

WHAT IS TO BE IRANIAN: ON THE POLITICS OF CRAFTING IDENTITIES

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با شاد باش های نوروزی و آرزوی سالی پر از خوشروزی و کامروایی!

It is an honour for me to present this Noruz lecture (now in the text form) at the Foundation for Iranian Studies.

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On Friday, October 28, 2016, tens of thousands of Iranians gathered at the tomb of Cyrus the Great in southwest of the palaces of Pasargadae to celebrate the birthday of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Among the slogans one could hear was: *Iran vatan-e mast, Kurosh pedar-e mast* (Iran is our homeland and Cyrus is our father).



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky7I4XBNOHY>

Cyrus is our father: surely such call for assigning collective ancestry and national identity bears a political burden. What made this large crowd, majority of them born after the Islamic Revolution, to identify themselves with the country's pre-Islamic history? A political burden that intends to fill the gaps between the distant past and the present actuality?

While the social media covered the Pasargadae demonstration wholeheartedly, the Iranian government reaction was twofold. While launching a campaign of chasing and arresting those who took part in the demonstration, some figures in the Islamic establishment endeavoured to appropriate Cyrus by identifying him as Zolqarnayn, a figure that has been esteemed in Quran (in sure-e [Kahf](#)).

The practice of appropriating certain episode or figure in history is a common practice usually made by the states or political establishments. The most eminent illustrative cases in our time are what were practiced in the former Soviet south, following the fall of the Soviet Union and the formation of sovereign republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In 1993, when the new independent Uzbekistan celebrated her two years' birthday, the municipality of Tashkent decided to replace the statue of the founder of Marxism in the city's main square with the bronze riding horse monument of Amir Timur (Timur Lane - Tamerlane), branded as the "great statesman and commander of Middle Ages". Then in another stride one of the Soviet rituals, the wedding pilgrimage, when new married couples in their wedding day placed flowers for those who contributed to the socialist life, the monument of Lenin or the memorial in honour of fallen soldiers during the Second World War was altered. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan the statute of Amir Timur became the new site for wedding pilgrimage.

The rediscovery of Amir Timur as the founder of the Uzbek nation-state was in harmony with the endeavours by other new Central Asia states to recast their past and craft their new identity. Examples are the Tajiks claim on Samanid dynasty of tenth century or the Turkmen association with Oguz-Saljuks tribes-dynasty of eleventh century or the Kyrgyz identification with the legendary Manas. Surely the construction of national memory associated with the discovery and the refashioning of these figures has been juxtaposed with certain degree of amnesia.



Dushanbe, Ismail Samani



Samarqand, Ami Timur



Bishkek, Manas

In nationalist tailored discourse, the institution of a particular historical memory often corresponds with a selected amnesia in order to turn history from a divisive to a unifying force aiming to found historical legitimacy for the today integrated territory. The selected amnesia reveals itself, more than any other space, in the disassociation with the immediate past. The distant past, by passing through a national engineering, arrives in the present public space and the immediate past is overlooked and being dehistoricized. While in the centre of Tashkent the Timurid architecture of Amir-Timur museum links today Uzbekistan with the fourteenth-century Timurid dynasty, every effort is being made to negotiate with post-Timurid period- the Shaybanid of the 16th century who put an end to the Timurid era and the 18th, 19th and the 20th centuries of the Khanates, Tsarist colonialism and the Soviet integration. Furthermore, by eradicating the remaining Soviet hammer and sickle icon from the most remote corners of the isolated building in the city, the intention is to obliterate the recent past from public memory. Ironically, while the iconography of immediate past fades away from public space, its ideology at a more profound level remains as a prevailing instrument leaving much of topography of historical memory unaltered.

In the case of the newly born Central Asian republics, appropriating historical myth and figures is a top-down, state-sponsored venture. However, it is not always the state that is in charge of recasting national identities by appropriating the past.

In Iran, which is the subject of the present talk, recasting Iranian identity in the last hundred years has been an enduring venture by historians of various political ranks and background who have made an effort to revisit the distant past and craft new definitions of the past that mesh with their political ideologies. In this regard, writing ethno-nationalist and Islamic histories in modern Iran has been articulated consciously by the recovery of self, rejecting the other, and the discovery of its elite agents who according to such narratives have exclusively been in charge of the protection of the motherland or the Islamic land against alien others. The alien others often comprised the Arabs, the Turks, the

Mongols, and in modern history, the colonial powers, namely, the Russians and the British or most recently the United States of America. Furthermore, in Islamic historiography, an attempt has been made to highlight the Islamic, and specifically the Shi'i, characteristics of Iran rather than its ethnic or cultural particularities - particularities that are summarily dismissed as a global imperialist conspiracy garbed in nationalist, secularist, or Marxist ideologies.

