

# THE ROLE OF NATIONALISM IN ARAB-IRANIAN RELATIONS: HISTORICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

## РОЛЬ НАЦИОНАЛИЗМА В АРАБО-ИРАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЯХ: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ И ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ



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For the last decades Iran has been playing significant role in Middle Eastern politics. Tehran's rooted involvement in Arab's political environments provokes tensions and hostilities in Arabo-Iranian relations. The author believes that historical legacy of Arabo-Iranian interactions has been still determined some important characteristics of Arabo-Iranian relations. In this article the author investigates the role of nationalism and national building process in Arab countries and Iran. He shows that the rise of national movement and emergence of new nation-states based on different ideological principals and theoretical models politicized historical Arabo-Iranian ethnic and sectarian differences and cultural rivalries. An author studies how developments of various forms of nationalism in Arab countries and Iran, their approaches to national state building affected their relations. The author considers that both Arabs and Iran have been challenged the internal political dynamics and regional transformations were forced to instrumentalized nationalism as a protective tool to secure and legitimize their state suzerainty, establish



their presence and provide their interests in the region. In practice, regards their historical territorial, ethnic, religious disputes, both Arabs and Iran frequently exaggerated Iranian threats to Arabism and overestimated Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism as Arab's ambitions for regional leadership. These fears converted into real politic have spoiled Arab Iranian relations. The author stresses that emphasizing on Islamic feelings at the expense of particular nationalism in Iran after Islamic revolution in 1979 and giving up secular ideas in favor of Islamism in Arab countries after the "Arab Spring" brought neither reconciliation, nor normalization in the Arabo-Iranian relations. The author pays special attention to the dynamic of Iranian nationalism in view of the developments in power mechanism of Tehran's politics in the Middle East.

*Keywords:* Arabs, Iran, nationalism, Arabism, Islamism, Middle East, international relations

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В последние десятилетия Иран играет заметную роль в ближневосточной политике. Глубокая вовлеченность Тегерана в арабскую политику провоцировала напряженность и враждебность в арабо-иранских отношениях. Автор считает, что историческое наследие арабо-иранского взаимодействия до сих пор определяет некоторые значимые характеристики арабо-иранских отношений. В статье исследуется роль национализма и строительства национальных государств в арабских странах и Иране. Показано, что развитие национальных движений и появление новых национальных государств, основанных на разных идеологических принципах и теоретических моделях, политизировало прежние арабо-иранские различия этнического и конфессионального характера и соперничество их культур. Автор изучает как развитие разнообразных форм национализма в арабских странах и Иране, их подходы к строительству нации-государства повлияли на двусторонние отношения. Автор полагает, что арабские страны и Иран, столкнувшись с вызовами динамики внутреннего развития и региональных трансформаций, были вынуждены использовать национализм как защитный механизм в обеспечении безопасности и легитимации государственного суверенитета, утверждения своего места и защиты интересов в регионе. На практике, с учетом традиционных арабо-иранских различий в этнической и религиозной сфере, разногласий в территориальных вопросах, арабские страны и Иран нередко преувеличивали иранскую угрозу «арабизму» и преувеличивали значимость арабского национализма, панарабизма как средства достижения арабского доминирования в регионе. В практическом плане эти страхи конвертировались в политику, которая осложнила двусторонние отношения между арабскими странами и Ираном. Автор подчеркивает, что сделанный Ираном акцент на исламские ценности в свое политике за счет отказа от партикулярного национализма после исламской революции 1979 г. и сдача позиций светской идеологии в пользу исламизма в арабских странах после «Арабской весны» не обеспечили ни примирения, ни урегулирования арабо-иранских отношений. Особо внимание уделено динамике развития иранского национализма в контексте трансформации властного механизма принятия решений в сфере ближневосточной политики Ирана.

*Ключевые слова:* арабские страны, Иран, национализм, арабизм, исламизм, Ближний Восток, международные отношения

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Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the process of reform and modernization is well underway in the Middle East. These processes had a profound impact on the development of Arabo-Iranian relations. The rise of nationalism in the Arab countries and Iran strengthened their national and cultural rivalry. The reformists and nationalist movement were accompanied by the growth of European colonial penetration in the Middle East [Kulagina, 2005, p. 70–83]. Western ideas of nationalism had a significant impact on ideological identity of the Middle Eastern societies. The predominant reliance on ethnic, linguistic, cultural patterns as a base for creation a nation-state was welcomed by most Muslim governments [Hourani, 1966]. After the World War II religion as the main ideological tool for managing local societies temporarily gave way to nationalism, secular, socialist and communist ideas.

