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Book Review

Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

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Reza Zia-Ebrahimi brings a fresh approach to the understanding of Iranian nationalism. Earlier works in Iranian nationalism largely overlooked the impact of nineteenth-century European racism on Iran. This book fills that gap in the literature by bringing out the racial discussions from the second half of nineteenth century, especially the creation of Aryan and Semitic racial groups. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), Zia-Ebrahimi posits that despite being in the east as a majority Muslim nation, predominant orientalist historiography presented Iranians as distant cousins of mythical Aryans and heavily emphasized its pre-Islamic past. The depiction of Iranians as what they were rather than what they currently are dislocated them from their reality. This dislocative nationalism that has been imagined rather than empirical has long dominated the scholarship on Iranian nationalism. Throughout the text Zia-Ebrahimi refers to these imaginary nationalists as "dislocative nationalists" rather than Iranian nationalists.

The book primarily highlights the works of two late nineteenth century Iranian intellectuals, Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aga Khan Kermani and how they hybridized the dominant European racial theories to the Iranian context in Farsi and became harbingers of modern Iranian nationalism. Both the introduction and the first chapter on "the Paleontology of Iranian Nationalism" cover the literature review and the historiography of Iranian nationalism. The first chapter summarizes in great detail how the orientalist scholarship created the nucleus of Iran and Iranians retooled these ideas incorporating local components. Orientalist ideas toward Iran emerged in the nineteenth century and their local hybridization dominated the nationalist discourse throughout the twentieth century. Zia-Ebrahimi's study of major works on Iranian history points out a dichotomy between the orientalist desire to present a pre-Islamic primordial Iranian *volkish* nationalism in the medieval Iranian sources and the lack of this narrative in these sources; the majority of medieval Iranian sources focus on the stories of kings and rulers rather than the imagined Iranian *volk*. In the same chapter he divides Iranian history into three periods; the pre-Islamic period, the Islamic period from the seventh to the sixteenth century and the last period

from the emergence of Safevid rule in the early 1500s to the present. He points out the gap in the literature that only few sources covered all three periods. From the major sources he covered, Zia-Ebrahimi highlights two works as being highly influential on the local Iranian nationalists: Pedro Teixeira's, *Kings of Persia* (1610) and John Malcolm's *History of Persia* (1815). Both books served as main sources for the Iranian nationalist ideologues Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aga Khan Kermani.

The second chapter covers "the emergence of Dislocative nationalism" in the works of these two Iranian nationalists. Zia-Ebrahimi covers Akhundzadeh under a subtitle as "the founding father" and presents that his ideas were neither mere translations of European ideas nor purely authentic representation of Iranian nationalism. According to Zia-Ebrahimi, Akhundzadeh launched the hybridization by utilizing European ideas in Iranian context. Akhundzadeh's more radical pupil, Mirza Aga Khan Kermani brought further racist thoughts into the nationalist rhetoric and set the tone of twentieth century racism/nationalism discourse in Iran. Later in the chapter Zia-Ebrahimi shows that except for a few works published in English, contemporary Iranian scholarship still adore these two pioneers of Iranian nationalism.

In the third chapter Zia-Ebrahimi examines an internal division among Iranians between hardcore nationalists, who embrace the pre-Islamic past of Iran, and conservatives, who prioritizes Islamic, *umma*, brotherhood over nationalist identity. The chapter starts with a narrative of former Iranian president Mahmood Ahmadinejad and his attempt to bridge the gap between two camps. Zia-Ebrahimi traces the origin of this controversy on the works of Enlightenment scholars, such as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721). The idea that Iran was a great nation until the arrival of Islam and Iranians were ruptured from their path was first initiated by European scholars and became the prominent approach under the dominance of orientalist scholarship. Zia-Ebrahimi presents that Akhundzadeh and Kermani again became the vessels of these European ideas on Islam and they deliberately omitted sources that contradicted their narrative.