Consequently, for historians engaged in the rewriting ethno-nationalist or religious histories, the refashioning of certain cultural elites becomes an essential component of their effort to mobilize people for affiliating to a new national, territorial, ethnic, or religious identity. Ironically, in the conceptualization of such an endeavour, Islamic historiography in Iran has opted to Islamicize or rather Shi'i-ize the past by reintroducing the same elite agents employed by the ethno-nationalist historiography, yet with a different agenda.

One of the best exemplifications of the appropriating myth and figure in Iran is the story of Babak Khorramdin's revolt in the early ninth century which I studied some years ago, published in a volume edited by Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani. The story of Babak demonstrates how a single episode in the distant past can be used as an instrument for generating and assessing factual and counterfactual scenarios to address the shifting identity of Iranians in the twentieth century. Almost two hundred years after the introduction of Islam to Iran, Babak, a neo-Mazdakite leader, emerged from the northwest province of Azerbaijan and revolted against the Abbasid caliphate.

Babak's life and his twenty-year-long revolt has been the subject of scholarly studies as well as controversial interpretations in twentieth-century Iranian historiography. Revisiting the differing viewpoints on Babak's revolt in Iran, in the country's past and present national curriculum, scholarly conducted research and idiosyncratic narratives representing nationalist, Stalinist, regionalist, traditional Islamist, and Shi'i historiographies is what I would like to share with you. During this revisiting process, we see how the shifting political culture of Iran has led to the construction of the nation's real or imagined past, with the aim of forming new self-protective identity umbrella for Iranians.

The Revolt of Babak

The Arab Muslim conquest of the northwest of Iran began in the seventh century when the Arab army gained victories on the western frontier of Persia during the caliphate of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab. They then marched toward the north conquering Azerbaijan from 639 to 643 CE. However, governing Azerbaijan soon proved to be an intricate task by itself. In *Futuh al-Buldan*, there are references to a number of uprisings during which the people of Azerbaijan defied the Muslims rule in the region. In the course of one of these uprisings, which ended with a peace treaty between the Arab commander representing the caliph and the satrap of Azerbaijan, the Arab army gave assurances to refrain from demolishing the fire temples in the province, acknowledging the right of Azerbaijanis to practice their religious and communal ceremonies and festivals.

Following the Arab conquest, Arab commanders were appointed to rule different parts of Azerbaijan. It was only after the revolt of Babak Khorramdin (or Khorrami), against the Abbasid caliphate from 816 to 817 CE, that the caliphate's influence gradually diminished in Azerbaijan. For the next two centuries until the arrival of the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century, Azerbaijan either enjoyed

semiautonomous status under the caliphate of Baghdad or was ruled by local dynasties.

Babak's somewhat sensational and legendary campaigns have been discussed extensively in some well-known classics such as Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist*, al-Muqaddasi's *Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*. He launched his revolt during the reign of al-Ma'mun in 816/817 CE. As a devotee of Khorramdin (Khorramiyeh), Babak enjoyed the support of the Khorramdin community in Azerbaijan as well as the volunteers from Isfahan or Kashan. From his formidably inaccessible Fort of Bazz (*Qalleh Bazz*), situated in the mountainous area of today's district of Kalibar at a distance of about 150 kilometres north east of Tabriz, Babak led his campaign against the Abbasid caliphates of al-Ma'mun and later al-Mu'tasim.



Qaleh Bazz, Kalibar, 150-kilometre northeast of Tabriz

Babak secured his authority by inflicting decisive and humiliating defeats upon al-Ma'mun. The twenty-year duration of Babak's revolt could be interpreted as a sign of the support his campaign enjoyed among the people of Azerbaijan highlands, especially the peasants whose fertile land was often seized by the Baghdad's official appointees and the Muslim newcomers.

Babak's revolt further spread in waves from an area stretching upper Azerbaijan, from the Mughan steppe, the Aras River bank into north of Aras River, Beylaqan, and Nakhjivan. His supporters held sway over eastward to Talesh and the Caspian Sea, westward to Marand and the district of Julfa, southward to Ardabil and the district of the Lake Urmia.

