

Islam and Nationalism in Iran: From Confrontation to Interaction*

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Abstract

Religion, nationality, and nationalism are perennial issues in human societies, with positive and negative outcomes. The ancient roots of religion and nationality in Iran, one of the world's oldest countries, facilitated the introduction of nationalist ideas in the 19th century. Today, the intertwining of religion, nationality, and nationalism in Iran has transformed it into a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. This article aims to elucidate the nature of Iranian nationalism and its relationship with religion in contemporary Iran, emphasizing the current context and reviewing its historical trajectory. The primary objective is to explain the components and relationship between religion and nationalism in modern Iran. A theoretical discussion on "religion" and "nationalism" is presented, followed by exploring their concepts, elements, and components. Subsequently, the relationship between religion and nationalism in today's Iran is examined across a spectrum structured into three main currents and nine sub-currents, ranging from the most interactive to the most confrontational. The main currents include the confrontation of Islam with nationalism, the interaction between Islam and nationalism, and the confrontation of nationalism with Islam. The article further delineates the different periods and phases of the relationship between religion and nationalism in the political and social arenas of Iranian society over the last century, which has been explained through five periods and six quasi-models. A key finding discussed towards the end is that although Iranian nationalism emerged under the influence of global nationalism, it significantly differs from Western and Arab examples in its causes, nature, effects, and outcomes, making it a unique phenomenon.

Keywords: Islam, Iran, nationalism, nationality, archaism

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Introduction

“Religion” and “nationality” can be considered two of the most potent motivators in societies, to the extent that thousands are willing to sacrifice their lives for them. Religion is complex and fraught with numerous disputes, even within a single faith, where individuals and groups may hold different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Nationalism is a contentious socio-political phenomenon intertwined with political power and groups seeking it. The entanglement of religion and nationalism complicates matters further. Iran is among the few countries where both religion and nationality have millennia-old histories. In the past two centuries, as nationalism entered Iran’s political and social sphere, Islam and nationalism have experienced ups and downs, playing significant roles that continue today. Alongside these, Iranian culture also has its unique complexities and nuances. The issue is to understand the nature of Iranian nationalism and its relationship with Islam in contemporary Iran. This involves examining how Iranian nationalism, with its similarities and differences from commonly understood “nationalism,” has impacted and been influenced in its interaction with Islam. The article’s central question is: what are the components of Islam and nationalism in contemporary Iran, and how do they relate? To answer this question, a conceptual discussion of Islam and nationalism is initially provided, outlining their elements and components. The subsequent section of the article defines the relationship between Islam and nationalism in modern Iran across a spectrum through three main currents and nine sub-currents. The final part of the article, with a practical approach, addresses the relationship between Islam and nationalism in the political and social spheres of Iranian society over the last century, illustrating the historical stages and developments leading up to the present day.

1. Conceptual Analysis of “Religion”

Religion stands as one of humanity’s oldest concepts. If we consider, as some Muslim thinkers believe, the human quest for God as an innate impulse, the origins of religiosity nearly align with the emergence of human societies. However, religion gained concrete form with the emergence of divine prophets, introducing “belief” and “rituals” into human life. Belief is an internal aspect, not observable or measurable, whereas rituals are the external manifestations of these beliefs, to some extent observable and quantifiable. Several widely accepted principles about religion can be articulated as follows:

Principle 1: God has tasked only prophets with a divine mission.

Principle 2: The mission and duty of divine religions include calling people to worship God, ethics, respecting others’ rights, abstaining from oppression and in-

justice, truthfulness, righteousness, advocating human virtues and goodness, and avoiding vices.

Principle 3: Prophets pursued no personal or group benefits from religion; their sole concern was to save people from ignorance, superstition, idolatry, and to call them to monotheism.

Principle 4: The teachings, beliefs, and goals of religions and prophets logically cannot contradict each other since all originate from the same source, despite differences due to social, cultural, and geographical conditions. Diversity is a positive attribute.

Principle 5: Religion is from God for all humanity; no one owns it, all humans are equal before it, and all are equally addressed by religion. Even prophets and bringers of religion stated they were merely humans like others.¹

Principle 6: Prophets did not appoint anyone after themselves to be responsible for preserving God's religion, stating instead that the religion belongs to God, Who will maintain it.²

Given these principles—an ideal or conceptual—definition of Islam can be provided as follows: Islam consists of a set of revelatory teachings that prohibit humans from injustice, violence, idolatry, lying, infringing on other's rights, and other immoral acts while inviting them to worship God, truthfulness, righteousness, justice and fairness, aiding others, and other human virtues, aiming for human well-being in this world and the hereafter.

Islam, the last divine religion, was revealed about fourteen hundred years ago, with other divine religions tracing back several millennia. Naturally, over the centuries, many people have associated themselves with religion or engaged in interpreting it, with interpretations being correct or incorrect. Consequently:

1. Some individuals and believers saw themselves as having a prophet-like mission, whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or secretly, to dedicate themselves to guiding people, contrary to the first principle. Currently, no prophet is present to explain their intended message.
2. Others used religion to justify their interests or needs through rules made for a better understanding of religion, like expediency, choosing the lesser of two evils, establishing religious symbols, etc., sometimes introducing new regulations and interpretations that, to impartial observers, seemed to justify unethical behavior, injustice, violence, and infringement of rights,³ contradicting the second principle.
3. Some explained and interpreted religion, calling themselves promoters and propagators. Their interpretations, whether intended or unintended, consciously or unconsciously, often aligned with the interests of certain individuals or groups, against the third principle.

