


ROUND TABLE

Iranian Identity and National Oppression: Crafting the Modern Iranian Nation–State

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During Iran’s 2022–2023 countrywide uprising, the intensity of popular protests in Kurdistan and Baluchistan drew attention to the question of national oppression. Some scholars then revisited a debate, originally articulated in Marxist circles, on whether Iran’s culturally and politically oppressed communities, like Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis or Arabs, are ethnic or national minorities. This article approaches the debate within the frame of national oppression as a historical construction. It argues that in Iran, as in almost all modern nation-states, nationhood was established through the forcible creation of minoritized communities whose potential claims to nationhood, or an equal place in a politically democratic and culturally pluralist nation, have been denied.

Keywords: national oppression; minoritized communities; ethnicity; nationhood; Marxism and the national question

The theme of “minoritized communities” in Iran reminds us that the making of minorities, whether linguistic, religious, ethnic, or national, is the by-product of nation–state formation in Iran as well as in other modern nations.¹ Drawing on my previous work on the topic, I will briefly discuss the formation of modern minorities in relation to the genesis of modern Iranian national identity, arguing that national oppression has been intrinsic to nation–state building in Iran.

Iran’s 2022–23 decentered, multiethnic, and multigendered protest movement marked a new departure from decades of Tehran-centric and male-dominated opposition. Leading the popular uprising, Kurdish and Baluch regions suffered about half of the casualties inflicted by the security forces, and the protest movement’s globally celebrated slogan, “Woman, Life, Freedom,” originating in Kurdish regions, borrowed from Kurdish revolutionary circles in Turkey. The remarkable synergy of countrywide protests elicited strong sympathy for Kurdish and Baluch communities across Iran and among the Iranian diaspora in Europe and the United States. Traditionally, mainly leftists had paid attention to the oppression of ethnic minorities, but now even the monarchists added a token Kurdish contingent to the coalition they hastily set up in the US.² Manifestos and declarations from inside Iran used terms such as “ethnic” or “national” oppression, proposing remedies ranging from cultural autonomy to political federalism, the latter being vehemently rejected by a broad spectrum, from monarchists to liberal nationalists and reformists of the Islamic Republic.³

¹ Mamdani, *Neither Settler*.

² Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Iran’s Uprisings”; Mohammadpour, “Decolonizing Voices.”

³ “Ehsan Hushmand in Conversation with Mehdi Beykogli,” *Etamad*.

Generalizations about ethnolinguistic or national oppression are complicated because Azerbaijan, the region with the largest (Azeri) ethnic minority had remained relatively calm throughout the protests. Some scholars argue that terms such as “ethnic minorities” belong to the discourse of European colonialism and therefore should not be applied to Iran. Instead, they propose the idea of Iran as a multinational country, in which Kurds, Azeris, and Baluchis are “national minorities.”⁴ But this remains problematic because nationhood is as Eurocentric as ethnicity, and it is not clear how the nationhood of Iran’s numerous culturally and linguistically diverse populations can be established.

International law recognizes nationhood when a potential or imagined national community gains political sovereignty by forming a state, a process involving the imposition of a national language and uniform political culture on diverse populations, some with their own claims to nationhood.⁵ The cobbling together of previously autonomous regions and culturally distinct people into unitary nation-states is easily seen in Iran’s neighbors (Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan), and France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and the United States show similar trajectories. As I have argued, the Iranian case is complicated due to the identification of Iran as an empire with Iran as a nation-state, a confusion originating in Orientalist scholarship and readily adopted by Iranian nationalist discourse.⁶ In fact, no Iranian nation existed under the Qajar kingdom, a “failed empire” that had lost its Caucasian and Afghan territories in wars with the Russian and British empires. Late Qajar attempts at self-strengthening and modernization took a protonationalist turn, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution, which introduced the juridical framework for a nation-state. It was only at this time that *mellat* came to mean a nation rather than a religious community, and “Iran” referenced a single country, rather than a plurality of countries (*mamālek-e mahruseh*), hitherto joined together in a premodern confederate structure.⁷

The Qajar system of decentralized and fractured sovereignties (*moluk al-tawā’efi*) persisted until after World War I, when leading nationalist thinkers, writing in publications like *Kaveh*, *Peyman*, *Iran-Shahr*, and *Āyandeh* argued that an Iranian nation needed to be forged by a centralizing state through the elimination of diversity in regional languages, cultures, lifestyles, and local economies, particularly pastoral nomadism. Mahmoud Afshar, for instance, wrote:

Perfecting national unity means the spread of Persian language throughout the country, getting rid of “fractured sovereignties” (*moluk al-tawā’efi*) and regional differences in behavior, appearance, etc.; and making Kurds, Lurs, Qashqāis, Arabs, Turks and Turkomans speak the same language and dress the same. . . . Unless we can make uniform all of Iran’s various regions and different ethnicities, in other words, making all of them truly Iranian, we face a dark future.⁸

The authoritarian nation-building agenda that Afshar and his cothinkers advocated was implemented from above and with considerable violence by the centralizing state that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s. Pahlavi era nationalist historiography justified the violent character of nation-building as a necessary remedy to the presumed chaotic and catastrophic conditions of early 1920s Iran. In fact, 1921 Iran was more stable than it had been during the entire post-Constitutional decade. Famine and foreign occupation had ended, the 1919 British attempt at imposing a protectorate was thwarted, and a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union was ratified. A fledgling parliamentary and multiparty system, including

⁴ Vahabzadeh, “Iran ‘Ethnic’ Nadard!”