For some twenty years, the Caliphate of Baghdad in number of ineffective assaults tried to suppress the revolt, and finally with the help of Afshin, the Caliphate launched a new and decisive attack on Babak and his followers in the summer of 837. The outlines of Babak's final days have been narrated in great detail by a variety of authors, including those mentioned earlier. Upon Babak's arrival in Samarra, al-Mu'tasim staged a ceremonial execution to set an example for his opponents. However, the

Khorramdin movement survived long after Babak's elimination. In fact, the remnants of it can be traced as late as the thirteenth century.

Let's now see how this episode has been projected in the Iranian historiography:

Since the formation, recognition and consolidation of the modern territorial boundaries of Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, historiographers have focused on the analysis of Iranians' endeavours to uphold their ethnic and cultural identities in the face of Islam. Arguably, the historiography of Babak's revolt opens up a challenging line of enquiry into Iranians' reactions to the inception of Islam to their plateau. Evidently, the question of accommodation of Islam and resistance to its dissemination has evolved into a more political enquiry since the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1982.

Narrative is at the heart of probably every historical event of which we are aware. In a sense, history is mostly a substantial collection of narratives, and it is on these that its power largely rests. The same is true of the history of Babak's revolt. The narrative and interpretation of his belief system, life, and death are all intrinsic to the understanding of his revolt. However, different narratives of his revolt have generated different readings.

A brief examination of the existing narratives of Babak's revolt, which appeared throughout the twentieth century, reveals that, in addition to an absence of adequate or substantiated exposition of evidence, the validity of arguments and counterarguments offered in these narratives, is often based on either political or ideological agendas.

Let's revisit these narratives in six acts:

Act One: Babak as the Son of Persia against the Arab Muslim Other

Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani's brief account of Babak's revolt in the late nineteenth century seems to be among the very few narratives that offer a new framework for an intellectual debate. While he emphasized the forceful dissemination of Islam to Iran, he recognized the fact that conversion to Islam was forcefully demanded inside Iran due to the oppression exercised by the Sasanian Moghan (Zoroastrian religious authorities). He described Iranians as having a natural propensity for adopting alternative religious traditions as well as developing various doctrines, philosophies and belief systems derived from their own religious traditions such as the Mazdaki and Manichaean practices. He further considers Babak's revolt as a conscious effort to pursue this tradition.

Between 1933 and 1934, Sa'id Nafisi, a nationalist historian, published a series of articles in the journal *Mehr* in which he presented a romantic picture of Babak as an ultranationalist who combined admiration for Iranian pre-Islamic beliefs with profound anti-Arab sentiments. Some twenty years later, Sa'id Nafisi's articles were developed into a book titled *Babak Khorramdin Delavar-e Azarbayjan* (Babak Khorramdin, the Hero of Azerbaijan).



Babak as portrayed in Iranian historiography

In his introduction, Sa'id Nafisi states that the greatest movements in Iran's long "turbulent history" occurred in the second and the third centuries following "the Arab incursion." According to Nafisi, the outcome of this incursion was the imposition of total submission and capitulation upon Iranians by a handful of ignoble camel riders and desert dwellers (*biyabangard*). He further argues "in the history of no region other than Iran can one find for almost three thousand years before and three thousand years after its formation, an uninterrupted endeavour to rescue itself from the sustained assault (*dastbord*) by the Semitic people." Sa'id Nafisi then refers to a number of individuals who, according to him, were the outstanding representatives of the Iranian national renaissance movements and the guardians of her distinct identity:

These great Iranian men have no intention but to liberate themselves from the oppressive shackles of the foreigners. All of the successive uprisings, which we have particularly witnessed in our ancestors' history against the Arab encroachment, have only taken place to save Iran from that excruciating captivity.

According to Nafisi, "what [distinguished] Babak amongst all of these great men was his bravery and prominence standing fast against the enemy [i.e., the caliphate]." He then referred to the purpose of his study:

This book is meant to bring together what we have so far been handed down so that it will be of benefit to Iranians when need is felt in the future and if, God forbidden, one day Iran were to face such calamities, this [book] could serve as an example and guide to bring forth yet another saviour such as Babak.

On Babak's origin and his ruling territory, Nafisi's account is mainly based on Tabari and Ibn-Nadim's accounts. Nafisi avers that Babak was a Mazdakite whose descendants originated in Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Persia, and settled in Azerbaijan. According to him, Babak's sphere of influence

lay southward across Ardabil and today's Marand, reaching eastwards the Caspian Sea cutting into the Shamakhi and Shirvan regions, stretching into the Moghan Steppe to the north along the south bank of the Aras (Araxes) River and extending toward Julfa and Nakhjivan. Nafisi also points out that the people who lived in the south of the territory controlled by Babak were Persian and those who lived in the north of this region were Alans or Alanis, who were an offspring of the Aryan ethnic group.