4. Because of these interpretations and the association of various individuals and groups with religion, not only did religions conflict with each other, but within a single religion, divisions into sects and denominations occurred, each considering themselves right and others wrong, and many deemed it permissible to shed the blood of others, leading to violence and destruction, contrary to the fourth principle.⁴
5. Some believers interested in religion or interpreting it according to their understanding unconsciously considered themselves guardians, responsible, and sometimes owners of the religion, against the fifth principle. Many acts of violence in the name of religion throughout history were perpetrated or ordered by people in this category.
6. Some individuals, including those engaged in interpreting, explaining, and promoting religion, saw themselves as tasked and obliged to preserve God's religion, contradicting the sixth principle.

Given the compromised state of the six principles above regarding religion and Islam, it is essential to provide a definition of Islam that aligns with existing realities. Below is my integrative or objective definition of Islam in today's world:

Islam consists of a collection of revelatory teachings interpreted by various and sometimes conflicting interpreters who understand and interpret these teachings according to their personal and intellectual frameworks, influenced by their contemporary conditions. Each group, based on their interpretation and justification, discourages humans from injustice, violence, superstition, lying, and other immoral acts, inviting them to observe or perform religious rituals and ceremonies, worship God, truthfulness, righteousness, justice and fairness, helping others, and other Islamic virtues, with each group considering only itself as the right Islam.

This definition, while general, can be specified further for each religion and its sects. It is based on this definition of religion that today we witness the conflict between religions and, more precisely, "the clash of Islams in the Middle East." Every individual, group, and country presents a set of beliefs and revelatory teachings, specifically the Quran and Sunnah, along with behaviors mixed with politics and current issues, and label it as Islam, obligating everyone to follow it while deeming anything else as outside of Islam, to be rejected and even destroyed. This includes groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, extremist Salafism, the Taliban, etc. The issue of nationalism is not exempt from this rule. When discussing the relationship between Islam and nationalism, we refer to the everyday Islam of people and its custodians, which often strays from the five well-accepted principles of religion. Islam is a universal human religion that does not recognize race, language, skin color, nationality, geographical borders, and similar aspects as religious matters;⁵ thus, "nationality" and "nationalism" are not concerns of Islam but are considered customary affairs that do not inherently relate to Islam, as long as they do not oppose religious teachings; and theoretically, religion does not contradict them. Whether Islam can function

within the realm of nationalism, become one of its components, or be exploited by some is similar to the role and use of religion in other social and political arenas, based on our integrative definition of religion.

2. Conceptual Analysis of “Nationalism”

2.1. Conceptual Network of Nationality and Nationalism

Nationalism is encompassed by a network of concepts that also vary within themselves, warranting collective recognition as part of a coherent system. These concepts are essential but not sufficient foundations for nationalism. Here is a brief explanation of this conceptual network:

Homeland: Humans are inherently connected to their homeland, with this attachment being a fundamental aspect of their recognition, introduction, and identity. The significance of the homeland is such that it ranks just below parenthood and filiation. Patriotism, or love for one’s homeland, is sometimes leniently interpreted as nationalism. It is unlikely that anyone would worship their homeland as a deity; the term probably conveys a deep affection for one’s country. A homeland’s physical and geographical aspects are more pronounced than its conceptual dimensions, and fundamentally, every conceptual and meaningful aspect can be discussed and presented in relation to the country’s physical geography.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity is tied to blood and race, with a strong sense of kinship. Its intrinsic and meaningful dimensions are more substantial than its physical aspects. Different ethnic groups can coexist within a single homeland, and while they may be enemies, they can share a love for a common homeland.

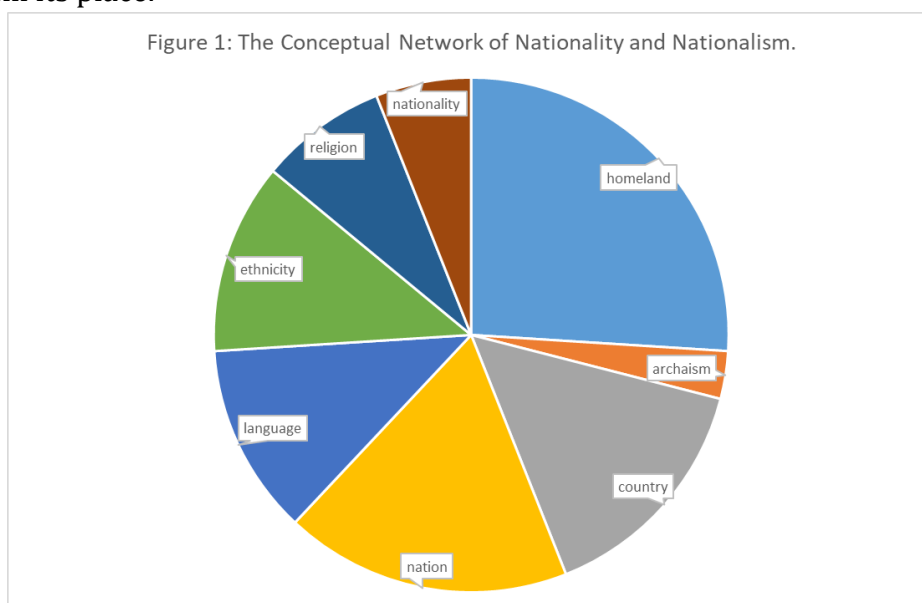
Country: A country can be defined as a specific geographical territory under the governance of a government. Iran, for example, has been a country from the era of the Medes to the present, despite changes in its territorial boundaries. Modern borders and related regulations are relatively new phenomena from the Treaty of Westphalia. Flags gain meaning in conjunction with countries.

