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*Reza Zia-Ebrahimi*

## **Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the “Aryan” Discourse in Iran**

*The claim to belong to the “Aryan race,” believed to be rooted in the ancient self-designation ariya, is a fundamental pillar of the Iranian nationalist discourse. This paper aims to show that in fact it is a twentieth-century import from Europe, where after being instrumentalized for colonial endeavors and Nazi atrocities, it has become almost completely discredited. Yet Iranians continue to nonchalantly refer to themselves as Aryans and the myth of the “land of Aryans” persists, even in academic circles. It will be argued that the reason for this resilience is the specific role Aryanism plays in Iranian identity politics, and the strategies designed to manage the trauma of the encounter with Europe.*

“From father to father...  
Of the Aryan race...”

*Āriyāyi nezhād* (of the Aryan race),  
Pop song by Shakila & Shahryar, 2009<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction and Methodology*

Hasan Taqizadeh (1878–1970) was undoubtedly one of Iran’s greatest modern intellectuals. He had an often-critical view of mainstream political discourses in his country. In the late 1940s, he lamented that the Iranian government “offers Iranian citizenship to foreigners, who reside in Iran for a few years,” while refusing the “right to become Iranian” to “Arabic loanwords that have lived in Iran for a thousand

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<sup>1</sup>This song’s video clip claims that the lyrics were written by the great tenth-century AD epic poet Ferdowsi. Needless to say, Ferdowsi never referred to “the Aryan race,” and this claim is grossly fallacious. The lyrics are taken from two poems by Mostafa Sarkhosh, “*peyk-e mebr* and *khāneh-ye mebr*,” in *Zabān-e Ashk [the Language of Tear]*, ed. Mostafa Sarkhosh (Tehran, 1343/1964).

years.”<sup>2</sup> Referring to the concurrent habit of importing wholesale vocabularies from French and other European languages into Persian, he inferred this seeming inconsistency to the “calamity” of considering “this Aryan, that Semitic and that other Altaic.”<sup>3</sup>

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—who had himself titled *ariyâmebr*, the “Light of Aryans,” a title without any previous incidence in Iranian history—declared in 1973 “Yes, we are Easterners, but we are Aryans. This Middle East, what is it? One can no longer find us there. But Asia, yes. We are an Asian Aryan power whose mentality and philosophy are close to those of the European states, above all France.”<sup>4</sup> In a private audience, he confided to then British ambassador Sir Anthony Parsons that as “Aryans,” Iranians were in fact members of the European family and that it was a mere “accident of geography” that Iran found itself in the Middle East rather than among its fellow European nations.<sup>5</sup>

In Iran, the so-called “racial” kinship of Iranians with their fellow Aryans of Europe still permeates parts of popular, cultural, political and historical discourses of identity. Ancient bas-reliefs and linguistic similarities are cited at length to prove the point, as if the racial claims of modern nationalists relied on a continuous and ancient tradition going back to the Achaemenids, or even the Avestan people before them. This paper aims to challenge the racial and perennialist assumptions of the Aryan discourse in Iran. In doing so, it will pursue a double objective: first, provide evidence that the Aryan discourse is a modern European import by reviewing both its European sources and its first appearances in Iranian texts. Second, demonstrate that it serves specific strategies in identity politics in Iran. I call these strategies “self-Orientalization” and “dislocation,” and I consider them to be discursive; indeed, nationalism discursively managed Iran’s traumatic encounter with Europe and its modernity by portraying Iranians as inherently progressive and destined for a high rank among nations and as such was a mere shortcut to modernity. The modernist movement, on the other hand, promoted a pragmatic program of reform and modernization, and was thus “programmatic” rather than merely discursive. This investigation will also highlight the influence of ideologies that we could today label as “fascist” on the Aryanist definition of Iranian identity.

It is surprising that despite its relevance to any rigorous assessment of modern identity or political and historical thought in Iran, the Aryan discourse has not yet come up for serious scrutiny. Such undertaking acquires particular urgency in view of the resilience of this discourse, and the lack of any critical assessment of either its scientific cogency or even its inglorious historical legacy. Since the discovery of Nazi Germany’s

<sup>2</sup>Hasan Taqizadeh, *Khatâbeh-ye Âqâ-ye Seyyed Hasan Taqizâdeh dar Mozu’è Akhz-e Tamaddon-e Khâreji va Âzâdi, Vatan, Mellat, Tasâbol* [Seyyed Hasan Taqizadeh’s Lectures on the Subject of Grasping Foreign Civilization, Freedom, Country, Nation, Tolerance] (Tehran, 1339/1960), 36.

<sup>3</sup>Taqizadeh, *Khatâbeh-ye*, 37.

<sup>4</sup>In *Kayhan International*, 19 September 1973, quoted in Mangol Bayat-Philipp, “A Phoenix Too Frequent: Historical Continuity in Modern Iranian Thought,” *Asian and African Studies*, 12 (1978): 211.

<sup>5</sup>Private discussion between Anthony Parsons and Homa Katouzian, 1987, conveyed to the author by Homa Katouzian, 18 August 2009.

death camps, the authority of the Aryan discourse in the West has at long last eroded, and the designation “Aryan race” has fallen into disuse except for a few publications of the most dubious scientific integrity, sometimes with evident racist and pro-Nazi leanings.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Iranians continue to nonchalantly refer to the *nezhād-e āriyāyi* and their alleged belonging to this family that would include Europeans. It figures prominently even in scholarly production.<sup>7</sup> The two anecdotes in the Introduction, although far—very far—from being exhaustive, give an idea of how deep the roots of what Léon Poliakov called *le mythe aryen* are in Iranian nationalist discourse, and the sheer variety of contexts in which it is to be found.

In this work, the terms “Aryan” and “Indo-European” will mostly be used interchangeably. “Indo-European,” “Aryan” and in some older sources “Japhethite” (in reference to a biblical parable tracing the origin of Europeans to Noah’s son Japheth) do usually refer to the same construct, although often seen through a different lens. At the beginning, “Aryan” gained the upper hand over “Indo-European” because it was “perceived as having sprung organically from the people, in contrast to the ‘geographical’ [term ‘Indo-European’ that was] seen as the [construct] of scholars.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, “Aryan” is both the more politically charged term and the most scientifically discredited, while “Indo-European” is used in linguistics. These semantic subtleties matter, as this article will advocate a rigorous differentiation between *ariya*—the self-designation used by ancient Iranians—and “Aryan,” the nineteenth-century racial category. Confusion between the two should be avoided: as we will see they are conceptually worlds apart. Similarly, in Persian, one can safely assert that modern *āriyāyi* is, in essence, a re-import into Persian of the European concept of “Aryan,” rather than a modernized version of the ancient appellation *ariya*.

### *The Aryan Dawn*

The Aryan myth<sup>9</sup> divides humankind into several races, and considers most Europeans, but also Iranians and Indians, as members of the Aryan race.<sup>10</sup> The Aryan myth spans a long period in European thought, from approximately the

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<sup>6</sup>Lincoln gives an overview of these publications. See Bruce Lincoln, “Rewriting the German War God: Georges Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the Late 1930s,” *History of Religions*, 37, no. 3 (1998): 188, footnote 4.

<sup>7</sup>The same situation is prevalent within Hindu nationalist circles in India, but is outside of the scope of this article. The interested reader can refer to two excellent publications: Gérard Fussman, “Entre Fantômes, Science et Politique: L’entrée des Aryas en Inde” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58, no. 4 (2003); and Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley, CA, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science* (Chicago, 2006), 21.

<sup>9</sup>There is some consensus on the mythological aspect of Aryanism. See these two seminal works: Léon Poliakov, *Le Mythe Aryen: Essai sur les Sources du Racisme et des Nationalismes* (Brussels, 1987); and Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*.

<sup>10</sup>Iran and India were by turns seen as either the idealized native soil of Aryans, or home to degenerate mixed-raced people. Gobineau for instance thought that the “Iranian nation” was composed of a Persian race under heavy Semitic and Turkish influence. See Arthur Comte de Gobineau, *Trois Ans en Asie; de 1855 à 1858* (Paris, 1923), 2: 20.

early nineteenth century to the aftermath of World War II, and therefore its conceptual framework and definitions evolved considerably. It was initially only a philological device used to explain similarities between European, Iranian and Indian languages. Yet, very rapidly, it acquired an anthropological and soon a political dimension. Aryanism's political charge, infused with romantic imagery, intensified over time, propagating claims that the Aryan race was bestowed with a special destiny, that of supremacy over what were now deemed to be the "others," the "inferior races." This glorification of the white man was a convenient justification for the imperial endeavors in which Europeans were engaged at the time. It is this racialist and politicized version of the Aryan myth, and its extension into Iranian thought, that will be the subject of this paper, although a detour through its more philological aspects is necessary to define the phenomenon.

The origin of the Aryan myth is usually associated with Sir William Jones' discovery in 1786 that Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian derived from common roots.<sup>11</sup> The term "Aryan" itself was coined by Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1806). The French Orientalist had lived in India from 1755 to 1761, and acquired some Persian, Sanskrit and other languages of the East, and published the first translation of the Avesta—the primary collection of Zoroastrian sacred texts—in any European language. In a talk he gave in 1763, he came up with the first occurrence of the term *aryen* (French for Aryan) in any European language.<sup>12</sup> Anquetil-Duperron effectively Europeanized *ariya*, a term he found in the Avesta, fusing it with *arioi*, the term Herodotus used for Medes (which also occurred in Latinized versions). His pioneering work was limited to the Avesta and its translation into French, and not at all with Jones' linguistic theories. It is however interesting to note that the term Aryan was, since the beginning, derived from the self-designation of ancient Iranians, a significant quasi-coincidence which we will discuss more below.

The key semantic evolution happened in 1819, when the young pioneering romantic author Friedrich Schlegel initiated further Europeanization of Aryan by suggesting that Vedic and Avestan *ariya* are related to Germanic *Ehre* (honor),<sup>13</sup> therefore related to "concepts of honor and noble deeds."<sup>14</sup> Schlegel altered Aryan from a translation of *ariya* into a modern racial category, which immediately captured the imagination of his contemporaries. From then on, the term Aryan, in this particular sense, became widespread in all of Europe. Before long, the Norwegian-German Indologist Christian

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<sup>11</sup>See Poliakov, *Mythe Aryen*; Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*. It must be stressed that many scholars had already taken notice of the similarities between European vernaculars and some Asian languages before Jones. See Konrad Koerner, "Observations on the Sources, Transmission, and Meaning of 'Indo-European' and Related Terms in the Development of Linguistics," in *Papers from the 3rd International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Amsterdam studies in the theory and history of linguistic science, IV: Current issues in linguistic theory*, 13 (Amsterdam, 1982), 154–55.

