

Chapter 3

Iranian Nationalism from its (Afghan) Margins

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The story of the origins of Iranian nationalism is written as one of a growing sense of national self-hood among political and intellectual elites during the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11, coming at the crumbling end of the Qajar period (1796–1925), is often singled out as the moment at which the idea of Iran coalesced and nationalism emerged as a significant factor within the arena of Iranian politics.¹ Since that time different actors have sought to harness the idea of the nation to diverse ideological ends, such that to the present day Iranian nationalism continues to be variously constructed and bitterly contested.²

Like most stories of nationalism, the Iranian story is one that remains very much focused on elite constructions. Indeed, the broader scholarship on nationalism has devoted considerable attention to the central role elites play in the production and reproduction of the nation, while relatively little has been said about “the ordinary people who are the presumed targets of this identity engineering.”³ I would suggest that “ordinary people” are not merely targets of identity engineering, but are integral participants in the making of the nation and the construction of national identity. In the case of Iran, “ordinary” Afghan migrants carry the border with them and, in their interactions with “ordinary” Iranian citizens, mark the limits of the Iranian nation.

I seek to approach the question of nationalism from a perspective that is simultaneously located within the nation and outside it. As such, I see this chapter as comprising an act of scrawling in the margins of dominant narratives of Iranian nationalism. By scrawling in the margins, I am not attempting to overthrow, or even to seriously challenge, existing narratives, but rather to offer a different perspective—one that is from the margins and speaks to the experience of marginality within Iranian society. In doing so, I suggest that

marginality itself has something important to say about the ways in which the nation is imagined and celebrated.

Threading through this discussion of nationalism and migration is a multifaceted ethnographic vignette which revolves around (without being restricted to) the experiences of a family of Afghan refugees living in the suburban precinct of Astane in the Iranian city of Shiraz.⁴ Focusing on points of contact and interaction with Iranian citizens, I take a flexible life-history approach in order to capture changing political and personal circumstances over a period of more than three decades. Ultimately this ethnographic encounter highlights the marginal position of Afghan migrants within the imaginary of the Iranian nation. Ethnographic techniques are peculiarly suited to getting at the marginal.⁵ In re-scaling the discussion of nationalism away from the state and toward social factors—in the process, capturing the ordinary, everyday processes of nation-making in the relationships between citizens and migrants—I seek to create a space for voices that are not ordinarily heard. Through ethnographic techniques, Afghan migrants and Iranian citizens resident in the city of Shiraz engage with and speak back to what I identify as two sometimes competing narratives of Iranian nationalism.

FINDING THE MARGINS

Elham reaches across the passenger seat and slides a steering lock across the wheel. She has parked the car as close to the wall as she can, turning the side mirrors in and leaving just enough room for another vehicle to inch past on the narrow street. Stepping back, she looks critically over the shiny white veneer of the new model Peugeot, a favored vehicle of the Iranian middle classes and as ubiquitous today on the streets of Shiraz as was, not long ago, the Iranian-manufactured Paykan. Evidently something still looks wrong with the picture and Elham leans back in, unhooking the dangling *faravahar* from the rear vision mirror and slipping it into her pocket. “Perhaps we should have caught a taxi,” she mutters.

The winged figure of the *faravahar* is perhaps the best known and most easily recognizable of the elaborate stonework reliefs that adorn the ancient Achaemenid ruins of Persepolis. Despite its connection to a minute Zoroastrian religious minority in Iran, it has emerged as a popular and intensely nationalist symbol. When I press Elham as to why she removed it from view when we parked the car in Astane, she smiles ruefully. “I just figured it for more of a *van yakad* neighbourhood,” she shrugs, referring, in a disarmingly light-hearted manner, to the Quranic prayer that is said to protect an individual from the evil eye.

Elham grew up only a short distance from the shrine precinct of Astane and Shah Cheragh, but like many *Shirazi* with the means to do so, she has gradually migrated northward and now lives on the very northern outskirts of the city.⁶ Years have passed since she has found reason to visit the shrines of her childhood. “My grandmother used to do *ziarat* every Sunday. All the women went. They would cry and pray to the saint. With a bit of luck they would forget I was there and I could slip out and play.”⁷

Today, our visit has little to do with worship or supplication. Elham, knowing my interest in the issues facing Afghan refugees in Iran, has arranged for me to meet the woman she employs as a house cleaner in the frantic weeks before the Iranian New Year. Leaving the car, we head away from the shrine that looms large as an orienting feature of the neighborhood and, following a bewildering set of directions recorded by Elham on the back of a receipt, head deep into a maze of narrow lanes.