Nation: Nation and nationality are relatively new concepts and phenomena. In Islamic texts and the works of Muslim philosophers, “nation” and “community” have distinct meanings.⁶ In its modern sense, a nation includes a group of people living under the sovereignty of a state with a shared collective identity in a specific territory, often with at least one official language. The presence of multiple ethnicities, languages, and customs does not contradict the notion of a nation or nationality.

Nationality: Nationality represents an individual’s membership in a nation and country, which can be primary (based on one’s initial citizenship at birth), secondary (additional citizenships acquired later), and mixed (for individuals with parents of different nationalities, leading to dual citizenship from birth).

Language: A unified language is one of the most crucial components of nationalism. With thousands of years of history, the Persian language is powerful in Iran. The *Shāhnāme* by Ferdowsi is one of the most significant sources of a common language within the cultural realm of Iran. Alongside the national language, various ethnic groups can maintain their unique languages without harming nationalism, national unity, or linguistic unity.

Religion: A shared religion and sect are other components of nationalism in Iran. Before Islam, Zoroastrianism was the prevalent religion among the people of Iran, and after that, Islam became the dominant religion, with religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians also present in Iran. This religious and belief diversity does not undermine Iranian nationalism, as these religions have coexisted peacefully for over a thousand years, identifying themselves as Iranian. In cases where the people's religion is not uniform, other components of nationality can fill its place.



Archaism: Typically, archaism is not among the components of nationalism worldwide, but in Iran, nationalism is intertwined with archaism. They are two distinct but related currents. This paper divides archaism into “ideological archaism”⁷ and “civil archaism.” Civil archaism is the inclination of any nation toward its past glories, myths, and proud symbols, considered decent and commonly possessed by Iranians from ancient times, and it is now part of their national identity. However, ideological archaism or archaism is a 19th-century European phenomenon. The ideological archaism movement in Iran seeks its intellectual and philosophical foundations in ancient Iran and organizes itself around teachings such as Aryanism, the Persian language, Iranian myths, Iranian traditions, customs, ethnicity, and ideological nationalism. This movement, influenced by the intellectual foundations of the Enlightenment and subsequent centuries in Europe (Cottam 1992, 7, 65),

does not reconcile with the teachings of Islam (Zia-Ebrahimi 2014, 190; Mirsalim 2005, 628) to the extent that it sometimes portrays Islam as an enemy of freedom and an authoritarian religion (Said 1992, 277).

Within the conceptual network of nationalism, four concepts are part of the essential components of nationalism, and four are the constituents of nationalism. The vital components of nationalism include homeland, country, nation, and nationality. The constituents of nationalism include language, religion, ethnicity, and archaism.

3. Definition and Types of Nationalism

Nationalism has had various aspects and fluctuations over the past centuries, initially in Europe (see Hobsbawm 2021; Russell 2015) and then in the Arab world (see Darvishpour 1994; Enayat 1979; Tibi 1981), which is not the subject of our discussion. The paper divides nationalism into two types and provides the following definitions for each:

Ideological Nationalism: Ideological nationalism, known as “nationalism,” has been a solid socio-political movement in Europe and the Arab world and, to a lesser extent, in Iran. Essentially, when discussing nationalism, this type of nationalism is meant, spanning a spectrum with varying degrees of ideological aspects but, in any case, emphasizes the elements and components of nationalism. Nationalism as an ideology represents “strong” nationalism, aiming to implement certain beliefs, decisions, and actions at any cost, with other ethical, human, religious, etc., standards being evaluated and, in a way, subordinate to it. This type of nationalism does not hesitate to commit unethical acts, including violence, bloodshed, and displacement of other humans considered “the other,” and some genocide may have been carried out within this framework. Researchers generally agree that ideological nationalism was introduced to Iran from Europe in the late 19th century (Kian and Reikes 2009, 190; Qeysari 2004, 31; Adamiyat 1970, 114; Ahmadi 2009, 144; Malekzadeh 2009, 78). It is incompatible with the profound and authentic Iranian culture and the divine, human, and supra-ethnic perspective of Islam. To conclude this discussion, if we were to define Iranian ideological nationalism, it would be as follows: Ideological nationalism is an intellectual, political, social, and cultural movement that relies on concepts such as Iranian nationality, Aryan race, Persian language, Iranian culture, and the civilization of ancient Iran, seeking to create national unity and cohesion to achieve revival and development and return to the ancient Iranian thoughts and values.

This movement considers Islam and Arabs as the cause of Iran’s backwardness and problems, viewing the return to ancient Iranian thoughts, values, and greatness as the sole solution to these problems and the path to progress.

Civil Nationalism: Nationalism as an inclination and affection of any nation towards its glorious and honorable past, scientific achievements, civilization, and myths, is a common and descent phenomenon. This type of nationalism, which we have named “civil nationalism,” can be considered “mild” nationalism that does not conflict with or contradict other religions and beliefs and does not need to disregard ethical or human values. This type of nationalism is identity-forming and unifying, capable of motivating social cohesion and mobilizing the people of a country towards mutual assistance or progress and development without the negative consequences of ideological nationalism. Nationalism as an inclination exists with varying degrees of intensity among almost all Iranians. Iranians have been familiar with nation, nationality, and national glories from ancient times (Ahmadi 2003, 12-31; Adamiyat 1970, 114; Ahmadi 2009, 86, 144). However, it may be acceptable to agree with Baqer Momeni that over the centuries, religion and sect have been the most essential elements of identity and cohesion among Iranians (Momeni 1993, 89). The emergence of civil nationalism in Iran can be attributed to “ideological nationalism” and its moderated and rationalized form, as “ideological nationalism” or nationalism, in general, created a sense of awareness regarding nationality and nationalism. To conclude this discussion, if we were to define Iranian civil nationalism, it would be as follows:

Civil nationalism consists of a set of thoughts, attitudes, and widespread national sympathies towards Iranian nationality, Persian language and literature, Iranian-Islamic culture, civilization, and the glories of ancient Iran, considering all these as sources for national unity and cohesion, devotion for the homeland, and growth and progress of the country.