Prior to the Revolution of 1978–1982, narratives such as Nafisi's were reflected in official history textbooks. In the history book of the sixth grade published in 1967, the uprising of the Babak was glorified and portrayed as a movement aimed at "re-establishing the country's independence and restoring the Iranian kingdom of the Sassanids." Parviz Natel Khanlari, the author of the schoolbook and one of the leading scholars of the period, asserts that Afshin, being of Iranian origin, could never stand against Babak:

Babak and Afshin reached a secret understanding to overthrow the Abbasids [750–1258] and re-establish a monarchic system similar to that of Sassanid Empire [226–651]...[However,] Afshin, who served as the caliphate's Chief of the Army, was compelled to fight against Babak; and after a great deal of struggle, he captured Babak and took him to Baghdad, where he was eventually killed. Yet, the caliphate, who always despised Iranians, soon killed its own Chief of the Army Afshin, who was a source of good deeds for the caliphate, making this hero's efforts to regain the country's independence futile.

Act Two: Babak as the Representative of the Iranian Subaltern

Following Sa'id Nafisi, there were other writers or historians who dealt with Babak's revolt. Ehsan Tabari's treatment of the topic seems to be quite distinctive both in form and in content. As a leading theoretician of the Tudeh Party, Tabari's analysis is informed by Stalinist historiography in that he attempts to exaggerate both the territorial significance of Babak's revolt and his adherence to class struggle with equal measures.

In the introduction to his work on Babak Khorramdin, Tabari asserts:

In the early centuries of the Arab hegemony, the main social context in which the Iranian people's movements took place was against the Arab caliphate. Within this context, two different orientations should be distinguished from each other: the first orientation was the *liberation* struggle in order to crush the oppressive shackles of the foreigners; the second orientation was the class struggle of the peasants and urban poor against feudal-aristocratic government including Iranians or Arabs that was materialized and manifested in the Abbasids.

He then contends:

Since only Marxism-Leninism renders sound scientific evidence for research and analysis of social phenomena, the best way to acquire the intrinsic causes of the many gesticulations that have occurred in the turbulent sea of the Iranian people's

life is to juxtapose this perspective with the thrilling account of humankind.

For Tabari, like Nafisi, Babak remained an “Iranian hero” who headed “one of the greatest social movements in a geographically wide region of western Iran following the Arab domination” By stressing Babak’s and Afshin’s Iranian identity, Tabari alleged that the former, in his struggle against the caliphate, endeavoured to persuade Afshin to unite with him. While he highlighted the ethnic dimension of Babak’s revolt, Tabari also argued that this movement enjoyed significant support from the peasants and the poor:

Babak rose from the poor masses of the people and in his struggle, he enjoyed the support of the peasants, the shepherds and the urban poor. Indeed, they considered him as their true representative and the guardian of their national as well as class interests.

Act Three: Babak as the Infidel Other

In addition to various Stalinist and nationalist interpretations of identity formation in Iran, during the Pahlavi period few Islamist or Islamicist scholars narrated Iran’s history, especially the history of the Islamic period. One may single out Morteza Motahhari as the most eminent scholar of this trend who, in his *The Mutual Contribution between Islam and Iran (Khadamat-e Muteqabel-e Eslam va Iran)*, vehemently challenged the nationalist historiography of the Pahlavi era, arguing that contesting Arabs and Arabism (*‘Arabiyyat*) is part of a “well-orchestrated and well-calculated camping to abuse Islam behind the mask of defending Iranian nationality.”

In Motahhari’s perception, the propaganda surrounding Zoroastrianism, which has gathered pace and has become popular these days, is a well-calculated political campaign. In today’s Iran, no one will ever convert to Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrian teachings will never replace Islamic teachings. Mazdaki, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrian personalities and all those who are being falsely introduced as “national characters” bear no characteristics other than deviation from Islamic teachings, whether they oppose Islam explicitly or use the struggle against the Arab ethnicity as a pretext, they will never ever replace Islamic heroes in Iranians’ hearts. Never will Al-Muqanna’ and Sanbad and Babak Khorramdin and Mazyar replace ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib and Husayn Ibn ‘Ali and even Salman Farsi in the hearts of Iranians. Everyone knows about these issues.