Fahima’s door is set just below street level and I have to bend to enter the dark, sloping, tunnel-like entrance. Around a corner and through a curtain, the claustrophobic space opens to a sun-lit courtyard. Four families live here, all hailing from the same village in northwestern Afghanistan and all related by way of blood or marriage. Each family occupies living quarters on one edge of the shared space of the courtyard.

Fahima is guardedly friendly and, on that initial visit, the conversation sputters along, stopping and starting over multiple glasses of overly sweet green tea. I can’t help but wonder what subtle pressures of obligation have been applied that Fahima is willing to share with me the details of a life that has touched tragedy and disaster on numerous occasions. On that first day I was offered only the sketchiest outline. Despite the brevity of the narration and the paucity of detail, it was enough to convince me that here was a story that could begin to capture the way in which shifting notions of Iranian identity have been experienced by those who exist at, and represent, the margins of the nation.

NARRATIVES OF NATIONHOOD

Before considering the ways in which nationalism is experienced in the domain of the everyday I want to turn briefly to elite-driven narratives of nationalism that have long dominated scholarship on Iranian identity. Most commentators identify two major strands of Iranian national identity: a Perso-Iranian strand and an Islamic strand. Historically prominent is a nationalist narrative that draws on Iran’s ancient past and is, as Alam Saleh and James Worrall point out, “almost entirely Persian” in its construction.⁸ In the context of the Iranian Revolution this Persian nationalism was suppressed, with Islam

emerging as the dominant theme in a discourse of identity that shifted from being a burgeoning counter-narrative in the 1970s to a state-sanctioned vision of selfhood in the early Islamic Republic. Today both of these narratives continue to circulate within Iranian society.

Animating the Past

Under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41) the idea of Persian culture came to be institutionalized and heavily circumscribed. *Farhang* (culture) was constructed as a distinct domain of human experience, and Iran’s pre-Islamic (and para-Islamic) history was glorified and become a “normative ideal cultivated through the disciplining of bodies and minds.”⁹ As such, alternative markers of Iranian-ness were violently suppressed and the people of Iran were forced to adhere to a vision of national identity that celebrated a heavily mythologized “Aryan” past, even as it embraced the trappings of a modern future. In this construction of “Persian-supremacy” Iran came to be imaginatively linked to Europe and its perceived technological, military, economic, and cultural successes.

With the ascension of Mohammad Reza Shah to the throne, the elevation of Iran’s Achaemenid history within a state-sanctioned narrative of identity continued. The leveraging of the ancient past in the service of contemporary politics culminated in the 1971 celebration of what the Shah—with some creative reconfiguring of both the calendar and dynastic history—declared to be the 2,500-year anniversary of the Persian Empire.¹⁰ This was a spectacle intended first and foremost as “a show of glamour and power to other nation-states, authenticating Iran as a modern state with ancient origins.”¹¹ The event was the highpoint of a carefully constructed narrative that linked Iranian identity to a heavily mythologized past. At the same time, it saw the emergence and consolidation of a popular counter-narrative rooted in Islam, eventually producing a groundswell of support for the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and, subsequently, the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

Today, the Achaemenid past is once again animated to political ends, not only as a persuasive counter-narrative to Islamist visions of Iranian self-hood but, significantly, by diverse factions among the ruling elite who seek popular legitimacy by way of reference to Iran’s pre-Islamic history.

Nation and Revolution

In the decade or so prior to the 1978–79 revolution new forms of what might be thought of as “Shi’a nationalism” had come to be articulated in answer to the Pahlavi imaginary of a Western-oriented Persian identity that drew on a 2,500-year plus history to legitimize the crown’s authoritarian rule. Islam was,

as a result, tightly woven into the revolutionary story that Iranians told (and continue to tell) themselves *about* themselves. Influential thinkers, such as Ali Shariati (1933–77), laid the groundwork for the revolution, calling for an Islamically grounded form of modern (that is to say, European-style) nationalism that was “free from chains” and would allow Iran to achieve “cultural, moral, and administrative independence.”¹² The nationalism promoted by Shariati and his peers answered back to the Pahlavi construct of identity that drew on Persian history and myth in order to validate the dictatorship of the monarch.

The narrative of Islamic, and more specifically Shi‘a, identity continued to dominate throughout the Khomeini decade (1979–89).¹³ Narratives of Islamic identity are most often seen to comprise an anti-nationalist trend and therefore can be understood as an absence or suppression of Iranian national identity in the context of Khomeini’s elevation of the *ummah* and his vision of exporting the revolution across borders.¹⁴ Further, in a number of scholarly accounts Khomeini himself is identified as virulently anti-nationalist, a political figure whose revolutionary zeal birthed the rise of a universalist ideal of radical Islam at the expense of a sense of national Iranian self-hood.¹⁵ This particular understanding of Khomeini and the revolution in which he emerged as the leading figure, accords with theories of nationalism that locate its origins in eighteenth-century Europe and see it as intrinsically linked to a post-enlightenment project of secularism. In this formulation, nationalism is seen to reemerge in the post-Khomeini era, breaking free from the shackles of Islamism.