<sup>12</sup>The talk was published in 1768 in *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Vol. 31, partly quoted in Hans Siegert, "Zur Geschichte der Begriffe 'Arier' und 'arisch,'" *Wörter und Sachen*, 4 (1941–42): 86.

<sup>13</sup>Siegert, "Zur Geschichte der Begriffe 'Arier' und 'arisch,'" 88–89.

<sup>14</sup>Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, 21–22.

Lassen (1800–76) further influenced the use of the term with the now well-known "prominent position among the European branches assigned to the Germanic group."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the meaning of Aryan was constantly shifting and by the early 1940s it even came to approximately mean non-Jewish and German.<sup>16</sup> Consensus on its actual meaning was lacking from the onset, so much so that in 1941 Hans Siegert advocated its abandonment.<sup>17</sup> There was always a degree of confusion between its modern racial use and ancient Vedic Indian or Avestic forms, creating one of history's less-researched—albeit most impactful—malapropisms. Other variants appeared following Jones' and Schlegel's works. In 1813, Thomas Young coined the term "Indo-European" and in 1823 Julius von Klaproth created a German variant: "*indo-germanisch*."<sup>18</sup> The advantage of "Aryan" was its concision, and the fact that it was the modern form of a term that had been an actual ethnonym. It was also more appealing to romantic fervor, "Indo-European" being somewhat too cold and scientific.

Prominent figures of nineteenth-century philology and Orientalism are associated with the evolution of Aryanism in Europe, the most important being arguably Max Friedrich Müller (1823–1900), although it must be stressed that his work was linguistic and that he was mindful of keeping his distance from the racial interpretations of his theories: "To me an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar."<sup>19</sup> Many French (suffice it to think of Ernest Renan and Arthur de Gobineau), but also British and even American thinkers espoused Aryanist views and contributed to the field, but it was in the emerging romantic and counter-Enlightenment atmosphere of the German *intelligentsia* that Aryanism found a particularly fertile breeding ground. It may have been so because Germans did not live in a unified state and therefore myths of genealogy and genesis had more appeal for them, although such explanation remains hypothetical at best and better left to specialists.

The force of the Aryan myth, and the reason partly explaining its extraordinary longevity in the face of scientific and discursive evolution, comes from its formulation in empirical terms. Most prophets of Aryanism upheld their views with such scientific assurance that little room was left for discussion. Consider this quotation from George Rawlinson, who happened to write extensively on Iran:

Ethnological science, we see, regards it as morally certain, as proved beyond all reasonable doubt, that the chief races of modern Europe, the Celts, the Germans, the Graeco-Italians and the Slavs, had a common origin with the principal race of Western Asia, the Indo-Persian.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Koerner, "Observations on the Sources and Meaning of 'Indo-European,'" 170.

<sup>16</sup>Siegert, "Zur Geschichte der Begriffe 'Arier' und 'arisch,'" 73.

<sup>17</sup>In Siegert, "Zur Geschichte der Begriffe 'Arier' und 'arisch.'" 75.

<sup>18</sup>See Siegert, "Zur Geschichte der Begriffe 'Arier' und 'arisch,'" 75–79. On the different uses of these terms see Koerner, "Observations on the Sources and Meaning of 'Indo-European.'" 170.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Koerner, "Observations on the Sources and Meaning of 'Indo-European,'" 170–71.

<sup>20</sup>George Rawlinson, *The Origin of Nations* (New York, 1881), 176.

Rawlinson holds this finding to be the outcome of advances in “modern inductive science, a result which it is one of the proudest boasts of the nineteenth century to have arrived at.”<sup>21</sup>

Although wrapped in the language of science, the fundamentals of the Aryan myth were conspicuously romantic in nature. The combination of these distinct frames of thought—scientism and romanticism—brought about three consequences with immediate bearing on the direction of the Aryan myth. First, the linguistic affinity between European languages was immediately interpreted as racial kinship, race being conceptualized in a romantic fashion. Nothing is more disputable as there are numerous examples of human groups speaking the language of other groups. There are of course the obvious cases of formerly colonized lands having adopted the language of the colonizer in today’s Africa for instance, but history is replete with similar instances. The Bantu Expansion, a millennium-long migration of Bantu-speaking people, generalized the use of Bantu languages in Africa, even within groups with radically different linguistic heritages. Han Chinese too came to be spoken by non-Han people after a long process of cultural expansion. For many authors, this confusion of language and race was the Original Sin of the Aryan myth.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, it was predominantly a genealogical endeavor. Aryanist authors’ obsession with the quest of common genesis is well illustrated by their continuous attempts to localize the original home of Aryans. They assumed that there had been some primordial proto-Aryan (or proto-Indo-European) tribe, from whom all subsequent descendants had sprung. Finding the proto-Aryan original home (or *Urheimat*), describing the cultural and “racial” features of the original Aryans, or coining their lost language became one of their main preoccupations. Using loosely connected clues and anecdotal facts, Aryanists offered audacious (if not outright fanciful) hypotheses on the proto-Aryan original home. Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–99) for instance, an “amateur linguist and ethnologist,” visited Ladakh and impressed by the natives’ physical features and clear eyes, became convinced that he had discovered the “cradle of the Aryan race.”<sup>23</sup> Since then, numerous European women—mostly German—have traveled to this area to be seeded by the local pure Aryans. This episode and its many other manifestations reveal how extensively Aryanist scholarship relied on anecdotal facts to advance its theoretical premise, and how cavalier most Aryanists were with empiricism.

India, or more generally Asia, the Caucasus, the Danube or the Scandinavian Peninsula, were all at one time considered by some of these thinkers to be the cradle of Aryans. Iran too played its role in the Aryanist geography of origins as “Anquetil-Duperron, Jones, and Herder all suggested, on some occasion, Iran (Persia) as the original home of the Indo-Europeans.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that no evidence, ruin, tool, inscription, piece of art or any other artifact left behind by the so-called proto-Aryans has ever

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<sup>21</sup>Rawlinson, *The Origin of Nations*.

<sup>22</sup>Poliakov, *Mythe Aryen*, 217.

<sup>23</sup>Kai Friese, “The Aryan Handshake,” *Transition*, no. 83 (2000): 8.

<sup>24</sup>Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, 52.

been found did not prevent this quest carrying on unabated until fairly recently. Moreover, there is no trace of either a primordial tribe or their migrations in any Indian, Iranian or European epic or oral tradition.<sup>25</sup> So strong was the appeal of genealogical pursuits that even the extreme fragmentation of opinions on the question of origins did not bring these men of science to the conclusion that there were serious empirical flaws in Aryanist assumptions.

Thirdly, the self-aggrandizement entrenched in romantic Aryanism and also the attempt of authors to use its racialist lens as a means to explain history, naturally brought about an obsession with racial purity. Racial miscegenation came to be seen as aberrant. Some like the Comte Arthur de Gobineau saw race as an "engine of history," and inferred the decline of master races to miscegenation.<sup>26</sup> Racial anthropologists measured skulls and classified physical features into racial categories, attached timeless psychological characteristics to them, and also identified cases of mixing. One race would be sensitive, creative and innovative (the Aryan), another would be decadent, inert, lazy and submissive (most others). This excessive racial consciousness elevated the opposition between Aryan and Semite to the rank of founding principle of human history and hence draped the pervasive anti-Semitism of those days in the language of science. Ultimately, Nazi ideology brought the Aryan myth to its paroxysm. Obsession with racial purity reached such intensity that the road was paved for the next stage: extermination.

In the contemporary western world, Aryanism is essentially relegated to history books or associated with Nazism. Racial anthropology is a discredited pseudoscience that, supplanted by social anthropology, genetic evolutionism or biological history, is neither taught nor studied anywhere in the world in the way it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The concept of human "race," although still used in political discourses, especially in the United States, is also receding. Genotypic or phenotypic variations are used to study hereditary and morphological differences between human groups or individuals, but they are not instrumentalized to demonstrate unchanging behavioral patterns or the superiority of a given group over others. Moreover, these variations are so gradual that they "render any attempt to establish lines of division among biological populations both arbitrary and subjective."<sup>27</sup> Leading anthropological associations discourage the use of the term "race."<sup>28</sup> In the scientific community, there is today a consensus on its socially constructed nature.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, 295.

<sup>26</sup>See Arthur Comte de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines* (Paris, 1853). See also Poliakov, *Mythe Aryen*, 245–88.

<sup>27</sup>"American Anthropological Association Statement on 'Race', May 17, 1998," <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>.

<sup>28</sup>See "American Anthropological Association Statement on 'Race', May 17, 1998".

<sup>29</sup>Michael Banton's works are key in this regard. See Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race* (London, 1977); and idem, *Racial and Ethnic Competition*, Comparative ethnic and race relations series (Cambridge, 1983).



Linguistically, the view of an Indo-European family of languages is widely held, although anything more than that is subject to fierce controversy. There is a consensus on the existence of the Indo-European family of languages descended from a common prehistoric language or group of dialects spoken by one people whose descendants migrated and, due to military prowess, often conquered peoples in Europe and in West and South Asia, thus spreading linguistic features. Modern linguists do not believe that language has any relation to race or to cultural superiority. Minority views, called cultural invention of languages, accidental convergence, or borrowing, are also proliferating and challenge long-held beliefs in the common origin of Indo-European languages and their respective speakers, although these theories are highly controversial. The linguist Merritt Ruhlen, for instance, dismisses the very concept of Indo-European distinction by arguing that “the notion that Indo-European is unrelated to any other [language] family is little more than a linguistic myth.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, other linguists claim that differences between Indo-European languages on the one hand and “Semitic” or “Turkic” ones on the other have been overstated. A prominent and controversial linguist, Joseph Greenberg, proposed the concept of “Eurasianic languages,” a family regrouping all languages of northern Eurasia under one higher-order family, which includes Indo-European languages but also, for instance, Japanese.<sup>31</sup>

It is not the purpose of this paper to instigate a technical discussion on linguistics and ethnology, but simply to highlight that Aryanism is held in disgrace and the reason behind the similarities between Indo-European languages is still being debated, although the idea of common origin—without racial connotations—is still a majority view. Kai Friese has perhaps proposed the best alternative to the *Urheimat*: “Streams don’t come from a spring, they come from confluences.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Iran and the Aryan Flattery*

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Aryanist discourse came to permeate the entire *corpus* of Orientalist writing on Iran and India. Confrontations between races alleged to be irreconcilably different had become a common means to decipher history’s riddles in the vein of Gobineau’s work. Iran and India were highly charged subjects for Aryanism, and often depicted as one of the most eventful stages of the struggle between races. Consider this passage from George Rawlinson’s influential *Origin of Nations* (1887):

While the Aryan civilizations ... were developing ... in the extreme west of the Asiatic continent, ... Asia Minor, the more central portion of the Continent—the Mesopotamian Plain, the great Iranic Plateau, and the Peninsula of Hindustan—was the scene of a struggle, not always peaceful, between three other types of human progress

<sup>30</sup>Merritt Ruhlen, *On the Origin of Languages: Studies in Linguistic Taxonomy* (Stanford, CA, 1994), 9.