In chapter four Zia-Ebrahimi touches on a sensitive issue, virtually pioneering where only few scholars dared to venture before; anti-Arab sentiments of Iranian nationalists. Iranian nationalist discourse has long presented Arabs as polar opposites of Iranians, although at the end of nineteenth century, when Iranian nationalism emerged, Arab nationalism was not a threat to Iran. Zia-Ebrahimi embarks to explore the source of this unrooted hatred in this chapter. He first examines the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi in detail as it was used by Iranian nationalists to show the primordial animosity toward Arabs. He points out that the often-referred section of *Shahnameh* that refers to lizard-eating Arabs was added later (p. 102). Then, he analyzes the remaining of *Shahnameh* and shows that the enemies mentioned in *Shahnameh* did not include Arabs. Then, similarly he analyzes another medieval movement, *shu'ubiyah*, and its approach to Arabs since "dislocative nationalists" often point to this movement as a pre-modern example of Iranian uprising against the Arab rule. He primarily states that this literary movement was first brought to modern daylight by Hungarian orientalist Ignaz Goldziher. Through various sources, Zia-Ebrahimi shows that *shu'ubiyah* was a literary movement whose members were loyal to Islam (p. 106). Despite the claims of "dislocative nationalists", Zia-Ebrahimi posits that no pre-modern racism, name-calling or enmity existed between Iranians and Arabs but rather there was multiculturalism. Then, Zia-Ebrahimi turns to orientalist European scholars of the nineteenth century and presents that this imagined pre-modern Iranian-Arab enmity is an orientalist product. At the height of the

Semitic versus Aryan/Indo-European debate in the late nineteenth century which was fueled by racist anti-Semitism in Europe, orientalist viewed Islam as a Semitic by-product and declared it static along with Judaism. Zia-Ebrahimi effectively quotes from the works of Ernest Renan, Arthur de Gobineau and Edward G. Browne to support his argument. He closes the chapter with a coverage on the racial and linguistic purification and how these European-born ideas were carried into Iran by “dislocative nationalists”, primarily Akhundzadeh and Kermani.

The fifth chapter covers the Iranian admiration of Europe as an ideal model for Iran, especially in the works of “dislocative nationalists”. In this chapter, Zia-Ebrahimi argues that Akhundzadeh and Kermani had a “superficial understanding” of rationalism and secularism (p. 126). Zia-Ebrahimi seeks to find out why “dislocative nationalists” omit Safevid grandeur and focused exclusively on pre-Islamic past of Iran. According to Zia-Ebrahimi, both Akhundzadeh and Kermani had anachronistic reading of history, which was typical among “dislocative nationalists”. “Dislocative nationalists” argued that the pre-Islamic Iranians were the first to invent cannons, telegraphy, and electricity (p. 129). Akhundzadeh and Kermani denigrated pretty much anything in Iran from religion and tradition to language and Arabic alphabet. The only things they approached positively were Europeans and imaginary ancient Iranians (p. 130). Zia-Ebrahimi finds it “exceptional” that “dislocative nationalists” were not anticolonial. While “dislocative nationalists” places Akhundzadeh and Kermani among the defenders of Enlightenment ideas, Zia-Ebrahimi places them in the anti-Enlightenment camp, fed by the ideas of romanticism and Russian despotism (p. 138-141). Later in the chapter the author details how Akhundzadeh advocated Russian-style of top-to-down “despotic modernization” (p.141).

In the sixth chapter Zia-Ebrahimi explores the European-constructed Aryan myth and its impact on “dislocative nationalism”. He first traces the origin of Aryan myth in the nineteenth century European scholarship and explains that although neither a piece of archeological evidence nor a trace of Aryans exists in European epics, the idea found supporters in Europe. He further elaborates on the Indo-European languages and the shady methods used to connect these language groups with race. Then, he narrates how Iranians embraced the Aryan myth as it connected them to Europeans. In the last part of this chapter he goes into detail and investigates the roots of the word “ariya” in the ancient Iranian sources and concludes that the term was not used as a reference to a racial group (p. 163). Zia-Ebrahimi states that by creating a glorious imagined pre-Islamic past of Iranians, the Aryan myth solidified the ideas of “dislocative nationalists”, who viewed Islam and Arabs as the obstacles in front of a glorious Iran so Iranians had to be westernized to regain their past glory.

In chapter seven Zia-Ebrahimi covers how the “dislocative nationalist” ideas of Akhundzadeh and Kermani were disseminated among Iranian intelligentsia and turned into predominant nationalist ideology in the interwar period. Zia-Ebrahimi narrates brilliantly that prior to the intellectual embracement of “dislocative nationalism”, Iranian constitutionalism offered an alternative civic nationalism. Failure of constitutionalism paved the ground for race-based “dislocative nationalism” (p. 176). He covers transitional intellectuals, who carried the ideas of Akhundzadeh and Kermani to the twentieth century. In this section he analyzes the works of Abolqasem Aref-e Qazvini, Mirzadeh Eshqi and Ali-Naqi Vaziri and Shin Partow, Bozorg Alavi and Sadeq Hedayat and connects their ideas to “dislocative nationalism”. The last section of the chapter briefly narrates the political transition from Qajar to Pahlavi dynasty then it covers how

Reza Shah Pahlavi utilized the ideas of “dislocative nationalism” and turned it into dominant understanding of Iranian nationalism through state apparatus.