The “second-coming” of nationalism is sometimes traced precisely to then President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s visit to the ruins of Persepolis in April 1991,¹⁶ or earlier, to the unsatisfactory peace made with Iraq after eight protracted years of bloody warfare,¹⁷ or to the death of Khomeini in June 1989 and the emergence of a pragmatic conservatism that saw the instigation of “a process of ‘rationalization’ of the regime.”¹⁸ For all Khomeini’s professed distrust of nationalism,¹⁹ the revolution was an *Iranian* Revolution—drawing together diverse actors under the rubric of the nation—before it was an *Islamic* Revolution.²⁰ As such, the Perso-Iranian character of postrevolutionary Iran remained prominent, even as powerful political actors sought to downplay its significance vis-à-vis a universalist Islam.

The notion that there are two distinct and mutually exclusive forms of nationalism acts to reinforce fault lines within Iranian society, separating out supporters of the theocratic regime, for instance, from its detractors, or the politically conservative from the reformist, or for that matter, urban from rural, and postrevolutionary generations from prerevolutionary. However, national identities are never entirely “consistent, stable and immutable,” but rather should be understood as “dynamic, fragile, ‘vulnerable’ and often incoherent.”²¹ A more nuanced approach, and one that I utilize in this chapter,

recognizes the ongoing salience of the nation to the Iranian imagination even as Islam has variously moved to, and receded from, the forefront of a discourse of national identity.

Religion was not, at the time of the revolution, an entirely novel source of identity formation in Iran. Shi'ism had been integral to the project of constructing a cohesive identity against the external Sunni other since as early as the sixteenth century, when it became the official state religion of Safavid Persia. Nor, in the revolutionary period, did it completely displace other ways of thinking about the Iranian self. Haggay Ram points to continuities between pre- and postrevolutionary Iran in terms of national identity construction by respective political elites.²² Highlighting the way in which these different narratives function in contemporary Iran is not to imply that they are mutually exclusive. Any individual Iranian may call on one or more of these narratives at any particular time. Indeed, the Iranian state prioritizes different narratives of nationalism in various circumstances and for diverse purposes. In this chapter I look to how these narratives function as the building blocks of national identity, not by analyzing the discourse itself but by examining the way in which an often-overlooked segment of Iranian society experiences and interacts with this discourse.

CROSSING BORDERS

Fahima doesn't know exactly how the decision to leave Afghanistan was reached. "There must have been some discussion," she frowns. "No. The first I remember of it was the bus trip to Herat. I vomited the whole way. Everybody thought the poor village girl had motion sickness but it was something else," Fahima laughs, her hand hovering over her abdomen to indicate what the something else was. She has already told me about the baby boy buried in her first year in Iran and how she felt then that she was burying some last link to her homeland. "In Herat we ate *bolani*²³ and my husband told me that we would be leaving for Iran in the morning. He told me not to cry. That my sister and her husband would be joining us soon and, in any case, we would be back in Afghanistan in the spring." That was in 1980. Khodadad and Fahima were part of a massive exodus, many millions strong, fleeing the country in search of a safe haven beyond the reach of the Soviet army. It would be fourteen years before they returned, briefly, to Afghanistan. By then, Fahima's mother had died and her father had remarried, breaking off contact with his older children. Much of the rest of the family was dispersed, including Fahima's older sister, who never did make it to Iran but years later relocated to Pakistan, where she died in a border camp under circumstances that, to Fahima's way of thinking, have never been satisfactorily explained.

Afghans have an established history of cross-border migration to Iran dating back centuries. However since the 1970s there has been a dramatic intensification of such movement, initially in response to the dual push and pull forces of drought in Afghanistan and the Middle East oil boom and then, more insistently, by the desire to escape the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.²⁴ The 1979 invasion by Soviet forces, intended to prop-up a rapidly crumbling Soviet-aligned government in Kabul, precipitated the flight of up to six million Afghans, almost half of whom entered Iran over the following decade.²⁵

Elham reminisces about the early postrevolutionary period and some of the first Afghan refugees who, during that period, made their way to Shiraz.

At that time, it seemed like all of Iran was being shaken up and rearranged. Poor people were moving from the country to the city; rich people were disappearing and you couldn't know if they'd migrated to America or been taken away by revolutionaries. Everywhere you looked there were new faces and even the faces you knew were changed [by the revolution]. Afghans were just another piece of that puzzle.

