian nationalism and modernity* (pp. xx–xx). University of Texas Press.

Sohrabi, N. (2011). *Revolution and constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*. Cambridge University Press.

Tavakoli-Targhi, M. (2011). *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and historiography*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tavakoli-Targhi, M. (2015). Ahmad Kasravi's critiques of Europism and Orientalism. In K. Talattof (Ed.), *Persian language, literature, and culture* (pp. xx–xx). Routledge.

Ünlü, B. (2016). The Kurdish struggle and the crisis of the Turkishness contract. *Philosophy & Social Criticism, 42*(4–5), 397–405.

P-ISSN: 2520-6338 | E-ISSN: 2617-4006

Ünlü, B. (2023). The Turkishness contract and the formation of Turkishness. In A. Alemdaroğlu & F. M. Göçek (Eds.), *Kurds in dark times: New perspectives on violence and resistance in Turkey* (pp. xx–xx). Syracuse University Press.

Vaziri, M. (1993). *Iran as imagined nation: The construction of national identity*. Paragon House.

Wolfe, P. (2016). *Traces of history: Elementary structures of race*. Verso Books.

Yarshater, E. (1993). Persian identity in historical perspective. *Iranian Studies, 26*(1–2), 141–142.

Zarrinkoub, A. (1957). *Do qarn sokout [Two centuries of silence]*. Entesharate Amirkabir.

Zia-Ebrahimi, R. (2011). Self-orientalization and dislocation: The uses and abuses of the "Aryan" discourse in Iran. *Iranian Studies, 44*(4), 445–472.

Zia-Ebrahimi, R. (2014). "Arab invasion" and decline, or the import of European racial thought by Iranian nationalists. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 37*(6), 1043–1061.

Zia-Ebrahimi, R. (2016). *The emergence of Iranian nationalism: Race and the politics of dislocation*. Columbia University Press.