Modern nationalist models of Arab countries and Iran had many common features. But they differ in some important respects, as well. At first, nationalism was viewed as a protective mechanism for saving state's integrity in face of colonial politics of the West. But in short period of time these nationalist theories formed ideological base for expansionist politics. Arab national movements had a strong component of pan-Arabism that focused on the creation of unified Arab state. A unified Arab state has never been built but remained as a delayed mission of the Arab nation, rather than an unreachable dream [Antonius, 2001]. Iran was concerned about the growth of inter-Arab solidarity and Arab's call for joined actions. Tehran feared Arab territorial claims in the Persian Gulf. Iranian nationalism was determined by the ethnocentric essences. The main feature of Iranian nationalism as a political ideology was the concept of "Iranian lands" (Persian: *Iran Zameen*). This ideological trend was not only patriotic in nature, but also distinguished by cultural connotations. For Iranian nationalists any territorial space predominated by Iranian cultural and linguistic features was considered *Iran Zameen*, even if ruled by alien nation. Since emphasis on the Persian character

of Iranian nationalism could challenge national minorities, Iranian authorities, first, presented Iranism as the cornerstone for a single Iranian nation. The concept of "Eranshahr" (*Eran* means Iran) meant the unity of land and empire [Amanat, Vejdani, 2012]. Iran did not make territorial claims against its neighbors, on whose lands the Persian-speaking population lived, including Herat, which until 1856 was part of Iran. An exception may be the disputed islands in the Persian Gulf, two of which (Greater and Lesser Tunbs) went to Iran under an agreement with the Britain on Iran's abandoning its claims to Bahrain. The island of Abu Musa was divided between the emirate of Sharjah and Iran [Agaev, 1971].

The nature of Iranian nationalism had protective character. Its main task was resistance to the growing threat of Arab and Turkish expansionism that claimed part of Iranian territory under the pretext of unifying Arab or Turkish lands. In practical terms, Iranian nationalism was primarily used as a basis for the development of political, economic and cultural reforms. Unlike the Arab countries, where pan-Arabism in the form of Baathism or Nasserism became the state ideology, "Pan theories" had little success in Iran. Pan-Iranism became a response to the growth of pan-Arab sentiments in the region as a defensive reaction and a desire to preserve its territorial integrity [Enayat, 1971]. In practical terms, pan-Iranism did not develop in the country. The differences in the Iranian and Arab national movements were partly related to Islam. All Shiite imams were ethnic Arabs. With regards of this very fact many Iranians identified themselves as followers of the Prophet Muhammad that made them Arabs to a certain extent. Along with this, Islamic feelings often contradict with Iranian nationalism. The Iranian clergy opposed the national movement in Iran. The modernization policy pursued by the Shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) limited the influence of the clergy in the state's educational and legal systems. The development of the modernization forced clerics to strengthen their attacks on nationalists. The Iranian clergy believed that the nationalists placed Iranian



identity and culture at the center of national building instead of the Shi'a Islam. They feared that the nationalists wanted to change Iranian society and the state along with European models. They were against even partial secularization of society, its culture and state's politics [Moussawi, 2011]. In fact, anti-nationalist ideas formed the basis of the ideology of the 1979 Islamic revolution. Latter on, the ruling regime and the clergy found common view of Iranian identity as a cultural and historical construct of the Shiite Islam based on the ancient Persian legacy that competed Islamic orthodoxy. This approach was fundamentally different from the practices of the Arab national movement, where Islam helped to achieve unifying goals of nationalism, and nationalism solved the problems of pan-Islamism. In Iran there was a certain dichotomy between nationalism and Islam [Ansari, 2006]. This fact prescribed a dual and contradictory character for Iranian foreign policy.