She goes on to describe the circumstances facing local Afghan migrants in those early years.

There was an Afghan family who moved in around the corner from us. I think he must have had two wives because there were eight or nine children all barefoot and hungry. By then all sorts of luxuries and even basic items had disappeared from the shops, but even with war we weren't hungry like those Afghan kids.

Elham recalls a teacher in her high school explaining the religious obligation on Iranians to support their fellow Muslims in the struggle against the Russian infidels, "all the while, this Afghan girl sat at her desk crying. It was really awkward and not long after that she stopped coming to school. I heard she got married and they went back to Afghanistan."

AN OPEN DOOR

The initial response of the Iranian government to unprecedented cross-border movement can perhaps best be described as "open door."²⁶ At the time of the Soviet invasion, in December 1979, the revolution in neighboring Iran was still, to a large extent, playing out toward its conclusion in the Islamic Republic and the consolidation of power to the Islamist pro-Khomeini faction. The Iranian government's willingness to welcome Afghans in flight from the Soviet invaders, must be understood in both ideological and pragmatic terms.

An open-door policy had the effect of upholding the new government's Islamic credentials. Importantly, it spoke also to pressing domestic concerns. At the time, the Iranian government was engaged in a bloody struggle against left-wing ideologues with whom it had formerly been allied against the Shah—further motivation to accept refugees in flight from a communist government. Later, Afghan refugees played a role in supporting the Iranian economy during the devastating eight-year war with Iraq.²⁷

On one of my last visits to Fahima's home, just weeks before I leave Iran, I am surprised to find her husband Khodadad seated on the steps, smoking a cigarette and nursing a glass of tea. He has the haunted look of a drug addict and sits slumped against the wall like a man defeated by life. Fahima appears ill at ease and the conversation, which on other occasions has flowed easily, becomes stilted, making me wonder whether she has in fact told her husband about me and whether he is happy for his family's history to be laid bare in this manner. He sits outside the room and makes no contribution until we move on to talking about Khomeini, at which point he calls out a comment too brief and quickly spoken for me to catch the import of. "He wants me to show you a picture of the Imam." She reaches up to a shelf on the wall above their small box-like television and pulls down a small black and white print, one of the familiar photos of Khomeini, in a patterned cardboard frame. "He says to tell you that Khomeini is our *marja*' (religious guide)." Evidently my response to this revelation lacks the requisite enthusiasm, as Khodadad comes to the doorway and launches into a monologue,

Khomeini told us that there are no borders in Islam and we believed him. At first it was like coming to our own country. To our own home. The Iranian was my brother and we were equal before God and the law. But Iranians no longer care for Khomeini. Today, in their eyes I am worse than an unbeliever. Less than a dog. I know this. I am called this [a dog] every day.

Khomeini was, and indeed remains, a deeply revered figure for many Shi'a Afghans. Throughout the 1980s the Islamic Republic was seen as a haven, and Afghan migrants were among those who willingly embraced Khomeini's Islamist vision.

Khomeini, prior to and following his return to Iran, roundly rejected what he saw as a decadent, indulgent, and ultimately oppressive Pahlavi nationalism, instead articulating a vision of pan-Islamism that caused ripples of disquiet in the region and beyond.²⁸ Pointing to the revolutionary potential and universal nature of Islam, Khomeini is cited as saying, "Not only does Islam refuse to recognize any difference between Muslim countries, it is the champion of all oppressed people."²⁹ Such statements if not held in memory are certainly recalled in essence by Afghan refugees residing in Iran today.

Khomeini's various declarations on the universality of Islam and the responsibility of Iran toward all Muslims in all places is held up as evidence of early goodwill or, less glowingly, of the divide between the words of the "Imam" and the practices of today's Islamic Republic.

I meet Zahra at the Astane shrine, surrounded by Afghan children, school-books spread out before them on the patterned carpet. An intensely religious Iranian, she is broadly supportive of her government, but is nonetheless unconcerned by the knowledge that her informal school contravenes the spirit of an official policy of encouraging voluntary repatriation. Her motivation to educate a small group of Afghan children from the neighborhood is simple, "I felt sorry for them." Zahra doesn't refer to systemic problems facing Afghan children in Iran, including unresolved residency status and exclusionary policies that deny Afghans access to education, housing, health care, and employment, instead pointing to symptomatic problems associated with long-term displacement including family violence and drug addiction. Notwithstanding the relationships formed with these children Zahra views Afghans through the dominant nexus of a "refugee problem"—one which can only be solved by the return of displaced Afghans to Afghanistan. "They are our fellow Muslims and it was right that we opened our doors to them," she explains, "But now the aggressor [the Soviet Union] has been defeated, we must secure our borders against these threats."

