

Unraveling History Myths and Nationalism: From Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic

The Fascinating Journey of Persia: Unveiling the Truth Behind History Myths and Nationalism

MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL ★ 475

ly formed *tayefehs* asserted themselves, ultimately with success, against 'Askari. Meanwhile, local incidents of violence — among them the stabbing of a popular village opposition leader and a vicious 'Askari-sponsored attack on a caravan of anti-shah demonstrators — led the previously hesitant villagers to commit to the pro-Khomeini opposition.

As Hegland notes, "Until the resistance movement made sense — when it became meaningful, relevant and imperative because of the violent incidents in 'Aliabad involving villagers — the majority of 'Aliabadis had felt no compulsion to act, [or] to participate in the revolutionary movement" (p. 145). Many ordinary 'Aliabadis used the phrase *az khwad gozashteh*, "outraged to the point of no longer caring about one's welfare" (p. 261) to explain their newfound sense of solidarity with the national struggle against the perceived injustices of Pahlavi rule.

Hegland's final chapter, written following visits to Iran in 2003 and 2008, recounts the changes that 'Aliabad has undergone in her absence. Over the past quarter of a century, the population of 'Aliabad has more than doubled and the one-time village is now a suburb of Shiraz. Thanks to real estate speculation, former sharecroppers and peasant farmers have become relatively affluent members of the middle class. With few incentives to farm, villagers have again relegated *tayefeh-kashi* to the past; its primary rationale, the regulation of communal affairs as they pertain to agriculture, no longer exists.

Other changes have taken place as well. Throughout Iran the nuclear family and companionate marriage have replaced the extended family and kinship ties of old. In place of the old confining hierarchical order, "Iranians have been working toward more egalitarian and negotiable relationships in all spheres of life" (p. 258). Hegland acknowledges the positive benefits of many recent changes, but her conclusion is circumspect: "For the short run, it is hard to know what direction Iran — and 'Aliabad — will move. For the long run, though, people will surely continue pushing toward a more participatory and less hierarchical political system" (p. 260).

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Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic, edited by Ali M. Ansari. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. 256 pages. \$96.

Reviewed by Rudi Matthee

This volume of essays fully lives up to the cliché according to which edited works tend to be thematically unfocused and qualitatively uneven. In his brief introduction, the editor tellingly makes no effort to infuse the work with direction and consistency. While most of the contributions fall within the broad category of "Perceptions of Iran," either by Iranians or by foreigners, they span a wide range in subject matter — from historiography in ancient Iran to reactions to the West in the Islamic Republic, from early-modern European travel to the Safavid realm to drama under the Pahlavis. Their quality and relevance, too, cover the spectrum, from the banal to the excellent-cum-informative.

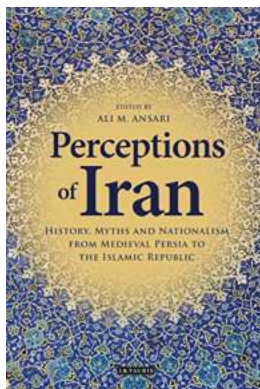
Excellent is the contribution of Ali Ansari, the editor, who takes issue with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's insistence that while history as progress originated with the Persians, it passed the latter by, depriving them of an "authentic identity." In a discussion filled with fascinating insight, he argues that throughout premodern Iranian history writing one finds elements of acute self-awareness and identity formation, much of it expressed as nostalgia by historians driven by a desire to "explain the loss of their civilization, and to protect and perhaps nurture its heritage for the future." Not historical amnesia — *la* Hegel, but a suffocating surfeit of myth-inspired historical awareness has been the hallmark of Iran's self-image. The narrative displacement that followed the confrontation of the Iranian tradition with the newly developed, more rigorous European methodology in the 19th century was cruel, Ansari observes, yet in the figure of Cyrus the Great modern Iranian historians managed to find an avatar of the emancipatory optimism inherent in modern, Western-influenced historiography.