<sup>31</sup>Joseph Greenberg, *Indo-European and its Closest Relatives: The Eurasianic Language Family*, 2 vols (Stanford, CA, 2000 and 2002).

<sup>32</sup>Friese, “Aryan Handshake,” 29.

and advancement. Two of these were ... Aryan, while one, the Assyrian, was of an entirely different character.<sup>33</sup>

The migrations and wars of Eastern antiquity were recast as racial struggles, and the people of the region were assumed to have been racially conscious and exclusively concerned with "race mastery" over others, this in spite of the absence of any trace of such thinking in historical sources. This view of history continued into the twentieth century, for instance in the influential works of Percy Sykes (1867–1945) and in particular his *History of Persia* (1915):

The Semites had held sway in the Babylonian and Assyrian empires until they were succeeded by the Aryans of Media and Persia. They in their turn for five centuries were dominated by a Turanian race until, in the third century A.D., the Aryans reasserted their supremacy.<sup>34</sup>

These quotations could be multiplied *ad eternam*. But what matters here is that gradually, the Aryan discourse started a new career among the western-educated native *intelligentsias* of Iran, India and elsewhere. In India, European Aryanists and native collaborators constructed "the Aryan model of Indian history as a narrative of heroic invasions, migrations, and settlement of an Aryan stock ... that not only founded kingdoms and empires but also developed a great philosophy and literature."<sup>35</sup> The promotion of Aryanism from a philological concept to a political discourse was even swifter than in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Upper-caste Hindus used their alleged Aryanness to claim parity with Europeans (while denying it to lower-caste Indians) and Aryan racial theories contributed to strong anti-Muslim sentiments within Hindu revivalist ranks.

The Aryan myth provided an appealing model of history for nationalist ideologues in other parts of the world as well. In Turkey, one such ideologue was Moïse Cohen, later renamed Munis Tekin Alp (1863–1961), ironically a Jew from Salonika who seemed little bothered by the anti-Semitic inclinations of Aryanism. He asserted that Turks belonged to "the great Indo-European family." His allegations—unlike those of his fellow nationalists in Iran or India—did not rely on any previous claim of European Aryanists and entirely proceeded from his own fertile imagination. He praised the Turkish physical type, "his pink and blond complexion, his blue, gray, or azure eyes, his long and slim waistline, and his remarkable beauty."<sup>37</sup> He went on to add that "the Turks are pure Aryans and the word Aryan itself is of Turkish

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<sup>33</sup>Rawlinson, *The Origin of Nations*, 86–87.

<sup>34</sup>Percy M. Sykes, *A History of Persia*, 3rd ed. (London, 1951), 1: 501.

<sup>35</sup>Vasant Kaiwar, "The Aryan Model of History and the Oriental Renaissance: The Politics of Identity in an Age of Revolutions, Colonialism and Nationalism," in *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*, ed. Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar (Durham, NC and London, 2003), 24.

<sup>36</sup>This fundamental text of Indian nationalism provides a good illustration: Surendranath Banerjea, "The Study of Indian History," in *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, ed. Elie Kedourie (London, 1970), 225–44. For a detailed study of the topic see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

<sup>37</sup>Tekin Alp, "The Restoration of Turkish History," in *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, ed. Elie Kedourie (New York, 1970), 214.

origin. The word ‘ari’ in fact means in the Turkish dialect (‘Tchagatai’), pure, clean, and it is a word much used in the new Turkish language.”<sup>38</sup> He further contended that Turks brought agriculture to Europe and founded nothing less than the Sumerian, “Greco-Latin” and Chinese civilizations! By all means, Tekin Alp’s thought was an aberration within already murky waters, and shows how delusional Aryanist self-aggrandizement could become, even beyond its original cradle.

Before discussing Aryanism in Iran, it is crucial to first stress that in the entire *corpus* of Iranian literature there is no trace of the today ubiquitous Aryan race (*nezhād-e āriyāyi*), until the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> There are ancient occurrences of *ariya* in the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods, there is the Greek (and later Latin) *arioi*, and Hamza al-Isfahani used *ariya* as an alternative to Iran in the tenth century AD. But as we will see *ariya* had a more restrictive nature and was never attached to anything even remotely resembling “race.”<sup>40</sup> This leaves little doubt about the modernity of the concept on the one hand, and its European origin on the other. It was Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, a radical nationalist author, who in several undated books probably all written in the 1890s came up with the first mention of the term Aryan in modern Iranian writing.

Kermani was also the first Iranian author to display a good grasp of racialist theories then *en vogue* in Europe. He believed that if one were to observe “an Iranian, a Greek and an Englishman, and then an Ethiopian Sudanese negro [sic] and an Arab, he would clearly be able to judge which one is clean and civilised and which other savage.”<sup>41</sup> When it comes to his pioneering references to the Aryan race, it is interesting to note that Kermani wrote *āriyān*, which is a transliteration into Persian of Aryan in English or *aryen* in French, as Iranian authors had then not yet merged the European neologism with the Avestic and Old Persian term *ariya* (more below). In similar fashion, Kermani referred to Semitic languages as *semetik*, rather than *sāmi*, which is the indigenized version of the term.<sup>42</sup> In *Seh Maktub*, he equates the *majus* or ancient Zoroastrians to the “great Iranian people” and the “noble Aryan nation.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in another work he mentions the “good Aryan people of good extraction.”<sup>44</sup> A third reference is more racially-tainted and relates the myth of common origins in less ambiguous terms: “They say that Europe, Russian [sic], Rome ... were initially of the same breed as Iranians and from there were scattered around the world.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Alp, “The Restoration of Turkish History,” 219.

<sup>39</sup> Katouzian has reached similar conclusions. See Homa Katouzian, “Problems of Political Development in Iran: Democracy, Dictatorship or Arbitrary Government?,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 22, no. 1–2 (1995): 16–17.

<sup>40</sup> It is useful to note that although *nezhād* is an ancient word that often occurs in literature, its contemporary use is unmistakably that of “race” in the modern European sense.

<sup>41</sup> Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, *Seh Maktub* [Three Letters], ed. Bahram Choubine (Frankfurt, 2005), 180–81.

<sup>42</sup> Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 387.

<sup>43</sup> Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 269.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Mangol Bayat-Philipp, “Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani: a Nineteenth Century Persian Nationalist,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 10, no. 1 (1974): 48.

<sup>45</sup> Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, *Sad Khatābeh* [One Hundred Lectures], ed. Harun Vohouman (Los Angeles, 1386/2007), 56.

It took some time for other Iranian authors to catch up with Kermani's racialist enthusiasm. Slowly, concepts of race and racial purity started to appear in historical commentaries, but no politicization was attempted yet. Hasan Taqizadeh's highly influential politico-cultural newspaper *Kāveh*, coincidentally supported by German propagandists and published in Berlin from 1916 through 1922, occasionally offered benignly racialist texts referring to the "pure Iranian race."<sup>46</sup> References to Aryans appear, but with a meaning akin to that given to the term by Kermani, i.e. the common ancestors of Iranians and Indians.<sup>47</sup> The New Year festival *Nowruz*, we are told, was an ancient "Aryan ritual."<sup>48</sup> We also learn that ancient Iranians had a calendar system, which predated Iranian history and therefore came from "the Aryan race." These initial Aryanist hints were philological, rather than political in nature. In particular, one cannot claim that *Kāveh* was a publication with a racialist outlook: indeed, as the quotation at the beginning of this article shows, Taqizadeh had no kind words for the prophets of Aryanism in his country. Similarly benign allusions to ancient Aryans can be found in almost all books on Iranian history written at the time. One such allusion is noteworthy as it is to be found in a book written for high school pupils by a frequent minister of education, Isa Sadiq (1894–1978). In this book, he traced the origins of Iran back to two waves of Aryans that entered the Iranian plateau from the north.<sup>49</sup>

Works by another historian, Sadeq Rezazadeh Shafaq (1897–1971), demonstrate better awareness of contemporary European debates on the Aryan question. For instance, he imparted the theory much *en vogue* in the 1930s that the "Nordic race" originated in the Danube.<sup>50</sup> At its current stage, my research tends to confirm that he was the first Iranian author to translate the European term Aryan into *āriyā* (adj. *āriyāyi*), rather than transliterate it as *āriyān* like Kermani. The ancient term *ariya* came full circle since Anquetil-Duperron as now even in its original home it came to mean something else, something new. More influential were the works of Hasan Pirniya (Moshir od-Dowleh, 1871–1935). This patriotic historian was also a high-ranking politician who served six terms as a parliamentarian, twenty-four terms as a minister and four terms as *sadr-e a'zam* (prime minister). His history volumes were some of the first in modern Iran to abide by the standards of European historical methodology. Yet they were mainly compilations of Orientalist scholarship to which, like many historians of his generation, Pirniya failed to contribute any significant addition. This weakness did not prevent his work having an important impact on Iranians' perception of their history: indeed, he sat on the commission

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<sup>46</sup>Oskar Mann, "Kāveh va Derafsh-e Kāvīyāni" [Kaveh and his Standard], *Kāveh*, 24 January 1916: 3.

<sup>47</sup>Moreover, Taqizadeh defines "Aryans" as people living in Central Asia in prehistoric times that gave birth to Indians and Iranians, and explicitly rejects the use of the word to refer to all Indo-Europeans as "sometimes can be seen in Iranian newspapers and books." See Hasan Taqizadeh (?), "Khiyālāt-e Gunāgun" [Various Beliefs], *Kāveh*, 3 October 1921: footnote 1.

<sup>48</sup>Hasan Taqizadeh, "Nowruz-e Jamshidi" [Jamshidian Nowrouz], *Kāveh*, 18 April 1916: 2.