Most Arab countries were skeptical towards Iran's claims to take an "Islamic mission". Iran's Shiite particularism caused Arab's suspicions of Iran, as well. Some Arab clerics often called Iranians "rafidun"<sup>1</sup>. They believed that Iran pursues a nationalist and expansionist policy under the banner of Islam. The development of Pan-Arabism and an Arab national movement along with Iranian nationalism complicated Arab-Iranian relations [Hunter, 2014(a)]. In the process of national state building several Arab countries, primarily Iraq and the Persian Gulf monarchies, used to portrait Iran as an "alien creature". Their authorities truly believed that they had to protect their nations from Iranian expansion. Iranian popular enclaves, based on their territory, and their integrity with Iranian cultural increased hostility of these states towards Iran. Iran's attempts to strengthen its position in

the region and in the Persian Gulf were perceived by the Arab countries as additional proof of expansionist nature of Iranian foreign policy<sup>2</sup>.

During the Shah's rule nationalism triggered feelings of historical rivalry with the Arabs. However, after the Islamic revolution the spread of Islam at the expense of the nationalism did not contribute to the development of friendly ties between Arabs and Iranians. After the Islamic Revolution, many Arab countries accused Iran of attempting to export Shi'a teaching under the umbrella of Islamic revolutionary ideas. Thus, historical ethnic and religious differences turned reformists and modernization process in the Arab countries and Iran into issues of national security and the integrity of the state. On the other hand, Arab attacks on Iran strengthened positions of Iranian nationalists. This fact forced Iranian clerics to be more tolerant towards nationalism as a more flexible instrument of reform [Hunter, 2014(b)]. Coming to presidential post Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) gave new inputs to the development of Iranian nationalism. The president and his power circle perceived Iran as not only as a territorial and ethnic construct but viewed Iranian nation as a cultural and spiritual phenomenon, the product of an ancient civilization. These views left a stamp on Iranian society and formed social claim for the development of Iranism, nationalism as the basis pillars of Iranian identity as an alternative to Islamists ideology. Thus, the flourishing of these ideas has formed the possibility for the revival of nationalism as the basis of a new state's ideology<sup>3</sup>.

The reformists and modernization processes, the emergence of new nation-states, the rise of nationalism, secular ideas in Iran and Arab countries had controversial impact on Arabo-Iranian relations. The historical content plays

- 1 *Rafidun* means in Arabic the denial of the first three righteous caliphs. For more profound understanding of rivalry issues among Sunni and Shi'a (*Alids*) during rulings of the first three righteous caliphs (632–656 A. C.), see: Al Samawi M. T. *The Shi'a: The Real Followers of The Sunnah*. Tr. by H. M. Najafi. Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2007. URL: <https://www.scribd.com/document/48784142/The-Shi-a-the-Real-Followers-of-the-Sunnah> (accessed: 20.03.2022).
- 2 Halliday F. Arabs and Persians beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf. *Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Mediterranee Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranian*. No. 22, 1996. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cemoti/143> (accessed 08.09.2022).
- 3 Mashaei B. Unveiling on Ahmadinejad's mission to bring the system to revolutionary conditions in 1978. 20 January 2018 (in Persian). URL: <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/766109> (accessed 13.04.20220).



significant role in shaping political interactions of the regional states in our days. The long history of Arabo-Iranian interactions left its stamp on the current essence of bilateral relations. The dynamic of national building and specific features in the development of nationalism in the Arab countries and Iran with regards of the shifting security balance in the region turned historic Arabo-Iranian rivalry into the subject of national security and state's integrity. The failure of secular ideas in Iran and Arab states in favor of sectarianism and Islamism changed power nature in both countries and forced their societies looking for a new ideological identity. These pseudo-nationalist ideas strengthened by glorious historical reminiscences presented under the Islamic logo drives political ambitions of hardliners in ruling elites in Iran and Arab countries in their sharp concurrent race for regional domination.

Nowadays religious determinants of Iranian politics in the Arab countries are clearly shown in the main developments of the Syrian crisis and the perspective of its peaceful settlement. Promotion of the confessional factor as a specific instrument of Iranian politics in Syria and Iraq results in the rise of the sectarian strife in both countries and is aimed at the strengthening of Iranian positions in the region. With the growing abilities and influence of nonresident Islamic paramilitary militias under IRG's squadrons control in Syria and Iraq, Tehran attempts to change confessional map of these countries to maintain its influence in Arab's environments. Iranian force involvement in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Tehran's behavioral political practice in religious question complicate current situation in the region and hamper peaceful resolution of the exciting crisis. Moreover, these behavioral patterns of Iranian politics could have an effect of boomerang and negatively impact on the situation inside Iran shaking its power and state's stability. Meanwhile, the revival of nationalism with strong secular component may challenge the rise of Islamists and cool down the sectarian and religious strife in the Middle East.

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