Several essays address questions involving ancient Iran. A lack of expertise prevents this reviewer from commenting on the contributions by Lynette Mitchell

From the empires of ancient Persia to the birth of the Islamic Republic, the land we now know as Iran has witnessed a tumultuous history that has been marred by myths and colored by nationalism. This article aims to shed light on some of the most intriguing aspects of this land's past, debunking popular misconceptions and exploring the complexities of nationalism that have shaped Persian society over centuries.

Ancient Persia: Separating the Facts from Fiction

When we think of ancient Persia, images of opulent palaces and mighty emperors often come to mind. However, the truth behind the glory of this civilization is shrouded in myth and distortion. Contrary to popular belief, Persian society was not solely ruled by male emperors. In fact, women such as Queen Esther and Queen Parysatis played pivotal roles in shaping the history and culture of ancient Persia.



Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic (International Library of Iranian Studies Book 37) by Ali M. Ansari (Kindle Edition)

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Another persistent myth about ancient Persia is its alleged hostility towards Greeks. While conflicts between Persians and Greeks did occur, they were not as black and white as history books make them out to be. Greek influence, art, and philosophy were embraced and integrated into Persian society during the reign of Alexander the Great, creating a rich cultural tapestry that defied simplistic narratives of conflict.

Medieval Persia: Unraveling the Mosaic of Diversity

The medieval period in Persia witnessed a flourishing of knowledge, arts, and literature. Contrary to nationalist narratives that depict a homogenous Persian identity, this era was characterized by a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups and cultures. From the Arabian influence of the Islamic conquest to the Mongol invasion, each wave of external influence left its mark on Persian society, shaping the linguistic and cultural landscape we see today.

One fascinating aspect of medieval Persia is the role of the Persian Jewish community. Often overlooked, Persian Jews made significant contributions to art, science, and philosophy during this period. Figures like Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Judah Halevi, among others, were instrumental in advancing intellectual discourse and preserving the rich Jewish heritage within the Persian context.

The Twists and Turns of Modern Iran: Debunking Popular Misconceptions

The birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979 marked a turning point in Persian history, catapulting Iran into the global spotlight. However, the tumultuous events that unfolded during the revolution and subsequent regime change have been heavily distorted by nationalist narratives and media portrayals.

Contrary to popular belief, not all Iranians supported the revolution, and the diverse socio-political landscape of the country was overshadowed by a singular narrative of Islamic fundamentalism. Many Iranians, particularly women and religious minorities, faced hardships and restrictions under the new regime, leading to a significant wave of emigration in the following decades.

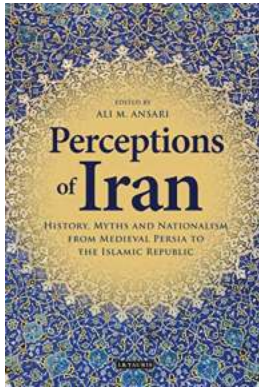
Nationalism in Iran: A Double-Edged Sword

Throughout its history, Persian society has been shaped by strong nationalist sentiments, both internally and in response to external threats. While nationalism can foster a sense of unity and pride, it can also lead to exclusionary practices and the erasure of minority voices.

One notable example of this is the issue of the Ahwazi Arabs, a marginalized ethnic group in Iran. Their struggle for recognition and autonomy within the Iranian state is often overlooked due to the dominant Persian nationalist narrative. Exploring these complexities is crucial in understanding the multifaceted nature of Iranian society and the challenges it faces in the 21st century.

As we delve into the history of Persia, it becomes evident that separating fact from fiction and dismantling nationalist narratives is essential for a comprehensive understanding of this fascinating land. By uncovering the truth behind history myths and nationalism, we can pave the way for a more nuanced and inclusive discourse on Iran's past and present, embracing the diversity and richness that define this extraordinary civilization.