4. The Relationship between Islam and Nationalism in Iran

The ideological nationalism, as it emerged in Europe and even the Arab world, leading to significant socio-political consequences, never manifested in Iran to the same extent and remained largely theoretical. Worldwide, organized nationalism often led to extremism, insult, and belittlement of others, deprivation of social rights, and sometimes violence. However, such actions did not occur in Iran due to nationalism. There are several reasons why Iranian ideological nationalism could not emerge in practical arenas. In practice, Iranian nationalism has been limited to celebrating the country’s luminaries, highlighting the significance and grandeur of Iranian culture and civilization, constructing memorials for a few Iranian scholars and luminaries, and publishing their works, including the rare organization of celebrations like the 2500-year festivities. This represents the minimum effort a nation could make towards its illustrious past, indicating that nationalism in Iran has predominantly been of the civil variety. However, even in this domain, there have been significant shortcomings, including many Iranian scholars and their works

remaining relatively unknown, historical sites deteriorating or being lost over the last century and recent decades, and valuable ancient Iranian traditions fading.

Researchers have offered various classifications of nationalism in Iran. Without delving into these, the paper presents a classification based on the relationship between Islam and nationalism. In contemporary Iran, the relationship between Islam and nationalism, both ideological and civil, spans a spectrum with three main currents and nine sub-currents. The three currents are as follows: the first opposes Islam to nationalism, the second sees an interaction between Islam and nationalism, and the third opposes nationalism to Islam. The classification and all definitions are ideal types and might blend in practice. Let's explore each.

4.1. Islamism vs. Nationalism

This current includes some religious factions, including clergy and their followers, who reject Iranian nationalism, do not honor the glories of ancient Iran, and show little favor or outright disdain for ancient Iranian customs such as Nowrūz, Sīzdah Bedar, Chāhārshanbe Sūrī, Yaldā Night, etc., preferring instead Islamic teachings, rituals, and holidays. Within this current, three sub-currents exist on a spectrum, with the most extreme being anti-nationalism, followed by milder forms:

Anti-Nationalist Islamism: This sub-current focuses on “destroying nationalism in favor of religion,” rejecting and denouncing the glories and myths of ancient Iran as exaggerated or worthless, aiming to direct people’s attention towards Islam. **Islamism Opposing Nationalism:** This sub-current minimizes and sidelines the glories, works, and myths of ancient Iran, advocating for “reducing nationalism in favor of religion” without outright rejection or destruction. **Non-Nationalist Islamism:** This sub-current seeks to “strengthen religion over Iranian nationalism,” pushing nationalism into the background without diminishing or trivializing ancient Iranian glories and works.

4.2. Interaction between Islamism and Nationalism

This interaction is arguably the most robust and widespread current or discourse in Iran, incomparable to the other two currents. It regards nationalism as an inclination, sees no contradiction between nationalism and Islam, reconciles any potential conflicts within popular custom, and does not push toward discord. The blend of national customs and religious occasions exemplifies this, where society, adjusting to individual and group preferences, subtly and unconsciously manages these within the private life sphere. If we consider the interaction of nationalism and Islamism roughly as a current, it could be divided into three sub-currents:

Convergence of Islam and Nationalism: This sub-current promotes mutual reinforcement, using each to support and strengthen the other. It views Islam as a continuation of Zoroastrianism and the Islamic-Iranian civilization as an extension of

ancient Iranian civilization. This sub-current draws on numerous scholarly works to demonstrate that in ancient Iran, thoughts, politics, philosophy, mysticism, beliefs and convictions, customs, and similar aspects, though varying from minor to significant, continued to exist after the advent of Islam and were present in Islamic Iran. They were in harmony with Islam. In this view, ancient Iranian customs and traditions either align with Islam or do not contradict it.

Coexistence of Islam and Nationalism: This sub-current believes in the coexistence of Islam and nationalism, deeming both desirable in their own right, as they do not contradict or conflict with each other, allowing each to fulfill its unique role and function. Some thinkers within this sub-current believe that many political-social theories and ideas from ancient Iran are applicable and practical today, addressing some theoretical societal needs without conflicting with Islam.

Divergence of Islam and Nationalism: Proponents of this sub-current believe that Islamism and nationalism each have their unique spaces, requirements, and beliefs and should be left to their own devices to serve their purposes. They avoid positioning Islam and nationalism against each other or merging them, suggesting that Islamic laws can be applied in Iranian society while, if possible or necessary, ancient Iranian theories, ideas, and models could be utilized, albeit maintaining a distinction between the two.

4.3. Nationalism vs. Islamism

The current opposing nationalism to Islam can be identified as “ideological nationalism.” This current views Islam and the Arabic language as conflicting with Iranian nationalism, national glories, and the greatness of ancient Iranian civilization, even blaming them for the destruction of this civilization and its heritage and ancient Iranian customs. The current opposing nationalism to Islam, which is primarily secular, non-Islamic, and sometimes anti-Islamic, spans a spectrum with three sub-currents as follows:

Non-Islamist Nationalism: This sub-current focuses on strengthening nationalism against Islam so that Islam naturally recedes from the Iranian nationalist process without openly opposing Islamic teachings and symbols. **Nationalism Opposing Islamism:** Besides strengthening nationalism in contrast to Islam, this sub-current aims to diminish the importance of Islam in favor of nationalism, attempting to present nationalism as more important and superior, subtly sidelining Islamic symbols, rituals, and teachings in favor of nationalism. **Anti-Islamist Nationalism:** This sub-current goes as far as to antagonize and undermine Islam in favor of nationalism, portraying Islam as a factor in Iran’s decline and backwardness. It emphasizes the value and relevance of ancient Iranian thoughts, glories, myths, and traditions as having sufficient contemporary utility. If possible, this sub-current would eliminate Islamic symbols and rituals from Iranian society.