⁵ Summers, “Right of Self-Determination.”

⁶ Matin-asgari, “Academic Debate.” Recent scholarship continues to see premodern Iran as a nation. For example, a scholarly critique of Iranian nationalism’s irrational tendencies still assumes that Iran is “a ‘relatively permanent’ historic nation,” and “the Iranian national narrative has been evident since antiquity”; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Psycho-Nationalism*, 15.

⁷ Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire*, 193.

⁸ Mahmud Afshār in *Āyandeh*, no. 1. Quoted in Entekhabi, *Nasionālism*, 42.

socialists and communists, was functional, although it did not reach far beyond Tehran, and none of the autonomous movements in Gilān, Khorāsān, and Azerbaijan sought secession. In such conditions, the authoritarian nation-building agenda of the Pahlavi state was not a historical necessity, but the choice of an authoritarian nationalist elite. Recently, historians have noted how the Pahlavi state's top-down nation-building was resisted by the urban and rural poor, the new working class in the oil fields, and particularly by tribal nomadic populations.⁹ After Reza Shah's fall, a majlis deputy gave the following description of his regime's treatment of nomads:

The Qashqāi, Bakhtiyāri, Kuhgiluya and other nomads . . . not only has their tribal property been looted, but group after group of these tribes have been executed without trial. . . . The way they settled the tribes was the way of execution and annihilation, not education and reform. And it is precisely this approach that has sapped the strength of the Iranian society and weakened the hope of national unity.¹⁰

The forced settlement of tribal populations, inevitably causing the destruction of their culture, is a common feature of modern nation-building, recently dubbed "internal colonialism" by scholars.¹¹ Hannah Arendt had already observed how post-World War I nation-building in Europe involved the creation of minorities prone to forcible assimilation or genocide. "The representatives of the great nations," she wrote, "knew only too well that minorities within nation-states must sooner or later be either assimilated or liquidated." Arendt also noted, albeit in passing, the similarity of the modern nation-state's treatment of its minorities to colonialism.¹² Similarly, historian Afshin Marashi writes that the Pahlavi state "came to play the role of a *surrogate colonial state*," assuming "the political character of an external presence."¹³ Kurdish scholars Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour argue that the Pahlavi regime acted like a colonial state in Iran's modern nation-building project.¹⁴

Historical and Intellectual Challenges to National Oppression in Iran

After the fall of Reza Shah, breakaway tendencies resulting from Tehran's repressive centralization led to the formation of two autonomous governments in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Although backed by Soviet occupation forces, these governments responded to popular grievances, sponsoring education in local languages, land reform, and women's franchise. The latter point was a radical contrast to the Pahlavi nation-state's highly gender-biased character, in which Reza Shah's campaign of "women's liberation" consisted of forcing European dress on women. As late as the 1960s, the monarchist White Revolution's most important planks, land reform and women's enfranchisement, were copied from the Azerbaijan government and leftist parties. Meanwhile, the brutal crushing of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan's autonomous governments left behind deeply felt grievances. The Iranian army had executed about 2,500 and killed close to 20,000 persons in Azerbaijan alone.¹⁵ These atrocities, as well as the legitimacy of the non-Persian-speaking populations' demands,

⁹ On the nationalist elite's capitulation to authoritarian nationalism, see Matin-asgari, *Both Eastern and Western*, ch. 3. See also Matin-asgari, "Intellectual Statesmen."

¹⁰ Quoted in Katouzian, "Riza Shah," 15–36, 28.

¹¹ Mohammadpour and Soleimani, "Can Non-Persians Speak?"; Massad, *Colonial Effects*.

¹² Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 270–73.

¹³ Marashi, "Paradigms," 18–19. Italics in the original.

¹⁴ On nation-state formation in relation to "internal colonialism," genocide, and "settler colonialism," see Mamdani, *Neither Settler*. For the Iranian case see Mohammadpour and Soleimani, "Can Non-Persians Speak?"; "Interrogating the Tribal"; and "Everydayness of Spectacle Violence." See also Soleimani, *Islam and Competing Nationalisms*; and Elling, *Minorities in Iran*. On al-Ahmad and coloniality and nationalism see Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Gharbzadegi, colonial capitalism"; and Sadegh-Boroujerdi and Yadgar, "Al-e Ahmad."

