

IRAN: Religion, Nationalism and Toponymy

The complex ongoing interconnections between Persian and Arabic

A: The Arrival of Arabic

- 1 The defeat of the Persian army by the Arabs outside Ctesiphon¹, capital of Persia's Sassanid empire, in AD637 - the Battle of Qādisīyah - saw the beginning of the Arab conquest of the Persian lands. The Arabs, newly united as a force by the birth of the Islamic religion, subsequently filled the political vacuum created by the end of this empire by spreading their language and religion throughout Persia.
- 2 Among other consequences, this Arab conquest brought with it the decline of Persia's language, Pahlavi, a forerunner of modern Persian. Pahlavi did continue in spoken form, but as Arab governors were appointed to rule over Persian provinces it became inevitable that the Arabic language would become the principal medium of administration in Persia. Further, Pahlavi was handicapped by having several linguistic variants, their use being distinguished from one another not by geographical location but by social class. This unwieldiness collapsed against the relative uniformity and simplicity of Arabic which, through its use in the *Qur'ān*, was also attractive (and even deemed essential) as the sacred language of the new Islamic religion.

B: The Persian Re-emergence

- 3 Yet gradually a Persian language began to resurface, as Arab rule in the 9th century became less directly administered from Damascus or (later) Baghdad, and developed into a more devolved administration based on local Persian potentates owing allegiance to Arab caliphs. But this Persian was not only a new language, enriched by the inclusion of Arabic vocabulary; it also appeared in a new guise, adopting as a writing medium the flexible and adaptable Arabic script in place of the cumbersome and inconsistent Aramaic-style Pahlavi writing system. This new Persian originated at the eastern extremities of Persia, such as in Bukhara and Samarkand². Bukhara, in particular, became the centre of a new Persian culture, attracting the philosopher Abu Ali Ebn Sina (also known as Avicenna) and a host of poets and artists. The poet Ferdowsi, also writing well removed geographically from the Arab lands (in what is now Afghanistan), revived Persian literature and Persian identity, though within a new Islamic context³.

¹ Modern Ṭāq Kisrā (3305N 4435E), in present-day Iraq.

² Both cities are in present-day Uzbekistan, within which they are spelt as Buxoro and Samarqand.

³ Through his *Shāhnāmeḥ* ("Book of Kings"), an epic written circa AD975-1010. In January 2003, both "Sina" and "Ferdowsi" were applied as the names of districts within Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

- 4 The period from the 11th to the 16th centuries saw Turkic and Mongol invasions, and the entrenchment of the minority *Shia* branch of Islam as the standard form of that religion in Persia. Put simplistically, *Shia* Islam (*Shiism*) appealed to a people who had embraced Islam, but had not welcomed the Arab culture of its donors, and who saw in adopting *Shiism* a means of differentiating Persia culturally and territorially from the largely Sunni Arab lands, thereby re-creating the distinction between Persia and Arabia which had existed in pre-Islamic times⁴. Ever since, the course of Persian and Iranian history can be seen as a constant battle for supremacy between Persian nationalism and Islamic religion. Equilibrium between these two extraordinarily powerful factors has rarely been harmoniously achieved.

C: The Twentieth Century: The Pahlavi Dynasty

- 5 The era of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79), encompassing the reigns of Reza Shah (1925-41) and Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-79), saw the supremacy of nationalism over religion as Persia sought to hold its own against political influences from outside, exerted particularly by the UK and the USSR. The very word “Pahlavi” - the name of the language spoken at the time of the Arab invasion - was chosen as the dynasty name to evoke an earlier glorious secular era of Persian history, while simultaneously taking the country into an equally secular future. Islam was suppressed in favour of a Persian identity, with the Pahlavi dynasty defined as the descendants of the ancient Persian kings. The constitution identified Persian alone as the official language of the country, and in the 1930s an attempt was made to purge the Persian language of its Arab vocabulary. Then in 1935 the Shah changed the country name from Persia to Iran, the name it had allegedly borne at the time of the original Aryan settlement⁵.
- 6 In a modernising device paralleling contemporaneous developments in Turkey, people were for the first time required to take family surnames, and surnames of a Persian (rather than an Islamic or Arabic) style were encouraged. Persian personal names such as Kurosh (= Cyrus) and Khosrow were favoured. In 1971, the Shah gave an extravagant and ostentatious celebration on the occasion of the 2500th anniversary of the Iranian nation founded by the Achaemenian emperor Cyrus the Great⁶. In 1976 the Iranian calendar, which had been dated to begin with the Muslim *hijrah* (flight of the Prophet) in AD622, was changed to date from the accession to the throne of Cyrus the Great in 559BC. Thus the country moved in a moment from year 1355 to year 2535 (though with limited popular acceptance). The Persepolis celebration and calendar change (with the names of the new months in Persian) were part of an ongoing tribute to Achaemenian imperial glory, to which the Pahlavi dynasty believed itself the successor and which it was attempting to re-create within the confines of a 20th century nation state.