In Motahhari’s reading of the early period of Islam, the Iranians not only converted to Islam wholeheartedly but also incorporated their ethno-linguistic characteristics into the new faith and therefore created a unique notion of Islamic-Iranian identity, which according to Motahhari was quite inseparable. Furthermore, in his reference to the “sporadic” resistances to the Islamic political and cultural establishment, Motahhari was convinced that the isolated confrontations were soon dealt with not by merely Arabs, but by Iranians themselves who acted as guardians of Islam:

Fortunately, since the beginning of Islam up to the present whenever some people have made noise about the revival of Iran’s ancient rituals and traditions, they have faced the Iranian nation’s wrath, to the point that the likes of Bahafarid, Sandbad and Babak and Mazyar have been crushed by the hands of Iranians such

as Abu-Muslim and Afshin and countless soldiers of this country.

Act Four: Babak as the Subject of Practicing Selected Amnesia

Motahhari vigorously denounced Pahlavi nationalist historiography, which widely acknowledged Babak as a national hero. Later on, his firm stance against Babak served as a departure point for the post-revolutionary Islamic state to re-craft Iranians' past identity. In the national curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Motahhari's construct of the Islamic-Iranian identity remains the prevailing paradigm. However, with the passage of time, total denouncement of Babak, and historical figures like him, gradually disappeared from public discourse and eventually became subject to selected amnesia. Evidently, the official historians of the Islamic Republic such as Rasul Jafarian, Abdur Rasul Khayrandish, Mas'ud Javadiyan and Javad 'Abbasi have opted for carefully measured and skilfully chiselled narratives rather than uttering obscenities and profanities at the likes of Babak.

Following a detailed account of the Abbasid caliphate and its interactions with the Shiite establishment in the second-grade history curriculum of the middle school, the author(s) briefly stated: "During the Abbasids' reign, someone known as Babak rose up against the caliphate in Azerbaijan. Babak was the caliphate's enemy and managed to inflict a series of defeats upon his army. He and his army created numerous difficulties for the caliphate but, eventually, the caliphate's army defeated them."

Ironically, most of these authors seem to venture into history in order to conceal Babak's religious conviction and portray him more as an Iranian without any religious affinity other than Islam. In doing so they embark upon sieving historical evidence through contemporary political and ideological filters and craftily construe self-justifying facts mainly echoing distortion and circulating misinformation. For example, Rasul Jafarian writes:

Utilizing public dissatisfaction with the Abbasids and propagating new ideas, which were a combination of Zoroastrian, Mazdaki, Ma'navi and Islamic traditions, Babak Khorramdin revolted against the rule of caliphate. Babak fought against the Tahirids and the Abbasids' armies for nearly twenty years. He was, however, defeated and hanged in Samarra.

Indeed, the process of "appropriating" (*khudi kardan*) of Babak has been part of a larger campaign to culturally dishearten some Azerbaijani activists who, since the early 1990s, endeavoured to portray Babak as an icon of their distinct identity.

Act Five: Babak as an Azerbaijani Turk

By the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and during the period of relative liberalization of the presidency of Rafsanjani, the call for the recognition of ethnic minorities' rights was gradually translated into a broader discourse on individualism, individual autonomy and citizenship solidarity, and rights, which had become the main preoccupation of Iranian reformist circles. Such developments became more apparent during President Khatami's term of creating strong ties between the question of citizenship and individualism on the one hand and the rights of ethnic minorities on the other.

The most articulated manifestation of such ties was the rapid increase of the number of books and periodicals published in ethnic languages. Moreover, a large number of intellectuals from ethnic minority backgrounds began writing on ethnic groups as part of broader intellectual enterprise during this period. Writing ethnic history has developed into a persuasive political project shaping a significant unbroken link with each ethnic group's constructed past with the aim of filling the gap between the ethnic groups' origins and their actuality. Books on local geography and ethnic history constitute the main part of these publications. The preservation of historical traditions, grassroots involvement, and the rediscovery of past traditions, both immediate and distant, have become the preoccupation of large segments of intellectuals whose aim was to legitimize their call for equal rights for their respective ethnic groups. However, the most cognizant step taken by certain ethnic groups, such as Azeris, was the local intellectuals' effort to link their scholarly engagement with the political culture to influence the latter accordingly.