¹⁵ JAMI, *Gozashteh Cheragh*, vol. 2, 422, 429.

were mainly acknowledged by the Iranian left, which articulated the question of national oppression in classical Marxist-Leninist terms. For example, a contemporary Tudeh Party pamphlet argued:

Iran's British imperialist-dependent ruling classes created Persian chauvinism and contaminated the entire country with it. They declared Persian the official language of all nations living in Iran, depriving them of the most basic right to education in their native language and thus stifling their cultural development.¹⁶

Prior to the 1979 revolution, such views were an anathema to official nationalism, finding rare expression, for example, in the work of writer and former Tudeh Party member, Jalāl Āl-Ahmad, who argued that Iran was a multilingual nation.¹⁷ Focusing on Azeri oppression during the 1960s, he wrote:

At least six to seven of Iran's twenty-five million inhabitants are born and live in a Turkish language zone. But they do not have the right to use their mother tongue in the cultural and artistic realms or in print and other communication media or for social services. Instead, they are forced to use Persian, a language imposed on them from outside their native language zone. . . . We have deprived six to seven million people from the most basic of human rights, which is the freedom to use any language they want.¹⁸

Āl-Ahmad's proposed solution was the cultural and linguistic autonomy of non-Persian-speaking regions. According to him, the forced imposition of Persian was a "colonial" practice, amounting to cultural genocide:

I would say that from the birth of the nation concept in the constitutional era to the present, Tehran governments have considered Azerbaijan a colony, if not politically and economically, certainly in a cultural sense. The first detrimental result of this cultural colonialism is the killing of Turkish culture in Azerbaijan.¹⁹

Leftist parties and organizations, however, had little clarity or consensus on the application of Marxist-Leninist solutions to national oppression in Iran. The Organization of the Iranian People's Fadā'ī Guerrillas, for example, declared Iran a multinational country, despite the fact the organization's name referred to "the Iranian people" in the singular. In *Āzarbāijān va Mas'ale-ye Melli* (Azerbaijan and the national question), the Fadā'ī organization said: "Iran's nations and nationalities have formed a country within state borders imposed by a chauvinistic Persian bourgeoisie." At the same time, the pamphlet condemned "petty bourgeois nationalists" who sought separatist solutions to the national question in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan.²⁰

When the forcibly centralizing Pahlavi state collapsed during the 1978–79 revolution, national oppression suddenly became an urgent issue, because the country's peripheries, most notably Kurdistan, became virtually autonomous. Backed by an armed population, Kurdish political parties asked for autonomy within a federal Iran, a demand unacceptable to the fledgling Islamic Republic. In the ensuing civil war, small leftist organizations fought alongside Kurdish parties defending the region's autonomy, but most of the left had no coherent position, some effectively siding with the newly emerging repressive state.²¹

¹⁶ *Masaleh Melli*, 41. This pamphlet was published by the Tudeh Party after the 1940s Azerbaijan events and republished by supporters of the Fadā'ī guerrilla organization in the 1970s.

¹⁷ Āl-Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat*, 278, 280.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 304–5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 316–17.

²⁰ *Āzarbāijān va Mas'ale-ye Melli*, 5–7.

²¹ Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran*.

While fighting Iraq during the 1980s, the Islamic Republic eventually crushed Kurdistan's defiance as it wiped out dissent and opposition throughout Iran. But resistance to national oppression persisted, and its dormant fault lines periodically flared up when the opportunity arose. During the last four decades, Kurdish and Baluch regions have remained among Iran's lowest ranking provinces in per capita income, poverty rates, and life expectancy. At the same time, these regions attract the heaviest concentration of military and security personnel, as they are placed in a permanent "state of exception" due to their alleged danger of separatism and serving as bases for foreign enemies. A particularly egregious case of discriminatory state violence is the targeting of Kurdish *kolbers*, male and female laborers who carry heavy loads of goods on their backs across Iran-Iraq borders. Driven by poverty to perform the work of pack animals, Kurdish *kolbers* are routinely shot to death by the Islamic Republic's security forces, who consider them enemy agents, bandits, and smugglers. According to some estimates, between 2020 and 2021 around 170,000 Kurdish men and women made their living as *kolbers*, 370 of whom were killed or injured by the Iranian military.²²

To conclude, the brief historical trajectory sketched here illustrates how national oppression emerged as a constitutive feature of nation-state formation in Iran. During the 2022–23 uprising, this was recognized in a declaration issued by labor and civic groups and organizations inside the country, and endorsed in petitions of support signed by over a hundred civic and labor organizations.²³ Although nationalist political factions, and some within the scholarly community, resist its recognition, the fact that national oppression is now a topic of contention between the Islamic Republic and its opposition is among the principal accomplishments of the 2022–23 uprising.

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²² Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings," 420–21.

²³ "Manshur-e motalebat,"

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