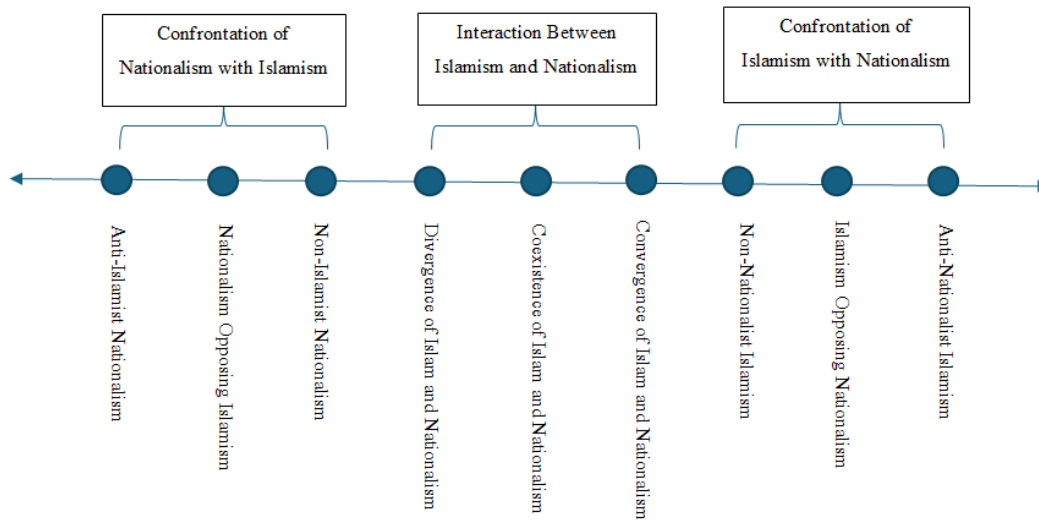


Figure 2: Spectrum of the Relationship between Islam and Nationalism in Iran, Comprising Three Currents and Nine Subcurrents.

5. The Evolution of Religion and Nationalism in Iran: Periods and Patterns

In practice, religion and nationalism in Iran have significantly fluctuated over the past two hundred years. Generally, the formation and practical course of this movement can be divided into five periods and roughly into six models, as follows:

5.1. Qajar Era: Formation and Beginning of the Movement

From the mid-Qajar period, the intellectual and social foundations of the theoretical ideological nationalism movement began with the works of Mīrzā Fath‘alī ‘Ākhūndzādeh and then Jalāl al-Dīn Mīrzā Qājār (see Jalāl al-Dīn Mīrzā Qājār 1976) and Mīrzā ‘Āqā Khān Kermānī. Intellectuals of this era, playing a significant role in framing the ideology of nationalism, became symbols of the nationalist movement and the modern middle class, adopting the Western model of progress (Kian and Reikes 2009, 190). Mīrzā Fath‘alī ‘Ākhūndzādeh (1812-1878) is the most prominent nationalist thinker of this era and, indeed, throughout this movement’s history. ‘Ākhūndzādeh is recognized as the first to employ the elements of Iranian nationalism in his thought and works in the new political sense, to some extent theorizing it (Ghadimi Qidari 2012, 80). Iranian nationalism, from its inception, was intertwined with the Western notion of progress, modernity, and ancient Iranian archaism, reflecting the inclinations and backgrounds of its pioneers (Entekhabi 1995). During this period, nationalism did not conflict with religion, including Islam and other religious minorities in Iran, emphasizing the need for progress and the restoration of Iran’s honor and greatness. However, these thinkers opposed

what they considered superstitions infiltrating Islam and among the masses, deeming them causes of backwardness.

5.2. Mashrūṭiyat Era: Strengthening of Nationalism

During the Mashrūṭiyat period, religious inclinations were prominent as the main components of Iranian identity. Nonetheless, nationalism, both secular and Islamic, was strengthened by the activities and nationalist tendencies of the proponents of Mashrūṭiyat, becoming a fundamental pillar of the Mashrūṭiyat and continuing as a powerful political current after this revolution (Malekzadeh 2009: 78; Alizadeh and Tarafdari 2010, 166). The Mashrūṭiyat Movement saw the practical introduction of nationalist thought and concepts into Iran's political and cultural arenas, with many leaders and fighters of the revolution emphasizing nationalism, modernization, and patriotism in their speeches, writings, and actions (Tarafdari 2011, 222). Applying these concepts and political attention to nationalist components motivated the movement's pioneers to develop their views further. The establishment of the Mashrūṭiyat system and the realization of certain nationalist elements played a significant role in the development of nationalist historiography, introducing ancient Iranian periods as the basis for the national identity of Iranians, providing intellectuals and political figures with an opportunity to expand their archaic views on Iranian history within this new structure (Alizadeh and Tarafdari 2010, 166-167), also presenting the Mashrūṭiyat movement as a "national" and "patriotic" revolution and writing historical events with a nationalist perspective (Tarafdari 2011, 222) and introducing ancient Iran as the proper foundation of Iranians' authentic identity (Alizadeh and Tarafdari 2010, 168). The nationalism of the Mashrūṭiyat era can be seen as a blend of secularism, modernism, Western nationalism, and the ancient past of Iran and Iranians (Kazemi 1997, 120-125). Islam also varied in presence among different social strata, from minimal to significant. Non-religious intellectual factions preferred secular nationalism, while religious factions and some clerics considered nationalism blended with Islam, allowing these two thoughts to coexist on a spectrum without conflict or contradiction.

