

REVIEWS

National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory. By Menahem Merhavy. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019. Pp. 280. \$29.95 (paperback) ISBN: 9780815636663.

National symbols, especially when connecting to a golden age through historical myths and constructed collective memories, often serve as essential features for most nationalist movements. Menahem Merhavy's *National Symbols in Modern Iran* deals with the convoluted and conflicted history of the making of Iranian nationalism's symbols and the interpretations of and meanings given to them. In Iran, pre-Islamic and Islamic symbols have been central to the conflicts among multiple intellectual and political actors to define the authentic sources of Iranian national identity. Merhavy focuses on two pre-Islamic symbols: Cyrus the Great and Persepolis. He traces how Iranian politicians and intellectuals from the late Qajar era to the present day sought to interpret these symbols for their nationalist agendas.

Merhavy's work critically reviews different approaches in nationalism studies, namely instrumentalism (that views nationalism as an instrument in the hands of the dominant social class), historicism (that views nationalism as non-subservient to any other social force, economic or otherwise), and modernism (that views nationalisms as invented movements in a universalist paradigm). Merhavy opts for the ethnosymbolic approach, which was initially developed by Anthony Smith, and perceives nationalism as the outcome of the historical evolution of older ties among members of a group. In this approach, nationalism is created and united around symbols like rites, ceremonies, and beliefs with a long history. Merhavy's ethnosymbolic approach is interested in revealing the meanings attributed to a historical figure and an archaeological site by Iran's

political and intellectual elite. He understands the process of mythmaking as “an ongoing, dynamic, and hence flexible process, not a rigid formula in which the group enters symbols on the one hand and expects nationalism to come on the other” (p. 11).

The core of Merhavy’s argument is related to his criticisms towards various approaches to nationalism studies. The author argues that the state’s ability to control society and culture on a broad scale is limited (p. 17). Merhavy emphasizes that masses are more sophisticated than nationalism studies generally consider them. He posits that “masses can embrace...the historical narrative encouraged from above while yet choosing which elements to appropriate and without necessarily endowing the political elite that cultivates these symbols with the legitimacy they seek” (p. 182). He understands the development of national symbols as a dialectical process between the state and society and not the result of a trickle-down progression. Merhavy thus criticizes paradigms that take the state almost as an omnipresent actor, acting in a void and creating symbols for mass consumption.

In consecutive chapters, the author deals with intellectual and political articulations on Iran’s national symbols from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. Chapter 1 studies the formation of Cyrus and Persepolis myths through late Qajar-era intellectuals such as Mirza Agha Khan Kermani and Mirza Fath Ali Akhuzadeh and early Pahlavi-era intellectuals such as Hasan Pirniya, Abdolhossein Teymourdash, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, Isa Sadiq, Said Nafisi, and Ali Asghar Hekmat. The chapter argues that the aggrandizing of historical myths was both an answer to threats to Iran’s integrity and a way to overcome these threats. Chapter 2 deals with the dissident discourses of ‘Ali Shari’ati and Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari and the proponent discourse of Shojaeddin Shafa’ regarding the monarchist nationalist project that excessively focused on pre-Islamic Iran for mythmaking. It argues that the oppositional views on Iran’s national identity were shaped to a large degree as a counterattack to the Pahlavi discourses. The chapter further shows how these intellectuals sought to resolve the tension between ethnicity and religion despite their disagreements. Chapter 3 deals with the image of Cyrus the Great and how the Pahlavi establishment attempted to utilize Cyrus to compensate for the historical depth, legitimacy, and authenticity that Muhammad Reza Shah lacked. It further deals with how Cyrus was religiously appropriated by the Islamic Republic. Chapter 4 deals with the image of Persepolis and argues that the

extravagant international festivities conducted in Persepolis 1971 signaled the degeneration of the Pahlavi cultural project and was an answer to the Pahlavi regime's loss of legitimacy, especially after the coup against Mosaddeq in 1953 and the Shah's White Revolution in 1963. Chapter 5 deals with the nationalization of the Islamic revolution and the republic, which had initially promised to cross the national barriers through Islam's universal and unifying message. It argues that the Islamic opposition learned nationalism and the importance of the nation-state from its adversary. The transition then represents not a change from nationalism to Islamism but from one form of nationalism to another. The chapter shows that the Islamist identity preached by the republic, especially from the mid-1990s, is a religious national identity of Iranianized Islam, with Twelver Shi'ism at its core.

Merhavy's book engages primarily with the field of nationalism studies, focusing on Iranian nationalisms, the making and interpretations of national symbols and myths, and collective memory, especially of the distant past. It is a worthy addition to any library with a special section in these fields. Merhavy writes in plain language, and the book is generally accessible for any reader interested in nationalism and/or Iran. The book is thoroughly researched, especially on intellectual narratives on Iran's national identity. It critically engages with different perspectives on nationalism studies and utilizes various secondary sources on Iran's nationalism. The book's argument, which stresses the limitations of elite-driven nationalist projects, is accurate and articulate. His argument or critiques are not novel in nationalism studies. What distinguishes Merhavy's work is his research and contribution to the studies on Iranian nationalism. The author exposes a vital aspect of the revolution that sought not to purge Iranian national iconography but rather sought to bridge the gap between ethnic and religious ones by "making Islam more compatible with Iranian nationalism and causing Iranian nationalism to incorporate Shi'ism as part of its symbolic vocabulary" (p. 186).

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