In the brief eight chapter Zia-Ebrahimi highlights the ethno-symbolism of Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah made a spectacular celebration of Ferdowsi’s millennial birthday in 1934 and erected a shrine on his name. In Zia-Ebrahimi’s view Reza Shah aimed to bridge the gap between the pre-Islamic past and the Pahlavi state through Ferdowsi (p. 203). The author points out that despite his secular worldview, Reza Shah caved in to the demands of Shia clerics and removed Baha’i military officers and Jewish state employees from their jobs (p. 203). His son, Mohammad Reza Shah crafted a new title, the light of Aryans, and granted it to himself. Following his father’s footsteps, he made a lavish celebration to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971. Furthermore, Mohammad Reza Shah changed the beginning year of Islamic calendar from the Prophet Muhammad’s *hijrah* (migration) in 622 to Cyrus the Great’s ascension to power making a jump from year 1355 of the *hijrah* calendar to the year 2535 of the new calendar (p. 206). Zia-Ebrahimi states that the ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Musaddeq, whose attempt to nationalize Iranian oil was reversed by a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953, was in favor of a democratic Iran with civic nationalism model and he refrained from Aryan rhetoric (pp. 208-209). Zia-Ebrahimi narrates that some scholars of Pahlavi period, such as Abdolhossein Zarrinkub carried on the “dislocative nationalism” narrative. Relying on the work of Kamran Aghaie, Zia-Ebrahimi narrates the responses of Islamic conservatives to Zarrinkub. Shia cleric Morteza Motahhari’s response to Zarrinkub indicated how deeply the “dislocative nationalism” ideas were embedded among Iranians. In his response, Motahhari denounced nationalism from an Islamic universal viewpoint but still embraced the common Aryan origin with Europeans. Another ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Shariati was more explicit in his response to Zarrinkub. Shariati argued that by embracing Islam, Iranians initiated the Aryanization of Semitic Islam (p. 210). Zia-Ebrahimi impressively covers major historiographical trends on the trajectory of “dislocative nationalism”. He states that no alternative arguments emerged until the 1960s but the ones that emerged in that period were more reactionary than scholarly. The Islamic Republic rivaled “dislocative nationalism” through universal “*umma*” in the 1980s but the Mullah despotism turned some Iranians back to the camp of “dislocative nationalism”. Zia-Ebrahimi mentions that Arab-bashing and anti-Islamic rhetoric is still common among some Iranians in Iran and abroad. He adds that Iranian governments are aware of the public sentiment and they selectively utilize some components of “dislocative nationalism”. In his last account, Zia-Ebrahimi adds that every year new books are published with the ideas of this “dislocative nationalism” filled with anti-Arab, anti-Islamic narratives that depicts Iranians as victims and blames external forces for the misfortunes of Iranians.

In his conclusion Zia-Ebrahimi lists the shortcomings and failures of “dislocative nationalism”. He states that because “dislocative nationalism” focused on a lost imagined past and viewed the creation of a racially pure Aryan race as a precondition to advancement it failed to produce practical solutions to real issues of Iran. Moreover, Zia-Ebrahimi posits that authoritarian political model of “dislocative nationalism” would bring more headaches than solutions to Iran as it was shown during the reign of Pahlavi dynasty. He sees contemporary Iranians caught between the camps of “dislocative nationalism” and Shia cultural heritage but adds that components of

“dislocative nationalism” can be found among religious masses and vice versa. Zia-Ebrahimi concludes his book with a hope to see civic nationalism model in Iran.

Overall this is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Iranian nationalism. Zia-Ebrahimi’s critical approach to orientalist scholarship expands the horizon of scholars. He brilliantly challenges not only the long-held orientalist crafts, such as the Aryan myth and its connection to Iran but also illustrates systematically how “dislocative nationalism” ideas failed to produce solutions to real problems of Iran. The book is a triumph and would be recommended to scholars dedicated to Middle Eastern studies, or those simply seeking to better understand the dynamics of nationalism as rendered by Iranians.