In 1999, Mohammad Taqi Zehtabi, an Azerbaijani linguist published his two-volume *The Ancient History of Iranian Turks (Iran Turklerinin Eski Tarikhi)*, covering the history, geography, and philology of the northwest Iran as well as the northern bank of the Aras (Araxes) River from "earliest times" to the Islamic period. In his concluding remarks, Zehtabi, blames the failure of the Persians to uphold Iran's sovereignty and praises the Azerbaijani Turks for their leading role in the Iranian plateau to secure the country's integrity whenever she was occupied by the neighbouring empires His pre-Islamic example is the "Parthian Turks" who put an end to the rule of Macedonian Seleucids. As far as the Islamic period is concerned, he names Babak Khorramdin as an Azeri Turk who "stood against Baghdad" and "demonstrated the vulnerability of the Islamic caliphate."



Babak as portrayed in Republic of Azerbaijan historiography

In his effort to present Babak as an Azerbaijani hero with a strong regional identity, Zehtabi follows in the footsteps of the historians of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the national historiography of the neighbouring Republic of Azerbaijan, Babak is acknowledged as a national hero of Turks. While

containing some erroneous information, the country's national curriculum indicates that:

[Babak] is a prominent Azerbaijani commander and a political leader...Under Babak's leadership, the people of Azerbaijan struggled against the religion of Islam, the Arab slavery and the feudal oppression. [His] movement was the most influential in the Near and Middle East in the Middle Ages [misinformation by the author]...Under Babak's guidance, people's liberation movement furnishes one of the brightest pages of the history of Azerbaijan... Babak's movement facilitated the neighboring nations' struggle for freedom.

However, the implication of Zehtabi's remarks on Babak's ethnic origin soon crossed the borders of academic enquiry and entered public space. Zehtabi's discovery of Babak's identity as an Azeri Turk was almost immediately followed by his call to pay homage to the Fort of Bazz (*Qalleh Bazz*, now *Qalleh Babak*) during the first week of summer. Eventually, Zehtabi's proposed pilgrimage turned into a public picnic celebration where a large number of Azerbaijanis congregate at the Fort of Bazz to celebrate Babak's alleged birthday, better known as Babak's Day. Although the entertainment dimension of the event is much more discernible, the public performance of folk and traditional Azeri dance and music not only defies the government's general ban on public performance of music and dance, but it also helps to strengthen communal solidarity accentuating a new sense of Azerbaijani-ness.

The popularity of Babak's Day, however, jolted certain individuals in the Iranian political establishment. Various sanctions, including allocating the site to the Mobilization Resistance Forces of the Islamic Revolution's Guard Corps (*Basij*) or setting up roadblocks, were imposed on those who attempted to reach the fort on Babak's Day. Although these measures resulted in a total ban of the event by the government, such festivities portrayed momentarily a concerted effort to promote social liberties with a strong will to articulate a collective identity, thus distinguishing Azeris from others.



Visiting Qaleh Bazz to celebrate Babak Day, June 2000

Arguably, Azerbaijanis' engagement in events of this nature was an indication of a political

desire to gain certain rights such as promotion of native education and administrative autonomy. Evidently, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of a sovereign state of the Republic of Azerbaijan have influenced certain political developments with unpredictable side effects within Iran's Azerbaijan. This impelled some historians, with a strong affiliation to the central state in Iran, to adopt a new cultural strategy toward the question of Babak's identity.

Act Six: Babak as a Shi'i Muslim. When a Crow Turns into a Nightingale

The process of appropriating of Babak in Iran in recent years, continued to the extent that some historian argued that the roots of Babak's revolt was nothing but his deep Shi'i conviction denouncing Sunni Baghdad. The new narratives not only postulate Babak as Muslim but even argue that his affinity with Shi'ism made his Islam different from the Islam of Baghdad.

In an interview with the Iranian Cultural Heritage News Agency, an Iranian historian, Abbas Zarei Mehrvarz, who has published some articles and a book on Babak, argues, "Babak was a Muslim. However, his Islam was different from the official Islam of the state [the Abbasid caliphate]. I suspect that he was inclined toward 'Alavism and Shi'ism.'"

The attempt to present Babak as a Shi'i soon gained momentum and became a key line of enquiry with its own merits. One who endorsed it was Rasul Razavi who in his book *Babak and Historiographical Critique (Babak va Naqd-e Tarikhnegari)* rejected all previous assumptions on Babak, arguing that the historiography of Babak had been influenced by Western scholars' schemes to challenge Islam by exploiting themes such as ethnicity, nationalism, and historical materialism:

The reason Iranian nationalists, following Westerners, show inclination to analyse the Iranian uprisings from the nationalist perspective lies in the fact that after the introduction of Islam to Iran, which faced no serious resistance, no major uprising, with patriotic slogans, took place and no one revolted against the Arab whilst claiming to have been affiliated to Zoroastrians or the Sassanid and almost all major uprisings revolved around religion or religious faction, especially that of the Shiite Islam.

