

Foundations of a Fars-centric state: Orientalist discourse and imperial agenda

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Abstract: The presented study examines the ideological foundations of Iranian statehood and its Persian-centered identity politics in recent centuries. After the decline of the Qajar dynasty, the Pahlavi dynasty, which came to power in 1925 with the support of imperialist forces, rewrote Iranian history and placed Persian culture at the center of state-building. As a result of the policies implemented by the Pahlavis, the language and culture of non-Persian peoples such as Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and Baluchis were marginalized. This study shows that claims about Iran's ancient statehood traditions serve more political-ideological purposes. Consequently, modern Iranian statehood is not a product of natural historical development, but a model formed under the influence of colonial projects. This, in turn, created an ideological basis for assimilation policies that limited the rights of non-Persian peoples.

Keywords: Iran, Persianization policy, Oriental narratives, imperial agenda

Introduction

Iran's history over the past century has been dominated by two political regimes with different ideological orientations – the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic. (Mozaffari 2014, 181) Despite the serious ideological differences between these different regimes, both political structures have continued a Persian-centric identity policy in the process of national identity and state building. This approach has presented the Persian language and culture as the mainstay of the state, while relegating Iran's multi-ethnic realities to the background.

Taking advantage of the weakening of the Qajar dynasty in 1925, Reza Khan, supported by the British Empire, came to power and tried to establish an ideological link with ancient Iran by introducing

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himself with the surname Pahlavi. (Baykara 1978, 205) In the 1930s, he appealed to the international community to officially recognize the name of the country as “Iran” rather than “Persia”. This step was an important element of the policy of reviving the mythical name “Iran” and bringing the Persian ethnos to the fore. Thus, the history of Iran was officially rewritten during the Pahlavi era. In this process, the role of various states and cultures that had existed in the country for centuries was systematically reduced or attempted to be erased. (Madatli 2020, 84) At the same time, it is claimed that the Persians have 2,500 years of statehood traditions, and this narrative became one of the main pillars of the state ideology. As a result, the language and culture of other ethnic groups within Iran – particularly Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and Baluchis – were marginalized, and policies aimed at their assimilation were implemented.

One of the main political and ideological pillars of this process was the strategic activities of the British Empire in the region in the 19th and 20th centuries. During this period, Britain, through its Orientalist institutions, had a significant impact on the history and ethnic identity of Iran. Orientalist activities formed the theoretical and ideological foundations of Iran's ancient history, culture, and ethnic structures, paving the way for the development of Persian-centered historical narratives. Thus, Britain, taking advantage of the strategic position of the region, played a decisive role in transforming Iran into a centralized state based on the Persian ethnos. The reason why Britain showed such interest in Iran was largely due to its imperialist interests. (Safari 2014, 261)

Iran, with its important geopolitical position in the East and its rich natural resources, was of strategic importance to the British Empire. For this reason, the British Empire used various ideological and political mechanisms to achieve its imperialist goals by strengthening the policy of Persianization. The main ideological pillars of the Persianization policy aimed to create a common Persian identity by uniting various ethnic and cultural elements in the history of Iran and strengthening it with the hegemonic influence of the empire. This article will conduct a comparative analysis of these historical processes, examine the main ideological pillars of the Persianization policy and the leading role of Britain in this direction.

Methodology

The presented research paper reflects the rewriting of Iranian history based on Persian identity and the Persianization of Iranian statehood, the interests of the British Empire in this process, as well as the assimilation policy of non-Persian peoples who lived together in Iran for centuries. The research is conducted mainly on the basis of Azerbaijani, Turkish, English and Persian-language sources. In accordance with the purpose of the research, a broad and multidisciplinary methodological approach is applied. The historicist approach is identified as the main method in the research paper. This allows for an in-depth analysis of how and under what conditions state policy was formed and how events were understood in their historical context. As a result of the research conducted, the existing historical and political literature is analyzed, and the stages of formation and development of Persian-centered state policy are determined. The study uses the method of critical discourse analysis, which allows for a systematic investigation of the ideological foundations, the state's identity policy and the impact of this policy on non-Persian peoples. Thus, the research work is based on a multidisciplinary approach, examining the interrelationships of historical facts, political ideologies, and cultural processes.