<sup>49</sup>Isa Sadiq, *Tārikh-e Farhang-e Irān* [Cultural History of Iran] (Tehran, 1336/1957), 31.

<sup>50</sup>Sadeq Rezazadeh Shafaq, *Tārikh-e Adabiyāt-e Irān barāy-e Dabirestānhā* [Literary History of Iran for High School Students] (Tehran, 1342/1963), 5–6.

tasked with the development of the first schoolbooks of the Pahlavi era.<sup>51</sup> Given the sheer importance of his historical work at the time, his impact on the type of identity that these schoolbooks instilled among young Iranians is not to be underestimated.

Of particular importance here is his *Tārīkh-e Qadīm-e Irān* (History of Ancient Iran; 1928), the “first history textbook published under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.”<sup>52</sup> It comprises a chapter on “Races—the White-skinned Race—the Indo-European People,” the content of which avowedly relies on “the science of race,” i.e. “the science of differentiating races, and the shapes and qualities of the people belonging to them.”<sup>53</sup> The chapter entirely relies on European racial classifications of mankind into Aryans/Indo-Europeans, Semites, etc. with a terminology borrowed from the common traditions of the Abrahamic faiths, in particular in its reference to the descendants of Noah’s sons Japheth, Ham and Shem, as a classificatory device. He also assumed that the ancestors of today’s Aryans/Indo-Europeans lived in some ancient proto-homeland, and he imparted another opinion much held in the early twentieth century according to which this proto-homeland was the Scandinavian peninsula (hence the appellation “Nordic Race”).<sup>54</sup> He therefore assumed that Iranians had migrated from Scandinavia!

According to Pirniya, “it is evident that the name Iran proceeds from [the Aryan people], since [Iranians] used to call themselves *āriyā*, which meant noble or loyal. The ancient name of Iran was *āyran*, later altered to *ayran*, *eyran* and finally *irān*.” He further claimed that “*ariyana vaej*” meant “the land of Aryans.”<sup>55</sup> As we will see, all these claims are based on the conceptual and semantic confusion of *ariya* and Aryan. Overall, Pirniya was a good student of the proponents of European racialism: although his tone was overall dispassionate, he did occasionally drift away from his rigorous academic pitch and indulge in racist prejudice. For instance, he referred to the “ugliness” and “racial and moral inferiority” of the original “pre-Aryan” inhabitants of Iran (reference to the Elamites of whom, it has to be said, almost nothing was known at the time), and likewise claimed that although initially Iranian Aryans had been behind their Semitic neighbors the Babylonians and Assyrians in terms of civilization, they were “morally superior” to them.<sup>56</sup> These assumptions proceeded from European Aryanism.

It should therefore come as no surprise that early Pahlavi-era schoolbooks, products of their own *Zeitgeist*, duplicated the same views. An early textbook simply puts it this way: “The people of Iran are part of the Aryan race and their current language is Persian.”<sup>57</sup> A geography textbook traces the origin of Iranians back to “[a] group of

<sup>51</sup>Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940*, 1st ed. (Seattle, 2008), 99.

<sup>52</sup>Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 101.

<sup>53</sup>Hasan Pirniya, *Tārīkh-e Irān-e Qadīm: az Āqāz tā Enqerāz-e Sāsāniyān* [History of Ancient Iran: from the Beginnings to the Fall of the Sasanians] ([Tehran?], 1928?), 8.

<sup>54</sup>Pirniya, *Tārīkh-e Irān-e Qadīm*, 8–10.

<sup>55</sup>Pirniya, *Tārīkh-e Irān-e Qadīm*, 12.

<sup>56</sup>Pirniya, *Tārīkh-e Irān-e Qadīm*, 14 and 16.

<sup>57</sup>Vežārat-e Farhang (Ministry of Culture), *Ketāb-e Chahārom-e Ebtedāyi* (4th Grade Textbook) (Tehran, 1310/1931), 276.

people belonging to the Aryan race," and "thus called their homeland Iran."<sup>58</sup> These schoolbooks deliberately portrayed all other "people," in particular Arabs but also Mongols, as non-Aryan invaders. This message was deeply ingrained in the minds of the first generation of Iranians educated by the Pahlavi state, making them particularly receptive to the Aryanist propaganda which would soon emanate from Berlin.

References to the alleged Aryan brotherhood between Iranians and Germans, which became prominent from the 1930s onwards, started to appear by World War I. Vahid Dastgerdi (1879–1942), a politically active poet, pamphleteer and founder of the *Armaqân* (Gift) newspaper had fervent pro-German sympathies during World War I. He expressed them in a politically charged poem in tribute to "Germania" in which he called on Iranians to join the battlefield against the "ugly fox" (Britain) and "deceitful bear" (Russia), the underlying motivation being that "Iranian and German are united in race."<sup>59</sup> It would be daring in the absence of clear evidence to assert that Dastgerdi's position was dictated by German propaganda rather than being a by-product of widespread aversion to Russia and Britain.

Although the expression of such ideas from approximately 1915 until the end of World War II is attested and documented, it is generally difficult to tell apart strictly defined political propaganda and mere intellectual influence. In the early Pahlavi era, Germany was heavily involved in Iran—although with ups and downs due to British and Russian wariness. Germany played a prominent role in the industrialization of the country and large numbers of German experts were established in the country, some of whom frequented the German social club *das Deutsches Haus* in Tehran.<sup>60</sup> From the aftermath of World War I, we see the appearance of Irano-German friendship societies and student exchange programs. These exchanges played their part in the consolidation of racialist and Aryanist views in Iran, as the opposition between the Aryan and Semitic races was by then firmly established as an axiom in German (and other European) universities.<sup>61</sup> However, one has to wait until the 1930s for the emergence of systematic German propaganda centered on these themes.

The strategic confrontation between Germany on the one hand and Britain and Russia on the other could only bring about intense propagandistic efforts to win the hearts and minds of Iranians.<sup>62</sup> Given the history of mistrust on the part of Iranians for *engelis-e por taddis* (perfidious Albion) and *rus-e manhus* (ominous Russia), Iranians were naturally inclined towards Germany and its appealing message of Aryan goodwill. Therefore, it can be argued that the environment was highly receptive to Germany's propaganda, not only in its Aryan myth component. Indeed, Germans

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<sup>58</sup>Vezârat-e Ma'âref (Ministry of Education), *Jogrâfiyâ-ye Panj Qat'eh barâ-ye Tadrîs dar Sâl-e Sheshom* [Geography in Five Parts for Teaching at Sixth Grade], 6th ed. (Tehran, 1316/1937), 87.

<sup>59</sup>Quoted by Homa Katouzian, 'Introduction,' in Ahmad Kasravi, *Qiyâm-e Sheikh Mohammad Kheyâbânî* [The Revolt of Sheikh Mohammad Kheyabani], ed. Homa Katouzian (Tehran, 1376/1998), 39–40.

<sup>60</sup>George Lenczowski, *Russia and the West in Iran, 1918–1948: a Study in Big-Power Rivalry* (New York, 1949), 162.

<sup>61</sup>Poliakov, *Mythe Aryan*, 241.

<sup>62</sup>See for instance Hossein Shahidi, "The BBC Persian Service, 1940–1953, and the Nationalization of Iranian Oil," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, 17, no. 1 (2001).

were also popular with Arabs for the same reasons, without the racial aspect playing any role. This being said, when the National Socialist German Workers' Party gained the upper hand in Berlin in 1933, it immediately embarked upon the cultural and political penetration of Iran, by stressing Germany's goodwill and non-imperialistic intentions.

In 1933, Abdolrahman Seif-Azad, a notorious Iranian Nazi activist, started to publish the *Nāmeḥ-ye Irān Bāstān* (the Epistle of Ancient Iran) journal. It has been claimed that this journal was published under direct supervision of the German Ministry of Propaganda.<sup>63</sup> According to one source the actual editor of the journal was none other than Major von Vibran, a member of the Nazi Party.<sup>64</sup> Although the numerous advertisements by German corporations (in particular *Siemens-Schuckert*) might be taken as an indication of German sources of financing, there is no evidence of any active role by Adolf Hitler's government in supporting or supervising the journal. Moreover, publication started in January 1933, one month before Hitler was sworn in as chancellor. This excludes the official initiation of the paper, although it does not rule out the involvement of Berlin's propaganda machine at a later stage. Be that as it may, the *Nāmeḥ-ye Irān Bāstān's* role as a conduit for Nazi propaganda, autonomous or supervised, can hardly be denied. One article reads as follows:

Those with increased thought and creativity in imagination and action are known as the Aryan group, and those who content themselves with simplicity and whose thoughts remain to some extent stalled are called the Semitic group ... [Aryans], in any place, at any time, and no matter how they are named, will carry out the same [creative] deeds. Iranian, German, English, French, these are the names of different kinds of Aryans, who have not renounced creativity in thought and deed, and are known for these qualities in the realm of science, although appellation, location and time have made them distinct.<sup>65</sup>

Elsewhere, it is said of the swastika that it "was customary among Aryan tribes that comprised Germanic people and Iranians." The author of the article finds it "truly delightful that the sign of Iran [allegedly the swastika] dating back two thousand years before Christ has become today a reason for pride for Germans (who are of the same race and family as us)." The article goes on to claim that Iran is the "father nation of all Aryans." Reporting a commemoration in Berlin where a fire-worship was staged, the newspaper affirms that the Aryan customs "that included igniting the holy fire has been renewed in the celebrations of the Nazis and not long will pass before all ancient Aryan customs, which are the same as those of ancient Iran, be revived in Germany."<sup>66</sup> In yet another issue, Alfred Rosenberg, one of the main

<sup>63</sup>Miron Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran: Soviet policy in Iran from the Beginnings of the Pahlavi Dynasty until the Soviet Invasion in 1941* (Alphen aan den Rijn and Genève, 1981), 319.

<sup>64</sup>See Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, 319, esp. note 24.

<sup>65</sup>"Mā Cherā Bartarim?" [Why are We Superior?], *Nāmeḥ-ye Irān Bāstān*, 14 October 1933.