According to Razavi, in Babak's era there were only two "racial" groups living in Azerbaijan - *Azeri-e 'Ajams* and the *Javidaniyeh*:

At the time, there was no trace of the Turkic ethnicity in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan saw the earliest presence of the Turks in the course of the battle between Afshin's army and the Javidanis.

Razavi further considered Babak as a Persian-speaking Iranian and an adherent of the Javidaniyeh sect. On the religion of the Javidaniyeh, Razavi asserts that the Javidaniyeh, whose movement was rooted in Shi'i Islam, believed in the doctrine of reappearance of the ultimate saviour of humankind. However, unlike Twelver Shi'is, who believe in the reappearance of Mahdi (the Shi'i Twelfth Imam), the Javidaniyeh believed in the reappearance of Kazim, the son of the Shi'i Sixth Imam Ja'far Sadiq who, according to the Javidaniyeh, was in occultation.

Babak and his Javidani supporters' revolt, in Razavi's opinion, was an egalitarian Shi'i movement challenging the Sunni aristocratic rule of Baghdad. In their endeavour, they enjoyed the extended support of not only Azerbaijanis but also the people of central Iran including Qum and Kashan. Nonetheless, followers of this movement, which Razavi prefers to label as "*Javidaniyeh-Kazimiyeh*," could not withstand the power of the Sunni enemy and, hence, were crushed eventually. Rasul Razavi believes that because of the sheer massacre of the Javidanis, there seemed to be no Javidani left to record details of what actually happened to them.

Crafting Identity: A Political Project

In the 1860s, Massimo d'Azeglio, a prominent Italian nationalist activist stated, "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." While Italy's geographical characteristics are distinctive from Iran's, the extent to which d'Azeglio's assertion about Italian identity can be applicable to Iran remains debatable. However, his well-worded aphorism implies that the construction of national identity could be perceived as a political project that could also be altered over time.

In Iran, the idea of re-composition of modern national identity, attuned to Iran's territorial boundaries, has developed in conjunction with her ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political hybrid cultures. Such identity building can be considered as a work in progress and is often juxtaposed with the changing of people's shared public memories and political system.

Prior to 1900, Iranian borders were predominantly elastic. The Safavids' attempt in the early sixteenth century to introduce greater political unity through centralization and institutionalization of Shi'ism created a new defensive identity in relation to those Iranians who lived beyond their borders. For the Safavids' Persian subjects defined themselves not by their own "national" characteristics, but rather by local exclusion, for example, through creating a negative image comparing themselves with their immediate Sunni Muslim neighbours.

Regardless of the specification of the national identity during the Safavid period, the considerable growth of dynastic allegiance led to the emergence of Iran (then Persia) as a defined territorial entity stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. This process took on a more concrete shape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the introduction of the first semi modern European maps of the country. The mapping of Iran as such, mainly based on the Safavid territorial expansion, was, however, different from the ancient design of the Persian Empire. In the premodern period, the threat of the Ottoman expansionism made the European powers concerned about the boundaries of their much-hated neighbour.

When, following the fall of the Safavid, the Ottomans seized the northwest of Iran in 1736, Nader Shah demanded the return of those territories to Iran insisting on Iran's recognized borders. It is noteworthy that Nader's reference to Iran's recognized borders during the Safavid era became a standard reference for successive rulers. Karim Khan Zand and Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar also used the same argument for similar settlements of land disputes. Throughout the Qajar era, reference to the Safavid mapping of Iran was a common discourse in the Iranian diplomatic correspondences creating the mass psychology of Iranian-ness.

The foundation of modern Iran in the post–World War I period, during the reign of Reza Shah with the motto of “*yek mamlekat, yek mellat*” (one country, one nation), was associated with the introduction of Iran’s designated borders. Obviously, the concept behind such demarcated territory was different from the civilizational boundaries of Iran (*hozeh-ye tamaddon-ye Irani*) or the Safavid mental mapping. However, the newly demarked territory virtually mirrored the bulk of the Safavid territories. If in the Safavid mapping of Iran a certain degree of ethnic or linguistic diversity had been tolerable, in the construction of the new territorial identity of Iran in the aftermath of the World War I, Persianization of her inhabitants became the main priority. Therefore, such a new identity necessitated a new definition of nation.