5.3. First Pahlavī Era: Establishment of Non-Religious Nationalism

The Pahlavī era can be recognized as a phase where non-religious nationalism was consolidated to the extent that it became the official discourse of the monarchy (Katozian 2009, 432; Soleymani and Azarmi 2017, 207). Many believe that one of the reasons for the Pahlavī monarchy, particularly Reza Shah's, focus on nationalism was to gain political legitimacy (Soleymani and Azarmi 2017, 211). Reza Shah's government embraced a form of historiography that was both nationalistic and secular-archaic, promoting secular nationalist beliefs and principles alongside modernization (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, 4). It seems that another reason for Reza

Shah's nationalism was the socio-political conditions of the time, characterized by fragmentation of power, the rule of autonomous and unregulated local lords, tribal systems, claims of independence and autonomy in various parts of Iran, and similar issues. Against such socio-political chaos, the only robust measure that could ensure national unity and the territorial integrity of Iran and put the opponents of independence—and potentially, secession—in their place was the reinforcement of Iranian nationalism, which proved to be highly effective and successful.

5.4. Second Pahlavī Era: Civil Nationalism

The trend of nationalism continued during the Second Pahlavī era, especially after 1953, reaching its zenith with the organization of the 2500-year celebration in Shiraz, which portrayed the Pahlavī monarchy as the continuation of ancient Iranian culture and civilization.⁸ In this period, historiography centered on nationalism and archaism persisted, with the difference that Islamic culture and civilization elements were not overlooked but integrated with Iranian civilization. During this era, Iranian nationalism provided an overarching umbrella for all religions, ethnicities, and sects in Iran, especially Islam, striving to establish coexistence between nationalism and Islam.

Another point mentioned by Zia-Ebrahimi is that the Second Pahlavī sought to establish a resemblance between “us” Iranians and “them” Westerners, considering Iranian civilization as part of the ancient Indo-European family, which also included Western civilization (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, 212). This strategy could also resolve the contradiction of the nationalist movement's inclination towards the West. Iranian nationalists had inclinations towards Iranian identity and anti-colonialism on the one hand, and on the other hand, they were intellectually inclined towards Western culture and civilization (Modir Shanechi 1993, 6). Richard Cottam also notes that Iranian nationalists were profoundly influenced by Western culture, while the essence of nationalism flourishes and emphasizes national culture. They attempted to remain nationalists using imported thought, culture, politics, and even Western governments and systems, which led to cultural, political, and economic dependency on the West, aiming with the help of the West to elevate and develop their country (Cottam 1992, 7, 65).

5.5. Official Discourse of the Islamic Republic: Coexistence of Islam and Nationalism

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic government, Iranian nationalism took on an Islamic hue, shedding its secular aspects and distancing from archaism. The outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war and its eight-year duration not only strengthened Iranian nationalism but also further integrated it into Islamic beliefs, giving Islamic nationalism a unified identity to the extent that the Iranian and Islamic

identities of the Iranian people were inseparable and even clear boundaries could not be drawn for them.

Although opposition to foreigners has long been a primary component of nationalist movements, before the Islamic Revolution, “Arabs and Islam” were considered “the other” and “foreign elements,” while Europe and the West were viewed with respect and admiration. Gradually, this perspective changed with the emergence of figures like Ali Shariati, Mehdi Bazargan, and Imam Khomeini, who adopted an anti-Western, anti-imperialist, and Islamic approach. The Iranian Islamic Revolution was the result of a broad coalition of pro-Islam forces and nationalists, with Imam Khomeini and many of his followers, like Martyr Motahhari, emphasizing the Islamic-Iranian identity in their positions and actions, attempting to present indigenous values and bases as popular nationalism instead of the Western-oriented foundations of secular and archaic movements (Motyl 2004, 1006).

Mohammad Bagher Khorramshad believes that prominent examples of Islamic nationalism were displayed during the struggles of revolutionary forces in the Shah’s era and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic system, especially during the years of the Iraq-Iran war. With the emergence of predominantly religious nationalist discourses and movements—including the National-Religious movement and the Nationalism of the Islamic Republic—the secular, liberal, and leftist nationalist currents lost their public base and were largely marginalized (Khorramshad et al. 2018, 35). The extreme views of the secular nationalist current, including opposition to Islam, extreme Persian nationalism, and racism based on Aryanism, which led to the disparagement of some Iranian ethnic groups like Arabs, also contributed to the marginalization of this movement. The influence of these extreme ideas was such that the Pan-Iranist sub-current, essentially a continuation of the secular nationalist movement in the years following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, adopted relatively more moderate positions towards Islam and a more inclusive approach towards Iranian ethnic groups. Overall, in the decades following the Islamic Revolution, the presence of the extreme secular nationalist current in Iran’s intellectual and political space has diminished, although it has not been eliminated.

5.6. Rival Currents to the Official Discourse: The Clash of Islam and Nationalism

Alongside the Islamic Republic of Iran’s official discourse on nationalism, there are currently two rival sub-currents that fuel the clash between Islam and nationalism, which are “Islamism against nationalism” and “nationalism against Islam.”

The Islamism against nationalism sub-current, primarily rooted among some clergy and their followers, considers Islam as the principle and axis, opposing nationalism and Iranian symbols such as Nowrūz, Sīzdah Bedar, Chāhārshanbe Sūrī,

Yaldā Night, etc., as well as the glories and myths of ancient Iran. This current is not widely popular but remains active within the Islamic Republic system.