<sup>66</sup>"Cheguneh dar Ālmān Jashnhā va Ādāb-e Āriyāyi va Irāni az Now Zendeḥ Mishavad" [How Aryan and Iranian Celebrations and Customs are Revived in Germany], *Nāmeḥ-ye Irān Bāstān*, 3 November 1933.

ideologues of the Nazi Party, is praised for allegedly advocating that National-Socialist Germany should replace Roman and Greek law by "Aryan and Iranian."<sup>67</sup>

The journal is replete with such assertions of racial kinship and rarely misses an opportunity to praise Hitler's vision for his country. Germany's technical achievements, industrial progress, the objective of training the nation into sport, and even trivial pieces of news are given wide coverage. The purpose of the *Nâmeb-ye Irân Bâstân* is formulated on the front page of every issue, where often the words "Iran," "God" and Zoroastrian symbolism are combined with a swastika: the revival of pre-Islamic glory. This objective is pursued through incessant admonitions to purify the Persian language from foreign "non-Aryan" additions. Anti-Semitism is recurrent. The tone is nationalistic and self-serving to the highest possible degree, reviewing the glories and feats of ancient Iranians in the most grandiloquent terms. The journal enjoyed significant popularity among the pro-monarchy literate elites. The repeated advertisements selling past issues are witness to this success.

Cultural propaganda, this time unquestionably sponsored by the Nazi propaganda machine, intensified in 1934 with the institution of the *Deutsch-Persische Gessellschaft* (German Persian Society), "which sponsored various publications, organized lecture tours, and generally facilitated cultural exchanges between the two countries."<sup>68</sup> Racial affinity was made official in 1936 when a special decree of the *Reich* cabinet exempted Iranians from the restrictions of the Nuremberg Racial Laws as "pure Aryans" (this in turn allowed Iranian diplomats based in European capitals to save the lives of thousands of Iranian *and* non-Iranian Jews<sup>69</sup>). The Nazis even succeeded in gaining a foothold in the crucial education sector of the Pahlavi state through the appointment of a German advisor and the employment of a number of German teachers.<sup>70</sup> According to George Lenczowski, who was then posted as a press attaché to the Polish Embassy in Tehran, the Nazis made great use

of the Aryan legend to encourage friendship between both nations. The adoption of the swastika as a symbol of the Nazi party was interpreted as pointing to the spiritual unity between the Aryans of the north and the nation of Zoroaster ... the German government presented Iran with a collection of books called the German Scientific Library, composed of 7,500 volumes. These carefully selected books were destined to convince Iranian readers of the cultural mission of Germany in the East and of the kinship between the National Socialist Reich and the "Aryan culture" of Iran.<sup>71</sup>

The Radio Berlin broadcasts in Persian were another channel used by the Germans to instill Aryanist ideas into Iran. The head of these programs was Bahram Shahrokh.

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<sup>67</sup>"Tahqiqât-e 'Elmi va Târikhi beh Khâmeb-ye yeke az Siyâsiyun-e Bozorg-e Doniyâ, Râje' beh Irân-e Kohan" [Scientific and Historical Research into Ancient Iran, Authored by one of the Most Important Politicians of the World], *Nâmeb-ye Irân Bâstân*, 14 April 1934.

<sup>68</sup>Lenczowski, *Russia and the West in Iran*, 159.

<sup>69</sup>See for instance Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution: a Biography* (London, 2000), 76–77.

<sup>70</sup>Lenczowski, *Russia and the West in Iran*, 160.

<sup>71</sup>Lenczowski, *Russia and the West in Iran*, 161.



Born to a prominent Zoroastrian family and son of Reza Shah's advisor Keykhosrow Shahrokh, he had studied in Germany where he acquired pro-Nazi sympathies and, according to one source, became a trainee of Joseph Goebbels (dubious).<sup>72</sup> It is interesting to note that after the war, Mohammad Reza Shah appointed him to the post of director of news and propaganda, along with a number of other members of the Nazi-inspired and pro-monarchy party SUMKA (Socialist and Nationalist Party of the Iranian Nation) who were given other key posts.

*Modern Aryan and Ancient ariya*<sup>73</sup>

Partisans of an Aryanist reading of Iranian history today fail to acknowledge that their claim to Aryanness is rooted in a dethroned and inglorious European ideology. Instead, they base their beliefs on the supposed racial self-definition of the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau as Aryans since "time immemorial." The name Iran and the recurrence of the word *ariya* in a number of pre-Islamic sources seem to corroborate this belief. Although *ariya* was indeed an ethnonym and Aryan is a modernized and Europeanized version of that ancient term, I will here argue that they are far from relaying the same meaning, and that the antique incidences of *ariya* can in no way be used to support the claims of Aryanism. The correspondence, or lack thereof, between *ariya* and Aryan in an Iranian context, has rarely—if ever—been seriously investigated, and doing so requires a detour by these ancient scriptures.

The term *ariya* and its variations occur several times in ancient sources. First, the Avesta refers to *airyanem vaejah*. This is a location where mythistorical events took place, and is usually translated by "the *ariya* plain" or "expanse."<sup>74</sup> Other place-names containing *ariya* occur in the Avesta, which also describes several mythic heroes in relation to their being of the *ariyas*, like "the most swift-arrowed of all *ariyas*" (Arash) or "the hero of *ariyas*" (Kay Khosrow). Secondly, on the inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam, the descent of kings Darius and Xerxes is defined as *hakhmanishiya; parsā, parsahya pucha; ariya, ariyachicha*, "an Achaemenid; a Persian, son of a Persian; *ariya*, of *ariya* stock." Thirdly, in one inscription in Elamite at Bisotun, the Mazdean and Zoroastrian divinity Ahura-Mazda is defined as "the God of *ariyas*," while in another, *ariya* is referred to as a language.

The Indian Rig-Veda use another variety of *ariya* in similar senses, and the authors of the Vedic texts also defined themselves as *ariya*.<sup>75</sup> Cultural kinship between the authors of the Avesta and the Rig-Veda is likely as linguistic similarity is striking

<sup>72</sup>Massoud Kazemzadeh, "The Day Democracy Died," *Khaneh*, 3, no. 34 (2003).

<sup>73</sup>For the sake of simplicity, this article will use one single transliteration *ariya*, although in reality the Sanskrit, Avestic and Old Persian versions of the term differ slightly.

<sup>74</sup>See for instance H. W. Bailey, "Iranian *Arya*- and *Daha*-," *Transactions of the Philological Society* 58, no. 1 (1959): 94; and Emile Benveniste, "L'Eran-vez et l'Origine Légendaire des Iraniens," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, 7, no. 2 (1934).

<sup>75</sup>Jean Kellens believes that the Sanskrit *ariya* cannot be unequivocally taken for an ethnonym, whereas Avestic *ariya* can. See Jean Kellens, "Les Airiia- ne Sont Plus des Aryas: Ce Sont Déjà des Iraniens," in *Aryas, Aryens et Iraniens en Asie Centrale*, ed. Gérard Fussman et al. (Paris, 2005), 240–42.

between the two texts, especially the oldest parts.<sup>76</sup> A comparative perspective should not detain us here as the debate on Sanskrit *ariya*'s meaning and its connection with the Iranian version still has some way to go.<sup>77</sup> Finally and in a more restricted manner, Herodotus called the Medes *arioi*, while before him Hellenicus believed that *ariya* was just another name for Persia.<sup>78</sup>

It is clear that *ariya* in the Iranian sources refers to a group of people sharing a common cultural and linguistic heritage, who defined themselves as *ariya* against *anariya*, or non-*ariyas*. *Ariyas* included Persians, Medes, Alans, Sakas and other groups broadly related to each other. Etymologically, it is usually accepted that *ariya* meant "of good birth," denoting ideas of nobility and lordship, particularly fitting for an ethnonym.<sup>79</sup>

Within this context, it is believed that the term Iran derives from *ariya* too. By Sasanian times, *eran* came to mean "of the *ariyas*," broadly "of the Iranians," while *eran shahr* (or the even more telling Parthian version *ariyan shahr*) was the official appellation of the Sasanian empire. It is argued that these appellations were Sasanian inventions, a sort of political device as it were to strengthen the legitimacy of the new empire by reference to those of the past. Invented or not, the modern term "Iran" derives from *eran* and *eran shahr* meaning once again "the land (or the expanse) of the *ariyas*." All these elements seem to support the Aryanist reading of Iranian history, confirm that Iranians are "Aryans," that they were endowed with sufficient racial awareness to differentiate the "others" as "non-Aryans."

This would have been the case if the division of mankind into biological categories was not an innovation of modern pseudo-science, and if *ariya* and Aryan did actually refer to the same reality. The confusion between *ariya* and Aryan is a particularly acute case of anachronism, one that has distorted ancient sources beyond recognition and exploited them to confer credibility to the Aryan myth in Iran and elsewhere. *Ariya*, as we just saw, was an ethnonym used by a fairly restricted group of ancient people sharing a culture and a language, scattered from North India to the Iranian plateau *exclusively*; in particular no western or European people were included in this appellation. Modern Aryan, on the other hand, although formally derived from *ariya*, is a racial category born in the nineteenth century, and whose very conceptualization was made possible with the advances of modern science (especially linguistics and Darwinism). It unites modern Indians, Iranians and Europeans (rather than merely Persians, Medes, Sakas, etc.) under one large racial cluster, and endows them with biological and psychological characteristics. This is not quite the same thing, and this malapropism stems from the fact that an existing term (*ariya*) has been used to describe a modern idea (Aryan).

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<sup>76</sup>Rüdiger Schmitt, "Aryans," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York, 1987).

<sup>77</sup>Excellent publications address this aspect of the topic. See for instance Gérard Fussman et al., *Aryas, Aryens et Iraniens en Asie centrale*, Publications de l'Institut de civilisation indienne (Paris, 2005). See in particular the article from Jean Kellens included in this volume.

<sup>78</sup>For more details refer to H. W. Bailey, "Arya," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York, 1987).

<sup>79</sup>Bailey, "Arya."

A few authors have already realized the complications that can arise from the use of the term Aryan. As early as 1941, when Nazis ruled Germany and civilians were sent to their death for failing to be Aryan, a German scholar, Hans Siegert, suggested that the use of the term Aryan should be abandoned altogether, because we have words at our disposal to mean Iranian, Indo-Iranian, Indo-European and German-blooded, therefore there is no room for a word (Aryan), which “is ambiguous and lacks any ... scientific clarity.”<sup>80</sup> Closer to our concern and within a strictly Iranian context, Jean Kellens has recently argued that it is only in the Iranian context that *ariya* is an ethnonym (as opposed to the Vedic context where, according to him, it is not). Hence, it should be neither “reproduced as it is, nor adapted in any modern language,” but rather translated, and the only valid translation is simply “Iranian”: “Let us say farewell to the term ‘Aryan’. We have no reason to regret it: it comes with a lot of baggage.”<sup>81</sup> We can then safely argue that when King Darius traced his lineage he meant “I am an Achaemenid [the ruling dynasty]; Persian son of a Persian [his local and geographic background], *Iranian of Iranian* stock [his ethnicity or cultural heritage].”