In 1926, almost ten years before Sa’id Nafisi published his work on Babak, another Iranian leading thinker Mahmud Afshar proclaimed a new definition of nation. According to Afshar, a nation was “a group of people who are united on the basis of common race/ethnicity, religion, social life, and history, who have lived together on the common land for centuries.” Underlining the centrality of political culture, Afshar explained the reasons behind accommodating the Persian as the national language of Iran in the following manner:

What I mean by the national unity of Iran is a political, cultural, and social unity of the people who live within the present-day boundaries of Iran. This unity includes two other concepts, namely, the maintenance of political independence and the geographical integrity of Iran. However, achieving national unity means that the Persian language must be established throughout the whole country, that regional differences in clothing, customs and such like must disappear, and that *moluk al-tavayef* (the local chieftains) must be eliminated. Kurds, Lors, Qashqa’is, Arabs, Turks, Turkmen, etc., shall not differ from one another by wearing different clothes or speaking a different language. In my opinion, until national unity is achieved in Iran, with regard to customs, clothing, and so forth, the possibility of our political independence and geographical integrity being endangered will always remain.

The authoritarian modernization, practiced throughout the Pahlavi era, was crafted with an illusion that modernization gradually would break down traditional allegiances and expose individuals to new opportunities. Consequently, urbanization, industrialization, education, communication, and improved transportation were supposed to lead ethnic and religious communities to ultimate national integrity in Iran. Indeed, Afshar’s definition of nation was in tune with the then propagated policy of the state.

However, during Muhammad Reza Shah’s reign, especially toward its end, there were others who proposed other definitions of nation and national identity. The Islamist scholar Morteza Motahhari, one of the leading architects of the Islamic Revolution denied that shared ethnicity, language, or even territoriality shaped a nation and instead professed a premodern definition of nation (*mellat*) as it was employed in the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages. This definition of nation corresponds above all with the followers of a particular faith or religion. Consequently, in his definition of nation, religion - such as Islam - occupies the major share. He further adopts the “nation of Islam” analogous to the “nation of Iran.” Besides, for Motahhari, Islamic identity could be substituted by other identities:

“This is an obvious issue that in the religion of Islam, the way nationality and ethnicity are nowadays characterized amongst people bears no validity, nonetheless this religion [Islam] treats all different ethnicities equally, and, right from the outset, Islam’s appeal has not been exclusive to any particular nation and ethnicity.”

However, such perception of nation and national identity needs shared public memories unifying inhabitants of the countries in a world structured according to the nation-state systems. The production of a new hybrid culture amalgamating the trans-territorial Islamic past with today’s shared territorial history often seems to be essential for the construction of a new hybrid identity. In creating such a hybrid identity, stones, buildings, papers, tales, communal heroes, and liberating myths are carefully exploited as natural components of the new Islamic transnational as well as national territories. While these components are often used for politically motivated mobilizations, it should concurrently be cross-checked if they ever expose any challenge to the legitimacy of the Islamic faith. To embark upon such a delicate process of Islamicization or more precisely the Shi`ization of the Iranian past, the call for certain invention, exclusion, or a selected amnesia is needed. Accordingly, the past, by passing through a national engineering, arrives at the present public space and crafts the new identity of Islamic nation, the *ummah*.

Therefore, as far as the process of invention is concerned, the “Javidaniyeh-Kazimiyeh” and Babak’s alleged conviction to that religious group is tangibly used as a means to justify the end. Also, the process of exclusion is manifested in denying Babak’s attempt to seek support from the Byzantine Emperor Theophius to eradicate the Islamic caliphate. Finally, the process of selected amnesia is carefully implemented to trace Babak’s distant ancestors back to a non-Muslim community in north-western Iran, while, at the same time, an effort is made to tie his immediate ancestors to a Muslim origin.

I would like to conclude this talk with some notes as conclusion:

The shifting nature of twentieth-century historiography set out to explain the emergence and peculiarities of Iranian national identity. Despite numerous institutional attempts and counter attempts in constructing and deconstructing miscellaneous identities of Iranians, the making of Iranian national identity remains to be a fascinating exploration of Iranian-ness and what it means to be Iranian. The nation’s twentieth-century historiography exhibits the historian’s endeavour to construct distinct national identities and craft histories based on political schemes. Evidently, this process has resulted in creation of sentimental fiction, grotesque denial or deliberate falsification of historical or traditional realities, and ideologically biased representations. Nonetheless, the issue of Babak’s identity has ironically necessitated an unholy assemblage of historians of ethno-nationalist, Islamic, and Stalinist traditions.

Thank you for your attention.