Between 1979 and 1992 the vast majority of Afghans entering Iran were issued blue cards, indicating their status as *mohajerin*.³⁰ *Mohajer* is an Arabic term which is often translated simply as migrant, but which carries with it a whole cache of meaning and which, for Muslims, recalls the flight of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in order to escape persecution. A mohajer is understood to have gone into exile for religious reasons where a "regime in power does not allow the free expression of Islam."³¹ The one who welcomes the mohajer is therefore performing a valuable religious act. With a blue card in hand Afghan mohajerin were granted permission to remain in Iran indefinitely and a minimum of restrictions, generally relating to employment, were placed on their residency.³²

AN AFGHAN-FREE ZONE?

The end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, and the death of Khomeini in June of the same year marked the beginning of a shift in Iranian attitudes toward Afghan migrants and refugees. In response to growing domestic, social, and economic concerns immigration policy from the early 1990s was reoriented to the prevention of entry of new Afghan refugees and the repatriation of Afghans living

in Iran. Since then there have been a number of mass-deportation campaigns, along with collaborative efforts between Iran and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Iran and successive Afghan governments, to implement (largely unsuccessful) programs of repatriation.

“Of course, in those early days there was suffering, but when we moved to Shiraz things started looking better. It felt like a new beginning. My husband had a steady job and in a year or two was promoted to foreman.” Fahima tells me, in some detail, of the pride she felt in seeing her eldest daughter, Nazanin, begin school. In 1994, the life that the family was beginning to build in Iran fell apart. Fahima disputes the notion that it was a voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan, claiming that they were forcibly deported in the context of a bitter workplace argument. “Everything was destroyed. There was nothing left for us in Afghanistan.”

Their return journey to Iran, after eight months of precarious living in Herat, was fraught with complexity and danger. At the border a series of misadventures caused the family to be inadvertently separated. Fahima, along with the two older children, Nazanin and Amir, made her way circuitously back to Shiraz where she expected to find her husband already waiting. In the meantime, Khodadad was picked up by border guards and severely beaten, before both he and their youngest daughter Golshan were sent back to Afghanistan. Fahima pauses when she tells this story, the pain of it still raw. Twenty years later the events of that period—and especially the death of three-year-old Golshan, struck down by a sudden, vicious illness on the Iran–Afghan border—continue to reverberate. Khodadad seeks doubtful comfort from the grief in an opium addiction. Fahima, meanwhile, mourns the loss of her daughter, the husband she once knew, and the life they might have lived.

Since 1993 Afghans migrating to Iran have been downgraded from *mohajerin* to *panahandegan*. While the former had honorable connotations, the latter has a pejorative nuance, suggesting impoverishment.³³ Afghan *panahandegan* are issued only temporary registration cards and are subject to various arbitrary restrictions. Furthermore, Iranian officials have instituted a project of encouraging voluntary repatriation though the gradual withdrawal of the broad rights that had earlier been extended to Afghans and the institution of a kind of low-level harassment. Over a period of more than a decade, subsidies for health care, primary and secondary education, transport, fuel, and basic food items have been gradually removed, resulting in a steady increase of costs for some of the most economically marginalized within the Iranian economy. Afghan refugees have been (variably) subject to restrictions on opening bank accounts, running businesses, seeking employment, and owning property.

“When I came back to Iran,” Fahima explains, “Everything had changed.” Perhaps most significantly for the family, Nazanin and Amir were prohibited

from attending school under a ruling that has, with uneven application, denied Afghans education in Iranian state schools. For several years Nazanin accompanied her mother as she cleaned houses in the wealthier Northern suburbs of Shiraz. Amir, in the meantime, worked in the bazaar—initially pushing heavy wooden trolleys of produce from warehouse to shop front, and eventually finding steady work with an Iranian store owner who was prepared to flout the restrictive policies on Afghan employment for the sake of a reliable (and considerably cheaper) employee. The family had difficulty renting accommodation and was forced to move nine times in a period of five years. “No landlord will rent to Afghans above Iranians. We have been lucky now that we could [pool resources] with the other families from our village [in Afghanistan].” Fahima waves her hand around, indicating the dilapidated state of the home in which they live.

Since 2002 there has been an increasing implementation of what are effectively Afghan-free zones. Such zones constitute entire provinces, cities, or urban spaces from which Afghans are prohibited from residing in or even visiting.³⁴ This spatial exclusion of Afghans, their *othering*, acts to demarcate the Iranian *self*, thereby contributing to the formation of an Iranian national identity.