Ancient statehood of Iran: Historical realities and Persian-centered approaches

With the ascension of Reza Shah to the Iranian throne in 1925, supported by imperialist forces, measures were taken to rewrite Iranian history based on the superiority of Persian culture. Within the framework of this plan of measures, a new 2500-year history of Iran was written. It was after this that attempts were made to forget and falsify the historical past of the peoples who had historically lived in Iran. In the history of Iran, which was rewritten at the request of the Pahlavis, it is claimed that the history of Persian statehood began with the Achaemenids.

There are many stone inscriptions (inscriptions) that have survived to the present day from the Achaemenid era. Any impartial scholar who studies the language of those inscriptions will understand that the ancient Persian ethnos is not the ancestor of the present Persians, but perhaps belongs to a branch of the Slavs. The structure, grammar and vocabulary of the ancient Persian language give reason to say this. Let us state with a simple example that in the present Persian language

there are 6 personal pronouns and no gender. However, in the Persian language of the Achaemenids there is a masculine, feminine and neuter gender. At the same time, this language contains many words belonging to the present Slavic languages. In fact, in one of the inscriptions written in the ancient Persian language, the Achaemenid ruler Darius wrote the word “this is mine” as “*eta mai*”. (Purpirar 1381, 48) From this it becomes clear that the structure of the language is almost identical to the structure of the Slavic languages. These facts prove that there is no connection between the ancient Persian language and the present Persian language. The ancient Persian (Arabized form is Farsi) language does not actually exist today. This language was the language of the Persian tribe that later migrated to the region, and since they were not native, they were unable to remain in the region as a people after the collapse of the Achaemenid state they founded. What they inherited from them was only the name *Persian*. This name became a toponym over time and is today the name of the Fars province in southern Iran.

Attempts to look for traces of the Persian ethnos in the Sassanids are also wide spread in Iran. In some cases, claims can also be made that the Sassanids were of half-Pahlavi, half-Turkic origin. If we do not take into account the Turkic factor in the Sassanid state, we can say that the rest of the population of this state consisted of Pahlavi. The Pahlavi language, the official language of the Sassanid state, was a separate language and was spread in approximately the central and southern parts of present-day Iran. This language also had no connection with the present-day Persian language. Thus, today an educated person who knows Persian cannot read and understand Pahlavi. Even the famous poets Saadi Shirazi and Hafiz Shirazi, who lived in the 13th-14th centuries, wrote poems in their native Pahlavi language, along with Persian, like other poets of the period. While today their works in Persian are fully read and understood, no Persian can read and understand their works in Pahlavi. This is due to the fact that the Pahlavi language has no connection with Persian and is a completely different language. (Rashidi 1386, 175-176)

In 651, the Sasanian Empire was conquered by the Arab Caliphate, thus ending the Sasanian rule in the region. After the Arab occupation of Iran, there was a stagnation in the state administration of the Persians for many years. This stagnation was further strengthened by the Turkic migrations. Turkic rule in Iran began with the conquest of Iran by the Oghuz Turks and the establishment of the Great Seljuk