Anti-Islamist Nationalism: This sub-current, considered “ideological nationalism,” has historical roots dating back to the Qājār era and has been active at times, though not widely popular. It negates Islamism, branding Islam and Arabs as factors in Iran’s backwardness. However, in recent years, it has become more active and intensified in reaction to the anti-nationalist Islamist sub-current and the political opposition to the Islamic Republic regime. For example, during the 2009 unrest, slogans like “Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic” and “My generation is Aryan, religion is separate from politics” were used to promote their version of nationalism (Abdolmohammadi 2015, 15). Thousands also gathered in Pasargad on 7th Aban 1395 (the anniversary of Cyrus the Great’s birthday) to celebrate this day, during which they chanted slogans against the Islamic Republic and in support of the Pahlavī dynasty (Shahidsaless 2016). Although this current is not widely favored, it remains active.

6. The Iranian Nationalism Model

Iranian nationalism, regardless of its influences and civilization, has a unique model characterized by “civil nationalism” aimed at “salvation from the current situation” at any given time. As a result, it lacks some of the main functions or consequences of nationalism seen in Europe or the Arab world. People and intellectuals, disappointed by the dictatorship and tyranny of kings and governors since the early Qājār era, became acquainted with modernity and Western societies, albeit not very accurately. Initially, their concern was merely to escape oppression and achieve a vague notion of justice, but this knowledge presented them with a practical and humane model centered on law, order, peace, and rationality. They grasped at any straw to escape their dire situation, clinging to religion, nationality, and the brilliant records of their ancient civilization to find a way out. From that period onwards, religion and nationalism became anchors and references to rescue Iranian society from the abyss of backwardness and decline, aiming for progress and legality, with each thinker clinging to one or both, depending on their expertise, perspective, and concerns. Hence, Iranian nationalism was formed out of necessity and emergency, not for “prestige,” “luxury,” “boasting,” “superiority,” or “othering.”

The most significant reason indicating that Iranian nationalism arose out of the need for salvation from the current state and was not a form of nationalism in the Western or Arab style is the lack of nationalist reaction to the damage to Iran’s national sovereignty and the loss of Iranian territories in the contemporary period. Agreements such as the Treaty of Gulistān in 1813, Turkmanchāy in 1828, Erzurum in 1847, Paris in 1856, Ākhāl in 1881, the separation of Iranian border cities with Russia in 1893, the delimitation of Iranian borders by the Englishman

McMahon in 1905, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg in 1907, and the detachment of lands in the southern Persian Gulf as per the regional agreement with British advisors, including the separation of Bahrain in 1970, resulted in approximately 3,613,011 square kilometers of Iran's best lands, rich in mines and natural and water resources, being separated from Iran. Logically, the primary and most crucial concern of Iranian nationalism should have been the reclamation of these regions to Iran. Whether this goal was practically achievable is another discussion, but at the very least, theoretically and in the outline of goals and strategies, reinstating Iran's tarnished national sovereignty should have been on their agenda. However, the nationalist current did not pay attention to this most critical national issue because it was focused on rescuing the country from much worse conditions and the tyranny of "absolute" rulers.

The most prominent manifestation of Iranian nationalism was the "Pan-Iranist" movement and party led by Mohsen Pezeshkpour and his companions, including Mohammad Reza Ameli Tehrani, Houshang Tale, Seyed Reza Kermani, Fazlollah Sadr, Esmaeil Faryar, etc. This movement, which emerged in the early Second Pahlavī era, considered itself a "political, social, ideological, and cultural nationalist movement" (Pan-Iranist Party Education Committee 2017, 3). It might be said that the secular and archaic nationalist movement in Iran, representing an extreme form of "Persian ethnocentrism," crystallized into Iranian nationalism in the form of "Pan-Iranism" (Boroujerdi 2005: 267). The Pan-Iranists introduced their party as a "nationalist party," considering their doctrine the "essence of Iranian nationalism" (Pan-Iranist Party Education Committee 2017, 2). Even this movement was not a solid nationalist current that could establish a robust and widespread Iranian nationalism in the country. Their opposition to the separation of Bahrain in parliament is commendable, but in practice, they made no progress, proving their lack of impact.

Conclusion

In this article, eight concepts are identified as the network of nationalism concepts, which also serve as the elements and components of nationalism. Historically, nationalism in Iran has primarily been characterized by patriotism and social solidarity. When nationalism as an "ideology" was introduced to Iran in the 19th century, the historical existence of nationalism's components and elements within Iran's socio-political culture provided a fertile ground for Iranians to lean towards nationalism, making the concept of nationalism emerge sooner in Iran than in other Eastern societies. As Fereydoun Adamiyat correctly states:

The concept of a unified political and geographical entity of Iran, the notion of the Aryan race, racial pride and even the pride of racial superiority, a common language, religion, and traditions, a distinctive Iranian intellectual view, and most

importantly, historical consciousness and the concept of unified sovereignty, all had tangible existence in the ancient Iranian culture. (Adamiyat 1970, 113-114)

However, all these favorable conditions only managed to give rise to “ideological nationalism” in a limited and primarily theoretical form towards the end of the Qājār era and the Reza Shah period. In contrast, “civil nationalism,” a kind of awareness of the glories and civilization of ancient Iran, became widespread. As much as Iran’s history, culture, and civilization contain the necessary and sufficient elements for “nationalism as an ideology,” they are even more so imbued with attitudes, values, beliefs, teachings, and a specific cultural and social structure that prevents the formation of “ideological nationalism,” thus hindering ideological nationalism from becoming widespread and impactful in practice.