From the early 1990s onward there has been renewed interest in the legacy of pre-Islamic Iran and its real and imagined contributions to the world of Islam and beyond. While some aspects of this have represented a popular revolt against the insistent Islamicization of all aspects of life in the Islamic Republic, Ali Ansari points to the way in which the state has actively sought to harness a narrative of Perso-Iranian nationalism to its own ends.³⁵ In 2011, in a remarkable echo of the Shah’s 1971 celebration, an elaborate New Year event was planned at Persepolis, involving multiple heads of state and historical reenactments. While President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad eventually caved to pressure presumed to have emanated from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and relocated the event to Tehran, the Achaemenid past was redeployed by Ahmadinejad and his controversial adviser, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, in a populist bid to distance the elected administration from the unelected clerical leadership.³⁶

The implementation of exclusionary policies toward refugees has coincided with the foregrounding of a Perso-Iranian identity in place of Islam within the story of national self-hood. For Khodadad and Fahima changing narratives around Iranian identity saw their position at the edges of Iranian society become increasingly precarious. A shift in emphasis from the shared Islamic identity of Iranians and Afghans, during the Khomeini decade, to a resurgent Iranian nationalist identity drawing on pre-Islamic motifs and mythologies, in the post-Khomeini era acted to sharpen Iran’s borders in a process that was felt acutely by Iran’s Afghan refugees. This sharpening of borders further points to the way in which Afghans resident in Iran mark out the margins of the nation.

IRAN'S AFGHAN MARGINS

In this section I want to briefly turn to the idea that Afghans carry the border with them, such that Afghan refugees living in the Iranian city of Shiraz enact and reenact the border in their interactions with Iranian citizens. When Iranians think beyond national borders they almost invariably think to the west—to the Arab countries of the Gulf and beyond, to Turkey or, indeed, to that amorphous imaginary the “West” itself.³⁷ All of these have, at various times and in specific circumstances, been constructed as other to the Iranian self. Scholarship on Iranian nationalism frequently looks to these others while overlooking *other* others both within and outside Iran’s territorial borders.³⁸ Rarely do thoughts turn eastward, and Afghanistan—sharing a border with Iran’s eastern provinces—can be thought of as both territorially and imaginatively marginal. Despite its significant shared history with Iran, Afghanistan is seen to have little to say to or about Iranian nationalism.

Elham admits that she gleans most of her knowledge about contemporary Afghanistan from Western news sources. Like a great many Iranians, her concerns about Afghanistan mirror those aired on the BBC and Voice of America, including the treatment of women, the relative unavailability of education and health care, the prominence of tribal warlords, and the prevalence of opium. Afghanistan is popularly represented as a dangerous and disorderly space. If thought of at all, Afghanistan is posited as an other to Iran—a reminder of a distant past out of which Iran has emerged or a threat of the unhappy future into which, by bad fortune, bad management, or the conspiracy of enemies, Iran might yet fall.

The approximately 600 mile-long border (almost 1,000 kilometers) between Iran and Afghanistan was established in the nineteenth century and has, with the exception of some minor skirmishes relating to water supply in the vicinity of the Helmand River Delta, gone largely unchallenged.³⁹ Historical fluctuations that saw whole provinces and cities passed back and forth between Afghan and Iranian rule have not translated into contemporary territorial disputes. However, the border itself variously moves into and out of focus.

Borders are not merely lines on the ground but are manifestations of social practice and discourse, constructed by way of narratives that bind people together in the imaginary of common experience, history, and memory. This understanding of borders allows us to locate multiple border sites that are complicit in the imaginative construction of self and other. The border between Afghans and Iranians is not comprised solely of an international boundary between two sovereign states but is produced and reproduced in everyday interactions between individuals. Further, it is in the context of these boundaries that collective identities are formed. Identities are often

discursively represented in terms of a distinction between self and other; boundaries therefore constitute part of what Anssi Paasi calls “the ‘discursive landscape’ of social power.”⁴⁰ Importantly, this discursive landscape is “not limited to border areas, but extends into society and its social and cultural practices, wherever it is produced and reproduced.”⁴¹

Throughout the period of the Islamic Republic, the Iran–Afghanistan border has, from the Iranian perspective, shifted from being a point of contact between two states enmeshed within the imaginary of an Islamic “world,” to a mark of the outer limits of the Iranian nation. Afghans, resident inside Iran, come to represent this border. Iran is “not Afghanistan,” as Zahra puts it when commenting on what she describes as the relatively more “progressive” form of Islam practiced in Iran. Elham’s friend Mina expands on this idea,

The problem is this Taliban mentality they [Afghan refugees] have. The men beat their wives and sell their daughters [in marriage]. We [Iranians] have our own Islamic fundamentalists. Thank God, though, that our country has never sunk to the depths of Afghanistan . . . God willing, we never do.