Considered in this light, Iran can be safely considered to mean “the land of Iranians,” nothing less, nothing more. Assuming that it is in fact the “land of Aryans” would mean that it is the land of Iranians, Indians and all Europeans, which is simply inaccurate and stems from the approximations of European Aryanism. This definition was popularized by Max Müller, who in 1861 claimed that the term *ariya* found in the Zand-Avesta indicated both a people and a land, and that *airyanem vaejah* in fact meant the “Aryan seed,” as it were, denoting the origin of Aryans.<sup>82</sup> Since then, and to this day, Iran has been abundantly and erroneously referred to as the “land of Aryans” in popular and scientific writings alike, creating an implicit ambiguity about whom those Aryans actually are.<sup>83</sup> The meaning of Iran as the “expanse (or land) of *ariyas* or Iranians” is transmuted by its passage through modern Aryanism into a land populated by a particular race, the Aryans, those same Aryans populating Europe, from which non-Aryans are by definition excluded. I do not accuse anyone employing “land of Aryans” as a definition for Iran of being ill-intentioned or having dubious sympathies, but in view of the histories of the terms *ariya* and Aryan, ambivalence is created, an ambivalence that the prophets of an Aryanist reading of Iranian history are too glad to exploit to advance their unimpressive claims to racial kinship with Europe.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Siegert, “Zur Geschichte der Begriffe ‘Arier’ und ‘arisch,’” 99.

<sup>81</sup>Kellens, “Les Airiia- ne Sont Plus des Aryas: Ce Sont Déjà des Iraniens,” 242.

<sup>82</sup>Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language: Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in April, May and June 1861*, 5th rev. ed. (London, 1866), 268. Before him, no direct hint was made to such definition of Iran: Anquetil-Duperron for instance, believed that *airyanem vaejah* meant “l’Iran pur.” Quoted in Siegert, “Zur Geschichte der Begriffe ‘Arier’ und ‘arisch,’” 86.

<sup>83</sup>Examples abound, even in highly influential and serious scholarly works for instance: Edward Granville Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: From the Earliest Times until Firdawsi* (London and Leipsic, 1909), 4; and Richard N. Frye, *Persia*, rev. ed. (London, 1968), 13.

<sup>84</sup>For a similar take on this topic, but from a slightly different and more polemical perspective, see Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: the Construction of National Identity* (New York, 1993), 75–81.

There is further ambiguity in using the phrase "land of Aryans." Conceptually, the "land of Aryans" is the product of a period that believed in, and advocated, the homogeneity of populations within national boundaries, in other words the congruence of nation and territory. The "land of Aryans" in nationalist writing and Pahlavi school-books furthers such modern ideas as the "national cohesion" of an Aryan Iran, contained from its racially distinct neighbors. The reality is very different as Iran has never been home to a homogenous population as all sources, written and material, from the most ancient attested settlements to this day make plain. History is a long succession of migrations and synthesis through war, interaction and amalgamation. This is particularly true of the Iranian plateau that is geographically situated at the crossroads of several migration and trading routes between Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. "The *ethnos* of the Achaemenid empire must already have been, in the 6th century B.C., largely composite, the result of a mixture of elements that we today would define as *arya* and *anarya* [non-*ariya*],"<sup>85</sup> rather than being some primordial era of racial purity as Orientalist scholarship and Iranian Aryanists alike would have us believe. The diversity of this region is acknowledged for instance in King Shapur I's royal title of *shàhanshàh eràn ud aneràn*: king of Iran—*ariyas*—and non-*ariyas*.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, it is useful to remember that out of 30,000 tablets excavated in Persepolis, none of them is written in Persian, but mostly in Elamite and a few in Aramean, that is a language of people deemed "Semitic" in Aryanist parlance.<sup>87</sup> The influence of other such people (Akkadians, Assyrians, Egyptians, etc.) is prominent in the architecture of Achaemenid and Sasanian ruins. Assyrian annals even point to the existence of *aribi* (Arabs) on the Iranian plateau in the eighth century BC, further contradicting the myths of racial purity, the Aryan exclusiveness of the Iranian plateau, or the axiomatic clash between Aryans and Semites. Rather, these clues point to a complex melting pot.<sup>88</sup> The view that history is shaped by the struggles of racially aware people tends to overlook a simple although momentous historical fact: that the relationship between Iranians and their "Semitic neighbors" is characterized by long and complex migratory waves interaction, fusion and borrowings in the cultural, linguistic and spiritual domains. The western part of the Sasanian empire, non-*ariya* populated Iraq, was even called the "heart of Iranshahr" (*del-e eràn shahr*): Aryanists would frown upon this designation.

Beyond the few facts reported above, it is very difficult if not impossible to reconstruct even an approximate image of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural—let alone racial—landscape of pre-Achaemenid Iran. We dispose of little material evidence, and when we do have them they are usually open to multiple interpretations, and a

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<sup>85</sup>Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin*, Serie orientale Roma (Roma, 1989), 14–15.

<sup>86</sup>See D. N. McKenzie, "Eran, Eranšahr," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York, 1998).

<sup>87</sup>Reported by French archaeologist Roman Ghirshman in 1976, quoted in Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 79.

<sup>88</sup>Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 78.

range of specialists (linguists, archaeologists, historians) work on them with mutually incomprehensible jargons and methodologies.<sup>89</sup> That Persian is a language of the Indo-European group is the only certainty that we have, but using it to draw conclusions about ethnicity, migrations, draw arrows on large maps, or claim that Iranians are in some bizarre way more akin to Germans than to, say, Iraqis or Turks, is simply nonsensical. The results of comparative vocabulary analyses, the study of anonymous artifacts and the attempts to use these frugal elements to construct a large narrative of migration and kinship is contestable and contested.

When Kermani, Rezzazadeh-Shafaq and Pirniya introduced the term Aryan (*āriyān*, later *āriyāyi*), the original meaning of *ariya* as Iranian was lost. It is safe to assert that in modern Iran, *āriyāyi* is not invoked as meaning Iran or Iranian or to denote a community of language and culture, but exclusively as evidence of Iranians' alleged racial bond with Europeans, or at the very least opposition to Arabs/Semites. All the sources mentioned above in one way or the other are indebted to this nineteenth-century European view. By connecting the ancient appellation *ariya* with modern Aryan, a new strategy of racial demarcation from Arabs and Turks, concurrent to racial affiliation with Europe's achievements—what I call “dislocation”—was legitimized by reference to ancient sources.

The contemporary objective of using *ariya* to legitimize Iran's Aryanness is merely political. To understand the reason why Aryanism received such an enthusiastic reception in Iran, one must take a closer look at the brand of Iranian nationalism that started to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century among modernist authors and later became the Pahlavi state's official ideology.

### *Nationalism and Receptivity to Aryanism*

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the complacent elite of Qajar Iran was given a brutal demonstration of European military might. The crushing defeat of Iranian troops shocked many informed Iranians and made them realize the extent to which Iran's power had declined. This traumatic encounter with Russia and Britain, and their willingness to deploy their influence in Iran brought about a painful process of self-questioning that gradually paved the way for a modernist movement (*nehzat-e tajaddod*).<sup>90</sup> Essentially, through reform of the state and its institutions, modernists (*motejaddedin*) aimed to force Iran's way into modernity in order to catch up with Europe's advances. Unfortunately for them, the arbitrary nature of the Qajar rule in addition to the resistance of court and clergy prevented any fundamental change until at least the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and arguably even thereafter. From the 1860s onwards, as a side effect of this inertia, a group of intellectuals led by Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzadeh (1812–78) took increasingly radical stances

<sup>89</sup>See the wise warnings of Fussman, “Entre Fantasmies, Science et Politique,” part. 785–88 and 813.

<sup>90</sup>For more on this process refer to Monica M. Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, Bibliotheca Iranica. Intellectual traditions series no. 5 (Costa Mesa, CA, 2001), esp. chap. 1 and 2.

in the modernization debate. Their writings engaged in new ways with Iran's past and what its future should be, and they provided the foundations of ideological Iranian nationalism.

Unlike their modernist counterparts, Iranian nationalists' solution to Iran's ills was preponderantly discursive as opposed to the formulation of a program of concrete reforms. Although they did advocate modernization of the political, social or economic order of the country (in rather vague and utopian terms), their nationalist discourse mostly lamented the present state of Iran and engaged in the archaistic nostalgia of a long-lost glorious past. They viewed the current state of Iran as an aberration given what they perceived to be the innate superiority of Iranians. This ambitious appraisal of Iranians' nature was based on the glories of pre-Islamic Iran as attested by Orientalist scholarship and largely unknown in Iran at the time. Even a superficial overview of nineteenth-century European writing on Iran reveals the Orientalists' infatuation with the pre-Islamic period. It can be argued that this infatuation proceeded from two premises. First, this period of Iranian history was, precisely, *pre-Islamic*. A certain distaste for Islam and anything Islamic was deeply ingrained in European writings on the Orient; it is therefore no surprise that Orientalists held the period before Islam in higher esteem.<sup>91</sup> Secondly, many Orientalists looked at their subject from a classicist perspective, through sources in Greek and Latin. Therefore, as Classicists, they had an aversion to Islam, seen as the phenomenon that put an end to eastern antiquity. In similar fashion they disliked Christianity, which put an end to western antiquity. There was perhaps an unconscious application of their reading of European history onto the East.

That European Orientalists' opinion on pre-Islamic Iran even mattered to early nationalists was due to the sacrosanct status in which European scholarship was, and still is, held. As was briefly evoked earlier, when local historians such as Pirniya and Foroughi started to apply modern historiographical methods to the history of Iran, their works often entirely relied on Orientalist scholarship. Citing a European work was almost tantamount, in methodological terms, to citing a primary source.<sup>92</sup> The entire *corpus* of modernist and nationalist literature is a long panegyric of Europe, its science, its scholars, its discoveries and the wish to turn Iran into Europe, if possible overnight. There was an element of an inferiority complex that will be touched upon soon. Thus, that European authors like Sir John Malcolm, George Rawlinson and others approved of Iran's past to be an admirable civilization certainly encouraged these thinkers—perhaps unconsciously—to stress its achievements. They attempted to present it as the embodiment of essential

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<sup>91</sup>Traditional Arabic, Turkish or Persian texts show an equal disdain for anything Christian. For two contrasting views on these issues, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, 1995): esp. chap. 1 heading 2; and Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, 1st ed. (New York, 1982). For a perhaps more balanced view see Albert Hourani, *Islam in European thought* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>92</sup>For a criticism of local historiography, see Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 151–67; Fereydoun Adamiyat and Thomas M. Ricks, "Problems in Iranian Historiography." *Iranian Studies*, 4, no. 4 (1971); and Hamid Enayat, "The Politics of Iranology," *Iranian Studies*, 6, no. 1 (1973).