state. (Bademci 2018, 21) Thus, from the conquest of Iran by the Oghuz-Seljuk Turks in the 11th century to 1925, there was almost no Persian rule in Iran. During this period, the lands of present-day Iran were ruled by the Eldaniz (Azerbaijani Atabeys), the Qara Qoyunlu, the Aq Qoyunlu, the Safavids, the Afshars, and the Qajars, respectively. The aforementioned dynasties were entirely of Turkic origin. (Jannatov 2024, 142) Even today, toponyms bearing the names of those dynasties are found in a number of areas where Turks live compactly in Azerbaijan, as well as in Iran. Nevertheless, they try to evaluate the history of the empire, especially starting with the Safavids, as a revival of Persian statehood in Iran. However, the Safavids, in accordance with their Turkic heritage, adopted the statehood heritage inherited from the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty. Famous Russian orientalists such as V.V. Bartold, M.S. Ivanov and I.I. Petrushevsky, who studied the peoples of the East, considered the Safavids to be of completely Turkic origin, considering the attributes of statehood, army building, and the language used in the palace. (Jannatov 2021, 11-12) The re-representation of Persians in state administration began with the Pahlavis taking the Iranian throne in 1925.

Thus, a comparative analysis of the history of statehood shows that the 2,500-year history of Iran is nothing more than a distortion of historical truths, and the rule of the Persians did not last long in this 2,500-year history, which is also mentioned. This study shows that the claim that Iranian statehood is based on ancient history is based on false narratives that serve political ideology rather than scientific facts. Although ancient states such as the Achaemenids and Sasanians are directly associated with Persian identity, linguistic and historical evidence reveals that these claims are far from scientific grounds. The policy of falsifying history was used to erase the multi-ethnic structure of Iran and form a single Persian-centered identity. Such approaches, in addition to being far from objective historical analysis, prevent us from understanding the ethnic and cultural diversity existing in the region. As a result, such approaches not only distort historical truths, but also create the basis for increasing contemporary political and cultural tensions.

Britain interest in the formation of modern Iranian statehood

Since the 19th century, Britain began to implement short-term and long-term strategic plans in order to implement its colonial policy in

the East. In the course of these plans, the foundation of Oriental studies and its important branch, Iranian studies, was laid in the West. In addition to universities in Cambridge, Oxford, etc., the College of Oriental Studies named Haileybury was established in the East India Company of England. The function of these Oriental studies centers was to train officials and personnel for the East for British colonialism. (Mirzabayova 2025, 369) Through these officials, a new history of Iran began to be written based on the Persian ethnos. British official John Malcolm (Sir John Malcolm) laid the foundation of Iranian studies by writing his work “History of Iran”. Apart from Sir John Malcolm, the vast majority of Iranian scholars were official civil servants of England or the British East India Company and carried out their research work in Iran based on their official positions. These officials sent by Britain were involved in Iran studies to write the history of Iran on a new basis. (Beygdelu 1380, 116) They were tasked by the British Foreign Office to write a new history of Iran based on the theory of Aryanism and to connect Iran with the ancient Persian ethnos. Eventually, this initiative did not stem from Britain’s admiration for Iran, but rather served its imperialist interests in the region.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the West, led by Britain, put forward the Aryan or Indo-European theory. Although this theory was first put forward in order for Britain to keep India as a permanent colony, it was later directed at Iran. (Musazadeh, 1384, 74) This theory basically states that there is a race called the Aryan race, and that race migrated to the territory of present-day Iran about 1000 years before Christ and founded the Achaemenid state 2500 years ago. Western missionaries and orientalist, as well as their local subordinates, simply kept the name of the state they had just founded as Iran by deleting the term “Mamalik-e Mahrusa” (which currently means united provinces). However, they resorted to fabrications to present the word “Iran” in the sense of the country of the Persians. They used the term “Aryan” that they made up in this matter. In fact, they have nothing to do with the term “Iran”. The word “Iran”, which is used alongside the term Turan, is also connected to the ancient Turkic epic “Alp Ertunga” as a mythical concept. (Safari 2014, 269) As Firdawsi himself wrote, the term Iran is used alongside the term Turan as a mythical term in his work “Shahnameh”.