The idea that Afghan refugees mark out what is *not* Iranian (and, therefore, what is not Iran) is remarkably prevalent. On one occasion Fahima’s son, Amir, articulates the way in which this distinction comes to be experienced by Afghans in Iran, “to Iranians, Afghanistan is everything that is ugly and bad in Iran, and none of the good. Not just Afghanistan, either but us Afghans.” Amir’s friend, Gol Muhammad, picks up this same theme of Afghan otherness, “Iranians think of us as a people with no history, no culture.” As the conversation swings around to questions of cultural identity—taking in the Achaemenid ruins of Persepolis and the destroyed Buddah’s of Bamiyan—the way in which a nationalism tied up with historical monuments impacts upon those excluded from the narrative of nationhood, is brought into stark relief. “What are stone monuments to us when everything has been destroyed? Here they call us animals and heap all the wrongs of the Taliban on our backs. Iranians preserve their old stones in museums and speak proudly of them, but they crush us under their feet.”

A MARGINAL APPROACH

In this chapter I have called on notions of marginality in two distinct ways. First, I have looked at how ideas of the nation act to render certain people and groups of people marginal. In Iran this process is laid bare in dramatically shifting narratives of nationhood that have seen policies, practices, and attitudes toward Afghan refugees take different form within a relatively short

period of time. Secondly, I have pointed to the way in which Afghan marginality speaks back to the nation. Afghans in Iran are represented as other and therefore make real and present in everyday life the border between Iran and Afghanistan.

I have traced these processes using ethnographic techniques and allowing multiple, often marginal, voices to speak to the issues around Afghan marginality in Iran. I propose that there is place for new forms of scholarship that move away from dominant discourses of nationalism emanating from the political and social elite, in order to capture other more fleeting experiences of the nation. Indeed, as Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson point out, “much can be learnt about the centers of power by focusing on their peripheries.”⁴² A “marginal approach,” drawing on disciplinary methods less commonly used in studies of nationalism and providing space for voices rarely heard in this scholarship, allows us to recognize nationalism as a project that is always variously applied and experienced.

NOTES

1. See for example Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution,” *Iranian Studies* 23, no. 1 (1990): 77–101; Homayoun Katouzian, “Nationalist Trends in Iran, 1921–1926,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 4 (1979): 533–51; and Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964).

2. Both Shabnam Holliday and Ali Mozaffari have recently produced volumes exploring this contestation. Shabnam Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Ali Mozaffari, *Forming National Identity in Iran: The Idea of Homeland Derived from Ancient Persian and Islamic Imaginations of Place* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

3. Jon E. Fox, “From National Inclusion to Economic Exclusion: Ethnic Hungarian Labour Migration to Hungary,” *Nations and Nationalism* 13, no. 1 (2007): 78.

4. Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in the city of Shiraz between February and October 2014. Quotes attributed to (in order of appearance) Elham, Fahima, Khodadad, Zahra, Mina, Amir, and Gol Muhammad were recorded over a number of interviews and have been translated by the author with the assistance of Abbas Yarbakhsh. All the names provided are pseudonyms on request of the participants.

5. For more on marginality and ethnography see Sarah Green, *Notes from the Balkans: Locating Marginality and Ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Josh Packard, “‘I’m Gonna Show You What it’s Really Like Out Here’: The Power and Limitation of Participatory Visual Methods,” *Visual Studies* 23, no. 1 (2008): 63–77.

6. The *-i* suffix attached to a place name indicates the inhabitants of that place. Thus, *Shirazi*, denotes the people of Shiraz, *Tehrani* the people of Tehran, etc. In the

course of my research I found that the term *Shirazi* implies a degree of belonging that goes beyond mere residence in the city.

7. The term *ziarat* is taken from the Arabic for “visit” and denotes pilgrimage to a holy site.

8. Alam Saleh and James Worrall, “Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran’s National Identity Problematique,” *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2014): 73–97.

9. Setrag Manoukian, *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 24.

10. Nikki Keddie describes the “vastly wasteful” 1971 celebrations in Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 224.

11. Ali Mozaffari, “The Problem of a Site Museum for Pasargadae World Heritage Site (Iran),” *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 4, no. 1 (2012): 48.

12. Mehmet Talha Paşaoğlu, “Nationalist Hegemony Over Islamist Dreams in Iran and Pakistan: Who Were Shariati and Maududi?” *Asian Politics & Policy* 5, no. 1 (2013): 114. It should be noted that this is not, in fact, a direct quote (or translation) of Shariati’s words but rather Paşaoğlu’s interpretation of Shariati’s scholarship.