Iranianness in order to minimize its afflicted present. This pre-Islamic frenzy—very much vivid throughout the Pahlavi period to this day—is one of the founding pillars of ideological Iranian nationalism. Pre-Islamic Iran also conveniently seemed to possess what the Qajar era did not (power and progress) while its temporal remoteness made it a more suitable starting point for a genealogical narrative of the Iranian community. Indeed, nations have a tendency to elongate their pedigrees.

Akhundzadeh's utopian description of ancient Iran for instance bears more resemblance to the Garden of Eden than to any real human society. He describes an ideal realm in which people lived under the "rule of benevolent kings" who were seemingly free of any vice. Ancient Iranians, sanctified by divine blessings, did not know poverty. Kings provided them with free healthcare, efficient institutions and the rule of law, and the death penalty was almost non-existent!<sup>93</sup> Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–96), a loyal disciple of Akhundzadeh's when it came to nationalist writing, went even further in claiming that ancient Iran was more advanced than contemporary Europe.<sup>94</sup> Nationalism's archaic frenzy became increasingly widespread in future generations, notably in the poetry of Abolqassem Aref Qazvini, Mirzadeh Eshqi, Mirza Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi, the novels of Sadeq Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi, and indeed the symbolic repertoire of the Pahlavi state, which elevated this particular brand of nationalism to the status of official ideology. Even today, claims that there was no such thing as an arbitrary ruler in ancient Iran, that royal cruelty was "exceptional" until Arab, Mongol and Turkish invasions made it customary, occasionally find their way into "scholarly" conferences in Iran.<sup>95</sup>

This brings us to the natural corollary of a narrative that portrays Iran as intrinsically progressive, yet in a present state of aberrant backwardness. Such a narrative requires an alien "other" to serve as a scapegoat to be blamed for the fall from Heaven, otherwise the aberrance of the present would necessitate long and painful soul-searching that human nature abhors. In this case, it was Arabs and their religion that came to bear all the blame. Early nationalist texts are replete with harshly racist invectives against Arabs. Kermani describes them as "naked, bare-ass, savage, hungry, vagabonds."<sup>96</sup> He goes on: "I spit on them ... naked bandits, homeless rat-eaters ... vilest humans, most vicious beasts ... camel-rider thieves, black and yellow scrawny lot, animal-like and even worse than animals,"<sup>97</sup> etc. His work *Seh Maktub* (Three Letters, c. 1890) is a long and empty tirade against Arabs that he makes a point to

<sup>93</sup>Fath'ali Akhundzadeh, *Maktubât: Nâmebâ-ye Kamâl od-Dowleh beh Shâbzâdeh Jalâl od-Dowleh* [Maktubât: Letters from Kamal od-Dowleh to Prince Jalal od-Dowleh], ed. Bahram Choubine (Frankfurt, 2006), 291–92.

<sup>94</sup>For instance, he claimed that the Sasanian revolutionary figure Mazdak laid the foundations of republicanism and *égalité* "two thousand years ago". See Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 267.

<sup>95</sup>See for instance Morteza Sagheb-Far, "Irân Bâstân va Hoveyyat-e Irâni" [Ancient Iran and Iranian Identity], in *Irân: Hoveyyat, Meliyyat, Qowmeyyat* [Iran: Identity, Nationhood, Ethnicity], ed. Hamid Ahmadi (Tehran, 1383/2004), 255.

<sup>96</sup>Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 128.

<sup>97</sup>Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 139.

blame for every single *Iranian* failing.<sup>98</sup> The pages of Sadeq Hedayat (1903–51), arguably Iran's greatest and most influential novelist, abound with similar references to "bare-footed and savage lizard-eaters."

This period saw the beginning of an endeavor to uproot everything that these authors considered to be of Arab origin, therefore "alien." The pre-nationalist author Jalal ed-Din Mirza Qajar (1826–70) for instance instigated the puritan fashion of *pārsi negāri*, that is writing Persian avoiding all Arabic loanwords, which is to this day a defining feature of nationalist writing. Akhundzadeh himself had great admiration for Jalal ed-Din Mirza's endeavor, which he equated with his own attempts to "rid our nation of the Arabs' alphabet."<sup>99</sup> Unsurprisingly, these anti-Arab sentiments were not founded on a genuine knowledge of Arabs (although Akhundzadeh for one could read Arabic). These authors' hatred was merely an intellectual device used to justify Iran's backwardness without engaging too deeply in an analysis of the actual shortcomings of the Iranian state and society themselves. Current institutions such as the Qajar dynasty or the clergy were also the targets of their attacks; yet their deficiencies were explained with reference to some "alien" factor supposed to have contaminated them, usually Islam. Very early on, pioneering Iranian nationalists were even happy to adopt the deliria of racial anthropology, as long as it could be used to disparage Arabs.<sup>100</sup>

This swift overview of the emergence of anti-Arab feelings among Iran's early nationalist intellectuals does not do justice to the complexity of this epoch and the debates raging then. It does however offer a clue as to why Iranian nationalist circles were so receptive to Aryanism. Akhundzadeh and his followers insisted on the inherent progressiveness of Iranians, while Aryanism stressed the intrinsic virtues of the Aryan race (innovation, civilization, superiority, etc.) Iranian nationalists wholesale blamed Iran's decay on Arabs and Islam, while Aryanism considered the Semitic race as characterized by "dirtiness, cupidity, its obsequious nature," and its incapacity to "grasp the beauties of metaphysics."<sup>101</sup> Intellectuals from Jalal ed-Din Mirza to Mohammad Ali Foroughi (Zoka ol-Molk) devoted their lives to "purifying" Persian from Arabic loanwords, and Akhundzadeh and Malkam Khan of the "Arabs' alphabet," while Aryanism condemned racial miscegenation that Gobineau—and later Nazis—considered to be the main cause of civilizational decline.

The essentialist view of Semites embedded in Aryanism (although targeting Jews more than Arabs), and the opposition between Aryan and Semite elevated to the status of a scientific principle, all fit perfectly into the anti-Arab aversion of ideological Iranian nationalism and its desire to free Iranians from any responsibility over their own decay. Likewise, nationalism's inferiority complex towards Europe could only welcome an intellectual construct that defined Iranians as racially akin to Europeans,

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<sup>98</sup>"Whenever I touch a branch of the ugly dispositions of Iranians I find its seed to be planted by Arabs." See Kermani, *Seb Maktub*, 265.

<sup>99</sup>See Akhundzadeh to Jalal ed-Din Mirza, 15 June 1870, in Hamid Mohammadzadeh and Hamid Arasli, eds., *Mirzā Fath'ali Akhundof: Alefbā-ye Jadid va Maktubāt* [Mirza Fathali Akhundov: the New Alphabet and the Maktubāt] (Baku, 1963), 172.

<sup>100</sup>Kermani, *Seb Maktub*, 180–81.

<sup>101</sup>René Verneau and Emile Burnouf, cited in Poliakov, *Mythe Aryen*, 311 and 308.



especially if this construct was itself a product of European thought. In hindsight, it is startling how compatible emerging ideological nationalism and Aryanism were. Offering nationalist thinkers an easy way out of the historical dilemma of Iran's decay, it is no wonder that Aryanism became such a central element of the nationalist definition of identity. It was a comfortable belief without being a belief: it was a scientific theory. Not only that, it was developed in Europe. How can Europeans be wrong?

### *Self-Orientalization and Dislocation*

The symbiosis between nascent ideological nationalism and Aryanism goes a long way to explain the swift reception of the Aryan discourse in Iran. However, its extraordinary resilience in the face of a sordid historical legacy and adverse scientific evidence indicates that it must have been more than just a pleasant and comfortable belief. I argue that Aryanism plays a central role in Iranian identity politics through two interrelated phenomena that I call *self-Orientalization* and *dislocation*. The concept of self-Orientalization does not presuppose blanket acquiescence to Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism. Acknowledging that European writing on the "East" (in fact anything but Europe) in the nineteenth century was essentialist and biased, if not outright racist, is a sufficient premise in this context. This fact had been noted even prior to Said's work and it goes largely undisputed.

Self-Orientalization partly takes root in Iranian intellectuals' lack of adverse feelings towards European thought (as we saw, it was quite the opposite). In contrast to formally colonized lands, nationalism in Iran did not attempt to emancipate Iranians from colonial rule, but to catch up with Europe in terms of military, economic and political advancement.<sup>102</sup> There was therefore less of a desire for emancipation or detachment from Europe's grasp than a willingness to either prove through the relentless reiteration of pre-Islamic achievements that Iranians are not a lesser people, or superficially emulate European ways to show that Iranians can do just as well. Lack of a desire for detachment from Europe coupled with the inferiority complex already mentioned caused an internalization of Orientalism's prejudices towards Islam and the "East."

Nationalist ideologues wholeheartedly embraced Orientalism's distaste for Islam, and their diatribes against both Islam and its clergy were even more excessive and fanatical than those of their European models.<sup>103</sup> Likewise with "Orientals," particularly Arabs. In some cases like Kermani's they even reproduced the prejudices of Orientalists against Iranians themselves.<sup>104</sup> Self-Orientalization is the unconditional espousal of Orientalist prejudices, and the refusal to engage in a debate with Orientalists aiming

<sup>102</sup>It is noteworthy that in the case of those other countries, in particular India, the tool used to emancipate the local population from Western rule—nationalism—was itself prisoner to the same West's intellectual legacy. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis, 1993).

<sup>103</sup>See in particular Akhundzadeh, *Maktubât*; and Kermani, *Seh Maktub*.

<sup>104</sup>"European philosophers write that [we excel] in all negative qualities." In Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, 263–64.

to formulate a response against their essentialism; a refusal to argue against a racist standpoint that in many ways targeted them as well.<sup>105</sup> Instead, they made theirs the prejudices of Orientalism and attempted to argue that while these prejudices were indeed correct, they did not apply to Iranians because of their pre-Islamic achievements. Aryanism exacerbates this mindset by introducing the "superior race" element into the paradigm. Under the heavy façade of pride and patriotism displayed by ideological Iranian nationalism, its self-Orientalization is however nothing more than self-hatred in disguise, the almost desperate desire to be something else than a mere "Oriental," a member of a wretched "Asiatic" nation, but rather of some Aryan people gone astray in the Middle East. Hence, self-Orientalization's strategy was to protect Iranians from European preconceptions of the Orient, not by fighting them but by uncompromisingly embracing them and introducing an exception in the general equation.