Pezhman Abdolmohammadi, in a report prepared for the LSE’s Middle East Centre, writes that visits to pre-Islamic historical sites like Persepolis and Pasargad and the tomb of Ferdowsī have increased. The use of Persian words like “*Dorūd*” [“hello”] and “*Sepās*” [“thank you”] instead of “*Salām*” and “*motshakkeram*” [rooted in the Arabic language] is also on the rise, indicating a trend towards secular nationalist thought (Abdolmohammadi 2015, 12). The interest of some youths in Iran’s pre-Islamic history and the Zoroastrian religion, as well as the inclination towards Persian names⁹ and symbols such as Cyrus the Great, Ferdowsī, Kāveh the Blacksmith, Ārash the Archer, Rostam, Siāvash, Bābak Khorramdīn, Aryo Barzan seen on some websites and blogs,¹⁰ is assessed in the same context. However, he acknowledges that the promotion and return to these symbols are pursued more for political purposes and in opposition to the Islamic Republic system (Abdolmohammadi 2015, 9); it should be added that this is also due to Iranians’ love for their history and civilization, and not necessarily indicative of a shift towards ideological secular nationalism among the youth and people. Although some of these activities are carried out by followers of the secular nationalist movement both within and outside the country to revive secular nationalist thought, it is not widespread among society, political and social activists, intellectuals, and scholars.

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Notes

1. "Say, 'I am only a human being like you ...'" (Quran, 18:110). This paper draws references to the Quran from Nasr (2015). For brevity and clarity, citations only include chapter and verse numbers, such as 18:110, without repeatedly specifying Nasr (2015) alongside each reference. This approach ensures conciseness while maintaining the integrity and clarity of Quranic citations throughout the document.
2. "Truly it is We Who have sent down the Reminder, and surely We are its Preserver" (Quran, 15:9).
3. Among the notable events in the early Islamic era, the Umayyad dynasty's actions stand out, particularly for their numerous crimes. These include the attack on the Ka'ba, the Ḥarraḥ incident in Medina, and the killing of Imam Hussein (PBUH) and his companions in Karbalā. References to these events include Muḥammad bin 'Ali ibn Ṭabāṭabā'ī Ibn Ṭaqṭaqī in *Fakhrī History*, translated by Mohammad Vahid Golpayegani, published by the Bongah Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab, Tehran, in 1981, on pages 1555-157. Ibn Qutaybah Dīnwarī further details the event of Ḥarraḥ in *Imamat and Politics*, translated by Seyed Naser Tabatabai, published by Qoqnus Publishing, Tehran, in 2001, on pages 231-234, and by Rasoul Jafarian in *History of the Caliphs*, published by the Publishing Center of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Tehran, in 1995, on pages 503-506. Regarding the

event of *Āshūrā*, sources include *Muthīr al-Aḥzān* by Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far ibn Numā al-Ḥillī published by Imam Mahdī School, Qom, in the third edition of 1985, on page 77; *Luhuf* by Sayyid Ibn Ṭāwūs, published by Jahan Publications, Tehran, in the first edition of 1969, on page 132; and Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far ibn Mashhadī’s *Al-Mazār al-Kabīr*, edited by Javad Qayoumi Esfahani, published by Islamic Publications Office affiliated with the Society of Seminary Teachers, Qom, in 1999, on pages 503-505. Additionally, Seyed Jafar Shahidi’s *Analytical History of Islam: From the Beginning to the First Half of the Fourth Century*, published by Scientific and Cultural Publications, Tehran, in the ninth edition of 2017, and Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub’s *Dawn of Islam: The Story of the Beginning of Islam and Its Spread Until the End of the Umayyad Dynasty*, published by Amir Kabir, Tehran, in the twenty-fourth edition of 2021, provide comprehensive insights into these events. This consolidation of references highlights the critical examination of the Umayyad dynasty’s historical actions within Islamic historiography, illustrating their significant impact on early Islamic history.

4. The references and instances cited in the previous footnote also apply here.

5. “O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you. Truly God is Knowing, Awar” (Quran, 49:13).

6. In Quranic terminology, *Ummah* refers to the followers of prophets, while *Millah* signifies the laws and beliefs adhered to by the Ummah (Davari Ardakani, 2021, 69-70; Ajodani, 2007, 177-207).

7. In this article, I have frequently employed the concept of ideology. To understand the intended meaning of this term, refer to Ali Akbar Alikhani, *Layered Methodology in Thought Research*, 2022, 169-174, and the same author’s *Dormant Reason: Islamic Philosophy and Political Wisdom and the Transition to Practical Politics*, 2019, Table 243.

8. The question of whether the celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary at Persepolis constituted “ideological archaism,” implying a confrontation with and marginalization of Islam through zealous othering, or represented “civic archaism,” aimed at reviving Iran’s dignity and greatness in convergence with Islam and bolstering “civic nationalism,” is open to debate and research. This topic is hoped to be thoroughly and substantively addressed in an independent study.

9. For instance, the website “*Nām-e Fārsī*” provides a list exclusively of Persian names (<http://www.namefarsi.com>).

10. Examples of websites and blogs that focus on the names of Iranian heroes and notables include “Pars Daily News” (www.parsdailynews.com), “Sepahe Javidan” (<http://sepahe-javidan.blogfa.com>), “Iran Zamin” (<http://dooroodiran.blogspot.co.uk>), “Kavehangaar” (www.kavehangaar.blogfa.com), “Parsiandej” (<http://parsiandej.ir/>), “Ostoreh” (<http://ostoreh.blogfa.com>), “Cyrus the Great” (<http://www.cyrusthegreat.net/id6.html>), and “Iran 7000 Saale” (<http://www.irane7000saale.com>).