⁴ Though to some extent *Shiism* was also an imposition of the Safavid dynasty which arrived at the beginning of the 16th century.

⁵ The word “Iran” is derived from “Aryan”, a people who about 1500BC settled in Fārs, a region in the south-central portion of the Iranian plateau centred on Shirāz. “Pars” & “Persia” derive from the word Fārs, and hence some consider “Persia” to have an application more geographically limited than “Iran”.

⁶ Cyrus built the Achaemenian capital at Pasargadae (3012N 5310E: “Dwelling of the Persians”), but his successor Darius moved it some 40 miles south-west to Persepolis (2956N 5253E: “City of the Persians”); it was principally at Persepolis that the 1971 celebrations were held.

- 7 Certain towns and cities possessing names of Arabic origin had their names changed to a more Persian style. Moḥammareh (3025N 4811E), in the Arab-populated south-western province of Khūzestān, became Khorramshahr in 1924⁷. Iran renamed the city Khūnīnshahr (“City of Blood”) during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, but it afterwards reverted to Khorramshahr. Khafajīyeh (3133N 4810E), also in Khūzestān province, became Sūsangerd at about the same time. Solṭānābād (3405N 4941E) in west-central Iran was re-named Arāk in the mid-1930s. The word for “province” was altered from the Arabic-style *velāyat* to the more Persian form *ostān*. But, even in Pahlavi times, certain Arabic names appear to have been too sacred to alter. Thus Mashhad (3618N 5936E), the “place of martyrdom” in the north-east of Iran where the revered *Shia* imam Ali Reza died (reputedly murdered) in AD817, has retained this Arabic name throughout⁸.

D: The Twentieth Century and Onwards: The Islamic Republic

- 8 Since Ayatollah Khomeyni’s⁹ Islamic revolution of 1979, which marked the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, religion has held the upper hand over nationalism. A system of *velāyat-e faqīh*, literally the “Guardianship of the Jurist” has operated. *Shia* Islam has traditionally eschewed the notion of secular government - indeed, of any earthly government - as being profane. Khomeyni broke with this tradition by arguing that earthly government was in fact required for practical reasons; this being so, it perforce needed to be a government of the just and holy who would in effect represent God on earth by providing religious and political authority to the community. This government would consist of the supreme clerical leader (the *faqīh*), who would be the person best placed to provide appropriate interpretations of Islamic law. The *faqīh* would, of course, be Khomeyni himself. Thus, although theoretically egalitarian, *Shiism* as functioning in Iran became in fact a clerical authoritarianism.
- 9 The Islamic Republic’s constitution continued to name Persian as the only official language, as in the Pahlavi era, but specified the language as Persian in “Persian script” (ie extended Arabic). This was aimed at preventing any move towards a Roman script (and hence perhaps an implicit secularisation) as had been carried out in 1920s Turkey. Many trends of the Pahlavi era were reversed. Education reversed the emphasis on Persian nationalism and replaced it with an emphasis on Islam. The calendar base date and names of the months were revised once again, to reflect Islam, and the government attempted to replace western words with Arabic ones in the Persian language. Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāmeḥ* epic, and Persian personal names such as Daryush (= Darius, who like Cyrus was an Achaemenian emperor), Kurosh and Khosrow, were all discouraged¹⁰.

⁷ As a town within Iran, the name *Moḥammareh* is given here in its romanization from Persian. In its romanized Arabic form *Muḥammadarah*, it remains the Arab (eg the Iraqi) name for the town today.

⁸ Before acquiring the name Mashhad, the settlement had been a village called Sanābād.

⁹ In *Shia* Islam, a cleric reaching the elevated status of *Āyatollāh* (“Sign of God”) assumes the name of his home village or town. Thus Ruhollah Mustavi, a child born as simply Ruhollah in the village of Khomeyn to a family who were later obliged to take a surname (choosing Mustavi), became Ayatollah Khomeyni.

¹⁰ For example, the Dāryūsh oilfield in the Persian Gulf was renamed Dorūd in 1985.