Nothing more than Aryanism strengthened ideological Iranian nationalism, its discursive nature and its inherent racism. Aryanism provided Iranian nationalism with a tremendous theoretical consolidation. It became the *pièce maitresse* of an intellectual edifice that attempted to explain Iran's decay in the simplest terms possible: ancient Iran was magnificent because Aryan, then Iran's glory waned because the Arabs came, and in the future Iran has to blindly westernize itself to become Aryan again. This utterly discursive political program, this blueprint for the future *with an eye on the past*, brought about another feature of Iranian nationalism: the politics of dislocation, or the attempt, through the racial discourse of Aryanism, to *dislodge* Iran from its Islamic and Eastern reality and artificially force it into a western one.

The dislocation mindset was a direct corollary of Aryanism. Self-Orientalization existed prior to Aryanism and was only enhanced by the addition of Aryanism and its aura of scientism. Dislocation, on the other hand, needed the element of racial kinship with Europeans to be conceptually possible. As a strategy, it addressed ideological nationalism's patent inferiority complex towards Europe. This complex has already been touched upon; it involved an obsession with proving through archaistic nostalgia that Iran was not that backward after all. This obsession is noticeable in many intellectual writings even beyond nationalist and modernist circles. Abd ol-Baha Abbas (1844–1921) for instance, the leader of the Baha'i faith and son of its founder Baha'ollah, referred to Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur to suggest that "it should not be imagined that the people of Persia are inherently deficient in intelligence, or that ... they are inferior to others."<sup>106</sup> Another tactic to demonstrate that Iranians were not a lesser people consisted in the superficial mimicry of European ways. In 1935 Reza Shah Pahlavi, a militant ideological nationalist himself, ordered the European *chapeau* (bowler hat) to become compulsory for all Iranian men, and he privately

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<sup>105</sup>As previously mentioned, although Iranians were considered Aryans, many Orientalists still considered them some debased and racially mixed variety, and usually did not exalt Iranians as they would Europeans.

<sup>106</sup>Quoted in Juan R. I. Cole, "Marking Boundaries, Marking Time: The Iranian Past and the Construction of the Self by Qajar Thinkers," *Iranian Studies*, 29, no. 1–2 (1996): 44.

justified his decision in these words: “All I am trying to do is for us to look like [the Europeans] so they would not laugh at us.”<sup>107</sup> This sentence fully represents the dislocation mindset.

In conformity to the general attitude of ideological nationalism, dislocation provided a merely discursive device that Iranian nationalists used to ease their inferiority complex and claim parity with Europe. It was already deeply rooted in the minds of the Pahlavi *intelligentsia* when in 1934 Persia was officially renamed Iran. As already discussed, it is beyond doubt that Iran would be the historically correct designation. However, the Pahlavi state’s argument for this *retour aux sources* was tainted with a “dislocation syndrome.” The government directive pertaining to the name change read: “because Iran was the birthplace and origin of Aryans, it is natural that we should want to take advantage of this name, particularly since these days in the great nations of the world noise has gotten out regarding the Aryan race which indicates the greatness of the race and civilization of ancient Iran.”<sup>108</sup> It has been claimed that the initial idea of the name change came from German officials who recommended the move to Iranian diplomats in Berlin.<sup>109</sup>

Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi’s claim that it was “an accident of geography” that Iran found itself in the Middle East is a more recent symptom of the dislocation thought in Iranian nationalism.<sup>110</sup> With a simple ideological tirade, it brushes aside Iranian history and its empirical reality for the chimera of an Aryan Iran, which is an Iran that is somehow European, even according to Europeans themselves from Max Müller to Adolf Hitler. The relation of Aryanism, self-Orientalization and dislocation is one of perpetual consolidation of its different parts. It goes a long way to shed light on the popularity, entrenchment and lack of reassessment of the Aryan discourse in Iran. It also partly elucidates the reason why Iranian nationalism’s method of managing modernity is essentially discursive and involves blind mimicry of European ways.

### *Conclusions*

On 12 October 2001, the Iraqi national football team lost 2–1 to its Iranian host, “but this did not stop Iranian fans from hurling stones and plastic bottles at the Iraqi players as they left the field. Police escorted the Iraqis to their locker room.”<sup>111</sup> The Irish went through an even more grueling experience, when in another World Cup preliminary game in November 2001 small grenades rained on them. The

<sup>107</sup>From Mokhber ol-Saltaneh’s memoirs, quoted in Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: the Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London, 2006), 336.

<sup>108</sup>File 102012/3201, no. 41749, 03.10.1313/May 1934. Prime Ministry Files. Quoted in Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

<sup>109</sup>Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT, 2009): 217–18.

<sup>110</sup>See footnote 4.

<sup>111</sup>“30 Iranian soccer fans appear in court for disturbing public order,” *Associated Press Newswires*, 16 October 2001.

Irish goalkeeper told the press that the team was expecting “a tough environment,” but that at the end it was “far worse than I anticipated ... They hurled abuse at us, plenty of rotten fruit and plastic bottles, so it took a strong character to get through it. Even as we made our way back to the airport, the road was littered with broken glass to stop us getting to the airport.”<sup>112</sup> Unfortunately, football hooliganism has gained ground in Iran in recent years, as these incidents and others seem to indicate.

Yet when the German national football team landed in Tehran on 7 October 2004 to play a friendly match, a wholly different reception was awaiting them. 1,500 Iranian supporters gave the German team a “triumphal welcome,” and chanted “Germany, Germany” and “welcome to Iran.” The manager of *die Mannschaft* declared: “It is unbelievable to be welcomed in such a way when you are the visiting team.” “I had never seen such a thing” added one of the players.<sup>113</sup> The game took place in the Azadi Stadium in Tehran in the presence of 100,000 supporters. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported the “absurd popularity of the German national team in Iran,” while the team’s manager described the ambiance of the stadium as “incredibly emotional ... positive fanaticism.”<sup>114</sup>

The Iranians’ enthusiasm was expressed when the German national anthem was sung. Right from the beginning, a large number of Iranian fans stood up and gave a collective Nazi salute to their German guests, while others brandished posters of Nietzsche, all this before the astonished eyes of the German supporters.<sup>115</sup> The ZDF TV commentator took notice: “Luckily we only see it briefly, some perverse slips; some people stood, many even, and showed the Hitler salute.”<sup>116</sup>

Undoubtedly, these large numbers of Iranian supporters were not expressing sympathy for Nazism or the horrors it committed. Iranians are not as familiar with this period of European history as most westerners. The unusual welcome given to the German team at the airport indicates rather that they were trying—although in an unfortunate way—to convey their sense of sympathy to the Germans. That in the annals of Iranian football this sympathy was demonstrated only to Germans indicates that the message of the so-called Aryan brotherhood inculcated by German propaganda decades ago still finds an echo in Iran.<sup>117</sup> Such “banal Aryanism” is common

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<sup>112</sup>“Football—Given’s blast ordeal—Interview—The Republic’s World Cup hero talks of grenades and glory ...”, *The Observer*, 25 November 2001.

<sup>113</sup>“Football—Accueil Triomphal pour les Allemands en Iran,” *Reuters—Les actualités en français*, 7 October 2004.

<sup>114</sup>“Kolossale Weihnachten in Teheran,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11 October 2004.

<sup>115</sup>“Kolossale Weihnachten in Teheran.”

<sup>116</sup>“Länderspiel Iran - Deutschland live im ZDF, 09.10.2004,” in *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)*. A video of the scene is available on YouTube under “Iran v Germany, 2004, National anthems”. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH0gl6OXXt4&feature=PlayList&p=5D4016A8C8B4B254&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=2](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH0gl6OXXt4&feature=PlayList&p=5D4016A8C8B4B254&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=2).

<sup>117</sup>Some friendly exuberance was also demonstrated at the Iran–USA game during the 1998 World Cup, but for wholly different reasons. It also has to be said that the games against Iraq and Ireland were crucial World Cup preliminary games, whereas the game against Germany was a friendly match. Yet the fact that Iraqis lost and were mistreated, while Germans won and were celebrated confirms the prevalence of sentiments among the fans that do not only relate to football.

in different aspects of daily life in Iran. It abounds in popular culture, literature, and symbolic repertoires. In fact, the Aryan discourse has become so entrenched in Iranian identity and self-perception that it is unconditionally reified.

The Aryan discourse has had a tumultuous history in Europe as a product—first—of linguistics, then racial anthropology. Beyond its scholarly garb, it has oftentimes been used as a political device, *inter alia* in endeavors of subjugation. Finally, it reached its climax in the murderous folly of Nazi Germany. It first appeared in Iran in the first half of the twentieth century, when a radicalized nationalist discourse was attempting to manage Iran's encounter with Europe and modernity. This movement's response to the challenges of the time was essentially discursive: it depicted the image of an idealized pre-Islamic Iran blown out of recognition as proof that Iranians were inherently a great nation destined to great deeds, but thwarted from a path to glory by Arabs and Islam. Arabs became a convenient scapegoat to be blamed for virtually any Iranian shortcoming.

In this context, the Aryan discourse was received as manna from heaven. Its polarization of "Aryan" and "Semite" was compatible with a developing anti-Arab racism, it allowed a simplistic reading of history along racial lines, and, most importantly, it gave Iranian nationalists the impression that they were racially equal to Europeans, and all this with the seal of approval of European science. Iranian nationalists' inferiority complex and lack of colonial liberation mentality allowed for a thorough internalization of European prejudices against Islam and the "East" leading to the phenomenon of self-Orientalization. In time, the conceptual toolbox of Aryanism would allow for yet another discursive protection against questioning Iran's ills. This would be the dislocation mindset, the fantasy of Iran being in fact a member of the European family accidentally gone astray in the backward Middle East.

In sum, Aryanist discourse in Iran proceeds from a discredited European thought, the radicalized variety of which was at work in the death camps of Nazi Germany. From a local perspective, it proceeds from an inferiority complex, a racial rewriting of history, and reprehensible racist sentiments. As a shortcut to modernity, it never provided answers to the challenges of reform, modernization and progress. Rather it has trapped its proponents in a highly problematic and distorting view of the world. It is also obsolete, rooted in a traumatic encounter with Europe that is now two centuries old. It is high time for a reassessment of this defective form of identity discourse—if not for a paradigm shift.