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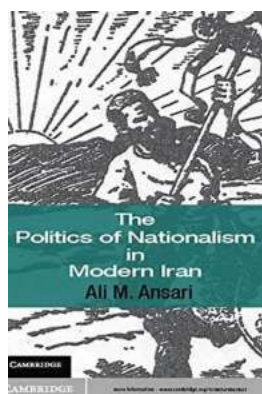
I.B.Tauris in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation

From the Sasanian to the Safavid Empire, and from Qajar Iran to the current Islamic Republic, the history of Iran is one which has been coloured by a rich tradition of myths and narratives and shaped by its wealth of philosophers, cultural theorists and political thinkers. Perceptions of Iran dissects the construction of Iranian identity, to reveal how nationalism has been continually re-formulated and how Iran's self-perception has been moulded by its literary past.

Here, Ali M. Ansari gathers together a varied and wide-ranging account of the long history of Iranian encounters with the Western world, whether via the observations of Herodotus, or the knowledge – via the Old Testament – of Cyrus liberating the Jews from Babylon, or into the modern era when nineteenth and twentieth century interactions reflect the unequal power relationship between Iran and the West. Perceptions of Iran also explores the salient elements in the country's narrative which helped to form Iran's identity,

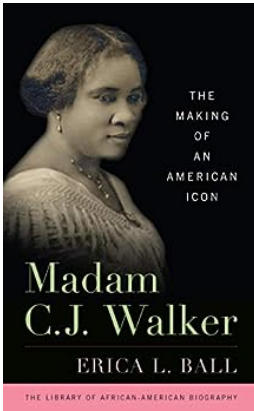
such as Ferdowsi's creation of the Shahnameh – the national epic – the exquisite architecture of Safavid Isfahan or the unfulfilled promise of the Constitutional Movement in the early twentieth century. It offers analysis of the Qajar Shahs' use of a mythical and dynastic past, as they drew on the narratives of Jamshid's glory and Khusraw's splendour in order to legitimise their rule. At the same time, it examines the ways in which foreign travellers and diplomats understood and conceived of the royal courts of Safavid Persia.

As it covers 2,500 years of political and intellectual history, *Perceptions of Iran* ties together the diverse threads of Iranian experience that have underpinned the country's social and cultural movements, spanning Mirza Agha Khan Kermani's writing on Persian history and liberal nationalism, through to the strident anti-Western discourses of Seyyed Jamal al-Afghani, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ayatollah Khomeini. The book is therefore vital for researchers of Iranian history and those interested in the use of myth in the construction of national identity more widely.



The Astonishing Facts about "The Politics Of Nationalism In Modern Iran Cambridge Middle East Studies 40"

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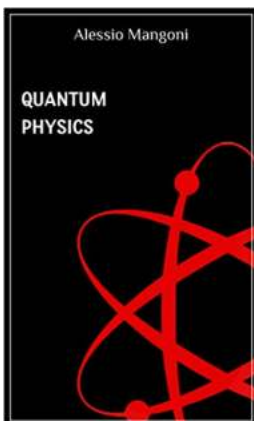
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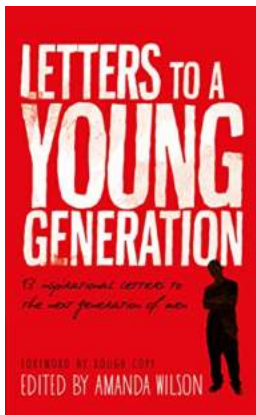
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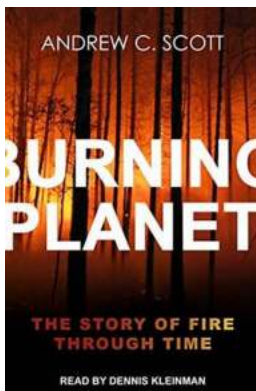
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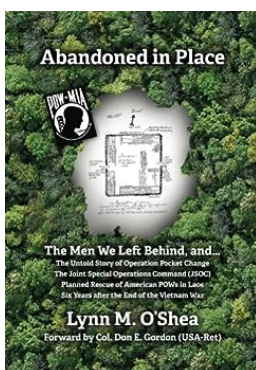
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