Thus, the British gave the name *Persian* to the ethnos, which at that time constituted a small part of the population in the territory of present-day Iran and connected them to the 2500-year-old root “Pers”

and began to write a 2500-year history in the name of Iran. However, the rule of the Persians lasted very little in the mentioned 2500-year history. During the period from the conquest of Iran by the Seljuks to 1925, Iran was continuously under the rule of the Turkic dynasties. Most of the Turkic dynasties that established states in the territory of present-day Iran for centuries used the mythical Iran-Turan concept in order to create a defense ideology against a foreign enemy, or rather, another Turkic state that was their rival. That is, the name Iran, which previously had a mythical character, was only established as the name of the country during the period of the Turkic-Mongol Empire as a result of the conflict between the Ilkhani and Jaghatay uluses, the successors of Genghis Khan. (Ibn al-Ebri 1364, 160) However, as a result of this process that began during the Ilkhanid period, the name “Iran”, which was rarely used alongside the names of some of the Turkic dynasties, was used only to name the common lands they ruled and did not apply to present-day Iran. The mythical and historical name Iran originally belonged to the Tajiks and its borders, as mentioned in the “Shahnameh”, encompassed part of present-day northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan. (Mohammadi 2011) In other words, there was no serious connection between the territory of ancient Iran and present-day Iran. This can be seen from the maps of ancient and medieval authors, including the map given by Mahmud al-Kashgari in his work “Divan Lughat-al-Turk” / “Compendium of the languages of the Turks” (Kashgharli 1985, 531)

Figure 1. M.Kashgharli, *Dîvânu Luġâti't-Türk*, çeviren Besim Atalay, Ankara, Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 1985



As it turns out, Britain carried out a coup in Iran in 1925 through missionaries and laid the foundation of the Persian state in Iran for its own long-term goals. The formation of the Iranian statehood, which the last generation of representatives of Persian chauvinism proudly talk about, is actually based on the colonial goals of Britain. Although the facts of the preparation of the historical basis of the Iranian statehood by Britain and the implementation of the coup were kept secret for a long time, they themselves were forced to admit it at certain points. Even the BBC radio commented on the overthrow of Reza Shah from the Iranian throne and his replacement with his son, Mohammadreza Shah, as follows: “We brought Reza Shah to the throne and we expelled him from Iran” (Amiratai 1361, 72). When we look at the history before 1925, it is possible to see that Iranian history is not ancient at all. The history of Iran, which was rewritten on fabricated grounds, served not only to Persianize the Iranian statehood, but also to destroy other cultures and languages existing in the geography of Iran today. It can be said that most non-Persian peoples living in Iran, especially Azerbaijanis, have suffered serious harm from this policy.

Conclusion

Therefore, the history of Iran over the past century shows that, although political regimes with different ideological foundations have dominated this country, the Persian-centered single identity policy in the field of national identity and state building has remained unchanged. Both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic have presented the Persian language and culture as the only criterion of the state and nation, ignoring the multi-ethnic and multicultural realities of the country. The strategic intervention and ideological engineering of the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries played a decisive role in the formation and implementation of this policy.

The British influence in Iran was not limited to political support and military interventions, but also involved a systematic identity engineering by artificially highlighting the role of the Persian ethnos in history through Orientalist institutions and Iranian studies. As a result of this engineering, the role of the Turkic and other non-Persian dynasties that ruled Iran in ancient and medieval times was either reduced or completely erased. The newly written Persian-centered history created an ideological basis for internal assimilation policies

and legitimized a state model that served the interests of the West in the region.

This study shows that the current concept of modern Iranian statehood — a “centralized state based on a single Persian identity” — is not the result of natural historical development, but a political-ideological project of the colonial era. Therefore, the continuation of this model means the legitimization of a systematic mechanism of oppression directed not only against history, but also against the cultural and political rights of non-Persian peoples living in Iran. Thus, a critique of these historical mistakes and recognition of ethno-cultural diversity are necessary for Iran to have a more just, multilateral, and inclusive state structure in the future.

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