13. Holliday contrasts Islamiyat and Iraniyat narratives of identity in *Defining Iran*.

14. For more on this see Hamid Ahmadi, “Unity within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 1–13.

15. See for example Saleh and Worrall, “Between Darius and Khomeini”; and Saeid Zahed, “Iranian National Identity in the Context of Globalization: Dialogue or Resistance?” CSGR Working Paper 162/05 (Coventry: Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation, 2004).

16. As noted by Fariba Adelkhah, *The Thousand and One Borders of Iran: Travel and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 27.

17. As suggested by Ali Ansari, “Iranian Nationalism Rediscovered,” *Middle East Institute*, January 29, 2009, <http://www.mei.edu/content/iranian-nationalism-rediscovered>.

18. Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 143.

19. See the chapter “Khomeinist Iran,” in *Defiant Dictatorships*, ed. Paul Brooker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 145–62.

20. In Mehran Kamrava, *Revolution in Iran: The Roots of Turmoil* (New York: Routledge, 2016), the author looks more closely at some of the causes of revolution in Iran; also Jahangir Amuzegar, *Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis’ Triumph and Tragedy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 5, the author proposes that in addition to the cultural (i.e., religious) revolution, Iran experienced simultaneous political, social, and economic revolutions.

21. Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisingl, and Ruth Wodak, “The Discursive Construction of National Identities,” *Discourse & Society* 10, no. 2 (1999): 154.

22. See Haggay Ram, “Exporting Iran’s Islamic Revolution: Steering a Path Between Pan-Islam and Nationalism,” in *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle*

East, eds. Efraim Inbar and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (London: Routledge, 1997), 7–24.

23. *Bolani* is a type of stuffed flat bread popular in Afghanistan.

24. See Mamiko Saito, “Searching for My Homeland: Dilemmas between Borders, Experiences of Young Afghans Returning ‘Home’ from Pakistan and Iran,” *AREU* (Kabul: The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009) accessed June 26, 2017, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/932E-Experiences-Of-Young-Afghans-Returning-Home-SP-2009-web.pdf>.

25. For more on the precipitating factors to the Afghan exodus see Omid Vafa, “Refugees in Iran and International Security,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, CA, 2006, accessed June 26, 2017, http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/8/4/2/p98424_index.html?type=info&PHPSESSID=13rvvno0kj1b4j58tbc3hntmo2.

26. Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi et al., “Second-generation Afghans in Iran: Integration, Identity and Return,” *AREU* (Kabul: The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008), 4–5, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/823E-Second-Generation-Afghans-in-Iran-CS-2008.pdf>.

27. As described by Elaine Stigter, “Transnational Networks and Migration from Faryab to Iran,” *AREU* (Kabul: The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2005), accessed June 26, 2017, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/504E-Migration-from-Faryab-to-Iran-CS-web.pdf>.

28. As described by Michael R. Brett-Crowther, “Iran and Iraq at War: The Effect on Development,” *The Round Table* 71, no. 281 (1981): 61–69.

29. This statement was taken from a speech made by Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran in 1980 and recorded in Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 286.

30. See Abbasi-Shavazi et al., “Second-generation Afghans in Iran.”

31. Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, “The Afghan Refugee in Pakistan: An Ambiguous Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, no. 2 (1988): 145.

32. See Abbasi-Shavazi et al., “Second-generation Afghans in Iran.”

33. See Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi et al., “Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran,” *AREU* (Kabul: The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2005), accessed June 26, 2017, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/514E-Return-to-Afghanistan-CS-web1.pdf>.

34. As described in a report by Justice for Iran, “Iran: An Afghan Free Zone?!” *Justice for Iran*, June 6, 2012, <http://justice4iran.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Iran-anAfghanFreeZone-EN.pdf>.

35. Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

36. This incident is described in detail by Abbas Milani, “Is Ahmadinejad Islamic Enough for Iran?” *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/04/29/is-ahmadinejad-islamic-enough-for-iran-2/>.

37. For more on Iran’s relationship to its *Others* see Sanam Vakil, “Iran: Balancing East against West,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2006): 51–65.

38. See for example Mehrdad Kia, “Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (1998): 9–36; Keddie,

Modern Iran; and Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

39. The Iran-Afghanistan border is 572 miles (921 kilometers) long. Tensions around water supply to the Helmand River Delta are described by A. H. H. Abidi, "Irano-Afghan Dispute over the Helmand Waters," *International Studies* 16 (1997): 357–78.

40. Anssi Paasi, "Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows," *Geopolitics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 84.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), xiii.

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