- 10 Today there are some 66 million people in Iran. The majority are Persian, but there are also about 15 million Azeris in the north-west, 6 million Kurds in the west, 1.2 million Turcomans in the north-east, 1 million Baluchis in the south-east, and half a million Arabs in the south-western province of Khūzestān¹¹. All the non-Persians (apart perhaps from the Kurds) consider themselves to have an Iranian identity, but all speak languages other than Persian: Azeri, Kurdish, Turkmen, Baluchi¹² and Arabic respectively. Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran allows for the use of local languages other than Persian, but such licence appears to be granted normally to the spoken word only. Thus in December 2001 the authorities permitted the official radio broadcasting of 2.5 hours of Kurdish per day, but in the same month banned the use of Azeri in newspapers in the predominantly Azeri north-western city of Tabrīz. Indeed, the authorities are reluctant to use the terms “Azeri” and “Azerbaijani” ethnically or linguistically at all, preferring the looser attribute “Turkish”. As an illustration of this, the *Toponymic Guidelines for Iran*¹³ contain the assertion that “in the northwestern parts of the country most people speak Turkish...in their daily conversations”. Here again, the emphasis is on the spoken word. Yet even this concession to there being a language other than Persian in Iran is unusual; elsewhere in the same *Guidelines*, Kurdish and Baluchi are designated as mere “dialects and accents” of Persian.
- 11 Yet the term “Azerbaijan” is encountered in the territorial administration of Iran, and indeed perhaps the most striking current example of the ambivalence between Persian and Arabic toponyms today concerns the names of the two most north-western provinces of the country. These may equally be encountered as *Āzārbāyjān-e Bākhtārī* and *Āzārbāyjān-e Khāvarī*, or as *Āzārbāyjān-e Gharbī* and *Āzārbāyjān-e Sharqī*. The words “*Bākhtārī*” and “*Khāvarī*” are Persian for “west” and “east” respectively, while “*Gharbī*” and “*Sharqī*” are the Arabic counterparts for those compass points. The most widely used versions are the latter (Arabic) versions, which BGN and PCGN have agreed to use since 1996:
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|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Āzārbāyjān-e Gharbī</i> | (= West Azerbaijan) | province centred at 3740N 4500E |
| <i>Āzārbāyjān-e Sharqī</i> | (= East Azerbaijan) | province centred at 3800N 4645E |
- 12 In reversing the trends of nationalism and religion, the Islamic revolution of 1979 brought with it the renaming of many settlements, often involving the application of names imbued with a revolutionary and religious fervour¹⁴ at the expense of names resonant of the Pahlavi dynasty¹⁵. A selection of examples is given in the following list. Whereas some were totally new names, a few involved no more than a neat change to the ending of the existing toponym, from the word “king” (*-shāh*) to the word “city” (*-shahr*).

¹¹ There are also Lurs, Bakhtiaris, etc, not detailed here.

¹² Though it is arguable whether Baluchi is wholly distinct from Persian.

¹³ 20th Session of UNGEGN, January 2000, WP41.

¹⁴ Such as *Āzād* (= “Free”), *Emām*, *Eslām*, *Khomeynī*.

¹⁵ Such as *Farah* (= “Joy”, the name of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s wife), *Pahlavī*, *Rezā*, *Shāh*.

List of selected name changes

Former Name	Current Name	Co-ordinates
Bandar-e Farāḥnāz	Bandar-e Kīāshahr	3725N 4956E
Bandar-e Pahlavī	Bandar-e Anzālī	3728N 4927E
Bandar-e Shāh	Bandar-e Torkeman	3654N 5406E
Bandar-e Shāhpūr	Bandar-e Emām Khomeynī	3026N 4906E
Kahak	Nowfel low Shātow ¹⁶ (3 rd -order admin div)	3425N 5045E
Kermānshāh ¹⁷	Kermānshāh	3419N 4704E
Khosrowshāh	Khosrowshahr	3757N 4604E
Naft-e Shāh	Naftshahr	3359N 4530E
Rezā'īyeh	Orūmīyeh	3733N 4506E
Rezā'īyeh, Daryācheh-ye	Orūmīyeh, Daryācheh-ye (lake)	3740N 4530E
Shāhābād	Eslāmābād	3921N 4427E
Shāhābād-e Gharb	Eslāmābād-e Gharb	3406N 4631E
Shāhī	Qā'emshahr	3628N 5251E
Shāh Pasand	Āzādshahr	3705N 5510E
Shāhpūr	Salmās	3811N 4446E
Shāhsavār	Tonekābon	3648N 5052E

The names of features within towns and cities (such as streets and squares) were also affected, with dynastic (and American) names disappearing in favour of revolutionary and religious themes. In Tehran, Daryush Street became Towhid Street (*towḥīd* = “monotheism”) and Pahlavi Avenue became Vali-ye Asr Avenue (*vālī-ye 'asr* = “imam of the age”, the promised messiah of *Shiism*). Kennedy Square became Towhid Square, and Eisenhower Avenue became Azadi Avenue (*āzādī* = “freedom”). The naming of a Tehran street in honour of Khalid Islambuli, who in 1981 assassinated the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, has soured Iranian-Egyptian relations for two decades. There are now proposals to change this name again, to Entefadeh (= *intifāḍah*; the Palestinian uprising). Interestingly, any such decision would be made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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¹⁶ This rather odd-looking name is a Persian rendering of the small French town of Neauphle-le-Château, where Khomeyni spent the final few months of his 14-year exile in 1978-79.

¹⁷ Kermānshāh briefly became Qahremānshahr after the 1979 revolution, and then Bākhtarān in the 1980s, but it has since reverted to Kermānshāh.